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WUF13 Highlights: Wednesday, 20 May 2026

On Tuesday, WUF13 participants switched into working mode in various sessions tackling the core issues of WUF13: the housing crisis and key challenges and opportunities to address it.

In the morning two dialogue sessions examined the housing crisis from different angles, with one session framing housing as a rights-based priority and exploring community-led solutions, while another dialogue looked at housing as a driver of economic growth with positive or negative impacts on equity, depending on whether the right mix of housing supply strategies is chosen.

In the afternoon, four special sessions provided an opportunity to dive deeper into specific issues and approaches, including:

- a session on building global coalitions in which participants explored how global housing commitments can be converted to action at scale;
- a session discussing concrete projects to build new regional connections and regenerate urban areas that identified cities as platforms of technology, climate action, regional cooperation, and economic and cultural development;
- a session on the link between housing and health, where participants concluded that housing investments are in fact investments in prevention, resilience, and equity, all of which affect people's health and well-being; and
- a session exploring community-led housing initiatives which, even though they are effective at improving equity outcomes, are largely absent from mainstream housing policy.

Two roundtable discussions served as fora for stakeholder groups to discuss their contributions to addressing the housing crisis. During the One UN Roundtable, representatives of UN organizations and programmes discussed ways to improve coordination and enable the UN system to support systemic and localized implementation pathways. The Local and Regional



Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat

Governments Roundtable explored how local and regional governments can lead the transition towards adequate housing and resilient communities.

Dialogue Sessions

The Global Housing Crisis: What is the Plan? With the world's population increasingly concentrating in urban areas, the lack of adequate housing for billions of people and persistent social and economic inequalities constitute —a housing crisis in urgent need of action. In this dialogue, participants framed housing as a rights-based priority and called for scaling up community-led solutions while bearing in mind that diverse contexts around the world call for diverse approaches.

In opening statements, Anacláudia Rossbach, UN-Habitat Executive Director, urged orienting action at the local level, the need for holistic solutions, recycling urban environments





Gulshan Rzayeva, Azerbaijan, Deputy National Coordinator of WUF13



Jeffrey Sachs, Sustainable Development Solutions Network

to address underutilized spaces, and changing existing housing finance to leverage community-led mechanisms. Gulshan Rzayeva, Azerbaijan, Deputy National Coordinator of WUF13, underscored the need for integrated urban planning and public, private, and civil society partnerships. Emilia Sáiz, Secretary General of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), linked the future of democracy with the housing agenda, urging co-creation of housing with communities and Indigenous Peoples and changing the financial architecture to address speculation.

Across two panels, participants highlighted a range of approaches and priorities, including:

- accounting for diverse contexts, as cities in some regions of the world, such as Africa and South Asia, are facing increasing populations, while others have stable or declining populations;
- accounting for different scales, as the challenges change from the level of the house to the neighborhood, city, and territory;
- community-led co-creation of housing, with localized investments and ensuring a seat at the table for communities in decision-making;
- prioritizing human rights over profits, including remedies and restitution for those facing eviction;
- prioritizing the poor, which Edna Elena Vega Rangel, Minister of Agrarian, Urban and Territorial Development, Mexico, said is “for everyone’s sake”; and
- prioritizing housing politically, as populations clearly are angry about the lack of affordable housing.

In closing remarks, Patricia Scotland, former Secretary-General of The Commonwealth, underscored the need for listening and for diverse approaches, because a “sustainable diet will be flavored in different ways in different places.”

The Social and Economic Power of Housing: Housing can be a driver of economic growth and act as a social equalizer, thereby shaping people’s wellbeing and other life outcomes. Many cities, however, experience unequal growth as social benefits do not reach middle and lower-income households. This roundtable explored how cities can transition to more inclusive housing strategies that deliver both economic performance and social benefits.

Via an online survey conducted with audience members attending the roundtable, 60% indicated that they would prioritize social considerations over economic objectives when designing housing policies. Against this backdrop, several keynote speakers argued that these objectives are inextricably linked.

Vahid Hajiyev, Special Representative of Azerbaijan’s President Aliyev, highlighted the need to consider social objectives like job creation in the reconstruction of post-conflict zones. Francine Pickup, UNDP, said financing must ensure housing investment benefits flow to the entire community, not just the wealthy. Joso Sette Whitaker Ferreira (Brazil) said

strengthening support for the rental sector is critical to achieving the social objectives of housing policy.

Other perspectives included:

- governments should focus on displaced people post-conflict in addition to low-income groups;
- investment in new housing must address accessibility for disabled and elderly people, which can have economic co-benefits;
- markets alone cannot solve these challenges: public-private partnerships are needed to de-risk investment and enable income-poor households to achieve secure accommodation; and
- building low-income housing on the fringes of cities, without adequate services and infrastructure, leads to higher costs over time.

In a closing fireside chat, Princess Lamia bint Majed Al Saud, UN-Habitat Regional Goodwill Ambassador for Arab States, highlighted UN-Habitat programmes that had supported 1.2 million new housing units around the world, recognizing that they needed to work with an extended system of services and infrastructure. Rossbach emphasized the importance of high-level leadership for successful housing programmes to navigate the complex interactions between housing supply and associated governance, services, and infrastructure.

In conclusion, Rafael Tuts, UN-Habitat, offered drivers to support a transition towards inclusive housing:

- rebalancing from market-driven to diverse housing systems;
- shifting towards integrated housing systems;
- strengthening public sector capacity; and
- using public finance to catalyze and de-risk diverse housing investments.

Special Sessions

Housing at the Centre of Global Coalitions: Housing affordability remains at the heart of a sustainable urban agenda, yet the gap between where people work and the affordability of housing where people live continues to grow. This special session explored how to turn global housing commitments into action at scale.

In opening statements, Jabril Ibrahim Abdulle, Ambassador of Somalia to Kenya, underscored that housing challenges are multidimensional and that housing affordability cannot be separated from land values. Patrick Canagasingham, Regional Programme Division at UN-Habitat, stressed that housing is an enabler of development rather than merely an outcome of development. He noted that housing coalitions are needed because no single institution or sector can solve the complexity of the global housing crisis on its own.

Across two panels, participants identified trends, strategies, experiences, and opportunities associated with the global housing crisis, including:



Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, UNEP

- an observation by Jonathan Reckford, Habitat for Humanity, that the gap between what it costs to build housing and what families can afford is the widest in modern history;
- the need to center care at the heart of housing policies, including by linking housing with service provision in education, health, and local social and economic development;
- that housing affordability can be prioritized through stronger public zoning regulations that pre-empt land speculation;
- that de-risking investment in affordable housing can be achieved through greater public-private collaboration;
- that participatory approaches are not a procedural add-on, but a core mechanism for more effective policy for urban planning;
- civil society organizations require sustainable and independent finance rather than project-based funding; and
- that affordable housing will not be possible if housing is viewed as a commodity and not as a human right.

Cities at the Heart of Connectivity: Urban Reconstruction and Regional Cooperation: In this special session, ministers and urban consultants showcased projects to build new regional connections and regenerate urban areas, foregrounding visions of cities as platforms of technology, climate action, regional cooperation, and economic and cultural development.

Following a video showcasing work to build the new transit corridors in Azerbaijan, which will connect transport networks and ease the flow of freight and people, Jeyhun Bayramov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Azerbaijan, underscored his country's work to place cities at the heart of the global agenda as drivers of innovation, resilience, and solutions to the climate crisis.

UN-Habitat Executive Director Anacláudia Rossbach stressed the need to build connections that simultaneously lift rural and urban communities. She underscored that “connectivity without inclusion and wider socioeconomic vision is simply a fast infrastructure that benefits few.”

In his opening remarks, Anar Guliyev, Azerbaijan, National Coordinator of WUF13, detailed post-conflict recovery efforts, including de-mining of territories, a new governance model, economic revitalization, new transport connections, and green energy zones.

Azerbaijan ministers outlined their sustainability approaches and visions across economic, digital services, transportation, and energy sectors, including:

- polycentric approaches to city governance;
- niche approaches that ensure services and connections are in place for returning residents;
- identifying traditional strengths and how to reinforce them;
- starting with clear gostarting with clear goals, which have included reducing transit times; and
- delivering measurable outcomes in energy efficiency, so that cities create more value with less energy.

In a second session, Philippe Cornette de Saint Cyr, Boston Consulting Group, stressed that urban regeneration projects need to make clear choices when weighing key trade-offs, including tensions between infrastructure and the economy, regional integration, and equity and efficiency. Nigel Dancey, Foster and Partners, highlighted urban development projects that consider culture, population density, health, carbon emissions, and other facets of sustainability.

Pulse of Healthy Homes: Moderated by Nathalie Roebbel, World Health Organization (WHO), this special session explored how the lack of accessibility to affordable housing isolates vulnerable groups and exacerbates poor health outcomes.

In a video message, Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, stressed that links between housing quality and poor health impacts are well-established and that partnerships and concrete commitments are required to build positive health impacts, particularly for those living in informal settlements and who face both climate impacts and humanitarian crises.

In a video message, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO, noted that low-income communities face unsafe structures, overcrowding, poor air quality, and limited access to basic services.

Across two panels, participants discussed linkages between adequate housing and health outcomes, including:

- how deteriorating public health outcomes, particularly for arboviral diseases like dengue fever, are the direct result of both climate change and policy failures in the provision of adequate urban public infrastructure;
- the need for community-led public health efforts to hold elected officials accountable to provide resources where they are most required;
- a positive example from Tampere, Finland, where 90% of new housing is planned to improve access to public transport, green spaces, and to integrate socio-economic backgrounds for stronger social cohesion; and
- linkages between the health of children in cities and the design of urban spaces that nurture their cognitive and social development.

In a video message, Jean Todt, UN Special Envoy for Road Safety, stressed that sustainable urban development will not be possible if families risk their lives simply by stepping outside their homes. He said road safety is a “silent pandemic” injuring 50 million people yearly and urged that governments set default urban speed limits of 30 kilometers per hour where people live, work, and play.

In closing remarks, Hande Harmanci, WHO Azerbaijan, said “investing in better housing is investing in prevention, resilience, and equity.” She stressed that governments must put healthy outcomes at the center of housing policy and that this requires greater accountability and working together across the health, housing, environment, and finance sectors.



HRH Princess Lamia bint Majed Al Saud, Saudi Arabia

Building from the Ground-up: From Resistance to Alternatives: Communities around the world are turning their visions for collective, equitable housing into reality, yet community-led initiatives are largely absent from mainstream housing policy. In this special session, community project leaders and experts shared on-the-ground experiences and best practices for centering people as key actors in achieving affordable and quality housing for all.

In an opening fireside chat, Somsook Boonyabancha, Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, urged demand-side perspectives and opening spaces for people to organize and become active actors in housing policy. Koldo Casla, UN Special Rapporteur of the Right to Adequate Housing, urged inclusive institutional frameworks that democratically regulate property and fulfill the right to adequate housing.

Across two panels, participants offered perspectives on how to scale-up and make community-led approaches visible. Recommendations and examples included:

- community participation in mapping land;
- legal frameworks recognizing the social production of habitats focused on the needs of people;
- housing subsidies for women as a way of fighting gender violence;
- training programmes and raising awareness;
- including communities at all phases of development;
- consistent national housing policies combined with strengthening local authorities and recognition of local dynamics; and
- community savings programmes and cooperative approaches that build networks of communities.

Following the panels, participants discussed how consistent policies can facilitate the effectiveness of cooperatives, the need for monitoring mechanisms to ensure the Baku Call to Action is put into practice, and the need to focus on implementation by having a plan on the ground.

In final remarks, Simon Deprez, UN-Habitat, highlighted the work of the [Open-ended Intergovernmental Expert Working Group on Adequate Housing for All](#) as a space for sharing knowledge and best practices.

Closing the session, moderator Mariana Gallo, World Habitat, emphasized that the core question is “not about whether these models work; it is about whether there is a political will to resource and scale them.”

Roundtables

One UN for Adequate Housing and Resilient Communities: Delivering the SDGs through Housing and Urban Solutions: Housing cuts across all aspects of human wellbeing and sustainable development. At this roundtable, representatives of UN agencies, programmes, and conventions discussed how the UN system can deliver coordinated solutions to accelerate housing and SDG implementation.

Setting the scene, Yalchin Rafiyev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Azerbaijan, said integrated solutions require UN system coordination and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Noting record participation of UN representatives at WUF13, UN-Habitat Executive Secretary Annacláudia Rossbach said WUF can bring the UN system together for systemic change.

In two panels focusing on solutions and implementation pathways, participants shared experiences and suggestions for integrated approaches, including:

- by considering key needs and services alongside housing, such as water and sanitation, energy, and urban food systems;
- better implementation of existing policies and follow-up on previous commitments such as the SDG accelerators discussed at WUF12;
- institutionalizing multi-level governance and long-term financial arrangements that bring together multilateral development banks and the private sector;



Kan Chan Kin, Trash to Music

- building the capacity of municipal governments to access funding and implement complex, multi-dimensional projects;
- better data integration to target communities in need and deliver systemic, coherent, and adaptive programmes; and
- recognizing linkages between urban and rural areas, such as the role of healthy land to reduce migration pressure and provide resources to cities.

Several UN Resident Coordinators shared experiences on the ground and suggested how the UN system can support integrated approaches, including by supporting technical integration for systemic solutions, developing integrated localized strategies, and by setting and coordinating incentives for integration at various levels of government.

Summarizing the discussion, Sébastien Vauzelle, UN-Habitat, said: integration must be the guiding principle, localization the pathway, and cities the accelerators of approaches that deliver the SDGs through housing and urban solutions.

Local and Regional Governments: Moderated by Emilia Sáiz, Secretary General, UCLG, this roundtable discussed local and regional governments’ potential to lead on achieving adequate housing and resilient communities as well as the scope to scale local solutions through partnerships.

Across two panels, key messages emerging from discussions included:

- The future of sustainable development will not be decided by global decrees, but by the work of local and regional governments;
- Too often cities and local governments are expected to deliver global goals with inadequate budgets and problematic governance arrangements. Long-term financial arrangements are needed;
- Multi-level planning processes need to be participatory and transparent, and data-informed, so that housing meets people’s needs appropriately;
- Cities need to treat housing as essential infrastructure and plan for it decades in advance, as is the case for other major infrastructure. This would enable better coordination between housing and schools, employment, and transport;
- Small to medium-sized towns are vital engines of economic growth, requiring careful planning to address population and housing pressures; and
- To support delivery of housing solutions at scale, investment banks are asking governments to “crowd-in” the private sector by de-risking investments with grants and concessional finance to lower borrowing costs.

Anacláudia Rossbach said the messages from this roundtable would inform the mid-term review of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) by the UN General Assembly in July 2026.