

Foreword

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This publication is a timely contribution as it addresses the mounting unmet demand for housing that stems from the almost global absence of government interventions since the 1990s. During the last few years, the international community has joined hands to articulate and formulate major goals, agendas and strategies. These 15- to 20-year perspectives set the backdrop against which key actors, including governments, academia, professionals, developers, civil society and the private sector, should further develop them into programmes, interventions and actions on the ground.

Challenges: Access to affordable housing globally is becoming more and more elusive to large numbers of urban populations. As many cities mature and expand, affordable land for housing becomes increasingly scarce and costly and thereby beyond the reach even of the middle class. In most developing countries, housing demand, from the rapidly growing lower and middle-income group, is neither met by the public sector (national and local authorities) nor by the private sector (the forces of the market). Planning the development of affordable serviced land and housing as well as providing financial and mortgage schemes are either absent, undeveloped or, if they exist at all, they do not target the informally employed lower-income groups.

Government responses: Over the last 60 to 70 years, housing policies have shifted the roles of the public sector from direct delivery by the central government to a laissez-faire role that is limited to enabling the market. Only in rare situations has the market worked and, even then, there has had to be some support to vulnerable groups through social and financial programmes. The private sector, in the majority of cases, favoured earning rapid high profits by focussing on housing for higher income groups that could buy housing units thus enabling

the developers to recoup their investments in the shortest possible time. In many cases, housing plans are sold before construction commences. In most countries, long-term investment in rental housing and other tenure modalities has nearly vanished, depriving the younger generations from accessing decent affordable housing. For the most part 'enablement of the market and the withdrawal of the public sector from the housing scene has proved ineffective as it has resulted in disastrous urban and human consequences.

In cases where governments have addressed housing through delivery they have, unfortunately, failed to reach the target populations. Often, housing policies and strategies aimed at building a certain number of housing units per year; for example, "building 100,000 housing units", etc. These output-based, quantitative policies only provide photo opportunities for officials who stand in front of usually towering housing projects. In reality, however, these schemes result in vacant abandoned settlements in a phenomenon referred to as "Ghost Towns". These are now abundant globally.

These expensive urban failures are the result of strict zoning regulations that segregate residential areas from other urban uses. The myth of low-cost public-owned land situated far away from urban areas is another culprit. It is only cheap for ministries of housing that are looking to reduce the costs of these housing units. However, this type of urban development shifts the real costs of infrastructure to other ministries (infrastructure, transportation, etc.). The real costs, however, are shouldered by the targeted low-income groups who have to commute to jobs, or to seek employment and social and economic amenities. Commuting costs are usually prohibitive for lower-income groups as they reduce their net incomes by 30% to 50%, thereby resulting in their moving back to well-located informal areas. Such cases are documented in a variety of developing countries.

Finally, many of these housing programmes have incurred very high costs that resulted from centralised delivery, inefficiencies and, in many cases, corruption. The failed laissez-faire policies and attitudes of the public sector towards producing affordable land and housing have left one third of urban dwellers living in informal settlements.

People's responses: In response to the absence of affordable options for land and housing, about 1 billion lower-income urban dwellers have taken it upon themselves to find alternatives through the development of informal settlements and housing. In extreme cases, they have resorted to illegally squatting on land which they then developed into their own settlements. In other cases, they have acquired land that was unsuitable for development, usually in climatically vulnerable areas, including in cyclone paths, and flood- and mudslide-prone areas.

In other cases, they have settled in hazardous zone where they have been exposed to high-tension power lines, or situated along railway lines or in toxic areas etc. Consequently, the most vulnerable urban residents are exposed to life-threatening and health hazards and end up living under inhumane conditions.

Global Responses: In recognition of past policy failures and in order to address the increasing housing demand, social segregation and urban divides; there has been a recognition for the need for new approaches to both urban development and housing delivery. The international community has developed some high-level frameworks for addressing these challenges:

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 “Sustainable Cities and Communities” surpasses the ambitions of its predecessor Millennium Development Goals’. It’s first target aims to “By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums”.

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) further unpacks SDG 11 by developing appropriate concepts and strategies. Paragraph 109, for example, calls to “... consider increased allocation of ... resources for: upgrading and ... prevention of slums ... with strategies that go beyond physical and environmental improvements, to ensure that slums are integrated into the social; economic; cultural; and, political dimensions of cities. These strategies should include ... access to sustainable, adequate, safe, and affordable housing; basic and social services; and safe, inclusive, accessible, green, and quality public spaces; and they should promote security of tenure and its regularisation, as well as measures for conflict prevention and mediation.”

UN-Habitat developed The Global Housing Strategy (GHS) as a collaborative global movement towards further supporting the concept of adequate housing for all and improving the housing and living conditions of slum dwellers. It was developed to explore ideas to be included in the NUA. Its main objective is to assist member states in working towards the realisation of the right to adequate housing.

Paradigm shift in thinking and practice: The above frameworks aim to go beyond the classic ‘in the box’ thinking that confines the housing debate to its limiting components: land, infrastructure, design, building materials and labour. Housing is to be situated “at the centre” of urban thinking and of cities as an integral part of urban development, thus avoiding many of the previous drawbacks.

The NUA treats housing as an integral part of an urban development approach within a larger cluster of thematic areas. The aim is to achieve sustaina-

ble urbanization that is based on the urban planning principles of high density and mixed land uses and integrating social groups with efficient street networks while reducing the urban environmental footprint. Through urban land management, fiscal instruments are combined with a focus on available affordable serviced land for urban uses that are intermixed with housing. Legal and regulatory frameworks would aim to enable and encourage investments in housing at all levels, thereby contributing to local economic development and income-generating opportunities for lower-income groups. Revitalised urban economic development would target growth in sustainable affordable jobs and the development of income-generating opportunities that would render housing and other services affordable. Policies are to include cross-subsidies between various land-use categories and, when necessary, subsidies and incentives are to be utilized to stimulate the supply and demand sides of housing. Slum upgrading and prevention are central to ensuring human rights are respected and are a corner stone to leaving no one behind.

Further effectiveness would be achieved through ensuring that a variety of housing tenure types provide a diversity of options that address different social, economic and cultural needs. Governance and maintenance of housing and neighbourhoods should ensure that the housing rights and needs of women, youth, and special groups are addressed through inclusive, affordable and culturally adequate solutions. Post-disaster reconstruction and the development of resilient solutions for housing in disaster-prone and climate change areas are also growing in importance.

Systemic reforms should promote an active role for the public sector beyond enablement so as to ensure universal access to adequate affordable housing. Linking housing with other parts of the economy should be strengthened to ensure economic development, employment generation and poverty reduction. Decentralized housing production and empowering different actors and modalities of housing development are to be encouraged within these frameworks. Sustainable building and neighbourhood designs and technologies are to be pursued with an aim towards more cost-effective, flexible and energy-efficient solutions. Most importantly, all efforts should result in significant and measurable improvements in housing and living conditions for all, while facilitating the role of housing as an important support for poverty reduction.

Forward looking – working together: While these recommendations might seem overwhelming, they rather provide a variety of avenues to better address housing needs. These frameworks are designed to support key stakeholders in

focussing on targeted conceptualisation and innovations and the research needed to operationalise them. Concerted integrated collaborative partnerships between key actors are vital to mobilising the added values they can each contribute, including central and local government leaders' political will; academia's creativity and innovation; the private sector's efficiency; civil society and the media's advocacy; the professional community's knowhow; and local communities' and individuals' deep understanding of their needs and their ability to harness their energies, resourcefulness and commitment.

