

# Briefing

Climate Change; Urban

Key findings and recommendations for urban living lab practitioners and policymakers



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## Key points

**Shift urban living labs from short-term experiments to embedded governance platforms.** In informal contexts, they are most effective when they provide a lasting framework of practices which build legitimacy, reduce delivery risks and stabilise community influence.

**Treat community self-organisation as political capability.** Repeated practices such as savings, housing delivery and technical literacy generate credibility and bargaining power, allowing communities to engage institutions as co-producers, rather than beneficiaries.

**Mediate rules-based access to planning.** Accreditation systems, standards and eligibility rules often embed exclusion. Intermediaries are essential to help communities translate these rules into real access and influence.

**Build durability through repetition and partnerships.** Long-term collaboration and repeated delivery reduce risks, build trust and turn relationships into formal recognition, ensuring influence outlasts project cycles and political turnover.

## From capacity to capability: urban living labs as a route to gain influence

Urban living labs (ULLs) are increasingly used to support climate resilience in cities across the global South, yet many struggle to move beyond bounded pilot projects, particularly in contexts of informality and fragmented governance. Informal settlers, despite being among the most exposed to climate risks, remain largely excluded from formal planning and decision making. This briefing examines how ULLs can have lasting influence, allowing informal settlers to gain access to planning and resettlement governance. The work of the Homeless Peoples' Federation Philippines, Inc. (HPFPI) and its partner Technical Assistance Movement for People and Environment, Inc. (TAMPEI) in the city of Iloilo in the Philippines shows how repeatedly demonstrating self-organisation capability can be converted into institutional leverage. The briefing identifies four strategies — vision, leverage, legality and durability — through which ULLs can strengthen community capability to negotiate, shape priorities and secure institutional commitments.

Urban sustainability transitions in the global South are unfolding under intensifying climate risks, rapid urbanisation and deeply uneven institutional capacity.<sup>1</sup> Informal settlers face compounded vulnerabilities, generally lacking secure tenure and basic services, and are systematically excluded from urban resilience planning and policy-making spaces. In response to these pressures, sustainability and resilience agendas are increasingly pursued through experimentation in situ, with practical, collective efforts to rework infrastructures, institutions and everyday life under these conditions.<sup>2</sup>

ULLs have become known for enabling the co-production of knowledge, technologies and institutional practices among governments, civil society, private actors and researchers.<sup>3</sup> Urban

policy debates commonly frame ULLs through the lens of multi-level governance (MLG), as 'solutions' for fixing weak vertical coordination across different levels of government as well as the limited horizontal integration across sectors (such as housing, land use, infrastructure and disaster risk reduction).<sup>4</sup> However, repeatedly identifying coordination gaps offers little insight into how legitimacy and influence capacity are built over time in contexts of institutional fragmentation. The central lesson is that the transformative potential of ULLs in informal contexts hinges less on solutions to fix 'inter-level' coordination, and more on long-term practice that turns self-organisation into institutional leverage and becomes the recognised planning authority.

## Collective visioning can transform diverse interests into an agreed agenda

In the city of Iloilo in Western Visayas province in the Philippines, resettlement governance is decentralised and weakly integrated.

Responsibilities for housing, land use and disaster risk management are fragmented across *barangays* (small administrative districts), city departments and national agencies. Although civil society participation is formally

mandated, in practice it remains uneven and politically contingent. Despite these constraints, HPFPI and its technical partner TAMPEI support homeowners' associations (HOAs) to secure land and housing tenure while increasingly influencing formal resettlement planning and decision-making bodies.<sup>5</sup>

Resettlement governance in Iloilo advances through a distributed infrastructure of community-led practices — around savings, land acquisition, subdivision planning, participatory design and construction, and negotiation — that intermittently receive formal recognition. For over 25 years, HPFPI and TAMPEI's approach has enabled communities to progressively meet institutional requirements, demonstrate collective and self-organised delivery, and become indispensable partners to capacity-stretched government departments.

Based on this experience, this briefing identifies four strategies through which communities can build influence: **vision, leverage, legality** and **durability**.

## Four strategies for emergent capacity in resettlement governance

### Vision: aggregating community demands

Collective visioning is a process through which communities articulate, negotiate and agree shared priorities, not simply to express preferences but to assemble a coherent agenda for planning and decision-making arenas. This matters because planning systems are poorly equipped to engage with plural, shifting or internally-contested demands. When communities present fragmented claims, institutions often interpret this as a lack of commitment. In fragmented governance contexts, collective visioning can transform diverse interests into an agreed agenda that can be recognised, negotiated and acted upon by multiple institutions operating at different scales. It allows communities to 'speak with one voice' while retaining internal diversity.

HPFPI and TAMPEI used participatory tools such as the 'Dreamhouse' workshops, where residents were invited to imagine, draw and model their ideal home, while sharing hopes and fears, and negotiating conflicting preferences. In flood-affected communities, residents prioritised elevated living spaces and habitable second floors, and in seismically-vulnerable areas, structural reinforcements became central concerns. TAMPEI translated these aspirations into feasible designs with the City Engineer's Office, providing continuous feedback to residents so that design could become a shared learning process, rather than expert-led output. The workshops functioned as a way of holding together an imagined future of security and permanence, while the slow labour of saving, compliance and negotiation unfolded over time.

### Leverage: building bargaining power through delivery

Here, the 'lab' is not a bounded pilot project — it becomes a distributed infrastructure of practice that accumulates capability, legitimacy and institutional traction. In political patronage contexts and fragmented institutional environments, communities that can mobilise labour and finance, and demonstrate cohesion, gain leverage because they can reduce delivery risks and compensate for state capacity gaps. Communities that can deliver elements of infrastructure effectively produce *de facto* public goods. This capacity demonstrates an ability to deliver where the state cannot, signalling

Figure 1. TAMPEI 'Dreamhouse' housing design process



Residents imagine, draw and model their ideal home. Credit: HPFPI

credibility and strengthening their bargaining power in negotiations over land, services and planning decisions.

In Iloilo, HPFPI's savings programme enabled informal settlers to pool resources for land acquisition and cover up-front transaction costs, bridging financing gaps created by delayed government programmes. The Community-Led Infrastructure Finance Facility (CLIFF) programme set up following the displacement of residents as a result of Typhoon Fengshen (known locally as Typhoon Frank) in 2008, enabled local government and national agencies to work more effectively with organised communities by reducing delivery risks and transaction costs. By combining revolving finance with sweat equity, CLIFF allowed communities to deliver housing and settlement improvements while producing public goods aligned with state planning and budgetary constraints. This capacity shifted community–state relations from ad hoc negotiation towards more durable collaboration, increasing political willingness to prioritise organised settlements within resettlement and planning processes.

### **Legality: creating rules-based institutional interfaces**

This strategy focuses on embedding community participation within rules-based institutional interfaces, supported by intermediaries familiar with technical, legal and bureaucratic systems. This matters in fragmented governance contexts where formal acceptance depends not only on recognition, but on the ability to translate community organisation into administratively-legible, technically-compliant forms. Procedures such as homeowner accreditation, land titling, and government repayment schemes are often presented as neutral, yet they frequently encode power relations that privilege actors with existing documentation and institutional familiarity. Intermediaries play a critical role by helping communities meet, contest and strategically work through administrative requirements, while reducing transaction costs for local government.

In Iloilo, legal accreditation of HOAs with the Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development is the primary gateway for formal representation of informal settlers. It affects eligibility for beneficiary verification, dispute resolution, land acquisition, financing schemes, and participation in planning forums. This procedural anchoring has been achieved through sustained intermediary support from TAMPEI. Their experts strengthened the HOAs' legal and technical literacy and translated community-

**Figure 2. Results of the CLIFF programme**



Uswag Relocation Site in San Isidro in Nueva Ecija province. Credit: HPFPI

designed housing aspirations into technically-compliant plans by securing land use reclassification, subdivision approval and building permits, while coordinating with the City Engineer's Office and other technical units. This mediation enabled city agencies to engage organised communities without overextending limited administrative capacity, while ensuring that community priorities were retained within formal planning and decision-making processes. In this sense, legality becomes a political capability — the ability to access, work through and hold institutions to their stated commitments.

### **Durability: sustaining collaboration through iterative delivery and partnerships**

ULLs become durable mechanisms when designed to enable iterative 'tinkering' through which community influence becomes institutional. In fragmented governance contexts, sustained inclusion rarely follows from single projects or formal agreements alone. Instead, it is built through repeated cycles of small-scale delivery, adjustment and negotiation. Multi-scalar partnerships matter not only for the resources and visibility they provide, but because they can be replicated. This lowers delivery risks, builds professional trust and creates the conditions under which collaboration can persist beyond single project cycles. Through this repetition, interpersonal alliances become critical conduits for institutional access, allowing trust established through practice to be translated into more stable forms of representation and influence.

In Iloilo, HPFPI's long-term engagement with international networks such as Slum Dwellers International, UN-Habitat's Global Campaign for Secure Tenure and the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights reinforced its legitimacy by providing finance, learning opportunities and public visibility. These partnerships enabled repeated delivery and organisational reliability, reshaping perceptions among city and *barangay* officials, and creating space for sustained collaboration. Under the 2008 CLIFF programme, continued interaction with the City Engineer's Office and the Iloilo City Local Housing Office (ICLHO) fostered trust with permanent technical institutions. City officials observed that community-led approaches reduced costs, extended limited public resources and strengthened beneficiary ownership. The interpersonal relationships formed through these repeated engagements ultimately translated into formal invitations for HPFPI to hold seats on the local housing board and the regional development council, consolidating its role as a durable planning partner within the city's governance structure.

## Future implications

Cities in low- and middle-income countries will continue to urbanise rapidly under conditions of increasing climate risks and institutional fragmentation. The experience of HPFPI and TAMPEI in Iloilo demonstrates that ULLs can be transformative when they function as embedded governance platforms, rather than short-term pilot projects. Their work has functioned much like an embedded ULL, evolving through repeated interaction with communities and institutions, enabling learning, trust-building and incremental shifts in planning practice. In this model, the primary contribution of a ULL is not only a matter of technical innovation or the correction of stratified modes of coordination, but the long-term strengthening of political capability that allows informal settlers to influence planning and adaptation.

To support the delivery of ULLs towards inclusive and transformative urban transitions, policymakers and funders should:

- **Design ULLs as long-term collaborative platforms rather than time-bound 'solutions'.** ULLs must be able to operate across electoral cycles and shifting institutional alignments. This requires long-horizon mandates, stable coordination roles and sustained presence within everyday planning and resettlement processes, allowing experimentation, trust building and institutional learning to accumulate.
- **Make community capability an explicit ULL outcome,** strengthening communities' ability to convene, decide, manage internal conflict, coordinate action and re-engage institutions. This underpins all other ULL outcomes and should be treated as a primary adaptation and governance result.
- **Use ULLs to institutionalise civil society influence pathways within governance,** by creating recurring, rules-based entry points for accredited community organisations in planning, budgeting and resettlement forums. The goal is not participation as presence, but capability as influence — the power to negotiate, shape priorities and secure durable institutional commitments.
- **Invest in intermediaries to be the bridge between community priorities and regulatory systems,** reducing transaction costs for both communities and the state. Long-term support for facilitation, technical assistance, coordination and compliance enables ULLs to operate across fragmented institutional landscapes without offloading responsibility onto communities.

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## Knowledge Products

IIED's mission is to build a fairer, more sustainable world, using evidence, action and influence in partnership with others.

HPFPI and its technical partner TAMPEI are non-profit organisations supporting homeowners' associations through collective savings, secure tenure, technical intermediation, disaster response and long-term engagement with local governments.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> IPCC (2022) *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report*. Cambridge University Press. / <sup>2</sup> Bulkeley, H, Marvin, S, Palgan, YV, McCormick, K, Breitfuss-Loidl, M, Mai, L, von Wirth, T and Frantzeskaki, N (2019) Urban living laboratories: conducting the experimental city?, *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 26(4), pp.317-335. / <sup>3</sup> Bulkeley, H, Coenen, L, Frantzeskaki, N, Hartmann, C, Kronsell, A, Mai, L, Marvin, S, McCormick, K, van Steenberg, F and Voytenko Palgan, YV (2016) Urban living labs: governing urban sustainability transitions, *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 22, pp.13-17. / <sup>4</sup> Betsill, M and Bulkeley, H (2006) Cities and the multilevel governance of global climate change, *Global Governance*, 12(2), pp.141-159. / <sup>5</sup> TAMPEI (2025) Facebook post, 12 October, [www.facebook.com/tampeiph/posts/community-leaders-across-iloilo-joined-the-two-day-kabalaka-learning-exchange-or/1124813926428166/](https://www.facebook.com/tampeiph/posts/community-leaders-across-iloilo-joined-the-two-day-kabalaka-learning-exchange-or/1124813926428166/). Accessed 2 February 2026.

## FIND OUT MORE

This work is part of IIED's 'Unlocking Resilience through Bottom-up Action-research and multi-scalar Networks' (URBAN) project, run with partners SouthSouthNorth, PRIA, KDI, Doh Eain and TAMPEI. Find out more about this work at

[www.iied.org/urban-living-labs-for-resilience-scaling-impact-through-secure-framework](http://www.iied.org/urban-living-labs-for-resilience-scaling-impact-through-secure-framework)

