Tackling health inequalities by improving the quality of housing

From evidence to action – WHO’s response

Housing and the built environment have a profound impact on human health. Healthy, safe, energy efficient housing can significantly decrease the risks of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

The quality and environmental context of housing is increasingly considered as one of the main dimensions of environmental inequalities and housing conditions are one of the mechanisms through which social and environmental inequality translates into health inequality. The poor/marginalized often live in unsafe locations without basic services, affected by flooding or industrial pollution as well as by different violence risks.

Based on this evidence WHO has scaled up activities to address health inequities due to substandard housing conditions and developing WHO Housing and Health Guidelines.

The WHO Guideline Development Group (GDG), which met on 13-15 July in Morges, Switzerland formulated first draft recommendations with a focus in particular on crowding, housing accessibility and safety, thermal comfort (heat and cold), energy affordability and active transport in the residential environment. Other housing related topics, such as water, sanitation and air quality, among others issues, were also addressed and will be covered. The Guidelines on Housing and Health which are expected to be finalized in the second quarter of 2016.

NEXT STEPS?

In line with the GDG expert group recommendations, the following areas for action required to reduce health inequalities due to substandard housing conditions, were identified:

- Build up communication and participation on the implementation of the guidelines
  - Development of concrete communication materials on the recommendations reaching out to various stakeholders, from policy makers to users;

- Provide concrete implementation tools for translation the guidelines into action, in particular for reaching out to the most vulnerable
  - Development of guidance on how to apply the recommendations to slums / informal housing;
  - Expansion of the guidelines to cover the access to green/open public spaces, in particular in low-income urban areas;
  - Development of healthy housing plans;
  - Collection of case studies on healthy housing interventions, model housing legislations and regulations with a high-equity co-benefit at urban level;
  - Development of healthy housing label/ check list.

- Link in to global processes promoting urban health
  - UNHABITAT III
  - Climate Change Process (Climate Fund)