

UN-Habitat Policy Statement on the Prevention of Evictions and Relocations during COVID-19

- ▶ As COVID-19 spreads around the world, billions of people have been told to stay at home, practice physical distancing, wash their hands regularly and wear masks. However, these simple preventive public health measures are impossible to follow for those who are homeless, or live in unsafe or overcrowded conditions, often with no access to water and sanitation. The response to COVID-19 needs to be tailored to the local context in each community. A one-size-fits-all approach is not feasible.
- ▶ In the face of this pandemic and considering cities as ecosystems, the lack of adequate housing has repercussions on society as a whole and is a direct threat to everyone's health and safety. Ensuring secure housing for all and the provision of essential services are crucial components in national efforts to contain the spread of the pandemic and prevent loss of life.
- ▶ In this regard, over the past months we have witnessed a global mobilization from all levels of government, all over the world. We applaud the efforts of the numerous national and local governments that have issued bans on evictions and moratoriums on payment of mortgages and rents, and those that have continued providing for the needs of their residents and communities.
- ▶ Unfortunately, we are also observing in several countries and cities that many cases of evictions and relocations are also taking place. These are principally affecting the poorest and most vulnerable populations living in poorer neighbourhoods, informal settlements and slums.
- ▶ Such evictions and relocations do not only result in grave violations of the fundamental right to adequate housing and protection against forced eviction as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. They also create significant additional risks in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and almost invariably have the effect of exacerbating the spread of COVID-19.
- ▶ Member States have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the right to adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living. Denying residents and communities this right during the COVID-19 pandemic can have devastating consequences for them. These consequences include increased exposure infection in addition to exposure to insecurity, violence, income loss and limited access to socio-economic safety nets, as well as scarce access to public health and care. Paying rent while experiencing a loss or reduction of income can also compromise the ability of individuals and families to fulfil their most basic needs, such as purchasing food and water, and increase the risk of crime and violence, further contributing to the rise in individual and collective vulnerabilities.
- ▶ All these conditions also reduce trust in political decision-making and endanger compliance with national and local measures related to the mitigation of COVID-19.

- ▶ In the absence of such proven mitigating measures, in addition to the normal guarantees and protections required by international law, the relocation and eviction of long-term residents and communities, particularly from informal settlements, during a COVID-19 lockdown could result not only in violation of their fundamental rights, but also in increased exposure to the threat of contagion for the entire population.
- ▶ Therefore, **we urge Member States and governments at all levels to stop all relocations and evictions at this time.**
- ▶ In highly exceptional cases where relocations or evictions are absolutely unavoidable, at a minimum to ensure that these are conducted in accordance with the requirements of their international human rights obligations, as well as the relevant national laws, and that the maximum possible protections are provided to ensure the health and safety of those affected. In such exceptional cases, evictions must at a minimum:
 - Be “proportional” and provide for the evaluation of the decision’s impact on and potential benefit for various groups, including through an eviction impact assessment and community consultations. Evictions and relocations justified by planned urban or infrastructural development, as well as to repossess public land, should not be carried out during the COVID-19 crisis as they would put the health of residents and the entire population at risk and disproportionately affect their right to health;
 - Promote general welfare and show evidence of such an outcome. Accordingly, during the COVID-19 crisis, only evictions and relocations that aim at preventing contagion of residents should be allowed. Even in this case, the expected benefits for affected populations and measures to mitigate the risks of contagion should be clearly and publicly outlined.
- ▶ **UN-Habitat also urges national, regional and local governments to:**
 - Take immediate and substantial measures to secure the right to adequate housing for all, including through moratoriums on evictions due to rental and mortgage arrears; deferrals of mortgage payments; extension of winter moratoriums on forced evictions of informal settlements; introduction of rental stabilization or reduction measures; suspension of utility costs and surcharges for the duration of the pandemic; and creation of emergency funds to reduce exposure for categories at risk; and
 - Provide for the basic needs of vulnerable communities or neighbourhoods, particularly food, water, sanitation and hygiene essentials, and primary health care. Nationally appropriate social protection systems for all can also address multiple, often interrelated causes of homelessness and inadequate housing by preventing poverty, easing the burden of certain expenditure during periods of unemployment and contributing to improved health.
- ▶ UN-Habitat is available and ready to assist national and local government in these efforts, including by investigating and devising alternative solutions and mitigating measures for the residents of informal and low-income communities. UN-Habitat has developed tools, measures and guidelines for dealing with situations where relocation has to be effected as a matter of last resort. UN-Habitat has also developed guidelines for local governments leading inclusive and integrated citywide response planning for COVID-19 mitigation in informal settlements.

