



# It All Starts at Home.

## Local Actions for Sustainable Cities and Communities

WUF12 background paper

### Introduction

Consider the pressing issues that affect our daily lives: the cost of housing, the ease of commuting, the air we breathe, the safety of our water supply, access to safe public space, exposure to the impacts of climate disasters and conflicts. These are not trivial matters; they are central to humanity's shared urban existence and how 4.4 billion people live, work, and find happiness across cities and communities.

#### ***It All Starts Locally***

Localization is central to achieving sustainable development and building resilient, equitable cities. This involves ensuring effective collaboration among diverse stakeholders, tailoring strategies to address shared goals at the local level, harmonizing efforts with subnational and national development frameworks, and aligning actions with community priorities, thereby recognizing the unique conditions and cultural nuances of specific regions, cities, and communities in the pursuit of sustainable development.

Bringing together leading international figures, entrepreneurs, local and national governments, grassroots activists, and those who too often have been kept voiceless, the World Urban Forum (WUF) is a space for collaboratively envisioning new pathways for urban life. We invite you to join in addressing the global challenges of ensuring a secure, sustainable home for all.

#### ***It All Starts Together***

By grounding WUF12 in a commitment to localization, we aim to empower local stakeholders, encourage citizen engagement and make sustainable development more responsive to local needs. Localization has the power to scale positive impact stemming from the smallest communities to sprawling megacities. Imagine the possibilities if we fully embrace the potential of localization all together.

#### ***It All Starts Now***

WUF12 will take place from 4 to 8 of November 2024, at a moment of growing calls to collectively address global challenges such as rising poverty and inequality, climate change, armed conflict, the digital divide, and a weakening multilateral system. It will occur some weeks after the United Nations Summit of the Future, which will be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to elevate global cooperation, governance and agree on a Pact for the Future.

Moreover, WUF12 will be held just five years before the deadline set to realize the 2030 Agenda, taking center stage to showcase how humanity's present and future are inevitably tied to cities, and the transformative role of sustainable cities and communities in realizing global goals now.

WUF12 has taken on the phrase "It All Starts at Home" to center discussion around issues of housing, belonging and community and to gesture towards the importance of localization and the idea that SDGs require enabling at different scales, which necessarily involves cities and homes. The concept of "at home" extends beyond the physical structure that shelters us; it encompasses the cultural, social, economic, and environmental dimensions that define our communities. The phrase is also an invitation to take home values, innovations, solutions, and inspiration from WUF12 and start transformational change from home: locally, together, and now.

## The WUF12 Dialogues<sup>1</sup>

The WUF12 theme “It all starts at home; local actions for sustainable cities and communities” is supported by 6 Dialogues, each of which explores a different dimension of the theme. The dialogues will structure WUF12 events and serve as conceptual headings for activities and discussions. They are curated by UN-Habitat and facilitated by global thought leaders and experts.

Dialogue 1 opens with one of the most important challenges for cities and communities: the lack of access to affordable and adequate housing. This dialogue explores solutions to the decades-long and ever-growing housing crisis and rising inequalities that spur from it, including for a renewed social contract. Dialogue 2 addresses the pressing challenge of climate change and cities, emphasizing the importance of localized adaptation and resilience in ensuring that cities and communities can thrive in a future with unprecedented climatic conditions.

Dialogue 3 shifts focus to strategies essential for partnerships to bridge global goals with local realities, highlighting the power of collaboration in driving localized progress. Dialogue 4 explores the importance of financial empowerment, ensuring that resources are readily accessible at the local level to fuel sustainable development and localization. And dialogue 5 ventures into the sphere of innovation, discussing how digital technology and knowledge transfer can drive localized solutions and promote inclusive development, while noting the risks posed to cities and communities.

Lastly, Dialogue 6 invites reflections on the meaning of "home" amid conflict or crisis, examining how urban stakeholders, communities, and authorities respond to turmoil. Each dialogue serves as a crucial lens through which to view connections between the concept of "home" and the multifaceted challenges and opportunities entailed in localization.

These dialogues encapsulate some of the central challenges and opportunities of localization. Beyond them, the WUF12 will further delve into sessions in multiple formats, such as roundtables, assemblies, special sessions, etc., which will analyze diverse entry points and the role of all urban actors, including grassroots, civil society, private sector, academia, all levels of government, international organizations, among many more.

### **Dialogue 1: Housing our future.**

#### **What needs to change to solve housing inadequacy for billions across our cities and communities?**

Housing affordability is a global crisis affecting people in both low- and high-income countries. Over the past 50 years, housing prices in high-income countries increased three times more than the price of other basic services.<sup>i</sup> Further, there are an estimated 318 million people worldwide which are homeless, and up to 2.8 billion people experiencing housing inadequacy<sup>ii</sup>. This issue is closely linked to urban inequality which has been increasing for 70% of the world's population and is a key obstacle to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>iii, iv</sup>

Addressing one of the lines of the great urban divide – housing - is therefore a matter of acute urgency. It is unacceptable that billions live in inadequate housing, which has countless adverse ripple effects on their economic and social wellbeing today, and for their offspring tomorrow. No region, country, city, or community is spared from the devastating impacts of housing inadequacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Dialogues are high-profile events which will take place at WUF, and which set the agenda for policy and action. They provide a platform for global thinkers, practitioners, and decision-makers to share insights and solutions on themes of global importance and include active discussion with the audience. Discussions collect key reflections on the status of and way forward for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Localization approaches have never been more relevant, as they hold a promise to improve lives and communities through innovative strategies, barrier-breaking, anti-discrimination efforts, collaborative initiatives, while leveraging local insights; all while bringing local actors to the forefront. Cities and communities are expressing a desire for enhanced governance frameworks, seeking increased regulatory power over real estate, as well as funding to improve public housing<sup>v</sup>.

In this light, creating new mechanisms to listen to and empower the most vulnerable in cities, as well as building and regaining trust and legitimacy are critical for sustainable, affordable, inclusive, and resilient urbanization. Indeed, the United Nations Secretary-general, has called for solidarity with the world's most vulnerable,<sup>vi</sup> underscoring the urgency "to renew the social contract between governments and their people and within societies, so as to rebuild trust and embrace a comprehensive vision of human rights." <sup>vii</sup>

This dialogue aims to showcase how localized approaches geared at ensuring adequate housing are necessary to tackle global inequality. This includes shedding light on how governments, the private sector, communities, activists, and other stakeholders have called attention to, and found solutions to the challenge. It will crisscross housing policies and regulations, grassroots demands, formal and informal construction, novel housing tenure forms, wealth generation and inequality in the housing sector, and more. It does so by delving into the nexus between housing inadequacy and inequality in cities, as well as laying out policies, mechanisms, and solutions that have successfully empowered the most vulnerable while paving the way for a renewed social contract.

**This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *Who is most affected by inadequate housing in today's cities?*
- *How are communities, cities, local and national governments, the private sector, grassroots, activists, and other housing stakeholders forging collaborations to tackle the prolonged housing affordability and costs of living crises?*
- *What changes and reforms must traditional governance and planning structures make to resolve the escalating levels of inequality arising from housing inadequacy?*
- *What experiences, innovations, and policies exist that have managed to reduce housing inadequacy and inequalities in cities, and which may provide lessons for other parts of the world?*

**Dialogue 2: The urgency of a safe home amid the climate crisis.**

**Can localization approaches provide a sustainable, safe, and resilient future for cities and communities to address the existential threat posed by climate change?**

One of the key questions of our time is how global goals on climate change can be turned into action at the local level, including the Paris climate agreement, and SDG13. Local actors are well positioned to address both the impact of climate change as well as being key players in greenhouse gas mitigation, but only if they are adequately empowered with resources, knowledge, and political will. Indeed, cities have demonstrated that they are at the forefront of global advocacy on climate commitments, many of which are more ambitious than those of national governments.

Localizing climate action in cities and communities has become an urgent issue as the concentrated nature of people, homes, businesses, institutions, and infrastructure in urban areas makes them vulnerable to climate shocks. It is estimated that a 2°C increase in global temperature in 2050 will expose 2.7 billion people to moderate or high climate-related risks, most of them living in urban areas. Further, the global urban population facing water scarcity is projected to be around 1.7–2.4 billion people by 2050.<sup>viii</sup>

Climate change is exacerbating existing urban inequalities faced by those in extreme poverty through compromised health, food security, and water scarcity. While climate change is distinctly a global challenge, cities and communities are at the forefront of addressing this challenge, uniquely positioned to pursue policies and actions to mitigate these impacts and to help reduce emissions.

Entire neighborhoods and public spaces are being redesigned to act as mitigators of the negative effects of climate change, whether they come in the form of floods, extreme water scarcity, or heatwaves. Cities and communities are pursuing urban circularity as well as leveraging the value of proximity to reduce the negative effects of traffic, sprawl, and pollution. Similarly, they are tapping into indigenous knowledge and nature-based solutions; as well as addressing larger scale issues such as urban-rural linkages and food production, among many more.

This dialogue delves into approaches that shed light into how building urban resilience and sustainability in the face of climate change can start at home. UN-Habitat's flagship World Cities Report 2024, which is focused on local climate action, will further provide the background to this dialogue.

**This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *How do we ensure climate action at the local level is people-centered and in a way that balances the urgency of climate action with the need for inclusive and participatory climate action?*
- *What are the different pathways for making cities and communities more responsive and resilient to the climate crisis?*
- *Who is being left out of policies and innovations to address climate change and what is being done locally to avoid this?*
- *What community-led initiatives have been successful at putting climate change on the urban agenda, as well as at mitigating and adapting to climate-related harms?*

### **Dialogue 3: Lost in translation: harmonizing collaboration across scales.**

**How can we make global agendas work for local realities, and local solutions shape global agendas?**

Global agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are primarily negotiated between national governments, with increasing involvement from local and diverse stakeholders. However, their implementation rests on creating effective partnerships across scales and actors, in the process of localization. Cities are central as arenas of change and of collaboration in this chain of partnerships across scales and actors.

The world is behind in achieving the SDGs, particularly SDG11 (achieving a resilient urban planet).<sup>ix</sup> At least 105 of the 169 SDGs targets will not be reached without proper engagement and coordination with local and regional government. At the same time, multi-level governance and partnerships are needed to ensure that global goals are translated into local action, and that local calls for action are integrated into global frameworks.

Challenges in formulating, implementing, adapting, and monitoring global goals can be the result of translation between languages, as most of the guidance on sustainable is still produced in the English language, but such challenges go beyond literal translation. An overlooked barrier in addressing global challenges, is the underappreciation of local, traditional and indigenous knowledge and practices. Whether in the domain of housing, climate change or technology, local communities engage in practices of sustainability that have been undervalued or misunderstood.

Effective localization requires building partnerships across scales and actors. Cities are crucial arenas for partnerships and are also actors in these linkages. Public administration needs to link up

with communities, the private sector, citizens, different levels of government, as well as with rural areas. International and multilateral partnerships among actors and across scales are necessary: city diplomacy is crucial as is the insertion of city actors, from the neighborhood level to officials, in global processes. Each partnership harbors the risks of mistranslation and the rewards of collaboration that come from the successful translation of global goals into local solutions.

The aim of this dialogue is to explore the ways in which local ideas can inform global agendas and how global agendas can be translated to local action – and how such ideas, values and meaning can get lost in translation through this process. This dialogue will explore state-of-the-art localization approaches and the role that partnerships can play in enhancing the global agenda’s impact on cities and communities by tailoring, scaling, and contextualizing.

**This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *How much of the global climate agenda language is reaching home and understood and applied by people and communities?*
- *How can global goals and agendas be translated into standards and indicators that are both meaningful and measurable at the local level?*
- *What is the role of city diplomacy in achieving global goals?*
- *Who gets left out and who is included in partnerships across scales to fulfill global goals? How do we understand, capture, and mainstream local, traditional, and indigenous forms of knowledge into global policy frameworks?*

**Dialogue 4: Localizing finance: A path to greater accountability?**

**How can we enable and account for local action through finance?**

Localization is pivotal for enabling cities and communities to be in the driver’s seat when fostering inclusivity, affordability, safety, resilience, and sustainability in urban areas.

The foundation of an enabling environment for localization begins at home, with financial empowerment. While there is a gradual shift towards decentralization to the local level, outcomes vary, with many governments faced with increased responsibilities that are not adequately matched by resources, leaving many local governments contending with significant funding gaps. In other words, cities and communities, and local and regional governments do not have the budget or regulatory power to take the actions necessary to achieve the SDGs. At the same time, climate finance is emerging as a key new source of development funding, yet they are often concentrated at the level of international and national governments, with only an estimated 10 per cent of climate finance trickling down to the local level.

Creating an enabling environment for the localization of Sustainable Development Goals includes the need for financial transfers from central governments to local and regional counterparts, but also requires the creation of endogenous finance frameworks. Persistent silos within governments and governance frameworks for national and international financing present an enduring challenge, acting as barriers to effective localization. Cities increasingly rely on private capital to support the scale, finance, and implementation of urban development, but there are also risks of such involvement in ensuring that public projects remain in the public good.

As a multilateral platform that has strong engagement from grassroots, communities and local governments, this dialogue offers to opportunity to send a clear signal to national governments and the international community regarding what is needed to enable action at the local level. In exploring regulatory and policy constraints, expertise deficiencies, short political cycles, corruption, and

accountability issues, this dialogue delves into the role of financial and legislative enablement to achieve localization. It also raises questions about actions cities can take to enhance accountability of all stakeholders and discusses the oversight role of various government levels during localization processes.

**This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *While the challenges that constrain empowerment of communities and local governments are well-known, why isn't the needle moving fast enough for cities and communities to fulfill their mandates?*
- *What are emerging opportunities for various levels of government and different types of local actors to access finance, both endogenous and external?*
- *Who is left out of the finance mechanisms that see transfers from central government to cities?*
- *How can cities and related national authorities enhance accountability, and oversight within urban development, to address corruption at the local level?*

## **Dialogue 5: Putting people first in a digital era.**

### **How can we ensure that urban innovation and digital transformation addresses the needs of cities and communities first?**

We must confront reality! In this era of ongoing technological progress, our lives are undergoing rapid, irreversible changes. The way we experience our cities and communities through daily life is transforming. It is our responsibility to proactively address the potential downsides to ensure that the opportunities presented by innovation and digital technology do not leave anyone behind.

Policymakers and regulators are navigating a fast-paced landscape of digital transformation, often struggling to keep up with emerging technologies. Likewise, there is a need to harmonize regulatory frameworks and policy incentives at all levels, with a focus on democratizing access, reducing discriminatory bias, and fostering innovation, especially in relation to artificial intelligence. Therefore, localized and people-centered approaches which uphold human rights must be at the forefront of urban digital transformation. There is an urgency to ensure policies address privacy concerns, cybersecurity risks, and ensure that the potential societal impact of digital technology benefits humanity and re-establishes trust between governments and local actors.

Digital technology and people-centered smart city development offers tremendous positive potential for transforming cities and communities. Empowering cities and communities to shape the use of technology to improve city life and services is vital. In the context of smart city projects, community engagement ensures that technology aligns with local needs, ultimately making urban services more accessible and cost-effective. This localized approach acknowledges unique challenges, fostering culturally sensitive solutions likely to succeed in addressing diverse urban needs.

When dealing with technology, cities require, accountable, transparent, and carefully planned experimentation so that cities can identify positive pathways of change embracing local economies, strengthening inclusivity for minorities, and engaging the citizenry in urban development processes. Further, to foster innovation, cities must also provide incentives for experimentation, and be ready to recognize when attempts fail, as well as ensuring that experimentation must be carried out with due protection of human rights.

This dialogue explores the urgent need to ensure people-centered approaches to technological advances, smart city development, and the application of localized digital solutions for sustainable cities and communities. It specifically focuses on how cities and communities can be empowered to



shape more sustainable futures, through strategic and innovative experimentation. The dialogue presents state-of-the-art technology driven approaches that put cities and communities front and center.

**This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *"What is needed to ensure citizens and communities play a leading role in shaping, monitoring, and fostering people-centered smart cities?"*
- *How can innovation and technology be used without leaving vulnerable populations behind, without violating rights, and deepening the great urban divide?*
- *What measures can be taken to maximize the benefits of digital technologies for citizens and communities while minimizing its potential harms to restore and strengthen trust?*

**Dialogue 6: Homes lost to conflict.**

**Faced with destruction, displacement, and despair: how to ensure a home for all?**

Cities, local governments, communities, and urban stakeholders are key front-line responders mitigating and overcoming crises and conflict. Likewise, in the face of conflicts there is a need to address a diminished multilateral system that is failing to empower local actors to support those most in need.

As the world witnesses the highest number of violent conflicts since 1945<sup>x</sup>, urban areas are at the center of conflicts: they have become both the main battlefield and the main refuge for those displaced. The ongoing devastating impact of conflicts on cities and communities is disproportionately felt by the most vulnerable.

The flows of people displaced, internally and across international borders, is reshaping human settlements, cities, and territories. A better understanding of the drivers of crises, the movement of people and development opportunities, can help shape a strategy to address root causes and an investment strategy that can help stabilize communities and provide a home for all.

Similarly, it is crucial to understand urban conflicts that break down established order, and the imposition of external forms of order over cities and communities, as well as what strategies and policies stemming from local actors have worked in the face of these challenges.

The pathway to localizing crisis response is paved with opportunities to go beyond mere recovery, but to venture into a road of prevention that fundamentally changes our territories, cities and communities for the better. This entails processes that can redefine and empower cities and communities to lead towards peace. When addressing displacement, cities and communities can move beyond short-term solutions and reimagine a future where livelihoods are not merely restored but thrive in sustainable and inclusive ways.

This dialogue focuses on localization approaches based on research, and data on the future of urban crises, the response of cities to neighboring crises and their impact, that will inform local governments to help them mobilize the political will and resources for action at scale, shifting fundamental policies and practices to mitigate conflict, adapt to crises, and to accelerate progress.

**This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *How can we ensure that the communities affected by crisis are also empowered as architects of their own recovery and made central to rebuilding processes?*
- *For those people and communities that face displacement, how can they be enabled and assisted to create a home away from home?*



- *What roles do local governments, and their associations and networks have in the design and implementation of crisis response?*

## **The promise for WUF12**

For 5 days, WUF12 will host thousands of people from all parts of the world. There will be over 300 different events, an extended Urban Expo with Cairo's Urban Week programme, in addition to countless opportunities for networking and informal exchange. All WUF12 main sessions will be livestreamed and translated into all 6 UN languages, as well as international sign language in English and Arabic. Further, the WUF12 premises will be universally accessible for people with visual, hearing, and mobility impairments.

WUF12 will serve to confront the complexities of sustainable urban development head-on. These discussions will be enriched by a dynamic collective process that encourages deliberation around the uncomfortable truths of our urbanizing world. Panel gender parity, geographical representation, and diversity of approaches will be ensured in all main sessions.

A focus on initiatives and interventions which showcase concrete, tangible, and positive impact will be combined with a space to amplify the voices of all, with an emphasis on children and youth, women, persons with disabilities, indigenous people, older persons, refugees and displaced persons, and other marginalized communities. It seeks not only to ensure their representation but to empower them as critical vanguards of change.

The forum envisions cities as key multilateral players promoting global collaboration to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals through localization and global collaboration. WUF12 will invite participants to start changes at home and to make the most of cities' potential to spur global change through local action.



## References:

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