



“Housing, the front line defense against the COVID-19 outbreak,” says UN expert

GENEVA (17 March 2020) – As Governments worldwide are relying on people to stay home to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, they must take urgent measures to prevent anyone falling into homelessness and ensure access to adequate housing for those without, a UN expert said.

“Housing has become the frontline defense against the coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation,” said Leilani Farha, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing.

“I am deeply concerned about two specific population groups: those living in emergency shelters, homelessness, and informal settlements, and those facing job loss and economic hardship which could result in mortgage and rental arrears and evictions.”

According to the expert, approximately 1.8 billion people worldwide live in homelessness and grossly inadequate housing, often in overcrowded conditions, lacking access to water and sanitation – making them particularly vulnerable to contracting the virus, as they are often suffering from multiple health issues.

“I am urging States to take extraordinary measures to secure the right to housing for all to protect against the pandemic. Good practices are emerging in a few States, including: moratoriums on evictions due to rental and mortgage arrears; deferrals of mortgage payments for those affected by the virus; extension of winter moratoriums on forced evictions of informal settlements; and increased access to sanitation and emergency shelter spaces for homeless people,” Farha said.

While significant, further measures are required to curb the risk for these vulnerable groups and address the growing infection rates, the Special Rapporteur said.

At a minimum, to ensure protection of those living in homelessness or grossly inadequate housing, States must: cease all evictions; provide emergency housing with

services for those who are affected by the virus and must isolate; ensure that the enforcement of containment measures (eg: curfews) does not lead to the punishment of anyone based on their housing status; provide equal access to testing and health care; and provide adequate housing which may require the implementation of extraordinary measures as appropriate in a state of emergency, including using vacant and abandoned units and available short-term rentals.

With respect to those facing job loss and economic hardship, States must: provide direct financial assistance for or defer rental and mortgage payments; enact a moratorium on evictions due to arrears; introduce rental stabilization or reduction measures; and, at least for the duration of the pandemic, suspend utility costs and surcharges.

“Measures are being introduced and significant resources allocated to mitigate against the economic downturn caused by COVID-19, such as lowering interest rates. There is a risk that such measures will enable global financial actors to use the pandemic and the misfortunes of many to dominate housing markets without regard for human rights standards, as they did in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis,” the Special Rapporteur said. “States must prevent the predatory practices of institutional investors in the area of residential real estate.

“By ensuring access to secure housing with adequate sanitation, States will not only protect the lives of those who are homeless or living in informal settlements but will help protect the entire world’s population by flattening the curve of CV19,” the UN expert concluded.

ENDS

Ms Leilani Farha is the [UN 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. She took up her mandate in June 2014. Farha is the Executive Director of the NGO Canada without Poverty, based in Ottawa. A lawyer by training, for the past 20 years Ms. Farha has worked both internationally and domestically on the implementation of the right to adequate housing for the most marginalized groups and on the situation of people living in poverty. Her most recent [report to the Human Rights Council](#) focusses on access to justice for the right to housing.

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