The right to adequate housing, as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, is enshrined in many international human rights instruments. Most notably among these are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 25.1) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (art. 11.1). During the 1990s, the right to adequate housing gained further recognition among the human rights community, and many governments adopted or revised housing policies to include various dimensions of human rights. The Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) in 1996 harnessed this momentum. The outcomes of the Conference, the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda, constitutes a framework where human settlements development is linked with the process of realizing human rights in general and housing rights in particular.

The Habitat Agenda, particularly in its paragraph 61, clarifies actions and commitments of governments and other stakeholders in order to promote, protect and ensure the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing. Subsequently, the Commission on Human Settlements adopted resolution 16/7 on ‘the realization of the human right to adequate housing’ in May 1997. The resolution recommended that UN-HABITAT and OHCHR elaborate a joint programme “to assist States with the implementation of their commitments to ensure the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing.”

More recently, the Commission on Human Rights in April 2001 adopted resolution 2001/28 on ‘adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living’ which requested the two agencies to “strengthen their cooperation and to consider developing a joint housing rights programme.” These resolutions constitute the main mandate for the establishment of the United Nations Housing Rights Programme (UNHRP).

Current rates of population growth and urban-rural migration, particularly in developing countries, have serious impacts on living conditions in human settlements. By the beginning of the third millennium, it is estimated that there are 1.1 billion people living in inadequate housing conditions in urban areas alone. In many cities of developing countries, more than half of the population live in informal settlements, without security of tenure and in conditions that can be described as life and health threatening. Among an estimated 100 million homeless people around the world, available data suggest that increasing proportions are women and children.

The annual need for housing in urban areas of developing countries alone is estimated at around 35 million units (during 2000-2010). The bulk of these, some 21 million units, are required to cater for the needs of the increasing number of households. The rest is needed to meet the requirements of people who are homeless or living in inadequate housing. In other words, some 95,000 new urban housing units have to be constructed each day in developing countries to improve housing conditions to acceptable levels.

While increasing housing production and improving existing housing stock are very important in every society, these activities must run parallel with actions that specifically address and focus on the human rights aspects. Rights-based approach to development in the housing sector can:

- Empower the poor and the homeless;
- Promote security of tenure, particularly for women and vulnerable groups in inadequate housing conditions;
- Strengthen protection against forced evictions and discrimination in the housing sectors; and
- Promote equal access to housing resources and remedies in cases of violations of housing rights.

The development objective of the UNHRP is to assist States and other stakeholders with the implementation of their commitments in the Habitat Agenda to ensure the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as provided for in international instruments.

The first phase of the UNHRP focuses on five programme areas:

1. Advocacy, outreach and learning from partners
   UNHRP will promote awareness, information exchange and learning among partners on housing rights.

2. Support for United Nations human rights mechanisms on housing rights
   UNHRP will support the United Nations human rights mechanisms, particularly the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing and works of the treaty bodies, and promote coordination among relevant United Nations agencies.

3. Monitoring and evaluation of progress of realization of housing rights
   Under UNHRP, a global system will be established for monitoring and evaluation on housing rights practices which should contribute to the work of treaty bodies and to exchange of good practices and lessons learned among policy makers and development practitioners.

4. Research and analysis on housing rights
   UNHRP will promote development of relevant norms, standards, guidelines and thematic research on housing rights, which will contribute to better understanding of human settlements and shelter development processes and policy formulation through the lens of human rights.

5. Capacity-building and technical cooperation
   UNHRP will assist States and other stakeholders, including independent national human rights institutions and the civil society, in building capacities for implementation and monitoring of housing rights.
The United Nations Housing Rights Programme

A joint initiative of UN-HABITAT and OHCHR

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“All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. … [It is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (paragraph 5).

“We reaffirm our commitment to the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing, as provided for in international instruments.”

Istanbul Declaration (paragraph 8) and the Habitat Agenda (paragraph 39).