

Good afternoon. It is a distinct pleasure to be here. I am Leilani Farha, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to housing. I was appointed in 2014 by the UN Human Rights Council to serve as a global monitor on housing conditions and State obligations in this regard.

I am visiting Ireland on an academic visit, not an official mission, so I am not here to assess the implementation of the right to housing in your domestic context. Instead, I can convey my work and expertise so that I might assist Ireland as it grapples with a number of significant housing issues. I have learned that homelessness is on the rise– up an alarming 34% in the last year. I have also learned about the paucity of social housing, and the ways in which housing has been financialized - with foreign investment being encouraged through tax policy and foreign investors playing a dominant role in the housing market. I was also interested to learn that last year Parliament voted down the inclusion of the right to housing as an enumerated right in the Constitution.

When I am confronted with housing situations like these, where conditions seem to be contrary to human rights standards, I am concerned that a State's international human rights commitments are not being taken up and that commitments made with respect to housing under the Sustainable Development Goals will not be achieved.

As you know, Target 11.1 of Goal 11 of Agenda 2030 commits States to ensuring access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services by 2030, which also means ending homelessness within this time frame. States made similar commitments under the New Urban Agenda.

These housing goals and targets are unlikely to be met in the next 12 years, unless States adopt human rights based housing strategies that recognize and implement housing as a human right.

Why are human rights so essential to housing strategies?

Homelessness, and grossly inadequate or unaffordable housing are an assault on dignity and life and as such go to the heart of what triggers human rights concern. Human rights violations of this nature demand human rights responses.

Human rights demand that Governments interact with people who are homeless and inadequately housed as rights holders empowered to engage and be involved in decisions affecting their lives. Experience shows that effective strategies are those that are empowering and inclusive of rights holders.

A rights-based approach clarifies who is accountable to whom: all levels of government are accountable to people, particularly marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Lastly, human rights incorporate universal norms which bring coherence and coordination to multiple areas of law and policy through a common purpose and shared set of values.

My most recent report focuses on the core principles that should inform a human rights based strategy. Let me describe some of them.

First, housing strategies must be based in law and affirm the right to housing as a legal right. This does not necessarily mean Constitutional provisions, though it could. Constitutional recognition of the right to housing is now very common. But it could equally be a legislated right to housing.

Strategies must prioritize those most in need and must make an absolute priority of eliminating homelessness and addressing the needs of those in the most desperate circumstances.

Strategies must adopt a comprehensive and whole-of-government approach, beyond just housing Ministries. Effective housing strategies must co-ordinate and guide the work of multiple departments as well as multiple layers of government, from local to national.

Strategies must ensure accountable budgeting and tax justice. Taxation is an important means for States to discourage speculation and encourage affordable housing.

Strategies must put in place independent institutional mechanisms to monitor progress and hold governments accountable to goals and timelines. They must also ensure access to justice, including access to hearings and remedies in courts or elsewhere.

Lastly, Strategies must clarify the obligations of private actors and regulate financial, housing and real estate markets. The obligation to realize the right to housing lies with States and cannot be delegated to private actors. However, housing strategies will not be effective if they fail to engage the dominant role played by financial markets and investors which are helping to push low and middle income households out of cities. Strategies must include robust measures to reorient private investment and development to ensure inclusive cities and affordable housing.

I hope this overview assists you as you move forward to ensure the right to housing for your most vulnerable populations. Before closing, I encourage you to take bold and swift measures to urgently address homelessness as an egregious human rights violation, no different from any other violation of the right to life, and security of the person.

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have. Thank you.