
COMMISSION for SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

United Nations Headquarters, New York



Side event Wednesday 12 February 2020

Report of the interactive, evidence based panel with international experts who explored the latest evidence on the human rights dimensions and interlinkages between the implementation of universal social protection systems, including floors, to combat and ultimately do away with homelessness and ensure adequate housing for all, and simultaneously address inequality.

Organisers: Winifred Doherty and Sylvia Beales, Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors

Moderator: Paul Ladd – Director, UNRISD

Keynote speaker: Juha Kaakinen – Director, Y Foundation, Finland. The presentation is [here](#).

Panellists

Daniel Zavala Porras – Ministro Consejero, Mission of Costa Rica to the UN.

Maren Jiménez – Social Affairs Officer, UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UNDESA).

The presentation is [here](#).

Joanna Padgett Herz – Project Coordinator, Institute of Global Homelessness.

The presentation is [here](#).

Christina Behrendt – Head, Social Policy Unit, International Labour Organisation (ILO). The presentation is [here](#).

Sylvia Beales – Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors. The presentation is [here](#).

Discussants:

Jack Kupferman - Gray Panthers, Stakeholder Group on Ageing

Lucy Richardson - IDA, Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities

Thomas Pallithinam - Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP).

Overview summary

The event was organised by the Global Coalition of Social Protection Floors and sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations and UNDESA. Co-sponsors were UNRISD, INPEA, Global Call for Action Against Poverty (GCAP), the ILO, The Institute of Global Homelessness, the Africa Platform for Social Protection, the Stakeholder Group on ageing, The Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities and USP 2030. Experts for the panel were drawn from leading organisations in the field of social protection and homelessness.

The theme of the 58th Commission of Social Development was “Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness.” 2020 is also the 75th anniversary of the Commission and the 25th anniversary of the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development. The side event was therefore part of a series of dialogues to support accelerated realisation of inclusive societies and reduction of inequalities everywhere for people of all ages. The event examined in depth two overarching social ambitions - that of achieving universal social protection for all across the life course, and doing away with homelessness. It examined the ways in which how the issues are linked, how progress on one (social protection) can help to provide solutions to the other (homelessness), and what the key policy provisions are to achieve both.

Conclusions of the event were:

- The achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals will depend in large part on making the social protection floor a reality for all. It is important to note that the social protection floor is a minimum, delivering essential health care and basic income security.
- Lack of social protection is a significant cause of homelessness. Progress on both social protection and homelessness depends on the willingness of government to deliver on their human rights obligations to all their citizens, recognising that both social protection and adequate housing are human rights.
- Homelessness is increasing almost everywhere. Finland is the only country which is on course to eliminate homelessness and is an example from which all other countries can learn. Having found a policy that worked, “Housing First”, Finland has stuck with it, provided the resources needed to implement it effectively, built the networks and coalitions of participants and supporters that anchor it in its wider society – in other words, Finland has demonstrated political will. Yet other governments regard homelessness as an impossible problem.
- The same approach could be adopted for the progressive implementation of social protection floors. There is plentiful evidence of the benefits of social protection in countries where people receive at least some benefits; social protection is affordable – and, in the small number of countries where it cannot be funded through national resources, international assistance in the form of a Global Fund is eminently feasible. Only the political will to make it happen is lacking.

Rights and obligations

The Rights to Social security and adequate housing are contained within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 as follows:

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Article 22.

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 25

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Both social protection and housing have clear targets in the Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 11 of the 2030 Agenda:

1.3 Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and vulnerable.

11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums.

Health coverage is an essential component of social protection and is also a target in Goal 3:

3.8: Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health care services and access to safe, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.

Evidence provided by the keynote speaker, panellists and respondents show that, with some exceptions, now, 10 years before the target date of the 2030 Agenda, policies and actions are a very long way from making those targets a reality.

Data and definitions

Data cannot be mentioned without definitions; because without definitions, and the data to support them, it is not possible to monitor and assess progress towards the realisation of universal rights and SDG targets. There are at present no clear definitions of homelessness between countries and no agreed methodology for collecting data and statistics on homelessness. One objective of the Commissions work was to make progress on globally accepted definitions of homelessness. For these reasons statistics on homelessness should be regarded as estimates.

While there is data and therefore greater clarity on the importance of social protection as being core to the successful implementation of the poverty, health and employment SDGs, and to reducing inequalities, there has been slow progress on extending coverage, financing and implementing universal roll out of the social protection floor; despite the full guidance for Member States set out in ILO recommendation 202.

The Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) sets out the standards for Member States on building comprehensive social security systems and extending social security coverage by prioritizing the establishment of universally accessible national floors of social protection.

- The components of the social protection floor are as follows:
- Everyone has access to essential health care, including maternity care.
- All children enjoy basic income security, providing access to nutrition, education, care, and any other necessary goods and services.
- All persons in active age who cannot earn sufficient income, enjoy basic income security, particularly in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity, disability.
- All older persons enjoy basic income security.

This repeats in similar wording the right to social security and to health set out in the Universal Declaration, but makes explicit that social protection should be afforded to those who cannot earn sufficient income, making clear that people experiencing in-work poverty should also have a right to income support provided by social protection. On average, full-time employment in a low-paid job brings two-earner couples with children to only 65% of the national median income. Over half OECD member states provide some sort of income support to top up the earnings of low-paid workers.¹ The ILO points out that poverty rates of people who are working are much higher in Asia (21%), the Arab states (16%) and above all in Africa where in 2018 almost one third of all workers were living in extreme poverty.² Currently some 55% of the world's population receive no social security benefit.

Social protection and homelessness

Data presented in the event illustrates why urgent progress is needed on social protection and homelessness.

STATE OF THE WORLD 2020

- Homelessness affects 1.6 billion people, with millions housed in informally built shelters and refugee camps that lack adequate and accessible services and fail all tests of adequacy
- 71% of people live in social and economic insecurity.
- 4 billion people have no access to even one social protection benefit
- 45% of the global population receives only one social protection benefit.
- 1.3 billion children do not have social protection
- Only 28% persons with disabilities receive social protection benefits
- 2.1 billion people have no access to safe water or basic sanitary services
- About 900 million people have no access to safe drinking water
- 815 million suffer from chronic hunger
- 100 million fall into poverty annually because they have to pay health services

Source Cichon et al

Homelessness

As mentioned above, there is no universally accepted definition of homelessness. Different countries work with different definitions and have different methods of collecting data so the numbers of homeless people which they record are not comparable.

Joanna Padgett Herz in her [presentation](#) illustrated definitions that are wide-ranging; for example *'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*

¹ OECD Observer. Fighting Poverty at Work.

https://oecdobserver.org/news/archivestory.php/aid/3066/Fighting_poverty_at_work.html

² ILO. (2019). Spotlight on work statistics. The working poor or how a job is no guarantee of decent living conditions.

https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/publication/wcms_696387.pdf

poverty, and a failure of multiple systems and the implementation of human rights” (Institute of Global Homelessness), and rudimentary, such as that used by Russian legislation – “*people without fixed abode or place of stay*”³, which in 2010, according to the Russian statistical agency Rosstat, delivered an estimate of just 64,000 homeless,⁴ likely to be an underestimate of the real figure.

As with the definitions, different methods are used to collect data on homelessness: Australia uses a street count and Russia a census with a focus on ‘records on residences and housing payments.’

Definitions of homelessness (IGH)

- People living on the streets or other open spaces;
- People living in temporary, emergency or crisis accommodation;
- People living in severely inadequate or insecure accommodation;
- People who lack access to affordable housing

Homelessness across the world

With the exception of one country, Finland, homelessness, on the basis of statistics gathered according to non-comparable definitions and by different methodologies, has increased over the past decade. There is little sign that this trend will be reversed any time soon. With so many different definitions of homelessness, with some countries including people living in inadequate or marginal housing as homeless, it is not possible to give a global figure of homeless persons. Suffice to say that it is very large. Estimates of homeless people provided by OECD member states, on the basis of different methodologies and base years, give a total of nearly 2 million.⁵ UN Habitat estimates that 1.6 billion people worldwide live in inadequate housing.⁶

Case Studies: Finland

In 1987 there were 17,000 homeless people in Finland. The number has come down steadily since then, is now under 4,000 and is on course to be zero within six years. According to Freek Spinnewijn, Director of FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless), Finland had already brought the number of homeless down to virtually zero.

Juha Kaakinen, CEO of the Y Foundation in Finland, (The presentation is [here](#).) outlined the policies and practices by which this has been achieved. The overall policy is ‘Housing First’ – the provision of permanent housing for homeless people with services to support the new tenants which help them deal with the problems that made them homeless in the first place. The provision of a stable roof over their heads makes it much easier for the formerly homeless tenants – and the services which support them – to manage and resolve their problems. And it also saves money. The savings in terms of the services needed by one person can be up to 9,600 euros a year when compared to the costs that would result from that person being homeless.⁷ Over a period of 30 years temporary solutions (hostels and shelters) have been largely replaced with permanent housing – independent rental apartments, social housing apartments and supported housing. In 1985 there were 2,121 shelters and homeless hostels; now there are just 52.

How has this been achieved? Juha’s clear answer is political will (and political will and political will). Finland’s approach to housing and homelessness, which pre-dates the official launch of Housing First, has

³ Institute of Global Homelessness. State of Homelessness in Countries with Developed Economies. https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2019/05/CASEY_Louise_Paper.pdf

⁴ Reported in EuroMaidan Press. <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/07/08/russia-has-as-many-as-5-million-homeless-not-the-64000-rosstat-reports-euromaidan-press/>

⁵ OECD Affordable Housing Database. <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/H3-1-Homeless-population.pdf>

⁶ Jesús Salcedo. Housing Unit, UN-Habitat. Homelessness and the SDGs.

https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2019/07/SALCEDO_Jesus_Presentation_2-1.pdf

⁷ Y Foundation “Housing First in Finland”. <https://ysaatio.fi/en/housing-first-finland>

survived through 11 prime ministers from different parties and is based on a wide partnership between state authorities, ministries, cities and NGOs.

An important conclusion to be drawn, accordingly, is that consistency of policy, purpose and implementation over time is required with support from governments of different ideological persuasions.

Costa Rica

Daniel Zavala explained how the government of Costa Rica is directly addressing the issues of homelessness which on the increase. There are approximately 7,000 homeless people in Costa Rica, mainly concentrated in urban areas, with 4,000 rough sleepers (described as “street” people – *personas en situación de abandono y situación de calle*) in the capital, San José. Nine out of ten of homeless people are addicts – drugs or alcohol – and similarly nine out of ten are of working age, between the ages of 18 and 65, a figure that came as surprise, with only 10 per cent of older persons, over the age of 65.

The importance of social and family networks should not be underestimated. These break down among homeless people in the urban environment.

The responses for homeless persons of working age focus ultimately on reintegration into employment by means of mentoring, training etc. This, however, may not possible for older persons so there are questions about approaches that are right for them. There is a possibility that they will be able to perform unpaid, reproductive services, (e.g. child-care, working with disabled persons etc). There is also a need to create a network to allow older persons to participate as citizens with full rights, in both the public and the private spheres. In this way, for both older persons and those of working age, socially inclusive policies are an integral part of the response to homelessness.

The government’s three pronged strategy is to:

1. Ensure that homeless people are integrated into social protection floors, including health provision;
2. Provide access to housing;
3. Decriminalise homelessness and combat stereotypes.

The government recognises that homelessness has multiple causes and four national institutions according participate in the National Policy Framework on homelessness:

- Ministry of Social Development
- National Institute of Drug Dependence and Alcoholism (*Instituto sobre Alcoholismo y Farmacodependencia*)
- National Council of Persons with Disabilities (*Consejo Nacional de Personas con Discapacidad*)
- National Council of Older Persons (*Consejo Nacional de la Persona Adulta Mayor*)

The experiences of Finland and Costa Rica show that it is essential to adopt a multidimensional approach to homelessness. People become homeless for a reason and, if those reasons, which inevitably vary from person to person, are not addressed, any respite from homelessness is likely to be temporary. Social protection – the provision of a basic income – together with health care and supporting services, which are a part of the social protection package, can prevent poverty and facilitate access to affordable housing. Housing First also involves specialist services which address the multiple causes of homelessness.

Social protection and inequality

Homelessness is, at least in part, a consequence of inequality – inequality in access to services and education and inequality in income. Inequality is increasing across the world. Social protection demonstrably reduces income inequality. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia social assistance and social insurance together reduce the Gini coefficient of inequality by 24%.

According to FEANTSA, which works across the EU, the multidimensionality of homelessness can be seen by looking at how trends in poverty reduction and homelessness can go in different directions. Less inequality does not automatically lead to less homelessness (as demonstrated by the Czech Republic, the least

unequal country in the EU); countries with more social housing do not necessarily have less homelessness (Netherlands); even countries with strong social protection systems struggle with homelessness (Denmark).

This also underlines the need to take a Housing First approach, deploying a tailored variety of government resources and making the stable roof first rather than the last component of the strategy.

Maren Jiménez pointed out in her presentation that statistics on income, provide only a very partial picture of inequality. They do not take account of inequality experienced by people discriminated against by age, gender, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other factors; groups and by people living in specific locations and by inequalities which are perpetuated or exacerbated by policy formulation, design and implementation. The presentation is [here](#).

Differences in educational achievement, for example, reflect horizontal inequalities between different groups. These are evident in school attendance statistics. These show large differences between children of parents with differing levels of education; children of higher and lower income families; and children of different ethnic groups – between whom, in theory, there should be no difference in attendance at secondary school which is, or should be, a universal service provided to all without discrimination. Inequality is intersectional, that is, the degree or impact of inequality experienced by individuals depends on factors such as age, ethnicity, gender, disability, location, sexual orientation, social and educational status, fluency in an official language etc.

Universal social protection is a step in the right direction but excluded groups can still suffer. They may lack information about benefits which are available; they may be subject to discrimination; and they may be excluded from the “universal” population because, for instance, they do not have the right ID documentation.⁸ Social protection does not in itself change the attitudes that lead to stigma and discrimination, and if not universally applied can therefore replicate or exacerbate exclusions. Homeless people are among those likely to be unable to access social protection support and services. For particularly vulnerable or discriminated groups, such as homeless people, as the example of Finland has shown, social protection has to be linked to guaranteed access to social services that can be tailored to particular needs, such as mental health support, alcoholism or drug addiction services.

Christina Behrendt in her [presentation](#) stressed the interconnections between the rights to social security and to adequate housing. The data show that for very large numbers of people these rights are non-existent or only partially realised. Only 45% of the global population is covered by one area of social protection; 23% of the world’s urban population lives in slums. The ILO has produced studies demonstrating the connections with global statistics showing that across the world there is a rough correlation between the percentage of the population living in slums and the percentage not covered by social protection. An even more informative correlation would show a comparison between countries with similar income levels.

Christina demonstrated that the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda show that a strong international consensus has been reached on the implementation of social protection floors, which is also extending to the urgency of tackling homelessness. It is also clear that there are a range of connections to show how social protection can reduce homelessness. By delivering a guaranteed minimum income and services, particularly health care, social protection can reduce or cushion the negative impacts of the risk factors that can trigger homelessness – unemployment, sickness, maternity, old age poverty and relationship

⁸ One very recent example of this is the treatment meted out in the United Kingdom to the children of the “Windrush Generations” (children who were brought to the UK as young children but who, for one reason or another, did not or were unable to regularise their nationality documents. They found themselves barred from health services, social security, employment and rental contracts – and effectively became non-people.

breakdowns. Besides a basic minimum income, social protection may include housing benefit. Thirty seven countries report having at least one type of housing allowance in place.⁹

Adea Kryeziu introduced the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (USP2030), launched in 2016,¹⁰ and invited those present to join the partnership. UNP 2030 calls for:

1. Protection throughout the life cycle: Establish universal social protection systems, including floors, that provide adequate protection throughout the life cycle;
2. Universal coverage: Provide universal access to social protection and ensure that social protection systems are rights-based, gender-sensitive and inclusive, leaving no one behind;
3. National ownership: Develop social protection strategies and policies based on national priorities and circumstances in close cooperation with all relevant actors;
4. Sustainable and equitable financing: Ensure the sustainability and fairness of social protection systems by prioritizing reliable and equitable forms of domestic financing, complemented by international cooperation and support where necessary;
5. Participation and social dialogue: Strengthen governance of social protection systems through institutional leadership, multisector coordination and the participation of social partners and other relevant and representative organisations, to generate broad-based support and promote the effectiveness of services.

Sylvia Beales spoke on behalf of the Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors, whose vision is to promote the implementation of social protection floors and the extension of social protection to all. The presentation is [here](#). With over 100 members comprising grassroots organisations, NGOs, think tanks, and individual experts the Coalition's mission is to work strategically, collaboratively and in spirit of global solidarity, to provide a space and virtual platform for coalition members united by the common purpose of promoting the consolidation of social protection floors from a human rights perspective. The Coalition stresses that social protection is a right and therefore an obligation of governments, and at a minimum, should consist of access to the set of goods and services set out in ILO Recommendation 202.

Sylvia pointed out this is not an unachievable fantasy but affordable and within the realms of possibility. 116 countries would theoretically be able to close their social protection gaps with national social protection spending increases of less than 4% of GDP (with 32 countries requiring less than 1% of GDP); 21 countries would require increases in spending of more than 4% of GDP to close their social protection gaps, and of these only a small number would be likely to require some temporary international support.

There are systemic issues which affect the full realisation of the right to social protection include the conditions attached to social protection determined by governments. These affect the range of social protection supports and services available and the people and groups who can benefit. To realise its transformative potential social protection needs to be universal, adequate and accessible to all across the life course. The resources are available; there is more than enough evidence that effective social protection reduces poverty and benefits the wider society as well as direct beneficiaries. Progress, however, is still painfully slow. Universal funding to underpin system development could be achieved via a global fund mechanism.

⁹ OECD. Affordable housing database. Key characteristics of housing allowances.

<https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PH3-2-Key-characteristics-of-housing-allowances.pdf>

¹⁰ USP2030 partners are World Bank and ILO (cochairs), other multilateral and bilateral development partners, UN Member States, trade unions, civil society organizations.

Discussion

Paul Ladd raised why social protection is “not happening” given the plentiful evidence that it is effective and affordable. Issues of homelessness and social protection (or the lack of it) go to the heart of how we govern the economy.

He reiterated that intersectionality – the way in which people’s different identities and statuses can have a cumulative impact on disadvantage – is a key issue. He pointed out that homeless people are neglected in multiple ways.

He invited discussants to look at the experiences of different sections of society in terms of homelessness and social protection.

Jack Kupferman (Gray Panthers, Stakeholder Group on Ageing) took up the issue of older people and homelessness, explaining causes and circumstances unique to older persons that could make them homeless. He gave the example of older widows in India who were shunned and abandoned by their families. The city of Vrindavan has become a mecca for widows who have been made homeless by their families. In other societies too it may be thought that older persons are cared for by their families, but the reality is that many older persons are not supported by younger generations. It is a government responsibility to deliver the rights of older people to social protection, care and shelter.

Mr Kupferman summarised as follows:

- The connection between homelessness and ageing is underacknowledged and under reported – and there is almost no data on this issue.
- Universal social protection will address some of the inequities and difficulties of older persons.
- Sometimes the causes of homelessness among older persons are unique to the ageing process.
- Solutions are available – but there has to be acknowledgement, accurate data and planning before solutions can be effective.

Lucy Richardson (IDA, Stakeholder Group on People with Disabilities) said that the cross cutting identities of persons with disabilities are a complicating factor. A key problem is the lack of accessible, appropriate and affordable housing for persons with disabilities, and inaccessible transport. To ensure that persons with disabilities are included it is necessary for there to be compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The Convention gives very clear guidance on the issues of the built environment and social protection and has been ratified by over 170 Member States.

While the SDGs have some relevant indicators for persons with disabilities there is a lack of adequate data. Without attention to data it is all too easy for persons with disabilities to be left behind.

Thomas Pallithinam (GCAP) explained that GCAP represented 11,000 CSOs in 57 countries. For GCAP the crux of the problem is politics and policy. Homelessness is not a standalone issue but a symptom of inequality. Inequality and homelessness share the same causes. The link between the absence of effective social protection and homelessness is evidenced by the fact that young people who are discharged from institutions (orphanages and children’s homes) are the very people who almost immediately become homeless.

Mr Pallithinam made the observation that the phrase “Leave no-one behind” is condescending – the SDGs should be about empowering people so they can have the capacity to say, “we will not be left behind.” To make change people should be willing to use the tools of data and evidence set out in today’s presentations.

Contributions from the floor included the importance of keeping social protection high on the policy agenda of the Commission for Social Development; and that the urgency of building family and community resilience requires action now to deliver universal social protection and to end homelessness.

Conclusions

- The achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals will depend in large part on making the social protection floor a reality for all. It is important to note that the social protection floor is a minimum, delivering essential health care and basic income security.
- Lack of social protection is a significant cause of homelessness. Progress on both social protection and homelessness depends on the willingness of government to deliver on their human rights obligations to all their citizens, recognising that both social protection and adequate housing are human rights.
- Homelessness is increasing almost everywhere. Finland is the only country which is on course to eliminate homelessness and is an example from which all other countries can learn. Having found a policy that worked, “Housing First”, Finland has stuck with it, provided the resources needed to implement it effectively, built the networks and coalitions of participants and supporters that anchor it in its wider society – in other words, Finland has demonstrated political will. Yet other governments regard homelessness as an impossible problem.
- The same approach could be adopted for the adoption of social protection floors. There is plentiful evidence of the benefits of social protection in countries where people receive at least some benefits; social protection is affordable – and, in the small number of countries where it cannot be funded through national resources, international assistance in the form of a Global Fund is eminently feasible. Only the political will to make it happen is lacking.

Further references

<http://www.socialprotectionfloorscoalition.org/>

<https://housingfirsteurope.eu/countries/finland/>

<https://ighomelessness.org/>

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/world-social-report/2020-2.html>

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/01/55706.pdf>

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<https://www.stakeholdergrouponageing.org/>

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<https://gcap.global/>