

**United Nations, New York**

**10 February 2020**

**Address by Mary McAleese**

Commission for Social Development

Division for Inclusive Social Development

Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)

High-level panel discussion on the priority theme:

*“Affordable Housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness”*

Dear friends

My thanks to the Commission and to Unanima International for giving me this unique opportunity to speak on a theme that has priority in so many people’s hearts but struggles to achieve priority in practical politics the world over. Homelessness, access to safe and affordable housing and to housing that is adequate to human needs, has made it on to the agenda of the United Nations for the first time in seventy five years. Though it is sad to have to admit that homelessness, housing supply and housing adequacy are growing and related problems world-wide, including in my own country Ireland, there is at least some hope and reassurance in this gathering for the one hundred million individuals who live in the complex unstable limboland which presents as contemporary homelessness, the one and a half billion who live in inadequate

housing and the growing number in the developed as well as the developing world who see their prospect of ever having a decent home of their own, recede rather than advance.

The objective of this gathering is to explore the working strategies and best practices capable of delivering the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which commits member states to prioritizing those who have been left furthest behind and in particular to providing access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and services and the elimination of homelessness. A safe, affordable and adequate home should be the right and the experience of each human being. It is a prerequisite of human flourishing, a basic element of healthy, holistic human development. Governments which fail to dynamically put housing at the centre of their political concerns often consign the homeless and those at risk of homelessness, including children, to lives which are unnecessarily interrupted by trauma and the waste of their time and talents as they try to ride out the storms created by haphazard and uncaring market forces, random circumstance, poverty, climate change or conflict. Nor are these problems simply manifest in the developing world.

Ireland though a small country is in some ways a microcosm of today's global crisis in housing and homelessness which has long been a feature of developing and unstable jurisdictions but is today impacting wealthy developed countries. In just a few short years we in Ireland have undergone a rapid change from a traditional experience of homelessness which was generally related to rough sleepers who were mainly male with complex problems including addiction or mental health problems, often decanted from institutions or prisons with poor supports and left to the best efforts of the charitable sector. Often

regarded as authors of their own misfortune, they were easily overlooked. Things changed and quickly.

First came the waves of asylum seekers from abroad in the early part of the new millennium for which we were then seriously unprepared. We were in the middle of an economic boom with significant inward migration mainly from other European countries, soaring property prices and full employment. It was immediately followed by a severe economic crash, austerity measures, double digit unemployment, unfinished ghost estates of houses no-one wanted and massive debt. Today we have returned to economic growth and almost full employment, a recipe you might say for greater stability and fewer housing problems but that is far from the case.

It was the homeless charities which first alerted us to the changing face of homelessness caused by a rapidly growing population, a dysfunctional housing market much too dependent on a stagnant private housing sector and on an inadequate supply in the public rental sector and the private rental sector which continues to experience unprecedented demand with consequent upward pressure on rents. With an insufficient dwindling supply of both public housing and private housing the scene was set for a homeless crisis which landed on the ngo's doorsteps. From the front-line with stretched resources they saw homelessness morph from the traditional rough sleepers to the new homeless forced out of their homes by debt, by increased rents, by inadequate incomes, into a bottleneck housing market far behind the curve of demand where no adequate safety net existed for those pushed out. Particularly vulnerable to market forces were poorer families, single parents, adolescents, the young, the elderly, the disabled, those on fixed or low incomes, those with no support

systems like those exiting the care system, ex-prisoners, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

It is hard to credit that in 2013 the Irish Government announced that homelessness would be resolved by 2016. In 2018 the OECD revealed that in fact homelessness in Ireland had grown by almost 150% between 2014 and 2018. It has continued to grow, as have State and charitable initiatives to deal with it. In the month before the national election held last week, for the first time, the homelessness figures showed a slight drop. It could be seasonal or it could be the first sign of a welcome systemic response to the new measures being put in place – time will tell. It would be a brave person who would claim as in 2013 that we are now on top of the situation and can look forward soon to an end to homelessness.

Today we have almost ten thousand people including about three thousand five hundred children and almost a thousand young adults living in temporary or emergency accommodation. True they are not on the streets, but they are not in their own homes. Many are like a young mother of two children I met several weeks ago in Dublin. Her landlord sold the apartment she had been renting for several years. She could find no alternative and was driven into homeless services. Today she is living in one small room, sharing a set of bunk beds with her children, no cooking facilities, a bathroom shared with transient strangers and no idea if and when her nightmare will end.

The numbers of homeless do not include the five thousand asylum seekers who are living in temporary accommodation in what are called direct provision centres. Some sixty thousand asylum seekers have been through the Irish system over the past two decades. For the first few years the official response was clumsy and adhoc but gradually a system evolved of funding private operators

to run direct provision centres where on a temporary basis asylum seekers receive bed and board and a very small weekly allowance. They had to take successful legal actions to get limited rights to work and to reduce the unnecessary intrusions into their privacy. The direct provision system is under review. It is expensive and controversial though it has improved on the early days of lengthy backlogs and queues. However for those who exit the direct provision system with permission to stay in Ireland the first thing they confront is the misery of the squeezed housing market with its new realities. Low housing supply, high rents, urban home ownership once normative now a receding pipe dream. We have not yet overcome the legacy of the commodification of private housing and land, the baleful impact of past funding decisions and strategies, complicated planning processes and the general braking effect on house building of the austerity years.

There are silver linings in our story not least of which is the fact that in our recent national election successive opinion polls showed that the public sees the provision of affordable and adequate housing along with the ending of homelessness as top priorities for government action. We can be under no illusion that this is difficult to a serious degree and will involve tough decisions as various basic civic needs like health and education compete for finite local and national funds.

I once described Ireland as a first world country with a third world memory. That memory and the visible evidence around us of a housing problem means we are not a Pollyanna people. There is a tangible determination that homelessness cannot, will not, mean unending hopelessness. We are proud that today seventeen percent of our people were not born in Ireland but came to live among us in very recent decades from a kaleidoscope of countries in order to

improve their lives. We are benefitting hugely from their education, skills, drive and ambition. We are proud that we have managed to emerge from the recent nightmare of economic collapse and austerity thanks to a significant level of social solidarity and forbearance. There is however a growing insistence that homelessness is soluble and avoidable, that provision of affordable and adequate housing is doable but if we have learnt anything over these years of turmoil in the housing system it is that neither the ngo sector, the private, nor the state sector can solve these problems alone. We need their collaborative efforts; we need the wisdom and experience from other jurisdictions which face the same issues and we need the pressure and policy guidance that a forum like this can help provoke and promote.

Drawing on similar schemes in the US and Finland the anti-homelessness strategy known as Housing First was successfully piloted initially by our leading ngo's the Fr. Peter McVerry Trust and Focus Ireland and now since 2019 forms the basis of our national and local Government strategy on homelessness. First developed as a model for dealing with the long-term homeless it now needs to be seen as the Finnish see it, as a model for all housing and homeless services. The Finns have made admirable progress in this regard. Past failures should make us wary about making big claims for it is one thing to say our official focus is on providing permanent homes, it is another to provide enough resources to breathe life into the supply of affordable housing, another to allocate homes fairly without creating either ghettos or resentment from those on public housing lists who may feel others jump ahead of them by pleading homelessness. Here again the Finnish model offers us good ideas and encouraging prospects.

Yet it is salutary to remind ourselves that for Sr. Jean Quinn now head of Unanima International and founder over twenty years ago of the Irish homeless ngo Sophia Housing this must sound like groundhog day Why? Because for two decades Sophia has been a quiet effective example of best practice with its own holistic “housing first” model . Back at the start of Sophia Housing I was invited to open its first housing project. The invitation said “Sophia was founded on the radical and simple idea that the best way to support those who are homeless is to give them a home as quickly as possible and support them as they recover from the trauma of being without a home”. It is still a radical idea and though simple it not yet been achieved nationally but is an idea whose time has come. The word that really hit me back then was “trauma”. Reading it I knew that in Sophia I would meet people who understood in a profound and necessary way that homelessness is not solved just by handing over a key to a new own door essential though that is, but by staying the journey with people whose experience of homelessness has been traumatic and who need a supportive holistic tranquility and long-term stability to help heal those wounds. I have read all the studies that tell of the increased levels of anxiety, of depression, self-harm and suicide, of educational and career underachievement, interrupted education, poor diet, restricted child development, reduced employment prospects and all the other subtle adverse things visited upon those who experience homelessness or who live with the constant fear of it but which are revealed over a lifetime. But nothing beats experience.

Almost fifty years ago I had a brief encounter with homelessness. It was enough to carve an enduring memory of the chaos and fear of life lived off the grid, dependent on the kindness of strangers and on the hard-to-access slow box-ticking of beleaguered bureaucrats. I was the oldest of nine children, the

youngest of whom was three years old when sectarian paramilitary thugs machine-gunned us from our lovely comfortable and happy home in Belfast, part of the United Kingdom during the early years of the Northern Ireland Troubles. We were never able to return to it. Along with our parents we sofa surfed for weeks distributed in ones and twos around family and friends until thanks to a religious order of nuns, like Sr. Jean, we were given temporary access to an affordable if very dilapidated home in a safer area. It was due for demolition so our tenancy always had a tentativeness about it, a realization that it was not a permanent home. Had we been dependent on the response of the government of the day I dread to think what fate might have been in store for us. My then boyfriend, now husband and his family had also been violently evicted from their Belfast home shortly before us. The careless official system of the day had decanted them thoughtlessly into an even worse area and a vicious sectarian attack on his youngest brother forced them to flee for their lives a second time. When our turn for forcible eviction came as it did for many hundreds of families during those years we knew that as far as government agencies were concerned, we were on our own. It was two years before my parents were able to provide an affordable permanent home for us but for the trauma there was nothing not even a recognition of its existence among ourselves never mind the political authorities. Such memories lock in an empathy with all those today whose lives are so catastrophically interrupted whether by conflict or other circumstances that they have no place to call home, impacting on men, women and children but most particularly on poor women and girls, robbing so many of control over their tomorrows, making parents powerless, making children fearful, school disrupted, diet disrupted, family scattered, some able to cope others not. It also locks in a memory of the trauma



of even short-term homelessness for that trauma often has a long shelf life that plays and preys on the many shades of human vulnerability.

Back then ironically I worked throughout my teens and young adulthood as a volunteer in a shelter for homeless men and as a co-founder of the first shelter for women and children rendered homeless through domestic violence. I knew that when people spoke of the homelessness they meant people in those kind of troubled personal circumstances who were primarily seen as the responsibility of the charitable not the state sector. But today we are challenged by the multiple faces of homelessness captured in the definition of homelessness constructed by the expert group which met in Nairobi last year in anticipation of this meeting in New York:

*"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 poverty and a failure of multiple systems and human rights".*

That definition embraces tens of millions today who live in that precarious erratic limbo world of housing instability and inadequacy, from slum-dwellers to tented refugee compounds, from homes demolished thanks to the storm, fire, drought and flood of climate change to homelands fled through conflict or endemic poverty from those pushed out of their homes by high rents or who stay long-term with parents because affording a home of their own is not possible. Today we see waves of refugees and asylum seekers, become new-arrivals, strangers in unknown places. People who were once strong and independent today rely on the charity of strangers and on extemporized official responses in countries which are often overwhelmed by the scale of their needs. They can so easily get lost in a sea of numbers, their very humanity at the mercy

of the hostile backlash of bigotry at all levels. They may never be able to go back to their homelands but until they have the stability of a place to call their own and make their own, their lives and talents, their hopes and dreams, their rights and dignity as human beings are on indefinite hold and when their lives are diminished so are we all.

The vast majority of those entering homelessness today never thought it could happen to them. In so many cases it was avoidable and it is soluble just not by the homeless on their own. It is Governments which have the heft and the duty of care. The growing and global nature of the housing issue is a challenge to the problem-solving credibility of this United Nations and its member states individually and collectively. To the extent that the world's citizens experience homelessness and inadequate levels of safe affordable adequate housing that is the extent of the failure of high-level leadership to do what it exists to do, to foresee, to plan, to avoid, to prioritize and to problem-solve.

The many governments which signed up to the 2030 Sustainable development goals promised to prioritise those left behind, to provide safe, suitable and affordable housing, to end homelessness. This great international forum must hold them to those promises starting here for if even the wealthy highly educated Western nations cannot solve such a basic and soluble problem promptly and efficiently, effectively and humanely on their own doorsteps what realistic chance is there for the global resolution of the big ticket problems such as climate change or the escalating threat of nuclear conflict.

The future as Seamus Heaney once said, lies with what is affirmed from under. The voices once ignored, the people once overlooked, the problems once not perceived from the top, have now been pushed up onto the public agenda

from under, by the people, the caring public. The voice of the Irish people is saying we are set on providing our citizens with a safe, affordable, decent place called home in communities that care. Can we come here in 2030 with other state parties as leaders not laggards in attaining those vital goals? I believe so but that will depend on what we and others around the world do today for that is what will shape tomorrow just as what was done or not done in so many yesterdays helped create this shameful mess.

Yes it was high time for this discussion, in this place. Now please help us to help one another in a national and global effort to find and implement the solutions which will consign homelessness to history and offer each human being the dignity and certainty of a safe, affordable, wholesome place called home. Thank you for listening.