



UN-HABITAT

## Open-ended Intergovernmental Expert Working Group on Adequate Housing for All

### Intersessional meeting on definition of homelessness

Land Housing and Shelter Section, UN-Habitat

Date: 17 September 2025

1

#### Introduction

**Adequate Housing** at the centre of UN-Habitat mandate since its establishment.

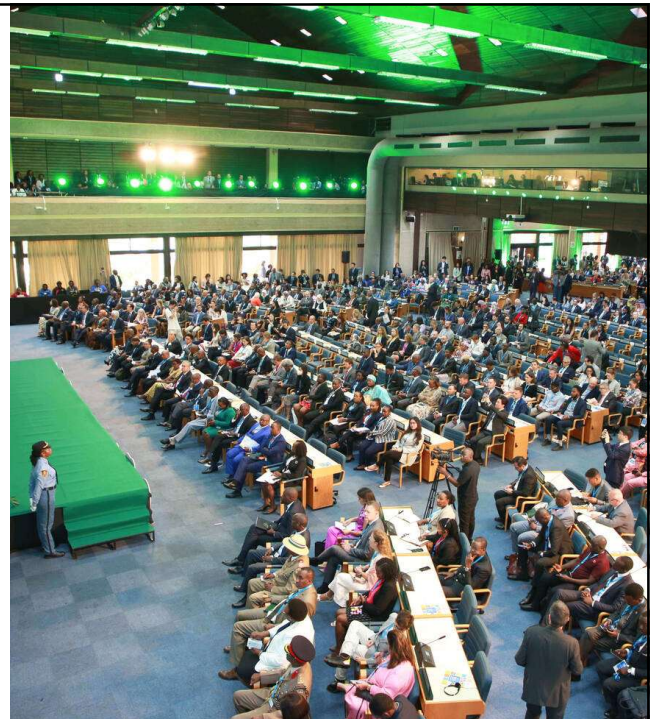
**Housing crisis:** 2.8 billion people live in inadequate housing, including 1.1 billion people who live in slums or informal settlements and over 300 million are experiencing homelessness.

**Habitat Assembly Resolution 2/7:** Establishment of OEWG on Adequate Housing for All (OEWG-H) and a Knowledge Platform on Housing.

**Resolution 2/2:** Accelerating the transformation of informal settlements by 2030.

Housing, land and basic services at the core of the new **UN-Habitat Strategic Plan 2026-2029**

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2

## Open Ended Intergovernmental Working Group on Adequate Housing for All (OEWG-H)

### Objective:

Develop robust, peer-reviewed, and Member State-endorsed set of guidelines to accelerate the achievement of safe, sustainable, adequate, and affordable housing for all.

Submit recommendations to the third United Nations Habitat Assembly in 2029.

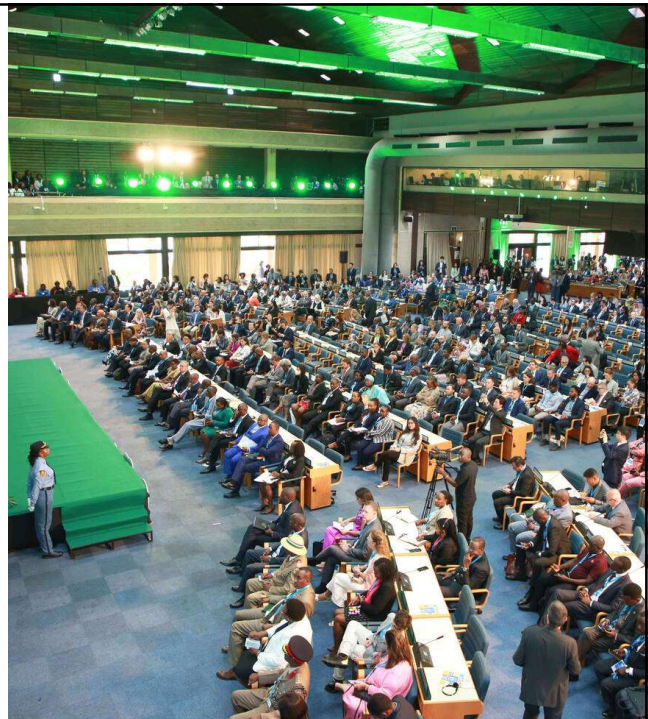
Use content developed and provisional recommendations to advance adequate housing policies and programmes at national and local level.

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3

## Open Ended Intergovernmental Working Group on Adequate Housing for All (OEWG-H)

- OEWG-H1 (Nairobi, 9–11 December 2024)
- Intersessional thematic virtual meetings
  - Housing Finance (24<sup>th</sup> June)
  - Tenure Security (25<sup>th</sup> June)
  - Informal Settlements (26<sup>th</sup> June)
  - Social Housing (27<sup>th</sup> June)
  - Sustainability (16<sup>th</sup> September)
  - **Definitions (17<sup>th</sup> September)**
  - Monitoring framework (18<sup>th</sup> September)
- OEWG-H2: Nairobi, 22–23 October 2025



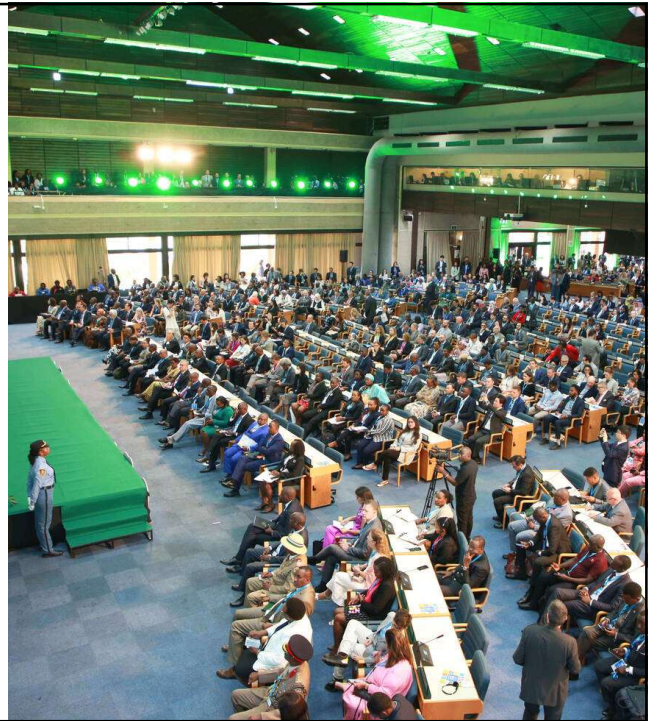
4

## Today's Intersessional Meeting on homelessness definition

### Goals:

- Present key challenges, trends and lessons learnt from existing definitions
- Bring back inputs for the formulation of draft recommendations from the EGM held on 21 August 2025.
- Provide additional inputs to the analysis to identify core elements of an harmonised, inclusive and culturally-sensitive definition of homelessness

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5

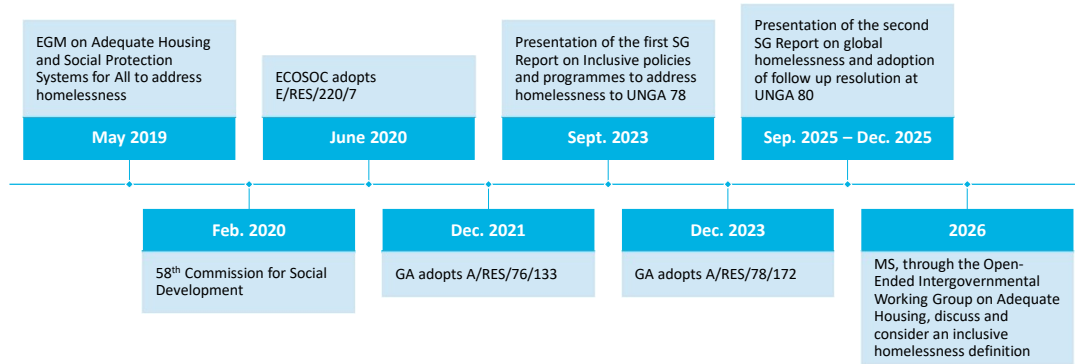
## Homelessness: Framing the discussion

- Homelessness is a denial of dignity and violation of human rights. Yet, homelessness is absent from the SDGs. There is no explicit mention in goals, targets, or indicators.
- UN-Habitat estimates that more than 300 million people worldwide are experiencing homelessness, but global figures remain fragmented and incomparable.
- Homelessness cannot be defined only as the lack of physical shelter. It is important to stress that it also entails loss of security, stability, social connection and belonging. These are central elements that need to be included in any definition.
- Without a shared definition:
  - No **common language** for policy.
  - No **consistent data** for monitoring.
  - No **accountability** in global agendas.

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6

## Homelessness within the international agenda



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7

## Homelessness definition: Why inclusive and culturally sensitive

- A rights-based definition must:
  - Focus on those in most vulnerable situations.
  - Recognise that people experiencing homelessness can define their needs and contribute to solutions.
- Many are consistently undercounted because they are less visible in public spaces or are not eligible for services:
  - Women and children relying on informal networks.
  - LGBTQ+, Indigenous Peoples, migrants avoiding services due to stigma.
  - Couch-surfing and other forms of precariousness.
- Cultural sensitivity matters:
  - Respect customary, nomadic, Indigenous living patterns.
  - Avoid automatically equating all informal settlement residents or inadequate housing with experiencing homelessness, while recognising people in unsafe, overcrowded, or precarious conditions.

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8



### Homelessness definition: conceptual – operational aspects

- **The conceptual (policy) aspect expresses the shared understanding that experiencing homelessness is a human rights issue and a systemic failure, not the result of individual behaviours.**
  - It sets the vision and guides policy priorities.
  - It helps ensure that people experiencing homelessness are recognised as rights-holders and actors in shaping solutions.
- **The operational aspect turns this vision into something we can observe and measure.**
  - It identifies different situations people may be experiencing.
  - It provides a way to monitor trends and compare across contexts.
- **Both elements are essential for a comprehensive and useful:**
  - Without the conceptual aspect, we risk losing the rights-based framing.
  - Without the operational aspect, we cannot track progress or hold systems accountable.

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9

### Homelessness definition: what already exist at regional/global level

Table 1.1. Harmonising the definition of homelessness: ETHOS Light typology

	Operational category	Living situation	Definition
1	People living rough	Public spaces/external spaces	Living in the streets or public spaces without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
2	People in emergency accommodation	Overnight shelters	People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation
3	People living in accommodation for the homeless	Homeless hostels Temporary accommodation Transitional supported accommodation Women's shelters or refuge accommodation	Where the period of stay is time-limited, and no long-term housing is provided
4	People living in institutions	Health care institutions Penal institutions	Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing; no housing available prior to release
5	People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing	Mobile homes Non-conventional buildings Temporary structures	Where accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence
6	People living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends due to lack of housing	Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence	Where accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence

Source: (FEANTSA, 2007<sup>[9]</sup>), ETHOS Light: European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, [www.feantsa.org/download/fea-002-18-update-ethos-light-0032417441788687419154.pdf](http://www.feantsa.org/download/fea-002-18-update-ethos-light-0032417441788687419154.pdf).

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10

## Homelessness definition: what already exist at regional/global level

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People without accommodation	People living in temporary or crisis accommodation	People living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation
<p><b>1A</b> People sleeping in the streets or in other open spaces (such as parks, railway embankments, under bridges, on pavement, on river banks, in forests, etc.)</p> <p><b>1B</b> People sleeping in public roofed spaces or buildings not intended for human habitation (such as bus and railway stations, taxi ranks, derelict buildings, public buildings, etc.)</p> <p><b>1C</b> People sleeping in their cars, rickshaws, open fishing boats and other forms of transport</p> <p><b>1D</b> 'Pavement dwellers' - individuals or households who live on the street in a regular spot, usually with some form of makeshift cover</p>	<p><b>2A</b> People staying in night shelters (where occupants have to renegotiate their accommodation nightly)</p> <p><b>2B</b> People living in homeless hostels and other types of temporary accommodation for homeless people (where occupants have a designated bed or room)</p> <p><b>2C</b> Women and children living in refuges for those fleeing domestic violence</p> <p><b>2D</b> People living in camps provided for 'internally displaced people' i.e. those who have fled their homes as a result of armed conflict, natural or human-made disasters, human rights violations, development projects, etc. but have not crossed international borders</p> <p><b>2E</b> People living in camps or reception centres/temporary accommodation for asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants</p>	<p><b>3A</b> People sharing with friends and relatives on a temporary basis</p> <p><b>3B</b> People living under threat of violence</p> <p><b>3C</b> People living in cheap hotels, bed and breakfasts and similar</p> <p><b>3D</b> People squatting in conventional housing</p> <p><b>3E</b> People living in conventional housing that is unfit for human habitation</p> <p><b>3F</b> People living in trailers, caravans and tents</p> <p><b>3G</b> People living in extremely overcrowded conditions</p> <p><b>3H</b> People living in non-conventional buildings and temporary structures, including those living in slums/informal settlements</p>

IGH FOCUS AREA IN **BOLD**

11

## Homelessness definition: what already exist at regional/global level

### • EGM 2019 (UN-Habitat/UNDESA):

- Proposed definition: *"Homelessness is a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space with security of tenure, rights, and ability to enjoy social relations, including safety. It is a manifestation of extreme poverty and a failure of multiple systems and human rights."*
- Identified four broad groups of people experiencing homelessness:
  - People living on the streets or other open spaces
  - People living in temporary or crisis accommodation
  - People living in severely inadequate or insecure accommodation
  - People without any alternative access to housing

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12

## Key issues emerging from the EGM: Existing definitions, strengths and limitations

- Wide diversity across countries and regions.
- Some convergence around ETHOS Light and IGH frameworks, but these need to be rooted in specific regional contexts.
- Broader, rights-based framings (security, belonging, social connection) are gaining ground.
- Definition and counting method don't always match. Even where inclusive definitions exist, data collection often focuses only on visible homelessness.
- Limitations:
  - Narrow definitions exclude hidden homelessness, women, youth, migrants, Indigenous Peoples
  - Overly broad definitions risk conflating homelessness with inadequate housing
  - Term "homelessness" is often charged with stigma



**Recognition that no single rigid definition will fit all contexts. Move towards a framework definition that allows local adaptation but enables comparability and visibility of all groups.**

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13

## Key issues emerging from the EGM: Essential elements of a definition

- Consensus emerging that homelessness is more than lack of shelter and understanding should include security, permanence, ability to sustain social relations. Legal, social, and physical dimensions.
- Must reflect visible and hidden homelessness, sheltered and unsheltered forms, across life stages and cultural contexts.
- Needs to be culturally sensitive (e.g. Indigenous definitions, Global South perspectives).
- Important to recognise difference between policy framing and statistical use.



**Convergence on the development of a tiered definition (core universal categories + local adaptation) to support both global advocacy and national policy action.**

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14

## Key issues emerging from the EGM: Measurements and monitoring

- Homelessness as a dynamic experience
- Over-all numbers are important, but so is publishing disaggregated data on the groups affected.
- Promising approaches:
  - Household surveys covering past experiences
  - Health and institutional screenings. As well as healthcare interruption.
  - Prevention-focused data (tracking drivers and risk factors) involving mainstream institutions such as schools, child protection agencies, primary healthcare providers and courts.
  - Community mapping and participatory surveys
  - Technological innovation (for example proxy indicators based on phone SIM use)



### Principles for way forward:

- **Combine approaches**
- **Invest in participatory, rights-based and disaggregated data infrastructure and training to improve quality, frequency and inclusivity**

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15

## Way forward

- Inputs from intersessional meetings will be compiled into a **final draft analysis and set of draft proposed recommendations**.
- Documents will be made available in preparation for the **third Session of the Open-Ended Working Group** taking place in **2026**
- At the OEWG-H3, member states, accredited organisations and nominated experts will have another opportunity to **comment, review, and endorse recommendations**, which will then constitute part of the recommendations presented to the Habitat Assembly 3 in 2029

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16



## Way forward

- Kindly submit any additional written input to [h4all@un.org](mailto:h4all@un.org) by the 30th September
- Next sessions of intersessional thematic online meetings
  - **Definitions of Informal Settlements:** 17<sup>th</sup> September 2025
  - **Monitoring framework:** 18th September 2025
- **Second session of the Open-Ended Intergovernmental Working Group on Adequate Housing for All (OEWG-H2), Nairobi from 22 to 23 October 2025**

Register to attend on GEMS ([UN-Habitat GEMS](#) | [UN-Habitat GEMS](#))

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17

# THANK YOU!

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18