

# It All Starts at Home.

## Local Actions for Sustainable Cities and Communities.

WUF12 background paper zero draft

### Introduction

Consider the pressing issues that affect our daily experience: the cost of your housing, your ease of commuting, the air you breathe, the safety of your water supply, your access to safe public space, your exposure to the impacts of climate disasters and conflict. These are not trivial matters; they define humanity's shared urban existence and how 4.4 billion people live, work, and find happiness across cities and communities.

If you share a deep concern for these issues, then the World Urban Forum (WUF) holds immense significance for you. It is the place where our aspirations meet the realities and future pathways of urban life, as shaped by leading actors and thinkers from around the world.

#### *It All Starts Now*

WUF12 will take place at a moment of growing calls to collectively address global challenges such as rising poverty and inequality, climate change, armed conflict, the digital divide, and a revitalized multilateral system. It will occur some weeks after the United Nations Summit of the Future, which will be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to elevate global cooperation and governance.

Moreover, WUF12 will be held just five years before the deadline set to realize the 2030 agenda, taking center stage to showcase how humanity's present and future are inevitably tied to cities, and the transformative role of sustainable cities and communities in realizing global goals now.

#### *It All Starts Locally*

Central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is the concept of localization, which is the process of achieving the SDGs at the local level in coherence with national development frameworks and in line with community priorities. The idea of localization has also evolved beyond implementation at the local level, and now recognizes the pivotal role of subnational governments as change catalysts and policymakers. It is a two-way process that necessitates a "whole of society + whole of government" approach.

#### *It All Starts Together*

Accordingly, localization can enable the empowerment of all local stakeholders, encourage citizen engagement and make sustainable development more responsive to local needs. It's about turning global aspirations into reality - plans and schemes that can be scaled up and down, translated, and mainstreamed to address similar issues in neighborhoods, communities, and cities at large. Further, localization has the power to scale positive impact stemming from the smallest communities to sprawling megacities. Imagine the possibilities if we fully embrace the potential of localization all together.

In the context of sustainable cities and communities, the words "It All Starts at Home." serve as a recognition that the foundation for resilient, equitable, and sustainable urban spaces lies within the choices, innovations, and collaborations of individuals and communities. The concept of "at home" extends beyond the physical structure that shelters us; it encompasses the cultural, social, and environmental dimensions that define our communities. The phrase is also an invitation to take home values, innovations, solutions, and inspiration from WUF12 and start transformational change from home: locally, together, and now.

## The WUF12 Dialogues

Dialogues are high-profile events which will take place at WUF and which set the agenda for policy and action. They provide a platform for global thinkers, practitioners, and decision-makers to share insights and solutions on themes of global importance and include active discussion with the audience. Discussions collect key



reflections on the status of and way forward for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The WUF12 theme “It all starts at home; local actions for sustainable cities and communities” is supported by 6 Dialogues, each of which explores a different dimension of the theme. The dialogues are curated by UN-Habitat and facilitated by leading global thought leaders and experts.

## **Dialogue 1: Housing our future.**

*Key words: Housing inadequacy, inequality, homelessness, renewed social contract, human rights, basic services*

### **What needs to change to solve housing inadequacy for billions across our cities and communities?**

We live in a fragile world, where the effects of the pandemic<sup>i</sup> and on-going crises of all kinds have laid bare the risks we left unattended for decades. Housing affordability is now a global crisis affecting people in equal measures in low- and high-income countries. Over the past 50 years, housing prices in high-income countries increased three times more than the price of other basic services.<sup>ii</sup> Further, there are an estimated 318 million people worldwide which are homeless, and up to 2.8 billion people experiencing housing inadequacy<sup>iii</sup>. Also, urban inequality has been increasing for 70% of the world’s population and has been identified as a key obstacle to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>iv, v</sup>

In this light, creating new mechanisms to listen to and empower the most vulnerable in cities, as well as building and regaining trust and legitimacy are critical for sustainable, affordable, inclusive, and resilient urbanization. Indeed, the United Nations Secretary-general, has called for solidarity with the world’s most vulnerable who need urgent support in responding to the worst economic and social crisis in generations<sup>vi</sup>. Specifically, he points to the urgency “to renew the social contract between governments and their people and within societies, so as to rebuild trust and embrace a comprehensive vision of human rights.”<sup>vii</sup>

Addressing one of the lines of the great urban divide - housing- is therefore a matter of acute urgency. It is unacceptable that billions today live in inadequate housing, which has countless adverse ripple effects on their economic and social wellbeing today, and for their offspring tomorrow. No region, country, city or community today is spared from the devastating impacts of housing inadequacy.

Today, cities are expressing a desire for enhanced governance frameworks, seeking increased regulatory power over real estate, as well as funding to improve public housing<sup>viii</sup>. Localization approaches hold a promise to improving lives and communities through innovative strategies, barrier-breaking, anti-discrimination efforts, collaborative initiatives, while leveraging local insights.

This dialogue aims to showcase how adequate housing is a necessary and achievable means to tackle global inequality and realize sustainable cities and communities. It does so by delving into the nexus between housing inadequacy and inequality in cities, as well as laying out policies and mechanisms that successfully empower the most vulnerable while pave the way for a renewed social contract.

### **This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *How can cities and communities forge collaborations to tackle the prolonged housing affordability and costs of living crises?*
- *What changes must traditional governance structures make to resolve the escalating levels of inequality arising from housing inadequacy?*
- *What experiences, innovations, and policies exist that have managed to reduce housing inadequacy and inequalities in cities and which may provide lessons for other parts of the world?*

## **Dialogue 2: A safe home on a warming planet.**

*Key words: Sustainability; climate change; resilience; circularity; proximity.*

**The places we call home are being hit the hardest by the impacts of climate change. How are cities securing a sustainable future for people and planet?**



Cities play a pivotal role in both addressing and exacerbating climate change as two-thirds of greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption occurs in them. Champion cities are actively working to reverse its negative impacts and reduce vulnerability among at-risk communities. At the forefront of addressing climate change in cities are approaches as diverse as mitigating the effects of heatwaves in cities, the local circular economy, urban proximity, urban-rural nexus, nature based solutions, transport-oriented development, among many more.

Cities are uniquely positioned to address climate change from many fronts. For instance, circular economy principles can facilitate resource optimization and the closure of energy and waste loops through recycling, re-use, and energy recovery. Entire neighborhoods and public spaces can be redesigned to act as mitigators of the negative effects of climate change, whether they come in the form of floods or heatwaves. Novel concepts for urban design, such as the 15-minute city leverage the value of proximity to enhance people's lives and to reduce the negative effects of traffic, sprawl, and pollution. Similarly, many solutions exist to make our homes resilient to climate change, whether it entails tapping into indigenous knowledge and nature-based solutions; or addressing larger scale issues such as urban-rural linkages and food production, or even the retrofitting of buildings using locally available resources.

This dialogue delves into localization approaches geared towards resilience and sustainability in light of climate change. It recognizes the importance of empowering and enabling communities to make informed, sustainable choices that preserve their immediate environment and enhance overall quality of life. This dialogue sheds light on the best initiatives and examples that are achieving this.

**This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *What are the most promising avenues to render cities less vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change?*
- *Who is being left out of policies and innovations to mitigate climate change-induced impacts and what is being done locally to avoid this?*
- *In what ways are cities actively working to reverse the negative impacts of climate change, and how significant are local strategies to the global scale of the problem?*

### **Dialogue 3: Lost in translation.**

*Key words: scaling-up and down; ; city diplomacy; local knowledge; networks.*

**How can we make global agendas work for local realities?**

Global Agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement, were primarily negotiated between countries, with increasing involvement from local and diverse stakeholders, as was the case for the negotiation process for the New Urban Agenda. Nevertheless, challenges persist in effectively implementing, adapting, and monitoring global goals within local urban development frameworks.

Challenges in this sub-theme of localization include the disconnection and limit to the roles and responsibilities that different levels of government and stakeholders have. Another set of challenges comes from how such gaps are playing out within urban multilateralism, city and regional networks and their power to communicate, connect, and bring the implementation of the SDGs back home. Further, abstract terms like "resilience" and "adaptive capacity" may be unclear, and have intrinsic challenges to translate into policies, strategic planning, and the goals of local urban actors, hence risking a loss of local concepts of sustainability or a lack of action<sup>ix</sup>.

This dialogue will explore state-of-the-art localization approaches that enhance the global agenda's impact on local level by tailoring, scaling, and contextualizing. This includes the potential of urban multilateralism, and city diplomacy in achieving localization. It also aims to emphasize diverse local knowledge, including indigenous perspectives, nature-based solutions, and locally driven innovations, that can in turn inform global agendas.

**This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *How much of the well-intended global agenda language is actually reaching home?*

- *To what extent are global language and technical jargon barriers to translating global goals into local success stories?*
- *What is the role of city diplomacy in achieving global goals?*

## **Dialogue 4: The costs of localization.**

*Key words: Local financing; multi-level finance; multi-level governance; decentralization; accountability; private sector*

### **How can we enable and account for local action through finance?**

Localization is pivotal for enabling cities and communities to be in the driver's seat when fostering inclusivity, affordability, safety, resilience, and sustainability in urban areas. However, this is not possible without adequate financing.

The foundation of an enabling environment for localization begins at home, primarily with financial empowerment. While there's a gradual shift towards decentralizing funding to the local level, outcomes vary, leaving many local governments contending with significant funding gaps. This empowerment entails not only the direct transfer of funds but also the vital delegation of discretion to local and regional governments, to generate endogenous finance and establish urban planning and management frameworks. Yet, persistent silos within governments and governance frameworks for national and international financing present an enduring challenge, acting as barriers to effective localization.

Creating an enabling environment for the localization of Sustainable Development Goals includes the need for financial transfers from the central government to local and regional counterparts, addressing imbalances. This environment also demands legislative bodies and decentralization levels that acknowledge local and regional governments as autonomous entities with legal powers, financial autonomy, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and the capacity to advocate for citizens before national authorities.

Cities increasingly rely on private capital to support the scale, finance, and implementation of urban development. Access to substantial private equity globally is proving instrumental in closing the financing and infrastructure gap. Frontrunner cities are tapping into it, enhancing local investment and capital management capabilities for continued, inclusive, and quality service delivery.

At the same time, cities have immense potential to generate revenues and financing for national economies. Many cities globally generate substantial financial resources for their own investments but also for national finance. Yet, too many cities remain with untapped potential that offers huge opportunities if unleashed. The role of local finance in national and global financial systems is often overlooked but must be at the center in an urban world where local and regional governments have a major role.

In exploring regulatory and policy constraints, expertise deficiencies, short political cycles, corruption, and accountability issues, this dialogue delves into the role of financial enablement to achieve localization approaches. It also raises questions about actions cities can take to enhance accountability and discusses the oversight role of various government levels during localization processes.

### **This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *While the financial challenges that constrain localization are well-known; why isn't the needle moving for cities and communities to fulfill their mandates?*
- *What distinctive opportunities arise in financing localization from various levels of governments and different types of local actors, namely the private sector?*
- *How can cities enhance accountability, and oversight within urban development, to address corruption at the local level?*

## **Dialogue 5: The innovation dilemma**



*Key words: innovation, tech-frontier, artificial intelligence, digital divide, knowledge transfer; big data.*

### **How will technology change our lives rapidly, irreversibly, and forever?**

In the era of continuous technological advancement, the question arises: how does technology and innovation shape our lives? Emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, and automated processes are modifying the way we experience cities, requiring a delicate balance between innovation, privacy, rights, and equity. At the same time, policy makers and regulators are struggling to keep pace with the rate of change.

Navigating this landscape involves recognizing the challenges and opportunities of innovation, technology, data, and experimentation particularly at the local level. Localization processes aim to drive innovation towards inclusive outcomes that increase government efficiency and make urban services more cheaply and widely available. Yet, the path is fraught with obstacles and potential failures. Frontier and emerging tech, while promising, can also reinforce inequalities, abuse by authorities, violations of data privacy, and marginalize certain groups.

At the same time, we live in an era of experimentation which can become important for cities and communities to identify positive pathways of change as it can open doors to improve local economies, strengthen inclusivity for minorities, and engage the citizenry in urban development processes<sup>x</sup>. However, experimentation in this field must be accompanied by accountability, transparency, and careful planning. Localized approaches can start small and address various scales of innovation, from specific locality issues such as participatory budgeting to complex challenges such as regional climate change adaptation strategies<sup>xi</sup> derived from local trial and error. To foster experimentation, cities must provide niches as protected spaces for sub-optimally performing experiments<sup>xii</sup>, allowing a "license to fail" and determining the most effective solutions. Crucially, this license to fail is not a license for recklessness or abuse and must be carried out with due protection of rights.

Drawing on experiences that have both failed and found success, this dialogue aims to provide answers to the big questions surrounding innovation and how they can change our lives for better or worse.

#### **This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *How can innovation and technology be used without leaving vulnerable populations behind?*
- *How can cities support various kinds of urban experimentation aimed at addressing societal problems without subjecting people to unnecessary risks?*
- *Why is it that in an urban world, urban data tends to be so poor?*

## **Dialogue 6: The loss of home**

*Key words: Regional conflicts and wars; Loss of home/ homelessness; Displacement / refugees*

### **Faced with destruction, displacement, and despair: what is the true meaning of home?**

As the world witnesses the highest number of violent conflicts since 1945, urban areas are at the center of conflicts: they have become both the main battlefield and the only refuge left. The ongoing devastating impact of conflicts on cities and communities is disproportionately felt by the most vulnerable. Conflicts are killing people, rendering others homeless and displaced, without basic services, food and water.

As conflicts increasingly impact cities, it is important to recognize cities, local governments, and urban stakeholders as the key protagonists to mitigating and overcoming them. Likewise, in the face of conflicts there is a need to address a failing multilateral system that is not supporting those in most need.

The shift from a rural to a more urban-centered response to crises has been picking up speed. At the same time, the interrelation of conflicts with the different crises and their impacts is ever clearer. Climate change – migratory flows – food security – instability – inequality – etc. The intricacies of these urban crises necessitate an understanding of their impact and the critical role that local actors can have as front-line mitigation, response, and reconstruction. This opens the possibility for starting at home with localization approaches to conflicts, that can open the door for innovation that renders pathways to mitigate and eventually solve crises.



The pathway to localizing conflict response is paved with opportunities to go beyond mere recovery, but to venture into a road that fundamentally changes our cities and communities for the better. This entails processes that can redefine and empower cities and communities to lead towards peace with authority and innovation in times of crisis. When addressing displacement, cities can move beyond short-term solutions and reimagine a future where communities are not merely restored but thrive in sustainable and inclusive ways.

This dialogue focuses on approaches that bring the science, research and data on the future of urban crises at the fingertips of local governments to help them mobilize the political will and resources for action at scale, shifting fundamental policies and practices to accelerate progress.

**This dialogue sparks debate with the following questions:**

- *How can we ensure that the communities affected by crisis are also empowered as architects of their own recovery and made central to rebuilding processes?*
- *For those people and communities that face displacement, how can they be enabled and assisted to create a home away from home?*
- *What roles do local governments, and their associations and networks have in the design and implementation of crisis response?*

## **The promise for WUF12**

For 5 days, WUF12 will host thousands of people from all parts of the world. There will be over 300 hundred different events, an extended Urban Expo with the Cairo's Urban Week programme, in addition to countless opportunities for networking and informal exchange. All WUF12 main sessions will be livestreamed and translated to all 6 UN languages, as well as international sign language in English and Arabic. Further, the WUF12 premises will be universally accessible for people with visual, hearing, and mobility impairments.

WUF12 will serve to confront complexities of sustainable urban development head-on. These discussions will be enriched by a dynamic collective process that encourages discussions and deliberation around the uncomfortable truths of our urbanizing world. Panel gender parity, geographical representation, and diversity of approaches will be ensured in all main sessions.

The forum will aim to push boundaries to achieve sustainable urbanization ambitiously and authentically, fostering a much-needed space for game-changing conversations. Consequently, WUF12 will have a focus on initiatives and interventions which showcase concrete, tangible, and positive impact. Moreover, WUF12 aims at propelling the ideas generated within its premises far beyond the event; documenting and making iconic and groundbreaking interventions widely available to everyone everywhere via its live feed and online platforms. Also, WUF12 vows to amplify the voices of all, with a particular emphasis on marginalized and vulnerable communities. It seeks not only to ensure their representation but to empower them as critical vanguards of change.

At a time when public trust in governance is at a crossroads, WUF12 pledges to strengthen approaches that renew trust across various scales. Fostering values of solidarity, justice, inclusivity, and sustainability the forum envisions cities as key multilateral players promoting global collaboration. Through the promise and the theme, WUF12 aims to achieve common goals for the well-being of people, planet, prosperity, and peace.

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