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Tyler Morning Telegraph

Property rights are they key to improving housing, lives

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If any further evidence we need less engagement with the United Nations - not more - then a new report from the U.N. on housing makes the case. Affordable housing is an issue worldwide, but not for the reasons the U.N. claims.

In fact, the things the report condemns, from private property rights to increased investment, are the only real hope of solving the problem.

“Housing has lost its social function and is seen instead as a vehicle for wealth and asset growth,” says the U.N.’s Leilani Farha, an official with the Orwellian-named Human Rights Council. “It has become a financial commodity, robbed of its connection to community, dignity and the idea of home.”

At the root of the problem, she said, is private ownership of property (and the financial structures that support that).

“The financial world has essentially operated without any consideration of housing as a human right and States are complicit: they have supported financial markets in a way that has made housing unaffordable for most residents,” she says.

But her claims are demonstrably false. Vanessa Brown Calder has studied the issue for the Cato Institute. She points out that housing has increased, and become increasingly affordable, throughout the world.

“In spite of burdensome regulation, worldwide markets are becoming better at providing housing to the poor,” Calder explains. “For evidence, just look at the data: the percentage of the urban population that is living in slums (houses with inadequate space, sanitation, water, durability, or security) has fallen consistently over the past 25 years.”

In 1990, about 62 percent of people living in urban areas were in slums. By 2014, that number was down to about 46 percent.

At the same time, housing continues to get relatively cheaper.

“The house price index, or price of housing relative to average disposable income per person declined by 25 percent worldwide since 1970,” Calder says.

There are exceptions - but not where you would expect. Housing conditions have trended downward in countries where housing is seen as a right, and property ownership is not.

“(Farha) paints a dismal picture of housing in the United States, which is puzzling given a plethora of U.N. member states with genuinely dire conditions that go unmentioned, like Zimbabwe, Cuba, and Venezuela,” Calder writes. “Still, conditions are even improving in the United States. Housing has become less crowded and more comfortable: as household size has fallen, the median and average square footage per home has consistently grown.”

The U.N.’s position is entirely wrong. Private property rights should be protected, and the markets freed to enable people to build equity and ownership in the places they live.

When private property rights are protected, people build equity, which they can then parlay into capital for other things - starting their own business, for example, or more education.

In a world without property rights, everyone is a renter, and everyone is at the mercy of a government that might decide someone else’s right to housing trumps theirs.

The U.N.’s philosophy is simply incompatible with freedom. It’s time to disengage.