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UN-HABITAT

#WUF13

# Housing the world:
## Safe and resilient cities and communities

**WUF13 BACKGROUND PAPER**

# INTRODUCTION

**Adequate housing is a human right**. Recognized as part of the right to an adequate standard of living in the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and reaffirmed in the 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, it is a right that extends far beyond shelter. It encompasses secure tenure, access to services and infrastructure, good location and affordability, as well as housing that is habitable, accessible and culturally adequate.[1]

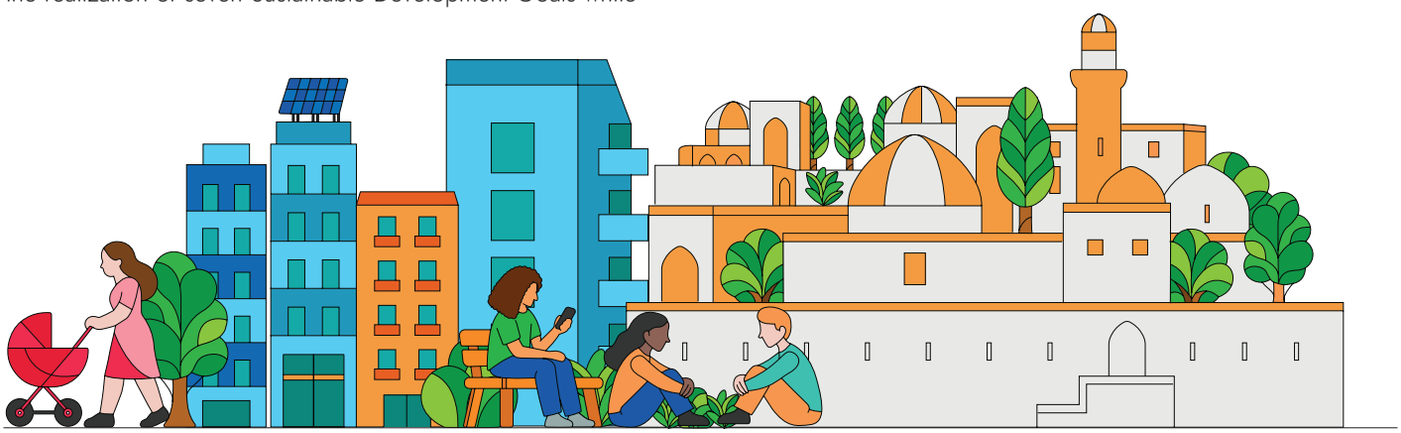
**The world is facing a global housing crisis.** Over 2.8 billion people live in conditions of housing inadequacy, including 1.1 billion in informal settlements and slums and more than 300 million experiencing homelessness.[2] Rapid urbanization will intensify this challenge, with 68 per cent of the world's population expected to live in cities by 2050 — an increase of 2.5 billion people.[3]

The impacts of the housing crisis reach far beyond shelter, affecting health, well-being, economic productivity and political stability at both local and global levels. They undermine progress toward sustainable and inclusive cities, posing a fundamental threat to human development and social cohesion. Addressing this challenge demands more than building homes — it requires recognizing, protecting and fulfilling the human right to adequate housing within the internationally agreed framework, as well as the recognition of the social and environmental function of land.

**Housing is a foundation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**. It lies at the heart of SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities – and is essential for the realization of seven Sustainable Development Goals while contributing directly to another eight.[4] Adequate housing enables progress in health, education, dignity, safety and social inclusion and is therefore a cornerstone of human dignity, security and well-being.

**Housing is a cornerstone of safe and resilient cities and communities.** Today, interconnected global crises — from climate change and environmental degradation to conflict, displacement and humanitarian emergencies — are eroding the safety and resilience of human settlements. These challenges have displaced millions, destroyed homes and deepened housing exclusion. As a result, achieving the vision of SDG 11 is becoming increasingly uncertain. Yet housing remains a critical requirement for recovery and resilience: rebuilding homes restores dignity, revitalizes communities and lays the foundation for peace, stability and sustainable development in the aftermath of crises.

**Placing housing at the centre is urgent and indispensable**. The *New Urban Agenda*, adopted in 2016, reaffirmed the centrality of housing in achieving sustainable urbanization and broader sustainable development. SDG 11 likewise emphasizes the urgency of ensuring access for all to adequate housing and basic services and of upgrading slums by 2030. However, the housing crisis has too often been overlooked as an urgent priority when international development agendas are framed and implemented[5]. Housing must instead be placed at the core of global, national and subnational policies and programmes.



## INTRODUCTION

**Adequate housing delivers transformative benefits for people, communities and the planet.** It enhances quality of life, reduces poverty and prevents environmental degradation and disease.[6] Housing is central to community well-being, particularly for children's health, education and learning outcomes.[7] Economically, it is a major driver of growth — creating jobs, generating wealth and supporting industries. For most households, it represents their largest financial investment and a source of stability.[8] A secure home fosters identity, belonging[9] and social participation, empowering people to contribute to the cultural, social and political life of their communities. Moreover, sustainable and resilient housing construction is vital for climate change mitigation and adaptation. The benefits of adequate housing are especially significant for low-income and vulnerable groups living in inadequate conditions.[10]

**Leaders have renewed and strengthened their calls for action on adequate housing**. Since 2023, a growing series of global commitments have converged to do more to position housing at the core of sustainable development. In 2023, Member States adopted two landmark resolutions of the UN-Habitat Assembly — on *Adequate Housing for All*[11] and on *Accelerating the Transformation of Informal Settlements and Slums*[12] — which together reaffirmed housing as a global priority. These resolutions also established the Open-ended Intergovernmental Expert Working Group on Adequate Housing for All, an historic and inclusive platform to translate political commitment into concrete recommendations and action.

Building on this momentum, world leaders in 2024 endorsed the *Pact for the Future,*[13] pledging to ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing.

The *Political Declaration of the Second World Summit for Social Development* recognized housing as a key enabler of social development, while heads of state and government at the High-Level Roundtable of Global Champions on Adequate and Affordable Housing issued a *Call to Action on Adequate and Affordable Housing*[14] in New York on 24 September 2025 at the invitation of H.E. Dr. William Samoei Ruto, President of the Republic of Kenya.

Together, these milestones chart a coherent pathway to make adequate housing a defining priority of global cooperation and sustainable urbanization. This momentum will culminate at the thirteenth session of the World Urban Forum (WUF13) under the theme "Housing the world: Safe and resilient cities and communities".

**Countries have called on UN-Habitat to lead global action on adequate housing**. In 2025, Member States endorsed UN-Habitat's *Strategic Plan 2026–2029*, which places housing, land and basic services at the core of the organization's work, positioning the agency to spearhead coordinated global efforts toward adequate and affordable housing for all.

# WUF13 DIALOGUES

**Dialogue 1**

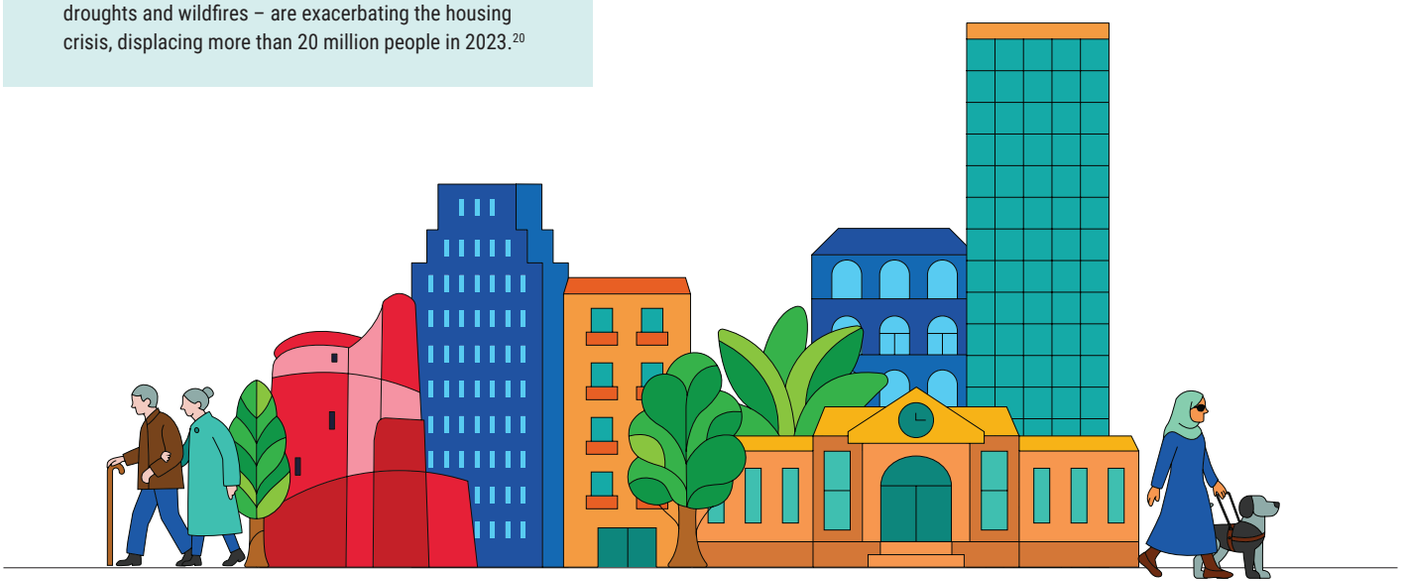
## The global housing crisis: what is the plan?

- Up to 2.8 billion people around the world face some form of housing inadequacy[15] and over 300 million people are experiencing homelessness.
- The proportion of household income spent on housing – including purchase, construction, rent or utilities – globally exceeds the recommended 30 per cent threshold, with the highest burden of over 40 per cent experienced in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by Northern Africa and Western Asia.[16]
- Meeting global housing needs by 2030 will require providing adequate housing for about 3 billion people – nearly 40 per cent of the world's population. Nearly 90 per cent of the need will arise in sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia, particularly in rapidly urbanizing countries and secondary cities[17]. This represents a global need equivalent to roughly 96,000 adequate housing units every day.
- Between 2011 and 2022, housing stock relative to population in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries remained largely flat or grew only marginally, while construction costs for new residential buildings rose by over 70 per cent (2000–2019) and real house prices increased sharply, outpacing gross domestic product (GDP) per capita growth[18].
- Globally 2.2 billion people still lack safely managed drinking water services, 3.5 billion lack safely managed sanitation and 2 billion lack basic hygiene services as of 2022.[19]
- Extreme weather events – including flooding, storms, droughts and wildfires – are exacerbating the housing crisis, displacing more than 20 million people in 2023.[20]

The world is facing a housing crisis of unprecedented scale and complexity. While the challenges of ensuring access for all to adequate housing are not new, they have evolved into a crisis of global reach, affecting both developing and developed countries alike. Today, nearly 3 billion people — about one in three — live in inadequate housing and over 1 billion reside in informal settlements and slums, a figure projected to reach 3 billion by 2050.

This crisis is not confined to any single region; it reflects deep structural trends in housing and urban systems that undermine sustainability, social cohesion and economic stability worldwide.[21] It is marked by a high degree of urgency and uncertainty, and calls for rapid and coordinated responses to prevent its continued deterioration. The crisis is multidimensional, spanning access, affordability, adequacy and security of tenure. Across regions, rising housing costs, stagnant incomes and insufficient public investment have deepened inequalities and excluded millions from adequate housing.

In both mature and emerging housing markets, shortages of affordable and well-located homes coexist with speculative investment and vacant properties, revealing systemic imbalances in land and housing systems. In many rapidly urbanizing countries, limited institutional capacity and fragmented governance have constrained the ability to plan, finance and deliver inclusive housing at scale. At the global level, the problem is compounded by new developments located on city peripheries without adequate infrastructure, transport or services — further entrenching spatial inequalities and undermining inclusive urban development.



## WUF13 DIALOGUES

These dynamics not only perpetuate housing deficits but also erode the social and ecological functions of land, undermining efforts toward the fulfilment of the right to adequate housing.

These dynamics have led to the proliferation of informal settlements and slums, a rise in homelessness and the exclusion of young people and vulnerable groups from access to adequate housing. There is a chronic shortage of well-located, affordable housing, not only for low-income groups but increasingly also for the working and middle classes.[22]

While the housing crisis is global, its most severe impacts are felt in the rapidly urbanizing cities of the Global South, where hundreds of millions live in substandard housing — often on public or marginal lands — and lack basic services and secure tenure.

The impacts of the housing crisis cut across all dimensions of human development. Inadequate housing exposes people to health risks, violence and social exclusion, while excessive housing costs reduce disposable income for food, education and healthcare. Poor housing conditions reduce labour productivity and amplify vulnerability to climate hazards. [23] [24] Displacement and loss of housing, whether due to conflict, disasters or evictions, undermine livelihoods, disrupt social networks and inflict psychological harm. [25] [26]

The causes of the global housing crisis are multiple and context-specific: rapid urbanization, population growth, poverty, high land and construction costs, weak governance, limited access to finance and rising inequality. Structural factors, such as the financialization of housing, have deepened inequality by turning homes into speculative assets rather than places to live. The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing has described this as a transformation that strips housing "of its intrinsic function to provide secure and dignified living spaces". [27]

Responding to this crisis requires coordinated, multilevel action. Governments need to address the housing gap through integrated housing, land and urban policies that link housing supply to infrastructure, jobs and services.[28] Fiscal and regulatory measures can discourage speculation and channel investment toward affordable and non-market housing. Strengthening community-led, cooperative and limited-profit models can also expand access to adequate housing while ensuring local economic benefits.[29]

Cities stand at the forefront of the crisis but often lack the fiscal and institutional capacity to respond effectively. Empowering local authorities, while ensuring coordination with national governments and international partners, is essential. [30] Public and private investment in housing must go hand in hand with reforms in land governance, finance systems and urban planning. [31]

The dialogue will examine the global housing crisis in its full breadth — addressing interlinked challenges of adequacy, access, affordability and financialization. It will explore key trends and local innovations that demonstrate scalable and inclusive approaches to make adequate housing a reality for all.

### The dialogue will address the following questions:

1. **What key challenges and opportunities are shaping progress toward accessible and affordable adequate housing amid demographic change, urbanization, migration and shifting household structures? Which initiatives have effectively promoted social inclusion, particularly for marginalized or underserved groups, and how can they be scaled and adapted across contexts?**
2. **How does the financialization of housing distort housing systems and drive the accessibility and affordability crisis and what policy, regulatory and fiscal measures can mitigate these effects?**
3. **How are governments at all levels, the private sector and non-profits developing long-term housing strategies that balance market efficiency, affordability and inclusion? Which measures have proven effective and under what conditions?**

## WUF13 DIALOGUES

**Dialogue 2**

# Transforming informal settlements and slums

- As of 2020, nearly 1.1 billion people lived in slums or slum-like conditions in urban areas. Over the next three decades, the global slum population is projected to grow by 2 billion people.[32]
- Children account for between 350 to 500 million of the estimated 1.1 billion people living in slum conditions[33].
- Today, 85 per cent of slum dwellers are concentrated in three regions: Central and Southern Asia (359 million), Eastern and South-East Asia (306 million) and sub-Saharan Africa (230 million).
- Over the last two decades, an estimated 76 million people have been displaced from informal settlements within cities, primarily through development-driven evictions.[34]

The plight of people living in informal settlements and slums is one of the most severe aspects of the global housing crisis. They face precarious living conditions, including inadequate water supply, insufficient sanitation, overcrowded, unsafe and dilapidated structures, exposure to environmental hazards and insecurity of tenure. Their neighbourhoods also suffer from significantly lower access to healthcare, education and other essential services, further deepening inequalities.

Informally built housing and neighbourhoods are often characterized by ongoing, self-driven cycles of repair, maintenance and upgrading, especially in contexts where land, housing and urban policies are poorly aligned with the needs of residents.

However, informal settlements should not be viewed solely as the outcome of policy shortcomings. They constitute a leading mode of urbanization which, alongside formal development, has shaped much of the world's urban expansion. This form of growth has provided a crucial, and often the only pathway for millions to access affordable shelter and opportunities in cities. At the same time, it is associated with significant challenges, particularly the slum-like conditions that affect residents' quality of life and long-term prospects.

Since the mid-1990s, upgrading approaches have offered promising ways of working with and within informality, building on existing practices, community initiatives and incremental development. Yet experience also points to persistent limitations, including inadequate participation, weak connections to livelihoods and challenges in integrating upgrading into broader urban systems. Today, the accelerating impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and the digital transformation of cities are further reshaping informal settlements and the policies that seek to address them — calling for more adaptive, inclusive and forward-looking approaches.

Local policies, building codes and financing mechanisms still penalize urban informality in many cities. Addressing the housing crisis in a comprehensive manner requires recognising the diversity of informal processes and neighbourhoods — and leveraging their strengths. Informal settlements can be supported through participatory approaches, recognition of diverse tenure

arrangements and the adaptation of planning regulations to allow for incremental, in-situ upgrading. Policy choices that seek to simply remove or prevent informality are costly and ineffective, but also risk undermining human rights and the dignity of affected communities.

The upgrading and transformation of informal settlements require improved infrastructure and basic services, as well as institutional support for incremental self-help and community-led housing improvements. They also depend on interventions that strengthen tenure security, enable land readjustment and promote inclusive approaches to land governance. Flexible legal and regulatory frameworks — covering zoning, planning, land rights and building standards — are essential enablers of these long-term transformations.

Key actions include strengthening data systems and localized knowledge of housing needs, income levels and coping strategies; embedding meaningful community participation in the design, implementation and oversight of upgrading programmes, and establishing long-term financing mechanisms such as land-based financing tools, community-managed funds and inclusive credit solutions adapted to informal incomes.

Slum transformation is a long-term, integrated and inclusive process aimed at progressively achieving adequate living conditions and realizing the right to adequate housing and an adequate standard of living.[35] Effective upgrading requires recognizing the informal construction skills and resources, financing practices, governance arrangements and livelihood strategies that sustain these neighbourhoods, so they can be socially, physically and economically integrated into the wider city — rather than left behind.

Employment and livelihoods are central to this transformation. Informal employment provides livelihoods for more than half the global population,[36] and most housing construction in low- and middle-income countries relies on informal labour. Without access to functioning markets, job and training opportunities, residents cannot sustain the livelihoods needed to improve their built environment. Upgrading programmes must therefore integrate vocational training and employment opportunities to support the long-term development of neighbourhoods and the resilience of their communities.

Investments in formal trunk infrastructure and essential city-level services remain indispensable. At the same time, the transformation of informal settlements requires fully recognizing and leveraging the capacity and agency of their residents and integrating informal land and housing markets into formal urban planning and policy processes. Successful experiences, such as Indonesia's Kampung Improvement Programme, which provided serviced sites for self-help construction; the large-scale upgrading of urban villages through community-led initiatives, as seen in Thailand's Baan Mankong programme,[37] and the recognition of informal tenure in several Latin American cities demonstrate the value of approaches that work with, rather than against, informality.

Transforming slums and informal settlements calls for participatory, in-situ upgrading approaches that bring together organizations representing residents. Evictions and relocations should be avoided to the greatest extent possible and be considered only when settlements face severe and unmitigable risks and when adequate safeguards, protections and resettlement standards are fully in place.

A key challenge is determining how housing regulations and standards can be improved, without raising cost, excluding informal construction practices, or triggering displacement and gentrification. Positive aspects of informality – such as flexibility, affordability, resourcefulness, strong community networks, kinship and the capacity for rapid adaptation – can and should be harnessed in this process.

## WUF13 DIALOGUES

This dialogue will examine current trends and emerging challenges and explore how to unlock the potential of informality to expand access to affordable and adequate housing, while addressing the factors that constrain that potential.

### The dialogue will address the following questions:

1. **What fundamental shifts are required in upgrading strategies to keep pace with urbanization trends while guaranteeing people's rights, leveraging informality (including informal livelihoods) instead of penalizing it, and responding to the climate crisis during a time of the digital transformation?**
2. **How can the formation of new slums be prevented with the provision of sufficient adequate and affordable housing?**
3. **What specific hybrid governance and planning frameworks are necessary to effectively articulate residents' and communities' efforts (informal economy and citizen data and participation) with local governments and housing authorities (formal planning and housing policies)?**
4. **How can we sustainably finance solutions that offer inclusive, higher quality accessible services and infrastructure in informal settlements?**

Dialogue 3

## Housing at the centre of crisis recovery and reconstruction

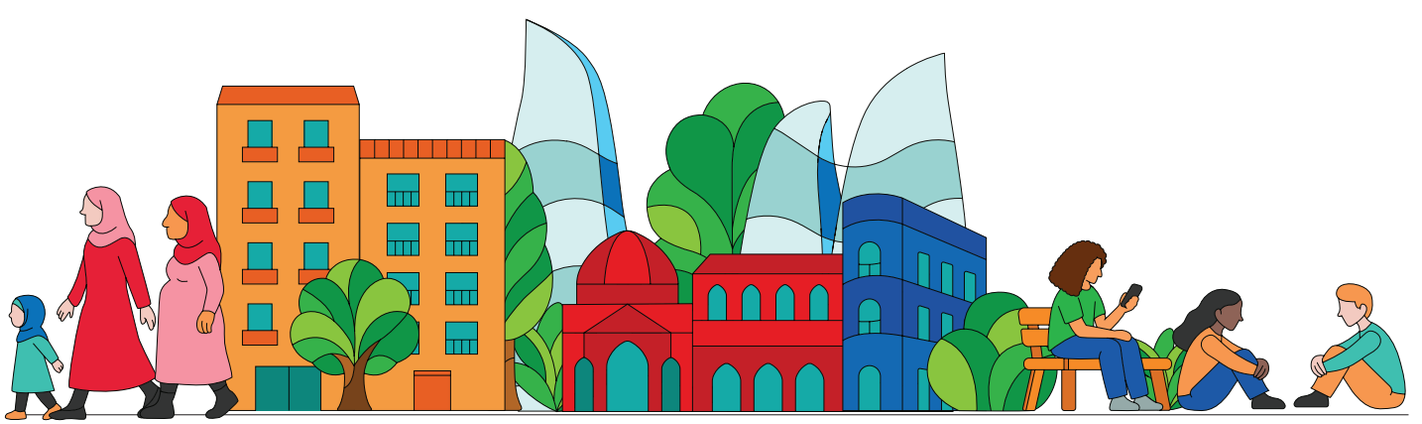
- There were more than 123 million people forcibly displaced primarily due to conflict by the end of 2022.[38]
- Of the 123 million people forcibly displaced, more than 60 per cent were seeking refuge and opportunities in urban areas.
- In the course of 2022, 32.6 million internal displacements due to disasters were reported, with 8.7 million people remaining displaced by the end of the year (IDMC, 2022).
- Disaster-related internal displacement accounted for more than half (54 per cent) of all new displacements in 2022 (UNHCR, 2023).

Conflicts, violence, insecurity, natural disasters and climate-related impacts are resulting in mass displacement of people from their homes, uprooting of communities and large-scale damage and destruction of housing stock. The impact on people is profound and includes physical harm, loss of lives, livelihoods, assets and social capital, all of which are associated with emotional, psychological and financial distress. Vulnerable groups – ethnic minorities, migrants, women, children, youth, older persons and people with disabilities – are disproportionately affected.

Damage assessments and recovery strategies often focus on financial losses, without sufficiently understanding what it means to lose one's home[39] and what the destruction of neighbourhoods means for communities. For the urban poor this loss is more devastating as their assets are largely concentrated in their homes. As their resilience is lower, the loss of homes often triggers further shocks: loss of livelihoods, food insecurity and reduced access to healthcare and basic services. Displaced people increasingly seek refuge and opportunities in urban areas, resorting to informality, as they end up in precarious housing situations with insecure tenures, making them vulnerable to further displacement. This also disrupts family and community cohesion, which exposes women and girls to various forms of gender-based violence.

Housing displaced people, mitigating the impact of displacement on their lives and livelihoods, and rebuilding places destroyed by conflict and disasters thus requires a co-designed, people-centred approach that recognizes and protects people's rights and puts rebuilding homes and neighbourhoods at the centre of recovery and reconstruction strategies. The protection and restoration of housing, land and property rights is a core element, critical for recovery, reconstruction, social reconciliation and stability.

Housing solutions for urban recovery can be articulated in three components. The first includes shelter and housing solutions for humanitarian protection, needed in the initial phase of displacement when people are very vulnerable, their shelter and housing needs are most acute and solutions need to be quick. This phase can last from a few days to a few years, depending on the type of crisis.[40]



## WUF13 DIALOGUES

The second component includes housing solutions for early recovery, promoting return whenever and wherever possible and creating conditions for building back better. This is needed for medium- to long-term sustainability to ensure that displaced people no longer have specific needs linked to their displacement and are integrated into the provision of local services. The preparation for their implementation should start in parallel with the establishment of shorter-term solutions for the humanitarian protection described above.

Lastly, housing solutions for resilience are needed to mitigate the risk of a relapse into crisis in contexts prone to further displacement. These solutions need to be accompanied by enabling interventions, such as the empowerment of affected communities, policy and legal reforms, credit and financing mechanisms, justice and disputes' resolution and data for evidence-based action.

Places affected by disasters or conflicts face the enormous challenge of recovery and reconstruction of housing and neighbourhoods. As housing is mostly seen as a private good, reconstruction funds tend to be limited in time and focus on infrastructure and services. While restoring infrastructure and basic services is key to functional neighbourhoods and housing, financial constraints often slow down housing reconstruction and upgrading.

There has been a shift from standardized shelter solutions for displaced people, which only provides immediate physical "shelter", to approaches that deliver broader socio-economic support and pay more attention to host communities. Transitional housing solutions are often not well suited to residents' needs and are disconnected from their original neighbourhoods. Families may prefer to stay close to their original location to protect their remaining assets and benefit from the safety nets and solidarity communities offer.

Displaced people often do not live in camps. They move to other neighbourhoods and cities. Recognizing this means that an urban response to displacement is required. While issues of displacement have often been approached solely through a humanitarian lens, over the last decade there have been increased calls for responses to displacement that move away from temporary and emergency arrangements and provide more permanent housing solutions. There is a need for a comprehensive urban response to displacement that places local governments at the centre of responses and puts cities on a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive track.

This would include a rethink that positions housing at the centre of immediate crisis response and consequent recovery and reconstruction strategies, and fully acknowledges the different dimensions of adequate housing.

A key challenge for cities is how policy and practice can integrate responses to displacement and subsequent reconstruction as part of the broader response to the housing crisis. How can local governments, NGOs and other emergency providers help those displaced by creating the conditions for self-recovery processes, without creating an undesirable dependence on external assistance?

This dialogue will explore displacement and urban recovery as both a humanitarian and a sustainable urban development issue. This requires cities to embed issues around displacement into their planning and housing policies. Such an approach will reduce the impact of development-induced displacement on urban inhabitants and provide support, shelter and reconstruction for those forced to flee from conflict or disaster.

## The dialogue will address the following questions:

1. How can we put access to the right to adequate housing at the centre of crisis recovery and reconstruction? What are the key challenges, and which solutions to them prove effective?
2. How can interventions on housing and the security of land tenure foster recovery and reconstruction efforts, particularly through incremental and participatory land recordation interventions?
3. What does an "urban response" look like that focusses on long-term integrated strategies to displacement?
4. What is the role of cities and national and international actors in providing adequate housing for displaced people and fostering urban reconstruction?
5. How can urban recovery plans and participatory mechanisms include community groups as first responders? How can local governments together with community groups and other actors support the most vulnerable groups during recovery?

**Dialogue 4**

## The climate-housing nexus

- Climate change is a major accelerator of the housing and informal settlements crisis, with climate risks such as floods, heatwaves and storms driving displacement and disproportionally affecting vulnerable populations in hazard-prone informal areas.
- Since 2015 the population living in flood-exposed areas in cities has increased by 18 per cent.[41]
- It is estimated that 167 million homes will be lost globally to the climate crisis by 2040.[42] By 2050, extreme weather events induced by climate change could erase 9 per cent of global housing value (about US$25 trillion), underscoring the fragility of housing systems under climate stress.
- Housing is at the core of climate change mitigation efforts as the built environment accounts for 34 per cent of global energy-related CO2 emissions and 32 per cent of energy demand in 2023.[43]
- The building and construction sector remains significantly off track to achieve decarbonization by 2050.[44]
- By 2050, nearly 70 per cent of the world's population is expected to live in urban areas, up from 57 per cent in 2024. To accommodate this growth, an estimated 60 per cent of the buildings needed by 2050 has yet to be constructed.[45]
- The floor area of buildings globally is expected to double by 2060, adding more than 230 billion square metres.[46,47]

In a world that is experiencing a rapidly changing climate, housing not only serves to determine the quality of life and welfare of people, but also represents a critical aspect of the relationships between communities and the environment.[48]

Housing is "the frontline in the fight against climate change" for billions of people across the world, [49] and as such, it must be resilient to the extreme weather conditions associated with climate change while simultaneously contributing to climate action.[50] Climate-resilient housing promotes equity and supports the social and economic resilience of the most vulnerable populations.

The interconnected nature of climate change and housing presents both an urgent and complex challenge. The nature of existing residential structures and their location can significantly amplify communities' vulnerability to climate-related hazards. Substandard shelter or housing in high-risk areas, such as low-elevation coastal zones, floodplains and slopes prone to landslides, make communities inherently vulnerable in extreme weather events. Yet the population residing in such conditions keeps growing, partly due to rapid urbanization that has led to unprecedented demand for housing and partly due to climate-induced gentrification, whereby resilient areas rise in value to the point of unaffordability for many. Climate-related events are increasingly being associated with displacements and depriving people of livelihoods and dwellings.[51]

Since housing is resource-intensive, its construction, operation and the broader physical infrastructure that supports its integration into the urban fabric have considerable environmental implications. As the world urbanizes, the global anthropogenic mass (global human-made mass) will increase in parallel,[52] and consequently so will the urgency to address both the climate and ecological crises. In 2020, the global anthropogenic mass, largely concentrated in urban areas, exceeded the global biomass for the first time.[53] Additionally,

according to the International Energy Agency (*World Energy Outlook 2024*), residential buildings account for about 18 per cent of global emissions. This means that, as cities and the demand for housing grow, sprawl and unplanned development will lead to ecosystem fragmentation, degradation and biodiversity loss.

Cities can play a significant role in developing and executing housing strategies that both meet the demand for housing while simultaneously protecting or restoring natural ecosystems. Housing resilience should consider today's conditions but also tomorrow's risks. The way in which housing needs are met will significantly determine the success of mitigation and adaptation strategies. If done without climate-resilient, low-carbon solutions, it will lock in future emissions, negating the benefits of decarbonizing existing housing stock. This may also create climate feedback loops where carbon-intensive adaptation technologies (e.g. air conditioners for urban heat) place considerable strain on energy grids, which in turn causes more local heating and so on.

There is therefore a need to ensure that urban planning efforts aimed at environmental protection, climate resilience and infrastructure maintenance do not inadvertently compete with or constrain the delivery of affordable housing. This might include approaches such as nature-based solutions, low-carbon building materials, drainage systems and passive cooling through techniques such as reflective surfaces, shading and wind tunnelling. Equally significant are equity considerations and the rights of marginalized communities, including the urban poor, people living in informal settlements, older persons, women, children, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, displaced persons and homeless persons, who are often disproportionately affected by climate change impacts[54] and should not be relegated to the periphery. A just transition toward rights-compliant, climate-resilient and carbon-neutral housing solutions that ensure no one is left behind is thus critical.[55] Housing design and policies need to integrate cultural practices, local knowledge and lifestyle adaptation strategies. Promoting community participation in developing housing solutions and supporting residents to incrementally build and retrofit homes with climate-adaptive solutions like rainwater harvesting and passive ventilation, as resources allow, will drive climate adaptation from the bottom up.

Adequate housing is not only a human right and a development goal, but a climate imperative, as housing rights and climate action are inseparable. Secure tenure, protection against forced evictions and support for community-led, non-speculative housing are essential for equitable adaptation and mitigation. When housing policies are designed through inclusive and participatory approaches to climate adaptation and mitigation, they unlock multiple benefits: reducing emissions, improving energy efficiency and safeguarding those most at risk from climate impacts.

In pursuit of shifting the narrative from crisis to opportunity and recognizing housing, including access to land and urban basic services, as a key lever for climate action, this Dialogue will explore integrated and equitable strategies for achieving adequate housing, and at the same time contribute to local and global efforts to address the triple planetary crisis: climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.

## The Dialogue will address the following questions:

1. **What are the policy trade-offs in planning for low-carbon housing in various contexts?**
2. **How does the spatial dimension of housing link with climate change and affordability? Can climate action in "satellite" cities help reduce the resource constraints urban migrants face in megacities?**

## WUF13 DIALOGUES

3. How can new housing initiatives and existing housing stock contribute to broader decarbonization goals while putting people and ecosystems at the centre?
4. What frameworks or safeguards can be put in place to ensure that climate-resilient housing policies do not result in forced evictions, gentrification or displacement of low-income and marginalized communities?
5. How can nature-based solutions be systematically integrated into housing policies and projects to simultaneously address climate resilience, biodiversity loss and urban liveability?
6. How can informal settlements and slum upgrading initiatives be designed to incorporate climate change considerations?
7. How can investments in housing advance both adaptation and mitigation coherently and maximize co-benefits, particularly in contexts where limited fiscal resources demand trade-offs? Additionally, what are the various climate finance pools and instruments that are best placed to maximize impact and investment in decarbonization and climate resilience of housing?

**Dialogue 5**

# The social and economic power of housing

- As of the end of 2022, housing accounted for USD 287.6 trillion, just over three-quarters of global real estate (USD 379.7 trillion).[56]
- Housing is a key engine of inclusive economic development, generating jobs, stimulating domestic industries and contributing to national growth even amid recent crises. The construction industry — residential and non-residential buildings — accounts for approximately 13 per cent of global GDP and employs 7.7 per cent of the world's workforce,[57] roughly 287 million people.[58]
- Well-designed and locally rooted housing systems foster social cohesion, economic stability and environmental sustainability, while speculative investment can heighten inequality and volatility.
- Investment in adequate and climate-resilient housing enhances health and wellbeing, reducing disease risks, improving mental health and lowering public health costs.[59,60]
- It is estimated that 50 to 70 per cent of household net worth globally is tied to housing, particularly in middle-income and emerging economies.[61]

Housing has been and remains one of the most powerful drivers of inclusive economic development. It contributes to national growth, strengthens local and community resilience and supports household wealth and stability. Past experiences and present trends, despite successive economic, financial and public health crises, demonstrate the capacity of housing to create economic growth.

A well-functioning housing sector, integrated into economic and social planning, contributes to poverty reduction, controls inflation, generates employment and income and reduces balance-of-payments deficits, especially in countries less dependent on imported construction materials. When housing systems are well designed, they stimulate domestic industries, generate stable returns for both households and governments and enhance fiscal stability.

The economic importance of the housing sector is evident in its capacity to generate income and employment. In the United States, housing consistently contributes around 15 per cent of GDP through fixed residential investment and housing services.[62] In Kenya, real estate and construction accounted for 10.4 per cent and 5.4 per cent of GDP respectively in early 2024,[63] while in Saudi Arabia real estate generated 9.4 per cent of GDP in 2023.[64] In many low- and middle-income countries, the construction sector remains a key absorber of unskilled labour, more labour-intensive than most other industries, with extensive backward and forward linkages.[65] In the Philippines, for instance, every 1 billion pesos (about USD 17.5 million) invested in mass housing generates approximately 1,558 jobs, including direct, indirect and induced employment.[66]

Beyond macroeconomic benefits, housing directly improves lives and livelihoods. Investments in upgrading informal settlements — through better housing, infrastructure and services — have lifted millions out of poverty. Evidence from a joint International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)—Habitat for Humanity International study shows that equitable access to adequate housing in informal settlements can generate national economic growth of up to 10.5 per cent, often exceeding the cost of upgrading itself.[67]

## WUF13 DIALOGUES

Adequate housing also plays a central role in building local economic resilience. Property and construction-related taxes constitute a major share of local revenues, while the expansion of adequate housing stimulates urban services and job creation in sectors such as energy, water, transport, education and health. For households, housing remains the primary form of wealth, providing economic stability, collateral and resilience against shocks.

The broader socio-economic returns of adequate housing extend far beyond its direct economic output. Investments in stable, affordable and climate-resilient housing strengthen human and social capital, improve public health, enhance educational attainment and raise labour productivity — contributing to safer and more resilient communities. Research indicates that improved housing could increase life expectancy by 2.4 years, prevent more than 730,000 premature deaths annually and add more than 40 million children and youth to education worldwide.[68] Combined, these impacts could lift countries by as many as 18 places in the Human Development Index, from low to medium or high human development levels.

Recognizing these economic and social benefits, many countries — especially across Asia — have invested in housing as a foundation for economic growth, homeownership expansion and social inclusion.[69] Public investment in social and public housing remains one of the most effective redistributive instruments, addressing the needs of low-income households while generating productive economic returns and intergenerational societal benefits. Globally, government expenditure on housing averages 1.2 per cent of GDP, though it varies widely: from 4.3 per cent in Italy to just 0.2 per cent in Denmark and Switzerland.[70] Yet expenditure levels alone do not capture the full scope of public action. In several contexts, relatively modest fiscal outlays coexist with strong regulatory frameworks, revolving funds and counter-cyclical investments that maintain affordability and market stability.

There is insurmountable evidence that adequate housing contributes to multidimensional poverty eradication and to the achievement of several interlinked SDGs. At the local level, it also strengthens social cohesion, reduces violence (including gender-based violence) and enhances education, health and employment outcomes.

The 2008 global financial crisis demonstrated that not all housing investments contribute equally to economic development. Over-leveraged loans, speculative investments and excessive financialization triggered widespread foreclosures and homelessness. The crisis exposed the limits of deregulated markets and highlighted the importance of distinguishing productive housing investments, which circulate value locally and sustain affordability, from extractive ones that prioritize short-term profit, drive volatility and widen inequalities.

Since then, real estate markets have recovered and grown faster than many other financial markets, with housing leading the charge,[71] based on strong regulatory changes in housing finance systems which have focused on increasing bank capital and liquidity. Some countries have attempted to reform housing finance systems, increasing capital adequacy, improving consumer protection and introducing macro-prudential regulations.[72] Productive investment models — such as Austria's limited-profit housing associations, which contribute €600 million to €1 billion annually to GDP,[73] or community-led housing initiatives in Thailand, Namibia, Uruguay and Mexico, show that affordable, inclusive housing can yield strong social and economic returns.[74]

## WUF13 DIALOGUES

The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored housing's centrality to public health and social stability. Inadequate housing and dense informal settlements exacerbated transmission risks, while economic slowdowns constrained fiscal capacity to respond. These pressures are particularly acute in lower-middle-income economies now at the forefront of rapid urbanization.

In this context, accelerating progress toward adequate housing for all requires re-envisioning and scaling integrated, smart and participatory approaches to urban and territorial planning. Planning systems must incorporate socio-economic, environmental and resilience dimensions and cities must be equipped to manage growth efficiently. Strengthening the financial robustness of cities and city-regions, through innovative revenue generation, diversification of municipal finance and more efficient expenditure across the housing and urban sectors, will be essential to support these transitions.

Data systematization, spatial analytics and planning instruments such as inclusive zoning, FSI/FAR and air-rights incentives and mechanisms for community participation and self-management must become standard elements of housing policy toolkits.

Unlocking the full potential of housing as both an economic engine and a social equalizer will also require revisiting multilevel governance frameworks. A coordinated system, guided by the principle of "common goals, differentiated roles" across national, regional and local governments, can ensure that policies, financing mechanisms and land-use systems reinforce rather than undermine each other.

The dialogue will explore how housing can generate sustainable and inclusive prosperity, enabling social mobility, bridging the affordability gap and strengthening resilience at household, community and national levels.

### It will consider the following specific questions:

1. **What roles can local governments and multilevel governance systems play in maximising the economic and social impact of housing, through integrated housing policies, urban and territorial planning, land-use management, local revenue mobilization or territorially rooted value chains?**
2. **Which housing investment, production and tenure models can generate strong long-term economic and social multipliers and how can they enable sustainable livelihoods, promote social inclusion and eradicate poverty across diverse contexts?**
3. **What are the most effective actions governments can take, beyond direct public expenditure, to strengthen the economic and social performance and resilience of housing systems?**

**Dialogue 6**

## A new deal for housing finance

- The formal segment of housing finance (mortgages, formal construction finance, etc.) is in the multi-trillion US dollars range globally and potentially tens of trillions when projected forwards.
- Housing finance markets exclude large segments of the population, particularly the informal workforce and lower-income households. Between 50 and 80 per cent of people in low- and middle-income countries cannot access formal sources of housing financing and often resort to incremental building financed through their own savings, borrowing from family members or other community-aided mechanisms.[75]
- The International Finance Corporation states that there is about a US$16 trillion financing gap for adequate housing globally (emerging markets), when accounting for what needs to be built and the finance required.[76]
- Between 2001 and 2011, declining housing investment averaged 4.6 per cent of GDP in low-income countries and 9.2 per cent in upper-middle-income countries.[77]
- Between 2019 and 2023, multilateral and bilateral actors allocated around US$54 billion to housing interventions. However, multilateral donors allocate a total of eleven times more funding for housing interventions than bilateral donors. Regionally, most multilateral financing was directed toward Europe, Latin America and South Asia.[78]

Housing and urban finance operate within multi-tiered institutional systems and involve a broad range of stakeholders — national governments, central banks, local authorities, private financial institutions, developers, civil society and households. Their relationship is symbiotic: together they shape the ability of cities and communities to provide adequate and resilient housing. In most countries, responsibilities for housing finance are shared across national, provincial and local levels, requiring alignment between market regulation, land and planning policies and service delivery mandates.

National governments regulate housing finance markets through legal frameworks, prudential oversight, consumer protection, subsidies and direct public investment in housing and infrastructure. Central banks influence the cost and availability of housing finance through monetary policy and financial supervision. Local and provincial governments, for their part, structure land use, urban development and service provision — functions that fundamentally shape the availability, cost and quality of housing.

Conventional mortgage finance has expanded globally and played a role in economic growth, yet its reach remains limited. Mortgage systems typically require collateral, formal employment, credit histories and substantial down payments, which exclude a large number of first-time buyers, self-employed workers and nearly all informal-economy households.[79] In lower-income countries, shallow financial markets, high interest rates, weak property rights and high transaction costs leave most households reliant on informal savings, incremental construction, community pooling or non-bank lenders. These structural constraints, embedded in the design of mortgage systems themselves, reproduce exclusion and undermine affordability.[80,81,82,83]

In high-income contexts, meanwhile, weaknesses in regulation,[84,85] speculative credit and investor-oriented tax incentives have contributed to the financialization of housing. This has distorted local

housing markets, driven up prices and diverted housing from its social function toward investment and asset accumulation.[86] The result has been rising homelessness, repossessions, oversupply of high-end stock and growing shortages of affordable housing.

Alternative and hybrid housing finance models have emerged to fill these gaps. Community savings schemes, revolving funds, cooperative lending, public-private partnerships and land-based instruments such as community land trusts or long-term conditional leases have demonstrated their ability to deliver affordable housing at scale.[87] Digital innovations, from digital subsidy platforms[88] to mobile-based microfinance across sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia[89, 90] are expanding access to finance for groups historically excluded from formal systems.[91] Yet these innovations remain largely peripheral to national housing strategies and receive limited support from global finance flows. Their scalability often hinges on access to low-cost public capital, which has become increasingly scarce.

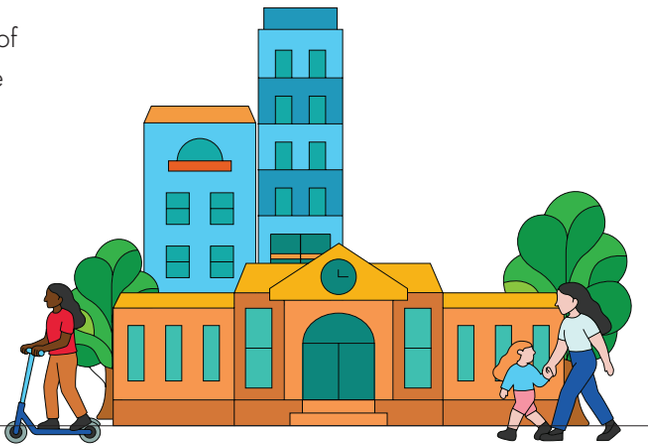
Over the past century, many countries have invested substantial public resources in housing and urban development — financing public and social housing, serviced land and basic infrastructure, as well as providing tax credits, subsidized loans and grants. These supply- and demand-side interventions reflected a recognition of the wide socio-economic benefits of adequate housing for cities, communities and households.

However, structural changes in global housing-finance approaches, including the gradual withdrawal of many states from direct housing investment in the 1970s and 1980s, have shaped today's landscape. Market-oriented reforms, financial liberalization and the shift from public supply-side investments to demand-side instruments redefined the role of governments and expanded the influence of private finance in housing systems worldwide.

More recently, fiscal constraints following the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have sharply reduced governments' ability to sustain such investments. In most regions, public expenditure on housing and urban development has stagnated or declined, despite growing needs. In Latin America and the Caribbean, it dropped from 1.0 per cent of GDP in 2015 to 0.5 per cent in 2022. In Western Asia, it remains low at 0.53 per cent of GDP. OECD data shows that since the global financial crisis, public capital investment in housing has halved, with overall investment in dwellings staying below 0.1 per cent of GDP. Demand-side support, however, has slightly increased, with housing allowances rising from 0.26 per cent to 0.31per cent of GDP between 2001 and 2017.[92, 93, 94, 95, 96] As a result, key public sector functions — such as social housing, subsidies and serviced land delivery — are unable to meet growing needs, exacerbating affordability and quality challenges for low-income households.

Since the mid-1990s, multilateral and bilateral actors have largely de-prioritized housing supply investments, focusing instead on demand-side interventions. Although development banks increasingly recognize the need to finance supply-side solutions, current investments remain limited. Redirecting international support toward inclusive, adequate and sustainable housing, especially for low-income and vulnerable groups in rapidly urbanizing and crisis-affected contexts, is now essential.

Rebalancing the multi-tiered architecture of housing finance is therefore essential to a "new deal" for adequate, inclusive and resilient housing. This requires coherent regulatory frameworks that curb speculative investment, align monetary and macro-prudential tools with affordability goals and



mobilize land use planning, taxation and construction standards in support of housing systems that function for all.

Better data is indispensable. Strengthening housing market intelligence, integrating micro- and macro-prudential regulation and establishing "regulatory sandboxes" for non-conventional housing finance can expand access for lower-income and vulnerable groups who remain excluded from mortgage markets. Public finance, when strategically targeted through subsidies, land, infrastructure or blended instruments, can unlock supply, reduce costs and incentivize inclusive and equitable access to adequate housing, particularly for low-income and underserved groups. To be effective, these interventions must be integrated within broader urban planning, land management and municipal finance frameworks.

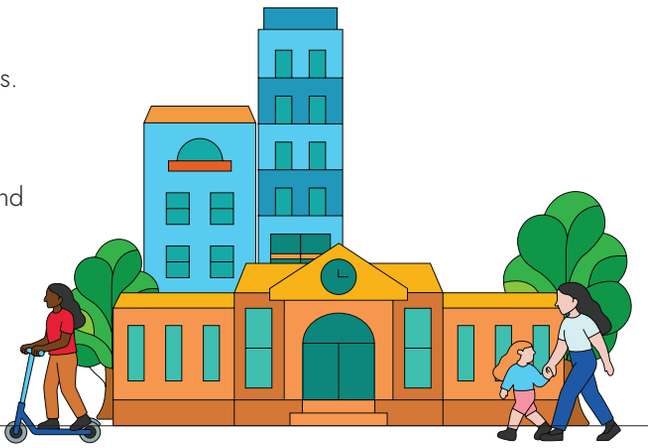
Private finance can play a central role, particularly in scaling affordable housing supply for lower income and poor households. In order to fully leverage its potential, governments should diversify housing finance instruments along the value chain — improving access to construction finance for SMEs, developing longer-term capital markets and de-risking investment. Public-private partnerships, when well-designed, can bridge gaps in both supply and affordability.

Local and provincial governments' role in adequate housing remains underdeveloped in most countries. To date, they have mainly focused on delivering, owning or managing social and public housing. Yet because housing demand and urban growth are local, strengthening their role is essential to improving the functioning of the multi-tiered housing and urban finance system. A more empowered local level would enable better housing data and demand projections, integrated land and resilience planning, more efficient and digitalized permitting and the use of land-value sharing tools. Local governments can also contribute through enhanced revenue generation (e.g., land value capture, FSI trading), expenditure efficiency, improved access to serviced land and support for domestic construction industries. Strengthening their capacity would help regulate oversupply, target public investments more effectively and enable private markets to reach lower-income groups — thereby advancing adequate and resilient housing.

This dialogue calls for a "new deal" for housing finance — one that is inclusive, sustainable and aligned with the diverse needs of countries. It will explore how innovative and alternative financing models, combined with stronger regulation and targeted public investment, can be scaled and integrated into national systems to expand access to adequate and resilient housing.

## The dialogue will address the following questions:

1. **What reforms are needed for a "new deal" for housing finance and what roles should national and local governments, as well as multilateral financial institutions, play in reshaping housing finance systems and prioritizing housing alongside other development?**
2. **How can housing finance systems be redesigned to be truly inclusive, reaching those excluded from conventional finance, particularly in low-income countries, and what models of investment are most effective for these contexts?**
3. **How can housing be strategically positioned to attract long-term private investment and deliver wider development benefits, including in climate resilience, health, education and sustainable urban development?**



# THE PROMISE OF WUF13

For five days, WUF13 will host thousands of people from all parts of the world, taking part in what is the pre-eminent global platform for debating ideas on sustainable urban development.

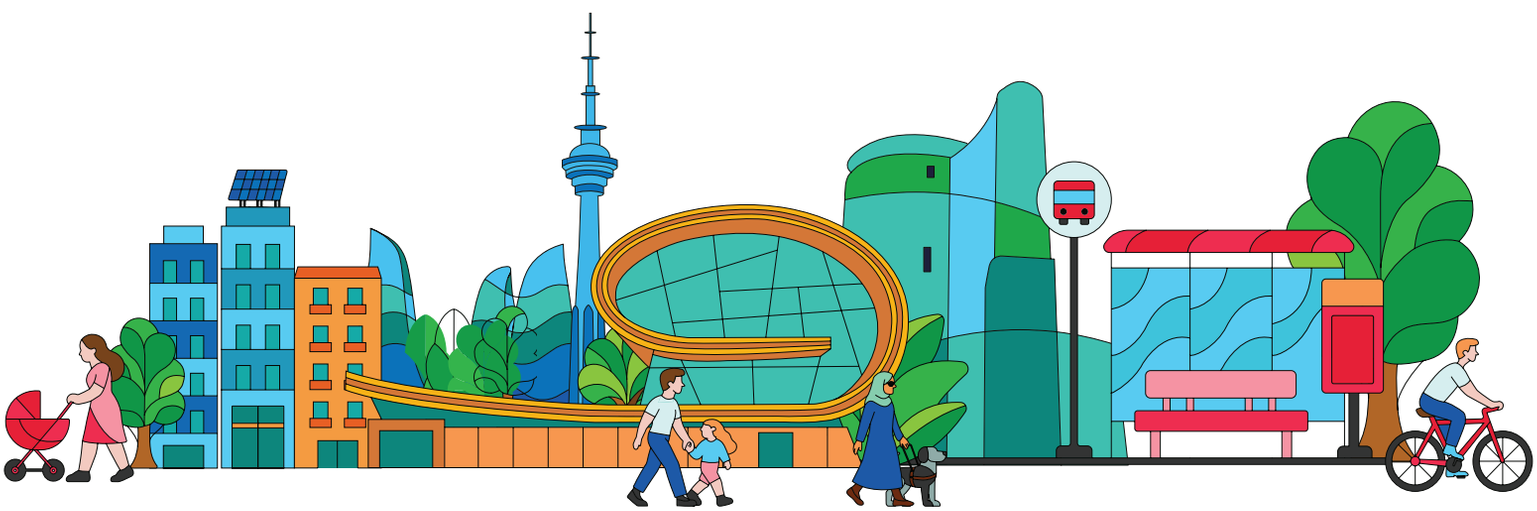
With its focus on "Housing the world: Safe and resilient cities and communities", WUF13 is a response to the escalating global housing crisis and the urgent need to discuss ideas, approaches and solutions to this crisis. The forum will ask how do we make WUF13 a turning point in the housing crisis, and how do we learn from each other's perspectives on housing and embrace new approaches?

In addition to the six Dialogues, there will be hundreds of different events, an extended Urban Expo and many opportunities for networking and informal exchange on issues critical to advancing the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda. The forum will indeed be preceded by a high-level ministerial meeting on the role of housing in achieving the New Urban Agenda.

WUF13 will introduce a Practices Hub, designed to spotlight tried and tested practices, enhance knowledge exchange and foster collaboration among stakeholders. WUF13 will also see the launch of UN-Habitat's flagship *World Cities Report 2026*, which provides an analytical deep dive into the state of housing globally and related solutions.

All voices matter at WUF. The diverse viewpoints on housing shared by attendees will therefore be captured for the *WUF Perspectives* document.

The range of discussions held during WUF, plus an inclusive stakeholder consultation process, will then feed into the *Baku Call to Action*, which will represent a collective expression of how to accelerate progress and co-design solutions to address the housing crisis.



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