

Dear Ms Farha

We refer to your letter and questionnaire dated 23 April 2015 requesting for inputs for your upcoming report to the General Assembly, focusing on priority issues towards the development of the New Urban Agenda (UN Conference on Sustainable Urban Development – Habitat III). We are pleased to provide Singapore's response.

#### Housing policy in Singapore

2 Homeownership has been a key tenet of Singapore's social compact since the 1960s. Singapore has a mix of public and private housing developments. Singapore's public housing authority, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was formed in 1960 soon after Singapore attained self-government, to solve the acute housing shortage then. Most of the population was immigrant settlers who came from the Malayan Archipelago, China and South Asia, to settle in Singapore. At that time, many Singaporeans had to live in overcrowded squatter colonies and city slums with no sanitation, water or basic facilities. Less than 10% of our people owned a home. Today, thanks largely to our inclusive public housing policy, Singapore has one of the highest homeownership rates in the world. More than 9 in 10 of Singaporeans own their homes and more than 8 in 10 of them live in flats built by the HDB. Several key strategies were responsible for this turnaround, and the success of Singapore's housing programme.

#### *Home ownership and government subsidies*

3 Public housing flats are made affordable, with both generous government subsidies on the selling price of the flat, additional housing grants for low- and middle-income households on top of the subsidised selling price, and concessionary interest rate loans. On average, a household buying a new flat would use less than a quarter of their monthly income to pay for the flat – a figure that is significantly lower than international benchmarks of affordability, which typically range from 30% to 35% of monthly incomes. In addition, grant amounts are progressively tiered in favour of lower-income families, so that they too can enjoy the benefits of home ownership. HDB's annual deficit averages S\$1.01 billion. This comprises the losses on the development and sale of subsidised home ownership flats, as well as other housing subsidies.

4 Public housing in Singapore also provides more than just shelter. Singaporeans today regard their HDB flats as not merely roofs over their heads, but also endearing homes where they can raise their families, forge ties over generations and build strong, harmonious communities. It is an important tenet of Singapore's nation building efforts. Home ownership enables citizens, across the income spectrum, to own a tangible stake in the nation. The HDB won the United Nations Public Service Award in 2008 for its Home Ownership Programme.

*Social objectives and cohesion*

5 HDB provides a mix of flat types with different sizes to provide choice to buyers. In addition, our housing policies help to ensure a balanced mix of the various ethnic groups within public housing estates to promote racial harmony and inclusiveness, and prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves. Through public housing, residents of different income levels, ethnicities, languages and religions live and interact as neighbours in close proximity every day. Within these public housing estates, facilities such as schools, public libraries and sports centres are also developed. At the block level, spaces and seats are provided in the lobbies and surrounding gardens for residents to meet and interact, fostering community bonding. This ensures close racial integration and promotes mutual respect for one another's culture, traditions and religious beliefs.

6 To promote family ties, extended families are encouraged to live together or close by for mutual care and support. Married children are given priority allocation for a new flat or an additional grant for the purchase of a resale flat to live with or near their parents. 3-Generation flats, which feature bigger flat sizes (four bedrooms and three bathrooms, compared to three bedrooms and two bathrooms for other bigger flats) are available for multi-generation families who wish to live in the same flat. For those who wish to live separately but close by, HDB sets aside a number of units specifically for parents and married children who jointly apply for a pair of flats in the same housing project. In addition, amenities such as 3-Generation play facilities - children's playground, adult fitness and elderly fitness – are clustered and made accessible via barrier-free routes (for wheelchairs and prams), to facilitate interaction across generations.

7 Together, these initiatives encourage social mixing, family togetherness and community cohesion, and, in 2010, HDB won the United Nations Habitat Scroll of Honour Award for providing "one of Asia's and the world's greenest, cleanest and most socially conscious housing programmes".

*Inclusivity*

8 While HDB focuses on helping young married or engaged couples who wish to start a family and buy their first subsidised flats from HDB, measures are also taken to ensure that the housing needs of other vulnerable groups in the society are suitably considered, such as:

- a. **Low income needy.** Whilst home ownership is the desired option, the Government recognises that some low-income households may not be able to achieve homeownership immediately despite generous housing subsidies. As such, the Government provides heavily subsidised public rental flats, under the Public Rental Scheme, for low-income households who have no other housing options and no family support. Government assistance through these public rental flats is substantial. The monthly rent for these flats can be as low as S\$30 a month, and rental subsidies can add up to S\$100,000 per family over 10 years. Rental

tenants are encouraged to purchase a flat when their financial circumstances have improved.

- b. **Singles.** Singles can purchase a new HDB flat with their parents, or a resale/new flat on their own, subject to eligibility conditions. They could benefit from substantial housing grants of up to \$40,000.
- c. **Widowed/ Divorced parents.** Divorced or widowed parents with young children may also enjoy priority when they apply for a new small flat, to help them transit more smoothly into a new phase in life.
- d. **Elderly.** HDB offers Studio Apartments (SAs) that are designed to meet the needs of elderly (aged 55 and above) residents. These SAs are sold in ready-to-occupy condition and are fitted with elderly-friendly features such as lever taps, levelled flooring, and bathrooms equipped with support and grab bars. Those who do not wish to move can make their flats more elderly-friendly through flat improvements offered by HDB at a subsidised rate, such as slip-resistant treatment for floor tiles and ramps.

Seniors can also use their HDB flat for retirement income. Depending on their preferences and needs, HDB provides a range of options for them to 'unlock' the value of their flat by (i) subletting a room or the whole flat; (ii) selling their flat and moving to a smaller one; or (iii) selling part of their flat's remaining lease to HDB.

- e. **Disabilities and special needs.** HDB provides a network of barrier-free routes, seamlessly linking blocks to major activity nodes and nearby amenities such as bus-stops and traffic junctions. These include drop-off porches with covered linkways and seats, link bridges connecting multi-storey car park roof gardens and residential blocks (where possible), and parking lots reserved for wheelchair users. HDB also has upgrading programmes in place to provide direct lift access to every floor, particularly in older blocks. These improvements in accessibility, which are heavily subsidised by the Government, benefits residents, especially the elderly, frail and disabled. Other features include colour contrasting lift buttons with Braille markings and pictograms which are easily understood by all residents. The letterboxes are also positioned at a level that wheelchair-bound users are able to access.

9 We hope that the above provides a concise overview of Singapore's housing policies. Do visit the [Housing and Development Board's \(HDB\) website](#), should you require further information.

With warmest regards,

**Centre for Liveable Cities**

A Division of the Ministry of National Development

With inputs from the **Ministry of National Development** and **Housing Development Board (HDB)**

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