

Better cities are possible: transforming informal settlements on a warming planet



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Summary

There are currently 1.1 billion people living in informal settlements worldwide and this number is estimated to triple in the next 30 years, with most of this growth happening in countries where urbanisation is on the rise. Residents of informal settlements are often the first to suffer the consequences of global crises and the last to recover. Recognising informal settlements as a predominant form of urbanisation will help cities work with informality rather than fighting against it.

This report explores the critical shifts in governance, policy and action that are needed to address the growing challenges, exacerbated by climate change, that are faced by informal settlement residents. Through reflections on what 'transformation' means for settlements from the perspective of migration and displacement, housing justice, climate justice and resilience, it provides recommendations for governments, researchers, civil society and international donors.

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1. Transforming informal settlements on a warming planet

Authors: Camila Cociña and Tucker Landesman

Building better cities is fundamentally about the 1.1 billion people currently living in informal settlements. People living in informal settlements are often the first to suffer the consequences of both local and global crises and the last to recover, be it from flooding after heavy rains, supply chain breakdowns during a pandemic or war, the loss of homes and property due to sea-level rises, or negative health outcomes due to extreme heat and insecure access to clean water and sanitation.

Over the next 30 years, the United Nations (UN) estimates that the number of people living in informal settlements will nearly triple, with an additional 2 billion people living in 'slum'-like conditions.¹ Most of this growth will occur in countries currently seeing rapid rates of urbanisation. Recognising informal settlements as a

predominant form of urbanisation will help cities work with informality rather than fighting against it.

But what does transforming informal settlements mean in the context of a warming planet? What are the key shifts in governance, policy, research and action required to transform informal settlements in ways that deal with the twin crises of inequality and climate change?²

This second publication in IIED's better cities series aims to strengthen and contribute to global commitments to accelerate real change for those who need it now. Through reflections around what 'transformation' means for settlements from the perspectives of migration and displacement, housing justice, climate justice and resilience, it provides recommendations for governments, researchers, civil society and international donors.

1.1 A long trajectory of collective struggles to transform informal settlements

Transforming informal settlements is a longstanding agenda that has been driven by informal settlement residents, grassroots groups, civil society organisations and their networks. Members of Slum Dwellers International (SDI),³ the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights⁴ and the Habitat International Coalition,⁵ among others, have sought to advance inclusive urbanisation through self-organised practices and targeted demands addressing power in the local, national and international spheres. But policies and interventions have not resulted in positive transformation and persecution of residents of informal settlements persists.

In recent decades there have been various initiatives at the global level to address the challenges faced by informal settlements. In 1999, Cities Alliance launched the 'Cities Without Slums Action Plan',⁶ and in 2003 the UN published its report, 'The Challenge of Slums'.⁷ Although these were pivotal steps in the discussion,

policy and programming around informal settlements, the political and material challenges around informal settlements have changed dramatically since their publication. These frameworks were strongly criticised for presenting slums as 'problems' and reinforcing narratives that increase the risk of eviction and dispossession.

More recently, the severe effects of climate change have placed informal settlements at the centre of calls for climate justice and increased investment for climate-resilient development. In this context, in 2023 UN-Habitat approved a resolution presented by South Africa on 'Accelerating the transformation of informal settlements and slums'.⁸ Through the implementation of its Global Action Plan,⁹ this resolution provides the opportunity to establish a pathway for member states that meaningfully responds to urban challenges, and values the co-produced knowledge and practices of organised residents of informal settlements.

The 2023 resolution was approved in a context of renewed attention to this agenda by actors at all levels and from a variety of sectors and perspectives. IIED's research on displacement,¹⁰ for example, has emphasised the importance of looking at informal settlements when addressing the challenges of urban refugees, considering that the majority of displaced people choose to live in urban areas and that informal settlements are often their only options for affordable housing.¹¹

IIED has documented the importance of climate action in informal settlements to build resilience and respond to structural inequalities.¹² Likewise, our research has shown that improving the housing conditions in informal settlements has direct and quantifiable implications for life expectancy, education outcomes, income, general wellbeing and human development.¹³

1.2 Setting up a collective action–research agenda for transformation

Each contribution in this publication is based on ongoing work led by IIED and partners. Each of them focuses on a thematic priority and offers concrete entry points and policy-relevant actions that contribute to transforming informal settlements in the context of a warming planet.

The sections below seek to draw on the opportunities provided by UN-Habitat's 2023 resolution as well as contributing to the longstanding efforts of grassroots groups in informal settlements:

- **Inclusive and targeted action for the urban displaced** discusses the challenges faced by migrants who find sanctuary in informal settlements, particularly considering their capacity to deal with climate-related challenges. It emphasises that to respond to displaced people's additional needs and difficulties, it is necessary to build inclusion within existing governance mechanisms, highlighting the importance of: strengthening participatory action among urban displaced populations; addressing data gaps on urban displacement; and promoting place-based approaches that are inclusive of displaced populations alongside local communities of urban poor.
- **Building housing justice: construction materials in informal settlements** discusses the role that access to resilient and affordable building materials in informal settlements plays in advancing housing justice. It proposes that mobilising a housing justice lens implies promoting policies and practices that are anti-discriminatory and radically democratic, that provide an infrastructure for better cities and that expand housing futures. In turn, this implies considering issues of livelihoods, tenure security, climate justice and governance in the building-materials value chain in informal settlements.
- **Climate action for equitable cities: working with informal communities for low-carbon, resilient futures** calls for a reorientation of interventions in informal settlements that spans mitigation and adaptation efforts. To advance this agenda, we must: strengthen the evidence and recognition of the disproportionate impacts of climate change on low-income, informal urban communities; enable decision makers to govern and resource equitable climate action effectively in such settlements; and document and support interventions that connect climate action (adaptation and decarbonisation) with efforts to tackle urban poverty.
- **Climate resilience and informal settlements: the urgent need to focus on how power and knowledge interact** calls for embracing principles of knowledge co-production to inform resilience decision making, collective action and policy agendas. Acknowledging that many vulnerable urban dwellers living in informal settlements are exposed to significant climate risks, it proposes a systematic and structured framework for co-producing resilience solutions around two sets of tools: a context analysis framework and an intervention framework to tactically guide organisations leading co-production interventions.

1.3 Partnerships for knowledge production and transformation

Beyond their thematic entry points, the contributions to this series have a common emphasis on partnerships and collaborative forms of knowledge production. This draws on the long history of the work of IIED's human settlements team, built on direct collaboration with grassroots movements and their networks.

Interventions in informal settlements will only be truly transformative if they put at the centre the agency,

priorities, needs and aspirations of their diverse residents. This requires challenging the ways in which knowledge, data, claims and agendas are produced and mobilised, committing to meaningful forms of collaboration and joint work. The agendas and priorities presented in the different sections of this series aim to advance in that direction, embracing grounded forms of knowledge co-production and centring the priorities of those at the intersection of urban challenges.

Box 1. Principles for equitable partnerships

Author: Marcelle Mardon

IIED's manifesto,⁵¹ launched in 2024, renews the organisation's commitment to equitable partnerships as one of its core values: "to proactively seek to collaborate with others, break down silos and share power with our partners". With longstanding urban partnerships at the grassroots level in the global South, the challenge is to continue striving to improve our way of working together, positioning justice and equity at the heart of what we do, guided by a set of principles that aim to:

Address power dynamics by acknowledging and redressing structural inequalities and power imbalances often tied to colonial legacies, social inequalities, gender biases and prejudice. This also means identifying and shifting mindsets to adapt our models of understanding and measuring value and success, and moving from competition to collaboration, and from results to more process-orientated impact.

Recognise diverse values, worldviews, priorities and interests through understanding and embracing differences. This also means promoting accessible language and fostering cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Enable procedural/relational decision making as collaborative processes, creating spaces for meaningful engagement and inclusion, particularly for communities that have historically been marginalised. This also means cultivating and nurturing relationships based on trust, clear and honest communication, mutual accountability, transparency and knowledge sharing.

Operationalise flexible, agile and adaptive institutional planning, and other systems that can cater for different needs and perceptions and accommodate unforeseen changes and/or evolving project requirements. All this while advocating for more accessible funding mechanisms and flexible project cycles with appropriate budget, timeline and reporting requirements.

Distribute resources, roles, benefits and recognition more fairly with more active and equal roles for our partners in the global South. This also means redistributing risks and developing tools and processes that allow for collaborative approaches to assessment and management that avoid disproportionate burdens on partners.

2. Inclusive and targeted action for migrants and the urban displaced

Authors: Lucy Earle, Boel McAteer and Deena Dajani

Links between urban informality and migration are increasingly recognised. Migrants, internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees generally move towards urban areas, where economic opportunities are most available. They tend to seek accommodation in informal settlements, where rents are lowest.

Informal settlements are also attractive for those (forced) migrants without legal documentation, since they can negotiate informal rental agreements and live 'under the radar'. Their status can, however, make them vulnerable to extortion, and an absence of legal documentation and/or work permits may draw migrants and displaced people into exploitative and poorly paid work in the informal sector.

Living alongside other low-income people who are not migrants, they face the same issues with substandard housing, limited access to services and precarious livelihoods, but with the additional and varied difficulties that come with being a migrant or refugee. Often the poorest of the poor, vulnerable migrants and displaced people may find themselves living in areas of informal settlements that are most exposed to climate hazards.

2.1 The challenge

There is growing recognition of the presence of forcibly displaced people in urban areas, and of the challenges they and other vulnerable migrants face in accessing services and achieving sustainable livelihoods. However, there is little granular data on their experiences of living in informal settlements and working in the informal sector. Understanding how their experiences differ (or not) from other low-income groups in towns and cities is critical to building solidarity and incorporating their needs into ongoing dialogue between organised groups of the urban poor, local governments and service providers.

IIED data from the informal settlements of Mathare and Kiambui in Nairobi, Kenya, clearly show the differences between displaced people and hosts. Using a survey sample of 273 displaced people and 132 hosts, the displaced population earned less than hosts on average, were more likely to live in makeshift shelters and less likely to be literate.¹⁴ While both populations rated their own access to healthcare similarly, displaced

respondents rated the general state of their health slightly lower than hosts. Among displaced respondents, only 7% had access to some form of social protection, compared to 30% of hosts.

Another research project, focused on informal businesses in Nairobi, shows that while arbitrary arrests and bribe demands affect both locals and non-nationals, migrants who run businesses pay higher fees than Kenyans, especially in proportion to their lower incomes, and expect to be arrested more frequently.¹⁵ Anecdotal evidence from interviews with urban refugees in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, also suggests that refugees are charged higher rents and pay more than local neighbours for goods and services.¹⁶

Research conducted by IIED in Mafraq in Jordan shows that refugees are more likely to live in households that are disconnected from water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services, leaving them reliant on private water vendors and paying more for water access than connected neighbours.¹⁷



Hamdi, urban refugee from Somalia, selling tea on the streets of Eastleigh, Nairobi. Credit: Arete-Brian Ongoro/IIED

In connected neighbourhoods, evidence shows that refugees are much less likely than hosts to contact municipalities or utility and service providers to raise complaints or to notify authorities when they don't receive services, such as piped water.

Forcibly displaced people living in informal settlements often suffer from double exclusions: from humanitarian support on the one hand and from city services or social security on the other. In countries where encampment of refugees is the norm, choosing to settle in an urban area often equates to relinquishing support from international agencies. Additionally, IDPs and refugees are often excluded from national and local development plans, considered as temporary residents and/or falling under the remit of national security rather than ministries responsible for service delivery. Where municipal populations increase exponentially as a result of a crisis, this often goes unrecognised by national governments and does not translate into increased intra-governmental budget transfers. This makes it difficult for city authorities to address service access needs of new populations.

Social exclusion and the economic vulnerability of displaced people and low-income migrants means they are often the least well-equipped to anticipate or deal with climate-related challenges when these emerge. They are often living in the most hazard-prone areas of informal settlements. Evidence from a recent research project investigating climate risks and adaptation in low-income neighbourhoods in four African coastal cities shows that most migrants had moved several times before they arrived in their current neighbourhoods.¹⁸ Additionally, migrants' precarious livelihoods can render them 'immobile' — unable to move to safer locations — and therefore more vulnerable to climate hazards.

2.2 Responses for transformation

IIED's work to support urban displaced populations and vulnerable migrants is based on the principle of inclusion within existing governance mechanisms and support structures for the urban poor. We recognise their additional needs and difficulties alongside those shared by all informal settlement residents. Together with our partners, we aim to do this by:

- **Strengthening participatory action among urban displaced and migrant populations,** by improving the representation of displaced people within existing platforms for dialogue and advocacy, and by creating new platforms to further their causes if adequate ones do not already exist. Such platforms

can further serve as a coordination mechanism for organisations supporting urban displaced populations, who have different remits.

- **Addressing data and information gaps on urban displacement and migration.** When city authorities and service providers are not aware of displaced populations within their boundaries, it is difficult to address their needs. For example, local authorities might need data to help them absorb new populations coming into the city as a result of climate shocks elsewhere. Community organisations need data on migration patterns into and within informal settlements, so they can share information that builds resilience among new arrivals and integrates them into programmes of support and advocacy for improved services.
- **Promoting place-based approaches that are inclusive of displaced and migrant populations alongside local communities of urban poor.** Strengthening the voice of all informal settlement dwellers as a community with shared issues has the potential to build solidarity between different nationalities or ethnic groups and support local integration for migrants and displaced people.

2.3 Mobilising knowledge for impact

One of IIED's core partners, SDI, has a long history of mobilising savings groups and leading enumerations and profiling to inform development interventions for communities in informal settlements. These processes ensure local people's views and knowledge are taken into account in upgrading processes. While not closed to displaced people or other migrants, these groups have rarely been purposefully included. Mobilising newer residents of informal settlements will take effort, but it may help uncover previously unrecognised forms of discrimination and marginality and ensure that these inform plans to upgrade services and infrastructure.

The place-based approach inherent in participatory local planning stands in contrast to a humanitarian status-based approach that singles out vulnerable migrants and displaced people as individuals in need of protection and assistance. The place-based approach could be extended to non-citizens, or recent internal migrants, and has the potential to contribute to better integration, as well as to reduce exposure to hazards in a more inclusive manner. By increasing connections between long-term residents and newer arrivals, it could potentially challenge politically motivated animosity towards migrants and displaced people.

In Kampala, Uganda, IIED has worked with the local SDI-affiliate ACTogether and the refugee-led organisation African Youth Action Network (AYAN) to include the participation of displaced people within local community-based governance structures. Aiming to create sustainable participatory governance from settlement level to district and city levels, partners created community-level committees for urban refugees, with elected representatives trained on how to take issues forward within existing city governance structures. Local community leaders were also engaged and the project revealed a need for further engagement between locals and urban refugees to improve their understanding of one another, their shared issues and how these could be raised up the chain within decision-making forums.

In Nairobi, findings from IIED-led research on the challenges facing urban refugees were presented in participatory forums, led by our partner SDI-Kenya.¹⁹ These forums included refugee representatives, international nongovernmental organisations and community-based organisations, as well as representatives of national and municipal government. SDI's ongoing work with Nairobi city county government has led to further engagement, as they set out to design Nairobi county's first urban refugee strategy, informed by data from IIED and partners' research.

Lessons can be drawn from these two examples to inform engagements in other refugee-hosting cities. The key is to build inclusive engagement within existing governance structures and to cover issues faced by displaced communities as well as other low-income urban groups, furthering participation and recognition for all.

2.4 Action agenda

- **Civil society and social movements should actively seek to mobilise migrants and displaced people into existing local forums, so that their experiences can feed into neighbourhood and city planning processes — particularly related to informal settlement upgrading and basic service provision.** This will require mobilising migrant populations, through new or existing structures of representatives, as well as language-inclusive decision-making processes.
- **Municipal actors must recognise the presence of migrants and displaced people in city strategies and planning processes, and proactively help them overcome the barriers and discrimination that they face in their daily lives.** This will require seeking out information about relevant populations and their needs, conducting necessary outreach activities and ensuring that migrant communities are represented in any consultations undertaken.
- **Researchers should support these processes by building greater understanding of migrants' and displaced people's lives, livelihoods and continued mobility within informal settlements.** This will require actively addressing data gaps on the lived realities of migrant communities, assessing the data needs of municipal governments to better serve them and equipping migrant and low-income communities with the information they need to further their own causes.



Research assistant Ala'a Omoush conducting research with urban displaced households in Mafraq City, Jordan. Credit: Deena Dajani/IIED

3. Building housing justice: construction materials in informal settlements

Authors: Alexandre Apsan Frediani and Camila Cociña

Housing systems fail to respond to the needs and aspirations of millions of people. In informal settlements, these shortcomings expose residents to several injustices, including housing insecurity, deprivation, discrimination and exclusion. Transforming informal settlements and advancing housing justice require a combination of several actions and pathways for change, one of which is securing access to resilient and affordable building materials.

Building materials are important, not only for their role in enhancing the quality of life and adaptation efforts of informal settlement residents but also because of the part the building materials industry plays in wider processes of climate change and environmental degradation. Current dynamics shaping the building-materials value chain are deepening injustices and transforming those dynamics is crucial for enhancing the capacity of informal settlements to adapt to a warming climate and address inequalities. A housing justice lens calls for the issues of livelihoods, tenure security, climate justice and governance to be considered in the building materials value chain.

3.1 The challenge

The current housing crisis is sustained by housing systems that create different forms of injustice, exclusion and discrimination, which are unable to respond to the needs and aspirations of the world's majority.²⁰ Informal settlements and slums, which host 1.1 billion people globally, concentrate some of the most acute manifestations of this longstanding crisis, with negative impacts on residents' wellbeing in multiple human development dimensions.²¹

Those living in informal settlements are disproportionately affected by crises associated with climate change, as well as increased costs of energy and building materials. This feeds into a cycle of poverty and marginalisation that intersects with inequalities in gender, race, age, ethnicity, class and ability.

One of the manifestations of those injustices relates to access to affordable, robust and resilient building materials for housing and shelter. Namely, materials that are accessible and provide adequate protection from floods and other weather events, as well as insulation from extreme heat. This is a key concern for people living

in informal settlements, particularly since poor households tend to pay higher costs, or a 'poverty penalty', for market goods. Studies in sub-Saharan African cities have shown that informal settlement households can spend as much as 15–30% of their monthly income on housing repairs and improvements.²² Additionally, the access to and use of building materials influence the capacity of communities to adapt to climate change and improve resilience, impacting local livelihoods²³ and cultural practices.²⁴

Beyond the important role it plays in the lives of people living in informal settlements, the construction sector is a significant contributor to climate change. Housing and infrastructure are the societal needs with the largest resource footprint globally, representing around 50% of the resources extracted annually.²⁵

The demand for building materials is growing particularly rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa, with large-scale companies behind the production of cement, for example, experiencing unprecedented levels of profitability in the region.²⁶

3.2 Responses for transformation

Addressing the social and environmental challenges related to access to affordable and resilient materials in informal settlements requires a housing justice lens. This means promoting policies and practices that are anti-discriminatory and radically democratic, that provide an infrastructure for more sustainable, caring and fairer cities, and that expand housing futures.

Applying these principles to the question of building materials requires transforming the ways in which interventions around construction systems are conceived. It means responses that address the penalties and discrimination that people living in informal settlements experience to access safe and durable materials, and that provide affordable solutions that work for people and the environment. New paradigms must democratically address climate injustices, recognising how diverse voices, livelihoods and tenancy insecurities exist throughout building-materials value chains. Finally, interventions should value local knowledge in the vision of housing futures, strengthening local building practices.



São Paulo, Brazil, 2023. Credit: Camila Cociña/IIED

Based on research developed by IIED, together with SDI affiliates in Harare, Zimbabwe, and Freetown, Sierra Leone,²⁷ we propose four key areas of transformation:

- Considering the complexity of livelihoods alongside the value chain, recognising, strengthening and making safer and more secure the diverse livelihoods that are connected to the extraction, processing, transporting, selling, storing and assembling of building materials in informal settlements.
- Addressing tenure insecurity and risk thresholds, highlighting that advancing security of tenure is central to promoting a fairer and more sustainable use of building materials in informal settlements and promoting local adaptation strategies. Insecure land tenure is a key determinant of residents' decisions around building materials and a key barrier to receiving official support.
- Promoting fairer distribution of climate change burdens and responsibilities, recognising that the urban poor should not be burdened with reducing their already minimal emissions. Housing construction in informal settlements should be part of a just transition towards low-carbon futures, while recognising the adaptation needs of current residents.
- Prioritising governance solutions over technology solutions, focusing transformation on the ways in which planning instruments, construction codes, economic incentives, taxes and other systems intersect with the affordability and access to building materials, and strengthening local groups' collective capacities to assess their needs and take action.

3.3 Mobilising knowledge for impact

IIED has developed three programmes to advance housing justice,²⁸ through initiatives that aim to strengthen grassroots capacities, influence policy and practice, and foster alliances and solidarity. When looking particularly at promoting resilient and affordable building materials for housing justice in informal settlements, impact pathways for transformation require: local-to-global analysis of value chains; local and national policy dialogues; and advocacy alliances to impact decision making.

Strengthening the capability of grassroots groups to generate local knowledge and mobilise advocacy capacities.

Knowledge gaps are hindering the ability to better understand and intervene in the regulations that affect the building-materials value chain.²⁹ Community-led knowledge production is critical in this field. IIED developed a pilot on this topic in Freetown and Harare,³⁰ which included community-led value-chain analysis and production of videos as part of the youth-led initiative Know Your City TV.³¹ This work is feeding into the development of a systematised methodology with SDI affiliates that focuses on following building materials and revealing relations, regulations and entry points for change. Local research needs to be complemented by analysis of global flows of materials, to show how broader dynamics and international regulatory frameworks impact the distribution of and access to resilient building materials in informal settlements.



Storage of sand, gravel and rock in Freetown construction site. Credit: Camila Cociña/IIED

Influencing policy and practice. Enabling multi-stakeholder dialogue is key to addressing the climate and social injustices embedded in the value chain of building materials used for housing in informal settlements. Dialogues can open up opportunities for impact at the settlement and city levels, such as enhancing the capacity of organised communities to access and store building materials in collective ways or identifying necessary areas of intervention and incentives. IIED has developed methodologies to establish housing policy dialogues.³² Working closely with local networks of civil society groups, researchers and local or national governments, these methodologies involve mobilising diverse actors around a common intent, agreeing on common principles and defining a plan of action to bring about change.

Fostering international alliances and solidarity. Existing networks advocating for housing justice need to identify concrete actions to make the value chain of resilient building materials fairer. These coordinated efforts can enable opportunities for impact at local and global levels. IIED has established partnerships with important initiatives in this field, such as Roof Over Our Heads and Cities Alliance Working Group on Sustainable Construction, which is trying to understand to what extent the urban poor can afford to be sustainable.³³ We have also contributed to discussions about multilateral agencies' initiatives, such as the implementation of the UN-Habitat resolution on 'Accelerating transformation of informal settlements and slums by 2030'³⁴ and the Buildings and Climate Global Forum's 'Ministerial Declaration'.³⁵

3.4 Action agenda

Advancing housing justice through resilient and affordable building materials in informal settlements requires action from all sectors:

- **Funders** should support more work on grounded knowledge co-production, involving communities of informal settlements and researchers, to analyse the building-materials value chain from a justice and environmental perspective, facilitate knowledge exchanges and establish connections between local and global processes.
- **Local and regional governments** could play a key role in identifying specific mechanisms that enhance access to affordable and resilient building materials. These might include initiatives related to strengthening local livelihoods and construction techniques, promoting mechanisms to secure tenure in informal settlements, improving access to infrastructure and service networks and recognising and supporting community efforts that increase collective bargaining power vis-à-vis providers and builders.
- **National governments and multilateral agencies** should promote commitments and policies that make the building materials value chain fairer, focusing on comprehensive packages that create more just incentives and pro-poor regulations that ensure affordability while promoting more resilient housing. Beyond the emphasis on public and private sector actors, commitments need to acknowledge and support the role of civil society and collective organisations in the various stages of the building materials value chain.

4. Climate action for equitable cities: working with informal communities for low-carbon, resilient futures

Authors: Anna Walnycki and Tucker Landesman

The global climate emergency disproportionately affects the 1.1 billion people living in low-income and informal urban settlements. While these communities have low emissions and have contributed least to climate change, they are increasingly vulnerable to flooding, rising sea levels, extreme heat and drought. As cities continue to grow, urban policy and practice must enable low-carbon and resilient housing and basic services for informal settlements. The scale of this challenge requires international agencies, researchers, governments, communities, businesses and donors to work together to foster innovation and forge new partnerships that respond to poverty, inequality and climate change. IIED is working with partners, including informal communities, to co-produce and promote low-carbon, resilient futures.

4.1 The challenge

The climate crisis is happening now. Across the world, increased rainfall, rising sea levels and overheating are impacting cities, with severe consequences for the wellbeing of urban residents. These risks will continue to grow, affecting more than 800 million people who live in low-lying coastal cities and the increasing number of urban areas with summertime temperatures of above 35°C.³⁶ With more people living in cities and informality as a common mode of urbanisation, new action research is needed to break patterns of growth that have led to vulnerability, inequality and high-carbon development pathways.

The funding available to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in cities far outweighs adaptation priorities, representing more than 90% of total urban climate finance.³⁷ Low-carbon development strategies that respond to urban infrastructure deficits and boost resilience can help plug the adaptation financing gaps, especially in low-income areas. However, structural and practical factors obstruct the flow of resources to the local level and the delivery of context-relevant

climate-resilient development. There are insufficient funds available to low- and middle-income countries, and very little of the money available targets populations most vulnerable to climate hazards. And when funding does arrive it can be restrictive, unresponsive to local needs and filtered through many intermediaries. Local urban organisations are often deemed to be 'risky' and get stuck in a loop of capacity building rather than scaling up and replicating interventions.³⁸

By bringing together the knowledge and experience of climate adaptation and settlement upgrading (which involves improving access to housing, basic services and tenure) that is in cities among governments, donors or organised communities, we see an opportunity to integrate and reshape future actions to address climate risks.

4.2 Responses for transformation

Our focus on climate action for equitable cities draws on more than 50 years of experience supporting partnerships and dialogues across local, national and global levels to mobilise action that responds to poverty and inequality in cities. IIED works with partners to co-produce action research at a local level, with city authorities and organised communities leading together to influence global climate actors and spaces. To advance these efforts, it is necessary to:

- **Strengthen the evidence and recognition of the disproportionate impacts of climate change on low-income, informal urban communities.** The impacts of climate change fall heavily on informal and low-income settlements. Better understanding of the complexities of these impacts across basic services and infrastructure can enhance climate policy and action that responds to urban inequalities.



Green intervention in Barrio 20 in Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Credit: IIED-America Latina

4.3 Mobilising knowledge for impact

This area of work brings together urban researchers and long-term partners working on poverty, decarbonisation and resilience to produce an overarching framework for equitable and inclusive climate action in cities. Our framing strengthens calls for more adaptation finance while recognising the false division between adaptation and mitigation action for many frontline partners. This action and knowledge agenda is timely given the long-anticipated Special Report on Cities from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This special report, due in 2027, underscores the imperative of urban climate action to halt global warming below the 1.5°C threshold and reduce climate risks to people and infrastructure. As host to the IPCC chair and with an organisational mandate to connect research, action and policy, IIED will work closely with diverse stakeholders to ensure the Special Report on Cities includes the latest research concerning climate change and informal settlements.³⁹ Importantly, we will work so policymakers, practitioners and civil society organisations have the appropriate tools and knowledge to act on the report's findings and policy implications.

Building on our long history of working with SDI, we are collaborating to understand how locally led climate action can simultaneously respond to structural poverty and inequalities. Our aim is to co-produce action research in cities across sub-Saharan Africa to better understand how community-led processes and participatory urban governance can promote environmental resilience and low-carbon development in informal settlements. This will be enabled through knowledge exchanges between sub-Saharan federations of the urban poor and will include local governments.

Using funding from the Wellcome Trust, we are collaborating with the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Kounkuey Design Initiative, Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) and the African Centre for Cities (ACC) to:

- **Enable decision makers to effectively govern and resource equitable climate action in low-income, informal urban communities.**

There are unequal opportunities for urban stakeholders, particularly from low-income and informal communities, to participate in climate policy, action and finance. Multi-stakeholder climate action, including financing, must prioritise urban equity and the inclusion of politically excluded groups. Climate finance and governance mechanisms should be designed to engage low-income and marginalised social groups and to identify, support and scale up community-driven projects that reduce climate risks and deliver on local development priorities.

- **Document and support interventions that connect climate action (adaptation and mitigation) with efforts to tackle urban poverty, inequality and injustice at scale.**

Links between decarbonisation and social justice in cities are emerging, but there is a need for more empirical research and practical knowledge about grounding climate justice in low-income and informal settlements among grassroots organisations, planners and practitioners, policymakers and other governing actors. Integrated climate action led by communities can boost city-wide resilience and reduce the risk of carbon lock-ins, while addressing structural and spatial urban inequalities.

- Synthesise and contextualise the impacts of climate change on health in vulnerable urban settlements in India, Kenya, Sierra Leone and South Africa
- Co-produce compelling stories of health-related climate impacts and the actions that could address them in order to bring complex causal pathways to life, and
- Develop innovative approaches to communicating and achieving impact at multiple scales.



Villa 31 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Credit: Christoph Wesemann

The International Climate Initiative and Transformative Urban Coalitions (IKI-TUC) currently supports the development of practical interventions focused on decarbonisation and inclusive, equitable climate governance in five Latin American cities. In Buenos Aires, we are working with our partner organisation IIED-América Latina and local partners on an ongoing participatory upgrading intervention in Barrio 20, a low-income informally developed settlement.⁴⁰

The team has established an urban lab⁴¹ that is currently exploring the use of green and blue infrastructure and nature-based solutions that respond to heat, and renewable and low-energy technologies that link resilience, decarbonisation and development.⁴²

4.4 Action agenda

- **Climate-proof upgrading:** Settlement upgrading programmes and policies should integrate climate resilience development, including green and blue infrastructure and nature-based solutions that absorb carbon, improve air quality, mitigate extreme heat and flooding, and increase wellbeing of residents. Planning codes and upgrading processes should enable and incentivise sustainable building practices and materials — especially low-cost solutions such as passive heating and cooling design, circular supply chains and traditional knowledges — and relevant energy-saving and renewable energy technology.
- **Spend climate funding (mitigation and adaptation) in informal settlements:** Climate funding streams and policies such as climate action plans should prioritise informal settlements as legitimate sites of climate action. Initiatives such as locally led adaptation, low-carbon development strategies or zero-carbon cities can and should align with the needs for housing, basic services and sustainable urban infrastructure to achieve climate targets and relevant sustainable development goals.⁴³
- **Leverage participatory upgrading capacities for transformative climate action:** Community-based housing initiatives, re-urbanisation and settlement upgrading strategies, and finance architecture such as urban poor funds or city upgrading funds, can catalyse climate action from pilot to city-wide scale. Grassroots networks such as SDI and transnational municipal networks can be key players for peer-to-peer exchange, capacity sharing and policy mobility.

5. Climate resilience and informal settlements: the urgent need to focus on how power and knowledge interact

Author: Alejandro Barcena

Climate risk is expected to continue to grow and concentrate in cities with low adaptive capacity, particularly in informal settlements, which tend to be highly exposed and vulnerable to climate disasters. Low- and middle-income countries are experiencing the highest and fastest urban growth in the world. This development pathway threatens to produce significant climate risks, exposing many vulnerable urban dwellers, but it also offers an opportunity for transformation. By addressing socioeconomic drivers of urbanisation and marginalisation, these risks can be prevented. But the rapid pace of urbanisation in low- and middle-income regions demands urgent policy and programmatic action before this window of opportunity closes.

5.1 The challenge

In the coming decades, the growth of global climate risk will be driven by cities in low- and middle-income countries.⁴⁴ Crucially, the ways in which urban development and planning processes integrate the risk knowledge and resilience priorities of vulnerable groups will determine whether these cities follow development pathways to resilience or increased vulnerability. At present, the knowledge and risk experience of marginalised and vulnerable groups, such as those living in informal settlements, is being systematically ignored. This structural marginalisation produces risk in cities, particularly among the most vulnerable groups.

Cities host half of the world's population and by 2050 this figure is projected to increase to more than two-thirds of the world's population.⁴⁵ In the period between 2015 and 2020, about 90% of all urban growth took place in less-developed regions, where informal settlements have been the dominant form of urbanisation. The most pronounced growth of urban vulnerability and climate exposure has taken place in informal settlements of low- and middle-income countries in small and medium-sized cities.⁴⁶

The fundamental role of cities and city actors in responding to climate change has been recognised in both policy and practice.⁴⁷ However, cities are complex in nature, and their development and adaptation pathways are shaped by a wide range of actors with diverging

visions of the future and conflicting interests. In other words, the politics of adaptation and risk often prevent top-down and linear interventions from contributing to inclusive urban resilience.

Interventions at multiple levels that facilitate dialogue and knowledge co-production through multi-stakeholder governance arrangements have been widely endorsed as an effective approach to deal with complexity, inclusive development and, ultimately, urban resilience.⁴⁸ However, knowledge co-production methodologies are generally deployed without a contextual understanding of the power and politics that shape cities' development and adaptation pathways, limiting their effectiveness.

5.2 Responses for transformation

Cities can substantially increase their climate resilience by democratising whose risk counts when it comes to development planning and decision making. This requires a fundamental shift from expert-led decision-making processes to include the knowledge of vulnerable communities, many of whom live in informal settlements. Learning how to balance uneven power relations in multi-stakeholder decision-making processes and planning is the crux of this challenge and will shape the resilience of the future.

To address this challenge, policy and practice must focus on context-specific power and politics in deploying knowledge co-production interventions.⁴⁹ These interventions should facilitate dialogue and knowledge sharing between city actors, such as policymakers, civil society organisations, businesses, researchers and knowledge brokers. They could also produce new evidence to inform decision making, as well as consensus for collective action and agreed policy agendas among city actors.

Ultimately, the ambition of co-production initiatives is to reshape the way in which the knowledge of different city actors influences decision making, such as urban development planning or investment in resilience.

When deployed tactically, knowledge co-production methodologies can:

- Redress power relations that systematically exclude the knowledge of marginalised groups, and
- Transform the drivers of urbanisation and marginalisation that produce and accumulate risk in cities and informal settlements.

Policymakers and practitioners should have an intimate understanding of contextually specific power and politics. This means teasing out local configurations of actors and networks and interacting across and through the institutional, cultural and biophysical contexts of informal settlements and the city as a whole. For instance, large infrastructure investments in cities tend to be driven by national development agencies, with little or no accountability to local constituencies. Relying on international consultancy firms to produce the risk assessments that inform the design of these projects means that the knowledge of vulnerable communities is systematically ignored. An understanding of the conflicts that limit municipal cooperation and fragment civil society can guide co-production interventions to broker agreements, produce local risk knowledge, align resilience priorities and utilise existing accountability mechanisms.

5.3 Mobilising knowledge for impact

IIED has a long history of partnership with community-based and grassroots organisations focused on co-producing knowledge to bring about solutions for urban poverty and sustainable urban development. For example, our decades-long partnership with SDI on initiatives such as Know Your City has provided solid experience of knowledge co-production. More recently, IIED has worked with the Adaption Research Alliance and more than 125 organisations across the world to develop the Strengthening and Enhancing Contextual Urban Resilience (SECURE) framework, an innovative, systematic and structured approach to co-producing resilience solutions.⁵⁰ The organisations involved were identified through a structured mapping exercise that looked for experience of research programmes or policymaking on climate justice.

The SECURE framework provides organisations leading urban resilience interventions with a 'roadmap' to conduct co-production interventions. The approach helps organisations to strategically address the power

relations that structure urban development and adaptation pathways in cities, and the way that the knowledge of vulnerable groups is excluded from collective decision making. For this, the SECURE framework deploys a power-focused context analysis to tactically orient the design of co-production interventions, maximising their chances for impact:

- **Power-focused analysis** helps us understand how institutional, cultural and biophysical contexts articulate and produce dominant networks of influence in cities, and their ability to drive urbanisation, risk accumulation and vulnerability in informal settlements. Crucially, this means understanding how resilience and development visions, incentive structures and regulation privilege the exchange of knowledge, information and resources between certain actors and institutions, while excluding others. This also means understanding how social norms and intersectional identities, such as gender, ethnicity, age, caste and class, shape who has authority, credibility and access to and control of resources.

Finally, this means understanding how the built environment — such as transport infrastructure — and climate extremes and stresses enable and disrupt knowledge and resource exchange between different networks and social groups, and the opportunities they open for institutional transformation and learning.

- **Based on this analysis, the SECURE framework** offers structured guidance for organisations leading co-production interventions on how to tactically engage networks of influence in cities, with the intention to transform urbanisation and adaptation pathways and produce more inclusive, resilient futures. Here, the SECURE framework provides a suite of methodological guidelines that help to increase the collaboration potential of different networks and their capacity to influence decision making and planning. These guidelines range from behaviour change and technical interventions to empowerment and brokering timely agreements to system restructuring. They use methods that approach the problem of realigning networks of influence through knowledge production and evidence, experiential learning and dialogue platforms. This intervention framework offers a systematic way of thinking through which methodological approaches are needed to transform the way institutional, cultural and biophysical contexts of cities privilege the collaboration and exchange of certain networks and thus their influence over collective decision making.



Aerial view of São Paulo, Brazil. Credit: Eric Bergeri

5.4 Action agenda

- **Researchers and practitioners** contributing to urban resilience should approach knowledge co-production interventions with a context-specific understanding of how power relations drive urban development and risk. Interventions that use co-production methods without considering the complexity surrounding the politics of risk and adaptation will have limited impact at best and exacerbate processes of exclusion and marginalisation at worst.
- **Researchers and practitioners** should adopt a common framework to inform and design co-production interventions, such as the SECURe framework. Adopting a framework to understand power relations and the transformative potential of their interventions will help accelerate learning and achieve results at scale.
- **Donors** should fund a knowledge hub to bring together lessons from researchers and practitioners working in different cities.

To guide future interventions, it is crucial to have comparable understandings of how city-specific articulations of power shape the potential for impact of co-production methodologies. This will increase the effectiveness of resilience investments and make use of the window of opportunity where cities of low- and middle-income countries are rapidly urbanising.

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Knowledge
Products

Toolkit

April 2025

Urban; Climate change

Keywords:

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There are currently 1.1 billion people living in informal settlements worldwide and this number is estimated to triple in the next 30 years, with most of this growth happening in countries where urbanisation is on the rise. Residents of informal settlements are often the first to suffer the consequences of global crises and the last to recover. Recognising informal settlements as a predominant form of urbanisation will help cities work with informality rather than fighting against it.

This report explores the critical shifts in governance, policy and action that are needed to address the growing challenges, exacerbated by climate change, that are faced by informal settlement residents. Through reflections on what 'transformation' means for settlements from the perspective of migration and displacement, housing justice, climate justice and resilience, it provides recommendations for governments, researchers, civil society and international donors.



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