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Remarks to the International Conference
"Rebuilding Sustainable Communities for Children and their Families after Disasters"
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Thank you to the organizing committee, namely Professor Awotona, for inviting me to speak this afternoon. At a conference dedicated to "Rebuilding Sustainable Communities after Disaster," I think it important to frame my comments around the post Hurricane Katrina and Rita organizing I have been privileged to be a part of.

Although Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit over three years ago many communities in the Gulf Coast and survivors nationally continue to try and piece together their fractured lives. I'll speak specifically to the housing crisis facing New Orleans and survivors living there, since that is where most of my work has been.

Let me give you several statistics and points of information regarding the housing crisis in New Orleans to help shape our discussion. Allow me to first frame this information by highlighting that even before Katrina and Rita the Gulf Coast region and specifically Louisiana had some of the highest poverty, health and other adverse social statistics in the country – so many communities in New Orleans were already quite vulnerable before the storms.

- Since Katrina, average housing prices in New Orleans have increased by 46% on average and in some instances as high as 200%.
- The homeless population of New Orleans has doubled from around 6,000 pre Katrina to 12,000 currently.
- Only 11% of families have returned to the Lower Ninth Ward, the numbers are even fewer for those who were former public housing residents.
- Experts estimate that it will take 20 to 25 years to rebuild New Orleans at the current pace.
- There are 6,982 families still living in FEMA trailers in New Orleans area.
- There are 14,000 displaced families in the New Orleans area.
- There are 71,657 vacant, ruined, unoccupied houses in New Orleans today, while there are 214,000 fewer people in New Orleans than before Katrina.
- In the wake of this crisis, which largely is an affordable housing crisis, last April, city officials began demolishing the city's four major public housing developments, representing over 4,800 units with the potential to permanently displace over 20,000 people. This was after widespread community opposition, national protests and international pressure.

Perhaps what's most startlingly about these figures is both that it's been over three years since the hurricanes and perhaps most alarming is that all of this is taking place in the United States.

Under the UN Guiding Principles for Internally Displaced Persons (or IDPs), survivors of natural disasters are entitled to certain rights from their government. Those rights include the right to adequate housing and the right to participate in rebuilding planning and processes. If one considers the current abysmal state of affairs in New Orleans and across the Gulf Coast for that matter, it would be difficult not to draw the conclusion that the U.S. government has failed in its obligations under the Guiding Principles.

The U.S. government adheres to the Guiding Principles in its work overseas; yet it has refused to apply these very same principles at home to survivors of Katrina and Rita.

This is the crisis facing communities and in particular poor communities in New Orleans and the greater Gulf Coast region as they try to rebuild their lives after the devastating storms with little to no government support. One of the ways in which survivors have been able to advocate and organize around the challenges facing their communities is through the use of human rights. The human rights framework has been particularly useful in the housing rights struggle.

I run the Human Right to Housing program at the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative and have been working with organizers on the ground, namely residents of public housing in New Orleans who came together to try and stop the demolition of their communities, and ensure an equitable rebuilding process for the city.

Human Rights has been an effective tool in their struggle by first and foremost allowing community members to define, both theoretically and substantively, the rights they seek to obtain. Human Rights have also allowed survivors to build coalitions within and across communities – locally, nationally, and internationally – with similarly situated groups. The campaign to stop the demolition of public housing in New Orleans was joined by housing rights activists around the country in cities such as Miami, Chicago, New York, and internationally by housing rights activists in Asia, Africa and Europe.

Finally, using the human rights framework has allowed communities in the Gulf Coast to receive the support of international experts and bodies concerned about Human Rights worldwide. Prior to the demolitions, the UN Special Rapporteur on Internally Displaced Persons visited the Gulf Coast. Additionally, the UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing and the UN Independent Expert on minority issues issued a joint press release calling for a halt to the demolitions in New Orleans.

The international community and in particular the United Nations remains very aware and concerned about the continuing post Katrina and Rita crisis. But international sympathy alone will not ensure that rights and in particular the right to housing is achieved for not just Katrina and Rita survivors but for the countless Americans facing

predatory redevelopment of their communities and push-out. To effectively advocate for the right to participatory development both in post Katrina New Orleans and nationwide, we must build this concept of a human right to housing within the United States.

One of the main assumptions driving the rebuilding process in New Orleans is that the private sector and market forces alone are best equipped to oversee and facilitate rebuilding. This was particularly true as New Orleans city officials demolished stable, structurally-sound public housing units to make way for private developments. Current estimates are that at best 5% of former residents will get housing in the new developments. This emphasis on deregulation and privatization has occurred in many sectors of our national economy and in the necessary social services traditionally provided by the government, such as education and healthcare. Perhaps, no where is this ideological framework most evident or painfully felt than in our national housing sector. Since the 1980s HUD's budget has been cut by 76% while public housing communities are demolished under federal programs such as H.O.P.E. VI and poor and working class communities fall prey to predatory redevelopment and lending schemes that drive them from their homes.

Our government must play a critical role in determining whether the housing sector becomes primarily a vehicle for speculation and profit, as is increasingly becoming the case in post Katrina New Orleans and throughout the United States, or one for ensuring stability for families across the nation. When government abandons its responsibility, as it has in the case of Katrina and Rita rebuilding, to responsibly regulate key areas such as housing and the role of developers in our housing sector, the market fails to enable the creation of stable homes. A government responsive to its human rights obligations – including the human right to housing – must adopt multiple strategies to ensure a home for all people within its borders.

The current financial crisis painfully demonstrates that when access to housing becomes dependent on one ideologically driven market strategy – namely, credit – it can be catastrophic. Access to housing must not be held hostage to narrow ideologies, rather a range of practical strategies to guarantee a home for all families and individuals must be implemented – and no where is this premise truer than in the Gulf Coast and New Orleans, in particular.

When balancing the interests of private sector investment and the need to prioritize decent and stable homes, we believe the human rights framework – including the rights to dignity, participation, transparency and accountability - provides useful guideposts to ensure a productive relationship between government and the private sector that enables the creation of safe, decent and affordable housing for all.

This is the model we have been pushing for New Orleans' rebuilding process and for communities across the country. We hope that with a new administration we will see some progress on this front.

Thank you.