Solutions Start with Cities

UN-Habitat’s Foundation Fund

At UN-Habitat, we believe solutions to the world’s most pressing challenges start with cities, which are home to a majority of the world’s population. That reality is why we dedicate our work to solving the most pressing urban challenges – from pandemics or broken property tax regimes or unplanned urban expansion – in order to unlock the value of cities and secure a sustainable future for their residents.

UN-Habitat is a catalytic organization that works in partnership with member states, local governments, civil society, professional institutions and communities to steer the global movement for sustainable cities and better human settlements. We are a nimble, specialized United Nations programme operating in a world expected to be 70 per cent urban by 2050. UN-Habitat anchors its impact in tailor-made local solutions that inform the global norms we share with communities to accelerate positive change. By bringing this guidance to scale, we ensure cities are well equipped to meet the challenges of this Decade of Action.

Inequality, poverty, climate change and migration are among the most urgent issues the global community must address as it redoubles its efforts to deliver on the ambitious promise of the SDGs in the next 10 years. At the same time, we are all grappling with the unexpected impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. UN-Habitat is uniquely positioned to leverage more than 40 years of experience to ensure progress on those global priorities where the SDGs will have the greatest impact – the planet’s growing cities, towns, and human settlements. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres put it, “2021 will also be critical in advancing the New Urban Agenda. The world’s cities are fundamental frontlines on sustainable development – vulnerable to disaster yet vectors of innovation and dynamism.”
With core support from donors, UN-Habitat has a proven track record in managing urban growth, mitigating urban displacement, improving access to basic municipal services, analyzing best practices for public space and public transport, upgrading slums and informal settlements, and monitoring global urban indicators. Core funding allows us to fulfill this normative mandate and oversee comprehensive research on cutting-edge issues facing cities and urban settlements. We draft evidence-informed guidelines and advocate for global policymaking standards on urban development. We translate this knowledge base into on-the-ground support to countries and cities. And we convene partners from neighborhood groups to national ministries at major events such as the World Urban Forum to disseminate ideas globally.

This methodology forms the basis for our effective use of project funding, which we mobilize to operate in 90 countries. Non-earmarked funding allows us to expand our influence and build up our capacity to galvanize action in cities that improves global development, humanitarian, and sustainability outcomes – a perspective that would otherwise be lost or ignored.

From securing property titles for Yazidi families to helping Fiji win climate adaptation funds for its towns; from measuring prosperity in cities in Latin America to assisting mayors in the Sahel as they absorb waves of displaced people, flexible funding is at the core of UN-Habitat’s ability to contribute to the global sustainable change. Through flagship programmes that cover our strategic pillars, we pursue key objectives and reinforce each other for demonstrable impact. UN-Habitat’s core mission is aligned with the UN’s broader goals, and we are directly contributing to the 5Ps of the global development agenda: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, Partnership.
57 national and subnational authorities are implementing fit-for-purpose land administration towards the achievement of tenure security for all.

In 2020, the Global Waste Wise Cities Campaign counted 169 members, each calling for urgent action on solid waste management.

More than 5 million people living in slums and informal settlements have directly benefited from improved policies and service delivery, avoiding forced evictions, over the past 5 years.

In 2019, 800,000 people were protected from evictions and partner countries were engaged in improving living conditions and acknowledged slum dwellers’ “right to stay.”

More than 1 million people have benefitted from UN-Habitat’s interventions in sustainable urban reconstruction in protracted conflict and post-crisis settings.
By the end of 2019, 540 cities in 13 countries were implementing the City Prosperity Initiative to undertake diagnostics, create baselines and set targets for evidence-based planning and policy implementation.

73 national statistical offices produced urban data for SDG and New Urban Agenda reporting using UN-Habitat tools.

355 urban observatories are monitoring urban trends and conditions at national and local authority levels using UN-Habitat tools, methods and data.

By the end of 2019, 383 local governments and 42 national governments were using UN-Habitat flagship publications for evidence-based policy formulation.
The Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar in Iraq and facing a deadly siege by ISIL (Daesh) gripped the world in 2014. While many remain displaced from this conflict, those who did return after fighters withdrew had no property deeds. The lack of secure tenure hampered their ability to secure compensation claims and repair their homes, risking further displacement. This experience is common: only two billion of the world’s estimated six billion land rights claims are legally documented.

While traditional land administration systems can be slow and arduous, UN-Habitat entered in 2018 with a programme to resolve property claims rapidly using a mobile application that relies on geospatial information systems (GIS) to identify family plots. The resulting property certificates were the first-ever tenure document for most of the 1,312 Yazidi households in the 17 villages benefitting from the programme that recognizes their rights over the lands they work and the houses they live in.

“So many disputes have taken place because we do not have property documents,” said Layla Salu Alias, a 22-year old Yazidi woman who received her property certificate through the programme. “It turns into land conflicts that can last years. Now this can be prevented.” The programme fostered female-only sessions to allow for more candid discussions about property rights issues in a safe environment.

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UN-Habitat resolved Yazidi land tenure conflicts by grounding itself in one of its founding principles and normative functions: developing and promoting pro-poor land policies to achieve secure land rights for all. UN-Habitat’s Yazidi assistance relied on the Global Land Tool Network, an alliance of international partners focused on secure land rights that UN-Habitat has cultivated since 2006 as the premier network for land and tenure security.

The Government of Iraq is now scaling up this effort to the entire governorate of Nineveh, and it has been fully adopted by both USAID and the International Federation of the Red Cross. These results are indicative of UN-Habitat’s ability to achieve impact in the first pillar of UN-Habitat’s strategy: reducing inequality among the urban poor.

It could take hundreds of years to document these land rights using current land administration systems. New fit-for-purpose systems need to be set up to rapidly document everybody’s land rights. UN-Habitat has been a world leader in promoting land rights for all, particularly in urban areas.

Clarissa Augustinus
Independent land tenure consultant
San Nicolás de los Garza, a 443,000-person suburb of Monterrey, boasts that all of its streets are paved and every address has curbside trash pick-up. Basic utilities like gas, internet, and telephone are available at every house. But when UN-Habitat studied San Nicolás in 2015 with its groundbreaking City Prosperity Index (CPI) tool, we also learned something startling with implications for the city’s fabled quality of life: particulate matter exceeds recommended air quality standards nearly every day of the year.

For San Nicolás, the discovery was a revelation that prompted the city to prioritize air quality in its 2030 strategic plan, which was developed in consultation with UN-Habitat and designed to align with the SDGs.

Debuted in 2012 and unique among urban measurement tools, the CPI is the only index that integrates spatial analysis, measuring aspects like the amount of land area consumed by urbanization relative to population growth or the number of street intersections per square kilometre. UN-Habitat’s urban researchers have pioneered this kind of cutting-edge evidence to inform policy decisions. For example, we can clearly demonstrate that growing a city’s land area faster than its population hampers achievement of climate goals.

In Medellín, Colombia, a poster child of successful urban renaissance, the CPI demonstrated how the city’s most economically productive neighbourhood was at risk of collapse because the street grid was inadequate to accommodate the daily commerce that pulses through the area.

“I never knew that the form of the city can conspire against or create benefits for prosperity,” said Bucaramanga, Colombia mayor Rodolfo Hernandez.

The broad-based appeal of the CPI reflects how UN-Habitat’s fine-tuned knowledge on the inner workings of cities contributes to the second pillar of UN-Habitat’s strategy: enhancing shared prosperity of cities and regions.

The CPI has helped cities realize they are not islands unto themselves — just like Zapopan, another affluent suburban municipality, did:

"Before the CPI, we thought we could isolate the municipality. Now we realize that’s impossible. The real prosperity of a region has to do with the whole metropolitan area and we have to work more with other mayors."

Pablo Lemus
Mayor of Zapopan, Mexico
Cyclone Evan left a trail of destruction when it hit Fiji in 2012. Over 8,000 people evacuated their homes. Overflowing rivers washed out bridges and roads while gusting winds knocked out power and damaged buildings. With global climate change intensifying extreme weather events, the next major storm is only a matter of time.

Against this backdrop, the Government of Fiji turned to UN-Habitat for assistance with an Adaptation Fund proposal to build resilience in cities and towns. Urbanization is a global trend even in Small Island Developing States like Fiji, where over half of the population has lived in urban areas since 2007 and where urban population growth continues to outpace rural areas. UN-Habitat has mapped 171 informal settlements, home to approximately 20 percent of the country’s urban population. These communities are most at risk from extreme weather events.

Through this partnership, Fiji’s successful application secured USD 4.2 million for infrastructure upgrades, sanitation improvements and local government capacity building. “UN-Habitat was a natural fit,” said Nilesh Prakash, Fiji’s former head of climate change and international cooperation. “No other UN agency looks at human settlements and related issues in a sustainable and considered manner.”

UN-Habitat launched its Cities and Climate Change Initiative in 2008, which has now accumulated over a decade of experience to understand what local and national governments need in order to prepare their residents for the worst impacts of climate change. Toolkits like “Planning for Climate Change” have been tested in countries like Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Philippines, and Sri Lanka, and then further refined for deployment in contexts like Fiji to conduct vulnerability assessments and consult on national development strategies. These efforts are drawn from global experience and inform the evolving work embedded in the third pillar of UN-Habitat’s strategy: strengthening local climate action.

UN-Habitat’s longstanding relationships with national ministries for housing have been cultivated over decades of core-funded work, from its engagement with regional roundtables of housing ministers to technical guidelines on how to conduct housing profiles. In Fiji, this work built a strong platform to facilitate UN-Habitat’s support to the government in securing the Adaptation Fund grant.

“They have a rapport. Because UN-Habitat has been working with the Fiji Ministry of Housing for some time, they have institutional expertise and know the situation on the ground. That’s why they’ve been able to succeed.”

Nilesh Prakash
Former head of climate change and international cooperation, Fiji
In 2020, internally displaced persons streamed into Dori, Burkina Faso as violent conflict erupted in the Sahel. The region is facing an urgent humanitarian crisis, hosting 1.5 million IDPs and over 820,000 refugees and asylum seekers. In Dori, the displaced have been squatting in school buildings or squeezing in with local families. This state of limbo will continue as long as insecurity prevents return to their hometowns, unless they can be welcomed into Dori as newcomers.

“I am constantly trying to be creative for meeting the needs of our population and the internally displaced people,” said Dori Deputy Mayor Aziz Ahmed Diallo. “We have increased our efforts to provide health services for all. The community stands together, but with the larger number of people to serve, we are at the edge of our resources.”

With funding from the EU, UN-Habitat is planning for the longer-term future of four Burkinabe communities facing the disruptive experience on the receiving end of forced migration. This project-based assistance benefits from a broader theory of change that UN-Habitat developed over many years. It requires stable core funding to ensure that this cutting-edge evidence-based approach to peacebuilding becomes part of the institutional knowledge within the multilateral system.

As Dori is rapidly discovering, refugee camps can become future cities or they can become future slums. UN-Habitat has been working to support cities faced with with these challenges since 2003, when we began working on reconstructin in Iraq. At the time, about 10 per cent of Baghdad’s population had been displaced to 230 informal settlements throughout the city. UN-Habitat was able to shift the analysis from a politically-charged issue of forced displacement to one of sustainable urban infrastructure to develop solutions with stakeholders. With parts of Baghdad, a World Heritage City, turning into slums, there was much more local buy-in to develop an integrated approach to restore and protect heritage through infrastructure such as water, sanitation, schools, and other municipal services in order to integrate displaced populations into the city.

In Kenya, which has absorbed large numbers of Somali and Sudanese refugees, UN-Habitat pioneered the first-ever planned refugee camp that would purposefully evolve into a new city. The Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, now home to 39,000 people, is an alternative to the much larger Kakuma Refugee Camp and has been approved by the local county government as a formally planned town. This simple administrative distinction is a watershed moment, where displaced persons can live in a municipality no different than any other in Kenya.

Limited core funding has affected UN-Habitat’s ability to systematically capture this long-term strategy for sustaining peace at a critical juncture for humanitarian response in order to pursue the fourth pillar of our strategy: effective urban crisis prevention and response. Yet UN-Habitat has been successful in influencing the ongoing global policy discussion in fora like the Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Displacement and the Global Compact on Migration while playing a key role advancing UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth Peace and Security. Most recently, UN-Habitat initiated and led the drafting process for the Secretary-General’s guidance note on land and conflict. But we do this vital advocacy while borrowing time from staff working tirelessly on the ground. More dedicated core funding would allow UN-Habitat to better advocate for a proven long-term solution to forced displacement: building cities, not refugee camps.
When 20,000 delegates from 160 countries arrived in Abu Dhabi in February 2020 for the tenth session of the World Urban Forum (WUF10), Natàlia Martínez was among them. Co-founder of the Catalonian housing NGO Hàbitat3, which renovates underutilized apartments and rents them below market rate to the working poor, she came to WUF10 looking to understand the bigger picture on the issues she was confronting every day around housing affordability in the Barcelona metropolitan area, whose government has made a strong commitment to meeting the SDGs by 2030.

UN-Habitat’s convening role is unique within the UN system as one of the very few UN entities with the mandate to work with local authorities. That mandate brings out mayors and city leaders from across the world, like the deputy mayor of Barcelona, who Martínez was able to meet with and discuss issues facing her NGO’s tenants. Back home, Martínez would have required a specific and focused reason to request a meeting with such a high-ranking official. At WUF10, they met on neutral ground and were able to have the kind of free-flowing conversation that would not have been possible at city hall.

We leverage our convening role between World Urban Forum sessions to facilitate regional, national, and city-based urban forums that guide stakeholders to consider the needs of their cities as an integral part of policymaking. The issues that bubble up in the dozens of local and national urban forums that take place in these intervening years create a groundswell that culminates every two years, where civil society and government can meet on equal terms. They come to WUF ready to join forces.

At the same time, UN-Habitat is committed to “delivering as one” with other UN agencies. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we executed a USD 500,000 subgrant from UNICEF to stand up WASH facilities in Mozambique. UN-Habitat is currently implementing 20 projects funded through UNDP, valued at USD 80 million, and recently signed a new framework for urban action. UN-Habitat also successfully made the case that the COVID-19 pandemic is fundamentally an urban crisis, which led the Secretary-General to issue the policy brief “COVID-19 in an Urban World” following an interagency process with local government participation that UN-Habitat convened in order to create a unified voice. Our work consistently brings forward the urban dimension in the UN mission.

“I realized that the 2030 Agenda isn’t just rhetoric. There are a lot of people working who are aligned with these goals and I had the opportunity to exchange ideas with them.”

Natàlia Martínez
Co-founder of the Catalonian housing NGO Hàbitat3
At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, UN-Habitat drew on core funding to support 13 rapid response projects ranging from USD 50,000 to USD 210,000. These projects provided water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities as well as public awareness campaigns in Brazil, Bolivia, Fiji, Ghana, Guinea, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Mozambique, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Syria. Non-earmarked funding was critical to respond quickly to needs that were changing constantly on the ground.

While UN-Habitat’s non-earmarked resources at the onset of the pandemic were relatively small, their flexible nature allowed us to respond where the need for immediate intervention was most apparent. By underwriting murals on informal transport and neighbourhood art walls to quickly disseminate public health messaging in vulnerable communities as well as installing emergency handwashing points, UN-Habitat’s rapid deployment signalled the urgency of the situation in the fast-moving early days of the pandemic, which spurred local authorities to act more quickly.

Today, UN-Habitat is asking for USD 10 million to buttress its core funding, which has reached critically low levels, in support of a larger portfolio of projects worth USD 210 million. The current funding situation risks our ability not only to sustain our project-based work on the ground but also to capture the knowledge and experience that comes from having projects in some of the world’s most vulnerable, impoverished, and conflict-ridden places. Core funding allows us to retain the experts, systems, knowledge and capacity in place to deliver norms and guidance in an urbanizing world. No other UN entity has the expertise of UN-Habitat to lead the UN system on urban solutions to the world’s humanitarian and development needs.

Not only does this modest investment support the mandate, it also allows us to support country programmes and achieve additional project outcomes. UN-Habitat’s catalytic potential converts even modest amounts into larger investments across the multilateral development system through public-private partnerships. For example, we established the Water and Sanitation Trust Fund in 2002 with USD 2 million of core resources, half of which would be deployed in Africa. Just two years later, the Government of the Netherlands agreed to support a USD 21.2 million pilot project to improve water and sanitation in Kenyan, Ugandan, and Tanzanian secondary cities along Lake Victoria.

The successful pilot spurred the African Development Bank to invest an additional USD 130 million for a second phase that expanded the scope to incorporate Burundi and Rwanda, reaching 15 towns. The Lake Victoria programme brought significant benefits to over 840,000 urban residents, achieving 80 per cent coverage in water supply and 60 per cent coverage in sanitation in the 15 target towns.

If properly funded to pursue its core mandate in service of the SDGs, UN-Habitat will produce more cost-effective, catalytic improvements to people’s lives like the Lake Victoria Water and Sanitation Project. The global need is immense and our capacity to tackle these challenges is limited by our current financial situation. Let us build a better urban future together.