**Input for the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing - COVID-19 and the right to housing**

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has generally exacerbated existing inequalities faced by many vulnerable people. Stay-at-home orders assume that people have a safe and habitable home. However, for many people, home is not safe or adequate. For many, home is simply not available, as for those living on the streets or in shelters. These situations of inadequate housing and homelessness make people particularly vulnerable to contracting the coronavirus. This is why we need to treat housing as a right! The report below presents a general overview of the situation of housing adequacy, affordability and homelessness specifically in Australia, based on the information gathered by the International Presentation Association – a Non-Governmental Organization accredited with special consultative status to the UN ECOSOC since 2000. This report does not attempt to provide a full picture of the situation. These considerations can, rather, serve as a first input to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing to the General Assembly - COVID-19 and the right to housing.

**COVID-19 and the right to housing in Australia**

**i.** The Covid-19 pandemic is affecting people all around the world. People experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing are extremely - not to say dangerously - vulnerable to the coronavirus. The instructions for self-quarantine or good hygiene are not applicable in situations where people live in an inadequate home or where people live on the streets or moving around from one overcrowded shelter to another. In the most recent Census (2016) more than 116,000 people were homeless in Australia, up from 90,000 a decade earlier.

**ii.** In response to the pandemic, the state and territory governments has stepped in to provide aid even paying for hotel rooms for the homeless. The initiative to house the homeless has been focused mostly on “rough sleeper”. There are 8,000 of these in Australia.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Some Australian states have committed funds on social housing in order to get these people, and others, into more permanent accommodation. The government of New South Wales has announced that they [will spend $36 million](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/nsw/nsw-launches-36-million-program-to-get-rough-sleepers-into-homes-20200607-p5507y.html) on getting rough sleepers into permanent homes. Of the $36 million, around half of that will be spent buying homes while the rest will be used to provide services such as mental health and drug and alcohol treatment. In Victoria a [$500 million package](https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/victorian-government-undertakes-biggest-social-housing-spend-since-gfc-20200517-p54trk.html) was announced to build 168 new units and upgrade 23,000 more. [In WA $319 million](https://indaily.com.au/news/2020/06/07/coronavirus-what-we-know-today-june-7/) of a $444 million package, will go towards building, buying, renovating and maintaining social housing across the state, including in remote Indigenous communities.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The chief executive officer of the Australian Alliance to End Homelessness (AAEH), David Pearson, commented that the funding announcements from some states are welcome, however more could be done if the Federal Government also played a larger role in ending the problem.[[3]](#footnote-3) The AAEH, on its part, launched a seven-point policy plan to end rough sleeping in Australia. The plan came after around 5000 of Australia’s rough sleepers were sheltered in temporary accommodation across Australia due to the coronavirus pandemic. The three stages of the plan included crisis response, recovery response and long-term response. According to the AAEH, this plan, over time, would generate savings to the government in the areas of health and justice of around $26 million. For the long term, the federal government needs to work closely and together with the state governments, to come up with a national plan aiming to end rough sleeping.

Building social housing would help to tackle the scourge of homelessness. In other words, social housing substantially reduces the risk of homelessness. The Community Housing Industry Association and National Shelter launched, in early June 2020, a 4-year program entitled the Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program (SHARP), which will deliver 30,000 homes to those in need, and at the same time it will create up to 18,000 jobs average per year for the Australians that would work for this house building program.

**iii.** Additionally, the National Cabinet adopted consistent rules to protect and help households that are struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic, a decision that has been fully supported by state and territory governments. A moratorium on evictions over the next 6 months for residential tenancies in financial distress who are unable to meet their commitments due to the impact of COVID 19 was agreed upon as a response to the risks of being pushed into homelessness that many Australian face during the crisis. The moratorium is not “watertight”, therefore the legal aid centers may need to support those evicted because they can no longer pay their rent but are provided with false reasons for conviction.

For people experiencing financial hardship during the crisis, some household bills and fees could be delayed or even waived. Essential services, such as energy, electricity and water, should not be disconnected to customers struggling to pay their bills. Phone and Internet providers would also be more flexible with the customers that could not afford to pay their bills. The hardship support would be available to households as well as small businesses experiencing "financial stress". Struggling households and small businesses will not be charged late fees if they cannot pay bills on time, and there will be no interest charged on debt.

**iv.** The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated existing inequalities and current forms of discrimination faced by many Indigenous Peoples in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were disproportionately affected by some restrictive Covid-19 policy responses at a state, territory and Commonwealth (federal) level. Stay-at-home and social distancing orders assume that people have a safe home and an adequate residence. This is not the reality though for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in overcrowded conditions, or with large family or kinship groups. It was reported, for example, that in Tennant Creek the police attended houses known to them as overcrowded, and then used Covid-19 regulations to order people to disperse. Amnesty International received reports that members of the community abandoned their houses and hid from police because they were scared of being issued with fines for breaching gathering rules, as a result of living in overcrowded housing or staying with family.[[4]](#footnote-4) It seems that they actually criminalize people for what is essentially a housing issue.

**v.** Refugees and asylum seekers in Australia have also experienced the devastating social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. The overcrowded detention facilities are prone to coronavirus outbreaks. The detainees’ fear of contracting the coronavirus, along with the indefinite detention policy of the Australian government, have significantly led to an increase of the suicide attempts.

Furthermore, many of the refugees and asylum seekers have lost their jobs and have no access to income government support. The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) reported 850 requests for food, health and employment services in the first four months of this year, compared to 1,249 for the whole of 2019, due to the exclusion of temporary-visa holders from the federal government’s emergency financial support schemes.[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, many of them have faced the fear of becoming homeless. Most of them seek emergency relief from community and humanitarian organizations in an attempt to address the financial hardships. Many of them are also in need of mental health support due to the uncertainty. In Springvale, for example, the majority of the people who picked up relief goods (like food, hygiene products etc.) from charities and community organizations during self-quarantine were refugees and asylum seekers. Many of them struggled to find an income since the Federal Government decided to raise the threshold for people needing to access funding and trauma support under the Status Resolution Support Services program (SRSS).

Refugees and asylum seekers encountered also additional challenges. In Springvale, for example, the English lessons available to refugees, migrants and asylum seekers were postponed, nearly for over three months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three Presentation Sisters teach such English lessons to refugees and asylum seekers that are newly arrived there. They have repeatedly expressed their concerns that the refugees and asylum seekers will not be able to learn the language properly and on time, in order to communicate more easily with the local people.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The COVID-19 pandemic is not just a health issue. It is a profound shock to all the societies and economies around the world. People living in inadequate housing, often in overcrowded conditions and in homelessness are among the most vulnerable to contracting the coronavirus and to suffering from its multidimensional impacts. States and governments across the world need to identify that housing ***is*** a right. Much remains to be done towards this direction.

Housing unaffordability and housing inadequacy can only contribute to further insecurity of children, women, older persons, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples at their respective place of living. Protecting the right to adequate housing can only lead to genuine sustainable development.

Respectfully,

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1. Source: <https://theconversation.com/if-australia-really-wants-to-tackle-mental-health-after-coronavirus-we-must-take-action-on-homelessness-139840> , 9 June 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Source: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/insight/covid-19-gave-these-homeless-people-housing-here-s-how-they-could-keep-it>, 2 June 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Source: <https://cathnews.com/cathnews/38169-government-urged-to-tackle-rough-sleeping-crisis?utm_medium=email&utm_cam>, 9 June 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ##  Source: “Critical Condition - the impact of Covid-19 policies, policing and prisons on First Nations communities” in <https://changetherecord.org.au/critical-condition>

 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-31/asylum-seekers-refugees-risk-homelessness-coronavirus-funding/12301860>, 31 May 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)