Briefing

Urban; Climate change

Reflections on knowledge gained and key lessons learnt from IIED research and action

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Issue date
November 2025

Project overview

Title:
Against forced evictions: building a renewed action-research agenda in the era of climate change

Timeframe:
January–September 2025

Summary:
This project explored the links between housing justice agendas and climate change, looking at the environmental impacts of forced evictions and the effects of climate change on housing justice and anti-eviction struggles. It identified localised evidence of the impact of evictions on populations' exposure and vulnerability to climate risks, estimated the environmental costs of evictions using community data and engaged civil society groups to explore the issue using multimedia.

Change in action

While there is a clear recognition that housing injustices can lead to human rights violations, there is little evidence on how unjust housing systems contribute to the drivers and impacts of climate change in cities. Climate change and official responses to such risks can exacerbate housing disparities and be used to justify forced displacements. This project therefore sought to provide more nuanced evidence about these links and support anti-eviction and housing justice arguments through a mix of quantitative research, literature review, audiovisual products and partner engagement.

Housing justice and climate change in cities

How transforming housing systems can contribute to more effective climate responses

The links between housing justice and climate change

While there is a growing recognition that housing and the construction industry contribute significantly to global emissions (with buildings being responsible for 39% of global carbon emissions[1]), there is little evidence on how unjust housing systems contribute to the drivers and impacts of climate change. This is critical, as there are currently more than 2.8 billion people experiencing some form of housing inadequacy and they are often some of the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.[2]

Housing responses play a key role in shaping the development pathways of cities, affecting their mitigation and adaptation strategies. Speculative, profit-driven and market-led housing solutions often result in poorly served urban sprawl, trapping cities in unsustainable, carbon-intensive development pathways that further exacerbate inequalities.[3]

In addition, housing rights violations, such as forced evictions, tenure insecurity, limited access to services and infrastructure, lack of affordability, as well as poor habitability conditions, weaken adaptation capacities of low-income communities and cities. They can also undermine mitigation and risk reduction efforts.

Key challenges and knowledge gaps

The data, evidence and stories that we collected through this initiative, alongside a growing body of work on housing justice in the context of climate change, reveal critical knowledge gaps and challenges in the housing sector that should be considered when looking at cities and climate change. We have identified four areas that need to be addressed to make sure urban policies are more responsive to both climate and social challenges:

- **Urban interventions and regulations that do not consider housing rights — leading to processes of dispossession, displacement and housing speculation — deepen the climate crisis.** Even if they are framed as protecting the climate, these interventions have led to processes of green-gentrification, maladaptation, and what has been termed 'renovictions' and 'low-carbon gentrification'.[4,5] In contrast, protecting and supporting low-carbon approaches that prioritise the housing rights of marginalised groups can safeguard cities and inner-city areas against more carbon-intensive usages and unsustainable urban sprawl.[6] Such approaches include regulating the real estate sector, advancing inclusive planning instruments and incentives, protecting tenants' rights and upgrading informal settlements rather than demolishing them.
- **The violations of housing rights through forced evictions of informal settlements undermine efforts to foster resilience and reduce carbon emissions in cities.** Forced evictions increase people's exposure to climate risks and hinder the capacity of communities to adapt by negatively impacting key dimensions of vulnerability and exposure (see Figure 1).

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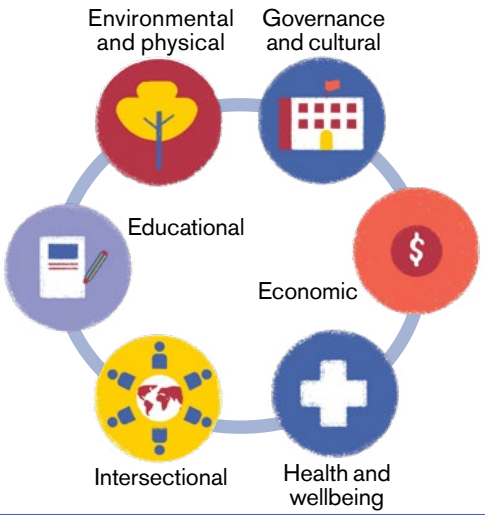
Figure 1. Key dimensions of vulnerability and exposure affected by forced evictions



Additionally, our research has demonstrated that forced evictions of informal settlements undermine efforts to achieve carbon reduction targets. Our new estimates[7] show that in Nigeria alone, CO_2 emissions related to evictions over the past 25 years could have generated more than 2.46 million tonnes of CO_2e,[8] which would take ten million trees — a forest the size of Paris — 11 years to capture. This magnitude highlights the need to review carbon accounting methods, as excluding evictions from current frameworks and policy discussions is not merely a technical oversight, but a political one.

- **Recovering, repairing, retrofitting and upgrading of existing housing must be prioritised and utilised to address housing inequalities.** Evidence shows that improving existing housing saves two-thirds of embodied carbon compared to new housing construction, and that making housing more resilient through retrofitting could save up to 4.8 gigatons of CO_2 emissions, while also addressing the more than 268 million inadequate houses globally.[9] A recent study in São Paulo, Brazil, for instance, suggests that repurposing vacant properties and land could cut 1% off Brazil's total emissions.[10] Our study[11] shows that upgrading and retrofitting of informal settlements can save up to 66% of CO_2e compared to alternative demolition and relocation policies. In turn, in-situ slum upgrading can promote both mitigation (by reducing emissions) and adaptation (by reducing determinants of risk) to climate change. Additionally, improving housing in informal settlements enables the conditions for poverty eradication, equity and just transitions, as shown by recent research on the impacts of adequate housing in human development.[12]
- **Existing policy, financial and regulatory environments overlook the potential contributions of non-speculative, collective and incremental forms of housing production to communities' resilience.** This has resulted in a lack of frameworks to support the scaling up of these forms of housing production, despite the fact that they tend to increase the adaptation capacity of communities and reduce their environmental impact.[13] Likewise, there is limited understanding of the challenges associated with accessing sustainable and resilient building materials for incremental housing in informal settlements.[14,15]

These conclusions demonstrate that the protection of housing rights and climate efforts are not separate issues but impact each other. Housing must therefore be made more central to current climate debates, such as the United Nations Climate Change Conference and the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, moving beyond limited notions such as shelter and instead embracing a more systemic, justice-oriented understanding of its relationship with climate change. This means acknowledging that the governance of housing delivery, financing, construction, maintenance and management have distinctive social and environmental implications.

Alexandre Apsan Frediani, Camila Cociña and Paula Sevilla-Núñez

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Key lessons

- The protection of housing rights and climate efforts are deeply intertwined.
- Housing systems must therefore be more responsive to both climate and social injustices by: prioritising the recovery of existing housing for social purposes; avoiding forced evictions of informal settlements; promoting community-led and non-speculative forms of housing; and centring the right to adequate housing in urban adaptation and mitigation interventions.
- Prioritising upgrading and retrofitting informal settlements, for example, could save up to 66% of CO_2e compared to forced evictions followed by relocation.

Partners' view

Urban poor communities are on the frontline of the compounding negative impacts of systemic housing injustices and the climate crisis [...] This critical work opens an important conversation on the connections between evictions and the climate crisis, and will hopefully become a tool for incorporating the emissions from evictions into carbon accounting frameworks.

Andrew Maki, Justice & Empowerment Initiatives, Nigeria

Notes

[1] Adams, M, Burrows, V and Richardson, S (2019) Bringing embodied carbon upfront: coordinated action for the building and construction sector to tackle embodied carbon. World Green Building Council, London. / [2] UN-Habitat (2023) Rescuing SDG 11 for a resilient urban planet: SDG 11 synthesis report, High Level Political Forum 2023 — Executive summary. / [3] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018) Rethinking urban sprawl: moving towards sustainable cities. OECD Publishing, Paris. doi:10.1787/9789264189881-en. / [4] Bouzarovski, S, Frankowski, J and Herrero, ST (2018) Low-carbon gentrification: When Climate Change Encounters Residential Displacement, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 42(5), pp.845–863. / [5] Von Platten, J, Mangold, M, Johansson, T and Mjörnell, K (2022) Energy efficiency at what cost? Unjust burden-sharing of rent increases in extensive energy retrofitting projects in Sweden, *Energy Research & Social Science*, 92, 102791. / [6] Cociña, C, Barcena, A, Sevilla-Núñez, P, Frediani AA and Roche, JM (2025) Forced evictions and climate change: the damaging impact on risks and emissions. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22672iied / [7] See note 6. / [8] CO_2e, or carbon dioxide equivalent, is a metric used to show the climate impact of various greenhouse gases as a single, comparable unit. / [9] Build Change (2023) Saving embodied carbon through strengthening existing housing. / [10] Instituto Polis (2024) Morar no centro como estratégia de mitigação climática (Portuguese). / [11] See note 6. / [12] Frediani, AA, Cociña, C and Roche, JM (2023) Improving housing in informal settlements: assessing the impacts in human development. Habitat for Humanity International, Washington, DC. / [13] Sevilla Núñez, P, Frediani, AA, Cociña, C, Papamanousakis, Y, Luka, Z, Kondowe, B, Chikumo Mtonga, G, Kabilika, P, Mphande, J, Fidalgo Ribeiro, T, Litsek, F, Manadhar, L, Joshi, L and Manandhar, D (2025) Community-led housing in the global South: benefits, blockages and ways forward. IIED and World Habitat. www.iied.org/22625iied / [14] Cities Alliance (2024) Can the urban poor afford sustainable construction? A just transitions in the built environment on informal settlements. / [15] Frediani, A, Cociña, C and Mardon, M (2024) Building sustainable housing futures for all: filling the knowledge gap on building materials in informal settlements. IIED, London. www.iied.org/22466iied

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