



A publication of the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)

Tuesday, 19 May 2026 | Online at: enb.iisd.org/world-urban-forum-wuf13

WUF13 Highlights: Monday, 18 May 2026

The thirteenth session of the World Urban Forum (WUF13) officially opened in the afternoon following an opening press conference and the Joint Closing of the WUF Stakeholder Assemblies.

Speakers at the press conference highlighted the opportunity of WUF13 to deliver solutions to the global housing crisis and other urban challenges as multiple crises and new opportunities demand faster and more coordinated action.

At the Joint Closing of the Assemblies, stakeholder representatives provided insights and recommendations emerging from consultations held the previous day to inform the Baku Call to Action and the mid-term review of the New Urban Agenda (NUA). They underscored that the future of cities can only be shaped together with stakeholders and that urban planning must treat stakeholders as leaders of co-created solutions rather than beneficiaries of services.

WUF13's opening ceremony featured a video and live dance performance depicting themes around the importance of adequate, affordable housing for human dignity, followed by remarks by Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev describing Azerbaijan's progress and continuing efforts towards sustainable urbanization. Other Heads of State followed suit sharing success stories, challenges, and recommendations.



President of Azerbaijan, **Ilham Aliyev**

Press Conference

Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, highlighted that WUF13 convenes at a pivotal moment as the scale and urgency of urban challenges demand faster, more coordinated, and inclusive action in the face of both crisis and opportunity. Stressing the systemic global nature of urban challenges, she recalled that nearly 3 billion people live in inadequate housing, with more than 1 billion living in informal settlements or slums, and over 300 million experiencing homelessness. She said WUF13 is bringing together Heads of State, mayors, UN officials, business, academia, and civil society representatives with the common goal to build scalable solutions that translate policy dialogue into measurable action on the



Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat



ground, noting that WUF13 is the largest Forum ever with more 42,000 registered participants from 182 countries.

Anar Guliyev, Chairman of the State Committee for Urban Planning and Architecture of Azerbaijan and National WUF13 Coordinator, described Azerbaijan's commitment to urban development, multilateral cooperation, stakeholder engagement, and practical application of sustainable urban solutions, including modernizing cities, expanding green infrastructure, improving affordable housing, and strengthening climate resilience. Guliyev said Azerbaijan is advancing urban transformation by rebuilding through smart urban planning, green growth, and human dignity, such as "the reconstruction of villages in the liberated territories of Karabakh and East Zangezur."

Nga Kor Ming, President of the UN-Habitat Assembly, recognized the Forum as an opportunity to both strengthen international cooperation and political momentum around sustainable urbanization and generate practical solutions that can be adapted to local contexts. "The future does not belong to those who predict it; it belongs to those who build it," he said.

Joint Assemblies Closing of the Assemblies

Gulshan Rzayeva, Deputy Chief of Staff for the State Committee on Urban Planning and Architecture, Azerbaijan, and Deputy National WUF13 Coordinator, said the five stakeholder Assemblies highlighted that the future of cities must be shaped together with stakeholders. She expressed hope that WUF13 deliberations will be reflected in the NUA mid-term review and the review of SDG11 (sustainable cities and communities) at the High-level Political Forum in July 2026.

The chairs of the five assemblies then presented summaries of their discussions.

- Local and Regional Governments said the NUA mid-term review must address structural challenges to implementation, including weak decentralization, fragmented competences, constrained fiscal space, financialization of housing, and insufficient multi-level governance arrangements.
- Grassroots and Civil Society Organizations called for: an end to forced evictions; laws that protect communities; secure land tenure; planning "with" instead of "for" communities; inclusion based on lived experience; and increased housing finance.

- Business and the Private Sector said the private sector is central to advancing adequate and environmentally responsible housing, noting that solutions to many challenges already exist and that collaboration is not optional.
- Women called for strengthening women's leadership, support for access to accountability spaces, inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in urban planning, and direct finance and aid for gender-transformative housing.
- Children and Youth reminded participants that young people will bear the consequences of today's decisions and called for shared spaces where youth and leaders intentionally engage and co-create child-centered solutions and youth-led action for livable cities.

Krzysztof Szczerski, Permanent Representative of Poland to the UN and co-facilitator of the NUA mid-term review, stressed the role of stakeholders in the NUA review, highlighting the importance of multi-stakeholder and multi-level partnerships in advancing urban development.

Anna Solave, UN-Habitat, said the Assemblies underscored that we need better alliances among sectors to prepare for stormy days and that cities are diverse and dynamic, needing flexible approaches and adaptive governance mechanisms to catalyze a better urban future.

Opening Ceremony

The opening ceremony for WUF13 commenced with a video and live dance performance depicting themes around the importance of adequate and affordable housing for human dignity.

President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, outlined Azerbaijan's commitment to improving people's lives through urban planning, including a decree establishing 2026 as the "Year of Urban Planning and Architecture," aiming to build on a rich architectural tradition reflecting centuries of Asian and European influences. He stressed the need to be brave in taking on significant urban planning challenges while also being cautious to preserve heritage. Aliyev highlighted a major program of reconstruction in western regions of Azerbaijan since 2020, rehabilitating severely damaged buildings and communities after decades of conflict. Aliyev also noted that Baku, parts of which were previously known as "Black City" due to pollution from oil



Oleksiy Kuleba, Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine



Maryam Nawaz Sharif, Chief Minister of Punjab, Pakistan

production, is now an environmentally friendly city, with model urban areas and a sustainable transport system.

In a video message, UN Secretary-General António Guterres pointed to the 2025 World Social Summit's *Doha Political Declaration*, which reaffirmed the right to adequate safe, accessible, and affordable housing as a step towards building momentum for accelerating the NUA implementation.

In her video message, Annalena Baerbock, President of the UN General Assembly, said the NUA is as relevant in 2026 as it was in 2016, with the upcoming mid-term UN General Assembly review in July 2026 providing an opportunity to learn the lessons of the NUA's first decade of implementation. She also noted the importance of a systemic approach connecting boosted housing supply with services and infrastructure.

Nga Kor Ming, UN-Habitat Assembly President, highlighted the importance of addressing a crisis which sees around one in four people living in inadequate housing. He welcomed statements made during a WUF Ministerial Meeting, held on Sunday, recognizing that all countries currently face similar challenges on housing and acknowledging the links between WUF's discussions to accelerate NUA implementation and contributions to targets under SDG11.

Framing the housing crisis as a "crisis of equity, resilience, and human rights" and emphasizing that the future of cities will be shaped "not by exclusion but by inclusion," UN-Habitat Executive Director Rossbach declared WUF13 officially open. Rossbach underscored housing as a "social necessity and powerful economic engine" that requires finance systems that support "homes, not speculation." She urged WUF13 to send the message that it is time to accelerate NUA implementation and voiced the hope that "we leave Baku with renewed confidence that despite today's global challenges, adequate housing can be within reach for all, without exception."

Leader's Statements: Introducing the dialogue with global leaders, Sarah Nandudu, Slum Dwellers International, described the urgency of ensuring that affordable housing for the world's poor is inclusive, noting the need for pro-people policies that support housing finance directed to marginalized communities.

Shafkat Mirziyoyev, President of Uzbekistan, described how sustainable urban development is of strategic importance to the new Uzbekistan, describing a plan to increase housing construction by 1.5 times by 2030 through allocation of

approximately USD 2 billion annually to provide the population with affordable housing.

William Ruto, President, Republic of Kenya, described how the establishment of a housing program as a fundamental development pillar in his country helped overcome challenges of land availability, cost of construction, and housing finance through standardized construction material, economies of scale, and a dedicated financial mechanism.

Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia, underscored problems of overcrowding, inadequate and expensive housing, uncontrolled pollution, and unmanageable waste production in cities around the world and prioritized urban decarbonization, green spaces, and digital innovation as a response in his country and beyond.

Sadyr Japarov, President of Kyrgyz Republic, highlighted the country's initiatives on urban modernization, greening, digitalization, and housing. He emphasized the need for ecosystem resilience and innovation for mountain urbanism, as climate change increases environmental pressures on cities in mountainous regions.

Iliana Iotova, President of Bulgaria, underscored the blurring of economic and infrastructural boundaries between cities, which requires governance that is connected, multilateral, and shared. Noting that climate change and conflict are spurring migration to cities, Iotova called for placing housing at the heart of policies, saying that cities become "big and great when nobody is considered unnecessary."

Irakli Kobakhidze, Prime Minister of Georgia, highlighted the country's integrated approach to sustainable development, which is guided by a strategic, long-term vision and effective governance. Kobakhidze underscored that national policies prioritize the wellbeing of people and aim to provide accessible housing, preserve cultural heritage, and ensure that rural and urban communities equally benefit.

Olzhas Bektenov, Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, emphasized national initiatives advancing sustainable urban development in three areas: technology, including legal frameworks for safe and human-centered use of artificial intelligence; water management and environmental protection; and cooperative approaches to resilience.

His Majesty Mswati III, King of Eswatini, underscored the country's efforts to expand access to home ownership and improve living conditions. He urged stronger cooperation,

innovative partnerships, and investing in renewable energy, smart technology, and sustainable construction while “ensuring we keep people at the center.”

Dharambeer Gokhool, President of Mauritius, pointed to the unprecedented pace of global urban expansion, noting urbanization often occurs without adequate planning. He said Mauritius’s 2025 national urban policy now aims for communities which are both sustainable and resilient by design. He called for targeted international support for small island states.

Mohamed Yunus al-Menfi, President of the Libyan Presidential Council, said climate impacts and increasing immigration posed significant challenges for Libya, noting that boosting housing is a key part of the country’s response. He called for strengthened partnerships to provide sustainable financing arrangements.

Speaking on behalf of China’s President Xi Jinping, Zhang Guoqing, Vice Premier of China, said his country is advancing urban modernization with Chinese characteristics, including through strengthened program governance. He said China stands ready to work with others to optimize the layout of urban spaces with stronger public service standards, resilience, and integrated data approaches.

Constantino Chiwenga, Vice President of Zimbabwe, congratulated Kenya on hosting the second African Urban Forum in April 2026, suggesting using its outcome statement as an input for the NUA mid-term review. He affirmed Zimbabwe’s commitment to sustainable urban development, noting that it had delivered a million housing units between 2020 and 2025, with plans for a further million to 2030.

Igor Sergeyenko, Chairman of the House of Representatives of Belarus’s National Assembly, said his country’s strategic development plan to 2040 includes a special focus on housing, aiming to provide all citizens with homes that are affordable, standards-compliant and energy efficient.

Tomáš Taraba, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Environment, Slovak Republic, stressed that cities are not just centers of growth but important sites of innovation and expertise.

He outlined his country’s expertise in water management and its commitment to the modernization of older dwellings.

Deryageldi Orazov, Chairman of the State Committee for the Construction of the City of Arkadag, Turkmenistan, described Arkadag as a newly constructed green and smart city embedded into the natural features of the landscape of the Karakum Desert. He said the city uses solar power, recycles, and treats water from sewage treatment plants, and ensures public safety through city-wide video surveillance.

Say Sam Al, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, Cambodia, described the historical journey of his country’s development and its committed focus on sustainable urban planning, enhancing partnerships, improving waste management, and promoting “green and healthy” living.

Albana Koçiu, Deputy Prime Minister, Albania, described how urban renewal in her country restored a sense of belonging after decades of urban decay. She stressed that sustainable urban development in Albania has meant constructing housing that does not simply replace buildings lost from natural disasters but corrects for “old vulnerabilities” and prepares better for future shocks.

Oleksiy Kuleba, Deputy Prime Minister, Ukraine, emphasized that his country “is participating in the Forum while facing a full-scale war for over four years,” lamenting damage to 40% of Ukraine’s housing stock amounting to USD 60 billion in war damages. He stressed that even while the war continues, Ukraine is “reshaping ways to make cities resilient for the 21st century” including by building cities that can survive war, energy attacks, and humanitarian crises at the same time.

Maryam Nawaz Sharif, Chief Minister of Punjab, Pakistan, highlighted urban sustainability initiatives to plant trees and roll out electric buses, bicycles, and taxis, and data-driven efforts to improve flood resilience, improve air quality, and deliver affordable housing, which is “dignity made permanent.”

