



Summary Report of the Americas Region Academic Dialogue on the Future of Cities “Advancing Knowledge, Policy, and Practice for the New Urban Agenda”

17 July 2026 | 13:00–15:00 |

New York University, Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York, USA

Overview

Convened on 17 July 2026 at the NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service on the margins of the General Assembly High-Level Meeting on the Midterm Review of the New Urban Agenda (NUA), the Academic Dialogue brought together approximately 160 participants from academia, government, and urban practice. The Dialogue examined how universities and research institutions can help close the implementation gap by connecting knowledge, evidence, innovation and capacity development with policy, finance and practical delivery.

The Dialogue featured welcome remarks by Professor Polly Trottenberg, Dean of the NYU Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, followed by a keynote address by Ms. Anacláudia Rossbach, Executive Director of UN-Habitat, who framed the discussion around the findings of the New Urban Agenda Midterm Review and the imperative to accelerate implementation through stronger partnerships, financing, data and capacity development. The keynote was complemented by a panel discussion featuring Professor Jo Ivey Boufford, Professor Michael Cohen, Professor Ana Diez Roux and Professor Ursula Eicker, who brought perspectives from urban health, governance and development policy, data and climate action, and sustainable urban systems. An interactive discussion with participants further explored opportunities to strengthen the contribution of academia and research institutions to advancing the New Urban Agenda through evidence, innovation, knowledge exchange and partnerships.

Opening the Dialogue, Professor Polly Trottenberg, Dean of NYU Wagner, welcomed the partnership with UN-Habitat and underscored the role of universities in generating knowledge, convening partners, educating future urban leaders, testing new ideas and bridging research and implementation in the coming decade. She also highlighted NYU’s Urban Initiative as an example of efforts to connect academic expertise with practical urban challenges.

The keynote address by **UN-Habitat Executive Director, Ms. Anacláudia Rossbach** provided the strategic frame: despite stronger urban policy frameworks since Quito, implementation continues to lag behind the scale of housing, informality, climate, inequality and displacement challenges. She emphasized housing as a connecting platform for sustainable urban development and called for stronger partnerships, financing, data-driven decision-making and collaboration among governments, academia, the private sector and communities. She also highlighted the consequences of urban expansion, including growing pressure on the environment, social

fragmentation, higher costs for cities alongside lower revenue collection, and the continued growth of informal settlements.

The Executive Director emphasized that the Midterm Review marks a shift from policy commitment to implementation at scale. While national urban policies have expanded significantly, persistent gaps in affordable housing, adequate living conditions, institutional capacity, financing and partnerships continue to constrain delivery. Climate change, disasters, conflict and economic instability are intensifying displacement and housing loss, reinforcing the need to treat housing, land and basic services as foundations for resilience, inclusion, public health and economic development.

She highlighted SDG localization as an important pathway for translating global commitments into local action, combining urban data, planning, capacity development and financing. Drawing on WUF13, she also emphasized the growing role of academia and the inaugural WUF Academy as a platform for evidence-based policymaking, learning and capacity development. Academic institutions were invited to deepen collaboration with UN-Habitat and to bring research, tools, partnerships and evidence of implementation into the journey towards WUF14.

Looking ahead, the Executive Director emphasized that the next phase of NUA implementation must prioritize translating commitments into concrete actions through stronger partnerships, improved financing mechanisms, data-driven decision-making, and closer collaboration between governments, academia, and the private sector. She invited academic institutions to showcase their work on the implementation of the Political Declaration at WUF14.

The keynote address was complemented by a panel discussion featuring eminent academics and urban experts: **Professor Jo Ivey Boufford, Clinical Professor of Global Health at New York University; Professor Michael Cohen, Director of the Global Urban Futures Project and Co-Director of the Observatory on Latin America at The New School; Professor Ana Diez Roux, Distinguished University Professor of Epidemiology and Director of the Urban Health Collaborative at Drexel University; and Professor Ursula Eicker, Canada Excellence Research Chair in Smart, Sustainable and Resilient Communities and Cities at Concordia University.** Drawing on their respective expertise in urban health, governance, development policy, data, climate action and sustainable urban systems, the panel reinforced the central message of the keynote: academic institutions must play a more active role in bridging knowledge, policy and practice to accelerate implementation of the New Urban Agenda. They also noted critical changes in the global context for UN Habitat's future work with academic partners. There is much greater clarity about the importance of the environment and climate change to healthy and sustainable cities. The COVID epidemic revealed to the world the inequalities and inequities in cities that have long been recognized by urban researchers and policy makers, but need much deeper exploration to develop strategies for action. Finally, the significant economic development and urbanization in the Global South creates a need for development models that reflect national and regional urban realities.

Their interventions highlighted four interconnected areas for strengthened academic engagement:

- Urban health, SDG localization and integrated policy. Professor Boufford emphasized that healthy and inclusive cities require political leadership committed to integrated approaches to the social determinants of health and stronger links between SDG 11, the NUA and local implementation (Local2030). Voluntary National and Local Reviews were highlighted as tools for policy coherence, strategic planning and multilevel coordination and policy alignment.

- Urban governance and policy-relevant research. Professor Cohen stressed that cities face increasingly complex climate, economic and geopolitical pressures while often operating under severe fiscal constraints. He called on universities to strengthen interdisciplinary research and education, focus more directly on community realities and emerging urban challenges, and prepare practitioners capable of navigating interconnected urban systems.
- Comparable, disaggregated data for climate and health action. Professor Diez Roux used the [SALURBAL](#) network to demonstrate how standardized, neighborhood-level and cross-city data can reveal inequalities in exposure to extreme heat, flooding, air pollution and other risks. Her intervention underscored the value of accessible and comparable evidence for local decision-making, policy evaluation and climate adaptation and the potential for academic networks that can collaborate on urban challenges.
- Research-to-practice partnerships and innovation. Professor Eicker emphasized the importance of policy alignment across national, regional and local governments, especially in the areas of technology that require significant capital investment. Universities must develop more robust partnerships with the private sector to access resources while developing clear and transparent “rules of the road” to avoid conflicts of interest. Research, digital tools and technology can accelerate energy transition and sustainable urban development when they respond to public objectives, local needs and implementation realities

The interactive discussion reinforced six cross-cutting issues for future academic engagement with UN-Habitat:

- Housing insecurity, homelessness and informality: improve definitions, mapping and evidence on populations and settlements that remain poorly captured in official data and connect that evidence to practical policy responses.
- Responsible digitalization and artificial intelligence: combine AI, satellite imagery and modelling with field-based evidence, community knowledge and local capacity so technology strengthens rather than displaces contextual understanding and addresses inequities
- Two-way global knowledge exchange: strengthening South-South, North-South and South-North learning through comparative research, regional academic networks and horizontal exchange for shared learning among cities and institutions,
- Research, finance and investment: translate academic evidence into decision-relevant information that helps public and private investors understand costs, risks, return on investment, and sustainability implications of alternative solutions.
- Interdisciplinary capacity and the next generation: create stronger pathways for students, researchers and practitioners to contribute to urban policy and implementation, including across institutional and geographic barriers. with increased focus on strengthening the capacity of universities in the Global South
- From evidence to practical tools: simplify and package research into actionable guidance, datasets, methods and capacity-development products that cities can adapt and scale.

Strategic contribution to the UN-Habitat Strategic Plan 2026–2029 and WUF14 The central message of the America’s Academic Dialogue was that the next decade of the New Urban Agenda requires academia to move closer to implementation. This means examining its structure and addressing the need for incentives that recognize the importance of interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching—“universities are organized in vertical departments, but policy makers are faced with horizontal problems”. Universities and research institutions can help bridge the persistent gap between global commitments and local delivery by producing usable evidence, strengthening institutional and professional capacity, supporting innovation, and building durable partnerships

across government, communities, finance and the private sector. Taken forward strategically through the WUF Academy and the lead-up to WUF14, similar dialogues of this nature can become a foundation for a stronger UN-Habitat academic coalition that contributes directly to implementation of the Strategic Plan 2026–2029 and the Political Declaration on the Midterm Review of the New Urban Agenda.

Building on this momentum, UN-Habitat can deepen its engagement with academia by developing a stronger network of academic partners around shared Strategic Plan priorities and a focused research-to-implementation agenda connecting universities with Member States, cities, communities, practitioners, financial institutions and the private sector. The WUF Academy provides an important platform to sustain this collaboration through applied research, capacity development, peer learning and the translation of evidence into practical urban solutions, while strengthening two-way knowledge exchange and the contribution of institutions from the Global South. The period leading to WUF14 offers a clear opportunity to demonstrate the value of these partnerships by documenting and showcasing concrete research, tools, innovations and partnerships that contribute to implementation of the New Urban Agenda, its Political Declaration and the UN-Habitat Strategic Plan 2026–2029.

Recording: [Academic Dialogue on the Future of Cities – Full Recording](#)