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Statement submitted by Habitat for Humanity Int’l, a 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

Habitat for Humanity International is pleased to submit a statement on behalf of its Solid Ground campaign and the 17 partner organizations and 34 national networks implementing the campaign. Habitat for Humanity International is a global non-governmental organization with ECOSOC consultative status, working in over 70 countries through national organizations, affiliates and local community partners. Its vision is a world where everyone has a safe and decent place to live. During the past 40 years, Habitat for Humanity has partnered with low-income households around the world, improving the housing conditions of nearly 7 million low-income people.

Globally, 75 percent of people lack proper documentation for the land on which they live. It is estimated that at least 1 billion people in cities around the world the majority of whom are women — lack secure land rights. With security of tenure, people are more likely to invest in their homes, their families, and their communities. Control over land is a means of economic and social empowerment for women. Land rights are particularly important for building resilience and recovering from a conflict or disaster.

In March 2016, on the occasion of International Women’s Day, Habitat for Humanity launched its global advocacy campaign to mobilize existing and new supporters to influence policy makers toward promoting policies and systems that improve access to land for shelter. Building on Habitat’s long-standing work on gender equality, one of the Solid Ground campaign is gender equality in property rights.

In October 2016, at Habitat III, the third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development held in Quito, Ecuador, Habitat for Humanity International announced its public commitment through the Solid Ground campaign to raise awareness and improve policies and systems to help 10 million people secure access to land for shelter. Solid Ground’s advocacy efforts focused on ensuring that secure tenure and housing affordability was included in its outcome document, the New Urban Agenda. The resulting New Urban Agenda, signed at Habitat III by over 160 nations, promotes “increased security of tenure for all, recognizing the plurality of tenure types... with particular attention to security of land tenure for women as key to their empowerment, including through effective administrative systems.”

Twice in 13 months, more than 150 countries came together laying a critical foundation for improving living conditions around the world. One year before the New Urban Agenda was agreed upon, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development set forth 17 Sustainable Development Goals designed to guide global development through 2030, including Goal 5 (the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls) and Goal 11 (to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable).

Together, these two global frameworks provide a collective blueprint for policy makers, donors and advocates alike and outline the broad contours for sustainable urban development for decades to come. While these agreements should be applauded, they are also voluntary and their implementation is not guaranteed. The Solid Ground campaign is a tool that Habitat for Humanity’s network and partners are leveraging to ensue accountability in their implementation.

The countries where the Solid Ground campaign is being implemented span many time zones, languages and cultures, but they share a common barrier that denies

people good homes — access to land. Although women are more than half of the world's population, many countries have cultural beliefs or specific laws about land ownership that discriminate against women, single mothers in particular. Women are more affected by land rights because male ownership is preferred in some countries over female ownership in terms of: paternal inheritance systems, rules only allowing husbands to own land and other customary practices. These roadblocks often leave families with no other option than to seek shelter with friends or move into slums, where one in every seven people on the planet lives.

Hearing the story from the advocacy specialist at Habitat for Humanity Lesotho sheds light on the realities of what can happen to widows in some cultures and countries. Despite a merging of their possessions in marriage, when her husband died, all of her property — movable and non-movable — was taken away from her and her child by her in-laws. Bohlokoa recounts her personal experience of disinheritance after the loss of her husband, “My husband and I had begun building what was meant to be our dream house for our family, but following his passing I was straightaway isolated by my in-laws and my world was upheaved.” Through Habitat for Humanity Lesotho, Bohlokoa is now actively engaged in the Solid Ground campaign, playing an integral role in strengthening policy and changing systems so that women in Lesotho will no longer share her experience.

Through the Solid Ground campaign, partners — civil society organizations, grassroots community members, representatives of the private sector, academics and policy makers — are expanding the reach and capacity of these efforts to increase access to land for shelter. They are working together with governments at all levels to change policies. We are witnessing progress thanks to the engagement of diverse stakeholders around the world.

Solid Ground's work in Honduras provides one examples of this. A decade ago, the housing crisis in Honduras looked insurmountable. Although the country's Constitution establishes housing as a human right, it's not uncommon for a significant gap to still remain between such a high-level statement and a tangible transformation of the housing and living conditions of its citizens. Many families in Honduras, even with such a constitutional provision, lived in shacks made from whatever scraps of wood or metal they could cobble together. Single mothers confronted laws and a culture that placed land ownership — and therefore homes where their children could grow and thrive — out of reach.

Led by Habitat for Humanity Honduras, civil society organizations in Honduras are working to eliminate barriers to land access by advocating for the formulation and adoption of improved housing and land policies, one municipality at a time. After engaging local governments in each municipality, they form a diverse commission to review existing policies and develop recommendations to improve them. A follow up phase involves implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the progress of new policies and their impact. Thanks to these efforts, more than half of Habitat Honduras' 298 municipalities have passed housing policies. Some of these policies explicitly give single mothers first priority for affordable housing opportunities in recognition that having access to housing keeps families together. The 2016 report, “Monitoring Municipal Investment in Social Housing,” was conducted in 102 municipalities where this methodology had been implemented and showed a total increased investment of US\$ 40,849,897.14 — an average of 5.36% of the municipal budget — benefitting 106,420 families.

A consultant group of academic, public sector and civil society representatives in South Africa — including Habitat for Humanity South Africa — drafted a new

policy — the Informal Settlement Support Plan. The Informal Settlement Support Plan includes a strategy and methodological guidelines for informal settlement upgrading in the Western Cape. The drafting process was accompanied by several training sessions for municipalities to build local capacity for implementation, enabling both a policy and a systems change. The Informal Settlement Support Plan was drafted on the principle of participatory and inclusive slum upgrading with residents being an active and equal partner in the upgrading and planning process. Sixty informal settlements have been prioritized for upgrading by 2019, indicating a minimum of 88,440 people will be impacted. The goal is by 2030, informal settlements in the Western Cape Province are transformed into livable, integrated, vibrant and resilient neighborhoods.

Through the Solid Ground campaign, Habitat for Humanity is working closely with our partners, including the Global Land Tool Network as well as many with United Nations Economic and Social Council status such as, Huairou Commission, Rural Development Institute Landesa and Women Thrive Worldwide, to address gender equality and land access. We have conducted regional and global learning exchanges and facilitated knowledge platforms to share local project experiences, tools and approaches, including gender equality efforts and gender evaluation criteria. The Solid Ground campaign invites the Commission on the Status of Women and its participating stakeholders to join these efforts to address inequalities, injustices and challenges around gender equality and property rights. Visit solidground.org to learn more.
