



WUF Bulletin

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WUF13 Highlights: Wednesday, 20 May 2026

On Wednesday, WUF13 participants attended dialogues, special sessions and roundtables that explored the complex interactions between housing, human wellbeing, and the environment from various angles. A dialogue on transforming informal settlements and slums for housing the world discussed challenges for transforming informal settlements into connected, serviced, and equitable neighborhoods around the world. Participants noted that this transformation can take diverse forms depending on specific contexts and that city-wide community-led collaboration with residents of informal settlements is pivotal to success.

At a second dialogue on the housing-climate nexus, experts considered how housing can be inclusive, resilient, and affordable while also contributing to climate change mitigation, discussing, among other solutions, the use of local building materials, nature-based solutions, and the role of data in planning resilient cities that are also affordable and sustainable.

The special sessions covered a diverse range of topics, including:

- a session on the role of heritage-led regeneration and how it can address housing challenges in historic neighborhoods and settlements and improve living conditions, safeguard affordability, strengthen resilience, and support more inclusive urban futures;
- a session on cities as playing fields in which participants discussed the importance of sports and physical activity for resilience, health, and wellbeing and how cities can provide more of these “low-cost, big impact” services to their citizens;
- a session on opportunities and challenges to accelerate efforts to improve cities’ systems for waste collection, recycling and safe disposal; and
- a session sharing stories from the climate frontlines in which participants shared stories on how to build resilience for the cities of tomorrow.

Roundtables also continued providing opportunities for participants to explore issues from the perspectives of specific stakeholder groups. The Business roundtable discussed opportunities to unlock private capital for adequate housing at scale, with participants outlining conditions for increased private capital flows, such as stable market environments, de-risking investments and ensuring stronger project discipline. The roundtable on the rights of older persons discussed how the right to adequate housing can be realized for older people in the context of rapid urbanization and ageing populations.

The roundtable on the rights of persons with disabilities discussed moving beyond accessibility as regulatory compliance and towards more holistic governance that serves the needs of persons living with disabilities in urban areas. The parliamentarians roundtable considered how national legislation can turn global housing commitments into real outcomes.

This report covers the dialogue and special sessions and two of the four roundtables.



Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat

Dialogue Sessions

Transforming Informal Settlements and Slums for Housing the World: Moderated by Nazanine Moshiri, Berghof Foundation, this session discussed challenges for transforming informal settlements into connected, serviced, and equitable neighborhoods around the world. In opening comments, Mikayil Jabbarov, Minister of Economy, Azerbaijan, described the key role of community buy-in for formalizing land titles to provide greater revenue to vulnerable refugees and internally displaced populations in the country.

Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, lamented that “we have failed as a society” when it comes to addressing the growing plight of those living in informal settlements. She stressed that while solutions exist, greater political will is needed to scale up and generate a multiplier effect of social and economic benefits.

Marie Huchzermeyer, University of the Witwatersrand, emphasized that pluralizing the context of slum-dwellers’ experiences and situations can prevent polarization when transforming informal settlements. She stressed that governments must distinguish democratically organized and solidarity-based collective living in slums from criminal syndicates that sometimes forcefully extract rental income from slum-dwellers.

Following these interventions, an interactive activity ensued in which participants were given a role card representing the profile of a person living in an informal settlement to demonstrate the stark realities for the 1.1 billion people living in informal settlements worldwide. Across three panels, moderated by Aditya Kumar, UN-Habitat, participants discussed key solutions for improving conditions in informal settlements, including:

- demand-led, community driven collaborations with local governments and community-based organizations;
- city-wide mapping of communities through participatory planning of critical needs facing residents of informal settlements;
- demand-led slum upgrading that produces alternatives that fit with communities’ needs and conditions;



Mikayil Jabbarov, Minister of Economy, Azerbaijan

- fostering an active citizenry that promotes collective management for food production, economic activities and social and welfare development;
- community housing cooperatives, in which subsidies and loans go directly to cooperatives to manage new housing infrastructure;
- a citizen-led app in India to elevate the voices of women and other vulnerable groups to report on security concerns in informal settlements;
- the role of blended finance that leverages government land and investment from domestic commercial banks and international development finance to scale slum upgrading; and
- upgrading informal settlements to center the needs of children and the youth, including by listening to children themselves and through consultation with caregivers.

In closing, David Dodman, Erasmus University, noted that transforming informal settlements can take diverse forms depending on specific contexts and that city-wide community-led collaboration with residents of informal settlements is pivotal to success.

The Climate-Housing Nexus: This dialogue discussed how housing can be inclusive, resilient, and affordable while also contributing to climate change mitigation. Setting the scene, moderator Anne-Marie Dias Borges, Cape Verde, explained that climate impacts disproportionately affect people in inadequate housing, noting that buildings contribute 37% of global greenhouse gas emissions. She added that housing must not just be affordable, but also resilient and sustainable while mitigating emissions. UN-Habitat Executive Director Anacláudia Rossbach said we have a debt to 1 billion people living in informal settlements without access to essential services and in fear of climate disasters.

In three panels, experts discussed the housing-climate nexus from different perspectives. Key insights included:

- Mainstreaming local building materials, which are often cheaper, more sustainable and less carbon intensive than imported materials, requires overcoming the perception that such materials are inferior by demonstrating their use in high-quality construction.
- Building satellite cities to reduce migration pressure in
- African cities is not working; instead housing policies should address peoples' needs where they are.
- In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, satellite cities are a solution to offer resilient housing to people from extremely vulnerable highland areas.
- Building cities that are resilient and inclusive requires additional measures directly targeting poor households.
- New technologies such as 3D printed houses can address multiple problems, including cost, stability and adaptability to diverse conditions.
- Nature-based solutions can deliver multiple benefits for people's wellbeing, resilience, and climate mitigation, but they must be integrated at the planning stage.



Thembisile Simelane, Minister of Human Settlements, South Africa

- Securing land-tenure rights is a condition for successful slum upgrading as it allows residents to invest in their homes without fear of eviction.
 - Good data are essential to identify vulnerable populations, plan and build resilient cities, assess climate risks, and identify nature-based solutions.
- In closing, Rashad Ismayilov, Azerbaijan's Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources, said nature-based solutions should be included at every stage of urban planning. Noting that climate resilience must include everyone, he highlighted the importance of multi-hazard early warning systems.

Special Sessions

Rethinking Cultural Heritage and Inclusive Urban

Regeneration: In this special session, speakers from UN agencies, development partners, governments, and local actors considered how heritage-led regeneration can address housing challenges in historic neighborhoods and settlements and improve living conditions, safeguard affordability, strengthen resilience, and support more inclusive urban futures.

Across two panels, participants' insights included:

- To retain identity and culture, cities should consider what to conserve, who will benefit, who will pay and how conservation will be implemented when developing housing in heritage sites.
- When crowding in private sector investment for restorations of historical neighborhoods, governments should conduct extensive and continuous consultations with affected populations to protect livelihoods and a sense of community.
- When evaluating costs and benefits to balance economic and social outcomes, governments should use a framework that appropriately values intangible cultural assets.
- Restorations can drive appreciation in property values and rent adjustments. These should not drive inhabitants from their homes, leading to either unplanned gentrification or to underpopulated city centers, such as in Venice.
- Transformation of historical neighborhoods is not simply about restoring buildings; communities need to trust the intended outcomes. For example, Barcelona's experience was that restoration of the Ramblas area involved being upfront about outcomes with residents, thereby building trust, which facilitated both physical and social transformations.
- Tourists should be considered as temporary residents of a city, to strengthen urban planning processes.

Cities as Playing Fields: Sports and leisure activities build and bind communities, yet they are often overlooked in conversations about essential services and urban sustainability. In this special session, government leaders, financial institutions, sports organizations, and other stakeholders brought recreation into the spotlight as a planning priority with positive impacts on urban resilience and wellbeing.

UN-Habitat Executive Director Anacláudia Rossbach opened the session by highlighting how sports infrastructures transform



Singer **Ahad Aghayev** in the Rethinking Cultural Heritage and Inclusive Urban Regeneration special session and Inclusive Urban Regeneration

urban environments and benefit health and wellbeing. Laura Chinchilla, International Olympic Committee, stressed that sports is a “low-cost, big impact tool” to accelerate social, environmental, and economic goals.

During two panels, participants emphasized:

- investment in sports as a prevention measure that reduces health costs, crime rates, and empowers citizens, including women and youth;
- the need to increase awareness that sports are most effective when they are integrated with broader frameworks that connect infrastructure, urban planning, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability;
- getting investment to the local level, where it can have most impact;
- leveraging development funding by “thinking beyond the ribbon-cutting ceremony” and planning accessible sports facilities with long-term sustainability;
- integrating sports systematically at the core of urban policy, rather than planning isolated projects;
- creating connections between athletes and communities to embed a culture of physical activity in everyday life, and
- measuring the impact of sports with “indicators of active cities,” such as time spent using public playing fields, frequency of sports practice, participation of women and girls, and accessibility for people with disabilities.

Closing the session, architect and paralympic swimmer Ileana Rodriguez called sports a healing process for people with disabilities and urged building urban spaces that provide “sports for all.”

Closing the Loop: Advancing Waste Management Towards Circular Economy: Redesigning cities with efficient systems for waste collection, recycling, and safe disposal is essential for ensuring adequate housing and creating healthy, sustainable living environments. In this special session, academics, development agencies, business, local leaders, and UN speakers shared their perspectives.

Speakers’ insights included:

- A third of all waste, one of the main sources of the potent greenhouse gas methane, is either not collected or openly dumped and waste is expected to grow by 50% by mid-century.
- Stronger waste classification and the circular economy need to be considered fundamental elements of climate action and sustainable development, and prioritized for accelerated action by all stakeholders, notably development agencies and the private sector.
- A high ambition scenario for improved waste management, involving countries investing 0.3 to 0.5% of GDP, can yield positive returns as poorly managed waste can involve an economic loss of up to 1.5% of GDP. A fully implemented global strategy could yield USD150 billion in annual savings by 2050.

- Fiscal incentives, as used in Azerbaijan, could prompt more widespread classification of waste, including by the private sector.
- There is potential for innovative approaches to be scaled globally, as Japan had demonstrated in developing semi-aerobic landfill management techniques in the 1970s, which nearly 80 countries across the world have since adopted.
- Requirements should be strengthened for companies to take responsibility for managing waste from their products’ life cycle.
- Impacts of poor waste management fall disproportionately on informal settlements.

Stories from the Climate Frontlines: As climate change intensifies, the world’s cities are grappling with flooding, sea level rise, heat waves, and droughts, all as urban populations grow. In this session, participants shared their experiences and offered insights on how to build resilience for the cities of tomorrow.

Umayra Taghiyeva, Deputy Ecology Minister, Azerbaijan, opened the session by highlighting climate impacts in her country, including longer droughts and more days with temperatures above 35° Celsius. She urged climate actions that are “people-focused and inclusive.” Juan Pablo Bonilla, Inter-American Development Bank, highlighted regional projects in the Amazon and Caribbean that move away from isolated projects to more integrated solutions.

In a panel focusing on Amazonian cities, participants stressed the need for multi-governance approaches and knowledge exchange. Paola Bances Chávez, Mayor of Maynas, Peru, highlighted the Amazon Cities Forum, which is working to improve access to finance and share good practices. Panelists also emphasized the need to achieve just transitions away from fossil fuels, tailored approaches to infrastructure, and co-producing knowledge with Indigenous Peoples.

A second panel turned to small island nations facing existential threats due to climate change, which Gillian Herdy Oti, Solomon Islands, called a “crisis of culture and belonging.” Priorities in this panel included the need to make financing more accessible, aligning financing with the lived realities of communities, and supporting community involvement in solutions.

Xenya Scanlon, UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), urged investments in land restoration and drought resilience as climate change fuels dust and sandstorms. Princess Abze Djigma, Burkina Faso, called for multilateral processes of engagement, co-creation, and knowledge sharing. Elnur Soltanov, Ministry of Energy, Azerbaijan, closing the session, emphasized partnerships that bring in people living on the frontlines of the climate crisis.

Roundtables

Business: Moderated by Carlota Rebelo, Monocle, this roundtable discussed the most critical opportunities to unlock private capital for adequate housing at scale. In opening remarks, Edlam Yemeru, UN-Habitat, stressed that mobilizing private



Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, UNEP

sector capital alongside support from international finance institutions is a central theory of change for overcoming barriers to scaling-up affordable housing.

In a first panel on what makes a housing market investable, participants provided reflections, including:

- mobilizing private capital into housing requires stable market conditions;
- the importance of expanding the public-private partnership model to include people, policy, and partnerships; and
- stronger project discipline, good design and long-term quality management to attract developers.

Michaela Friberg-Storey, UN Resident Coordinator, Thailand, said sustainable housing stresses the importance of de-risking investments through ambitious commitments such as the UN's Global Compact Network in Thailand, which has resulted in more than 300 companies in the country committing USD 46 billion to establish a "sustainable investment ecosystem."

In a second panel, participants discussed risk, resilience and long-term performance for investment in adequate housing, including:

- a recognition by Musadik Malik, Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, Pakistan, that climate change is a kind of "natural terrorism" in which only three countries produce up to "67%" of global greenhouse gas emissions, while his country produces less than 1%;
- the need to revisit and revise Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) taxonomies for a more "human-centered" approach; and
- that housing serves two contradictory objectives at the same time: a shelter that needs to be affordable and priced relative to incomes, and an asset that delivers risk-adjusted returns, resulting in pricing relative to capital markets rather than incomes.

In closing remarks, Anacláudia Rossbach offered an inspiring example from Brazil where international financing investment began flowing in informal settlements once national regulation was reformed to earmark areas as special development zones.

The Rights of Older Persons: This roundtable discussed how the right to adequate housing can be realized for older people in the context of rapid urbanization and ageing populations, including isolation resulting from depopulating rural areas, challenges for housing design for older people and caretakers, and the need to make green spaces, transport and other services accessible for all age groups.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities: In this roundtable, co-designed with input from Organizations of Persons with

Disabilities (OPDs) and moderated by Mikaela Patrick, Global Disability Innovation Hub, participants discussed moving beyond accessibility as regulatory compliance and towards more holistic governance that serves the needs of persons living with disabilities in urban areas.

Heba Hagrass, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, lamented that "too many urban environments treat accessibility as an afterthought or a charitable add-on."

Elnara Ansari, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Population, Azerbaijan, mentioned that her country is among the first in the region to digitize medical records for more transparent accounting of the needs of people living with disabilities, noting that building inclusive cities is not just a policy choice, but a moral responsibility.

In a panel discussion, participants discussed the need for:

- universal, yet dynamic, design standards that account for persons with disabilities;
- dedicated financial support through retrofitting grants;
- improved participation and integration of OPDs;
- disability-disaggregated data and tracking mechanisms to identify persons with disabilities in their communities following climate shocks;
- valuing qualitative over quantitative data, particularly in terms of the role of caregivers and broader community networks to support inclusion and accessibility; and
- including persons with disabilities at all stages of designing and implementing development policies.

In an open dialogue, participants noted, *inter alia*, the need for more integrative approaches to climate resilience and disability, with an example of how the silence of electric vehicles poses a threat to blind individuals; the need to hold governments accountable to their commitments to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and retrofitting housing for disabled persons as a priority for local municipalities.

In closing, Anacláudia Rossbach stressed that accessibility needs and the rights of persons living with disabilities will be at the heart of the upcoming mid-term review of the NUA.

Parliamentarians: This roundtable addressed how national legislation can turn global housing commitments into real outcomes.



Speakers from the Dialogue on Transforming Informal Settlements and Slums for Housing the World pose for a group photo