Roundtable on Inequality, Housing, and the Future of Urbanization

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1. Introduction

The virtual Roundtable on Inequality, Housing, and the Future of Urbanization was held on May 22, 2024, from 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. EST. The event, organized by Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just, and Inclusive Societies, in collaboration with the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity (AFSEE) and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), focused on exploring housing issues through the lens of Sustainable Development Goal 16+ (SDG16+). The roundtable aimed to address the intersection of inequality, inclusion, justice, and governance within the context of urban development and housing policy. The speakers ranged from activists to academics working on human development in cities across the world (see the Agenda attached in the Annex I for more information).

2. Background and context

The global housing crisis affects an estimated 1.6 billion people worldwide who lack access to adequate housing and basic services. This crisis is deeply intertwined with issues of governance, economic disparity, and social injustice. Housing provision is often viewed as a driver of economic development, yet the benefits are unevenly distributed, favoring affluent populations while marginalized communities struggle for basic shelter. This governance failure is exacerbated by the prioritization of profit-driven housing approaches and inadequate regulation, which allow speculation and exploitation in housing markets. Questions addressed by the speakers included:

- **Urban development and inequality:** In what ways do urban development policies and projects contribute to inequality within cities? What strategies can be employed to promote more inclusive approaches to urban planning? How does housing and land inequality hinder broader efforts to address societal inequalities? Is the commodification of the built environment leading to or reinforcing patterns of social exclusion, violence, and polarization?

- **Actors in urban inequality:** Who are the primary actors driving urban inequality? Conversely, which groups are mobilizing against it? What strategies can be employed to promote more inclusive urban planning?

- **Community collaboration and housing justice:** How can local communities and social movements collaborate to address housing injustice, and what role can governments play in supporting these efforts? Additionally, can housing justice initiatives be interconnected with other social justice movements, such as those advocating for racial and environmental justice, to foster a more holistic approach to equity and inclusion?

- **Financialization and housing:** What impact does financialization have on housing, particularly regarding who benefits and who is disadvantaged by policies prioritizing profit over social welfare? What are the implications of viewing housing through a governance lens? Which stakeholders must be involved in adopting a housing justice approach?

- **Integrating measures to reduce urban inequality:** How can measures to reduce urban inequality and prevent financialization be effectively and sustainably integrated into global, national, and local urban policies and programs? What pressures, incentives, and trade-offs do policymakers face when considering advancing financialization and foreign investment as drivers of economic development versus ensuring the social function of housing and securing the right to the city?

3. Key themes and discussions

After an initial presentation by Paula Sevilla, which provided an overview, findings, and insights from her new paper on housing injustice, "Who Will Cities Be For?," Alexandre Apsan Frediani (IIED) presented the housing justice framework used at IIED. Interventions were made thereafter by important academics and activists (see Annex I) from around the world on diverse themes ranging from urban development and inequality and housing financialization to integrated measures to reduce inequality in the urban sphere.

The discussion was varied, though primary themes included: housing as a governance challenge; the need for more inclusive, radically democratic forms of housing policy, practice, and production; the importance of inclusive housing policies, including community-led housing policies; the impact of urban development policies on urban inequalities; and significant challenges and solutions.

3.1. Governance and urban inequality

The roundtable highlighted that housing inequality is a profound **governance challenge**, reflecting systemic failures in policy frameworks and decision-making processes. Relatedly, housing injustice is predominantly a governance issue that must be contextualized within the SDG16+ framework, as it has links to SDGs 11, 10, and 16, which together highlight not only sustainable cities and communities but also inequality, inclusive governance, and institutions. In fact, housing policies tend to favor elites and powerful private actors, perpetuating cycles of inequality. This systemic bias manifests in various ways, including the prioritization of **profit over social welfare.**

Moreover, urban inequality is also being triggered by the current approach of cities seeking a particular "world-class" status. The result is that many cities end up competing with one another rather than responding **to the immediate needs of their constituents. In many cities in the Global South, this has led to the government responding by building a wave of so-called "smart cities" or "tech-enabled" cities.** These cities are driven by tech companies and international real estate companies seeking to expand their markets by targeting a particular niche: the wealthy or diaspora populations.

These developments, in turn, have the effect of distracting people from more fundamental questions related to what is being prioritized and for whom (see Box 1). All of this leads to increasing urban discontent and resentment, sometimes triggering protests.

Meanwhile, the financialization of housing, which in some circumstances has democratized homeownership, often comes at the expense of eroding public housing and social welfare systems. The discussion emphasized the need to address these **governance failures** to ensure equitable access to housing and mitigate the adverse effects of financialization.

> ## Box 1: Vital questions to ask when approaching the issue of housing
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> "Are we looking for more increased home ownership? Or rather for decent housing for people? Is the conversation about affordable housing, low-income housing, social housing, multi-income housing, or something else? Are policymakers looking to provide housing for all stages of life? Are we able to think about the various approaches with which people can collectively mobilize resources to achieve their housing needs? Finally, should we be prioritizing a new build, or focusing on urban regeneration and providing infrastructure in underserved communities, which automatically catalyzes urban transformation? These are the questions that should be on the forefront of African housing."
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> *— Dr. Tabat Lawanson, speaker*

3.2. Inclusive housing policies and social justice

The roundtable underscored the importance of inclusive housing policies that advance social justice. Successful examples of **community-led housing initiatives** from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other regions were presented, showcasing the potential for collective management and financing to create long-term affordable housing. The need for **radically democratic forms of housing production and management** was stressed, aiming to protect against discriminatory market forces and ensure affordable housing opportunities for all.

It was further suggested that housing inadequacy be viewed as a **human rights crisis.** Housing inadequacies disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Improving housing in informal settlements could increase economic growth by 10.5 percent, save 730,000 lives, and bring 1.2 million children back to school. In this way, housing is not just a commodity but a human right crucial for advancing social justice and tackling broader societal inequalities.

3.3. Impact of urban development policies

Urban development policies often contribute to **inequality within cities,** with gentrification and the commodification of land leading to social exclusion. Urbanization presents economic and social development opportunities, but inequalities in urban areas can hinder inclusive policymaking and sustainable living. Cities also see a concentration of wealth and production, but that does not necessitate a better standard of living for people living in poverty or even for those with middle-range incomes. Many cities do not provide sufficient livelihood opportunities for new urban residents and additional resources to address public services and infrastructure strains.

The roundtable explored strategies for promoting more **inclusive urban planning** and addressing the contradictions of urban development. **Viewing housing through a governance lens** can facilitate the adoption of inclusive housing policies that tackle inequalities and promote social justice. This perspective encourages transparency, accountability, and equitable resource distribution, essential for creating inclusive urban environments.

3.4. Challenges and solutions

Challenges

Several challenges were identified throughout the discussion. Concerning the issue of government building tech-enabled smart cities, the example of Lagos, Nigeria, was mentioned, where housing is often built for affluent people or diaspora tenants. This has the effect of further exacerbating inequality for the remaining population. Moreover, some governments' prioritization of financialization, foreign investment, and trickle-down economics hinders social justice and equity in land and housing. In most cases, financialization is increasingly detached from location, leading to global competition for assets and increased inequality.

In addition, policymakers increasingly face tensions between local housing supply and global housing demand, with varying impacts in the Global North and South. Therefore, it was suggested that housing policy is in step with social welfare policies, trends in financial markets, and rental stock. One example mentioned was the integration of social justice measures into local policies to address housing issues in South Africa, where policymakers seek to address the contradictions of gentrification in Cape Town, to protect basic rights and the social value of land.

Another country case study presented and discussed related to Indonesia. In this case, developers are meant to adhere to a particular ratio when building a new housing project. For every house constructed for the upper classes, two must be built for middle-income individuals and three for low-income people (this 1-2-3 ratio was originally a 1-3-6 ratio). In response, there was significant resistance from developers. Meanwhile, local governments lacked an understanding of their role in promoting public goods, which led to weak compliance with housing policies and instruments. The power differential between wealthy and powerful developers and local governments also feeds into the non-compliance of the existing law. Furthermore, staff members often do not have enough information or training to undertake evaluations of monitoring of existing instruments. Therefore, the core issue in many countries is not the lack of existing instruments to ensure more even development but rather the lack of compliance with these instruments.

Besides the financialization and commodification of land, basic services, and housing markets, additional challenges include the availability of limited tools to engage with diverse processes of housing provision and city-making, limited regulations and incentives in some sectors, and the crisis in care and social protection systems.

Potential solutions

The discussion called for a reevaluation of these approaches to prioritize social justice and equity. **Local and regional governments play a crucial role** in promoting inclusive housing policies and addressing the housing crisis. Strengthening the capacity of grassroots groups and fostering partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society were identified as critical strategies. In fact, actors across the world—from local to national governments to communities and activists—are addressing housing as a governance issue through collaborations. Several (less well-known) policies and strategies are already in practice.

For example, it was mentioned that while many communities might face the threat of eviction, many also have land tenure rights. Therefore, social movements are mobilizing around the right to dissent, housing as a right to the city, and the right to housing justice. Many movements are asking how governments can begin to see housing as more than just shelter and view urban regeneration as a serious option. Some strategies include participatory action research and community profiling, which can contribute to providing quality housing in local communities. An important need is to scale up ways to shift arguments centered on protest to actions on the ground that are largely driven by community efforts and local agencies.

Some solutions proposed included: recognizing systematic injustices by engaging in reparative housing practices; and advocating for more radical and democratic forms of housing production, management, and financing to protect against discriminatory market forces and to create affordable housing opportunities.

Examples of **innovative housing policies,** such as Sierra Leone's affordable building materials, were highlighted as potential solutions to housing challenges. Meanwhile, in Lisbon, Portugal, a counter-cartography collective bridges research and activism to understand how to create spaces for data collection and strategy. These policies aim to promote social justice through redistribution and inclusive urban development. Community-led housing initiatives in different parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, which showcases the potential for collective management and financing to create long-term affordability, is another potential answer.

Additional important strategies to ensure greater housing justice include: democratizing data collection, monitoring housing conditions and organizing housing demand, monitoring housing rights violations, promoting more inclusive and responsive forms of land tenure, establishing and enforcing regulations of land and housing markets, and enabling different forms of community-led and co-produced housing and basic services.

Taken together, there is a need to expand the housing policy imagination, which includes shifting cultural attitudes towards alternative housing options (i.e., not just land ownership, which should be valued). Local and regional governments, in particular, have a crucial role in promoting inclusive housing policies and addressing the housing crisis.

In summary, the roundtable highlighted the critical need for governance reforms, inclusive policies, and innovative approaches to address the global housing crisis and promote social justice. By framing housing as a human right and leveraging community-led initiatives, stakeholders can work towards creating more equitable and just urban environments.

4. Conclusion

The virtual Roundtable on Inequality, Housing, and the Future of Urbanization provided a platform for diverse stakeholders to discuss the critical issue of housing inequality through the lens of governance and social justice. The discussions underscored the need for inclusive and participatory governance mechanisms, community-led housing initiatives, and radically democratic forms of housing production to address the global housing crisis. By framing housing as a human right and leveraging innovative policies, stakeholders can work towards creating more equitable and just urban environments.

Key recommendations include:

1. **Promote inclusive governance:** Encourage transparent and accountable governance structures that prioritize equitable resource distribution and address systemic housing inequalities, in particular of marginalized populations.

2. **Support community-led initiatives:** Foster and support community-led housing initiatives that offer sustainable and affordable housing solutions.

3. **Adopt radically democratic approaches:** Embrace democratic forms of housing production and management to counteract discriminatory market forces and ensure housing affordability.

4. **Integrate housing with social justice movements:** Connect housing justice initiatives with broader social justice movements, including those advocating for racial and environmental justice.

5. **View housing as a vital infrastructure to reduce inequality:** Equitable housing is important to ensuring more sustainable and fairer cities.

6. **Strengthen local government capacities:** Enhance the capabilities of local and regional governments to implement inclusive housing policies and address urban inequality.

7. **Innovative housing policies:** Develop and implement innovative housing policies that promote social justice and equitable urban development.

8. **Broaden and make more transparent housing policy and practice such that it advances boundaries and imagination:** There is a need for knowledge production processes that promote more open and diverse visions about where, how, by, and for whom housing policies happen.

The roundtable concluded with a call to action for continued collaboration and research to address housing justice and advance social equity globally.

ANNEX I

VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLE

Who Will Our Cities Be For? Governance and Inclusive Housing Policies

Opening

Opening remarks
- Fernando Marani, Director, Inequality and Exclusion Grand Challenge, Center on International Cooperation, New York University

Paper presentation: Overview and key findings from the Pathfinders paper, Who Will Cities Be For?
- Paula Sevilla, Researcher, Housing Justice, International Institute for Environment and Development

Panel Discussion

Moderator
- Roshni Menon, Senior Program Officer, Center on International Cooperation, New York University

Keynote speaker: Towards a housing justice framework
- Alexandre Apsan Frediani, Principal researcher, Human Settlements, International Institute for Environment and Development

Panelists
- Taibat Lawanson, Professor, Department of Urban and Regional Planning and Co-Director, Centre for Housing and Sustainable Development, University of Lagos
- Astrid Haas, Independent Urban Economist
- Sonia Roitman, Associate Professor, University of Queensland
- Kitti Baracsi, Co-lead of the 'Just Housing for All' Incubation Lab and AFSEE Fellow, London School of Economics
- Rosario Fassina, Program Coordinator, 'Right to the City' initiative at the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ), and AFSEE Fellow, London School of Economics
- Alicia Fortuin, Post-doctoral researcher, University of Groningen; former researcher, African Center for Cities

Discussion and Audience Questions and Answers

Closing Remarks