



UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME  
P.O. Box 30030, Nairobi 00100, Kenya  
unhabitat-info@un.org | www.unhabitat.org

**FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE**

## **Adequate housing as a human right: A call to action at the World Urban Forum in Cairo**

Anacláudia Rossbach

UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director

The world faces a severe housing crisis affecting both the Global South and the Global North. According to UN data, 2.8 billion people globally experience some form of housing inadequacy, with 1.1 billion people living in slums and informal settlements and at least 318 million homeless. Across the world, affordability gaps are widening, putting safe and suitable housing out of reach for an increasing number of people.

The global housing crisis is exacerbated by historical disparities between average wages and housing costs—a gap that continues to grow—and by enduring poverty and inequality. Housing challenges are further deepened by wars, armed conflicts, and climate-related disasters, which force people from their homes and communities. UN data shows that the number of people affected by disasters per 100,000 people rose from 1,198 in 2005-2015 to 2,113 in the last decade.

These challenges highlight the urgent need for systemic transformation, especially within urban environments, to address disparities and mitigate vulnerabilities. Adequate housing is a basic need and a foundational human right, essential for fostering inclusive, sustainable, and equitable development.

Addressing the global housing crisis requires urban policies that integrate the social and ecological functions of land, creating affordable and interconnected neighborhoods that promote resilience while reflecting demographic growth, migration trends, and evolving social habits. Collaboration across all levels of governance and across different sectors is essential if we want to see change.

The World Urban Forum (WUF) is our premier global conference on sustainable urban development and a stakeholder engagement platform. It is the second-largest UN conference after COP. This non-legislative meeting was established in 2001 to address some of the world's most pressing issues: rapid urbanization and its impact on communities, cities, and



economies, climate change, and related policies. The first forum was held in Nairobi, Kenya, and has since taken place biennially in various cities around the world.

This year, the twelfth session of the World Urban Forum (WUF12) is co-organized by UN-Habitat and the Government of Egypt from 4 to 8 November in Cairo. The theme of the forum is “It all starts at home: Local actions for sustainable cities and communities.” WUF12 has engaged 37,000 participants from 182 countries, including policymakers, urban planners, academics, civil society members, and representatives from the private sector. The forum focuses on urgent themes such as affordable housing, climate resilience, and the transformative power of sustainable urbanization, particularly with an emphasis on Africa and other rapidly urbanizing regions.

### **Building Coalitions**

To address the mounting global challenges and the global housing crisis, we must work together. We cannot solve them alone. I see the World Urban Forum as the largest coalition in support of transformative change, crucial to overcoming the global housing crises and making urban contributions to the major crises we face, such as climate, conflict, and poverty. The forum is a key space for dialogue and solution-building, addressing issues that impact both individual lives and the broader social fabric of urban areas.

At the heart of WUF’s mission lies the New Urban Agenda, a global framework adopted by the Member States in 2016 in Quito and aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aimed at promoting human-centered urban environments that are resilient to economic shocks and climate-related challenges, with housing at its center. As urban centers worldwide face unprecedented pressures, WUF12 represents an opportunity to harness the collective expertise of global stakeholders to build sustainable, inclusive cities that drive both local and global prosperity.

### **Focusing on Solutions**

Based on current global challenges and on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, the forum focuses on several critical areas at its main high-level dialogue sessions:

- **Adequate Housing:** WUF12 will address the urgent need for affordable and adequate housing, especially in rapidly urbanizing regions where informal settlements are expanding. Addressing the global housing crisis requires more than infrastructure alone; it demands systemic change and a renewed social contract that recognizes housing as a fundamental right. The forum will explore potential avenues to alleviate the housing crisis, discussing policies that can help close the affordability gap, mitigate forced evictions, and promote the integration of informal settlements into the formal urban fabric. Efforts in this area could pave the way for more equitable cities where safe and adequate housing is a given for every resident, not a privilege.
- **Climate Action:** Climate change remains one of the most significant threats to urban areas, many of which are located in climate-vulnerable regions. WUF12 will prioritize

strategies to build climate resilience within cities, emphasizing the need for green infrastructure and sustainable urban planning that reduces environmental impact while adapting to changing climates. Discussions will likely cover investments in renewable energy sources, disaster-resilient building practices, and urban greening initiatives. The forum aims to promote strategies that empower cities to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change locally, fostering resilience through tailored approaches that consider unique environmental and cultural contexts.

- **Partnerships for Development:** Addressing complex urban challenges necessitates collaboration across all societal sectors—government, civil society, academia, and the private sector. WUF12 will underscore the role of robust partnerships in facilitating knowledge sharing, resource mobilization, and cross-sectoral initiatives, each of which is vital for implementing effective urban policies. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, the forum hopes to catalyze partnerships that strengthen urban governance, enhance civic engagement, and foster innovative solutions to longstanding urban problems. Partnerships have the potential to empower local communities and drive sustainable development at the grassroots level.
- **Financial Empowerment:** Sustainable urban development requires financial empowerment at the local level. WUF12 will explore mechanisms to enhance resource allocation within cities, including establishing local development banks, encouraging public-private partnerships, and promoting community-based financing. Financial localization is crucial to fostering inclusivity and resilience in urban areas, enabling local authorities to respond more effectively to unique challenges. This focus on financial empowerment aligns with the broader New Urban Agenda goals, which emphasize the need for cities to become self-sufficient, adaptable, and resilient in the face of shifting global economic landscapes.
- **Technology and Innovation:** Technology plays a transformative role in modern urban planning, and WUF12 will examine its potential to improve city management and address localized urban issues. From smart city technology that enhances service delivery to digital platforms that enable better data collection, technology offers new avenues for urban resilience and inclusive development. However, WUF12 discussions will also address the risks associated with increased reliance on digital tools, such as data privacy concerns and the digital divide, particularly in developing regions. By evaluating both the benefits and challenges, the forum aims to foster an approach to urban innovation that is both technologically advanced and socially equitable.
- **Redefining "Home":** As cities confront overlapping crises—economic instability, environmental disasters, and mass displacement—the concept of “home” takes on profound significance. WUF12 discussions will likely explore the emotional and social dimensions of housing beyond mere shelter, focusing on policies that help communities reclaim a sense of belonging and stability in an increasingly unpredictable world. For many, the loss of a home represents not only physical displacement but also a disruption of identity and community, underscoring the need for housing policies that support social resilience as well as economic stability. This exploration reflects a



growing recognition of the need to view housing through a humanistic lens, with considerations that extend beyond structural safety to encompass emotional well-being and cultural continuity.

## Looking into the Future

As cities worldwide continue to expand and evolve, the insights and commitments generated at WUF12 will be instrumental in shaping future urban policies. The forum's inclusive approach allows for diverse perspectives, encouraging global leaders, local policymakers, and community advocates to jointly envision sustainable urban futures.

We are committed to advancing transformative change needed to build sustainable, strong, and resilient communities. There is a global consensus on the need for transformative change, as demonstrated by the Member States when they adopted the Pact for the Future at the Summit of the Future in New York in September 2024.

The Forum in Cairo will conclude with a **Cairo Call to Action** that represents the common visions and voice of stakeholders. For us at UN-Habitat, the next steps after WUF12 include ministerial meetings on urbanization and climate change at COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan. We will bring together key stakeholders, including ministers of housing and urban development, ministers of environment, and ministers of finance, as well as relevant non-governmental actors and local leaders. We will present takeaways from the sessions on climate change and cities at WUF12 and discuss ways to align subnational and national efforts to meet the Paris Agreement goals and SDGs. All these results will feed into discussions within the UN-Habitat governance structure.

I believe it is possible to create vibrant, safe, and sustainable urban spaces and to achieve adequate and affordable housing for us. Housing is a fundamental human right and essential need. WUF12 is a pivotal moment where our ambitions must turn into action. Together, we can make it happen.

## About the Author

**Anacláudia Rossbach** is United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN-Habitat. An economist with over 20 years of experience in housing, informal settlements, and urban policies, she was the Director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and served as Regional Manager for Cities Alliance. She oversaw the development and implementation of Brazilian housing and slum-upgrading policies at the World Bank.