

Outcome document of the UCLG World Congress session “Cities for Adequate Housing: from present emergencies to a future of housing justice”

On October 11th, 2022, in the framework of the UCLG World Congress, UCLG, led by its Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights and its Research team (GOLD), co-organized the session [“Cities for Adequate Housing: from present emergencies to a future of housing justice”](#) in partnership with [Habitat International Coalition](#), the [Global Platform for the Right to the City](#) and the [International Institute for Environment and Development](#). The session proposed an exchange on practices and strategies put forward by local and regional governments to protect the right to adequate housing during the COVID-19 emergency, identifying **how these experiences could be revisited, reinforced and sustained over time as a basis for a joint, local-level strategy to face a global, yet localized, housing emergency.**

In this sense, the conversation sought to kickstart the articulation of the upcoming joint work of the UCLG Housing Community of Practice. A summary of the key points exchanged can be found below, and a list with useful resources can be found as an annex.

Summary of the session’s discussion

Following an introduction on the work of UCLG on Cities for Adequate Housing and the [local governance of complex emergencies](#) by **Ainara Fernández**, UCLG Research, the first segment of the session, framed and moderated by **Adriana Allen**, President of Habitat International Coalition, was devoted to understanding what emergency housing measures had been adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, whether they were still in place or not, and what key lessons could be extracted. **Somsook Boonyabancha**, from the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, noted how, during the pandemic, it was community organization in Asian cities – “having people reach out to and check on each other” – that bridged the gap between government institutions and the people in need of support, underlining in particular the key role of women in making this work. Ms. Boonyabancha stressed the importance of **understanding housing systems** not just as buildings, but **as systems of people**. She thus suggested that **local and regional governments (LRGs) should encourage and support the building of communities, given how important the scale of the community has proven to be, in order to then be able to upscale solutions and achieve city-wide impact.** Importantly, she concluded by highlighting that **the key question is not just how to move from pandemic to permanent housing solutions, but to move to solutions that worked for the people.**

Sonia Francine, Secretary of Human Rights and Citizenship of the city of São Paulo, shared **two key housing-related emergency measures** that were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first one was the **reconversion of hotel rooms**, which were empty due to mobility restrictions, **into emergency housing for homeless people, particularly the elderly.** Currently, this measure has been extended to house Afghan families seeking refuge. Ms. Francine noted that while at the beginning about 200 people were sheltered in hotel rooms, the scheme currently houses about 3,000 people. She shared how the city’s decision to negotiate with, as opposed to force, hotel owners was key to the success, together with the fact that it was mostly older people who were housed. Moreover, for

Afghan families, the use of hotel rooms has enabled asylum seekers to stay together, as opposed to refugee camps, where men and women are housed apart. However, she also noted that, although people are entitled to five meals a day and securely housed, the downsides are that hotel rooms do not offer autonomy and users themselves are saying this should not be considered as a permanent solution. In spite of this and of the high cost of this scheme, the city continues supporting it, while exploring more sustainable options.



The second measure, Ms. Francine shared, has been to **offer financial aid to women who are victims of domestic violence**, which got worse with lockdowns. Sao Paulo's Secretary of Human Rights is in charge of this measure and women no longer have to go to the police first, which they may not want to do for a variety of reasons. **This has now been transformed into a law.** Ms. Francine shared **a new housing policy that entitles people with disabilities to priority rental housing or access to other kinds of housing.** She also shared that **another housing measure adopted in Sao Paulo recognizes homeless people's right to choose, which has also now become a law.** It consists of "asking homeless people whether they would like to go back to their families, rent a room or share a rental room".

In the second segment, moderated by **Alexandre Apsan Frediani**, Principal Researcher at the International Institute for Environment and Development, participants discussed the importance of articulating a joint municipalist strategy for addressing the housing emergency, what objectives it should pursue and what principles should underlie it. **Sunkarie Kabba**, Mayor of Makeni, underlined how in Sierra Leone communities regularly experience emergencies that render them homeless and lead to situations that are hazardous for their health. The mayor noted how this was due to settlement patterns (such as fire-prone informal settlements); harsh weather conditions (such as floods and storms); and emerging social welfare concerns (such as partial concentrations of infectious diseases and unsafe building). In light of such complexity, **Ms. Kabba highlighted the importance of strengthening multi-level governance structures to ensure a common understanding of priorities, processes and budgets to ensure effective and expeditious responses.** She also underscored the **importance for municipalities to take preventive measures when possible.** In particular, she spoke about how **supporting continuous community participation will help identify best responses and support the development of partnerships for effective emergency housing delivery.** She also emphasized how municipal leaders can leverage urban planning as a powerful tool to guide investment and balance development and environmental concerns. The mayor also highlighted how,

to effectively do all of these, it was necessary to build the capacity of local government officials, for which local educational institutions were important and could be supported by LRGs themselves.



Jonathan Cote, former Mayor of New Westminster, stressed how the commonalities in the issues exposed by session participants called for adopting a global perspective to address the housing crisis. Regarding his municipality and Metro Vancouver, its metropolitan area, Mr. Cote emphasized that the disconnection between salaries and housing sale and rental prices was a major concern. He noted how, during the pandemic, all three levels of government urged to spotlight housing challenges in an unprecedented manner. He shared in particular two federal policies that were adopted and the role played by multilevel coordination in their implementation. Firstly, the **Rapid Housing Initiative for expediting the supply of affordable housing**, which was immediately oversubscribed. The former mayor shared how LRGs are negotiating through their national association, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, for further rounds and for this kind of investment to become a permanent fixture of federal support. Secondly, Mr. Cote mentioned **changes in tenant protections**, some of which he indicated were short-lived while others became permanent. **As per its local government, Mr. Cote shared how they have eliminated regulatory barriers to ease the construction of public housing:** “we have eliminated approval processes for public housing, which no longer has to go through the same process as a market development process, it is a completely different track”.

In moving towards a joint municipalist strategy, Mr. Cote highlighted three key principles: (i) the importance of **not forgetting the pandemic showed it was possible to act boldly, quickly and coordinated** on housing challenges; (ii) the need to **recognize how our housing systems perpetuate inequalities**, making some populations suffer more than others when emergencies like COVID strike; and (iii) the need to **view housing as a system that needs to be fixed** through concrete policies but also through adopting a holistic approach to it. **And as a system that should be able to respond to a spectrum of housing needs.**

Pascal Smet, State Secretary of the Brussels region, shared concrete challenges and measures they are implementing to protect three population groups of special concern. Firstly, regarding asylum seekers, he emphasized the importance of being able to house them while they were going through the asylum-seeking process. In this regard, he **expressed the need for a country-wide approach that enables the distribution of people seeking asylum across the country, so as to alleviate the**

pressure that larger cities' housing systems are under. Secondly, regarding homeless populations, he shared how, like in Sao Paulo, they repurposed empty hotel rooms as emergency housing and are currently moving towards adopting a "Housing First" approach. Thirdly, with respect to lower- and middle-income renters living in the city, the State Secretary highlighted how it is necessary to increase the offer of affordable housing, while renovating existing housing and preserving and greening public space to ensure these populations can stay in the city – a challenge, he argued, shared by many European cities. In order to do so, Mr. Smet shared they have (i) changed the law to include affordable housing quotas in new constructions; (ii) subsidized rents; (iii) created a public agency to guarantee rent payments to homeowners that put up their housing units for rent to lower-income populations; (iv) granted the extension of COVID-19 eviction moratoria to winter times; (v) changed the building code to preserve and green public space but also to increase quality of life inside houses. In particular, activating rooftops and encouraging inhabitants to turn them into green rooftops; and (vi) provided incentives for homeowners to renovate their homes and concretely, improve energy efficiency through proper isolation. These incentives being linked to the possibility of increasing (indexed) rent prices based on energy performance.

Shams Assadi, head of the Human Rights Office of the City of Vienna and in representation of the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, shared how the city's approach to housing stems from recovering from a crisis, World War II, and how it lies on three principles: quality, affordability and accessibility. Ms. Assadi shared how **social housing in Vienna is not seen as for the lower-income populations only, but also for middle-income people**. She pointed out that the city subsidizes both the supply and demand of housing: "The city of Vienna builds itself and owns more than 200.000 units. Over 60% of the population lives in subsidized housing". On these lines, she emphasized the importance of the role of the city government in the management of the housing stock as an important means to keep market prices down. Ms. Assadi also shared how the city provided emergency housing to homeless populations, a policy they have now extended to summer and winter times. She also noted how Vienna has also adopted a "Housing First" approach.



In moving to the third segment of the session, **Ms. Camila Cociña**, Researcher at the International Institute for Environment and Development, highlighted key principles that emerged from the discussion: adopting rights-based approaches; affordability; autonomy; respect; choice; LRGs'

capacity-building; collaboration across government levels; flexibility; and engaging with housing systems and housing markets in a systemic way. These principles, together with the 2018 Municipalist Declaration of Cities for Adequate Housing, set the precedent for municipalist joint action. Based on this, Ms. Cociña asked participants how this work could be taken forward together as part of the UCLG's Pact for the Future.

In her response, **Ms. Assadi** pointed at how it is still necessary to **insist on changing the narrative to acknowledge housing as a human right necessary for the fulfillment of other rights**, as recognized by paragraph 11 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. **Daria Cibrario**, from Public Services International, insisted on the need to collectively address the root causes of the housing crisis and, in particular, its commodification and hyper financialization: **"it is very important that the LRGs, but also us, as part of the Right to the City movement - collectively demand the decommodification and deprivatization of housing, and its adequate regulation, not only in our local government but also at the national level and as a global movement"**. She also highlighted the need to reverse the trend currently underway in some cities of selling off public housing stock, which creates situations in which "local councils, like in London, have to pay double to re-rent those formerly public housing stocks from private owners that they have subsidized".

For her part, **Somsook Boonyabancha** emphasized **how changing the financial system needed to be a priority work area moving forward**. In her own words: "Innovation today is restricted to the government or the private sector. We need to diversify the different housing options so that the demand side, the people who are organized, can initiate, negotiate, create room to make change. This can be possible if we have a more creative financial system to allow people to innovate". In final remarks, participants agreed on **the importance of adopting a preventive approach to housing**, as the currently widespread reactive approach leads to an inefficient use of resources, including money spent on ex-post emergency housing solutions. In concluding, participants urged to **escalate the discourse beyond this room**, taking the opportunity of the current post-pandemic momentum in which housing has emerged as a critical need in the minds of world leaders.

As a conclusion, based on the session's discussions, participants, UCLG and the three co-organizing institutions agreed to explore how to articulate further joint action in synergy with [UCLG's Pact for the Future](#).

Annex

- **Useful resources**
 - [Cities for Adequate Housing Declaration](#)
 - [UCLG Live Learning Experiences: Housing responses during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
 - [Housing emergency declarations that have already been adopted by some LRGs around the world](#) (Emergency Governance Initiative for Cities and Regions, Policy Brief 2).
 - [The Shift Directives for addressing the financialization of housing from the local level](#)
 - [UCLG Report: Rethinking housing policies](#)
 - [GOLD VI: Pathways to urban and territorial equality - addressing inequalities through local transformation strategies](#)
 - [GOLD VI Working Paper Series #15: "Housing systems and urban and territorial inequalities: Bottom-up pathways to more equality-driven housing systems"](#)
 - ["Towards a post-pandemic housing policy for cities" by CIDOB](#)