



WUF Bulletin

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WUF13 Highlights: Thursday, 21 May 2026

On the penultimate day of WUF13 participants discussed crisis prevention and recovery from crises, financing, opportunities for sustainable tourism in small island developing states, and numerous other issues in dialogues, special sessions and roundtables.

The dialogue on housing at the center of crisis recovery and reconstruction discussed approaches to urban recovery that restore safety, dignity, livelihoods, and social cohesion when rebuilding communities after natural disasters and conflicts.

The second dialogue considered housing finance, focusing on opportunities for more effective and inclusive systems that can better deliver affordability, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

A special session on the blue economy and sustainable tourism in small island developing states (SIDS) investigated how SIDS can scale climate-resilient housing and inclusive urban development through policy and practical actions.

A high-level special session focused on the Africa Affordable Housing Compact, a strategic, multi-stakeholder initiative designed to transform Africa's housing sector. Ministers and high-level representatives from six African countries presented updates on housing activities in their countries.

The academia and research roundtable explored how academic knowledge can be translated into action in a rapidly urbanizing world facing complex crises of housing. The grassroots and civil society organizations roundtable focused on rights-based approaches, reframing housing as a public good rather than as a commodity, and on follow-up to commitments made at WUF13.

In selected One UN sessions, which showcase efforts to tie work across the UN system to the New Urban Agenda (NUA), delegates discussed, among other issues:

- priorities for the new Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing;
- regenerating historic settlements for adequate housing: traditional techniques, value chains, resilient homes, and
- water responsive urbanism for resilient African cities.

Dialogue Sessions

Housing at the Center of Crisis Recovery and Reconstruction: As natural disasters and conflicts destroy homes and displace people, responses require new thinking about urban recovery that restore safety, dignity, livelihoods, and social cohesion. This dialogue brought together leaders and experts to share ideas and lessons learned on the ground.

In opening remarks, Emin Huseynov, Special Representative of the President of Azerbaijan in the Aghdam, Fuzuli and Khojavand

districts, emphasized that “rebuilding homes means rebuilding belonging” and that housing must come first in recovery efforts and with full involvement of communities from the start.

Barham Salih, High Commissioner, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), stressed the need to move from temporary shelter to long-term solutions and from parallel systems to inclusive national frameworks.

In the first panel, participants urged systemic shifts and rights-based efforts, also noting that housing investments have multiplier effects for social and economic dimensions. UN-Habitat Executive Director Anacláudia Rossbach underscored the need to fix structural mismatches between humanitarian and development funds.

During the second panel, Sami Hijawi, Minister of Local Government, Palestine, called housing “the cornerstone of recovery,” which requires “genuine international good will” and “meaningful involvement of local communities.”

Olena Shuliak, Ukrainian Parliament, highlighted mortgage programmes, legal reforms, and compensation mechanisms to help communities return and rebuild.

Imad Hamad Al-Masri, Deputy Minister of Public Works and Housing for Planning and Studies, Syria, highlighted a national rebuilding strategy using creativity, algorithms, and metrics.

Across both panels, participants emphasized the importance of:

- allocating resources to achieve permanent solutions;
- context-specific and rights-based approaches, including land rights, access to services, and documentation;
- maintaining the agency of people who have been impacted, and
- foregrounding women in recovery efforts, as they often are leaders of households.

A New Deal for Housing Finance: This session discussed limitations of current housing finance systems and considered potential opportunities for more effective and inclusive systems that can deliver affordability, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

Tamara Paseyro Marin, Minister of Housing and Territorial Planning, Uruguay, highlighted tax breaks to incentivize private sector supply and direct support and capping of prices for low-income families as key elements needed for a successful affordable housing programme.

Anacláudia Rossbach stressed that all countries subsidize low-income housing and noted that middle- and low-income countries rely on international funding sources to drive a multiplier effect domestically.

In his keynote speech, Anar Karimov, First Deputy Minister of Finance of Azerbaijan, noted that investment in affordable housing worked closely with his country's industry policy to support sectoral growth and that concessional finance for various

groups, including nurses and teachers, contributed to stronger communities.

In a panel discussion, participants then provided expert insights, including:

- Housing systems are too fragmented, and governments have a responsibility to ensure that key elements, such as land supply release, oversight of land title, the banking sector and fiscal policies are joined up to enable delivery of affordable housing;
- Subsidizing mortgage repayment levels for low-income households can contribute to lowering delinquency rates;
- International funding should strengthen the broad domestic finance sector, conditional on its growing the capacity of the low-income sector;
- Appropriate international funding requirements can contribute to joining up elements of the domestic housing sector support system;
- Regulation recognizing the value of some informal housing, constructed by poorer households, will contribute to such housing becoming higher quality and safer;
- Mortgages work best for middle-income groups but many low-income workers, including migrant workers, have no connection with a bank and require support for increasingly high-cost rental accommodation, and
- Introduction of or increase to existing property taxes would provide viable funding streams to support governments' investment in affordable housing.

Special Sessions

Inclusive Urban Resilience, Blue Economy and Sustainable Tourism in SIDS: This special session investigated how small island developing states (SIDS) can scale climate-resilient housing and inclusive urban development through policy and practical actions to strengthen services, security of tenure and resilient urban planning, while supporting sustainable tourism and the blue economy.

UN-Habitat Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, Kazuko Ishigaki, noted SIDS are among the first to feel the impacts of climate change, and so issues such as housing and urban resilience, blue economy, and sustainable tourism are of particular importance for them.

Following a dance performance from the Solomon Islands conveying dilemmas that development poses for traditional cultures, Ministers from SIDS and other representatives shared insights, including:

- Tourism and housing are inter-related investments, and both need to be scoped within integrated urban planning. For example, tourism growth comes with coastal protection and waste management challenges, but there are potential synergies such as the need to provide adequate housing for the tourism sector's workforce;
- SIDS are small populations and economies, which makes challenging the use of conventional cost-benefit analysis and payback periods for housing projects. Greater weight therefore needs to be given to broader community benefits;
- Upfront investment in making planned housing more resilient to hurricanes, flooding and other climate impacts is less costly than repair after the fact, and
- Successful tourism initiatives, such as guest house tourism in the Maldives, can drive capital uplift, potentially leading to remote island business operators relocating to urban centers.

Africa Affordable Housing Compact – Deal Room Investor Session: This session focused on the Africa Affordable Housing



Ana Sakhokia, Spatial and Urban Development Agency, Georgia

Compact, a strategic, multi-stakeholder initiative designed to transform Africa's housing sector by driving investment, fostering innovation, and strengthening partnerships. A central feature of the Compact is its deal platform, which acts as a dynamic connector between investors, accelerators, financial institutions, and high-impact housing projects.

Anacláudia Rossbach, said Africa's finance gap of more than USD 1.4 trillion represents a significant green investment opportunity. She also recalled that at the second Africa Urban Forum meeting in April 2026, African Union Member States had committed to the Compact, including the platform for facilitating investor partnership.

In her keynote address, UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, noted that by 2050, Africa's population will reach 2.5 billion, with most people living in cities. She stressed the value of the Compact's delivery platform for channeling bankable affordable housing projects, saying that African risk is mispriced in global markets. She urged multilateral funds to use their financial heft to crowd in the private sector to deliver affordable, sustainable housing at scale.

A panel of high-level speakers then provided updates on their countries' improved financing arrangements for affordable housing:

Hamat Bah, Minister of Lands, Regional Government and Religious Affairs, The Gambia, said that his country recently launched a policy to focus on transparency of land tenure and security and introducing digitalization to combat fraud.

Apollo Maphalala, Minister of Housing and Urban Development, Eswatini, said that while there is considerable financial services expertise in Eswatini, uptake to develop housing remains low, noting that traditional land tenure arrangements are not accepted as financial collateral and alternative freehold land is prohibitively expensive.

Angolan Secretary of State for Urbanism and Housing, Conceição Cristóvão, reported construction of more than 350,000 publicly funded houses, noting plans to shift government funds to services and infrastructure, while drawing in private-sector housing construction.

Fatima Bintu Sirleaf, Deputy Minister for Urban Affairs, Liberia, outlined the link between affordable housing and supporting women and youth, including demographics data mapping to inform improved healthcare and waste management.

Youssef Hosni, Secretary-General, Ministry of Territory Planning, Urban Planning, Housing and City Policy, Morocco, said government action reduced slum housing by 80% in recent years,



Kecia Rust, Centre for Affordable Housing Finance in Africa (CAHF)

pointing to upgrades in the land deed system and innovative fiscal measures, and

Susan Nakhumicha Wafula, Permanent Representative of Kenya to UN-Habitat, outlined affordable housing legislation which introduces a levy to source national funds for the national housing programme.

The session concluded with representatives of the private sector outlining four specific housing projects in Ghana, Rwanda, Mozambique, and Senegal.

Roundtables

Academia and Research: Academic research informs and challenges understandings of how housing both shapes and is shaped by social, political, and economic forces. This roundtable explored how this knowledge can be translated into action in a rapidly urbanizing world facing complex crises around housing. Anacláudia Rossbach urged a shared research programme that can benefit the New Urban Agenda (NUA) and UN-Habitat strategy and practitioners.

In the first panel, David Dodman, Erasmus University Rotterdam, underscored ways to communicate research findings with nuance and complexity without stifling action, such as avoiding dogmatic perspectives and including diverse voices and building long-term relationships to inform research. Camilla Cociña, International Institute for Environment and Development, urged including and valuing diverse types of knowledge.

Researchers in the panel identified critical housing-related research and knowledge gaps related to:

- improving existing housing stock;
- mobile populations;
- how housing issues have changed over time, and
- rental housing markets, particularly among low-income populations.

To close these gaps, researchers emphasized the need to: inclusively co-produce knowledge and to connect with civil society and other groups gathering data; leverage trust in academia and incentivize research with public service dimensions; and create venues that connect cities and university research.

In a second panel focused on gaps between professionals and academia, Enrique Silva, Harvard University, urged creating a “talent pipeline” and promoting “lifelong learning” to keep pace with rapid changes in urban environments. Edgar Pieterse, University of Cape Town, urged “holistic thinking” that adopts a systems perspective to recognize interdependencies in urban environments.

Other recommendations included:

- designing agile, interdisciplinary educational programmes; leveraging technology to break data analysis bottlenecks, and
- putting people at the center of integrated knowledge systems that recognize change as constant.

Children and Youth: This roundtable explored how cities can be co-designed with young people to create livable urban futures.

Grassroots and Civil Society Organizations: Civil society voices have the power to ensure justice and accountability in decision-making about urban futures but too often go unheard. This roundtable brought together grassroots and civil society organizations (CSOs) to amplify their calls for sustainable urban environments for all.

In opening remarks, Aygun Aliyeva, Agency for State Support to Non-Governmental Organizations, Azerbaijan, underscored that CSOs are important because they often are the first to hear community concerns and help ensure that development remains connected to the people.

During a panel discussion, participants emphasized the importance of reframing housing not as a commodity but as a public good, as well as advancing rights-based approaches to stop forced evictions.

Massa Kone, Habitat International Coalition, stressed that business models are not concerned about the rights of people and urged social housing that is accessible to everybody. Samuel Mbonu Okechukwu, Media4Change, recounted his documentary work to put a human face on the community harms from forced evictions. Lajana Manandhar, Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, underscored that the “space for civil society is shrinking” and that advocates need protection and communities need funding at a regional level for housing.

Other interventions stressed the importance of:

- including people with disabilities as leaders in housing solutions;
- moving from building- to neighborhood-level solutions, which are more scalable and inclusive;
- investing in local data collection and strengthening local knowledge systems, and
- accountability in what leaders agree to at WUF13, which for Rose Molokoane, Slum Dwellers International, requires the “power, wisdom, and encouragement to knock at our governments’ door and to make them listen to us.”

In closing remarks, André Dzikus, UN-Habitat, noting Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 11.3.2 on direct participation structures, urged creating a roadmap to measure progress on implementing actions from one WUF to the next, through to a potential Habitat 4 in 2036.

Professionals: This roundtable discussed how architects, urban planners, policymakers, researchers, and other housing professionals can help bridge global capacity gaps to deliver adequate housing everywhere.

One UN Sessions

Priorities for the New Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing – Consultation for Stakeholders: This interactive event, moderated by Gunnar Theissen, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, gave representatives from UN-Habitat, civil society, and local and regional governments an opportunity to highlight key challenges that the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, Koldo Casla, should address during the next six years.

In response to reflections from participants, Caslo mentioned, *inter alia*, the importance of maintaining the use of the concept of domicide, referring to the deliberate and widespread destruction of homes during violent conflicts; the need to address “invisible evictions,” referring to market-induced dispossession that psychologically threaten families with eviction for years prior to the actual eviction event, and fiscal and tax measures to curb real-estate speculation.

Participants also discussed other priority concerns for the Special Rapporteur, including:

- the need to integrate the right to adequate housing with the right to adequate food, particularly when agricultural land is lost through urbanization;
- the impact of temporary rentals in the organization of UN events;
- the criminalization of people using local materials for housing construction despite its important cultural connection for people;
- access to legal protection against the abuse of public authorities, and
- taking plural and traditional reflections on the meaning of “property” beyond a Western individual perspective.

Participants also discussed the need for more creative language to convince people that housing is a human right, given that governments continue to be elected based on promises to evict informal settlements and promote the “money-making machine” of short-term housing rentals for tourists.

In closing remarks, Emilia Sáiz, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), urged addressing the struggle of local and regional governments to access finance to provide social housing needs for cities. Maria Silvia Emanuelli, Habitat International Coalition, stressed the importance of community-led housing and the use of local construction materials.

Regenerating Historic Settlements for Adequate Housing: Traditional Techniques, Value Chains, Resilient Homes:

Historic settlements are home to millions of people and are under pressure from socio-economic development, climate impacts and natural disasters. This session explored how the regeneration of historic settlements can drive inclusive, resilient and sustainable housing recovery.

Panelists discussed risks and challenges of regeneration projects, such as narrowly focusing on profitable activities while leaving communities behind, the need to overcome the stigma of historic settlements as slums in many countries, and political short-termism.

They shared lessons learned and challenges encountered in regeneration projects in Morocco, Egypt, and Georgia, most of which were realized through partnerships between multiple UN organizations and local partners, including:

- Regeneration of heritage must be linked to socio-economic development to avoid crowding out residents and reinforcing outmigration;
- Communities must be co-owners and co-creators of regeneration from the start to ensure that regeneration creates benefits, identification, and a sense of belonging;
- Communities should also be recognized as the long-term custodians of cultural heritage;
- Heritage should be seen as a dynamic, living settlement, not as a museum or a collection of iconic buildings;
- Multi-actor governance is essential to achieve interlinked objectives;



Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director, UN-Habitat

- Institutions need shared methods for diagnostics, as communities do not experience development challenges in “institutional categories”;
- Traditional buildings are often adapted to harsh climates and can provide safe, resilient housing once reconstructed;
- Traditional knowledge is an infrastructure for reconstruction, and knowledgeable elderly persons should be involved in reviving traditional artisan skills that can provide local employment, and
- Regeneration projects should also provide long-term investment pathways for the private sector, rather than calling on the private sector only once funding gaps arise.

From Grey to Blue-Green, Water Responsive Urbanism and Sponge Cities for African Resilient Cities: Moderated by Deen Sharp, UN Environment Programme, this event explored risk-proofing urban areas through water-resilient infrastructure that prioritizes nature-based solutions (NbS), community ownership, and a shift from grey to blue-green infrastructure for the future of African cities.

Nelson Muffuh, UN Resident Coordinator for South Africa, stressed that African cities are increasingly facing limited water or too much water at the same time and argued that “we need to work with water rather than trying to control and fight it.”

Francine Pickup, UN Development Programme, emphasized that NbS must be the core of urban infrastructure and not an “add-on,” and that this requires a risk-informed investment design.

In a first panel, participants identified key principles of water-responsive urbanism, using the example of Garissa Town, in Kenya. They discussed the need to “slow, spread, and store water” to optimize its benefits, the need for green and grey infrastructure to complement engineered infrastructure, and embedding community ownership as the foundation for success.

In a second panel, participants discussed the role of urban NbS in informal settlements in Kenya, noting the need to co-design solutions, use local materials for construction, and integrate water management infrastructure with other facilities that communities require in the face of growing climate stress. Other topics discussed included: the design of NbS in remediating oil-polluted natural lakes and other oil-contaminated sites in Azerbaijan and avoiding “orphaned” green infrastructure projects left to decay after donor funding dries up by determining who will operate and maintain the asset, with what budget, and for how long.

The IISD’s summary of WUF13 will be available on Monday, 25 May 2026, at: enb.iisd.org/world-urban-forum-wuf13