



Towards a just transformation: climate crisis and the right to housing

Report to the Human Rights Council

Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing

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The climate crisis poses a fundamental threat to the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing. Housing is more frequently washed away by floods, flattened by hurricanes or down by wildfires. Desertification, lack of water for agriculture and drinking, and rising sea levels are every year displacing millions.

At the same time housing is in itself a major contributor to the climate crisis: The way we build, heat, cool and seal land with housing and infrastructure contributes to 37 percent of carbon dioxide emission alone. A just and human rights-complaint transformation is necessary, if we want to ensure that current and future generations have access to adequate housing.

What means the right to adequate housing in the context of the climate crisis?

Adequate housing is defined under international human rights law to include **security of tenure, availability of services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, appropriate location and cultural adequacy**. In the view of the Special Rapporteur the climate crisis requires in addition **the recognition of sustainability** as an **element of the right to adequate housing**.



Housing should not be realized endlessly, in a way that destroys our planet.

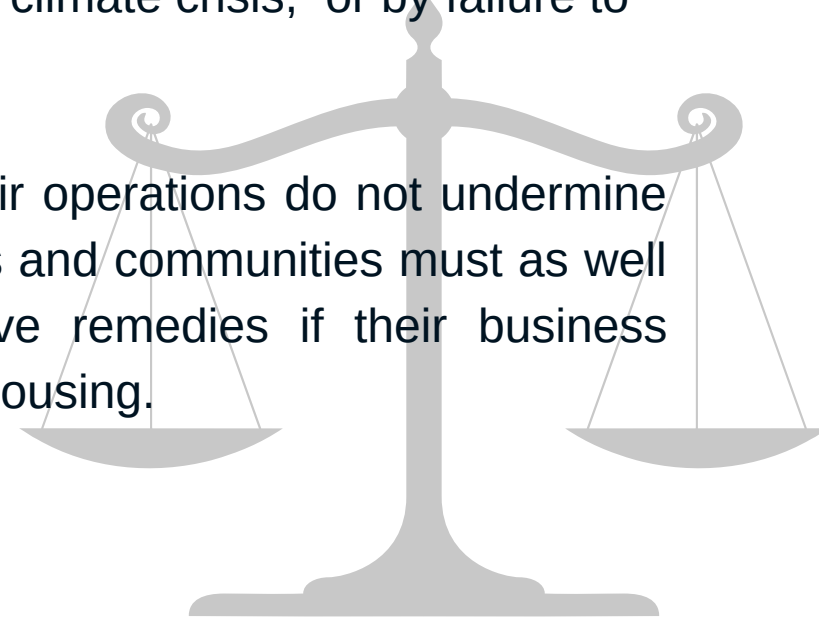


What are the relevant obligations under international law?

States have obligations to:

- Take measures to prevent foreseeable harm caused by climate change, making use of maximum available resources;
- Support adaptation and mitigation efforts by financing initiatives and facilitating the transfer of green technologies;
- Avoid conduct that would create a foreseeable risk of impairing the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing in other States;
- Reduce global emissions contributing to the climate crisis - including those related to the housing sector;
- Ensure that their actions to address climate change are compliant with human rights;
- Prevent violations of the right to adequate housing caused by state policies, but as well by corporations or investors that are domiciled or operate in their jurisdiction, irrespective of whether the harm is caused within their jurisdiction or abroad;
- Provide an effective remedy should the right to adequate housing be violated by emissions accelerating the climate crisis, or by failure to take necessary adaptation measures.

Businesses must as well ensure that their operations do not undermine the rights to adequate housing. Individuals and communities must as well have access to appropriate and effective remedies if their business operations threaten the right to adequate housing.



How does the climate crisis impact on the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing?



Extreme weather events - such as cyclones, typhoons and changing monsoon patterns - wreak damage and destruction on housing, through the winds and floods they produce. Extreme heat and extreme cold also directly impact the habitability of housing, where homes are not properly insulated, or lack adequate appliances or energy for heating or cooling. Heatwaves produce conditions conducive to wildfires, which can cause serious and widespread damage to housing. More extreme weather conditions have implications for the habitability and affordability of housing by further entrenching energy poverty.



Slow-onset events - such as sea level rise, increasing temperatures, ocean acidification, glacial retreat, salinization, land and forest degradation, loss of biodiversity, and desertification - also have an impact on the right to adequate housing. When homes are located in places that become uninhabitable, people are forced to migrate. Climate change is already today strongly contributing to the migration from rural areas to cities, which are often overburdened and unable to provide adequate housing for all, forcing people to establish their homes in informal settlements, with inadequate living conditions and blatant lack of security of tenure.



Can climate policies have a negative impact on the right to adequate housing?



When climate response, adaptation and mitigation measures are not designed in a rights-compliant, holistic and long-term manner, they can increase vulnerabilities and entrench existing inequalities. Sometimes such measures have resulted in unnecessary displacement and forced evictions without proper consultation, participation or procedural fairness.

For example:

- **Post-disaster reconstruction** – has sometimes favoured the interests of elites and promote privatization or land grabs.
- **Climate gentrification** – Measures to strengthen climate resilience and public investments in energy efficiency can decrease the affordability of housing.
- **Resettlement and relocation for disaster prevention or climate adaptation** – can result in the forced relocation of entire communities forced evictions and arbitrary displacement.
- **Green grabbing** – Certain projects implemented under climate mitigation programmes or to protect nature or rainforests have displaced local communities, resulted in loss of livelihoods and housing, without adequate prior consultation, remedies or compensation of those persons that live or use these areas.

Who is mostly at risk?

Marginalized groups living in poverty or facing discrimination on the basis of gender, sex, age, religion, race, cultural or ethnic background, disability, or migration status are often the most exposed. They are more vulnerable to climate events, frequently left out of climate adaptation actions, more likely to be negatively affected by harmful climate mitigation and (mal)adaptation, and less likely to benefit from relief and reconstruction efforts. To minimize their exposure to risks, it is crucial that policies are tailored to their specific needs and that they are consulted and can participate in decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation at all levels of climate action.

How does housing contribute to the climate crisis?

All stages of housing construction, use, management and demolition have environmental impacts: these processes consume resources (land, water, energy and building materials) and produce greenhouse gas emissions. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has estimated that alone the use and construction of buildings accounts for **at least 37 per cent of energy-related carbon dioxide emissions**.

- **Energy consumption for cooking, heating, cooling and lighting** - represents approximately 28 per cent of global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions.
- **Construction and construction materials** - are estimated to be responsible for approximately 10 per cent of total global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions. Materials such as steel, cement bricks and non-certified wood have a large carbon footprint.



- **Increase in average per capita living space** – contributes to greenhouse gas emissions due to the additional land and materials needed for construction and the additional energy needed for heating and cooling.
- **Emission of pollutants** - the waste produced by households is responsible for 5 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions (methane, carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide).
- **Urban sprawl, deforestation and soil sealing** - are drivers of deforestation, conversion of ecosystems and land degradation. Soil sealing, and replacement of green areas with asphalt and concrete contributes to additional urban heat effects. Urban sprawl increases transportation demands resulting in additional carbon dioxide emissions.

How achieving just, human rights-based, climate-resilient and carbon-neutral housing for all?

Addressing the climate crisis requires immediate and substantial reductions in emissions from the global building and construction sectors. At the same time, an increase in the global housing stock is needed in order to ensure adequate housing for all. **In the global South the biggest mitigation potential is in new more efficient buildings, while in the global North the highest mitigation potential is in retrofitting existing buildings.**



The Special Rapporteur identifies the following pathways:

States should:

- **Step up efforts to improve the energy efficiency of households**, such as the adoption of energy efficiency standards; the encouragement of retrofitting; the use of highly efficient and low-emissions lighting, appliances and equipment systems;
- **Encourage greater housing-need satisfaction from the existing housing stock**, such as restoring disused buildings as living spaces; renovating and retrofitted the existing housing stock; stronger use of vacant and secondary homes as main places of residence, for example through appropriate taxation policies;
- **Promote the use of affordable and accessible net-zero embodied carbon** for major building components, as well as **renewable materials** such as wood, clay and straw, or recycled materials;
- Invest in the development of new carbon-neutral, climate-resilient **social housing** that is affordable for all;
- Ensure **that urban planning policies** integrate climate change, disaster risk reduction, energy response, land use, transport, location of services and infrastructure equity and include the residents of informal settlements;
- Make sure that **local governments** are equipped with adequate authority, **human and financial resources** and technical expertise in the areas of human rights, housing and climate change and conduct participatory land use planning and urban planning.



Non-State actors:

- **Businesses** should incorporate measures to respect and fulfil the right to adequate housing in corporate, social and governance policies;
- **Architecture and design firms** can contribute to the design of climate-resilient and carbon-neutral housing making use of innovative and sustainable materials and by paying specific attention to the needs of marginalized groups;
- **Construction and engineering companies** should consider climate impacts when sourcing materials and should utilize low-carbon construction processes and methods;
- **Investors and developers** should shift investment away from short-term profit-maximization that promotes overbuilding to investment into affordable, climate-resilient, carbon-neutral housing;
- **Owners and managers of buildings** should seek to reduce the operational carbon emissions from buildings.

The international community should:

- Create **simplified, efficient mechanisms for the provision of international financial assistance** for mitigation and adaptation in the housing sector for countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change;
- Ensure that the **recently established loss and damage fund becomes resourced and operational as quickly as possible, is disbursed efficiently**, and ensure that support actually benefits those whose homes have been damaged or rendered inhabitable due to climate-related impacts;

- Establish the **historic responsibilities** of States, businesses, private equity and real estate entities in the field of housing related climate impacts and ensure their participation in any redress and compensation mechanism;
- Allow for the **suspension or cancellation of debt payments** in the aftermath of extreme climate events so that governments can ensure climate-efficient and resilient reconstruction for those whose homes have been damaged or destroyed.



Read the full report ([A/HRC/52/28](#)).

Useful links:

- [Webpage of the UN Special Rapporteur on climate change and human rights](#)
- [OHCHR webpage on climate change](#)

