

## An adequate environment for everyone

### Inclusive housing and sustainable families

1 November 2019



Urban settlements are a growing challenge for social inclusion and development. With its rapid growth and increasing challenges, innovative solutions are needed to ensure social inclusion and development. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the UN Conference on Housing (Habitat III) have set global standards to make cities sustainable by creating career and business opportunities, safe and affordable housing, and building resilient societies and economies. Some of the proposals involve investment in public transport, creating green public spaces, and improving urban planning and management in participatory and inclusive ways. Strategies that have proven to be effective and measurable need to be taken to ensure that no one is left behind. Modern cities should aim to be resilient and constantly diagnosed of their urban strength. A holistic approach of the numerous urban variables can manage to give a complete picture of the city's vigor.

A dialogue among stakeholders is equally important; any effort aimed at facilitating it among government, civil society, residents, and the private sector about risks and the performance of urban systems is a worthwhile cause. With an accurate diagnosis, priority actions and investments

The fifty-eighth session of the United Nations Commission for Social Development will take place from 10 to 19 February 2020 under the priority theme 'Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness'. The Commission is the advisory body responsible for the social development pillar of global development.

This paper contains the written statement sent to that Commission by the International Federation for Family Development as an ECOSOC General Consultative Status organization, in accordance with the ECOSOC resolution 1996/31.

It deals with the need of affordable housing, as expressed by the first point of the Venice Declaration: "Cities design should include all family situations and social groups, flexible urban and environmentally sustainable planning, and social services to meet every need." \*

\* Founding document of the 'Inclusive Cities for Sustainable Families' project. See more information at: <https://bit.ly/2qgAbCw>

## Homeless or houseless? \*

Housing has become a political issue and has contributed to putting homelessness on the map.

Housing is essential to ending homelessness, but housing alone is not sufficient. Tackling homelessness requires a multi-disciplinary approach, involving combatting discrimination, social exclusion, poverty, inequalities, the financialization of housing that leads to vacant property, etc.

There must be a clarification what we mean by 'housing', 'adequate housing' and 'affordable housing'. Also, it should be noted that "homeless" is not the same as "houseless". The right to adequate housing is recognized and enshrined within broader international human rights legislation. Affordability is a key criterion of the adequacy of housing. In Habitat, the term "Housing" already incorporates social dimensions, as demonstrated as a slogan "Not Just A Roof". Homelessness isn't all about the availability of housing but involves other factors that enable people to lead a safe and decent life without discrimination.

There are policies and programmes to support/deliver affordable housing in countries across the world. However, given that homeless people are, in most situations, the poorest in any society, affordable housing policies and projects are not reaching this group. Many low-cost housings are, simply, not affordable for the very poorest, due to high purchase costs, unavailability or inadequate terms of financing, lack of regular, formal employment, lack of payment flexibility, high interest rates or minimum acceptable income level, which discourage or disenfranchise the poorest.

In other cases, affordable housing for low-cost groups are built in peripheral areas of the city, which requires additional costs for transport, local taxes and utility charges. For these reasons, for many homeless people, income is the highest priority, not adequate housing.

The urban poor in the world already construct their own housing, but it is informal and, by UN-Habitat's criteria, inadequate. This problem cannot be addressed by providing for them adequate housing which is unaffordable.

\* Report of the Expert Group Meeting 'Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for All to Address Homelessness' (Nairobi, 22 - 24 May 2019), organized in preparation of the Commission for Social Development.

can be identified, as well as strengthening resilience for planned or aspirational projects.

The family unit has proven to be one of the main agents for development within societies and thus cornerstone for inclusive cities. Therefore, its area of action must be of great concern in order to facilitate its role in generations to come. If families are these crucial development agents, an adequate environment is needed to facilitate their role. The Inclusive Cities for Sustainable Cities project is a worldwide alliance promoted by The International Federation for Family Development that aims to be inclusive of sustainable families by being responsive to their needs in these ten issues, based on 2030 Agenda and Habitat III and under the leadership of the Veneto Region in Italy: Housing, New Technologies, Education, Healthcare, Safety, Clean Air, Transportation, Affordability, Leisure and Tourism, and Vulnerable Families. Their commitment consists on presenting once a year the results in those topics and attending an annual Conference organized to share good practices.

## Intergenerational Urban Arrangements

The first of the topics of the project mentioned above is Housing. Cities design should include all family situations and social groups, flexible urban and environmentally sustainable planning, and social services to meet every need. Almost 1 billion people of the world's urban population live in inadequate housing conditions in slums and at least 2 million people in the world are forcibly evicted every year, while millions are threatened with forced evictions. Adequate housing is critical to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals because it creates acceptable conditions for an adequate standard of living, water and sanitation, health, good, quality education, freedom of expression, privacy and family, and employment.

Despite all different family's typologies, flexible-housing units should be promoted. Usually, the life cycle of housing units can last between 50 and 70 years. But, families respond to a wide variety of scenarios as of a single person, a couple, families with children, later on adolescents and their development, students out for education, youth in transition to the labour market, parents living alone after youth emancipation, grandchildren, older persons leaving alone, etc.

It is clear that housing cannot be static. It should be adaptable to different stages of family formation and transformation. It should consider flexibility to reconfigure, adapt or even change size. Dwelling units could be modular, with the possibility of interchange rooms, or having common spaces for the community, like offices or extra rooms for visitants in ground floors or rooftops. Regarding urban design and management, in cities and regions public policies should allow housing interchange depending the different realities, especially for low income families that are more vulnerable to changes in prices, family situations and resource availability.

### **Breaking the Intergenerational Cycle of Poverty**

In order to tackle social exclusion and ensure inclusive housing some countries have developed and implemented policies to support the transition from education to labour market of young persons. For example, Nordic countries are known to have a strong commitment on education combined with a variety of social aid. The Nordic countries stand apart from the other countries through more widespread and diverse state aid. In this regard, housing aid is more widespread in Finland, Denmark and in Iceland, particularly for young unemployed people having left the education system and the parental home. The proportion of young people covered by housing benefit in Sweden and Norway is lower and the number receiving such benefits is closer to the average. Above all, major differences exist concerning the number of NEETs receiving no aid at all. This rate is among the lowest in Finland and Iceland and below average in Denmark and Norway, while Sweden has one of the highest rates of young people receiving no aid at all. That said, the proportion of 20-29 year-olds considered as in employment is similar between Nordic countries and comparatively high: the employment rate of 20-24 year-olds is 63.7% in Denmark, 58.1% in Sweden and 66.8% in Norway. Meanwhile, the employment rate of 25-29 year-olds is 80% in Norway, 74.8% in Finland and 77.2% in Sweden. Denmark and Iceland stand out from other Nordic countries through their high percentages of students in employment during their school year, whether or not the job is part of their training. This rate is 32% in Denmark and 26% in Iceland compared with an average 13%.

Young people in the Nordic countries also receive more social aid than those in the other countries,

although coverage is more varied. Young people leaving their parental home more frequently receive housing aid and also more frequently receive compensation as job seekers in Denmark and Finland. Aid supporting the entry into adult life and aid for education are more developed in these countries, enabling young adults to move into their own home while completing their education or starting out their professional careers. This aid is less widespread in Sweden, and the proportion of young people without jobs having left the education system covered by no aid is extremely high. Denmark and Finland rather than Sweden or Norway have the state more strongly committed to making both access to tertiary education and the possibility of leaving the parental home not entirely dependent on family resources. With nearly one-third of students working a job during their school year, Denmark is, together with Iceland, one of the countries that most favours professional integration during education rather than entirely separating the two life periods. As such, young people leave their parental home at a much later age than in other countries, and in Denmark and Finland the departure is associated with a strong increase in the risk of poverty (Aassve et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the system is geared towards encouraging young people to take on that risk through support for those leaving the parental home before finding stable employment.

In France, leaving the parental home is accompanied by housing aid and the familiarization of financial aid, somewhat similar to the Nordic countries, which sets it apart from the other "continental" countries in a number of respects.

The proportion of young adults living with their families (49%) is significantly higher than the average (34%), and the average age of departure from the parental home (23.5 years old) is lower than the average (26.7). The share of young adults as a whole receiving housing benefit is much higher than the average (36% compared with under 9% on average for young people leaving education), with a particularly strong difference for young people neither in education nor employment, 43% of them receiving housing benefit.

Leaving the parental home is accompanied by broad access to housing benefits, while access to other forms of aid is much more limited. The social aid system covers a larger fraction of the young adult population than in most other systems in Continental Europe and provides an important safety net for the most vulnerable having left the education system but without having found a job. \*

## Recommendations

- Implement measures on housing with a disaggregated and adapted approach, to each of the different situations within the family: young couples, single parents, older persons living alone, persons with disabilities, widows, etc.
- Take into account the changing needs of urban settlements; future houses should include the design for all family situations. Furthermore, housing with common settlements allowing older persons, youth, children, persons with disabilities, to cohabit facilitate integration and the generational transfers. Intergenerational urban arrangements should be promoted among public and private sector investment.
- Consider housing strategies that focus on city challenges and growth with a family perspective in every decision so it can be flexible and adaptable to its changing needs.
- Safeguard cultural heritage and physical landscape, in order to protect all the characteristics of citizens that are part of the family.
- Evaluate the impact of city design in all members of the family unit and especially for the children, older persons and persons with disabilities as the most vulnerable to changes.
- Invest in sustainable housing urban development policy that minimizes the gap between high-income families and low-income families. This policy must pay special attention to the most vulnerable and in risk of social exclusion in order to achieve a lasting improvement in their liveability and sustainability. In this context, public co-housing projects aimed at disadvantaged people and families and marginal segments of the population can be developed without overloading the use of land and without increasing energy needs. It is key to establish a strong multidimensional and multidisciplinary network of social services.
- Develop indicator is the link between life and environmental sustainability: not only as a limit to defend the ecology, but also to include new models of life and social organization: mobility, air quality, energy efficiency, the prevention of earthquakes or the fight against waste.
- Ensure access to housing, both from an architectural and economical point of view. An important aspect of access to housing is its affordability, cost of housing, settlements quality, its relationship with health, safety, etc. In this case, an important element is represented by the percentage of income that is dedicated to housing, evaluating the income levels. If the percentage destined to housing is high, other vital benefits will be lost (food, education, etc.).
- Promote the connectivity with ICT and the digital world as a gateway for the services people need (access to health rights, family allowances; home care or other assignments going through on line procedures). It is necessary to evaluate which are the one left behind in the use of digital technologies and address the gap.
- Ensure social integration and the fight against loneliness and isolation specifically for older persons living alone, in a context allowing them to establish social relations in order to overcome the terrible feeling of loneliness, death or separation.

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\* 'Aid policies for young people in Europe and the OECD countries', Olivier Thévenon, FamiliesAndSocieties European Research Project, Working Paper 34 (2015), (pp. 21-37). Available at: <https://bit.ly/2JFilus>