



PRESS RELEASE

World Habitat Day: Need for a Stronger Human Rights Approach in India

New Delhi, 5 October 2015

On World Habitat Day, *Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN)* proposes that the Indian government—at the central, state, and local level—adopts a stronger human rights and social justice approach to housing and habitat issues in the country. The first Monday of every October is celebrated by the United Nations (UN) as World Habitat Day. Unfortunately, with the majority of its population living in inadequate conditions without access to basic services, there is not much for India to celebrate on this day.

India faces a national shortage of 18.78 million homes in urban areas and 40 million in rural areas; about 95 per cent of this is for economically weaker sections. Over two million people are estimated to be homeless. Census 2011 reports that 13.75 million households live in ‘slums.’ Forced evictions, demolitions of low income settlements, forceful land acquisition, and displacement in urban and rural areas further exacerbate poverty, inequality, and the housing deficit. Since independence, about 65–70 million people have been displaced from ostensible ‘development’ projects; the majority without rehabilitation. HLRN estimates that between January 2014 and September 2015, at least 28,000 families suffered from forced evictions in urban areas, resulting in loss of housing, livelihoods, income, health and healthcare, education, and security.

Several groups face multiple levels of discrimination with regard to housing and land, especially on intersecting axes of caste, gender, income, marital status, religion, and age. These include women, children, Dalits/Scheduled Castes Scheduled Tribes/*adivasis*, older persons, minorities, homeless and landless persons, internally displaced persons, migrants, and persons with disabilities. Their needs and concerns must be prioritized in all laws, policies, schemes, and programmes related to housing and land.

According to Shivani Chaudhry, Executive Director, HLRN: “In order to achieve the commendable goal of ‘housing for all by 2022,’ the government should adopt the human rights framework of *adequate housing*; identify the most marginalized constituencies; set annual targets for delivery; prevent evictions and real estate speculation; develop rights-based indicators to assess progress; and incorporate principles of gender equality, non-discrimination, and sustainability. Instead of introducing market-driven schemes, the state should work towards a national law on adequate housing for rural and urban India. In order to increase global respect and strengthen its presence on the international stage, India needs to fulfil its national and international human rights commitments.”

India is also being monitored internationally on its housing and land commitments. The recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals, which India is mandated to implement, include targets on reducing inequality, eliminating poverty, and making human settlements inclusive, safe, and sustainable. In October 2016, the UN Housing and Sustainable Urban Development Conference (Habitat III) will take place in Quito, for which India is to submit a report on the status of implementation of the Habitat Agenda (1996). For its next Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in January 2017, the government needs to report to the UN Human Rights Council on the situation of human rights in the country, including progress made in implementing recommendations from its last UPR (2012). With its multiple commitments and with the world watching closely, it is important that the Indian government adopts strong measures to improve housing and living conditions across the country. Mere slogans and budgetary announcements for schemes are not sufficient. State accountability, transparency, financial monitoring, and active participation of people, are required. For durable solutions, urban and rural issues need to be viewed along the same continuum and policy response developed accordingly.

The human right to adequate housing is upheld in international law and has been interpreted by the Supreme Court of India as an integral part of the right to life. World Habitat Day is an occasion for India to reaffirm its commitment and take concerted action towards the realization of the human rights to adequate housing and land for all. Let India take the lead, this World Habitat Day, in meeting its obligations to its people and to the international community.

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