

Beyond buildings and property rights: what it takes to ensure the right to adequate housing in disaster relief

NEW YORK – “Disasters provide opportunities but also serious risks for human rights,” today said United Nations Special Rapporteur Raquel Rolnik urging governments to go beyond physical structures and individual property rights in their relief efforts and protect the right to adequate housing of the most vulnerable.

“Governments must ensure disasters are not manipulated to serve the interests of a few, to the detriment of the most vulnerable, and that relief efforts do not intentionally or unintentionally exclude or discriminate against them,” Ms. Rolnik said during the presentation of her annual report* to the General Assembly in New York.

“Discrimination affects the impacts of disasters and the way these are addressed,” the UN expert on the right to adequate housing stressed. “All too often informal settlers, the poorest, ethnic minorities, indigenous groups, women, lose their lives, their homes, their land, to a disproportionate degree. In the wake of a disaster, they do not always benefit from disaster assistance as other groups do.”

Ms. Rolnik noted that displaced renters and informal settlers have been excluded from housing restitution and reconstruction schemes, on the basis that they could not show formal private ownership titles. “They are more vulnerable to land grabbing or eviction, so it is time to acknowledge the legitimacy of multiple forms of tenure that exist worldwide, and give protection to those with the most insecure tenure and property arrangements.”

The Special Rapporteur also stressed the broad implications of fully taking into account the right to adequate housing into disaster response. “A focus on ‘deliverables’ — shelters, houses — as ends in themselves might divert from the fundamental responsibility to ensure all aspects of the right to housing.”

Property restitution and housing reconstruction have sometimes come at the expense of rebuilding and improving the broader social, political or economic conditions required to support sustainable return. “Realizing the right to adequate housing is about ensuring basic services and infrastructure, upgrading settlements and strengthening communities, as much as it is about building housing,” she added.

“Putting the right to adequate housing at the core of reconstruction and recovery efforts is not an easy task. It requires decisive action, and the willingness to address difficult issues, such as inequalities in society, that are magnified and exacerbated by disasters. Yet it is crucial to do so if we are serious about making human rights commitments a reality in all circumstances,” the Special Rapporteur said. “Human rights do not stop when a disaster strikes – to the contrary, it is then that they matter most.”

(*) Read the full report by the Special Rapporteur on housing:

www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Housing/Pages/AnnualReports.aspx

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Raquel Rolnik (Brazil) was appointed as Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context by the United Nations Human Rights Council, in May 2008. As Special Rapporteur, she is independent from any government or organization and serves in her individual capacity. An architect and urban planner, Rolnik has extensive experience in the area of housing and urban policies.

Learn more about the mandate and work of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/housing/index.htm>

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