Social Justice - Providing Housing for Low Income Families/Individuals
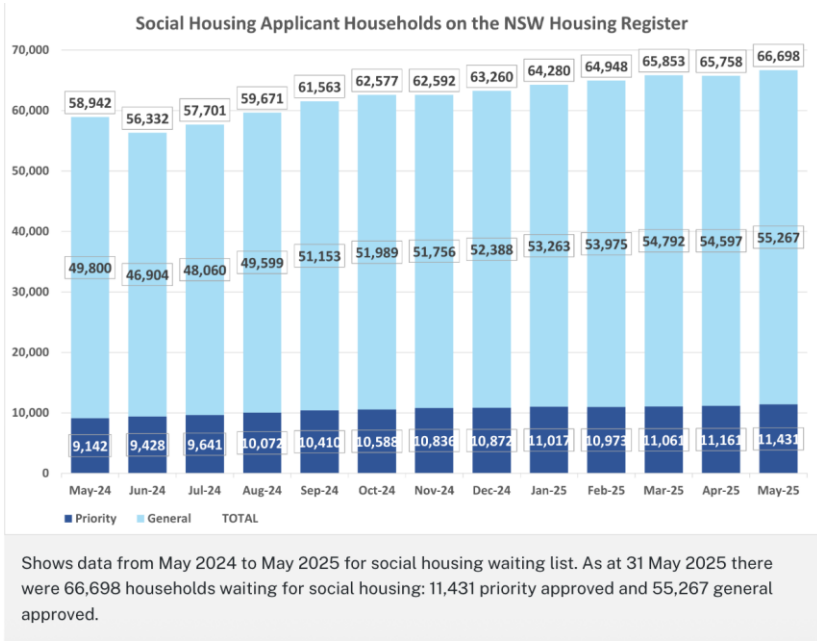*(Written by Shannon Tumbridge - HOPE Researcher QLD)*

Access to safe, secure, and affordable housing is a fundamental human right and is imperative to social justice. However, across the globe (as well as here in Australia) countless low-income individuals and families struggle to find stable housing. According to the United Nations, adequate housing is crucial for achieving several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including reducing poverty and inequality (United Nations, 2015). The Earth Charter also calls for economic systems that ensure all people can meet their basic needs with dignity, meaning that housing is a fundamental need (Earth Charter International, 2000). In Australia, rising housing costs, long waitlists for social housing, and increasing rates of homelessness highlight the urgent need for systemic reform and innovative approaches.

The importance of social housing can be better understood through the lens of social justice, with examples from **New South Wales** and the **Netherlands** highlighting both challenges and successes. By also exploring **alternative housing models**, such as tiny homes and repurposed buildings, we can uncover practical pathways toward fairer, more inclusive, and environmentally sustainable communities.

Understanding Social Housing in Australia

In New South Wales, social housing provides rental housing options for people with low incomes and urgent housing needs. It includes public housing managed by the government, community housing managed by non-profit organisations, and Aboriginal housing designed to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Social housing tenants typically pay rent calculated as a percentage of their income, ensuring affordability.

Shows data from May 2024 to May 2025 for social housing waiting list. As at 31 May 2025 there were 66,698 households waiting for social housing: 11,431 priority approved and 55,267 general approved.

However, demand for social housing in NSW far outweighs supply. According to the NSW Government's Family and Community Services, as of May 2025, there were over 66,000 households on the waiting list. In some regions, wait times exceed ten years. This shortage is pushing more people into homelessness or forcing them to live in overcrowded, insecure, or substandard conditions.

Image Source: NSW Department of Communities and Justice, Social Housing Waiting List Data, May 2025. Available at: https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/about-us/families-and-communities-statistics/social-housing-waiting-list-data.html

This situation reflects a broader issue across Australia, where a lack of investment in social housing over recent decades has left vulnerable populations without adequate support. Addressing this gap is essential not only for protecting human dignity but also for creating more equitable and resilient communities.

The Role of the Earth Charter and UN SDGs

The Earth Charter calls for social and economic justice, including the right to shelter, within a framework of environmental sustainability and global cooperation. It urges societies to ensure that everyone can meet their essential needs in a manner that does not exploit others or the planet.

Similarly, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals provide a roadmap for creating a better world by 2030. Several SDGs relate directly to housing:

- **Goal 1: No Poverty** – Adequate housing is critical in lifting people out of poverty.
- **Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities** – Access to housing must be equitable, addressing systemic barriers faced by marginalised groups.
- **Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities** – Ensures access to safe, affordable, and sustainable housing.

Sustainable Development Goal [1/10/11] icons. © United Nations. Used according to UN guidelines. [¹]
www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment

Housing that meets these goals shouldn't just focus on providing a physical building (a roof and walls), but also housing must offer safety, community, sustainability, and access to essential services such as transport, education, and healthcare.

Learning from the Netherlands

The Netherlands provides a strong example of fair and effective social housing management. While there is no single definition of social housing in the country, Article 22 of the Dutch Constitution mandates that public authorities promote access to adequate housing. The Dutch Housing Act of 1901 offers the legal framework for how social housing is organised and regu*lated.*

A key feature of the Dutch system is rent regulation. In 2019, the government set a maximum rent for social housing at €720.42. This cap applies not only to properties owned by housing corporations but also to those owned by individual landlords. Rent limits are determined through a detailed points-based system called the **Housing Quality System** (Woningwaarderingsstelsel, or WWS), which scores properties based on size, amenities, and location to assess eligibility and rent levels.

Canal view in Groningen, Netherlands — an example of sustainable and inclusive urban planning.

Over 30% of the Netherlands' housing stock is classified as social housing. This sector is mainly managed by not-for-profit housing associations that reinvest profits into maintenance and development, ensuring affordability and sustainability. This model illustrates how government regulation, legal frameworks, and non-profit providers can work together to promote social justice through housing.

In 2024, the Affordable Rent Act extended rent controls beyond traditional social housing to the mid-range rental market, also using the WWS points system. For example, properties scoring up to 186 points are capped at €1,123 per month. This legislation protects tenants from excessive rents on poor-quality dwellings and promotes fairness for middle-income earners. It complements the 2023 Good Landlordship Act, which introduced minimum standards for ethical rental practices.

Together, these reforms demonstrate the Netherlands' national commitment to treating housing as a social good rather than merely a market commodity. Australia could learn from this approach by adopting strong legal protections, regulated rent systems, and tenant-focused legislation. As rental stress increasingly affects middle-income households, similar measures could help ensure fair access and prevent exploitation in Australia's housing market.

Innovative and Sustainable Housing Alternatives

To meet growing housing needs while also respecting environmental limits, Australia must embrace innovative housing solutions. These include:

- **Caravan Parks and Temporary Housing**: Often used as crisis accommodation, these provide short-term shelter for individuals facing homelessness. However, they are not long-term solutions and often lack proper facilities.
- **Tiny Houses**: These small, often mobile dwellings offer a sustainable and affordable option for individuals or couples. They use fewer resources, are quicker to build, and can be placed in underused urban or rural spaces.
- **Repurposing Commercial Buildings**: Transforming unused offices, warehouses, or factories into apartments helps reduce urban sprawl and makes use of existing infrastructure. This approach also aligns with circular economy principles.
- **Pocket Neighbourhoods**: These are small clusters of homes centred around shared open spaces, promoting community and reducing the cost of land and infrastructure. They can create vibrant, supportive communities ideal for older adults, single-parent families, or people with disabilities.

Each of these options not only helps address the shortage of affordable housing but also supports more sustainable urban development. With careful planning, these alternatives can be integrated into existing communities without displacing current residents or damaging the environment.

Barriers and Challenges

Despite the clear benefits, several barriers prevent the wide-scale adoption of social and alternative housing in Australia:
- **Funding and Political Will**: Government investment in social housing has declined over the years, and without strong political commitment, large-scale change is difficult.
- **Community Resistance**: Some neighbourhoods resist social housing developments due to stigma or concerns about property values.
- **Planning Regulations**: Zoning laws and building codes can make it difficult to approve alternative housing models like tiny homes or repurposed buildings.
- **Lack of Awareness**: Many people, including potential tenants, are unaware of their rights or the options available to them.

Overcoming these challenges requires collaborative effort between government, community organisations, and citizens. Public education campaigns can reduce stigma, while changes to zoning laws and financial incentives can encourage the development of affordable and sustainable housing.

A Path Forward

Australia has the resources and capacity to provide adequate housing for everyone. However, prioritising people over profits is necessary and it is crucial to see housing as a human right rather than a commodity.
To move forward, we must:

1. **Invest in Social Housing**: Rebuilding the public housing stock and supporting community housing providers is essential.
2. **Support Innovative Models**: Government grants and planning reforms can encourage the development of alternative housing types.
3. **Learn from Global Examples**: Adapting policies from countries like the Netherlands can help Australia create a more balanced housing market.
4. **Align with Global Goals**: Embedding housing strategies within the Earth Charter and UN SDG frameworks ensures an ethical and sustainable approach.
5. **Foster Inclusive Communities**: Housing developments must be planned with input from future residents to ensure they meet real needs.

Conclusion

Providing secure and affordable housing for low-income individuals and families is not just an economic or political issue, it is a moral one. Social justice dictates that we ensure all people, regardless of income or background, have the opportunity to live with dignity and stability.
By embracing the principles of the Earth Charter, committing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and learning from both local and international best practices, Australia can create a housing system that better supports its most vulnerable citizens. With creativity, collaboration, and compassion, we can ensure everyone has a place to call home.

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[1] The use of SDG icons does not imply endorsement by the United Nations. The content of this publication has not been approved by the United Nations and does not reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials or Member States. SDG icons available from https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/