

Response by Finland to OHCHR's questionnaire on the right to an adequate standard of living

1. What role will national and international human rights standards on the right to adequate housing play in informing your positions and proposals for Habitat III? Can you please provide concrete examples in this regard?

Finland has set up a National Habitat Committee, which will formulate positions and proposals for Habitat III at a later stage this year.

In general Article 19§4 of the Constitution of Finland (731/1999) obliges the public authorities to "promote the right of everyone to housing and the opportunity to arrange their own housing."

In addition, Finland regularly reports on the implementation of the right to housing to international monitoring bodies pursuant to the relevant human rights obligations, such as in particular those undertaken under Article 31 of the European Social Charter, as well as Article 11§1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. These obligations are taken into consideration when forming the positions relating to housing.

On a general level, the housing policy in Finland is based on cross-sectoral cooperation; the Ministry of the Environment being primarily responsible for the Government's housing policy and combatting homelessness. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health is furthermore responsible for housing benefits and services and hence the supporting of independent living and coping with housing costs.

2. One aspect for discussion in the context of Habitat III will likely be "social cohesion and housing". What public policies, programmes or plans are being considering or have been put forward by national or subnational level governments related to "social cohesion" (for example: non-discrimination and equality) and the right to adequate housing? Please specifically reference any policies, programmes or plans aimed at ensuring inclusive housing for disadvantaged groups such as migrants and refugees, women, young people, older people, and people with disabilities in urban centres.

One of the basic targets of the Finnish housing policy is to promote social cohesion by several instruments like city planning, architecture, site and housing allocation and mixed housing tenures and housing benefits. Ensuring inclusive housing also for disadvantaged groups is a priority for Finland. The objective is to support independent living at home instead of institutional housing. Priority in housing allocation is given to homeless people, evicted households and households living in an overcrowded dwelling.

In general, housing benefits are essential in ensuring an adequate standard of living. There are three housing benefit schemes in place: general housing allowance, housing supplement for students and housing allowance for pensioners. The benefits are granted by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland.

The amount of the general housing allowance is determined by reference to the number of people in the household, the municipality in which the home is located and household's monthly income before taxes. A household includes everyone sharing living quarters and the housing allowance is granted to the household collectively. Assistance with housing costs is available for rental, right-of-occupancy, partial-ownership and owner-occupied homes. There are no standards regarding the level of housing, such as age or equipment. As of January 2015, the size of the dwelling is not taken into consideration when granting the general housing allowance. The general housing allowance is important to many low-income households and families.

Another central element for ensuring an adequate standard of living and social housing are state-subsidized rental apartment buildings. The Finnish State promotes construction and renovation of social rental housing by granting various subsidies (interest subsidies, guarantees and grants). Tenants are eligible for state-subsidized social housing according to their housing need, their income and their asset level. The basic principle of spacious accommodation in the abovementioned apartments is one person per room excluding kitchen. Rents are lower in the state-subsidized housing than in the private rental housing.

With regard to for example the elderly, living at home is considered crucial to the quality of life. Living at home supports the elderly people's right to self-determination, inclusion and a meaningful life. The majority of older people live, and wish to live, at home. In 2013, 90,3 % of those aged 75 years or over lived at their own home. The national target is that 91-92 % of those aged 75 or over would live at their own home in year 2017. The Government is implementing a development programme for housing for elderly people in 2013-2017. This programme seeks to improve older people's housing conditions for instance by providing financial support for renovation of houses and residential buildings.

A precondition for updating the service structure in support of living at home is to take simultaneous action to reform housing, the living environment and services. According to quality recommendations issued by the Government, municipalities must include the development of a functional combination of housing, living environment and services as part of their care and service plans. The municipalities must assess the alteration and renovation needs of both home care and informal care clients' dwellings, while taking into account accessibility and safety. This should be done in connection with home visits that support well-being and promote living at home.

Moreover, regarding people with intellectual disabilities, the Government issued in 2010 a resolution of principle on a programme to organize housing and related services for people with intellectual disabilities in 2010–2015. The goal is to provide persons with intellectual disabilities individual housing solutions in regular housing environment, as well as to reinforce their inclusion and equal treatment in the community and society. The programme aims at producing about 1,500 homes for the de-institutionalization of persons with intellectual disabilities and about 2,000 homes for adults moving out of their childhood homes. Once implemented, the programme will reduce the number of places in institutions, from 2,000 long-term placements in 2010 to about 500 placements by the end of 2015. The goal is to ensure that no one lives in an institution after 2020. Through this resolution, the Government has committed itself to continuing the structural reform of the services for persons with intellectual disabilities, as well as developing services that enable people with the most severe disabilities to live in the local community.

The Finnish Government and the Helsinki Metropolitan Area municipalities will make an agreement on how to promote the Metropolitan Area's international competitiveness and development as well as cooperation in the planning of land use, housing and transport, and the prevention of segregation. Work to reduce homelessness continues with emphasis on prevention of homelessness.

3. In light of the fact that subnational and local governments play an essential role with respect to the implementation of the right to adequate housing, what plans and procedures does your Government intend to implement to ensure they are engaged in the lead up to Habitat III as well as with respect to the implementation of commitments coming out of Habitat III?

Finland has set up a National Habitat Committee to formulate positions and proposals for Habitat III. Unfortunately the committee's work is not yet at the stage where it would be possible to respond to this question.

4. What interesting or unique housing policies, programs or good practices consistent with the human right to housing does your Government intend to highlight through the Habitat III process? Please provide examples both from local, subnational or national levels of government, and, if applicable, from non-government actors as well.

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Please note that further information on the Finnish homelessness policy can be found in Finland's 6th periodic report to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (E/C.12/FIN/6).

5. Please reflect on mechanisms used to monitor compliance with Habitat II (1996) at the national level that have proven effective and, if possible, provide examples. What kind of mechanisms would your Government envisage as part of the monitoring and implementation of Habitat III?

The main mechanisms used to monitor compliance with Habitat II have included "Finland's National Report to Istanbul +5", published in 2001, and "Finland's National Report for the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (Habitat III)" compiled in 2014. These reports include both expert analyses and statistical data on compliance with Habitat II. Pending the decisions of the National Habitat Committee, Finland may monitor the implementation of Habitat III through the formulation of further national reports. However, we do not recommend national reports as the sole form of monitoring or an effective way to do so.

The mechanisms used to implement the results of Habitat III remain to be agreed upon. However, former experiences suggest that implementation will include various measures related to government policies and cross-sectoral action at the national and local levels.