More than ever with COVID-19 we need strong public and social housing services

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While the promotion of market-led approaches to housing is still prevalent at a global level, some local governments are joining forces to swim against the tide.

Facing a 100 percent surge in rent prices since 2015, Berlin's local government has frozen rent prices for the next five years at June 2019 levels and repurchased 670 apartments that were to be sold to real estate holding company Deutsche Wohnen, sparing tenants disproportionate rent rises due to superfluous renovations imposed by the company.[2] In late 2019, the public Berlin's Housing Association further remunicipalized 6,000 apartments in the Spandau and Reinickendorf districts.[3] This makes sense when thinking of Vienna, one of the cities topping the world ranking for the quality of living, where 62 percent of the city's residents live in publicly owned or subsidized housing. Surprisingly, these are not only the lowest income earners, as housing here is seen as social good, not as a market commodity.[4]

In March 2019, a European civil society coalition including tenant associations, human rights organizations, trade unions, student and pensioners groups as well as representatives of city networks launched the Housing for All initiative, demanding the European Union take action to ensure affordable housing for all in the EU. Although halted in February 2020 by the organizers before it reached one million signatures because of Brexit, the initiative has triggered an EU parliamentary initiative on "access to decent and affordable housing for all".[5]

Cities are also uniting to return housing to its primary social role. In July 2019, eight cities[6] together with United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) launched "Cities for Adequate Housing,"[7] a global call for action on national governments and global institutions to demand more regulatory and fiscal powers as well as resources for local governments to regulate and enhance their public housing stocks. The call is part of a series of actions joining "The Shift" campaign launched by the former UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing to reclaim housing as a fundamental human right.[8] As of today the number of endorsing

1 This box is an extract of a paper published by PSI in August 2020, see https://bit.ly/3hiInbc.

2 A. Stoyanov, "Berlin continues fight for affordable housing," 5 October 2019, https://www.themayor.eu/en/berlin-continues-fight-for-affordable-housing

3 The Future is Public Conference Report, "Towards democratic ownership of public services," Working draft, Amsterdam, December 2019, https://futureispublic.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/TNI_the-future-is-public_online.pdf

4 V. Lorin, "Can Vienna's model of social housing provide the inspiration to tackle Europe's housing crisis?" Equal Times, 22 January 2020, https://www.equaltimes.org/can-vienna-s-model-of-social?lang=en#.XpX1jcgzbct

5 Housing for All website, https://www.housingforall.eu/european-citizens-initiative-housing-for-all-stopped-but-still-successful/

6 Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, London, Montevideo, Montreal, New York, Paris

7 "Cities for Adequate Housing," Municipalist Declaration of Local Governments for the Right to Housing and the Right to the City, New York, 16 July 2018, https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/cities_por_adequate_housing.pdf

8 UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, "The Shift" website, http://www.unhousingrapp.org/the-shift

cities and metropolitan areas has increased to 42.[9]

As cities are forced to rethink and adapt their social measures in the context of the global health and economic crisis, public and social housing emerge clearly as an essential part of the solution to beat pandemics and protect public health in the long term. Market-based solutions have proved inadequate to solve the global housing crisis and uphold the human right to housing, leaving deep social inequality scars that are tearing apart the social cohesion of many cities and communities, while losing lives to COVID-19. Published in December 2019 by the former UN Special Rapporteur, the "Guidelines for the Implementation of the Right to Adequate Housing" contain a clear call to prevent "any privatization of public or social housing that would reduce the capacity of the state to ensure the right to adequate housing".[10]

As public authorities seek to enable lockdown measures to beat COVID-19, it is imperative that things do not just go back to what they were before the crisis, but that the lessons learned from the pandemic are integrated, made permanent and scaled up to ensure lasting, decent housing solutions for everyone, especially the most vulnerable. Public and social housing services have a fundamental role to play in making that happen and must be fully rehabilitated and refurbished as a critical part of the toolkit that governments at all levels should have to secure everyone's social security and public health for all.

9 Amsterdam, Asunción, Bangangté, Barcelona, Barcelona Provincial Council, Beitunia, Berlin, Birmingham, Blantyre, Bologna, Buenos Aires, Cascais, Copenhagen, Durban, Eyyübiye, Geneva, Jakarta, Lisbon, London, Mannheim, Mexico City, Medellin, Montreal, Montevideo, New Taipei, New York, Paris, Rennes, Río Grande, San Antonio de Areco, Seoul, Strasbourg, Taipei, Terrassa, Tlajomulco, Vienna, Zaragoza, Barcelona Metropolitan Area, Greater Manchester, Plaine Commune, Grand Paris, https://citiesforhousing.org/cities/

10 UN General Assembly, "Guidelines for the Implementation of the Right to Adequate Housing"(A/HRC/43/43), Art. 69 (i), 26 December 2019, http://www.unhousingrapp.org/user/pages/04.resources/A_HRC_43_43_E-2.pdf