



Housing is much more than a mere commodity.

The shift towards a predominantly urban world makes the process of urbanization one of the most significant global trends of the 21st century. While this phenomenon could positively contribute to the lives of millions, in many places across the globe people find themselves living in unacceptable conditions in burgeoning urban centers. The way housing is being produced and consumed has shaped urban growth, regrettably in many cases, by producing cities that are fragmented, gentrified and increasing inequality among its inhabitants. The sustainable future of cities and yields of urbanization will therefore strongly depend on facing and tackling the housing problems. The growing urgency to provide adequate housing to millions of households and the need to do so in ways to guarantee a sustainable future for cities calls for a paradigm shift in housing policy and practice.

“We reaffirm our commitment to the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing, as provided for in international instruments. In this context, we recognize an obligation by Governments to enable people to obtain shelter and to protect and improve dwellings and neighbourhoods. We commit ourselves to the goal of improving living and working conditions on an equitable and sustainable basis, so that everyone will have adequate shelter that is healthy, safe, secure, accessible and affordable and that includes basic services, facilities and amenities, and will enjoy freedom from discrimination in housing and legal security of tenure. We shall implement and promote this objective in a manner fully consistent with human rights standards.”

Habitat Agenda, Chapter III.A., Section 39

The right to adequate housing means that all human beings have the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity.

The right to adequate housing is recognized under international human rights law in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and has been recognized or referred to in many human rights treaties, declarations and conference outcome documents.

Adequate housing is more than four walls and a roof. A number of conditions must be met before particular forms of shelter can be considered to constitute “adequate housing”. These elements are just as fundamental as the basic supply and availability of housing. For housing to be adequate, it must, at a minimum, meet the following seven criteria:

Security of Tenure

Housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have a degree of tenure security which guarantees legal protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats.

A home is a place to live in security, peace and dignity. Lack of security of tenure and adequate protection place people under the threat and fear of eviction, homelessness and destitution. This is a problem in developed and developing countries alike with grave consequences for all, especially children.

Affordability

Housing is not adequate if its costs threatens or compromises the occupants’ enjoyment of other human rights.

This happens when the costs of rent or mortgage are so high that people cannot afford food, medication, electricity, etc. In many places, people will choose to have a roof over their family’s heads rather than becoming homeless. They then need turn to food banks and charity organizations to survive.

Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure

Housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, energy for cooking, heating, lighting, food storage or refuse disposal.

The right to adequate housing is intimately linked with the realization of other human rights, including the rights to water, sanitation and health.

Habitability

Housing is not adequate if it does not guarantee physical safety or provide adequate space, as well as protection against the cold, damp, heat, rain, wind other threats to health and structural hazards.

Living in unsafe structures, near polluted sites, in disaster-prone areas or overcrowded conditions is an issue faced by many.

Accessibility

Housing is not adequate if the specific needs of disadvantaged and marginalized groups are not taken into account.

Policies and programmes should prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable, for instance by removing the barriers in the built environment for persons with disabilities, or ensuring that ethnic minorities have full and sustainable access to housing.

Location

Housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, health care services, schools, childcare centers and other social facilities, or if located in polluted or dangerous areas.

Location has many implications for households, but also for the society and the development of cities. The right to adequate housing cannot be achieved without access to livelihood, education and basic services. That is why the production of housing units alone is insufficient to create a housing sustainability.

Cultural adequacy

Housing is not adequate if it does not respect and take into account the expression of cultural identity.

Housing is also the expression of various ways of life and traditions. For instance, some indigenous communities' way of life and housing would be quite different from non-indigenous urban dwellers. That is why these communities should not be imposed with housing that would contradict their culture and their needs.

Housing at the Centre

National and local authorities must ensure conditions in which everyone is able to access and sustain adequate housing. Among other measures, States should ensure that various housing options are available to meet the various need and financial possibilities of various parts of the society.

With 'Housing at the Centre', UN-Habitat proposes not only to take into account the socio-developmental dimension of housing; but to position housing at the center of national and local urban agendas, aiming to shift the focus from simply building houses to a holistic framework for housing development, orchestrated with urban planning practice and placing people and human rights at the forefront of urban sustainable development.

Additional Resources from the UN Housing Rights Programme

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) collaborate under the auspices of the United Nations Housing Rights Programme (UNHRP). For additional information, see:

[Fact Sheet 21: The Right to Adequate Housing](#)
[Right to Adequate Housing Toolkit](#)
[Housing and Slum Upgrading](#)



Human Rights and Urbanization

Urbanization is one of the most important global trends of the 21st Century. This phenomenon could positively contribute to the lives of more than half of the world population and to countries prosperity. Yet, in many places, the current forms of urbanization come with the creation of more slums, more people residing in inadequate living conditions and lacking security of tenure of housing and land, and greater disparities, inequalities and discrimination.

Urbanization processes have too often narrowly focused on growth, on markets, and on private investment, with relatively little attention to equality and wealth distribution, or to environmental and social sustainability, and virtually none to civil, economic, political, cultural and social rights.

Inadequate regulations, poor governance, lack of inclusive urban planning, and considering housing, water, education, justice or land as mere commodities have, amongst other factors, have left millions of people in unacceptable living conditions in burgeoning urban centers wherein poverty, forced evictions and displacement, violence and insecurity are common.

More than 50 percent of the world's population is now urban and by 2030, the number is expected to rise to 60 percent. During this period, 90 percent of the world's population growth will take place in the cities, particularly in Africa and Asia.



Urbanization may only have a positive transformative force if it respects and promotes human rights

The Habitat III conference in October 2016 offers a unique opportunity to develop a New Urban Agenda, an urbanization that is sustainable, socially inclusive, that promotes equality, combats discrimination in all its form and empowers individuals and communities to make cities a place of equal opportunity for all where people can live in security, peace and dignity. That is why the model of urbanization that we should all promote must ensure:

- **The free, active and meaningful participation** of the beneficiaries of development, and in particular of the most marginalized. Urban and spatial development should be done **with** and **for** all city dwellers. This means wide consultation and participation of all inhabitants – not only of the richest and the most powerful - with a view to improving the living conditions and security of tenure for the most vulnerable, as a priority.
- Urbanization processes should evolve from technocratic models to **rights-based models** that ensure the **accountability** of duty-bearers and the rights of urban dwellers. Decisions and processes in cities need to be transparent, subject to public scrutiny and to include free and fair dispute and complaint mechanisms. Accountability and the Rule of Law are both key principles of human rights.
- Achieving sustainable urbanization must address the root causes that violate the principles of **non-discrimination and equality**, not only on the basis of gender and geography, but also on the basis of race, culture, religion, age, disability and social and economic status. Too often the poor, people living in slums and informal settlements, women, children, minorities, migrants, refugees, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, older persons and others, do not count in urban development, resulting in city development that further marginalizes and discriminates against those most in need.
- Any serious development activity must in all circumstances embrace strategies for the **political, social and economic empowerment** of people, especially the most vulnerable and the most marginalized. Freedom of speech and assembly, the right to information, consultation and participation in decision-making processes, the right to vote - to name a few - are all crucial to sustainable and fair urban development.

Urbanization may only have a positive transformative force if it respects and promotes human rights. Developing a New Urban Agenda offers a unique opportunity to advance and further develop an urbanization that is sustainable, socially inclusive, that promotes equality, combats discrimination in all its forms and empowers individuals and communities to make cities a place of equal opportunity for all where people can live in security, peace and dignity.

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