

## PRESS RELEASE

### ‘National Forum for Housing Rights’ Launched on World Habitat Day

New Delhi, October 1, 2012

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At a press conference held in New Delhi on the occasion of World Habitat Day – celebrated on the first Monday of October every year – the **National Forum for Housing Rights (NFHR)** was officially launched. This event was accompanied by simultaneous press meets launching NFHR in the cities of Vishakapatnam, Bhopal, Allahabad, Mumbai, Indore and Lucknow.

Indu Prakash Singh, convenor of NFHR and head of the urban poverty programme at *Indo-Global Social Service Society*, explained that NFHR is a coalition of organizations, networks, institutions, social movements and individuals across India committed to working at multiple levels to promote the respect, protection and fulfilment of the human right to adequate housing and related rights, including protection against forced evictions, especially for the most marginalised. “Concerned that the situation of housing and living conditions in India has been worsening and the number of homeless and those living in adverse conditions continues to rise, and given the lack of adequate government response, housing rights activists and organizations across India felt the need to come together and form a strong national campaign,” he said.

Bipin Rai, co-convenor NFHR, provided a brief history of the housing rights movement in India and the context for the launch of NFHR. The housing rights movement in India has been active for the last 30 years. Although there have been several challenges, the movement has continued in different forms and at various fronts. In 1986, the *National Campaign for Housing Rights* was launched, which worked effectively for around eight years. From 1994 until 2000, a number of state level campaigns were active in India. From 2000 - 2005, a new alliance called the *National Forum for Housing Rights (NFHR)* worked across urban India towards ensuring “Housing for All.” During the years 2005-2011, though several organizations, networks and movements continued working on different dimensions of housing rights across India, and state level housing rights campaigns continued, they were not organised as one national movement. In 2010-2011, at several meetings, the need for reviving NFHR was felt and articulated. At a national meeting held in Indore in August 2012, NFHR was formally constituted again with seven co-convenors from different parts of India assuming responsibility for different tasks. On 1 October 2012, which is World Habitat Day, NFHR is being publicly launched with the mandate to build an inclusive and participatory national movement committed to promoting the realisation of housing rights.

Shivani Chaudhry, associate director of *Housing and Land Rights Network* and co-convenor NFHR, stated that housing is a human right guaranteed in international law and upheld in numerous judgements of the Honourable Supreme Court of India and several High Courts. Despite this, millions of people in India do not have access to adequate housing, basic services and livelihood options. It is a matter of great shame and distress that more than half of India’s urban population lives and works without security of tenure, and in extremely inadequate housing and living conditions. Economic globalisation policies have exacerbated speculation in land and property; brought about a marked change in land use, planning and distribution; and have greatly affected ownership rights on vacant land in cities. Within this context, spaces for the urban poor in cities and towns are rapidly shrinking. Distress migration from rural to urban areas and forced evictions are resulting in displacement and growing homelessness and landlessness. But the land acquisition and resettlement bill currently being discussed by a Group of Ministers, does not have sufficient

protections for human rights, neither does it address the issue of urban displacement adequately. “On World Habitat Day, the government must reaffirm its commitment to meeting its national and international legal obligations to providing adequate housing for all,” she stressed.

Amita Joseph from *Business and Community Foundation*, and *Shahri Adhikar Manch: Begharon Ke Saath* drew attention to the national urban housing shortage at the end of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, which was estimated to be 26.53 million, 99% of which was for Economically Weaker Sections and Low Income Groups. Government policies and programmes like Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JnNURM) are further pushing the urban poor towards the fringes, where adequate housing, basic amenities and livelihood options are not available. She drew attention to the issue of regularisation of settlements in Delhi calling for legal recognition and provision of basic services in slums and informal settlements.

Ashok Pandey of *Beghar Mazdoor Sangharsh Samiti* – a movement of the homeless in Delhi – described the grossly inadequate conditions of the urban poor and homeless. Despite several progressive orders from the High Court of Delhi, the situation of homelessness in Delhi has not improved. He welcomed the formation of NFHR as a platform to raise the issue of housing rights and homelessness at the national level.

Usha Ramanathan, a legal researcher, while supporting the launch of NFHR, drew attention to regressive laws that impede the realisation of housing and land rights in India. She raised concerns about the *Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959* that criminalises the visibly poor, and also drew attention to the problematic definition of ‘public interest’ in the draft land acquisition and resettlement bill (recently renamed the *Right to Fair Compensation, Resettlement, Rehabilitation and Transparency in Land Acquisition Bill*).

NFHR will monitor developments of national importance with regard to housing and land issues, including the land acquisition and resettlement bill, Rajiv Awas Yojana and JnNURM.

Members announced that NFHR will initially focus on the following five thematic areas of work through research, publication, information dissemination, advocacy and strategic campaigns:

- Homelessness;
- Forced Evictions;
- Security of Tenure;
- In situ upgradation; and,
- Resettlement and Rehabilitation.

NFHR will also use the ‘right to the city’ framework to promote equitable and inclusive urban development and housing policies.

Over the next year, NFHR will organise state consultations and work to expand its membership as well as develop its position and strategy on the above issues.

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