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WUF12 Highlights: Thursday, 7 November 2024

Dialogues and Special Sessions put ordinary people’s needs foremost today, through discussions of digitalization that puts people first, empathy for informing city planning for accessibility to people with disabilities, and the ways in which the loss of home—affecting 170 million people worldwide—reverberates through the generations.

Mazen Ismail, a Lebanese-Palestinian poet, brought the refugee experience to WUF12 with his poem, “Who Truly Escapes A War”, reflecting his personal experience of the long-term impacts of war and violence.

During the day, UN-Habitat convened high-level conversations on housing, infrastructure finance, and potential collaboration through a data platform to inform urban development and housing. Participants noted that WUF brings together many different sectors, including town planners, data specialists, and housing advocates, and that partnerships can help bring visibility to the practice of urban development.

Today’s packed agenda reflected enthusiasm to reach out and connect across different sectors and levels of governance. As one participant observed: “the local creates the national.”

Roundtable: Future Global Action Plan on Housing and Infrastructure Finance

Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, convened this high-level roundtable, noting finance looms large at WUF12—particularly given the international reforms underway within the Financing for Development process.



Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat



View of the room during the session on “Future Global Action Plan on Housing and Infrastructure Finance”

In other opening remarks, speakers recommended:

- private sector investment for meeting the affordable housing challenge, leveraged by public sector concessional funding and well-targeted regulatory frameworks;
- addressing cities’ needs in the context of meeting SDGs;
- distinguishing between concessional debt and commercial debt in international financial institutions’ (IFIs’) debt sustainability analyses; and
- considering realistic access to funding much earlier in goal-setting processes.

Representatives from global, regional and sectoral IFIs and multilateral development banks (MDBs) then participated in a series of three panels.

Panel 1: Unlocking Investment for Vulnerable

Communities: Speakers pointed to key needs, including: high-level government leadership to facilitate investment; articulation of subnational governments’ constraints in the lead-up to the 2025 Financing for Development conference; and coordination between UN-Habitat and MDBs to ensure projects are developed to be “bankable” with creditworthy institutional participants.

Panel 2: Collaborative Strategies for Financing Aligned with the SDG 11: Speakers said, *inter alia*, that: SDG 11 will only be achieved if IFIs work with key stakeholders to close the finance gap on housing; high African growth rates provide opportunities for at-scale investment in cities; subnational bodies should be able to access finance directly; and MDBs need to link project planning and delivery processes. An ongoing need for deep consultation with local governments on capacity building and a lack of data to support better targeted finance were also noted.



Mazen Ismail, performer



Dance performance during the Special Session: Empathy in Motion

Panel 3: Successful Partnerships Among Local Governments, IFIs, and the Private Sector: Speakers pointed to a need for capacity building at the municipal level to enable development of bankable project concepts and dialogue with communities to identify appropriate locations for sustainable housing.

Dialogue 5: Putting People First in a Digital Era

Journalist Chika Oduah moderated this session, challenging panelists to explore leveraging technology to meet specific community needs as cities become smarter and more resilient.

In opening remarks, UN-Habitat Deputy Director Michal Mlynár highlighted some themes for discussion, including inclusive technology, ethical governance, and sustainable innovation. He noted the growing implications of the digital divide, citing new international guidelines on smart cities expected to be adopted at UN-Habitat's resumed session in 2025.

Egypt's Vice Minister of Communications and Information Technology for Institutional Development, Ghada Mustafa Labib, presented her vision of building inclusive, sustainable, and resilient cities. She reaffirmed that technology should enhance people's lives rather than complicate them. She noted the country's 150 billion Egyptian pound investment in information and communications technology to replace copper cables with fiber optics.



Felicia Williams, UX Director, Google Play Developer and Co-chair, Google Women at Europe, the Middle East and Africa

Featuring government officials from various regions, the first panel focused on country-level efforts to introduce and use technology for a variety of needs. Developing country representatives highlighted ensuring digital literacy, especially in their young populations, with others speaking on the introduction of digital property tax systems allowing for swifter work and more granular data collection, analysis, and planning. Others explored their challenges with developing legislation on the use of AI. Some speakers explored differences between a smart city and a sustainable city, noting quality of life and urban governance are key elements to achieving smart city targets.

The second panel explored the application of technology in all sectors to meet needs across the globe, from helping populations get connected and make informed decisions when using digital products to using technology as a class equalizer in consultations and development of their local built environments. Speakers touched on the importance of knowledge sharing to ensure digital safety and smart city development.

Dialogue 6: The Loss of Home

Errol Burnett, CBS News. US, moderated this session. Welcoming participants, Amr Aljowally, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Egypt, stated 80% of displaced people live in cities, predominantly in low- and middle-income countries. He called for medium- and long-term investment in refugee-hosting communities, not only short-term humanitarian aid.

Keynote speaker Sultan Barakat, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar, lamented that "countering terrorism" now involves attacks on whole cities, despite the illegality of such actions under international law. With other speakers, he questioned why international funders of UN agencies should "pay the bill" of Israel's aggression. He called for enabling long-term refugees to create a sense of "home" where they are, home being critical to one's identity.

Ammar Azzouz, academic and writer, defined the concept of "domicide" as the destruction of ordinary people's lives by war and by mass evictions, and called for addressing the root causes of violence. Ievgeniia Gubkina, architect, questioned the discourse of post-war reconstruction and challenged the UN to support the prosecution of war crimes. Azzouz and Gubkina, who are displaced by wars in Syria and Ukraine, respectively, stressed that there is no peace without justice, and without peace, reconstruction efforts are meaningless.



Yuriko Koike, Governor of Tokyo, Japan

Other speakers discussed the impacts of climate change and conflicts on food security and the economy, driving migration to urban centers at an accelerating pace. They stressed: long-term resilience and the need for collective rebuilding of communities, not just houses, to reduce competition for resources; securing land tenure for displaced people; and providing benefits, resources and opportunities to both displaced people and the host communities to make resettlement a positive experience.

Raouf Mazou, UNHCR, explained that the organization is changing its focus to long-term development solutions, in view of the increasing numbers of displaced people and increasing length of displacement. He stressed that return of displaced people must be voluntary, and that resettlement must include the creation of housing and livelihoods.

Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, highlighted UN-Habitat's draft strategic plan, which includes mobilizing resources from international financial institutions (IFIs).

Special Session: Towards a Global Coalition for Urban Data

UN-Habitat convened this closed-door session with potential partners to discuss creating a shared platform for urban data. Edlam Yemeru, Chief, External Relations, Strategy, Knowledge and Innovation Division, UN-Habitat, invited participants to put forward proposals.

Robert Ndugwa, Head, Global Urban Observatory Unit, UN-Habitat, noted that data is available for less than 30% of the indicators associated with SDG 11 on sustainable cities. He welcomed potential contributions from citizen science, noting that issues of data quality and completeness, data privacy, and timeliness should be considered.

Participants, many from academic and research institutions, mentioned their work in: collecting data on homelessness; recognizing diversity and heritage in urban cultures; promoting data interoperability, transparency and traceability; developing standards for metadata so as to improve searchability; finding ways to access data used for regulatory purposes, for example, in the context of inland revenue, to better understand community needs; and applying AI to accelerate the process of data collection and analysis.

Other participants from human rights and housing groups cautioned that governments often do not prioritize housing and therefore lack interest in using community-generated data that has long been available.

Participants recommended keeping in mind the purpose of data gathering, involving data users, and connecting local needs with national agendas.

They proposed that a collaborative project could:

- develop consistent definitions of key terms in urban data;
- use data to plan for resilience, for example, through informing flood preparedness;
- compare different urban scenarios so as to inform the choice of interventions; and
- treat data collection not as a preliminary activity but an outcome of programme intervention.

Participants and UN-Habitat staff affirmed that: a concept note should be written, which would include a roadmap for action; an online portal could be established for “matchmaking” participants with similar interests and that a voluntary group could lead this process within an agreed time frame.

Special Session: The Wisdom of Civilizations

Chika Oduah, journalist, moderated this session.

In a keynote address, Rania Al-Mashat, Egypt's Minister of Planning, Economic Development and International Cooperation recalled Egypt's enormous historical influence across thousands of years.

Yuriko Koike, the Governor of Tokyo, Japan, walked the audience through 400 years of Tokyo's history, beginning with its humble start as an unassuming fishing village, to becoming a modern metropolis of 14 million people, citing the innovations in city planning that have helped the city thrive in a disaster-prone region of the world.

Michal Mlynár, Deputy Director, UN-Habitat, recommended drawing inspiration from ancient civilizations while also being forward-thinking. The panel featured researchers in urban planning and engineering and people responsible for heritage conservation and the betterment of displaced peoples' living conditions. They spoke about:

- advances in wastewater management in cities, which have reduced illnesses and disease;
- the inspiration to be gained from travel;
- making use of heritage and local knowledge to address contemporary challenges;
- the impacts and importance of urban planning in cases such as Palestine to improve the lives of displaced peoples forced to live in inadequate housing; and



- current developments in making cities more resilient to climate change.

In closing, Ismail Sirag El Din, Founding Director of Biblioteca Alexandria, took the audience through thousands of years of civilization development, highlighting the pillars of good governance including the rule of law, the recognition of individual rights, democracy, and the free flow of information. He stressed that investment in human and social capital has historically been most crucial to development.

Special Session: Empathy in Motion

This session gave insights into the experiences of people of different ages and abilities in advocating for fairer and more accessible urban transport. Maruxa Cardama, Secretary General, Partnership on Sustainable, Low Carbon Transport, convened the special session with Ethan Kent, Executive Director, Placemaking X.

A panel of speakers from health and disability organisations, as well as UN-Habitat, considered transport needs from childhood to old age, and from the perspective of the visually impaired. Key insights included that: every child deserves the freedom to experience their world safely and fully through well-designed streetscapes; public transport that is affordable and nearby enables educational and employment opportunities for those unable to drive a car; and reliable, accessible transport is key to older people staying active.

The second panel comprised speakers from Albania, Germany, Ireland, the AfDB Group, UNEP, and the EBRD. Panelists considered public responsibility for inclusive transport policies for all, regardless of age or ability. Insights included that: if budgets are constrained, initial small steps are valuable, such as reclaiming small public spaces for pedestrians; innovative approaches such as Ireland's "way-finding center", where planners experience firsthand the mobility challenges faced by the disabled, are valuable; and investing in accessibility upfront is cost-efficient, avoiding expensive retrofits.

A dance performance, *Empathy in Motion*, choreographed by Shaymaa Shoukry, reinforced the theme of enabling people living with a disability to achieve their full potential.



Margarita Greene, Pontificia Universidad Católica, Chile



View of the panel during the Special Session: It All Starts At Home

Special Session: It All Starts at Home

Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, moderated this "fireside chat" for identifying housing solutions.

Hector Becerril, academic researcher and keynote speaker, said the housing crisis affects three billion people, and homelessness 318 million, exacerbated by rising land costs, violence, and climate change. Noting that housing is central to human rights, he said political participation must transcend the paradigm of homeownership.

Panelists recommended:

- returning to bio-based materials, and phasing out steel and concrete;
- reflecting social and ecological functions of land in economic systems;
- recognizing slum dwellers' own tools and financial systems;
- acknowledging governments' responsibility for adequate housing, and their capacity to contribute resources such as land;
- developing a mechanism to coordinate investment in ESG to eliminate greenwashing;
- fixing the supply side of the housing crisis, particularly access to land for housing development,
- introducing appropriate financial tools after fixing supply;
- "leveling" institutions of authority by giving communities equal voice; and
- ensuring that subsidies for housing reach the poor; and
- regularizing land tenure for poor communities and slum dwellers.

Panelists also noted how changing demographics influence the types of housing that are most needed, stating that the nuclear family concept is no longer the reality in many contexts. One stressed the power relationship between planners, practitioners, and politicians, and the need to build change incrementally. Another noted continuing problems in implementing legislation, despite 20 years of experience, calling for a movement to put housing at the center of the global agenda. One noted that 40-50% of publicly-owned land could be put into affordable housing.

In closing, Rossbach encouraged all to pay attention to what is already working on the ground.