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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development
and the twenty-fourth special session of the General
Assembly: priority Theme: Affordable housing and
social protection systems for all to address homelessness**

Statement submitted by VAAGDHARA, non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Proper and dignified home has always been an important component in overall quality of life and growth for mankind. Home offers security, peace, and dignity, allowing humans to enjoy both mental and physical health and laying a foundation for humanity and social cohesion. All these basic necessities required for better living hinge on properly designed housing, which suits the culture and livelihoods of communities. Therefore, housing in different regions and different communities has traditionally evolved and accommodated various aspects of life and livelihoods of such communities, adapting agro-climatic aspects of the regions. However, in recent decades, housing has been relatively neglected in various schemes and support programs of various Governments. Though there are schemes that provide funding support to communities, their prime objective moves around the urbanization of rural housing. This results in poor performance of such schemes and more or less non-acceptance of such houses by the communities.

The traditional approach of indigenous communities towards housing centered on the utilization of local material and planned approaches within the farming system. Their houses used to accommodate different components of their livelihoods by creating space for animals (cows, bullocks, goats, and poultry birds), space for agricultural equipment and implements, space for drying crop produce and to thresh, etc. For the indigenous community, it was not a place for residence, rather it was, and it is a place of living, working, enjoying and endeavouring. Current housing schemes are often targeted to provide financial support to these indigenous communities to create a frame, in which they can hide in summers, rains, and winters, but not live around and enjoy these seasons and earn their livelihoods. In doing so the basic premise is that they are vulnerable and lagging behind in the development process, so should be offered some support. In our view, this is only financial help but not true support.

The shelter is a vital entitlement of the citizens of a country and Article 21 of the Constitution of India guarantees the 'Right to Life' to all its citizens. The scope of this right incorporates various other rights, including the Right to Adequate Shelter, which implies the rights to food, water, hygienic environment, medical care, shelter, and education – all consolidated a basket of facilities that provide a quality life to all citizens. It talks about habitat or an environment that facilitates dignified living, with privacy and self-respect.

In India, the predominant population lives in rural areas, dispersed over in villages with varied land and agriculture-related occupations providing marginal to low levels of economic development. Thus, the country faces a unique challenge in the task of addressing appropriate and adequate habitat for all mainly those with low resources. The task is a multi-dimensional one and has to factor in area-specific geo-climatic features, low level of disposable incomes of the majority of the people, technological and information gaps and inadequate delivery mechanisms and management capacities.

Therefore, the concept of a social protection system for affordable housing for all to address homelessness of rural communities particularly those of indigenous origin whose housings are integral parts of their livelihoods need a paradigm shift from the present concept of urbanizing rural houses to strengthening rural housing and livelihoods. This shifting may need the following considerations to work towards dignified housing and sustainable livelihoods.

1. The policy of affordable housing should not only focus on vulnerable individuals/families, rather they should target a complete village or hamlet as a unit of development.

2. The strategy of a Rural Housing Policy would have to be sustainable, leveraging the inherent potential of the rural society. It would have to empower rural communities to manage the development of their habitat and own the assets so created.
3. The basic idea behind affordable should not be cheaper housing, but housing that can provide scope for strengthening the livelihood of families. For example, a farmer's house should have provisions for accommodating drying and threshing crops; or cattle-shed, feed-manger for animal, water trough, cage for poultry etc. besides provisions for toilet, bathing, bio-gas plant, solar-based electrification etc.
4. The house needs of rural and urban regions are quite apart; in urban areas housing is a sector of the economy, while in rural sector housing is a support to the economy, more so for indigenous communities and poor families. Therefore, each country should have a separate housing policy for the rural sector.
5. While designing a rural housing policy, scope should be given for occupational variations. For example, a potter's house can have scope for furnace and similar in the case for other occupations.
6. Similarly, studies should be carried out to design aspects of indigenous houses using environmentally-friendly and locally sourced material, which are climate-sensitive and sustainable.
7. Besides developing rural housing policy, provisions should be searched within the other policies to strengthening the concept of affordable housing. Initiatives such as land-use and agroforestry programs should also include plantation of local level timber, considering the forthcoming requirements.
8. Housing policy itself should take care of basic amenities like health, drinking water, sanitation, education, housing, livelihood, etc. in order to improve educational, economic and social conditions. Still, the indigenous community faces many challenges in taking benefits of the provisions.