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Strategic plan

Development of the strategic plan for the period 2026–2029¹

Report of the Executive Director

I. Introduction

1. In decision 2/1 of the second session of the United Nations Habitat Assembly², to promote policy coherence across the United Nations system, Member States committed to the alignment of the strategic planning process of UN-Habitat with the cycle of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system³, by extending the strategic plan of UN-Habitat for the period 2020–2023 to also cover the period 2024–2025. In its decision 2/2⁴, the United Nations Habitat Assembly adjourned its second session, to resume from 29 to 30 May 2025, with the consideration of the strategic plan for the period 2026–2029 on the provisional agenda.
2. Following the report of the Executive Director to the Executive Board at its third session of 2023 on the preparations for the development of the strategic plan for the period 2026–2029⁵, the strategic plan is being developed through a consultative process, guided by lessons learned and consultations with Member States, United Nations Development System entities, staff, stakeholders, and partners.
3. In decision 2024/1⁶ during its first session of 2024, the Executive Board took note of the report of the Executive Director on the development of the draft strategic plan for the period 2026–2029⁷ and encouraged its development and refinement.

* HSP/EB.2024/14.

¹ The present document has not been formally edited.

² HSP/HA.2/11/Rev.1.

³ A/RES/75/233.

⁴ HSP/HA.2/11/Rev.1.

⁵ HSP/EB.2023/15.

⁶ HSP/EB.2024/13.

⁷ HSP/EB.2024/5.

II. Our preparatory process

4. The preparatory process includes elements that sequentially, incrementally, and iteratively articulate the development of the plan. The key stages of the process of developing the strategic plan are:

- (a) Guiding principles, defining the purposes, approach, and other considerations;
- (b) Key elements of the substantive framework: global challenges, strategic focus in the context of the vision for the period of 2026-2029, impact areas, and means of implementation;
- (c) Planned results: impact on people's lives, and outcomes for the key actors and stakeholders in the process.

5. At the time of publication, the first two stages have been carried out in consultation with Member States, and following their guidance, the initial discussions have commenced on how to articulate the planned results.

III. Our consultative process

6. Three retreats of the Member States were organized by the Executive Director for the development of the strategic plan of UN-Habitat for the period 2026-2029 to present the progress and to solicit guidance, comments, and suggestions from Member States:

- (a) 31 January 2024 on the proposed guiding principles;
- (b) 30 May 2024 on the priorities and goals to be included in the strategic plan;
- (c) 16 September 2024 on the draft annotated outline, containing the proposed key elements of the substantive framework, the proposed hierarchy of the planned results, and examples of the proposed formulation of the impact and outputs.

7. Additional consultations on the development of the strategic plan were conducted at the meetings the ad hoc working group on programmatic, budgetary and administrative matters on 11 March, 8 April, and 3 July 2024.

8. The Executive Director held retreats with staff members on the development of the strategic plan on 15-16 April, 19 August and 28 August 2024.

9. At the time of publication, consultations on the alignment of the strategic plan with those of other United Nations Development System entities have been planned during the 12th session of the World Urban Forum in Cairo, Egypt, from 4 to 8 November 2024, and at the annual meeting of the United Nations Strategic Planning Network in Rome, Italy, from 18 to 21 November 2024.

10. The consultations with stakeholders and partners, including civil society, professional associations, and academia, are organized by the Stakeholder Advisory Group to the Executive Director of UN-Habitat (SAGE), which has established a dedicated working group to facilitate the consultations.

IV. Our proposed annotated outline

11. The Executive Director, following the preparatory and consultative processes described above, has developed a proposal for the annotated outline as follows.

A. Introduction

12. Reflecting on the current strategic plan and on lessons learned from its implementation and evaluations, this proposal builds on the former themes but refines the approach with a clear focus.

13. Additional consideration was made for recommendations from the mid-term evaluation of the current strategic plan, which emphasized that a stronger focus and prioritization are needed; that the current outcomes capture all key aspects of work but without a clear hierarchy; that working towards better access to adequate housing would be a valid example as it captures seven key dimensions; and that both core and emerging priorities must be considered, including as set out in the resolutions of the United Nations Habitat Assembly. The evaluation called for a simpler structure with more straightforward language, drawing inspiration also from the strategies of other United Nations entities. The proposal refines the current domains of change as impact areas, and refines the themes as challenges to global society as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals and in the New Urban Agenda.

B. Our challenges to global society

14. A global housing crisis is emerging, alongside the accelerating impact of climate change and pollution, the loss of biodiversity and the increasing prevalence of conflict. Urbanization is both a challenge and an opportunity with respect to achieving sustainable development in times of global crises.

15. Natural and man-made disasters destroy housing and infrastructure, destruction that is especially acute in cities, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities. Migration and forced displacement are increasing, with significant consequences on territories, cities, and human settlements. If unmanaged, the various types of migration can disrupt social cohesion in urban areas and intensify informality due to gaps in absorption capacity. However, when planned, such flows of people can boost sustainable urban development growth.

16. Unchecked urbanization and inadequate housing increase global greenhouse gas emissions and generate more waste, more pollution of air and water, as cities, in particular informal settlements, bear the brunt of the consequences. The design, location, construction and maintenance of housing directly shapes climate outcomes and overall urban and economic growth. Urban sprawl, largely driven by unsustainable consumption of land for housing, results in the decline of densities, the erosion of biodiversity and ecosystems, the growth of spatial inequalities, the exacerbation of the challenge to provide basic services, and the increased pressure on municipal financial resources.

C. Our strategic focus

17. To address the challenges above, and within the broader vision of sustainable urbanization, UN-Habitat will focus on access to adequate housing, land, and basic services for all, and the transformation of informal settlements and slums. The focus on adequate housing, land, and basic services will maximize our added value from 2026 to 2029. Building on the resolutions of the United Nations Habitat Assembly on Adequate housing for all⁸ and on Accelerating the transformation of informal settlements and slums⁹, the proposal returns housing to the centre of our work.

Figure 1

The seven aspects of adequate housing¹⁰



18. Access to adequate housing, as a fundamental human right, is a cornerstone of a new social contract, crucial to fostering inclusive, sustainable, and equitable development. Housing is recognized as a common good, not as an asset, alongside the important social and ecological functions of land. Due to its multi-faceted and cross-sectoral nature, adequate housing has shown its potential as the engine of inclusive and sustainable urbanization with linkages to most of the other SDGs – particularly to addressing poverty (SDG 1), reducing inequality (SDG 10), particularly for women (SDG 5). Many of the SDGs cannot be achieved if people do not have adequate homes.

⁸ HSP/HA.2/Res.7.

⁹ HSP/HA.2/Res.2.

¹⁰ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: General comment no. 4: The right to adequate housing, 13 December 1991.

Figure 2
Housing at the centre of sustainable and inclusive development



19. The New Urban Agenda elevates housing as fundamental to economic development and poverty reduction. Housing is essential for health, dignity, safety, and social inclusion, as recognized in earlier global frameworks including the Istanbul Declaration and Habitat Agenda¹¹ of 1996. Adequate housing provides secure access to services, employment, and urban life, enhancing social cohesion and well-being. Secure housing and land tenure are particularly vital for women and girls, increasing their independence, reducing poverty, and protecting against exploitation and violence.

20. This strategic focus is in line with the core areas of our mandate and our unique position to lead the multilateral system, and adding value to the work of other entities by concentrating on the territorial dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals and multi-level governance.

D. Our role and impact areas

21. Through our strategic focus, our role is to provide guidance and support to governments on harnessing the transformative potential of sustainable urbanization. Experience has shown that an integrated focus on adequate housing, land and basic services is a powerful tool to deliver impact, directly or indirectly, in three important areas: equitable and inclusive prosperity and poverty eradication; crisis prevention, response and recovery; and climate action and environment. Several United Nations entities work in these areas, and UN-Habitat coordinates with them to respond to related challenges from a distinct perspective, as UN-Habitat is uniquely positioned to guide how territories are planned and how people and services are housed.

¹¹ A/CONF.165/14: Report of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II).

1. Equitable and inclusive prosperity for poverty eradication

22. A more prosperous and inclusive society is fostered by properly planning and managing rapid urbanization and sustainable development of cities and human settlements, by developing infrastructure and institutions that support equitable economic growth, and by creating more decent jobs – thus leveraging the potential of cities as engines for economic growth. These interventions alleviate poverty and provide a decent quality of life for all, including gender equality and the empowerment of marginalized groups.

23. Underpinning these social and economic functions is the nexus of adequate housing, land, and basic services, which is essential to laying the groundwork of a society where everyone can thrive. The housing sector touches most aspects of the economy of a country, and interacts with many other sectors, including technology, research, water and sanitation, building industry, land and property rights, and finance.

2. Crisis prevention, response and recovery

24. UN-Habitat has a key role to further strengthen a shared understanding of the complex impact of converging crises on cities and territories to guide more effective prevention and response, with particular attention to the most vulnerable affected by natural and man-made disasters and conflict. The different crises are increasingly resulting in large scale displacement, where UN-Habitat can contribute to better foresight analysis to anticipate the impact of crises on cities and territories, strengthening prevention and resilience. UN-Habitat is helping to ensure a more cohesive response to displacement across the humanitarian, peace and development nexus, advancing the importance of ensuring solutions from the start during humanitarian response while fully integrating solutions to displacement in urban and territorial development strategies.

25. Adequate housing, land and access to basic services are central to peace and security and to stabilization. The strategic focus can help provide a framework for a more integrated response with all actors involved, using urban and territorial planning and multi-level governance to localize and enable solutions, working across the nexus.

3. Environment and climate action

26. The interlinkages and implications between climate change and the current global housing crisis are clear, considering (i) the need to improve and extend infrastructure, to build or improve housing, inevitably leading to an important ecological footprint in terms of emissions, to the use of land, and to the pressure of urban expansion on natural surroundings; and (ii) the unjust and concentrated impact of the effects of climate change on vulnerable territories and communities.

27. Well-managed urbanization and adequate housing can play a key role in addressing the impacts of climate change and pollution, including public health effects. Energy-efficient building designs can improve indoor thermal comfort while reducing energy expenditure and poverty, as well as global carbon emissions and extractive practices. Urban flora mitigates heat and promotes biodiversity, while enhancing well-being. The shift towards a circular model in the buildings and construction sector and towards the use of sustainable building materials can reduce waste and promote the creation of value chains based on sustainable and affordable materials. Waste management is regulated by a range of actors, requiring targeted legislation, appropriate technology, and capacity building.

28. UN-Habitat adds value to the efforts of the United Nations system by leading in climate and environment through the dimension of people-centred and ecological urban planning, the use of land, and design. This value includes support to subnational authorities who have a key role in implementing policies to adapt to climate change and to mitigate its effects, including through risk assessments and early warning systems. To scale up impact, strong collaboration with other partners is also required.

E. Our means of implementation

29. The means of implementation build on the desired impact and guide the planned results in the impact areas through the strategic focus.

1. Integrated urban and territorial planning, management, investment and finance

30. Long-term urban and territorial planning and design underpins delivery of positive outcomes of urbanization. Participatory spatial planning and management, in harmony with nature, are central to

leaving no one and no place behind – including gender equality and the empowerment of vulnerable and marginalized groups. UN-Habitat provides normative guidance and technical assistance to improve the capacity of all levels of governments to coherently plan, manage and implement productive, equitable, inclusive and environmentally sustainable urban development in all the impact areas. Long-term planning helps to address water and food requirements, leads to better public transportation systems, and reduces traffic and air pollution, leading to an improved urban environment.

31. Recognizing the transformative force of sustainable urbanization in national development planning and addressing the territorial and urban dimensions through spatial planning and management improves strategic prioritization of investments in sustainable and coherent territorial development across the rural-urban continuum, ensuring that the needs of people in both rural and urban areas are met. Coherent spatial plans on all scales underpin sound decisions on investment in infrastructure and buildings. Such plans can help mobilize resources for implementation, opening the fiscal space of national and local governments, and build on land-based finance, supporting stable local revenues. UN-Habitat, in collaboration with multilateral development banks and the private sector, helps governments seek coherent territorial development policies and the alignment of large-scale investments with the New Urban Agenda.

2. Participatory multi-level governance and localization of the Sustainable Development Goals

32. The localization of the SDGs transforms governance and develops systems at all levels – global, national and local – by anchoring action local communities and the development of human settlements to a participatory approach. UN-Habitat will leverage the potential of localization to foster more effective multilevel governance systems for the SDGs, facilitating dialogue and cooperation across all levels to promote locally responsive governance reforms. Localization of the SDGs leads to better implementation of the SDGs.

3. Knowledge, data, digitalization, foresight, and capacity building

33. UN-Habitat undertakes policy research, intelligence gathering, and data analytics to generate knowledge in support of effective evidence-based policy formulation and implementation. These activities are grounded in and geared for action, such that knowledge and practice inform one another. UN-Habitat continues to advance robust and timely monitoring of the New Urban Agenda and the territorial dimensions of the SDGs, and addresses the capacity gaps to accelerate implementation. The programme promotes and supports research, joining the efforts of diverse researchers and practitioners for shaping effective solutions for sustainable urban development. UN-Habitat will strengthen its normative work by better integrating efforts on the global scale and in regions and countries, leading to greater impact on the ground, and adding value to the current portfolio of projects and programmes.

34. Foresight and capacity building helps to manage uncertainty and ensures that lessons learned, and knowledge of the latest global and regional trends are leveraged to shape global policy narratives. UN-Habitat offers normative guidance, delivers technical assistance, and supports stakeholders in building capacity to implement Agenda 2030, the New Urban Agenda, and the resolutions of the United Nations Habitat Assembly. UN-Habitat works to optimize the use of digital technology, “promoting a people-centred smart cities approach... to ensure that innovation and digital technologies are used to help cities and human settlements”¹².

4. Partnerships, coalitions, advocacy and communication

35. UN-Habitat will strengthen its partnerships and stakeholder collaboration by actively engaging its advisory groups and by prioritizing strategic coalitions. Additional attention will be given to partnerships with other United Nations entities, especially at the country level, seeking to include the strategic focus of this plan, where relevant, in Common Country Assessments and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks. By advocating for sustainable urbanization and development, UN-Habitat will build on its convening power and partnership platforms, including the World Urban Forum, the New Urban Agenda Platform, Urban October, and the World Urban Campaign. The programme will continue to bring together diverse voices and will leverage expertise and capacities through stakeholder engagement, e.g., organizing communities of practice, seeking expert advice, sharing experiences and best practices, and making scientific contributions to discussions. Whereas fostering more effective collaboration among the levels and sectors of partner

¹² HSP/HA.2/Res.1.

governments is reflected in participatory multi-level governance, this mean of implementation reflects the partnerships of UN-Habitat with other key actors and stakeholders.

36. UN-Habitat will focus its communication on the strategic focus in the three impact areas of the new strategic plan, showcasing how the agency leads and supports the multilateral system efforts to address global challenges within its core mandate and adds value in accelerating multi-level action to achieve sustainable development. These communication efforts will increase understanding of the transformative potential of sustainable urban development and adequate housing and gain recognition from governments, media, donors, and broad global audiences.

5. Effective resource mobilization

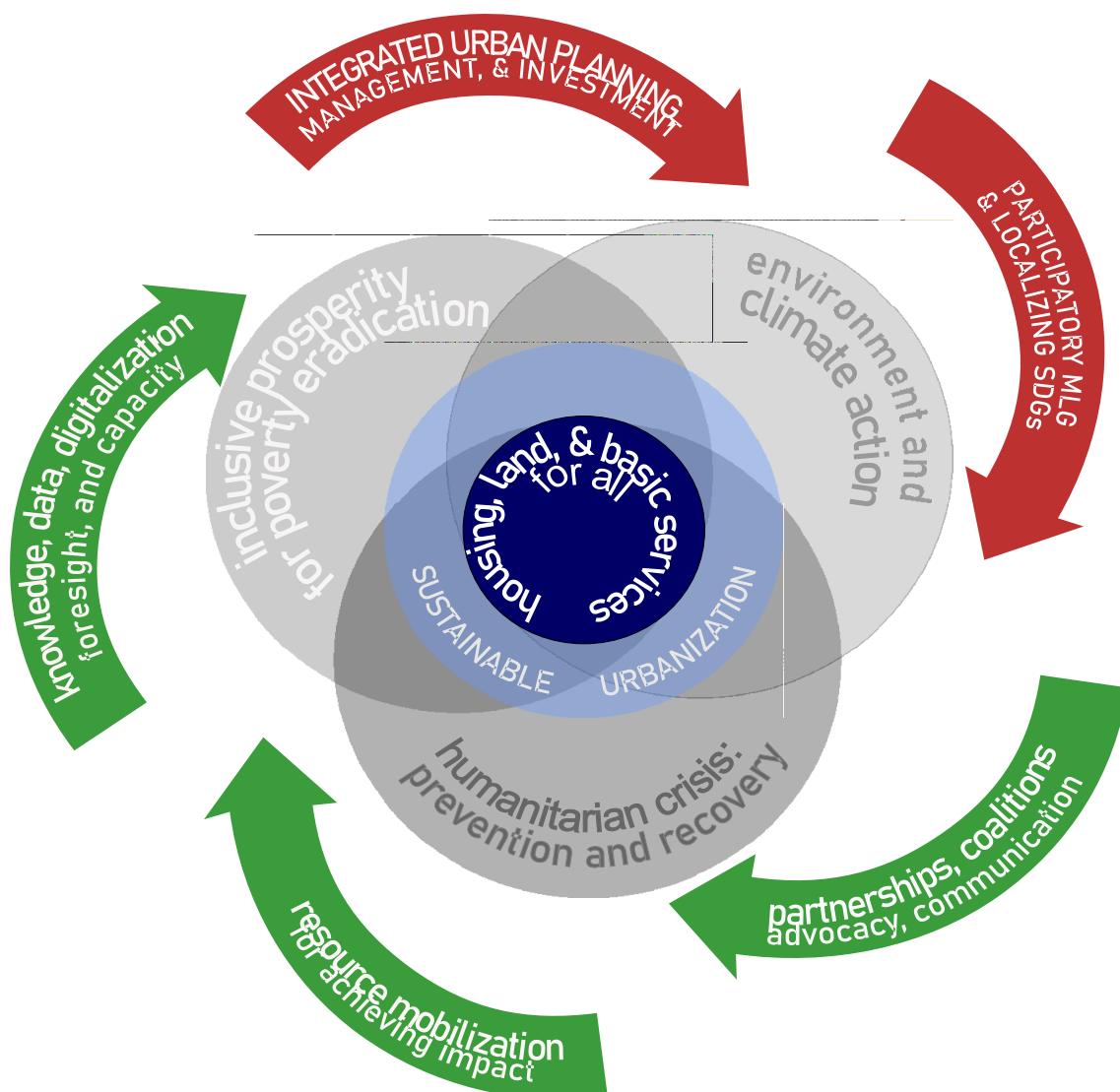
37. UN-Habitat engages in the main impact areas to mobilize greater, diversified and more predictable resources for its work, especially in response to demand in developing countries and countries most in need. This engagement will also help mobilize resources for the work of Member States on the impact areas through the strategic focus.

38. Resource mobilization is thematically guided by this plan. Beyond traditional donors, close collaboration is required with multilateral development banks and international financial institutions as well as the private sector.

39. Additional implementation plans will be developed as required to deliver each mean of implementation.

Figure 3

Key elements of the substantive framework

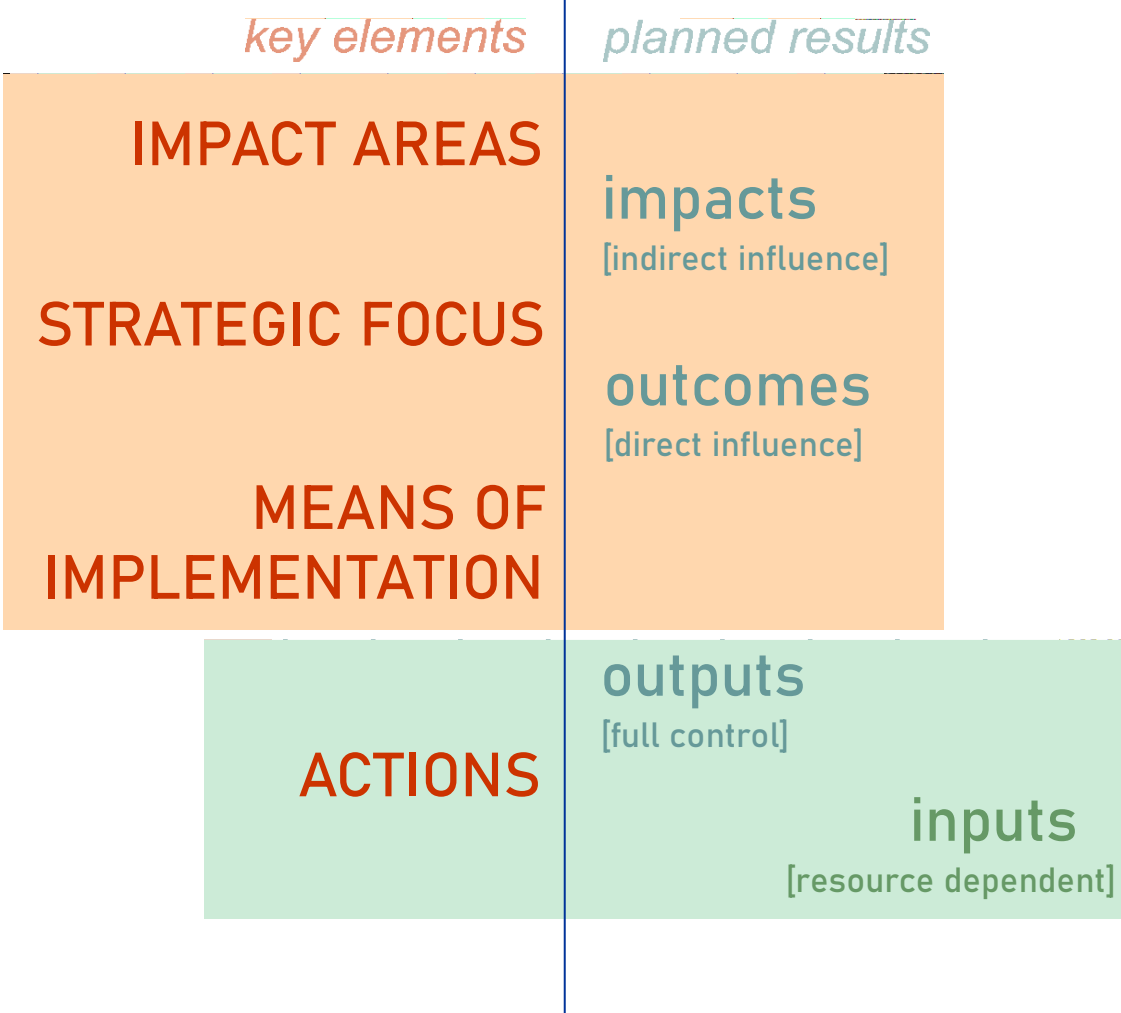


F. Our planned results

40. For coherence, the planned results will be achieved through interventions employing all means of implementation across all impact areas, within the strategic focus.

41. The planned results will be arranged in a hierarchy, differentiated by the degree of influence of delivery by the programme: the control of the outputs, the direct influence on the outcomes, and the indirect influence on the impacts. This model of planned results is arranged in a hierarchy of actions and outputs, leading to outcomes, and in turn leading to strategic impact, as illustrated below.

Figure 4
Key elements and planned results at the level of strategy and action planning



V. Our way forward

42. The Secretariat will continue its development of the strategic plan by continuing the consultative process, engaging Member States in structured dialogues in dedicated retreats and in meetings of the ad hoc working group on programmatic, budgetary and administrative matters. The concluding retreat for Member States is planned in January 2025.

43. A complete draft of the proposed strategic plan will be available for the preparations of the first session of the Executive Board of UN-Habitat, provisionally in March 2025, and the final draft of the proposal of the Executive Director is due on 22 February 2025.

44. In the first session of the Executive Board of UN-Habitat, provisionally in March 2025, Member States are expected to conclude preparation of the strategic plan for consideration in the resumed second session of the United Nations Habitat Assembly from 29 to 30 May 2025.