

40

**Celebrating four decades of
the World Habitat Awards**



**world
habitat**



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Foreword by the Executive Director of UN-Habitat

As we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the World Habitat Awards, we reflect on four decades of innovation and community-driven solutions that have transformed housing practices worldwide. Established in 1985 as a partnership between UN-Habitat and World Habitat, the Awards have consistently championed creative and practical approaches to housing challenges, highlighting how local initiatives can evolve into mainstream strategies that shape policy and practice.

Over these years, we have witnessed small-scale experiments become widely adopted approaches to housing. From tackling homelessness through Housing First to addressing climate impacts through community knowledge and fostering inclusion, the power of transformative ideas arising from the ground-up, cannot be underestimated. This evolution is a testament to the strength of communities and grassroots innovators who, often in the face of significant challenges, have demonstrated that housing solutions rooted in local realities can drive positive change.

The World Habitat Awards are particularly dear to us at UN-Habitat because they highlight the essential role of adequate housing as a foundation for health, dignity, safety, inclusion, and wellbeing. Adequate housing is more than just four walls and a roof. It is a home that is secure and connected to services, employment opportunities, and urban life. Recognising housing's profound impact on quality of life, the Awards celebrate initiatives that not only address immediate housing needs but also

promote inclusive and sustainable development, directly contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Awards also offer invaluable opportunities for knowledge sharing, allowing best practices to be adapted and implemented in diverse contexts. In 2024 alone, the Awards received 111 remarkable entries from 56 countries, showcasing a diverse range of innovative housing solutions that respond to critical challenges such as climate resilience, unaffordability, gaps in access to services and tenure security, while also ensuring social inclusion, and community-led development.

Through this publication, we aim to demonstrate how communities and organisations, nurtured by World Habitat and UN-Habitat, lead positive change on the ground. By documenting successful initiatives and drawing key lessons, we hope to inspire actors and stakeholders in the housing sector to adopt and adapt these proven solutions, while also encouraging new ideas and future participation in the Awards.

We are particularly proud to see how many of the innovative approaches first recognized through the Awards have gained traction in public policy and practice, reflecting the evolving understanding of housing's role in promoting equity and sustainability. The Awards' legacy demonstrates that when governments and communities collaborate, housing solutions can become sustainable, inclusive, and impactful on a larger scale.

As we look ahead, we remain committed to advancing housing innovations that improve lives and foster inclusive urban development. We hope this publication serves not only as a celebration of the past 40 years, but also as a visionary guide for the next 40, driving meaningful and lasting change for communities everywhere.



Introduction

We are living in a rapidly changing and increasingly fragile world. Ecological, political and economic turbulence is buffeting communities right across the globe, from lower income countries to the wealthy cities of northern Europe. These changes, coming fast and often with little warning, are having a direct impact on our ability to access safe and secure homes.

All around the world, the risk of becoming homeless is rising. Whether as a result of conflict, rising temperatures, the impact of climate disasters or the effects of poor government policy, millions of people face losing their homes and the security of their communities in the coming decades.

In 2024 alone, 120 million people were refugees as a result of violence, persecution or human rights violations. The climate crisis is expected

to displace 1.2 billion people by 2050.

The habitats we have built are often insecure, unable to weather the storms ahead. While the global north is struggling to manage growing levels of poverty and poor housing conditions, many in the global south still are still denied the most basic safe and warm shelter. Many children are spending their early years in temporary makeshift camps and informal housing is being built without support, leaving residents cut off from vital amenities.

Too many of the world's citizens do not have a home of their own, and much of our housing is unfit for purpose.

We stand at a precipice. Four decades ago, the World Habitat Awards were founded to acknowledge and reward innovation in housing and the built environment. But their purpose

was much greater than this: they also existed to create a global network of experts and innovators in good quality building, meeting housing needs and community development so every nation could benefit from the leaps forward taken by housing champions all over the world. Their solutions helped communities meet the challenges that arose in a rapidly changing world.

Now, that community has an important role to play in guiding the next four decades. Their skills are more relevant and crucial than ever before. Their impact is also more obvious, with projects and ideas being replicated around the world thanks to the connections between members of that community - something that World Habitat, in partnership with UN-Habitat, has played a unique role in facilitating.

40 years of exemplary practice

In 1985, when the World Habitat Awards were first established to celebrate and promote good practice among those working in habitat, even the idea of 'good practice' was almost unknown. The Awards were designed to run for just three years, but the positive response was overwhelming, so they just kept on going.

Four decades on, to mark their anniversary, we are celebrating some of the most impressive and impactful work we have seen and shared over the last 40 years.

This report offers us a unique chance to showcase much of what has been learned, and the strength of the community that we have built around making a better habitat for us all.

Back in 1987, the World Habitat Awards became part of the United Nations International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. Since then, with the backing of UN-Habitat, World Habitat has allocated awards (and nominated runners up) every 12 months to the most innovative and exciting housing projects around the world.

Hundreds of social entrepreneurs, non-profits and community organisations apply to the Awards each year. They are part of a global network of advocates: A group of passionate experts united by a shared purpose: finding new ways to secure decent, affordable housing for vulnerable and excluded communities. World Habitat, working alongside UN-Habitat, is proud to provide a place that not only celebrates that work, but also disseminates and transfers it, so that it has a tangible impact elsewhere. As this report shows, this process has huge power and potential to lead global change. That is why it is such an important part of our work.

The world faces a difficult transition as we tackle the multiple crises of homelessness, mass migration, climate change, isolation and discrimination. Many nations are also dealing with the impact of decades of deregulation and privatisation, which has robbed many of their right to housing. Yet, even at this febrile moment, there are also reasons for great hope.

Rapid advances in eco-tech mean we are better prepared than ever to build sustainable homes that can endure the future ahead. New ideas are being spread across the world in a shared effort to meet housing needs, and to eliminate homelessness.

Through our own networks, and by connecting



Image Credit: Nubian Vaults, Burkino Faso 2016

our past awardees to witness each other's projects in action, we have encouraged relationships that are fostering a positive new future of housing activism. During the last four decades, we set up 40 exchange programmes so that housing leaders across the world could learn from each other in person. We have funded the appointment of staff to help promote best practice on the ground in multiple countries. As our Life President Pat Elderfield describes, these connections are based on the principles of **"looking and learning... and engaging our communities."**

One lesson of the pandemic era that we take forward with us is just how easy it is to communicate, network and support one another without needing to travel long distances to do so. With digital tools, communities of purpose can stay together and help one another to share ideas across borders - and create new solutions together, rather than struggle in isolation.

Through the press, social media and other communications, we are sharing the best ideas and tools so that every nation, government and community can benefit from them. The organisation is also funding projects to circulate this information as widely as possible, encouraging policymakers to think big about the right to housing and healthy habitats.

This is an exciting time for World Habitat. From green building techniques to radical social policies (such as 'Housing First' and the creation of Community Land Trusts), the work of the World Habitat Awards in highlighting good practice is driving a new era of better housing across the world.

In just four decades, the World Habitat Awards have encouraged innovation and proved how small projects can have big global impact. As this report explains, in every area - from providing safe homes for women fleeing violence to slashing the energy costs of maintaining a home - the awards have celebrated and connected the people making change happen.

Of course, this publication features only a snapshot of hundreds of examples of exciting solutions to housing challenges that have been considered and acknowledged by 40 years of the Awards. Behind every award winner there have been hundreds of contenders. There is so much great practice on the ground to learn from and to inspire new work.

Now it is time for a new chapter - and a new revolution in sustainable housing that will meet our rapidly changing needs for the next four decades. World Habitat and UN-Habitat call on you to help find, share and promote ideas with big impact. And what you learn from us, we urge you to make use of.

By 2065, we want to be handing out our awards in a changed world - a world where every global citizen is securely housed, living in supportive communities that allow them to flourish, able to withstand the social and ecological changes we face together. By sharing what works, our shared vision of a world where everyone has a safe and secure home will be realised.

"In just four decades, the World Habitat Awards have encouraged innovation and proved how small projects can have big global impact."

The world we live in, and how we live in it

300 million+

Estimated homeless people worldwide

300 million

New homes needed globally by 2030

1.1 billion

People living in slum conditions according to the UN

120 million

People forcibly displaced as of May 2024

60%

The world's population that will live in cities by 2030

80%

Cities without sufficient affordable housing

67%

Global private net worth stored in real estate

40%

OECD house price value increase in the past 10yrs

Homelessness

Image credit: Community Solutions 100,000 Homes New York USA 2013

Homelessness is not an unsolvable problem, and yet it persists. Even in nations with stable economies, the failure of those systems to meet true housing need means the number of people who are unhoused continues to rise. In the US, homelessness is now at its highest ever level. The capturing of private wealth in property and land is leading to an epidemic of eviction and displacement, with many of the lowest income communities hit hardest.

Those living in informal developments are most at risk, with land clearance, mass eviction and gentrification also leading to displacement and people becoming unhoused. Meanwhile, refugees from climate emergencies and conflict - both rising dangers in the coming decade - are creating new waves of mass homelessness.

We know that there are practical answers to homelessness - often with only small upfront costs - by governments, non-profits and other community services working better together. Over the last four decades, many World Habitat Award winners have demonstrated just how simple it can be to turn lives around by providing

a person who is experiencing homelessness with safe, adequate and affordable accommodation together with the social support they need to sustain a home.

We know what works and - thanks to our networks - it is now being put into practice. Housing First, a radical solution to homelessness that places the lack of a secure home at the heart of the solution, is now the guiding principle of many European nations' approaches to this entrenched social issue. That move can be traced right back to one of the first World Habitat Award winners.

There are many forms of homelessness, from displaced communities seeking care in emergency shelters to the housing supply crisis forcing the eviction of low-income tenant families, leaving them in unfit temporary accommodation. The most extreme and dangerous form is street homelessness, which is rising across Europe. This is the sharp end of a complete failure of the housing system, and yet it's one of the simplest forms to address.

Leadership to prevent homelessness

When homelessness occurs, a person is robbed of their human right to a home. Prioritising it is an essential task - but preventing it happening in the first place is even more important. Projects that anticipate and intercept the root causes of homelessness have been recognised by the World Habitat Awards for generations, and their lessons are more crucial than ever.



Image credit: Housing Rights in Jakarta: Collective Action and Policy Advocacy Indonesia 2024

Those living in informal settlements are among those most at risk of homelessness and seeking to secure their rights to land prevents this occurring.

Jakarta, Indonesia is home to many informal settlements where thousands of families living in poverty have created their own homes, businesses and communities. These settlements - known as 'kampungs' - are often portrayed as a barrier to creating a modern Indonesia and the threat of "slum clearance" is ever-present. The political popularity of such aggressive and discriminatory policies meant that residents lived in fear of sudden forced eviction, leaving them homeless and without their livelihoods.

A decade ago these fears became a reality for 10,000 families who were forced to leave

their homes to make way for urban development under the excuse of flood risk, road construction and illegal occupation of private land. Kampung residents fought back, calling for legal changes that would grant them rights to the land they had built their communities on.

Through a political advocacy network involving Jakarta Urban Poor Network (which represents residents of 25 kampungs), Rujak Centre for Urban Studies (a think tank focusing on urban issues) and Urban Poor Consortium (a networking and advocacy organisation), 256 evictions were prevented. At least 400 families were helped to return to new apartments on the site of their former homes. Not only was homelessness prevented in this instance, but the residents' housing security was confirmed for the long term.

In India, the Koraga people and other communities in the Karnataka state have suffered generations of abuse through the caste-based system, which has also shut families out of access to housing and rights to the land they live and work upon.

ActionAid India, together with the Koraga Federation and Samagra Grameena Ashram (SGA), worked to break the cycle of oppression for these groups through projects that supported social and economic empowerment - and, as a result, prevent homelessness. The focus of the project is to assist indigenous communities to access government support to which they are entitled.



Image Credit: Action Aid India Karnataka Community, India 2019

Thousands of acres of land have now been secured for these communities, and 19,000 people have accessed grants to build secure, long-term homes. Koraga women hold leadership positions within the community and more than 1,000 have been supported to become self-sufficient, reducing the risk of child homelessness too. In future, this group of organisations is looking to use the same framework to support people freed from forced labour across India to access the land and housing they are entitled to, including in the Kodagu district where household-bonded labour is common.

In South America, poor quality housing and lack of basic infrastructure is causing flight from rural to urban areas across Chile as residents leave the countryside in hope of finding housing security. But that process is leading to rising homelessness as the cities are suffering a housing crisis of their own, with insufficient units to meet rising demand. The shift is also affecting the country's economy, which depends on rural productivity.

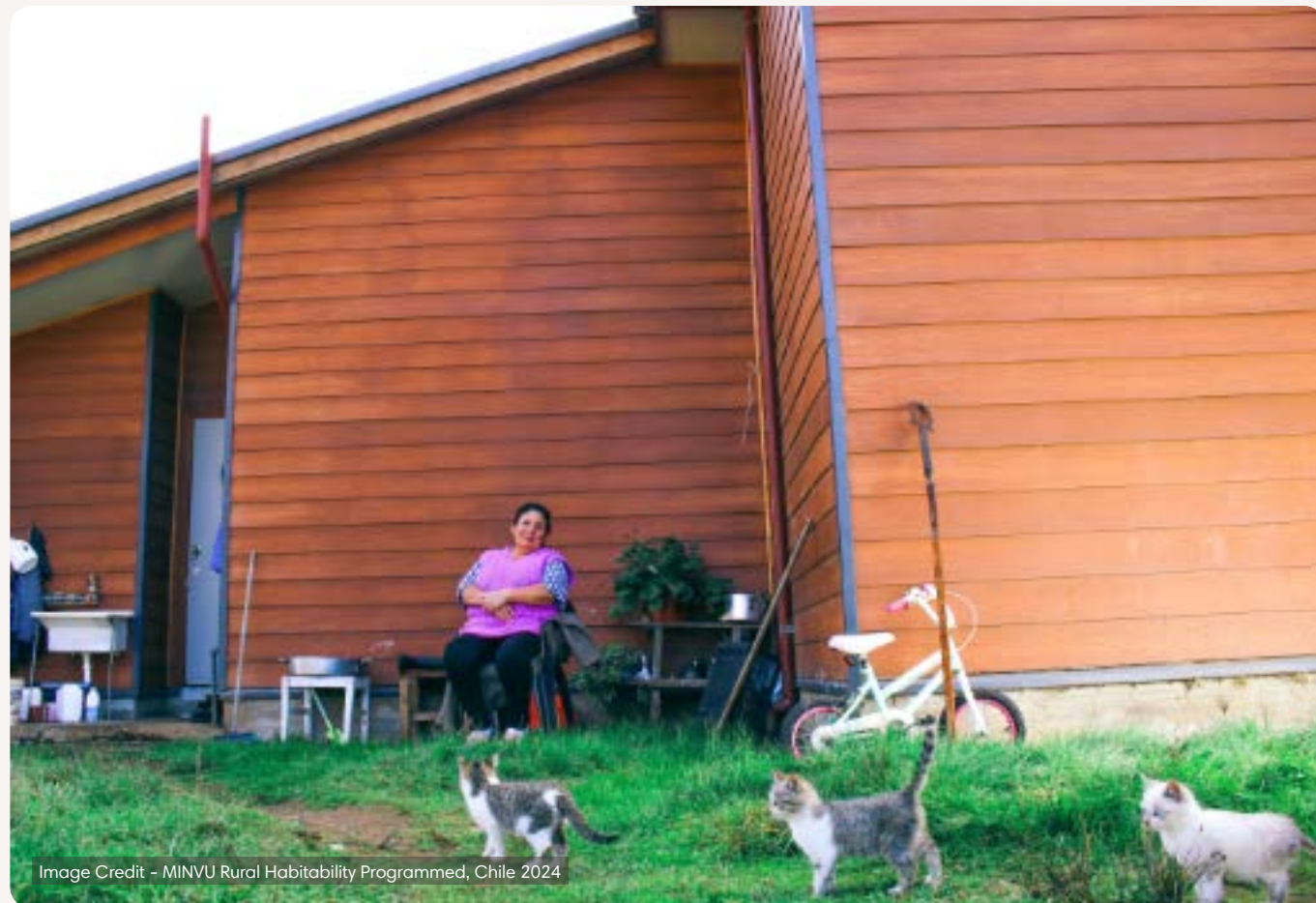


Image Credit - MINVU Rural Habitability Programmed, Chile 2024

The Chilean government's Emergency Housing Plan set a goal of creating 260,000 new homes by December 2025. The emphasis of this plan is to ensure remote communities had access to the funding and technical support needed to build good quality housing and meet local people's needs so they could stay in place. Priority was given to older persons, indigenous people and women-led households.

Since it started in 2016 the Chilean 'Rural Habitability' programme has delivered new or improved homes to over 55,000 households. That group includes migrants, traditional agricultural communities, and people living in the southernmost regions of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego.

As of the end of 2025, it also had another 9,900 projects underway, due to be delivered imminently.

Across Europe, prevention work is focusing on the root causes of homelessness in economies that do not meet the needs of all residents.

The cost-of-living crisis, including a rapid rise in both housing and food costs at the same time, as well as a shortage of affordable public housing, is a driver of a rising homeless population.



Image Credit - Newcastle City Council Active Inclusion Newcastle partnership, UK, 2020

In Newcastle, UK, one project presents a holistic approach to prevention work at a time when public funding cuts were leaving more people at risk of losing their homes. More than 100 organisations within the city work together to identify people in need of support to sustain their home, and addressing issues such as debt and welfare rights, to increase their personal income and reduce costs where possible. These organisations estimate they prevented 24,000 households becoming homeless in just five years between 2014 and 2019. The local council has also reduced evictions from its own housing by 75% since 2008.

Innovation across Europe

Prevention is the first defence against the social crisis of homelessness, but with a world facing turmoil and economic shifts such as the Covid-19 pandemic, migration rising and cost of living challenges, the inevitable does occur. While two decades ago rough sleeping was at its lowest recorded level in western Europe, that is no longer the case. The change has become very visible to residents who want to see action from their governments.

In Norway and Finland, street homelessness has been significantly reduced. Through World Habitat's European End Street Homelessness Campaign, launched just under a decade ago, solutions to the issue have been shared with huge impact. And this is only the beginning of that process. Within the next 40 years, homelessness could reach zero in some nations.

In this process, World Habitat has acted as a catalyst by bringing together policy makers in housing across multiple European countries. These connections make things happen. **"You can see the thinking maturing within governments and organisations as the route forward,"** explains World Habitat Life President Pat Elderfield. **"Housing First is being adopted by so many different nations, it's a guiding principle and Europe is the leading light."**

The World Habitat Campaign has been instrumental in driving this shift. A group of European cities joined the campaign - none with significant government support or large funding streams - and together they demonstrated how all kinds of communities can make immediate changes that will start to bring about an end to street homelessness.



Image Credit - World Habitat's European End Street Homelessness Campaign 2016-2025

The Campaign was rooted in two principles: Housing First - in which housing is provided to anyone found to be experiencing homelessness without any other qualification or expectation upon them, as a human right and the bedrock upon which other support services (such as addiction recovery, mental health support or help out of worklessness) are offered - and community involvement in designing and delivering local homelessness services.



Image Credit: 100,000 Homes Community Solutions, USA 2013

The campaign was first inspired by two World Habitat Award Winners - 100,000 Homes Campaign by Community Solutions in the US and Y-Foundation in Finland. Both these projects demonstrated how community action, collecting and using data, and focusing on a Housing First strategy work to make immediate practical change. So, 13 cities joined the campaign over the first three years to test this out and learn new lessons: Barcelona, Croydon, Valencia, Westminster, Brighton and Hove, Brussels, Glasgow, Torbay, Alicante, Leicester, Athens, Bratislava and Sheffield.

The first three years of the campaign saw huge success: almost 3,000 volunteers were involved across the 13 cities, 163 'Housing First' homes were created, and 344 former rough sleepers moved into a home of their own.

Each community drew up its own strategic city plan, setting targets to reduce chronic rough sleeping and reporting upon them. And the confirmation of what works - knowing more about exactly who is sleeping on the street, providing them with housing immediately before challenging any other issues - helped create a toolkit to share around the rest of Europe and the world.

The primary causes of homelessness - worklessness, addiction, family breakdown, mental health issues and many more - may be impossible to eliminate, but homelessness itself is not an inevitability. There is reason for great hope that, by following the example of these cities, street homelessness could be measured at zero within the next decade.

Above all these connections and strides forward offer hope in a rapidly changing world. Geoffrey Payne, a former World Habitat trustee, reports that concerns he held around lack of housing provision for those experiencing homelessness in the global south, where economies and government support were underdeveloped, now increasingly apply across all nations.

“Tent cities are increasingly big issues, so Housing First is something that has great potential globally and you see the transference of these ideas between countries.

Wherever they are, giving a secure base where they can rebuild their lives would be a massive boost for society.”

Geoffrey Payne, former World Habitat Trustee and Housing and Urban Development Consultant



Homelessness Statistics

300 million+

The World Economic Forum reports there are 150 million people experiencing homelessness worldwide. Experts suggest **this is a vast underestimate**, with many nations only reporting street homelessness and disguising the size of the issue. UN-Habitat estimates that the world's homeless population is in fact **closer to over 300 million people**.

1 bn

By 2050, more than **1 billion people could be displaced by the climate crisis** according to a report from the Institute for Economics and Peace.

↑18%

In the United States, homelessness is rising and at its highest recorded level. A total **653,104** people experienced homelessness in the country on a single night in January 2023, an **18% increase** on the previous year.

25%

Homelessness **disproportionately affects people from minority ethnic groups**. In the UK, **black people make up a quarter of rough sleepers in London**, up from 15 per cent a decade ago. In Canada and the United States, indigenous peoples make up a **disproportionately high** number of the population experiencing homelessness.

42yrs

Homelessness is dangerous: in European nations the average life expectancy for a person who is unhoused is 42 for women and 46 for men, compared to 79 years for men and 84 years for women. **Homeless women lose, on average, half their life.**



What is Housing First?

'Housing First' is a radical but extremely successful policy designed to end street homelessness by simply housing people who are found to be experiencing homelessness, securely and permanently. That permanent home is given unconditionally, with the support and guidance needed to sustain it long term, instead of using temporary housing such as hostel beds, shelters, bed and breakfasts or other forms of emergency accommodation, which often perpetuate instability.

Cities across Chile, Vienna and Helsinki in Europe, and Salt Lake City in the US, have all seen great success in tackling street homelessness by adopting this policy. Countries struggling with a lack of affordable housing find it harder to implement this policy, however the initial cost upfront is saved in the long term - particularly in cutting the cost to the state of managing chronic homelessness and the devastating effects of being unhoused on wellbeing and life chances. In the US, for example, the cost of street homelessness left unaddressed has been calculated to reach an estimated \$80,000 USD per person, per year, in additional pressure on health, criminal justice and other public services.

Understanding what works

The success of the European End Street Homelessness Campaign was underpinned by the lessons learned through projects recognised and commended by the World Habitat Awards throughout our 40-year history.

This celebration of projects working to lift people out of housing poverty and homelessness has also acted as a timeline, measuring progress on homelessness policy during this period.

The first seeds of the ideas embedded in Housing First to the US in 1988, were sown by a team working within the local Catholic Diocese in San Diego. They created the St Vincent de Paul Village. The project offered a solution to every need a person experiencing homelessness might have, in one place, co-locating housing and other support services - and was one of the early World Habitat Award winners.

The village was the largest residential agency in San Diego, offering 46 per cent of all 'transitional housing' beds available in the city at that time, but what marked it out was that education, medical support and financial services were all available to residents on the same site, helping them to rebuild their lives while in residence. Those services included addiction support, access to therapy, crisis intervention and specialist care over issues such as grief and loss, and anger management. Many of these services were provided by expert community volunteers from across the public and private sectors, bringing in government and private financial support for the project too.

Meals were also provided, not only to residents but to a wider community of people experiencing homelessness - up to 2,000 a day - bringing many future clients closer to the services that could lift them out of housing poverty. The World Habitat Award judges at the time found that the accommodation provided **"an atmosphere that enables [residents] to control their own lives, so that ultimately they can**

return to mainstream society with self-assurance and dignity". The model was eventually replicated in cities throughout the US.

Transferring what works

Around 15 years later, in New York, a large derelict hotel building was converted to provide affordable accommodation for 416 low-income key workers and people experiencing homelessness. It too was designed with inbuilt support for all residents, ensuring that each member of the community was able to use their time in the building to become self-sufficient, allowing them to move on to non-supportive housing. The initiative, established by the organisation Common Ground, was so successful it was recognised as a model for the provision of socially, economically and environmentally sustainable housing.

Both these projects were a precursor to the huge success of the 100,000 Homes Campaign. This initiative, designed by the American NGO Community Solutions, had the ambition that we all share: ending street homelessness in the US.

The team drew together a network of 100 organisations working in 190 communities between 2010 and 2014, to register all people experiencing street homelessness in every city worked in, with the aim of moving 2.5 per cent of America's long-term homeless population into permanent housing each month.

This targeted, practical, no excuses approach worked: more than 44,000 long-term homeless people, many of them medically vulnerable, were permanently housed, with a staggering retention rate of 85 per cent among what is a very difficult-to-sustain tenancy group. In fact, the success was so overwhelming that 28 of the participating communities were meeting that 2.5 per cent target locally long before the initiative ended.

Community Solutions now works with 190 local groups across the US and has inspired projects

CASE STUDY: James* from Brighton, UK

After trauma throughout his childhood, James took a job in a pub as a young adult and turned to alcohol to numb his pain. His father attempted to help him to address his addiction but after breaking up with his partner James became involved in criminal activity and was sentenced to three months in prison. On his release, he began sleeping in Brighton's Queen's Park, where he was interviewed and then supported by European End Street Homelessness Campaign volunteers. He was housed in supported accommodation and has a good relationship with his key worker, who is supporting him to sustain the tenancy.

"Being housed isn't always easy," he admits. "I have struggled to cope with many of the rules and this has made me want to leave the accommodation at times. When you are sleeping outside there are no rules, no-one to say what guests you can bring back, no boundaries"

James describes it as a "big jump" choosing to live indoors again, but says the support he has around him means that he's able to adjust. "Where I live I can get a job and they will allow me to stay, which is quite unusual for supported accommodation. Knowing that really helps. I've got my CV and I'm looking for work in cafes and catering where I can leave early evening at the latest and get home."

He says that, though he feels "close to the streets" he is hopeful for his future. "I'm dead keen to work and I want to get my own place and get settled into a normal life again, where I have the freedom to make my own decisions. Sometimes the lack of responsibility you have when rough sleeping is attractive, and I want that again, but I know that's not the right thing. I'm on the path, but it is a long one."

right across the world, leading to meetings about rolling out similar initiatives in Canada, Australia, Ireland and Belgium. Of course, it was also a key inspiration behind World Habitat's European End Street Homelessness campaign, showing how much can be achieved very quickly by sharing best practice.

New initiatives based on this model are emerging each year. In 2025, the World Habitat Awards granted a bronze award to the Advance to Zero (AtoZ) scheme in Australia for introducing an initiative based on a similar approach, using data to track and plan a journey for individuals experiencing homelessness moving them from rough sleeping to safe, secure, adequate and long-term housing. The aim is to ensure that when homelessness happens, it occurs once and is resolved.

It couldn't be more necessary: Australia is facing a homelessness crisis with 122,000 people lacking a permanent home and First Nation Australians disproportionately affected, in part due to decades of discrimination in the housing system.

Preventing homelessness: Following Barcelona's example

Tackling existing homelessness is a challenge, but true success in this policy area also requires harder work from governments and local communities to prevent it happening in the first place. One project celebrated by the World Habitat Awards more recently shows how this can be done.

In Barcelona, Spain, both mortgage and rent costs have risen much faster than the population's average incomes. Together with growing unemployment, the sub-prime housing crisis, the effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic on the nation's economy, and increased pressure on household finances due to rising food and utility bills has put many more people at risk of eviction from their homes. Like many European cities, a severe shortage of social housing in Barcelona means homelessness – and street homelessness – became a genuine threat to many families.



In June 2022, Barcelona had 650 families on the waiting list for an emergency tenancy and that number continues to rise. Even during the pandemic, when lockdown meant movement was restricted by law and eviction orders were paused, there were still an average of 20 evictions a day.

Barcelona created a mediation service which works between tenant and landlord, or finance provider and homeowner, to prevent the eviction of vulnerable people and families. The service, SIPHO, is based in local housing offices and intervenes in 90 per cent of cases where a home is at risk of being lost. So far it has supported 31,000 people to sustain their homes. Demand for the service grew rapidly during the pandemic, and the local government responded: budgets were increased, and staff numbers were more than doubled from 19 to 43 during the third quarter of 2022. Investing in prevention is much cheaper than spending to find a cure.

The next steps

World Habitat and UN-Habitat want to see a complete end to homelessness – and we believe it can be achieved in many European nations by learning the lessons of the most successful

practices across the US and Europe. Our rough sleeping campaign demonstrated how quickly connecting experts and volunteers can achieve this without direct investment from any central government. By taking a policy and data-led approach, and rooting practices in the unique needs of local areas, change can be made within a matter of months. For those new to this work, as our examples have shown, implementing a Housing First strategy and a zero rough sleeping target is an ambitious but realisable way to start. Both have an immediate effect on entrenched and complex cases of homelessness.

Now we know what works, it is no longer good enough to say that homelessness is simply a fact of society. It is not, it can be solved and we know how. The challenge is to share that information with every community so that no vulnerable person must ever spend a night outside.

31,000

People in Barcelona supported by SIPHO to sustain their homes



Climate

Image Credit: Arkom's Building Homes Collectively for Better Habitat, Indonesia 2021

The world is getting hotter, and our weather systems are becoming more turbulent. The last 22 years have seen 20 of the warmest years on record, according to The World Meteorological Organization. Yet the pace of escalation of the climate crisis is faster than that: the world's five warmest ever years were all recorded within the last eight. By 2070, it is predicted that many parts of the world we currently inhabit will become too hot to live in, with up to three billion people – almost half the world's population – affected.

“The coming decades are going to see the impact of climate change forcing tens or hundreds of millions of people to leave their existing homes and move to other areas where their chances of survival and a decent life are greater,” warns Geoffrey Payne, former trustee of World Habitat. He warns that parts of the Sahara extended southwards by 25 miles in 2024 and that large swathes of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa will become inhabitable zones within existing human lifetimes.

“At the moment I don't think there is significant recognition of the scale of these imminent challenges.”

It is not only people's health, work and lives that are at risk, but also housing and communities. Research shows that as the effects of climate emergency begin to damage people's health, with heat stress and extreme cold putting lives at risk, the quality of housing will be a huge factor in the survival and sustainability of communities in the hardest hit areas.

Meanwhile, housing itself is a contributor to climate change. The construction sector is responsible for an estimated 39 per cent of carbon dioxide emissions, with the push to secure better housing for the world's population

39%

Global CO₂ emissions generated by construction sector

paradoxically also speeding up global temperature rises.

People experiencing homelessness, or who lack secure housing, will be the most adversely affected by the climate crisis – yet they are often the least responsible for our heating planet. Under-occupation of large homes by wealthy communities leads to high carbon footprints, while emissions from informal settlements are far lower than in urban areas where concrete is the dominant construction material. Those who are unable to sustain a home at all, either through eviction or lack of resources, are first to feel the pain of a problem they did not cause.

As the climate breakdown deepens it will drive migration, forcing many to leave their homes and risk becoming homeless. It is predicted that there will be 1.2 billion climate refugees by 2050, resulting from climate disasters such as extreme weather events and tsunamis. Around 190 million people are expected to be affected by rising sea levels in the coming decades.

People living in inadequate housing are also more likely to live in areas that are vulnerable to climate-related catastrophes, including mudslides, storm surges, hurricanes, and floods. In Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, early mapping suggests rising sea levels will predominantly affect the city's communities of urban poor; around 85 per cent of the 2,380 people expected to be displaced by 2050 will be those in living in informal settlements.

“Land and housing are the physical manifestation of bigger issues around inequality and the climate crisis,” Payne says.

Housing is crucial to our resilience and adaptation to climate change. Over the last four decades, the World Habitat Awards have recognised and celebrated projects that highlight how communities respond to a shifting climate and rebuild their homes after extreme weather events.

There are three principal areas of focus for these initiatives: resilience and repair in wake of disaster; adaptation to a world in which the climate crisis is a real and present threat; and finally, mitigation of the climate crisis by building and designing homes in sustainable ways.

These examples have highlighted how using sustainable materials and practices can help communities to recover from shocks and protect themselves from future disruption. These initiatives prove how essential adequate housing is in building communities that are stable and strong enough to survive even the most damaging of climate disasters.

“It is predicted that there will be 1.2 billion climate refugees by 2050, resulting from climate disasters such as extreme weather events and tsunamis.”

The biggest challenge is that housing must not only help its residents weather the storm ahead but also contribute to the systematic prevention of ecocide. Construction, along with shipping and farming, is listed among the most polluting sectors of the global economy. Its processes must change and adapt.

In many countries, populations are growing rapidly, and new, secure housing must be created to meet their need for shelter. In others, declining birth rates and demographic shifts mean that housing is no longer adequate for residents' needs. As nations plan to build shelter and protect residents from the global climate crisis, the examples highlighted by World Habitat Awards prove the best ideas and most promising innovations in community building – and how

these ideas are being transferred between communities and organisations.

Recovery and resilience

Perhaps the most significant issue for community resilience is the ability to rebuild in the wake of an extreme weather or climate event without relying solely on government authorities – which are sometimes underfunded, poorly organised or errant.

In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines, destroying the homes of tens of thousands of families. When the recovery began, it was led by local people. Rather than moving residents away from their homes, the NGO Leyte Center for Development offered them the materials, tools, and skills they needed to quickly recover – by rebuilding their homes and their lives. This self-recovery required the dedication and commitment of those traumatised by loss – but it has set a precedent and proven to other regions the effectiveness of working within communities when rebuilding from disaster.



Image Credit: Post Haiyan Self Recovery, Philippines 2017

In the Philippines, the leaders of the rebuild were themselves survivors. Minet*, the executive leader of the Leyte Center for Development, helped 23,000 families rebuild their homes over just four months, despite dealing with the impact of the typhoon on her own life.

She was in Manila when the typhoon hit. It took her four days to get home to Tacloban, a journey which usually takes a few hours. She recalls: **“I didn’t recognise the place. Houses with no roofs. Trees with no leaves. When I reached the bridge nearby, I realised that this was my house and my office. It had all been destroyed.**

“We lost everything. Everything we had saved up for over the decades had gone. The main thing was the people I worked with were all alive and okay.

“Our roofs were blown off by the typhoon which meant we had to use transparent fruit covers as our make-shift tents. We looked at the positive side – at night we could see the stars, and they were so beautiful.”

“Most importantly, the residents stayed on site, retaining the rights to their land and taking ownership of building their community back up.”

The grants provided by CARE Philippines and distributed by organisations like the Leyte Center for Development, provided roofing, hurricane strapping, nails and tools. The total cost of full repair from the destruction cost around US\$190 per house and residents were expected to make some financial contribution themselves, and provided labour to reduce the cost of the rebuild. The most vulnerable families were offered extra funds.

Most importantly, the residents stayed on site, retaining the rights to their land and taking ownership of building their community back up. They worked with CARE and other organisations to find locally available materials and debris that could be recovered from the wreckage. Training was provided for residents on how to fix their homes and how to make them safer for the future – local knowledge now passed between residents which means they and their homes are now more resilient to climate disasters.

The project gave residents control over their own destinies, putting decisions about their homes and future in their hands rather than implementing a pre-prepared emergency plan that might not actually meet their needs. Cash stipends were also given to families so they could purchase their own building materials, pay for any labour they could not provide themselves and rebuild their lives and businesses, meaning they could avoid getting into debt during the rebuilding process. For example,

grants were used to buy livestock or farming equipment. A group of 70 households pooled this investment to buy a rice mill for the whole community.

As weather events and climate disasters become far more common, passing on the skills to recover without outside aid or assistance is crucial to build local resilience. Giving communities the tools to take control of crisis situations and create homes that will withstand future shocks and create an ongoing sustainable community, is an investment that lasts decades. Other projects recognized through the World Habitat Awards demonstrate how this is possible.

Earthquake-resistant homes

One such initiative supported a community to manage its own recovery, reconstruction and relocation following the devastating tsunami in Palu Bay, Indonesia. When an earthquake struck the region in 2018 it triggered a tsunami (a threat level which rises along with sea levels) to hit the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, killing more than 4,000 people and leaving thousands more homeless, including the entire community of Palu Bay.



Image Credit: DARAJA early warning announcements, Tanzania 2024

The government had proposed relocating survivors to a site five kilometres inland – out of the risk zone, but far from the primary source of income for most residents of the fishing village. Working with the non-governmental organisation Arkom Indonesia, the community negotiated an alternative location in the safe zone that would enable them to still earn income from the sea – mostly fishing, drying and selling fish.

Their proposal (part of Arkom's Building Homes Collectively for Better Habitat project) was accepted by the local government, and the survivors were actively involved in the design and construction of 38 earthquake-resistant homes in an area protected from rising sea levels. The new houses were completed in December 2020 and have so far withstood shocks below five on the Richter Scale.

The success of this initiative has prompted a change in official policy that could give thousands more people the opportunity to decide how and where to rebuild their lives. Its principles of building a safe life while retaining local connections are now also being echoed in other parts of the world.

World Habitat Award judges commented on the radical and influential way the initiative looked at the issue of local land. **“They have a collaborative plan for the protection of the natural environment on which they depend on for their livelihoods,”** they said. **“There are very few instances of that with emergency housing.”**

Adaptation: The key to life in a changing climate

Adapting to a world in a state of climate crisis also means equipping communities with tools to manage the risk of extreme weather events, predict them, and plan for them. In recent years, the World Habitat Awards have highlighted a number of initiatives which achieve that. When residents have the skills to create and maintain their homes, they can also protect them from the worst effects of climate change.

In Tanzania and Kenya, the DARAJA service offers weather information in an easy-to-understand format. It is accessible and straightforward to digest for communities living in informal settlements, which often lack protection by government authorities in a time of crisis.

The service, run by the global social enterprise Resurgence, not only provides a weather forecast but also shares information on how best to respond to it. When that key weather information is shared, residents act upon it – to protect their lives, their homes and incomes. Since the project was introduced, there has been a 300 per cent increase in household repairs made in response to weather forecasts in Nairobi, and a 122 per cent increase in Dar es Salaam.



More than one million people have benefited from the service which won a 2024 World Habitat Award for its approach to helping people protect their own homes and save lives in the process. It is a model that can be replicated by communities around the world, particularly where informal housing is at high risk of damage or destruction by extreme weather.

In another notable example in Pakistan, a project initiative by the Aga Khan Agency for Habitat combines local knowledge, scientific risk-mapping, and community hazard, vulnerability and risk assessments so that planning, development and construction take place in safer zones and reduce disaster risk.

The group's geologists use satellite images and risk-mapping tools, with the help of residents and their own local knowledge. The project has provided more than 20,000 households with help to improve their homes, has built more than 4,000 shelters for internally displaced people and created hundreds of community disaster management plans and weather monitoring early warning systems. Hundreds of settlements, housing more than one million people, have benefited – and the work goes on.

These schemes could be iterated by other communities facing a climate threat, weather from rising sea levels, soaring temperatures, growing flood risk or violent storms, to meet their residents' specific local needs. The networks created between awardees are helping to spread these schemes to even more residents who are set to benefit in other parts of the world.

Innovation and mitigation

The World Habitat Awards have not only celebrated success in adapting to the climate emergency but recognise and share the innovative ideas that will protect and shape the homes of the future. These are homes that are not only shielded against damage but mitigate climate risk, by reducing the impact of human habitation on our environment. Here, the awards can also spot future trends to share that knowledge with experts and innovators around the world.

Where are these ideas coming from? Innovation can be expensive. In some cases, the social housing sector has taken the lead, as it is able to invest in the newest ideas around construction, design and maintenance in a changing climate. Social homes can provide a testbed for radical new technologies and tools and allow data on the performance of housing to be gathered and shared.



Many countries, particularly those in the global north, have introduced carbon reduction targets following the Paris Agreement as part of a push to demonstrate their role in the global effort to tackle the climate emergency. But progress on measurable change is still extremely slow. Much of the work to retrofit existing housing to better insulate it and reduce energy costs has taken place in the global north, but these nations also have a large stock of older buildings. Despite the clear need, take up has been slow. According to the International Energy Agency, retrofit rates would need to increase to 2.5 per cent annually in developed countries and 2 per cent in developing nations to meet targets.

However, some organisations have made change even where that process to achieve it has been slow and mired in bureaucracy.

More than 10 years ago a group of Dutch housing associations, which house families on low incomes, got together to solve a specific problem: how to make their existing homes more energy efficient and cheaper for tenants to run in a time of rising energy costs but without the extreme cost and upheaval of a major internal retrofitting programme. Together the associations challenged manufacturers to come up with a radical answer to the question of speeding up and cutting the price of positive change.

The winning idea was ‘Energiesprong’ – a system that uses prefabricated insulated wall and roof panels embedded with green technologies such as solar panelling and heat pumps, and attaches them to the building with minimal disruption to residents. Each fitting is usually completed within a day, and can be carried out from the outside, without residents having to vacate their home, and records a 70-80 per cent reduction in energy use by the home. For housing providers in Europe, where energy costs are rising every year, the technique is extremely needed.

The solution is spreading rapidly, allowing large numbers of buildings to be improved at the

same time. In 2025, more than 10,000 projects have now been completed across seven countries in Europe and North America, with thousands more planned.

The recent report into the Grenfell Tower tragedy, where 72 lives were lost in a fire accelerated by flammable cladding insulation, has raised awareness of the risks of cladding. In contrast, Energiesprong technology uses tested, non-flammable materials and is designed exclusively for low-rise developments.

“
In 2025, more than 10,000 projects have now been completed across seven countries in Europe and North America, with thousands more planned.
”

Residents have immediately seen the benefits, both aesthetically and in terms of the cost of living for their families. One Dutch resident said: **“I think it’s beautiful, from the outside it looks very nice and it’s a lot warmer too. And we got a lot back, first time, through those solar panels. I really do find it helps. In the room we have the windows all the way to the floor. I think it’s beautiful. This way you can look into the garden. I am very satisfied with it.”**

As the number of renovations increases from tens of thousands to millions of homes, many more tenants will benefit from increased comfort and reduced energy bills. Energiesprong’s open-source innovation has the potential to dramatically reduce global carbon emissions if it is spread worldwide – and the World Habitat Awards are sharing these lessons widely.

The use of new or alternative materials is a key component of other initiatives with widespread impact in the global south. The work of UrbaSEN in Senegal, which has created a new development model to lift up the life chances and economic opportunities of women (as noted in our chapter on gender and housing rights), is also making leaps forward in the use of environmentally-friendly construction techniques, including compressed earth bricks and solar-powered water pumps. Some residents have been trained to use the typha plant, an invasive weed in the region, as an income-generating resource, by drying and weaving the fibres into mats and fencing. But the material will also play a crucial role in building eco-housing in Senegal too.

Typha clay bricks and insulation is being used in the construction of a 150-home eco-district, Cité-FSH, on a plot of land now owned by residents through a cooperative model.

This scheme is influencing local urban development across Senegal, and as more members join the movement it is hoped the programme’s scale and success will demonstrate how women can carry out pioneering development work.

“
This DIY programme could be replicated by anyone in the world, using readily available materials and basic electronics skills, so that it can be taught at school and within communities.
”

Letting in the light

The same spread of ideas is occurring at the grassroots of housing improvement, right down to how to offer one of the most basic needs in a human shelter and yet also one of the most energy hungry: a source of light.

In 2011 in the Philippines, MyShelter Foundation created the “Liter of Light” programme which aims to provide low-income communities in the Philippines – and around the world – with a cheap source of lighting that can be produced and distributed locally. It uses recycled plastic bottles filled with water and bleach, which are fitted into the roof of temporary and permanent homes to provide lighting during the day. They can easily be upgraded with an LED bulb, micro-solar panels and a battery to provide a low-cost night lighting system.



This DIY programme could be replicated by anyone in the world, using readily available materials and basic electronics skills, so that it can be taught at school and within communities. And the replication has already happened: this hyper-accessible technology has become a global movement, with more 150,000 households in the Philippines and 350,000 homes across 15 other countries all implementing the Liter of Light principles.

The spread of homes now lit through a low-tech and affordable solution that protects the climate continues, demonstrating the power of community-led problem solving on improving our habitat in a time of climate emergency.



Image Credit: Liter of Light, Philippines 2014

Honouring traditional techniques

Finally, in Burkina Faso, a project has revived the ancient Egyptian technique of creating roofs from sun-dried mud bricks, a perfect material for the regional climate. These materials are cool, affordable and locally produced – but they are also resistant to the many earthquakes that can trouble the region.

The Nubian Vault Association shares this technique across several Sahelian countries, aiming to create 300,000 new homes for local communities and train 60,000 new mud brick masons by 2030. The skills these tradespeople learn create affordable, good quality and low carbon homes.

The carbon savings of the initiative are huge. The project has led to a cut in imported materials for building as it relies solely on readily available local materials, principally earth and water. The bricks are made using local, manual labour (which does not generate waste) and are baked

by sunlight. In the first six years of the programme, emissions of around 70 tonnes of CO₂ have been saved, in comparison to traditional construction, and there has been a reduction in deforestation as the need for timber is minimized..

The lessons from these initiatives go further: communities can benefit from sharing technical research and traditional skills and techniques like these. The core target group for the Nubian Vault Association are rural populations of West Africa living on less than \$2 per day and largely in communities operating outside formal economies, including informal housing. But the concept is flexible and can be adapted for changing local needs.

As climate destruction hits many parts of the world, this global push for innovation and resilience is spearheaded by small, local projects. In the next four decades we will continue to share the best and most effective ideas to create sustainable housing and communities that can withstand the turbulent years ahead of us.



Image Credit: Nubian Vaults, Burkino Faso 2016



Gender

Image Credit: TAWAH, Tanzania 2025

Although women and girls constitute just over half the world's population, their lives are shaped by the persistent inequality between men and women.

Statistically, women are more likely to outlive their male counterparts, but on every other measurement women come second. Violence against women and girls is a global crisis: one third of women have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, and 18 per cent have experienced such violence within the last year – a statistic that is consistent regardless of age, location, income or education. Economic violence is also endemic, and often goes unchallenged in nations where women's rights to financial independence are not enshrined in law or custom.

Despite a huge increase in the number of children in education in the last quarter of a century, gender parity has not followed suit. Girls are far more likely to be out of education

in most regions, particularly at primary school age.

At the same time, unpaid domestic and care work, which disproportionately falls on women's shoulders, restricts their ability to earn. According to UN statistics, as of 2020, less than half of women of working age were economically active, compared to around 75 per cent of men – a global gender gap of 27 percentage points, and almost unmoved in the last three decades.

Gendered property laws place barriers in the way of women's fair access to both land and housing. As part of the work of the Sustainable Development Goal 5, countries are currently reporting on their legal frameworks around women's rights to control land. The results are instructive: even by 2022, the majority (60 per cent) of the 71 countries taking part had limited protections in place to secure women's rights to land ownership. Only nine of those countries

had active policies in place to strengthen women's land rights.

Projects driven by women often have the most immediate impact on the daily lives of a community. Radical action, as demonstrated in these female-driven, award-winning projects, makes the biggest difference and also inspires waves of positive action.

“Some of the most innovative and sustainable projects among the history of World Habitat's award winners are led by women who have experienced housing-related crises,” says World Habitat trustee Jo Richardson. **“I have witnessed their strength myself. Women's leadership is vital for the change we want to see in our future world – one where everyone has a safe and secure home.”**

Yet what happens next depends on global leaders, who have the power to embed women into the heart of social and housing policy. As we face a period of turbulence due to conflict, economic instability and a shifting climate, women must be central to the creation of sustainable communities.

Major legislative and policy changes will be needed to secure women's rights across the globe, but there is much that can be achieved on a project basis to prove how the right to safe housing plays a key role in ensuring equality of rights, opportunity and security. In its first four decades, the World Habitat Awards has commended housing and community initiatives that do just this. They set an example of how radical change often comes from the grassroots – and how the right for equality involves the solutions of women for women.

Women supporting women

Women's access to safe, affordable and adequate housing with the support of a community is an vital component of a more equal world. But for many women, security in their own home remains out of reach. Yet, small scale, innovative approaches to providing safe

accommodation have international relevance and hold valuable lessons.

In the northern English city of Hull, the Preston Road Women's Centre is supporting women to escape domestic abuse – which affects more than one in six women in the region. The centre is home to a group of six organisations which together run the Hull Women's Safe Homes project, an initiative which acquires empty homes across the city and converts them into safe, affordable and adequate housing for women fleeing violence at home. It also provides specialist counselling, legal advice and nursery care to help them start a new life free from abuse.



Image Credit: New Ground Co Housing UK 2024

One former resident, Georgina, found the number for the centre online and called asking for emergency help. The previous night she had fled her abuser and found somewhere to stay in a local bed and breakfast, but could not afford to stay there any longer. She was quickly found short-term housing with the group, and a specially trained crisis team stepped in to support her. They assessed her risk and helped her make a safety plan, helped with the completion of a housing application which resulted in a supported tenancy in her local area at a rent she can afford. Within weeks she was thriving in a new home and applying for employment to support herself.

The project manages around 300 properties, bringing abandoned properties back into use and providing safe homes for hundreds of

women and children. Most excitingly, the team has also designed two financial products which could be replicated in other cities and countries. The Social and Sustainable Housing Fund, and the Women in Safe Homes funds have invested more than £43m in other organisations across the UK, providing 600 safe homes in the first phase alone. There are double benefits: the fund itself invests in other areas, while it demonstrates to the wider world how a funding model like this can operate both locally and nationally – or even internationally. It is a product designed by women with women’s lives at its heart.

Born of a similar ethos, but meeting a very different need, the London-based women’s co-housing group New Ground also won a World Habitat Award for its clever answer to the problem of women’s isolation and independence in later life. This community-led housing initiative in north London, is the UK’s first mixed-tenure development for women aged over 50. New Ground was created and is run by its residents. Each household has an individual home – there are 25 flats on site – but there are also shared spaces for socialising.

Residents have described how the homes are warm, designed to meet their needs and offer a better quality of life because they feel connected to their neighbours. The development has been well publicised, especially as the 18

year journey to make it a reality was a long and complex one, providing lessons of resilience for similar initiatives elsewhere.

The UK’s population is ageing – as is the case in most nations worldwide – so there is an urgent need to understand what type of housing is most beneficial and sustainable in later life. Throughout the global north, where healthcare systems have made major improvements in supporting women through crucial chapters such as pregnancy and childbirth, women are now routinely expected to live longer than men. New Ground Cohousing is a positive example of a radical housing model specifically designed to prevent the marginalisation, exclusion or isolation of older women.

The site is home to a group of 26 women aged between 58 and 94. Crucially, it includes social housing so women from all backgrounds have an opportunity to access a home at the heart of this unique community, increasing the diversity of the group across sexualities, abilities, cultures and heritage.

It offers huge potential for scale up over the next two decades – and policy makers are watching. Members themselves have been keen to encourage this too; they regularly meet and speak to housing professionals and policy makers to show them the benefits of this radical idea in action.



Image Credit: New Ground Co Housing UK 2024

CASE STUDY: Independence in later life

When Charlotte Balacz, an administrator for the Royal College of Pathologists, entered her fifties she started to think seriously about her future. As a happily single woman in London she lived a rich and varied life, with a large group of friends, but had realised there was an important question she would soon have to answer: “What will my third age look like?”

“I was living in a nice part of London, but in a second floor flat without a lift and not really having any connection with my neighbours,” she explains. “Most of my family lives abroad. I thought: I’ve got to be proactive and think about how I want my life to pan out.”

Charlotte, who is now 71, started researching housing options for older people and didn’t like much of what she saw. Then one day she stumbled across the Older Women’s Co-Housing Group which was establishing a group to help plan, build and occupy a co-housing community in north London. “They were meeting once a month then about a 10 minute walk from where I was living. They were hosting a lunch one Saturday. I nearly didn’t go, I nearly chickened out, but I did it; I went and I joined the community.”

Charlotte was allocated a buddy, an established member of the community, and took part in outings and socials to meet the other women involved in the group and get to know them better. At this point she still had some concerns, particularly around the practicalities of co-housing, which she had previously known nothing about. “I like people, but I like my privacy too,” she laughs. “To be quite honest, at first I was quite reticent about telling friends and family. I thought they’d say I’d gone mad. Nobody knew what co-housing was and I had to explain it all the time, but when I did I had nothing but positive responses.”

Eventually she became part of the group of first residents, who together led the construction project. She retired in 2016, sold her flat and



purchased one of the newly-built homes, and moved in along with other residents in the community. The group now manages the community and all its homes, including common space for all to share, communal gardens as spare rooms for visitors.

Becoming a member of the co-housing group has changed Charlotte’s quality of life for the better and given her great peace of mind entering the later chapters of her life. “We’re a very bonded community,” she says. “Bricks and mortar are wonderful things but the group actually started about 18 years earlier than the building. The community really starts with people. You can’t just plop people into a building and expect it to be a community. It doesn’t work that way.”

The biggest benefit for Charlotte is that the community keeps her physically and mentally active. “I have learned and I’m always learning,” she says. “It’s about neighbourhood and community, and being a part of the world.” Now Charlotte wants to spread those benefits to as many other women as possible. As part of the community’s communication groups, she is responsible for telling their story across the UK and worldwide. She has received housing activists from all over Europe, and a delegation of women from Canada came to stay in the guest apartment last summer, taking new insights back across the Atlantic.

Thanks to co-housing, Charlotte’s third age is turning out to be one filled with opportunity and possibility. “The more I put into the community the more I get out of it,” she says.

Transforming women's lives: Tanzania Women Architects for Humanity, Gold award winner 2025

In addition to the individual, female empowerment benefits the wider society. Among the most recent award winners is an initiative addressing housing poverty and gender inequality in rural Tanzania. Designed by Tanzania Women Architects for Humanity (TAWAH), the initiative in Mhaga village teaches women new skills, supporting their development and investing in their communities.

Women involved in the project are taught brick-making from local soil, brick-laying and construction techniques, and are offered training and support in marketing their new skills. During the programme, trainees build homes for older members of the village using sustainable building practices and local materials, creating affordable housing that benefits every part of the community.



New resident Bibi, who had been left homeless after many siblings in her large family passed away and her home was destroyed, has found new happiness and purpose after being allocated one of the new purpose-built homes for community members like herself. After moving in she told the project leaders: **"I did not know there was humanity. I did not know there was luxury. I can now sleep well until**

sunrise. Thank you for this new house, you have saved my life. You saved me from diseases, loneliness and the feeling of poverty. I sleep well these days and I am grateful."

The project also emphasises collaboration with local authorities, university students, and volunteers - which is changing attitudes towards gender equity and housing justice. This is an example of how one small housing project can have wide-ranging social impacts far beyond the individuals and small developments involved.

The longer term goal for this group is to empower women to replicate the model right across Tanzania, improving economic opportunities for women in the country but also shifting attitudes and driving policy change. It is an initiative with international relevance.

Improving the daily lives and health of women in Pakistan

But it's not just adequate and safe housing that has an impact on women's security and happiness; it is the labour of the home and family life too. According to the UN's annual gender survey, on an average day, women spend about three times as many hours on unpaid domestic and care work as men (4.2 hours compared to 1.7 hours). In North Africa and Western Asia women spend on average seven times the hours men allocate to these activities.

In rural Pakistan, food preparation is an essential part of daily life that has become a time-consuming and arduous task for the country's women. Millions of households living in poverty depend on open-flame wood-burning stoves to cook food for their families, which are dangerous to live with. Not only is managing the stoves hard, physical work, the smoke damages health, causing respiratory infections and eye problems. Food cooked on these low stoves are also at risk of contamination with bacteria and viruses which

cause diarrhoea, which puts vulnerable children's lives at risk.



Image Credit: Heritage Foundation of Pakistan, Pakistan 2018

The Chulah programme, which builds low-cost smokeless stoves, is helping to improve women's health and quality of life in the region. The award-winning project teaches women how to build a sustainable earthen stove, which reduces some of their own domestic load and improves their health while also giving them a skill which they can use to earn an independent living, by marketing and building stoves in other villages.

So far the programme has trained 35 entrepreneurs to manage the transfer of these skills, and

participation is an affordable investment for women: each one charges \$2 USD to teach other women to build their own Chulahs out of mud bricks and lime. Materials cost an additional \$6 USD, bringing the total cost to each household to just \$8 USD. The stoves also use 70 per cent less firewood than traditional open stoves, saving women more time and energy, given that collecting wood is usually a female task in these households.

Since its launch in 2014, more than 40,000 stoves have been built, improving the health of 300,000 residents. The scheme aims to build 100,000 chulahs per year.

The organisation behind this groundbreaking project, the Heritage Foundation of Pakistan, was founded by the country's first female architect, Yasmeen Lari - a pioneer in the built environment, and a woman whose work is influential worldwide. The award made in 2018 not only recognised the Chula project, but the ongoing impact of her work.

Women leading change in this way is an important tool in the shift towards a more equal and sustainable world economy. Where women are empowered to drive sustainable development,



Image Credit: UrbaSEN, Senegal 2023

they also have opportunities to participate in the formal economy.

Around the outskirts of Dakar, the capital city of Senegal, approximately 1.8 million people live in informal settlements. Rapid development, the pace of urbanisation and the progress of the climate crisis mean the city is now dogged by severe flooding which is damaging temporary homes and creating issues with sewage, leaving these communities at risk.

An initiative funded by NGOs and organised by the women-led Senegalese Federation of Inhabitants is helping women to fund and carry out improvements to the settlement's sanitation systems, public spaces and their own homes. The NGO UrbaSEN provides training and technical support for residents, who then carry out drone-mapping and provide data on the local sanitation network to local authorities. That data then allows women to generate certificates of occupancy – the first step towards legal ownership of their own homes.

What works in Dakar is having an impact nationally. Now 18 municipalities have replicated the project with support from national and international institutions. The scheme also introduced an early-warning system for floods and encouraged development using sustainable local materials. More than 20,000 residents have directly benefited from the project so far, including 8,000 people whose homes have been upgraded.

The scheme is also prioritising the structural and cultural barriers experienced by Senegalese women, by finding a route to greater financial autonomy. There are now 570 small groups working through the project, which was launched only a decade ago, and each also forms a collective savings network. The women gather their financial resources together and can take out loans from a revolving fund to carry out the improvement work.

Hope for vulnerable women in Cambodia

Chan Rin, 58 is a groceries seller. She lives in Peaek, a Cambodian village, and has two children. Cambodia has one of the fastest growing economies in the world, but it remains one of the least developed. Widespread poverty means there are almost 300 informal settlements in the capital alone, characterised by makeshift housing, high unemployment and poor sanitation.

Chan took part in the Habitat project, run by Planète Enfants & Développement, which supports residents in informal settlements to make them safer. It prioritises vulnerable families, living in unsafe housing or at risk of domestic violence, and trains women in sustainable building techniques. While passing on the techniques to improve their housing, it also provides financial education and access to savings and credit schemes.

"If I had missed the chance to renovate... I wouldn't have dared to stay in the house anymore. My house was leaning to one side and I felt unsafe. I have lived here a very long time and I had always lived in a very precarious house," she says. "Now, we have a better house and we learned how to maintain it. The villagers say that my house is very good compared to the previous one. I am glad to hear their compliments about my new house."

Her children also worked on the project, passing down those skills to the next generation and securing the future of the settlement. "My village has improved thanks to this project. The villagers are happy to see that some fragile and unsafe houses were renovated," she says.



Image Credit: Housing Rights in Jakarta: Collective Action and Policy Advocacy 2024

In some of the poorest communities in the world, where informal housing has proliferated with too little state support or oversight, the relationship between residents and the land they inhabit is fragile. Without a legal right to the home that is their own, vulnerable families are at risk of eviction or removal from the land without compensation – particularly if their home is lost through climate disaster. In communities where tenure is held by long-standing cultural norms, private property systems enforced by law have often been implemented on top, with little sensitivity to existing residents and often stripping them of their land rights.

Yet even in countries where land rights are formalised in complex property law, the issue of the relationship of residents to the land is the source of many housing problems. It is land prices, rather than property prices, that have become detached from local incomes in many European nations and across parts of the US. However, across the world, there is a movement

aiming to break down this problem and, in doing so, create a new wave of sustainable and affordable housing that could rewrite the relationship between people and the land they share.

The popular and ascending Community Land Trust (CLT) movement has the potential to overhaul how we think about housing provision and ownership of the shelter we need to thrive.

That model – designed in the US by one of the first winners of a World Habitat Awards – has spread rapidly across Europe and in many other parts of the world. It has adapted to local conditions and worked with local social and political forces, and its triumph is largely thanks to the work of those campaigners and activists inspired by that first award winner.

Community land trusts are locally based and community-led non-profit organisations that own land (and sometimes property too) in trust.

The CLT acts as a long-term steward of the land and all development upon it, including housing and civic buildings, on behalf of the community – now and into the future.

This radical approach means that the cost of housing, whether rented or owned, becomes much more affordable. These models guarantee long-term affordability and access to good housing for low-income residents, and provide a model for community engagement in land and housing management too. CLT residents have true control over the places where they live through the mutual ownership of their land.

Over the last 40 years the CLT movement has grown from a handful of experimental projects to a huge global push for change. The connections between awarded initiatives, with visits between countries and relationships between participants has been instrumental in that spread.

Much has been learned since the first projects that caught our attention as early award winners in the 1980s and 1990s, and that is informing the rapid spread of these transformative ideas now.

Pioneer projects

In 1984, the Champlain Housing Trust (CHT) was established in Burlington, Vermont in the US. It was one of the first housing initiatives to explore the CLT approach to providing affordable housing in perpetuity, with the ownership held in trust for the people of Burlington. The community homes were available to local households earning 57 per cent or less of the area's median income, and has since developed more than 2,200 properties for both low rents and low-cost home ownership.

CHT acquires land and properties and then sells or rents the housing to local people while retaining ownership of the underlying land. Through a perpetual ground lease, the trust gives owner occupiers full rights to the land for the duration of their occupancy (and that

of their heirs) but requires that equity is shared on resale. Only 25 per cent of any appreciation in the property value goes to the occupier.



Image Credit: Champlain Housing Trust USA, 2008

Champlain Housing Trust was one of the first of what is now more than 200 CLTs created across the US, and has achieved its early aims of both providing secure homes to those on moderate incomes and protecting vulnerable renters from evictions and risks of gentrification.

The impact of this early pilot cannot be overstated. In the local area it has increased mobility within the housing market with three quarters of those moving out going into market homeownership. It has influenced residents' rights across Vermont and new laws have passed to ensure that permanent affordability is built into state housing policy. And the CLT's structure – which ensures that all members co-own and govern the land – has been copied throughout the American CLT movement, and overseas.

The World Habitat Awards and the exposure granted to the winning initiatives helps facilitate the global transfer of this crucial knowledge about what works to keep housing affordable.

One of the notable finalists of the World Habitat Awards in 1997 was the Tanzania-Bondeni land trust in Kenya – one of the first projects to challenge the way the spreading of private land ownership rights had undermined and unpicked the historic relationship between the Kenyan people and their land.



Image Credit: Tanzania Bondeni Community Land Trust Kenya, 1997

At the start of the project Tanzania-Bondeni was a settlement of 530 temporary structures. A new community land trust was created, one of the first forms of CLT to be followed by housing experts in the southern hemisphere. The model was designed to prevent the benefits of housing upgrades in the village being lost to its residents.

After surveys were carried out, community decisions were made on how to reallocate land to provide space for infrastructure provision and improved access, so that the place was more liveable for all. Once the new form of tenure was established, residents conducted improvements to their own homes, with the assistance of technical advisers. Infrastructure improvements were also carried out at the community's own cost – but the benefits stayed within their control too, due to the trust holding the land and its dwellings on behalf of the community.

Funding for the initiative was shared between local and central government and community partners, but loans provided for securing land and constructing new homes came directly from the central government. The scheme provided a pathway to providing compensation

for the country's colonial history, where land was forcibly taken from indigenous populations and handed to British colonial settlers. The project was a pioneer in providing security of tenure provided by the community itself rather than a paper title granted by another administration.

Later, in 2009, World Habitat organised a visit from 24 housing policymakers, community builders and activists to visit CHT in Burlington, offering each member the chance to get on-the-ground knowledge about how CLTs work.



Image Credit: Community Land Trust Brussels Belgium, 2023



Image Credit: Community Land Trust Brussels Belgium, 2020

One of the participants, Geert De Pauw, who travelled to Vermont from Brussels, said the visit had been inspiring and essential in the journey towards setting up the first CLT in Belgium. **“The visit went much further than we could have imagined. It was so refreshing to see people so open to sharing everything they have developed over years. The information and support we received enabled us to convince the Belgian authorities that community land trusts were possible,”** he said. **“When we went, the CLT was something relatively new. We were thinking about setting up something in Brussels and looking for a model that guaranteed permanent affordability.”**

Belgium was, and continues, to face some of the same pressures on affordable housing as communities in the US. But the visit also helped unlock political interest for the first time. **“We had a freshly appointed minister and from there we started exchanging ideas with him and his cabinet,”** he explains. **“Then we set up a coalition of mainly community and housing rights organisations that set as a goal to create a CLT in Brussels and from then on we also had a possibility to do a feasibility study to research the legal and**

economic aspects of it and after that we received funding to do two pilots. It was quite quick. Compared to colleagues in other cities we were lucky that it went quite quickly.”

Throughout the process the group remained in contact with the Burlington project.

Rising house prices and the lack of social housing means people in Brussels on lower incomes have two brutal choices – rent poor quality housing, often in disrepair, or move out of the city. The creation of Community Land Trust Brussels (CLTB) was motivated by a desire to tackle the problem, and find new ways to keep a mixed, diverse community at the heart of the popular city.

And just like in Burlington, CLTB – which received a World Habitat Award in 2021 – develops affordable housing on land owned in trust by the community. The homes provided by the trust are mostly occupied by people on low incomes, the majority of whom are migrants to Belgium. Residents participate in the governance and the management of new building projects.

What makes this initiative so exciting globally is the radical affordability structure the trust has adopted. Homes are rented at between 20 per cent and 50 per cent below market rate, and the cost of each home is set according to the household’s ability to pay.

Resident Fatima, who occupies a flat in Molenbeek inside the trust’s Arc-en-Ciel project, was one of the first residents to join the group when the properties were just drawings on a plan. **“We stood our ground and got where we wished for,”** she says of its success.

For Fatima, finally finding a sustainable, affordable home was a huge relief. “I was in a difficult housing situation, because I was living in a quite small and very expensive flat,” she explains. **“We were one of the first families to get involved in the Arc-en-Ciel project. I was interested in the idea of having a home where I could be at peace, without being stressed about a possible increase in rent, worries about humidity or a problem with the owner.”**

The community, she says, was built even before the homes were complete. **“Before the first stone was placed, as there were many meetings, I got to know my neighbours. We are not going to lie, we had our ups and downs, but we held on and learned to understand each other’s difficulties, to find solutions together,”** she says. **“Now we all have our own flats and when we meet in the halls, it is always polite and friendly. If there are any difficulties, we can talk to each other. I’m happy to come home, which I didn’t have in my previous apartments.”**

As of 2025, five projects have been completed by the trust so far, meaning 450 people have been affordably housed in 103 homes. Four more projects are being developed.

De Pauw says: **“From the beginning we received a lot of attention, and we also organised in very quick succession some exchanges around the topic, in collaboration with people from the US.”**

As CLTs have sprung up across the continent

over the last four decades, the movement has launched a new umbrella organisation – the European Community Land Trust Network – to bring all that experience and expertise together across the continent. It is hoped that many more CLTs will be created in the next decade, unlocking permanently affordable housing for all, across Europe’s diverse towns, cities and communities. New CLTs have been established everywhere from Amsterdam to Turin. Meanwhile an exchange programme launched between Brussels and France led to French politicians working on new legislation in the country to allow the creation of CLTs.

By disrupting ownership structures, it is hoped that the growth of European CLTs will spark a new era of progressive thinking about housing solutions that are sustainable, accessible and affordable. Most importantly, they put communities at the heart of the housing crisis and give them both housing rights, and the rights to make decisions about their local areas. As the European Community Land Trust Network describes: **“They empower communities to play an active part in their environments.”**

CLTs are already active across the UK, Ireland, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, France and Spain and there is growing interest in parts of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. The network provides a way for hundreds of CLTs to connect and work together, to expand the model right across Europe and beyond. They are also campaigning for CLTs to be given the same

Community Land Trusts: in numbers

627 CLTs worldwide estimated as of 2024

14 countries with an active CLT movement

7 National CLT networks

Source: International Center for Community Land Trusts

legitimacy in public policy (including access to government development funding) as other housing providers such as housing associations.

Dave Smith, chief program officer at Grounded Solutions Network and founder of the London CLT, has long advocated for greater land rights for ordinary citizens in the UK and the US. He says **“unrestrained market pressures are hollowing out the most vibrant communities across the world. But that experience is leading to a grassroots fightback.”**

“It feels like the need to meet housing demand is being used to justify housing being done TO local areas, rather than WITH them, and through local communities. But the appeal of CLTs is spreading across the continent precisely because it refuses to accept this narrative,” he says. **“They demand local definitions of affordable, based on what people truly earn; they demand sympathetic developments which help build rather than destroy local economies; and they build homes and local relationships which people want to invite into their local communities.”**

“If local communities are actively involved in their housing solutions, then over the next four decades housing movements, working alongside local governments, will be better placed to respond to the challenges posed by migration, the climate crisis, and other social pressures.”

Community land trusts in the Global South

In Kenya, the Tanzania-Bodeni CLT may have been the first experiment of its kind in the country but it also kickstarted a more creative way of thinking about land tenure based on a local indigenous perspective of land ownership and custodianship, one which benefits the community rather than the individual. Under the CLT, land once again became a shared resource for this small Kenyan community, even while in many other parts of post-colonial

Africa the process of alienating the land from its citizens was continuing.

One of the most important results of this early CLT was the residents’ perceptions of their own ability to challenge the system and shape their own destinies, and their relationship with the land. Its success gave impetus to other projects looking to break down the increasing privatisation of land.

Two decades later in Puerto Rico, a similar model helped offer a new start to an informal development in turmoil. The Caño Martín Peña Community Land Trust transformed a settlement around a polluted river channel prone to flooding into a safe and sustainable community. It provided a new model for improving informal settlements in cities without them then becoming unaffordable for the original residents through land grabs or gentrification.

The Martín Peña Channel was once a waterway that ran through the middle of the Puerto Rican capital San Juan. People in need set up homes on the mangrove swamps along its banks, but the pressure on the local environment of 5,000 new homes meant that the river filled with debris and silt and, with no sewer system installed, it became highly polluted. With nowhere for water to flow, every time it rained the area flooded, creating a dangerous situation for residents.



Image Credit: Cano Martín Peña Puerto Rico, 2015



Image Credit: Cano Martín Peña Puerto Rico, 2015

Since it was established in 2000, the community land trust has helped to give 2,000 of those families a legal claim to the land on which their homes stand, a guarantee of affordable and safe housing and also the chance to share control of how that land is managed. For those living in the most extreme high-risk areas for flooding, there were other options including the resettling into other good quality homes in a fair manner.

The trust is also managing the land, so the community is not disrupted by a changing climate: basic infrastructure, including dredging of the river channel, has been introduced. However, the most important change is the legal regularisation of land tenure which guarantees long-term affordability for residents and prevents them from being displaced, as they now collectively hold the title of the land in perpetuity through the trust.

In another example across the world, after the success of preserving the kampung communities in Jakarta, Indonesia (see chapters on Inclusion and Homelessness), campaigners involved in housing rights are now exploring the possibility of land trusts to help prevent the destruction

of existing communities due to the threat of gentrification.

There has already been success with this in many other parts of the world, particularly in South America. Almost one in four of the population of Rio de Janeiro live in favelas – some of the largest informal settlements on earth. With homes built by residents themselves, these communities have become the only affordable options for people who are financially excluded from Brazil’s formal housing market. The favelas are unregulated by the government, are already self-managed, and are often struggling against the influence of drug cartels which hold power in these areas free from state oversight.



Image Credit: Housing Rights in Jakarta: Collective Action and Policy Advocacy 2024



World Habitat 2025 Gold award winner: Hastings Commons, UK

Like many British seaside towns, the coastal community of White Rock in the town of Hastings struggles with poor quality housing, high housing need and a lack of response from the traditional market to meet the needs of those excluded due to spiralling prices. Its residents took action to find another way, setting up a group – Hastings Commons – to take community control of derelict and difficult to sell or let buildings around White Rock.

The team has transformed these properties and buildings into homes, work hubs and social spaces which are affordable and open to everyone from the local area regardless of their income. It is an antidote to the rapid gentrification of the town caused by the exodus from London prompted by the capital's spiralling house prices.

Using grant funding, it has so far brought 8,500 square metres of local property (much of it is part of the town's historic architecture) under community ownership, benefiting

6,385 people who use the space – including 15 residents and more than 160 commercial tenants. These are held under permanent community ownership, rented out and used by the community in ways that will always be affordable.

Many of the area's new residents were previously experiencing homelessness, sofa surfing with friends and relatives, or in very unstable or overcrowded housing. Importantly the project meets the housing needs of those who are not considered vulnerable enough to be an urgent priority for social housing allocation (public housing), but are still in acute housing need.

"The focus is on putting people first, making sure that housing decisions are made with the community's needs in mind, not on the basis of how much money can be made," the organisation states.

Lessons from this initiative are already being passed on to other community-led housing organisations and CLTs in the UK. The team is also developing a course to teach local community groups about development economics so they can learn the core principles behind community ownership.

And though residents have invested time and energy and their limited resources into building these communities, they are increasingly vulnerable to attack, raid or destruction either by criminals or by developers seeking to take over ownership of plots of land – often in prime locations in the city.

Meanwhile residents were mistrusting of any efforts to secure land ownership in law, fearing any process of gentrification – including the formalisation of their land rights in the area – could cause huge cost of living increases that would push them off the homes and the land that could finally become theirs.

Around the period of the Olympics in the city, resistance was extremely high. **"In one favela there were even rumours of international soccer stars buying up property, and the Financial Times advertised that international investors should buy up in this favela,"** says Theresa Williamson, founding executive director of Catalytic Communities, an NGO working to support Rio de Janeiro's favelas. **"One of the solutions we discussed was community land trusts. We didn't think it could happen, because it felt too distant from anything that had already happened."**

But after visiting and learning from community work in Puerto Rico, and the success of the CLT model there, there is now hope for a radical change for Brazil's major cities too. **"We were thrilled, and from that moment we started a dialogue. We had interns interview them to present the model in Brazil. We began a relationship with them,"** Williamson says. The Favela Community Land Trust project is using their guidance to adapt and introduce the CLT model to Brazil's favelas, giving residents more control and rights over their land and homes.

World Habitat has been closely involved in that project, which is still in its infancy, by providing legal support to help obtain recognition of rights, and through the drafting and endorsing of a new federal law creating the right to develop a CLT and assisting with community

engagement. CLTs have already been successfully integrated into local government planning, with lobbying resulting in their presence being formally written into the Rio de Janeiro City Plan.

"Because we're introducing CLTs in a new country it's not about starting a specific community land trust, it's about introducing a new model," Williams says. **"We're working with communities that want to retrofit the model where they have already built their own housing and communities. It's about improving the quality of the housing that a huge portion of Brazilians have built for themselves. We have been working on those different fronts ever since."**

Once one is implemented, the intention is to spread the initiative across the country and South America region. **"The potential is enormous given Brazil's housing scenario and the number of people who are not housed with security of tenure worldwide."**

Lessons learned

Whether in expensive European cities or the informal communities of South America, community land trusts are changing the way low- and middle-income people think about their right to housing and their access to land. These principles are already being applied worldwide with thousands of new trusts expected to be created within the next year – many of them building on the lessons already learned.

These projects offer a way to build more homes in a complementary way for future generations, and to invest in environmentally sustainable habitats. According to Dave Smith, **"It's a promise that is both revolutionary and very simple – housing which is affordable, intentional and sustainable."**



Inclusion

Image Credit: Ecumenical Humanitarian Organization

Across the world, some groups of people find themselves marginalised by our economies and societies. These may be poorer communities left behind in the formal economy, or people excluded by discriminatory practices because of their race, religion, disability, gender identity or sexual orientation. These communities often face particular barriers in accessing adequate, safe and affordable housing. In many cases they also have unique and specific housing needs, which can only be met in a supportive and safe community that is respectful of their identity.

While many nations have become more culturally progressive over the last four decades, pockets of exclusion still exist. When these exclusions affect the right to housing, they undermine quality of life, wellbeing and the opportunity to flourish. Safe and adequate housing – accessible both physically and economically – is a recognised human right. To uphold this right, access must be fully inclusive.

Beyond the characteristics of gender, race and sexuality, inclusivity also means recognising and supporting people disadvantaged by factors such as location, age, ability, or socioeconomic background. Too often, housing policy overlooks these groups. The most successful initiatives challenge this exclusion by building new, long-term relationships between tenant and resident, the community and the land on which they live.

Over the years, our judges have been inspired by the efforts made by projects to bring together parts of the community and enable people to remain in their homes even as their life circumstances change. In 2004, Singapore's Toa Payoh town renewal scheme was recognised for embracing its increasingly elderly district community and retrofitting their homes, preventing the breakdown of their networks and preventing housing loss through increasing vulnerability. In the US, Mia Senior Living in the District of Columbia was highlighted by judges

for developing an affordable, evidence-based model for assisted living – combining care and retrofitting – to allow older persons and people with disabilities to remain in their home rather than be forced into shared nursing care against their wishes. The scheme works with Medicaid, public authorities and housing charities and generates employment and economic benefits to the whole community. The model has since been replicated in at least 40 other settings in the US and offers a template with international relevance

An inclusive history

When the World Habitat Awards began seeking out examples of radical housing action four decades ago, the inclusive approaches identified were often small projects in large cities. In South London, in the borough of Lewisham, the Walter Segal self-build housing scheme of the 1970s and 80s offered low-income households, often facing life in extremely poor and overcrowded housing, the opportunity to build their own homes using lightweight timber-frame construction. Twenty seven families were involved in the pilot project, supported by trained architects and evening

classes in basic building methods. The homes, completed in 1981, were made more affordable through a shared-ownership scheme – a housing finance model now common across the UK – and are still lived in today.

At the same time, in housing policy, the organisation Stonewall Housing was established in the UK to provide a voice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who were experiencing discrimination in accessing a home, higher rates of homelessness and limited housing options in later life. The organisation also worked to support victims of domestic abuse and to improve housing conditions and rights for LGBTIQ+ refugees and migrants. Over time, Stonewall Housing expanded to include advocacy work with the homelessness charity Shelter and supported housing service for gay and bi adults, as well as young people under the age of 25. By 2015, the Stonewall Housing team was supporting more than 1,300 people a year.

The scheme was transformational in shifting attitudes towards the LGBTIQ+ community in the UK. Today the majority of housing organisations in the country adopt approaches modelled on that early support framework



Image Credit: Stonewall Housing, 2016

when working with marginalised clients.

Both the Walter Segal scheme and Stonewall Housing received awards recognising their work making access to housing more inclusive, and for embedding values of inclusion into the local housing practices. Since then, this ethos has been reflected in large-scale schemes in a broad range of global settings.

More recently, awards have gone to initiatives that link inclusive design with solutions to wider social challenges. In Chile, where rural housing poverty is playing a significant role in mass migration to under-prepared cities, the government launched an action plan to prioritise the housing needs of rural people already experiencing vulnerabilities, such as female-led households and indigenous people. The programme provides funding and support to community groups to build their own home or upgrade existing ones, ensuring they are habitable and equipped with suitable sanitation and weather protection. Crucially the scheme ensures that higher funding is available to those with the lower income, and those in high-priority bands such as older people and those in the most remote parts of the country.



Image Credit: Viviendas para las Entidades Sociales, Spain, 2019

Inclusion and self-sufficiency: making progress together

The structure of local economies is a barrier to good quality and affordable housing for

some groups. In large European cities, a shifting, transient population puts particular pressure on housing which is often already in scarce supply.

Barcelona, for example, receives millions of tourists each year, many of whom rely on short-term lets through online platforms. This demand has worsened the city's housing crisis, reducing further the options available to local people on low and middle incomes.

Each home diverted into the tourist market is one less available to local residents, adding to the shortfall in the wider region of Catalonia, which already has 170,000 fewer homes than it needs to house its population. Rates of eviction and homelessness continue to rise.

The Viviendas para las Entidades Sociales project has responded by increasing the supply of affordable housing in the region by acquiring and renovating empty homes or securing leases and offering them to charities working with vulnerable people. The project is run by Habitat3, which renovates the homes in collaboration with local social enterprises providing training and employment opportunities to people who have experienced social exclusion.

The organisation also manages the homes, working with charities to select the tenants. This ensures that people most disadvantaged in the open housing market- such as those experiencing mental health issues, people with disability, drug addiction or cultural and language barriers - are prioritised. The project has already renovated hundreds of properties, creating homes for hundreds of tenants.

A similar principle of granting opportunity to those excluded, underpins a major scheme in Karnataka, India, which has enabled Koraga people and nine other tribal communities to access land and stable housing for the first time.

The ActionAid project, working together with local NGOs, secured rights to thousands of acres of land for local tribal communities and



Image Credit: Action Aid India, 2019

supported them to access grants to pay for housing materials and labour to build their own homes. This has acted as a foundation for them to rebuild their lives: food security has improved and more children are attending school. The self-build development scheme has also given Koraga women the chance to take up community leadership positions for the first time.

For centuries, the Koraga people suffered intense social oppression under India's caste system. Though caste-based discrimination is now illegal, many prejudices remain widespread across society. In the most egregious example, Koragas are forced to eat leftover food from upper caste households mixed with inedible and demeaning substances such as human hair and fingernails.

Gowri, a Koraga woman who lives with her husband and four sons, became the owner of an acre of agricultural land through the project and now describes herself as "self-reliant". She describes her journey to independence through the project as a "breakthrough" for her family and her people.

"Before land was allotted to us, I used to work as a labourer in the houses of upper caste people. We were treated as untouchables. We were doing long hours of work; it was a painful struggle of life," she says. "Now, we have obtained homestead land and have constructed a decent house which reflects our dignity. Now our efforts are to support and ensure every Koraga claims their right to land for a decent survival and dignity, as land is inextricably linked to dignity. With pride, I wish to say that land is a breakthrough in my life to come out of oppression."

Breaking away from centuries of oppression and discrimination involved a significant intervention to disrupt local social and economic norms. The project was highlighted by Leilani Farha, the former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing and one of the judges for the World Habitat Awards. She described it as evidence of **"the centrality of the right to housing, to health, dignity and security. The rights-based approach - and clear success of the project - makes this project an example of true leadership in the right to housing field,"** Farha added.



Image Credit: La Ciguë, 2024

Young and priced out: Student housing in Geneva

Gaia, a 24-year-old student at the University of Geneva, has been living in a shared flat managed by La Ciguë for three years. Before joining the cooperative, she lived with her mother in a Geneva apartment and juggled three jobs while studying. But during the Covid-19 lockdown, that living situation became increasingly difficult. Gaia moved in with her boyfriend's family for a while, and then sublet a room that she describes as “expensive, and unsanitary”. That was when Gaia found La Ciguë, a cooperative known across Geneva for providing affordable housing for students – a World Habitat Award winner in 2024, in recognition of decades of success.

Geneva is the most expensive city to live in across Europe, and this high cost of living makes it tough for many students, especially those from lower-income backgrounds, to attend its renowned universities. This has been a long-standing issue: protests over the lack of affordable housing in Geneva led

to the creation of La Ciguë in 1986. Today, La Ciguë manages nearly 740 student rooms in central Geneva.

More than half of these rooms are in shared flats within vacant properties that are leased from public bodies and private owners. The remaining 40 per cent are in buildings developed by La Ciguë itself, designed with high energy-efficiency standards and featuring commercial spaces that help build a strong sense of community.

To stay in these rooms, students, interns or trainees must also become members of the cooperative, meaning they contribute time and skills to support the community in exchange for affordable rent. On average, rents are 55 per cent lower than the open market and residents can stay for up to five years, offering a much-needed sense of stability during a period of life that can otherwise feel uncertain.

As a non-profit organization, La Ciguë reinvests any surplus rental income into future housing projects and solidarity initiatives. This includes helping people facing vulnerabilities, both locally and internationally.

Similar approaches have been used to break down walls created by intergenerational persecution in very different economic contexts. In Europe, Roma people are among the most marginalised groups. In Serbia, which has one of the largest populations, many Roma people live in poor quality housing with little access to public services, contributing to poor health. A project funded primarily by charitable donations from Swiss Church Aid and a grant from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation improved the living conditions of 3000 Roma people, living in 13 settlements, in its first five years from 2008. The work was carried out in partnership with residents, and also provided on job training, education support, legal advice and access to schooling for children. The scheme was not only about funding high quality housing, but offers a model on how to promote inclusion for any marginalised or historically persecuted group.

Inclusive leadership around the world

In many parts of the world, communities at risk of forced eviction and of losing their right to housing are being supported into the formal economy through revolutionary housing action schemes. In Jakarta, Indonesia, an anti-eviction scheme which protected the land and housing rights of residents from 25 informal kampung communities who were threatened by an aggressive and discriminatory slum clearance

policy, justified on the grounds of flood prevention and climate risk management. The pushback has given this traditionally marginalised group a new stake in their country. With that has come further legal change, and a transfer of power to the community.

The project – run jointly by the Jakarta Urban Poor Network which represents residents of 25 kampung communities, urbanism think-tank Rujak Centre for Urban Studies and the Urban Poor Consortium, a networking and advocacy organisation – also challenged social perceptions of Kampung residents. Its advocacy work helped secure important legal changes that now protect more communities from eviction by either business monopolies or governments.

The future

As the world faces a series of economic and social changes, the risk of exclusion and of creating new marginalised groups, is ever present. Housing needs are evolving, and so are the characteristics of those least served by the housing market. The right to housing is a human right, and it cannot be realised unless the projects and plans that create our future communities are truly inclusive.

In the next chapter of the World Habitat Awards, we will continue to place inclusion at the heart of our decision making. The awards will seek to celebrate leading practice in meeting housing needs for all, without exceptions.



Image Credit: Rural Chile, 2024



Conclusion

Image Credit: Payatas Liter of Light Philippines, 2015

From seismic shifts within Russia to conflict in the Middle East, from the arrival of the internet to the onward march of climate change, the last 40 years have been a tumultuous period in human history. The pace of social, political and environmental change has required creativity and determination to solve some of the biggest problems faced by our global communities.

In many ways our situation is better now than it was when World Habitat and UN-Habitat first started the World Habitat Awards back in the 1980s. Living conditions are improving right across the world. Extreme poverty rates are lowering, education is available to more children than ever before, global infant mortality rates have halved since 1990 and life expectancies – including healthy life expectancy – are rising too.

More people than ever now have a safe, stable and suitable place to call home and the World

Habitat Awards have played a key role in getting us there. Sharing the examples of 40 years of award winning projects has helped make for better housing initiatives internationally. Every day their work is sparking new ideas that change lives, often for people experiencing the most disadvantaged conditions.

Yet there are still hundreds of millions of people falling through the cracks. Homelessness is rising right across the globe. Even in the wealthiest nations, affordable, safe and secure housing is often out of reach of many low- and middle-income households. The people experiencing the most marginalisation in our communities are more likely to find themselves poorly housed too. The pressures of privatisation and deregulation are rising again as populism spreads.

In the next four decades, life will change even more rapidly. The roll-out of artificial intelligence (AI) will change the way the world economy

operates, putting many communities at risk of poverty, as many skilled and unskilled jobs are replaced with automation and AI services.

The effects of climate change are already with us, but the worst impacts will be felt within the coming decades – especially in terms of the world's housing.

Changing patterns of migration will put pressure on the areas where large numbers of people choose to travel in search of a safe and stable life. If not inevitable, conflict between nations and communities appears more likely in these challenging circumstances.

Whether it's eradicating street homelessness, making housing affordable and accessible to the poorest, or protecting communities against the ravages of climate change, we have witnessed how people have organised to respond to the unique challenges they face with local solutions that work. The awards have highlighted the most interesting and innovative ideas borne out of a need to make things better – the kind of ideas that, in time and with the right support, will change the world.

The next chapter of our shared history will require these skills, and more, in abundance.

So far, almost 400 outstanding projects have been recognised by the World Habitat Awards.

That is only the start. Over the next 40 years, the Awards will continue to highlight good



Image Credit: STARTBLOK Netherlands, 2018

work, and seek out pioneering and often revolutionary housing initiatives from across the world.

Crucially, the Awards won't exist only to celebrate but also to have real, meaningful and measurable impact. World Habitat, in partnership with UN-Habitat, will aim to play an even bigger role in disseminating the lessons, policies and expertise that we find, for the benefit of the whole world.

We are entering a febrile period but we are excited about the progress that, together, we can make towards a world in which everyone has a safe and secure home.



Image Credit: Champlain Housing Trust, USA 2008

Afterword: Rumana Kabir

Rumana Kabir is a World Habitat trustee and a policy lead on urban regeneration at the UK Government's Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Over the last 40 years the World Habitat Awards team has demonstrated a remarkable, rare and incredibly precious skill: the ability to find optimism and hope in the smallest corners of a world that faces huge challenges.

Housing is a primary human right and, thanks to the World Habitat Awards, we are one step closer to realising our shared ambition - that every person should have a safe, affordable and comfortable place to call home.

However small the project, however local the impact, our team has found this good work, shared it, celebrated it and worked hard to spread its message to communities right across the world, through networks of experts, professionals, activists and advocates - and through the voices of those whose lives are benefited by these projects. Four decades from now, we believe that ambition will be met.

The World Habitat Awards - and, more importantly, the innovators behind each awarded project - have incredible influence, yet sometimes the true impact of their work goes unnoticed. Take, for example, the recent kampung community project in Indonesia, a winner for its impressive impact.

Activists worked tirelessly, over decades, to support poor communities at risk of forced eviction due to slum clearance and regeneration. These campaigners fought ingrained prejudice and political discrimination to protect the housing rights of hundreds of families, supporting



400 families into new apartments on the site of their former makeshift properties. They also forced through legal changes to ensure they had a legal right to their land.

Their persistence, commitment and focus influenced local and central government, and was a wake-up call for governments all over the world who see what is possible when communities stand up for their rights. A small group of local activists sparked a global chain reaction, and this is just one example of that.

The world's housing challenges are evolving and now exist across national and even continental boundaries, particularly when it comes to tackling the migration crisis and the plight of refugees. With that shift, the impact of our work is spreading too - as we have already seen, from the dominance of the Housing First model in tackling homelessness, to the innovation celebrated in facing the realities of the climate crisis.

This is where our focus for the next four decades will be. The World Habitat Awards will seek to have even more influence, amplifying and extending the impact of these award-winning projects and the solutions they generate to increasingly complex problems. This will be seen from the grassroots right up to the global political arena.

As a professional working in low-income housing, I know just how significant awards can be in changing the discourse around how problems are solved. As an architecture student in the mid-1990s I was heavily influenced by the Aga Khan Award, which encourages building concepts that address the needs of majority Muslim societies. World Habitat has the power to do the same and influence a new generation of advocates for decent housing in the face of a changing world, in every community with every type of challenge before them.

Over the last four decades the great strength of the awards has been the variety of scale it embraces, from tiny community regeneration schemes benefiting a handful of people and funded on a tiny budget to huge national and even international housing projects. That is brilliant, and inspiring for everyone who engages with the work we do to chart the progress that is being made all around the world.

Every single project we reward, in the past and in the future, matters. Solving the world's problems always starts with a small first step, but World Habitat will help to take that next, great leap forward.

We extend our sincere thanks to all the individuals and organisations who contributed to this report through their insights, expertise, and collaboration. Their input has been instrumental in shaping the findings presented here, and in furthering our shared mission to ensure adequate housing for all.

We are especially grateful to UN-Habitat, our valued partners in the World Habitat Awards for the past 40 years. Together, we continue to make it possible for practical, inspiring housing solutions to reach the communities where they are needed most.