UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME

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FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

Expert Group and Intersessional Thematic Meeting on:

Definition of Informal Settlements

OEWG-H process

The Open-ended Intergovernmental Expert Working Group on Adequate Housing for All (OEWG-H) was established pursuant to resolution 2/7 on Adequate Housing for All, adopted by the UN-Habitat Assembly in 2023, and is complemented by resolution 2/2 Accelerating the transformation of informal settlements and slums by 2030. Accordingly, the first session of the OEWG-H was held at the headquarters of UN-Habitat in Nairobi on 9-11 December 2024. The elected co-chairs, France and Kenya, developed a road map for 2025 which includes virtual intersessional meetings to pursue the work on the identified priority thematic areas, and a second meeting of the Working Group (OEWG-H2) to be held in 2025.

In June 2025, virtual intersessional thematic meetings were held for each of the four topics: Housing Finance, Tenure Security, Informal Settlements, and Social Housing. Member states made observations and recommendations on each theme. The draft recommendations will be presented at the second session of the OEWG-H, scheduled to take place in Nairobi from 22 to 23 October 2025.

A second round of virtual intersessional thematic meetings will take place in September. There will be two sessions for each topic to cater for different time zones, according to the following schedule:
- Sustainability: 16th September 2025 10:00-1:00 pm EAT (English, Russian, Arabic) and 4:00-7:00 pm EAT (English, French, Spanish, Arabic)
- Definition of Homelessness: 17th September 2025 10:00-1:00 pm EAT (English, Russian, Arabic)
- Definition of Informal Settlements: 17th September 2025 at 4:00-7:00pm EAT (English, French, Spanish, Arabic)
- Monitoring framework: 18th September 2025 10:00-1:00 pm EAT (English, Russian, Arabic) and 4:00-7:00 pm EAT (English, French, Spanish, Arabic)

The recommendations from the sessions held in September will be presented at the third session of the OEWG-H in 2026. Similar processes will take place in the following years, and a comprehensive set of housing policy recommendations will be presented at the third session of the Habitat Assembly in 2029. Such recommendations will already guide policy reform at the country level before 2029 and will inform other key multilateral processes.

Objectives of the meeting

The meeting intends to review and provide input to the information contained in this paper, particularly:

1. Map existing definitions of informal settlements
2. Identify the core elements of an international definition of informal settlements
3. Key considerations and approaches for monitoring informal settlements

An informal settlements definition

Recognizing the challenge of informal settlements as a manifestation of inadequate housing—and acknowledging that rapid urban expansion continues to occur largely within slums and informal areas—broad efforts, research and policy discourse towards addressing this pressing issue.

UN-Habitat process on defining Informal Settlements

The Expert Group on Slum Definitions (2002) was foundational in establishing the five deprivation criteria: durable structures, sufficient living space, access to safe water, improved sanitation, and security of tenure. These criteria directly informed the development of MDG Target 7.D and later the current SDG Target 11.1. The Habitat III Issue Paper on Informal Settlements[1] further advanced the settlement perspective defining informal areas as residential zones without tenure security, lacking basic services and non-compliance with planning or building regulations - conditions that result in socio-spatial exclusion from facilities and resources.

Globally, the SDG 11 Target 11.1 and Indicator 11.1[2] provides the overarching framework guiding countries in data collection and reporting on proportion of urban population living in informal settlements. Indicator 11.1.1 captures the realities of clustered housing that is serviced and inhabited without formal recognition through land ownership, building standards, or urban planning systems.

For more than two decades, UN-Habitat has been working to both highlight and improve the living conditions of informal settlement and slum dwellers through strategic programmatic interventions, notably the Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme (PSUP). The PSUP pioneered a collective, settlement wide methodology that placed communities at the centre of the process, applying the five core deprivation indicators to map settlements and to plan and codesign urban upgrading initiatives.

Emerging Processes on Understanding Informality

In recent years, the Global Review Series on Informality[3], led by Cities Alliance and partners has advanced the understanding of informal settlements. Moving beyond early deficit-based definitions of informal settlements aligned to the five deprivation areas, this process emphasizes spatial scale and aggregation as building blocks for a harmonized, multi-layered definition capable of guiding consistent measurement and rights-based upgrading.

Multistakeholder efforts such as the Global Action Plan (GAP) for Accelerating the Transforming Informal Settlements and Slums by 2030[4] emphasize reduction of spatial inequality and injustice as key enablers of transforming. The GAP underscores the importance of spatial integration and prioritizes improvement of entire contiguous settlement to achieve transformational change through mapping, planning, and interventions. Similarly, resolution 2/2 on Accelerating the transformation of informal settlements and slums by 2030, and 2/7 Adequate housing for all, reinforce these commitments. Resolution 2/2, in particular, calls decisive action across 10 key transformation areas spanning across social and spatial dimensions.

Innovative tools are also reshaping the understanding of informality. The BEAM tool developed by UNITAC (United Nations Innovation Technology Accelerator for Cities)[5], uses geospatial technologies, artificial intelligence, and machine learning to detect and delineate informal

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[1] UN-Habitat. 2015. *Habitat III Issue Paper on Informality*

[2] UN-Habitat. 2020. *Metadata on SDGs Indicator 11.1.1 Indicator category: Tier I*

[3] Cities Alliance. 2022. *Informality in Cities: Global Review Series*.

[4] UN-Habitat. 2022. *GLOBAL ACTION PLAN: Accelerating for Transforming Informal Settlements and Slums by 2030*

[5] United Nations Innovation Technology Accelerator for Cities (UNITAC). *https://unitac.un.org/*

structures, combining these with participatory design to map settlements. The Global Human Settlement Layer (GHSL)[6], developed by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, complements this approach by leveraging multi-temporal satellite imagery and machine-learning to quantify built-up density, roof textures, and expansion patterns across metropolitan regions, providing a city-wide perspective to BEAMs high-resolution analysis.

Finally, The OEWG-H definitions-setting process is working to establish an international definition of informal settlements, shaping their conceptualization, and guiding policy responses and monitoring at local, national and international levels.

The Problem and why we need a definition

While UN-Habitat provides a definition of informal settlements, it primarily hinges on household level deprivations, treating individual dwellings as the unit of assessment. Although household assessment is important, it remains incomplete, as it fails to capture the collective dynamics that characterize informal settlements: the spatial clustering of households, shared infrastructure deficits, communal governance arrangements, and systemic vulnerabilities that emerge at scale. For instance, while 2.2 billion people worldwide lack safely managed drinking water, only 1.1 billion are officially classified as living in slums—a discrepancy that underscores a fundamental weakness of household definitions, which label a slum household as one experiencing one or more deprivations. This approach excludes many households facing service gaps simply because their neighbours do not share the same conditions. What is missing is a settlement level definition capable of identifying and describing the contiguous clusters of households that together form informal communities. Without such a definition, the social, spatial, regulatory, and infrastructural coherence of informal areas remains unrecognized and unaddressed.

At the same time, although the term *informal settlements* is widely used, its meaning varies significantly across contexts. The absence of an internationally agreed definition hampers efforts to fully understand the scale and nature of informality and to design effective policies, interventions, and monitoring frameworks. For example, if one country defines informal settlements by tenure status while another focuses on infrastructure deficits, global data become incomparable and international support may end up targeting very different populations. Such divergent interpretations risk misaligned policies, exclusion of vulnerable communities, and inefficient allocation of resources.

Developing an internationally accepted definition of informal settlements is therefore essential to ensure consistency, strengthen accountability, and improve monitoring and policy responses at local, national, and global levels.

Guiding questions

Meeting participants will be asked to reflect and answer the following questions:

1. Does your country or organisation have a definition of informal settlements? If so, which one is it? Has this been recognized by statistical offices? What are the pros and cons of such definition?

2. What should be the key elements of a definition of informal settlements?

3. What data collection methodologies exist? What are the innovations needed?

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[6] Global Human Settlement Layer - European Commission. *https://human-settlement.emergency.copernicus.eu/*.