

23 October 2008

Markets alone cannot ensure housing for all, says UN expert

The following statement was issued today in New York by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, Raquel Rolnik:

The belief that markets will provide adequate housing for all has failed. The current crisis is a stark reminder of this reality. A home is not a commodity – four walls and a roof. It is a place to live in security, peace and dignity, and a right for every human being.

In the United States alone, the millions of homeowners and renters affected by foreclosures means a sharp increase in the numbers of the homeless. With the continuing housing and financial crisis spreading to many countries, things are only going to get worse. Millions more may face eviction because they cannot pay their mortgages.

Most analysts blame the crisis on a shortage of liquidity or a failure of regulation. Yet the subprime mortgage crisis reflects fundamental flaws in our approach to housing and the inability of market mechanisms to provide adequate and affordable housing for all. Excessive focus on homeownership as the one and single solution to ensure access to housing is part of the problem.

Homelessness does not affect only those marginalized by society or the very poor. Increasingly, it threatens also those who work but cannot afford market prices and are forced to live in inadequate housing. Homelessness, or living in inadequate housing conditions, can cause not only material deprivation but also the loss of enjoyment of a wide range of other human rights, whether civil and political or economic, social and cultural. The increase in foreclosures and homelessness also limits the ability of cities and communities to fund social programs, and spreads urban blight.

The current crisis should force us to think of a better system, one that provides more housing options and avoids relying on a single solution. Those countries that have not done so already should legally recognize the right to adequate housing for all; some so-called “developing” countries are more advanced in that regard than many wealthier ones. Housing legislation and policies should be defined with the contribution of all relevant stakeholders, not only by finance departments or the construction industry. Increasing public assistance for housing and ensuring it is available to all those in need is the way to prevent the current threat to our cities and communities.

We need to think out of the box. Homeownership may be the preferred option for many. But adequate housing for all is a public goal whose achievement requires a wide variety of arrangements, from tax advantages to buy a home to better legal protection for tenants and rent control areas; from direct subsidies to the poor to publicly owned housing and a range of tenure arrangements. Markets, even with appropriate regulation, cannot provide adequate housing for all: in any case an active public sector is needed.

Ms. Raquel Rolnik was appointed in May 2008 as 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. Her mandate involves reporting annually to the Human Rights Council on the status of the realization of the right to adequate housing throughout the world, and identifying practical solutions and good practices towards this end. An architect and urban planner, Ms. Rolnik has extensive experience in the area of housing and urban policies.

For further information on the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, please consult the website of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/housing/index.htm>