



The UN & You

BY TERESA KOTTURAN SCN – FEBRUARY 2019

Working group aims to eliminate homelessness

“To mark this 400th Anniversary of the Charism, the Vincentian Family decided to launch this major global project aimed at reducing and, where possible, ending homelessness in the countries in which it works. It will involve both immediate holistic care for those suffering homelessness and a campaign for systemic change in the way that homelessness is tackled at a local, regional and global level.” ([Famvin Homeless Alliance](#))

Initially, the Vincentian Family NGOs at the UN took up the issue of homelessness in order to advocate at the UN; to measure homelessness as well as to consider homeless as an emerging issue. To go forward with advocacy at the UN, we needed to bring in other NGOs. Our initiative grew into the “Working Group to End Homelessness.” Members of the group, which also includes Daughters of Charity NGO representatives, have been busy meeting ambassadors from different countries to give visibility to homelessness. —Sister Teresa

By Chris Herlinger, [Global Sisters Report](#)
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The United Nations is no stranger to the issues of poverty, women’s rights, climate change, the nuclear arms race and other pressing challenges. But the global body has yet to tackle head-on one social problem visible on the streets of the world’s urban centers: homelessness.

That may be changing, though, as sisters and other religious are bringing the issue to the halls of the global body.

“It’s a global issue, but it hasn’t been viewed as such,” said Sister Veronica Brand, who represents the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary at the UN. “It’s an issue that touches on so many things. It’s not just about housing, but connected to so many social issues across the world: jobs, rising economic inequality, social pro-



Iris Bailey, left, who has lived in New York’s homeless shelters and represented Life Experience and Faith Sharing Associates, an interdenominational ministry sponsored by the Sisters of Charity, and Vincentian Fr. Guillermo Campuzano, the Congregation of the Mission’s U.N. representative who chairs the U.N.’s homeless working group, at a Feb. 11 event on homelessness at the United Nations (GSR photo by Chris Herlinger)

tections.”

Sister Margaret O’Dwyer, one of two representatives of the Company of the Daughters of Charity at the United Nations who, like Brand, is a member of an NGO (nongovernmental organization) Working Group to End Homelessness, said there are “multiple breaches of human rights” connected to homelessness, which can involve poverty, migration or climate change.

“In all cases,” she told GSR, “there is a loss of dignity.”

The 27-member working group is harnessing the concern about homelessness among sisters and other religious, pushing the United Nations to formally take up the problem as an emerging issue of focus and concern, perhaps as early as next year. The body was formed in 2017 and has roots among the [Vincentian Family](#), the global Catholic movement that follows the

example of St. Vincent de Paul.

The Vincentians established a [Vincentian Family Homeless Alliance](#) the same year to mark the 400th anniversary of the birth of the Vincentian charism, said Vincentian Father Guillermo Campuzano, the [Congregation of the Mission's](#) UN representative who chairs the NGO Working Group to End Homelessness. The Vincentian advocacy work prompted Campuzano and others to form the UN working group to include both religious and secular advocacy organizations that work at the United Nations.

"We're coordinating our work to make more noise," Campuzano told GSR. He said the issue of homelessness at the United Nations is analogous to the visibility of homeless people in urban areas: They are in plain sight, but ignored.

"We don't want to see them," he said of most societies' attitude toward people who are homeless. "And that is the hardest thing: being ignored. The homeless become subhuman."

The group is working with such organizations as the [Institute of Global Homelessness](#) and the International Coalition to End Homelessness, arguing in a joint brochure that "homelessness is the clearest evidence that states are failing to meet their obligation to provide housing as a basic human right."

The groups note that housing "is the foundation for dignified, decent and rewarding lives," but homelessness "is growing in many parts of the world, and people who experience it are in danger of 'being left behind'" as the United Nations works on its global agenda to eliminate or reduce poverty by 2030.

That agenda, with its 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#), does not totally ignore the importance of housing. Goal 11 notes: "By 2030, [nations should] ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums."

Other UN documents or declarations dealing with urban agendas and human settlements have all declared the need for safe housing, and the 1948 [Univer-](#)



Sister Margaret O'Dwyer, left, one of two representatives of the Company of the Daughters of Charity at the United Nations, and Daughter of Wisdom Sister Jean Quinn, executive director of UNANIMA, are both members of the NGO Working Group to End Homelessness. (GSR photo by Chris Herlinger)

[sal Declaration of Human Rights](#) also affirms housing as a human right.

But the UN has not highlighted the problem of homelessness explicitly. One reason may be, as the groups like the NGO Working Group to End Homelessness note, most countries either do not accurately measure the extent of homelessness or use different methods to measure the problem.

As a result, a common global measurement of homelessness does not exist. But, they note, the UN

Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing estimates that as of 2005, "approximately 100 million people worldwide are without a place to live. Over 1 billion people are inadequately housed."

With a current global population of more than 7 billion, that means that 1 in 7 people on the planet faces some kind of housing challenge.

The extent of the problem is one reason the issue of homelessness, often seen as a local problem, needs to be seen as a global priority, Brand said.

"If it's just a local problem, why is it in nearly every country? There are features of homelessness in San Francisco, New York, Nairobi, Abu Dhabi, Beijing, Dublin," Brand said, noting the common thread of a "rapidly urbanized world" in which millions are migrating from rural areas to urban centers.

Campuzano agreed, arguing that "homelessness is a transnational problem that touches or relates to the UN's SDGs in some way."

One reason sisters and other religious are now championing the issue at the UN is because of their congregations' work at the grassroots, Brand said. "The issue of homelessness [among religious at the UN] comes from our ministries across the world. People have seen the problem on the ground and have developed initiatives."

That's one reason Irish Daughter of Wisdom Sister Jean Quinn, executive director of UNANIMA International, a United Nations-based coalition of Catholic congregations focused on concerns of women, children, migrants and the environment, is making the

issue a cornerstone of her work.

Quinn called her long experience in working with the homeless in Dublin “transformative,” saying there are many stereotypes that need to be dispelled about people who are homeless, including the belief that being homeless is a kind of permanent condition.

It isn’t, she said, adding that she has seen many people who have experienced homelessness find paths to useful, affirmative lives — paths that are rarely easy, given that those without homes are often ignored and bereft of basic human dignity, she said.

Affirming such lived experiences in the debates and discussions at the UN are vital, she said. The United Nations got a taste of these during the first day of the UN’s annual meetings of the Commission for Social Development, the UN’s advisory body on social development issues.

Many of the sisters who represent their congregations at the UN attended a Feb. 11 convening by the NGO Working Group to End Homelessness, the Institute of Global Homelessness and the Republic of Ireland’s UN mission.

“It’s such an obvious issue,” said Daughters of Charity Sister Catherine Prendergast, who moderated the event. “Our attention to this at the UN just has to happen.”

Brian Flynn, the deputy permanent representative of Ireland to the UN, concurred, saying, “You cannot underestimate” the global nature of homelessness, as “it touches every country, every city.”

“Homelessness is one of the most visible and egregious signs of inequality [globally today],” Flynn said.

One of those advocating that the UN take the issue seriously at the Feb. 11 UN meeting was Iris Bailey, who has lived in New York’s homeless shelters and represented Life Experience and Faith Sharing Associates, or LEFSA, an interdenominational ministry sponsored by the Sisters of Charity of New York.

Bailey described her entry in the New York City shelter system in August 2015 as demeaning and an affront to dignity because of poor living conditions in the shelters and for being viewed as nothing but a

number. She said these experiences convinced her that governments, advocacy groups and housing developers must find ways to provide more affordable housing in the world’s urban centers.

“We need to stop building luxury buildings,” she said. “We need affordable housing.”

Julieta Perucca, the senior aide for the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, agreed, calling the global numbers of those living without homes “staggering.”

“Homelessness is not a personal failure, such as a problem of drug addiction, psychosocial disabilities, or a personal unwillingness to live within the confines of society,” she said. Nor is it due to “a lack of services, food banks or shelters. These numbers show that the crisis is systemic to our societal structures.”

Rather, Perucca said, “Homelessness is directly related to the unaffordability of housing. In cities across the world, housing costs are skyrocketing and not commensurate with incomes, making it impossible for moderate- and low-income residents to manage.”

In an interview with GSR, Campuzano said he understands the perception that

debates at the UN over homelessness are abstract and distant from the problems faced by those without homes on the streets of, say, Bogotá, the capital of Campuzano’s home country of Colombia.

But international debates can become part of national and even local policies, he argues, and the UN can be a “social lab rotary” for policies that may result in needed change.

“Not one document at the UN is legally binding — but morally binding, yes,” he said.

“The UN can show the right policy to national governments. Even if the UN is broken and dysfunctional, it’s the best we have to promote the common good.”

This article was published/posted Feb. 14, 2019, in Global Sisters Report with the headline, “[Working group urges UN to step up the fight against homelessness](#).” Chris Herlinger is an international correspondent for GSR.



Daughters of Charity Sister Catherine Prendergast, right, moderates a Feb. 11 event at the United Nations on homelessness. To her right is Brian Flynn, the deputy permanent representative of Ireland to the UN. (GSR photo by Chris Herlinger)