

IHRP Summer Fellowship Final Report

IHRP Fellowship with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing

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1 in 3 deaths around the world is linked to poverty and inadequate housing. The death rate of homeless persons is 2 to 10 times higher than someone with a home. Globally, approximately 1.6 billion people are inadequately housed, while homelessness occurs in every country. The consequences of inadequate housing are stark; devastating health, well-being, dignity, and feelings of self-worth, while perpetuating marginalization and vulnerabilities. Yet, conversations regarding housing tend to focus on markets or finances, and ending homelessness is set as a lofty policy goal of the distant future. Housing is in a state of crisis.

To be clear, housing is a human right, grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in Article 28 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and it is recognized as such by each state party to the ICESCR. Why then does homelessness and the prevalence of inadequate housing continue to exist in every region of the world, and what must states do to meet these international obligations.

These are typical of the questions the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, seeks to address. This summer I had the privilege of providing the Special Rapporteur on her research and writing efforts in respect to these issues, advocating for the realization of the right to housing for persons around the world.

The Mandate

UN Special Rapporteurs are independent experts that conduct country-specific missions and reports of their findings, respond to individuals' complaints through official Communications to respective state actors, and write two thematic reports a year, one presented to the UN General Assembly in New York, the other to the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

The Thematic Report to the General Assembly

As a research fellow, my primary responsibility this summer was to assist in the research and writing of the Special Rapporteur's thematic report to the General Assembly on the right to adequate housing for persons with disabilities. This thematic report was particularly interesting due to its overlap with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which specifically includes the right to adequate housing as well as a number of other interconnected rights, such as the right to live independently and participate in the community, the right to reasonable accommodation, and the principles of accessibility and participation. Accordingly, the right to housing for persons with disabilities benefits from a robust and coherent international legal framework.

Together with the mandate's senior advisor, I sought to canvas important cases, policies, and legislation from around the world in order to depict the state of housing for persons with disabilities in comparison to potential presented by this framework. Almost immediately the following became clear. First, from the continued existence of institutionalization and inaccessible, unaffordable, and uninhabitable houses, the state of housing that many persons with disabilities are forced to live in is abhorrent.

Second, despite the fundamental importance of housing for persons with disabilities, and the for realization of other rights in the CRPD, the right to housing has received relatively sparse and narrow attention from states, advocacy groups, disabled-persons organizations, and international bodies such as the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Few countries have enacted laws or programs that seek to promote, protect and realize the right to housing for persons with disabilities in a comprehensive manner, as is required from a human rights approach. This created a challenge in regards to researching the issue, finding examples of best practices, and examining how courts have been exercising their jurisdiction to further the right. We responded to these challenges by drawing on right to housing and rights of persons with disabilities jurisprudence and policies more broadly, using the international framework to bridge the gaps.

The report delineated the clear obligations states have respecting the right to adequate housing for persons with disabilities under the CRPD and the ICESCR, core principles courts should rely on to better adjudicate the right, and ultimately urged states to implement the disability rights paradigm to realize the right to housing in accordance with Agenda 2030.

The Shift

In addition to her required duties, the Special Rapporteur has initiated an international movement to reclaim the right to housing, called the Shift. The Shift seeks to facilitate paradigmatic change in the context housing, to motivate states and individuals to refrain from further referring to housing as a commodity, an opportunity for investment, or a staple in a booming economy, and to instead refer to it as a human right.

Over the summer I had the opportunity to participate in the development of the Shift. In June, the Special Rapporteur hosted the first global strategic planning meeting including representatives from international organizations, national government, national



Figure 1 Participants of The Shift Global Strategic Planning Meeting

human rights institutions, the arts community, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and United Cities and Local Governments. In preparation for the meeting, I assisted in the preparation of the agenda and concept notes in preparation. During the meeting, which I had the rather surreal opportunity to attend, I was deeply inspired by the incredible and committed advocates around the table. Following the meeting, I was presented with additional opportunities to participate in the development of the Shift; providing follow up notes to the participants of the meeting, creating info-graphics, and drafting social media messaging.

My most challenging task following the meeting was drafting a core concept note to be circulated amongst all participants as a unified platform, first for participant feedback then subsequently to be used to seek funding from the participants various networks and to garner additional support. This consisted of revisiting the notes taken during the meeting and distilling core messages and underlying principles that captured the ethos of the movement and that all participants supported. Before finishing my fellowship, I completed the concept note and had sent it to the Special Rapporteur for approval before being circulated to the partners around the world.

The Importance of Communications

A significant and absolutely crucial element of the right to housing mandate is communications. Housing truly is everyone's issue. In order to successfully transform the way in which housing is considered, talked about and dealt with from a framework that prioritizes wealth generation to one that respects the human rights and dignity of all requires that people everywhere recognize it as such. Strong messaging, strategic communication, and an effective platform are necessary to make that happen.



Figure 2 A infographic highlighting a key comment from the CESCR for the mandate's social media pages.

Through my fellowship I came to realize the importance of a strong communications team and strategy to the forwarding of human rights, and was presented with the opportunity to learn about and contribute to the communications aspects of the mandate, including helping manage social media, curating media content in response to significant events, preparing for presentations at public events, translating important messages into info-graphics,

and brainstorming and planning additional media opportunities such as podcasts and video blogs.

One example of the importance of communications work was the Special Rapporteur's response to the tragedy of Grenfell Tower. In addition to a letter to the respective British government emphasizing the steps mandated by international human rights law, the mandate team created a short video outlining these requirements and used social media to highlight the human rights elements of the tragedy to ensure that subsequent action emphasized the crucial human rights at stake.

Overall

I can say without hesitation that my fellowship with the Special Rapporteur was an invaluable learning experience that taught me about a crucial human rights system, the international human rights framework, issues respecting the right to housing, and about the various facets of strong rights advocacy. But a recap of my summer would not be complete without referring to



Figure 3 Dinner planning meeting with the mandate team.

unparalleled value of being part of this team specifically. Being on the mandate team with the Special Rapporteur, the mandate's senior advisor, and her executive assistant and communications coordinator, presented me with incredible mentorship, direct feedback on my work, a willingness to talk through issues I was covering, and the opportunity to jump in on any issue or task that presented itself, all from incredible human rights advocates. Working with such renowned human rights advocate is an experience I could not have had without the IHRP fellowship, and is one I truly believe will shape my career moving forward.