

**High Level Political Forum 2018 – Thematic Review of SDGs
implementation
SDG 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe,
resilient and sustainable**

11 July 2018

Good afternoon distinguished delegates, representatives from civil society organizations, UN entities and participants,

It is a distinct pleasure to be here at the High Level Political Forum and to engage you on SDG11.

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 and have been immersed for the last four years in understanding global housing conditions and working on global solutions.

This is my first time participating in a HLPF – as I prepared for this event, I have been amazed at what has happened with the SDGs. Not in terms of progress made, sadly. But instead with respect to how the implementation of the Goals seems to have become a complex web and an industry unto itself.

And so, having been a student of law many moons ago, I'd like to use some of my training to do what I was taught back then. I want to bring us back to some basic principles and utilize my time before you today to make just two points.

First, that housing is the most significant issue facing cities today and will continue to be so.

Second, that Goal 11 and Target 11.1 will not be met unless each State develops and implements human rights based housing strategies.

Half of humanity – 3.5 billion people – lives in cities today. By 2030, almost 60 per cent of the world's population will live in urban areas.

As it stands, globally, housing conditions are fraught.

It is estimated that 1.6 billion people are inadequately housed worldwide and that close to 900 million people are living in informal settlements and encampments in both the global North and South.

I have seen people living on sidewalks in India and California, beside railway lines in Mexico and Philippines, without electricity in Cabo Verde and Serbia. I have seen children playing on garbage heaps in informal settlements like they are trampolines and I have seen persons with disabilities languishing in darkened rooms, cut off from society.

Though there are no global homeless statistics, I assure you it is an acute problem – one that hardly garners the priority status it deserves. There are few cities I visit where I don't see people having to live on the streets, forced to eat, sleep, cook and defecate on sidewalks. They cling to dignity and life – but it is a thin thread.

I have seen entire communities of marginalized and vulnerable groups evicted from their homes and lands by often brutal force, in inclement weather, so that extractive industries can turn a profit, or to make way for a new shopping mall or so that luxury flats can be built.

And I know of private equity and asset management firms using unprecedented wealth, cash and power to insinuate their way into cities, gobble up entire neighbourhoods, only to use housing as a vehicle to grow profits for a few who have no intention of living there, while displacing the many who do. Creating cities for tourists and the wealthy.

What is perhaps most worrying of all is that these assaults on dignity and life are being accepted as fixed features of a new global economic order.

If we do not find housing solutions, no State will be able to meet their other Agenda 2030 commitments because without access to adequate, secure and affordable housing there is no equality, there is no end to poverty, to health and well being, to sustained access to education, to employment.

Of course, States **have** recognized these conditions must be addressed and have responded appropriately by committing en masse to Goal 11 and Target 11.1 of the 2030 Agenda: ensuring access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services by 2030 and to upgrading slums.

The challenge of ensuring access to adequate housing for all in the next 12 years is not a matter of simply plugging away trying to improve on current programming and policies. It is clear that in most cases current approaches are not working.

My recommendation is that if States are going to meet their commitments under Goal 11, Target 11.1, a fundamental shift is required – a shift whereby States start to understand housing differently – where housing is recognized and implemented as a human right, not a mere matter of policy, nor simply a commodity, and certainly not something to be left to the whims of the unregulated private development sector.

Why do I think a human rights approach would make a difference?

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.

A rights-based approach clarifies who is accountable to whom: all levels of government are accountable to people, particularly marginalized and vulnerable groups, who are recognized as rights holders, not the beneficiaries of charity.

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.

I recently presented a report to the Human Rights Council which provides a checklist for States as to the core principles

that should inform a human rights based strategy. Let me elaborate some of those principles.

First, housing strategies must be based in law and affirm the right to housing as a legal right either in a Constitution or through legislation. You'll find those States that are most active in addressing homelessness and inadequate housing are those who've legislated the right.

Strategies must prioritize those most in need and must make an absolute priority of eliminating homelessness. I note that the 2030 Agenda requires States to end homelessness – what else could ensuring access to adequate, affordable, secure housing mean?

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.

I want to be very clear here because I have heard States say that there is no way they can meet their commitments under the SDGs without engaging the private sector.

If that's true, then States must recognize and understand that the obligation to realize the right to housing lies with States and cannot be delegated to private actors. Housing strategies will have to engage the dominant role played by financial markets and investors and must include robust measures to reorient private investment and development to ensure inclusive cities and affordable housing.

I think meeting the requirements of Goal 11, Target 11.1 will not be easy. But there is no choice. Because anything else creates cities that none of us want to live in.

-- Notes for post presentation discussion

1. The Shift
2. Cities and their important role
3. Municipalist Manifesto – Meeting on Sunday July 15 5:30-7:00