

Special Topic: Housing-Homelessness

The 2019 Grassroots Task Force’s Inequalities Survey managed to bring voices of people from the ground to the UN level, enabling them to express what people experience in terms of homelessness and housing. Homelessness is an acute expression of the housing crisis experienced globally. Housing emerged as a crucial issue in the Survey and it was deeply connected to other inequalities. Inequality is a central theme in the United Nation’s 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

What is the definition of **homelessness**? The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) noted through a resolution during the Commission for Social Development in February 2020 (CSocD58), which was agreed upon by Member States who are Commission members, and further approved by ECOSOC on June 18, 2020, that homelessness is not merely a lack of physical housing, but is often interrelated with poverty, lack of productive employment and access to infrastructure, as well as other social issues that may constitute a loss of family, community and a sense of belonging. According to a definition agreed upon by thematic experts in Nairobi, Kenya (in May, 2019), ***"Homelessness is a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space with security of tenure, rights and ability to enjoy social relations, including safety. Homelessness is a manifestation of extreme poverty and a failure of multiple systems and human rights"***. Homelessness is a failure of multiple systems that are supposed to enable people to benefit from economic growth and lead a safe and decent life.

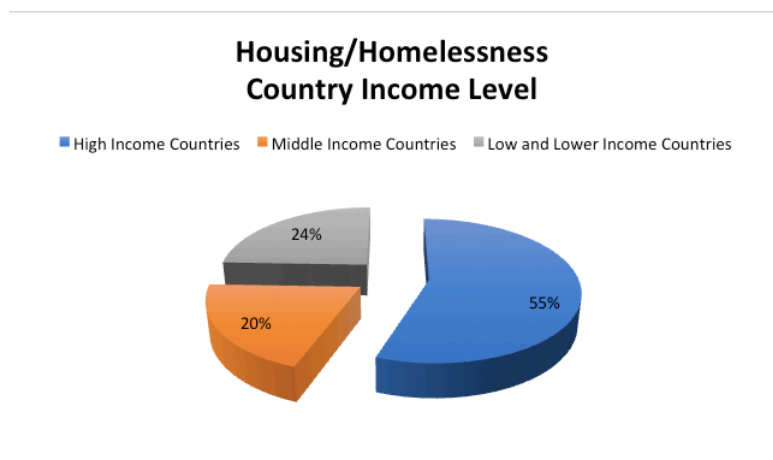
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not explicitly mention homelessness. However, the issues of those who experience homelessness are systematically and integrally tied to the SDGs. It is a reciprocal relationship. Working to achieve the SDGs helps to end homelessness and working to end homelessness helps to achieve the SDGs.

Homelessness represents multiple SDGs with causes or drivers linked to poverty (Goal 1), poor health (Goal 3), lack of decent jobs (Goal 8), lack of infrastructure (Goal 9), unsustainable cities (Goal 11) and climate-related disasters (Goal 13). Being homeless further exacerbates access to employment (Goal 8), health care (Goal 3), the ability to prepare food (Goal 2), children’s access to education (Goal 4), access to water and sanitation (Goal 6), and more. Thus homelessness reflects the accumulation and perpetuation of multiple inequalities. Even though the SDGs do not specifically address homelessness, the first specific SDG 11 target refers to housing. According to that target, by 2030, access must be ensured for all to



adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, and slums must be upgraded.

“Inequality is the most consistently identified cause of homelessness, and yet homelessness is the least discussed representation of inequality”, said the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, in her report¹ presented to the UN Human Rights Council in 2016.

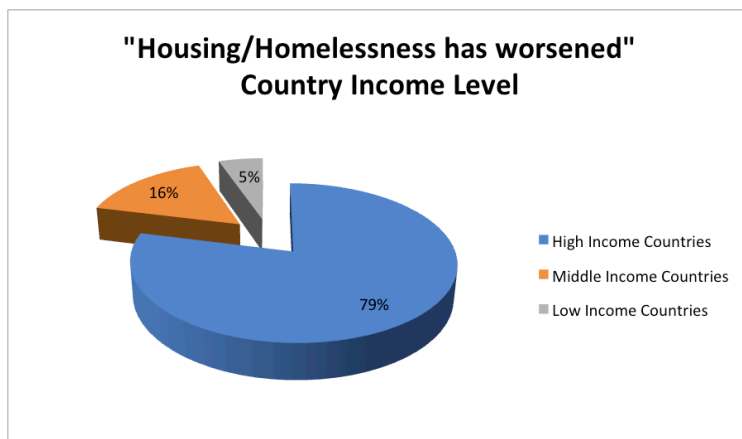


When Grassroots Survey respondents were asked what inequalities they observed in their own communities, housing and homelessness were among the most frequent responses. Specifically, housing was identified fifth on the list of inequalities mentioned by the respondents in response to this question. Of those respondents pointing to

housing/homelessness as an inequality, almost 55% (54.3%) were from wealthier countries and 24% from low and lower income countries.

It appears that housing and homelessness are problems in both cities and towns. Almost two-thirds (67.4%) of those who mentioned housing inequalities were from cities. Only 9% of responses came from rural areas.

When respondents were asked about changes they have seen since 2015, when the UN launched the 2030 Agenda, in the status of services or access to necessities related to housing (access to quality and affordability of housing), a large majority of them indicated that the situation had worsened. This was particularly true among higher income countries.



¹ Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context., 30 December 2015 (Source: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G15/294/52/PDF/G1529452.pdf?OpenElement>)

“Things are pretty much the same except for **housing** which is **worse.**”
(Australia)




“The increasing incidence of people sleeping in tents and in their cars is also a **new phenomenon** in Dublin and other cities in Ireland.”
(Ireland)



“Low-income workers are unable to afford to purchase houses in regular neighborhood or even to rent in Lima. The **housing situation** was also **exacerbated** by the recent influx of refugees and migrants from Venezuela, Haiti and other countries experiencing unrest.” **(Peru)**

“People in poor neighborhoods have been displaced from their homes and resettled in tenements 30 miles away where basic facilities and education are not there and livelihoods have been disrupted.” **(India)**



“More evictions especially due to innocent defaults that have **worsened the situation** of families, especially those with young children.” **(Italy)**

To the question, “Who suffers most in your area/community in terms of housing and homelessness,” responses referred to women and children, migrants and refugees, indigenous peoples and ethnic groups, elderly persons and youth, persons experiencing poverty, and people living on the streets. Some quotes of *why* these particular groups suffer can be found in the following table:

Who suffers and why in terms of housing/homelessness?

- “Remote communities (like indigenous people) have very limited access to health, education, services. Racial discrimination, inadequate housing and lack of a voice.” **(Australia)**
- “Women continue to struggle to keep their families fed, clothed, educated, to pay the rent, the bills. They are working in very low paid jobs and often the husbands have abandoned the family.” **(Pakistan)**
- “Immigrant families with language barriers- lack of education – struggle with housing.” **(USA)**
- “Children migrants and refugees lack of basic human rights to appropriate housing.” **(Ireland)**
- “Children, youth, elderly and ethnic groups suffer due to lack of adequate living conditions and social imbalance.” **(Gabon)**
- “Street children suffer due to extreme poverty situations, oppressive cultural beliefs, and social inequality.” **(Ghana)**

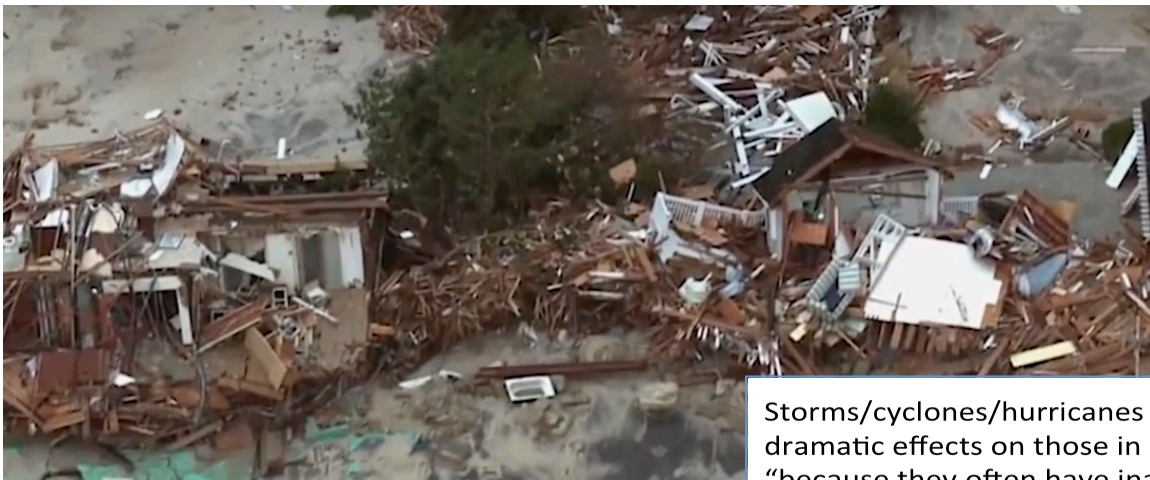
Housing unaffordability was another crucial dimension highlighted in responses to our survey. We received a great deal of input in the survey about the cost of housing. It is obvious that people are really concerned with the lack of housing affordability. This was especially



stressed in the most developed countries.

When respondents addressed the question, “Have there been any natural disasters in your area since 2015” and were queried about how **natural disasters were associated with housing issues** in their area, they most frequently cited that flooding due to storms, cyclones, hurricanes and other extreme weather conditions impacted their houses and livelihoods.

Those whose localities had been impacted by climate-related disasters since 2015 stated that poverty and income inequality were associated with vulnerability to destructive storms and extreme weather events. This, in turn, led to damage to, or destruction of, housing, as cited by many respondents. Such responses were prominent, especially in countries with lower or low income levels.



“Because the poor families in urban areas lack decent housing, and do not have employment to support leases and so they build in subnormal areas, being completely vulnerable to these natural calamities”. **(Colombia)**

Storms/cyclones/hurricanes have had dramatic effects on those in poverty... “because they often have inadequate housing that suffers the most damage during severe storms and they also have less income to put towards unexpected things such as storm costs.” **(United States)**



“The homeless population increases significantly with each hurricane (due to collapse of hillsides and/or floods caused by heavy rains) and solutions arrive at a slow pace and disproportionate to reality/needs.” **(Brazil)**

Vulnerability to natural disasters was associated not only with the loss of homes and an impact upon livelihoods, but also with a lack of adequate finances to rebuild and extreme difficulty in recovering from losses. Who is most affected or disadvantaged when natural disasters occur? Respondents pointed out that persons experiencing poverty, people very close to the area of disaster, youth, and persons living in street situations are among those most affected by extreme weather events.



- “People from poorer neighborhoods, living in poor settlements in Lima, often near the rivers or on the side of the mountains...They are informal settlements and it seems the local government is not interested.” **(Peru)**
- “Those in poverty often have inadequate housing that suffers the most damage during severe storms and they also have less income to put towards unexpected things such as storm costs.” **(USA)**
- “Youth are most affected by disaster.” **(Cameroon)**
- “Low houses, very close to area of disaster, did not have proper safe houses or homes.” **(Kiribati)**
- “The most affected by natural disasters are the poor living in street situation.” **(Brazil)**

Recommendations for addressing homelessness and unaffordable housing due to natural disasters.

The homeless population increases significantly with each extreme weather event and solutions arrive at a slow pace and disproportionate to reality/needs. Respondents who connected environmental disasters and housing issues also provided some **solutions to the problem of vulnerability to natural disasters.**

- **Availability of affordable housing**

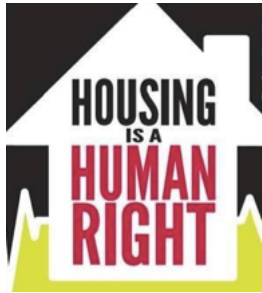
“We need more affordable housing. If low income individuals had adequate low cost housing options they would be able to save more money, providing a better ability to deal with unexpected costs such as storm related issues”, said one survey respondent from the United States (Outreach service in a Midwest County). The availability of appropriate accommodation with



medical/psychiatric and practical support was among the recommended solutions some respondents provided.

- **Awareness raising / information sharing / Community participation**

When survey respondents were asked about recommendations for addressing homelessness and vulnerability to natural disasters, “effective information, education and communication before the calamities” was identified as an essential solution, otherwise “the people would depend upon the nature’s stability for their survival” (Kenya). Respondents from India pointed to the need for creating awareness and organizing people to fight for their rights. A well functioning



legal system, with trained lawyers who will defend those affected by natural disasters, was seen by some respondents as crucial in the process of addressing vulnerable persons.

Community participation in the reparatory process was also an important feature named by respondents as necessary in order to resolve vulnerability to extreme weather incidents. Strengthening grassroots organizations was considered equally significant in this regard.

- **Social Protection & other Policies / Funding**

Some survey respondents suggested that government has to “increase federal funding for housing assistance - for repairs and low interest loans for home purchases,” (USA) in order to minimize people’s vulnerability to natural disasters and homelessness. Other responses identified the need for international financial and economic justice that could put a stop to wealthier countries taking advantage of the poorer countries’ natural resources. Additionally, governmental policies that mitigate climate change effects were among the most frequent answers provided by respondents.

Case studies on homelessness/inadequate housing as expression of inequalities.

Case study 1

Inadequate Housing – Lukulu, Zambia



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“Musole, a 14 year old girl suffering from severe malnutrition and TB. Musole weighs only 20 kgs and lives with her old grandmother in a mud thatch house constructed over 10 years ago before her father died in 2009. The roof is badly broken and the rain pours in during the current wet season. Her biological mother abandoned the child and they have no source of income apart from the little the grandmother grows and begs from the local community. It is a very traditional and patriarchal society, and girls and women receive less education, and thus have less opportunity to provide for themselves. A social welfare department exists but has little or no resources. This woman has been to Social Welfare many times and has been turned away

empty handed. Social Cash Transfer has been introduced for the most vulnerable in the society. Yet this woman has been unable to access it. It seems that communities have local coordinators who decide who receive and in many cases these coordinators are corrupt or politically aligned. Therefore those who should receive frequently miss out.”

Case study 2

Inadequate Housing – Jicamarca, Peru



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“Homelessness in Peru is not apparent as one can hardly see people living in open spaces even in Lima. However, there are neighborhoods in Lima where people live in inadequate housing build on the side of the many barren hills around Lima. Often families would stake their claim on a piece of land or purchase them and initially build a makeshift house from any available materials. Despite purchasing the land or building their houses, there is no security of tenure, as it will take years before they can get a proper land title. Most of the neighborhoods, especially the newly settled do not have access to piped water, sewer and sometimes there is even no

proper sanitation and electricity. Income inequality in Peru remains an issue despite the reduction in extreme poverty and the economic improvement in the last ten years. ”

Case study 3

Street children – Kumasi, Ghana



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“In Northern Ghana, it is customary to give a girl-child to an aunt to be raised. Some aunts turn these girls into household helps, abuse and maltreat them. Many of these girls escape this exploitation and slavery by migrating to Kumasi to work for their survival. However when the children get to Kumasi, they soon realize that they have no qualifications or job skills for dignified jobs. They end up carrying loads as “head porters” or engage in commercial sex work, or wash plates for food vendors, or commit armed robbery for a living. Some end up as drug addicts, while others suffer all sorts of abuses from gangsters they meet on the street. Another reason many young girls go to the street is to flee forced or early marriages, which is another way their fathers trade on

their girl-child. A young boy dropped out of school when his poor widowed mother could no longer provide for his school needs. In order to survive, he came to the street, hoping to engage in petty trade to support his daily needs as well as his family. On the streets, he had no place to sleep and nothing to eat. The struggles he encountered left him depressed and emotionally unstable.”

Case study 4

Inadequate Housing/Homelessness – Ireland



NGO COMMITTEE

“The boy in the small photo is 5 years old and ate his carbonara on the ground as he couldn’t manage otherwise. His mom availed of the hot meals despite living in homeless hotel accommodation where the only meal on offer is breakfast. Children are now being born into homelessness which is a new phenomenon in Ireland. Ireland is currently experiencing a housing crisis. Home for many is a sleeping bag on a broken box and is evident to all, even around Dublin City Centre. In 2018, there were 72,000 households in need of a home. As of Nov 2019, there are 10,448 people homeless in

Ireland of whom 3,826 are children. Given that there is a lack of houses those who are homeless are housed in hotels and family hubs and the typical length of a stay can be up to 2 years. The figures exclude those who are in refuges. In 2018, there were 1,138 admissions of women and 1,667 admissions of children to refuge in Ireland.”

Submitted by the Members of the NGOCSocD Grassroots Task Force subcommittee
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