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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority Theme: Affordable housing and social protection
systems for all to address homelessness**

Statement submitted by International Council on Social Welfare, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Homelessness is one of the most visible signs of human deprivation and social exclusion. It affects not only the well-being of individuals and families but also human dignity. For any country homelessness represents a huge social challenge that must be tackled in a proactive way – not only fighting homelessness but also preventing it. The International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) wholeheartedly supports the efforts of the Commission for Social Development aimed at identifying specific ways and means to address this highly disturbing and painful socio-economic phenomenon and come up with policy recommendations. The integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals requires joint efforts on the part of all stakeholders in the quest for effective policy solutions. Adequate social protection mechanisms are widely seen as an essential tool for poverty reduction, the promotion of affordable housing, the upgrading or complete elimination of slums, and pro-poor infrastructure development.

The achievement of Agenda 2030 target 11.1 to ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services cannot be realized without an integrated social policy. Our experience on the ground has convinced us that such a policy must involve cross-sectoral policymaking that goes beyond a piecemeal approach with limited institutional responsibilities on the part of individual ministerial departments at the national level. Rather it must be holistic in nature, effectively combining objectives and means, and shape institutional arrangements conducive to integrated policy making. It must also ensure wider stakeholder consultation and public participation when specific policy objectives are identified. And it needs also to be comprehensive and visionary so as to address the structural causes of homelessness – the lack of affordable housing and the inadequacy of health and social services for people living in poverty. It should be recognized that while housing is the essential foundation for efforts to address homelessness, housing alone is not sufficient – societies must find a way to ensure that supporting social services are available, accessible and affordable across the life-cycle.

In the context of Agenda 2030 one needs to see multiple connections among the goals and their targets that could facilitate access to adequate housing. In turn, such access could be seen as a precondition for the enjoyment of several human rights, including the rights to health, education and privacy. On the other hand, the violation of the rights to adequate housing affects the possibility of earning a living, receiving social services and transfers, and could even prevent people – for example, those who live in slums – from taking part in political activities, including voting. It is important to underscore that the right to adequate housing has been widely recognized as an indispensable part of the right to an adequate standard of living.

Therefore, the human rights dimensions of housing conditions should not be overlooked. We would like to draw the attention of the delegates to the findings of the 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, which were submitted to the Human Rights Council in March 2017 and stated that “millions of foreclosures, evictions and displacements and more than a billion people living in grossly inadequate housing conditions and homelessness worldwide signal, among other things, the failure of States and of the international community to manage the interaction between financial actors and housing systems in accordance with the right to adequate housing” (A/HRC/34/51, para 12). In this context, the recognition of housing as a “social good” (along with the social functions of housing investment) should be discussed as part of the social policy agenda, with the subsequent transformation of the relationship between the State and the financial sector when new initiatives are developed aimed at bridging the worlds of finance,

housing and human rights. When social policy is seen comprehensively and is conceived as an integral socio-economic mechanism, it facilitates work in this direction.

The New Urban Agenda endorsed by the UN General Assembly in December 2016 makes a commitment to inclusive measures in housing policies based on the principles of social inclusion, economic effectiveness and environmental protection. This is an important commitment with profound consequences. Much more needs to be done to translate these commitments into reality on the ground. Around the world millions of people live in informal settlements and work in precarious conditions. The absence of social investment aimed at ensuring universal access to health, education and social protection systems makes social inclusion just a dream.

Many local organizations working under the ICSW's institutional umbrella and using a variety of mechanisms and tools are striving to promote access to a wide range of affordable and sustainable housing options, based on the above principles of social inclusion. The location, cost and quality of housing have a direct influence on urban poverty. In order to maintain access to employment opportunities, the urban poor frequently resort to settling even in high-risk areas. Economic constraints, as well as legal and social barriers, often play a negative role in accessing even the minimal housing provided by formal markets, creating a fertile ground for the growth of slums and squatter settlements. This is the visible price for abject poverty that society has to pay in the face of continuing urbanization, putting into question the core commitment of the New Urban Agenda, which seeks to ensure the safety and security of everyone who lives in urban areas, of any gender and age.

Given that extreme poverty remains a key stumbling block in the efforts to foster the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, efforts aimed at poverty reduction are directly related to the housing debate. The vivid examples of millions of socially-excluded and vulnerable individuals forced to live on the street and facing extremely negative outcomes that include death, ill health and the inability to earn a basic income or obtain other basic elements needed for survival bring to the surface a clear need for well-conceived holistic programs that could alleviate poverty and relieve the plight of marginalized subgroups among the urban poor. The role of various social protection schemes has been widely recognized in this context as one of the best ways to deal with poverty, homelessness and slums. At the same time, transparency in local governance and the engagement of the urban poor in the decision-making process, particularly regarding infrastructure and service delivery, have proved effective for the successful implementation of various housing and slum-upgrading programs.

As it is well known to the ICSW organizations working on the ground throughout the developing world, the high cost of city housing represents a critical threshold for the urban poor, often squeezing them out of the formal housing market and preventing access to home ownership. The affordability predicament and subsequent spread of informal settlements, often located in high-risk areas, create a chain reaction in terms of the failure of these substandard settlements to provide adequate basic services such as health care and transportation facilities. Social exclusion is an unfortunate fact of life for the urban poor, reinforcing the marginality of various subgroups such as children, people with disabilities, older persons and the homeless. The growing inequality and the widening gap between rich and poor are factors of deep concern, as they affect the dignity of people and exacerbate the existing divisions and discontent and create triggers for social conflict. Often the tensions that are created in low-income or informal localities become a fertile ground for social anomalies such as criminality, bringing further insecurity.

While specific concerns are often country-specific and vary widely across countries, the social dimensions of urban exclusion affect the individual and group rights of people. For example, according to a recent study done by the World Bank on the existing situation in East Asia and Pacific cities, the most visible forms of exclusion affecting the urban poor, both directly and indirectly, and particularly acute for marginalized groups, include limitations on the rights to land and property, limitations on citizen participation, and exclusionary policies that prevent some groups from accessing urban services and social protection. The drivers behind social exclusion must be carefully examined in each region and in every country.

In this context, universal social protection provides the most logical answer to the critical situation that many countries, both developed and developing, are facing in terms of access to affordable housing and supporting social services. In order to accomplish the objectives of Agenda 2030, social protection must be recognized at the national level as an investment in people. The promotion of inclusive social protection systems, including floors, has been recognized as a critical tool in fighting poverty, but it is equally an essential tool for mitigating and overcoming marginalization linked to discrimination or various structural disadvantages.

The International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Social Protection Floors Recommendation 202 – based on a rights-based approach – envisions four social security guarantees, as defined at the national level, and also speaks about the mechanism for the “progressive realization” of those standards within a social guarantee framework. Specifically, it envisions access to essential health care, including maternity care; basic income security for children, providing access to nutrition, education, care and any other necessary goods and services; basic income security for persons of an economically active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, owing in particular to sickness, unemployment, maternity or disability; and basic income security for older persons.

While social guarantees to citizens can be provided exclusively by the state, using constitutional provisions or some other existing legal norms that define such guarantees and the respective entitlements, the role of civil society is crucial in service delivery, the setting of higher standard of services, and monitoring the effectiveness of service provision and social spending in general. A comprehensive, holistic approach to social policy, with equity considerations at the core, requires the integration of economic and social objectives at its inception.

When social guarantees are provided through existing legal norms and represent part of the domestic social contract, such guarantees could be seen an important instrument for building opportunities in society, strengthening human capital and facilitating equitable growth and upwards mobility. The recognition of the social guarantees' framework facilitates converting the abstract notions of rights – in this case social and economic rights – into tangible standards that are pertinent to service delivery.

The ICSW supports the ongoing efforts of international organizations such as the ILO and the World Bank aimed at promoting universal social protection schemes. We strongly support the coordination and outreach activities of the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board co-chaired by the ILO and the World Bank. In our view it would be highly desirable if those two crucial international players in the area of social protection spared no efforts to bridge any differences in their definitions of social protection and promoted better cooperation between the two agencies on social protection schemes on the national level, enhancing the effectiveness of joint efforts, which is truly important for achieving the SDGs.