

POLICY BRIEF

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Harnessing Adequate, Safe, and Affordable Housing for the Urban Poor to Achieve the SDGs in Cities

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Highlights

The issue of housing links multiple SDGs. For the urban poor, adequate, safe, and affordable housing is a prerequisite for economic prosperity and social inclusion. Well-defined and action-oriented delivery of affordable housing is needed to achieve SDG 11 (sustainable cities & communities) and other SDGs addressing access to basic services, economic growth, sustainable production and consumption, inequalities, and climate change.

Recommendations:

- Prioritise integrated slum redevelopment for better economic opportunities through inclusive and cost-sensitive approaches.
- Promote integrated, inclusive, and accessible green space to enhance liveability through a city-wide approach.
- Apply regenerative design and integrate housing with clean public transport to improve energy efficiency and deliver net-zero carbon housing.
- Adopt community-designed, water-sensitive infrastructure, including local sanitation systems, wetlands and biofiltration gardens, and stormwater harvesting.

Affordable Housing Is Essential to Achieve the SDGs

Cities have become the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic, with their large populations and high interconnectedness making them particularly vulnerable to the spread of the virus (UN 2020). The pandemic has highlighted the critical role of SDG 11 in crisis response, recovery, and rebuilding in cities. Ensuring universal access to adequate, safe, and affordable housing, which is a fundamental human right, as well as access to basic services, supports a socially just, economically viable, and ecologically healthy future.

The pandemic has exacerbated issues of inadequate housing, including tenure insecurity and limited access to water supply and sanitation, which trap the vulnerable and marginalised in a cycle of poverty. Investment in adequate, safe, and affordable housing will have a profound and direct impact on the realisation of many SDGs, particularly goals 6 (clean water & sanitation), 7 (affordable & clean energy), 8 (decent work & economic growth), 10 (reduced inequalities), 12 (responsible consumption & production), and 13 (climate action). It is also an enabler of poverty reduction (goal 1), gender equality (goal 5), and a just, peaceful, and inclusive society (goal 16).

Delivery of adequate, safe, and affordable housing ensures secure access to clean water and sanitation at the household

level, which is critical to mitigating the spread of COVID-19. Good housing can support food security, primarily in urban and home-based agricultural societies. Addressing housing accessibility contributes to inclusive growth by enabling job creation, supporting economic development, and reducing inequality. Providing fair and equal access to economic resources, housing is a productive investment. Furthermore, sustainable living requires the sectors involved in housing development to address factors contributing to environmental degradation through renewable energy, sustainable sanitation, and sustainable design and building materials.

This policy brief explores some of the direct and indirect linkages of adequate, safe, and affordable housing (SDG target 11.1) to other targets of SDG 11 (e.g., 11.B, 11.C) and other SDGs, focusing on the goals identified above. Drawing from recent literature and best practices in Asia and the Pacific, it provides recommendations to harness affordable housing for the urban poor and further strengthen these interlinkages as part of the global effort to attain the SDGs.

Key Linkages

Inadequate provision and management of housing constitute significant impediments to achieving the SDGs through their direct or indirect effects on multiple goals and targets. Where positive connections are established, relevant supporting policies must be integrated and reinforced to strengthen these linkages.

1. Clean Water & Sanitation (SDG 6)

Inadequate housing is a major cause of exposure to hazards and health threats resulting from inadequate services, among other issues (UN-Habitat 2020). To achieve SDG 6, affordable housing is needed to improve management of waste generated by cities. An effective urban waste management system is critical to ensuring access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene (target 11.6). Promoting better housing, improving slums, and reducing the number of people affected by water pollution will reduce the risk of infection from COVID-19 and other diseases. Better quality affordable housing with access to adequate infrastructure can reduce the vulnerability of the urban poor, which is often exacerbated by climate change and other threats (UN 2019a).

2. Affordable & Clean Energy (SDG 7), Responsible Consumption & Production (SDG 12), and Climate Action (SDG 13)

The housing sector accounts for significant energy consumption and affects the sustainability of urban development

(IEA 2015). Access to a clean and efficient energy system is critical for developing safe, resilient, and sustainable human settlements, linking SDG 7 and affordable housing. Access to energy services is also essential to keep people connected at home, facilitate remote working, and enable clean cooking to improve respiratory health. Housing that expands choices for residents to pursue sustainable lifestyles and consumption (SDG 12) could also increase the productivity of cities. In turn, affordable housing and other targets of SDG 11 create conditions for achieving goals 7, 12, and 13 through sustainable and direct energy consumption and controlled embedded energy in goods and services that contribute to environmental degradation. Building and energy standards applied to housing can help reduce energy and material footprints, and ensure safety and security.

3. Decent Work & Economic Growth (SDG 8) and Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10)

Exclusion and marginalisation are often experienced by people who lack access to housing, with poor urban planning, design, and governance exacerbating these situations in complex ways. Slums arise in part from a gap between supply and demand of affordable housing, leading to inequality, deprivation, and exclusion from economic opportunities (UN-Habitat 2020). COVID-19 has exacerbated the unaffordability of adequate housing and increased the risk of evictions, particularly in the poorest neighbourhoods (UN-Habitat 2021). When housing rights are safeguarded in cities, they serve as an incentive for sustainable economic development for all (SDG 8). Housing with good transport links can have profound impacts in preventing slum proliferation and supporting opportunities for decent work (UN 2019b). For the poor, housing is a positive and potent force for reducing inequalities (SDG 10) as it drives income, consumption, and investment. Equal access to housing can reduce homelessness, especially in cases resulting from gender-based violence, thereby contributing to women's economic empowerment (SDG 5) (UN-Habitat 2014).

Innovations & Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided for national and local policymakers, urban planners, and housing practitioners to accelerate the delivery of affordable housing. Policy measures to ensure affordable housing while pursuing socio-economic benefits should aim to preserve the fabric of the community, liveability conditions, and energy and environmental sustainability. As housing issues are deeply interlinked, it is critical to galvanise effective multilevel governance (e.g., vertical and horizontal coordination

between government agencies and various sectors), and create enabling institutional environments to ensure delivery of integrated, comprehensive housing solutions.

1. Prioritise integrated slum redevelopment for better economic opportunities through inclusive and cost-sensitive approaches.

Resettlement of slums frequently reduces the proximity of slum dwellers to their employment sources. Relocation or involuntary resettlement of slum dwellers should, as far as possible, be avoided, except in cases where slums are located on physically hazardous or polluted land, or where density is so high that new infrastructure (especially water and sanitation) cannot be installed. It is critical to implement integrated redevelopment of slums through inclusive approaches that support in-situ development, slum upgrading, incremental housing, and increases in rental stock. Interventions must be cost-sensitive and focus on the process by which low-income households acquire their own housing. Medium-term housing policy focusing on strengthening renter protections can reduce vulnerability to the housing insecurity that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis through rent capping, and incentives and assistance provided to owners.

A successful example of in-situ development is the Thai Baan Mankong program, a community-driven slum upgrading initiative that allows inhabitants to collectively manage public funds, determine priorities, negotiate forms of tenure, and design and implement housing projects. Such approaches are achieving success at scale and offer valuable insights for further exploration. Employing a similar model, the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) implemented a large-scale project during 2009–2012, the Asian Coalition for Community Action Program (ACCA), which supported citywide slum upgrading in 215 cities in 19 countries throughout Asia. Empowering the community as decision-makers has a significant impact on the cost-effectiveness of the investments made. It also creates communities that successfully interact with local governments in ways likely to lead to deeper and more constructive engagement with their local policies (World Bank Group 2014).

2. Promote integrated, inclusive, and accessible open green space to enhance liveability.

The pandemic has brought renewed recognition that access to green space is important for urban dwellers. Limited availability of green space may result in chronic stress, insufficient physical activity, and exposure to anthropogenic environmental hazards. Accessible green space can mitigate

the negative health effects of the mobility restrictions introduced during the pandemic (Venter et al. 2020). Provision of shared green space can also reduce spatial inequality within cities (UN 2019b). Affordable housing projects should seek to realise the long-term benefits of accessible green space, such as community gardens that can boost community participation, support gender equality, improve food security, and function as carbon sinks. A city-wide approach is needed to fully realise these benefits, which can include investing in accessible urban layouts that connect multiple public spaces through compact, well-planned density, and mixed-use development.

A successful example of integrated, inclusive, and accessible green space enhancing liveability is the Greater Sydney Green Grid, which connects communities to the landscape. The long-term vision of the project is to create a network of high-quality green areas — from regional parks to local parks and playgrounds — connecting urban centres, public transport, and public spaces to green infrastructure and landscape features. Another example is the Public Open Space in Private Developments (POSPD) program in Hong Kong, which aims to increase quality open space for public use in high-density residential areas. POSPD has been helping to align the availability of public space to the needs of each community.

3. Design solutions to reduce resource consumption and deliver net-zero carbon housing.

Affordable housing can also ensure clean energy by rationalising energy consumption. Well-designed housing and neighbourhood density that provide residents with better access to services and prevent overcrowding can avoid placing pressure on urban energy supplies. When possible and context-appropriate, walk-up apartments should be prioritised to create liveable, energy-efficient, resilient, and sustainable neighbourhoods. To adapt to the specific, evolving needs of each area, flexible zoning and regenerative design should be employed, using the minimum resources needed. Combining compact, high-density, and mixed-use housing with public transport powered by clean energy can contribute towards achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

Delivering net-zero carbon in public housing will require collecting comprehensive data and providing regenerative options that achieve the maximum benefits for the lowest cost — for example, installing clean heating, fabric retrofitting for better thermal performance, and introducing rooftop solar panels. Green procurement is relatively easy to implement as a starting point to improve the sustainability

of public housing. Solutions targeting energy efficiency in buildings through energy isolation and modulation of energy requirements can help reduce emissions. Lower energy consumption leads to reduced household expenditure, a vital factor contributing to housing affordability. Clear building regulations that detail the minimum requirements to be met by housing developers for existing buildings, together with green building certification schemes, can accelerate the delivery of affordable and energy-efficient housing.

4. Adopt community-designed, water-sensitive infrastructure, including local sanitation, wetlands and biofiltration gardens, and stormwater harvesting.

Water infrastructure is an essential consideration for developing urban areas, relying on treatment facilities that are often located at great distances away from cities. Water-sensitive urban design (WSUD) concepts and technologies, if planned and implemented correctly, have the potential to improve the water cycle, provide water sources, and reduce long-term water development needs. However, both state and non-state actors require understanding and technical know-how for effective and efficient implementation to achieve the desired output in terms of sustainable water management. Affordable housing projects should also incorporate water-sensitive infrastructure such as rainwater harvesting, biofiltration gardens, and other innovative water conservation techniques that can help make them environmentally sustainable and expand access to safe drinking water. A successful example of innovative water conservation in urban housing is the development of urban footpaths with nature-based designs and other water-sensitive improvements in the slums of Makassar City in Indonesia (ADB 2020).

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