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Extreme poverty and human rights

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Elena Díaz Galán, in accordance with Human Rights Council resolution 62/28.

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Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Elena Díaz Galán

Cities and poverty

Summary

In this first report, the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Elena Díaz Galán, analyses the links between urbanization and poverty. The report argues that the type of urbanization pursued is a political decision that can either reduce or deepen poverty, depending on how cities are planned, governed and financed. It examines the processes of social exclusion and the structural drivers of poverty in cities. The Special Rapporteur highlights the importance of national and local authorities in addressing these issues, calls for a human rights-based approach to urbanization and provides a number of recommendations.

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I. Introduction

1. Urbanization is one of the defining demographic, economic and social transformations of the twenty-first century. According to the latest United Nations estimates, approximately 57 per cent of the world's population currently lives in urban areas, and this proportion is expected to reach nearly 68 per cent by 2050.[1] This trend has undeniable consequences for the protection and promotion of human rights and for the Sustainable Development Goals. Cities have often been presented as engines of economic growth, innovation and cultural exchange, with a concentration of employment opportunities, infrastructure, public services and political institutions. Yet, the social and environmental costs of unsustainable economic growth are often not considered. In addition, as urban populations continue to grow, the extent to which cities succeed in ensuring inclusive and sustainable development will increasingly determine the realization of human rights for a large proportion of the world's population.[2]

2. From a human rights perspective, urbanization should therefore not be understood merely as a demographic or economic phenomenon, but as a process that profoundly shapes the realization of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Whether cities become spaces of opportunity or spaces of exclusion depends largely on public policies governing land use, housing, infrastructure, fiscal redistribution, social protection and participation. Inclusive urbanization requires effective multilevel governance, adequate municipal financing, participatory planning, equitable access to public services and specific measures of social protection, so that the benefits of urban development are shared by all rather than reinforcing existing inequalities. Poverty in cities is an undeniable reality, but it can be overcome.

3. The Special Rapporteur wishes to thank all those who contributed to the preparation of the present report and provided valuable insights. In view of the many contributions and expressions of interest received from States, local government and other stakeholders, the Special Rapporteur decided to focus in the report on the links between urbanization models and their impact on poverty. She will present a follow-up report to the Human Rights Council in 2027, after additional consultations with all stakeholders and in situ visits, to provide concrete proposals and recommendations for combating poverty at the local level.

II. Urbanization: processes and impact on human rights

4. Looking at the growth of cities, numerous studies have shown that poorly planned and unmanaged urbanization generates serious social challenges. As noted by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), "current development trends have demonstrated the inability of cities to cope adequately with the challenges of sustainable urbanization and to deliver implementable and feasible solutions for all, not only in developing and rapidly urbanizing countries, but also in developed and highly-urbanized nations".[3]

[1] See https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS and https://www.un.org/uk/desa/68-world-population-projected-live-urban-areas-2050-says-un.

[2] Cástor M. Díaz Barrado and Sagrario Morán Blanco, "El objetivo de desarrollo sostenible 11 de la Agenda 2030: ciudades y comunidades sostenibles. Metas, desafíos, políticas y logros", *Cuadernos de estrategia*, vol. 206 (2020).

[3] United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *The Implementation of the Principles of Planned Urbanization: a UN-Habitat Approach to Sustainable Urban Development* (Nairobi, 2016).

5. In many rapidly urbanizing developing countries, large numbers of residents in cities remain trapped in low-paying informal employment and overcrowded settlements, limiting opportunities for upward mobility and perpetuating intergenerational poverty.

6. Scholars have argued that the relationship between big cities and inequality has shifted over time. In many cases, while rising levels of urbanization may initially coincide with reductions in poverty and narrowing rural-urban gaps, at more advanced stages the relationship may be reversed, as such further urbanization is associated with worsening poverty outcomes, greater inequality and wider rural-urban disparities.[4]

7. While urban areas historically combined wealth creation with relatively strong equality of opportunity, contemporary large and dense cities now generate high levels of income and wealth but fail to translate this into upward economic mobility, particularly across generations. Using long-term data on urban expansion in the United States of America, a study found that, since the mid-twentieth century, increasing city size, density and spatial expansion have been associated with declining intergenerational mobility, rising inequality and weaker social capital. In that context, children from families experiencing poverty and inequalities are less able to improve their economic position. The study seems to indicate that, in effect, modern urbanization concentrates prosperity while simultaneously locking in disadvantage, reinforcing both current and intergenerational inequality.[5] The way cities are currently designed also contributes to poverty. It has also been argued that growing income inequality is closely linked to greater spatial separation based on economic status. It has been found that the places in which people live and the environments that they experience in daily life significantly shape outcomes such as education, income and well-being, especially over time and across generations. Hence, poverty and inequality are reinforced in a self-perpetuating cycle, and effective solutions require that individuals, neighbourhoods and access to opportunities are addressed together.[6]

8. Consequently, without clear and effective urban planning and investment in inclusive housing, infrastructure and social services, and without concrete social protection measures in cities, urbanization can become a driver of poverty, inequality and social fragmentation rather than sustainable development. In this context, political decisions have an impact on the increase or reduction of poverty in cities.

A. World-class/global cities

9. Since the 1980s, urban policies have been strongly influenced by economic globalization and by the idea that cities compete with one another to attract investment, multinational corporations, tourists and highly skilled workers. This logic has given rise to the concept of the “world-class city”, which is based on the ambition of enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of metropolitan areas on a global scale. Urban space is therefore increasingly conceived as a tool for economic development by authorities, and urban policies are strongly oriented toward land “valorization” and enhancing the city’s image in the eyes of investors.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Dylan S. Connor and others, “Big cities fuel inequality within and across generations”, *PNAS Nexus*, vol. 4, No. 2 (February 2025).

[6] Maarten van Ham and others, “Geographies of socio-economic inequality”, *Oxford Open Economics*, vol. 3, No. 1 (2024).

10. Many scholars argue that the pursuit of world-class city status often prioritizes the interests of investors, businesses and affluent groups over those of the most vulnerable populations.[7] Investments are frequently concentrated in city centres, business districts and strategic areas designed to attract capital. Low-income neighbourhoods often receive less attention or become targets of urban renewal projects aimed at transforming their image and social composition. These dynamics foster processes of gentrification, whereby lower-income residents are gradually replaced by wealthier households.[8] As rents and property prices rise, residents with limited financial means are increasingly pushed towards less attractive peripheral areas. Working-class neighbourhoods thus become spaces to be redeveloped, upgraded or sometimes displaced altogether, while low-income populations are progressively relegated to less visible and less well-serviced urban peripheries.

11. In many cities, efforts to achieve world-class city status, including by the organization of mega events such as the Olympic Games or the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup, have been accompanied by the destruction of informal settlements and the forced eviction of their inhabitants, the forced displacement of low-income communities, restrictions on informal economic activities, and large-scale investments in infrastructure primarily benefiting middle- and upper-income groups.[9]

B. Smart cities

12. Smart cities rely on the use of digital technologies, big data analytics and artificial intelligence to improve the management and delivery of urban services. These urban development models are characterized by the deployment of interconnected sensors and digital infrastructure throughout public spaces (street lighting, public transport facilities, waste management systems, residential buildings and urban networks). Their application spans a wide range of sectors, including transportation, energy consumption, waste management, public safety, access to administrative services and urban planning.

13. Proponents of the smart city model argue that the collection and analysis of real-time data can contribute to a more efficient allocation of resources, improved urban mobility, enhanced service delivery and more sustainable infrastructure management. By gathering, processing and disseminating information, smart city initiatives seek to optimize urban operations and support evidence-based decision-making by public authorities while improving the quality of life of urban residents.[10] Smart city initiatives may also facilitate a better identification of residents' needs and contribute to a more efficient allocation of public resources. In this regard, smart cities are often presented as a response to contemporary challenges associated with rapid urbanization, climate change and increasing pressure on urban infrastructure.

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[7] Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1991); and see https://keywords.sites.ucsc.edu/2023/10/24/global-city/.

[8] The term "gentrification" was first used by Ruth Glass in *London: Aspects of Change* (Centre for Urban Studies, University College London, 1964).

[9] See comments on mega events and the right to adequate housing in the report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living (A/HRC/13/20); and Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Belknap Press, 2014); and Agnès Deboulet, "Villes globales convoitées et inégalités", *Idées économiques et sociales*, vol. 1, No. 167 (2012).

[10] See, for instance, Laetitia Van Eeckhout, "Ce que la 'smart city' apprend aux villes", *Le Monde*, 9 October 2023; and Amro M. Farid and others, "Smart city drivers and challenges in urban-mobility, health-care, and interdependent infrastructure systems", *IEEE Potentials*, vol. 40, No. 1 (Jan.–Feb. 2021).

14. Beyond the deployment of modern technologies, these initiatives are aimed at providing residents with safe, inclusive and sustainable living environments, expanding economic opportunities and improving access to social services. Similarly, digital technologies (online learning, digital financial services and remote transactions) have helped overcome barriers due to movement restrictions and territorial fragmentation, thereby improving access to education, financial services and other essential opportunities. Therefore, it is often argued that smart cities would significantly reduce poverty.

15. Nevertheless, concerns have been raised regarding the potential of smart city models to reinforce existing inequalities. The benefits of digital technologies are not distributed equally across urban populations. Older persons, low-income households, migrants, persons with limited educational opportunities and other marginalized groups often face barriers in accessing digital technologies or lack the skills required to make effective use of digitally delivered services. As access to public services, information and administrative procedures becomes increasingly digitalized, these groups risk being excluded from essential aspects of urban life. Smart city initiatives may therefore contribute to widening social and territorial disparities unless accompanied by measures aimed at promoting digital inclusion and ensuring equitable access to urban services.[11]

16. Digitalization "creates a 'double vulnerability': material deprivation combined with digital exclusion, turning automated systems into barriers rather than tools of inclusion".[12] A further concern relates to the territorial impacts of smart city initiatives. Technological investments frequently tend to be concentrated in areas that are already economically dynamic and attractive, such as city centres, business districts and high-value urban zones, where digital infrastructure, connected services and innovation projects are most readily deployed. By contrast, low-income neighbourhoods and peripheral urban areas often receive fewer investments and may benefit only marginally from these developments. As a result, smart city strategies could risk generating new forms of spatial inequality that are attributable not only to income disparities but also to unequal access to digital technologies, data-driven services and advanced urban infrastructure. Without deliberate efforts to ensure an equitable distribution of resources and investments, smart city projects may reinforce existing patterns of sociospatial segregation and further marginalize communities already facing multiple forms of disadvantage, and, in doing so, increase poverty.

C. 15-minute city

17. The "15-minute city" model offers an inclusive vision of urban development by seeking to ensure that all residents have access, within a short distance – typically a 15-minute walk or bicycle ride – to essential daily services and opportunities (employment, shops, schools, healthcare facilities, green spaces and recreational amenities).[13] Through the equitable distribution of urban resources, this approach is aimed at moving away from traditional patterns of urban development in which residential areas, employment centres, commercial zones and public services are spatially separated. Such functional separation of urban space has often contributed

[11] Olga Kolotouchkina, Laura Ripoll González and Warda Belabas, "Smart cities, digital inequalities, and the challenge of inclusion", *Smart Cities* vol. 7, No. 6 (2024).

[12] Submission from Viviana Ponce de León Solís.

[13] See, for instance, Huan Dong and others, "Walkability index for older adults and their travel in a 15-min community life circle: evidence from Anshan Xincun, Shanghai", *Cities*, vol. 176 (September 2026).

to car dependency and reinforced territorial inequalities, particularly for low-income households and populations living in underserved neighbourhoods.

18. In its conceptual form, the 15-minute city is presented as a response to sociospatial segregation by promoting proximity, accessibility and more balanced urban development. Its central objective is to ensure that all residents, regardless of where they live within the city, enjoy equitable access to essential services, public infrastructure and urban opportunities.

19. Nevertheless, some researchers have cautioned that such policies may also contribute to processes of gentrification when improvements to the urban environment lead to rising rents and property values. In the absence of adequate safeguards, these dynamics may progressively displace lower-income households and reduce their access to well-serviced and centrally located neighbourhoods. As a result, urban regeneration initiatives intended to enhance accessibility and quality of life may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities unless accompanied by measures aimed at preserving affordability, promoting social inclusion and protecting vulnerable residents from displacement.[14] In addition, a study in New York City found significant socioeconomic and racial disparities in air-pollution exposure within residents' 15-minute walking activity zones, with lower-income and Black communities facing a higher number of airborne particles with a diameter of 2.5 micrometres or less (PM2.5). The findings suggest that accessibility-based urban planning should be complemented by environmental justice considerations.[15]

D. Inclusive cities

20. The concept "inclusive city" is generally attributed to a city in which all residents – regardless of income, gender, age, ethnicity, disability, migration status, religion or other characteristics – can participate in, access and benefit from urban life, services, opportunities and decision-making processes on an equal basis.[16] As part of the European Union cohesion policy (Europe 2020 strategy), the concept supports the social inclusion of marginalized groups, including people with disabilities, low-skilled workers, migrants, ethnic minorities and more.[17] However, beyond policy, true inclusion is tied to cultural, psychological and historical factors, addressing identity, prejudice and the acceptance of "others". In this context, some scholars have highlighted limitations in urban design regarding public spaces, equitable housing, mobility services and tourism, with challenges often due to uneven power dynamics, market-oriented development frameworks and a lack of engagement with inequalities.[18]

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[14] See, for instance, Federico Caprotti, Catalina Duarte and Simon Joss, "The 15-minute city as paranoid urbanism: ten critical reflections", *Cities*, vol. 155 (December 2024); and Stella Kwon, "The 15-minute city: liberation or limitation?", Harvard Undergraduate Urban Sustainability Lab, 2025.

[15] Feifeng Jiang and Jun Ma, "Environmental justice in the 15-minute city: assessing air pollution exposure inequalities through machine learning and spatial network analysis", *Smart Cities*, vol. 8, No. 2 (April 2025).

[16] See https://www.unesco.org/en/query-list/i/inclusive-cities.

[17] See also the New Leipzig Charter, adopted at the Informal Ministerial Meeting on Urban Matters, 30 November 2020.

[18] Donagh Horgan and Tom Baum, "Addressing dereliction and devaluation in urban tourism: the case of Cork, Ireland", *International Journal of Tourism Cities*, vol. 9, No. 1 (2023); and Claudio Milano, Ko Koens and Antonio Paolo Russo, "The politics of urban tourism (im)mobilities: critical perspectives on inequalities and social justice", *Cities*, vol. 152 (2024).

21. Many other models of urbanization have been developed. But the bottom line is that, just as poverty is a political choice, urbanization also remains a political choice that can combat or reinforce poverty and discrimination.

III. Urbanization and processes of social exclusion

22. Urbanization can be an important driver of economic development and poverty reduction. By concentrating productive activities, markets and public services, cities may create opportunities for employment, education and social mobility that are often unavailable in rural areas. When accompanied by inclusive public policies, universal access to essential services, effective social protection systems and balanced territorial development, urbanization can contribute significantly to reducing poverty and improving living conditions. Nevertheless, market-driven urbanization, if left insufficiently regulated, may increase housing costs, deepen territorial inequalities, lead to displacement, social exclusion and new forms of deprivation, and increase poverty.[19]

23. These trends are reflected in the growing spatial concentration of poverty within cities. Between 1.6 and 3 billion people worldwide face a housing affordability crisis, while approximately 1.12 billion people continue to live in slums or informal settlements lacking adequate housing or essential services.[20] In the World Cities Report 2026, it is further estimated that around 3.4 billion people lack access to safe, adequate and secure housing, with more than 1 billion people living in settlements characterized by insecure tenure, overcrowding, environmental hazards and inadequate infrastructure.[21] These figures illustrate that urban poverty cannot be understood solely through income levels. It also reflects unequal access to land, housing, water, sanitation, healthcare, education, transport, digital connectivity and other essential services that are indispensable for the effective enjoyment of human rights.

24. The multidimensional aspects of poverty in cities are the consequences of structural inequalities that affect civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights alike, as well as decent employment, social protection and participation in public life. In many urban contexts, poverty results from the spatial organization of cities, where residential segregation, informal settlements, precarious employment, unequal infrastructure and uneven access to public services reinforce one another and perpetuate cycles of deprivation.

25. While cities foster economic growth and expand opportunities, they can also be characterized by a concentration of inequalities and poverty. The benefits of urban development are not distributed equally across urban populations, and certain groups are disproportionately exposed to poverty and exclusion. As highlighted in several submissions received for the present report, low-income households, women, older persons, persons with disabilities, informal workers and migrants are more likely to live in inadequate housing, experience limited access to clean energy, digital technologies and affordable transport, and face greater exposure to pollution, climate-related hazards, labour insecurity and weak social protection. These disadvantages frequently overlap, creating cumulative forms of exclusion that prevent individuals from fully enjoying their human rights.

[19] Submissions from Azerbaijan and Brazil.

[20] *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025* (United Nations publication, 2025).

[21] Available at https://unhabitat.org/world-cities-report-2026.

A. Spatialization and segregation of poverty in cities

26. Urban poverty is shaped by spatial processes that concentrate certain populations in areas characterized by limited access to economic opportunities, infrastructure and public services. Such concentrations are often rooted in historical patterns of migration or racial, ethnic or religious segregation, as well as land and housing policies that have excluded certain groups from formal housing markets and urban development processes. As a result, urban poverty is not merely a condition that is visible within cities; it is also produced and reproduced through the organization and governance of urban space. The spatial concentration of poverty reflects and reinforces broader patterns of social and economic exclusion. Segregated neighbourhoods frequently experience lower levels of public investment, reduced access to quality services and fewer opportunities for social and economic mobility. Understanding urban poverty therefore requires an examination of the historical, political and institutional factors that have shaped the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities and rights within cities. Numerous examples illustrate these situations.

27. Spatial segregation is both a manifestation and a driver of urban poverty. According to the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context, it refers to the separation of individuals and groups within urban space on the basis of factors such as income, race, ethnicity, religion, caste, migration status or disability. Segregation often results in the concentration of disadvantaged populations in neighbourhoods characterized by inadequate housing conditions, limited access to public services, pollution, environmental hazards [22] and fewer economic opportunities. While segregation may arise from historical patterns of exclusion, it is also reinforced by contemporary urban policies, including discriminatory zoning, physical barriers, forced evictions and displacement, criminalization and stigmatization of specific groups, unequal land use regulations, exclusionary housing markets and the spatial concentration of social housing. [23] Spatial segregation adversely affects the enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, including the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, the rights to adequate food, safe drinking water and sanitation, the right to education, the right to work and the right to security of person.[24]

28. In addition, spatial segregation is reflected in contemporary realities, including informal settlements, resettlement sites, refugee camps, gated communities and institutional housing arrangements. These forms of segregation often isolate marginalized populations from essential services, infrastructure, employment opportunities, education and political participation.

29. In France, the construction of large-scale social housing estates in the suburbs (banlieues) in the decades following the Second World War was intended to address severe housing shortages and accommodate both internal migrants and immigrant workers. While these policies significantly expanded access to housing, they also contributed to the concentration of low-income populations in specific peripheral

[22] For instance, the Single Mothers Association of Kenya notes that the informal settlements in Dandora and Korogocho, located near Nairobi's main landfill, are exposed to a toxic environment and polluted air and groundwater.

[23] Francisco Sabatini and Guillermo Wormald, "Segregación de la vivienda social: reducción de oportunidades, pérdida de cohesión", in *Segregación de la vivienda social: ocho conjuntos en Santiago, Concepción y Talca*, Francisco Sabatini, Guillermo Wormald and Alejandra Rasse, eds. (RIL editores-Estudios Urbanos, 2013).

[24] See report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing entitled "Spatial segregation and the right to adequate housing" (A/HRC/49/48).

areas over time.[25] In Brazil, the favelas of Rio de Janeiro historically emerged as a response to the exclusion of low-income populations from the formal land and housing markets in a context marked by a severe housing shortage, internal migration and the gradual demolition of working-class housing in central areas of the city.[26] Formerly enslaved persons, rural migrants and persons in precarious working conditions progressively self-constructed settlements on empty land, often located on hillsides and in areas that were of limited interest to public authorities and private developers. Over time, these informal houses were progressively replaced by more durable brick and concrete structures, population density increased, local businesses emerged, and networks of water supply, electricity, transportation and community support developed, often through informal arrangements.

30. Therefore, contemporary forms of urban poverty cannot be understood independently from the historical and ongoing processes that shape the distribution of urban space and determine who is able to fully benefit from urban development and who remains partially excluded from its advantages.

B. Urban transformation processes

31. Urban renewal, infrastructure projects, environmental rehabilitation programmes and city beautification initiatives are often presented as necessary components of urban development. However, these processes can heavily impact inhabitants, in particular communities living in poverty, that often do not have the means to defend themselves.

32. Gentrification generally starts with urban renewal and the moving-in of wealthier individuals into neighbourhoods experiencing poverty and social exclusion. This influx of investment leads to changes, in particular rises in rents. As a consequence, people who cannot afford housing and other costs associated with living in the neighbourhood have no choice but to move to cheaper areas of the city, often on the outskirts.

33. City beautification, urban renewal and transformation, changes in zoning, and urban and spatial planning without a human rights lens often entail forced eviction and displacement of communities experiencing poverty and marginalization when adequate safeguards are not in place.[27] Development-based evictions frequently affect residents of informal settlements, street vendors and other marginalized groups whose presence is perceived as incompatible with urban modernization strategies. While such projects may improve urban environments for wealthier segments of the population, they deepen poverty, with affected populations losing their access to housing, employment opportunities, social networks and essential services.

34. Inclusive urban planning, protection of human rights and the recognition of the social function of housing and land are essential to ensure that urban transformation benefits all residents rather than contributing to the displacement and further marginalization of individuals and communities experiencing poverty in cities.

[25] See report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing entitled “Visit to France” (A/HRC/43/43/Add.2); and Cyprien Avenel, “La construction du ‘problème des banlieues’ entre ségrégation et stigmatisation”, *Journal français de psychiatrie*, vol. 34, No. 3 (2009).

[26] Lícia do Prado Valladares, *The Invention of the Favela* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

[27] UN-Habitat and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Forced Evictions*, Fact Sheet No. 25/Rev.1 (New York and Geneva, 2014); and basic principles and guidelines on development-based evictions and displacement (A/HRC/4/18, annex I).

C. Informality

35. Urban informality is one of the most widespread responses to exclusion from the formal housing, land and labour markets. Far from representing a temporary or exceptional phenomenon, it has become a structural feature of urban development in many regions of the world. Informality should therefore not be understood merely as the absence of regulation or compliance with legal norms, but rather as the consequence of the inability of formal institutions and markets to provide universal access to housing, employment and essential urban services.

36. Increasingly, scholars have argued that informality is itself produced through political and institutional choices. Rather than existing outside the law, informal settlements and informal economic activities often emerge from the selective application of planning regulations, the unequal enforcement of legal frameworks and the limited capacity of formal urban systems to respond to the needs of rapidly growing urban populations. In this sense, informality constitutes a parallel mode of urban production that reflects both regulatory exclusion and the functioning of housing markets.[28]

37. The scale of urban informality illustrates its structural nature. UN-Habitat estimates that approximately 1 billion people currently live in informal settlements worldwide.[29] Moreover, most future urban expansion is expected to occur in low-income countries, where urban populations are projected to increase by approximately 141 per cent over the next five decades, compared with 44 per cent in lower-middle-income countries and 34 per cent in upper-middle-income countries. Unless urban planning systems significantly expand access to affordable housing and basic services, informal urbanization is likely to continue growing alongside formal cities.

38. Informality also characterizes labour markets. According to the International Labour Organization, more than 60 per cent of global employment, involving approximately 2 billion workers, was informal in 2018.[30] Informal employment accounts for more than 85 per cent of total employment in Africa, approximately 68.2 per cent of employment in Asia and the Pacific and 68.6 per cent in the Arab States, while the average rate across the Americas remains close to 40 per cent. These figures demonstrate that informality is not a marginal phenomenon but one of the principal mechanisms through which urban economies function.

39. Institutional tolerance of certain forms of informality has enabled cities to absorb rapidly growing populations while providing a flexible and low-cost labour force without fully assuming the financial and institutional costs associated with the provision of adequate housing, infrastructure and public services. Informality therefore performs an important economic function for cities. However, this function often depends on maintaining populations in conditions of legal uncertainty and with limited access to rights, thereby transferring many of the social costs of urbanization onto low-income households themselves.

40. For millions of people, informality constitutes the principal gateway to the city. Informal settlements frequently operate as parallel land and housing markets that emerge because formal housing markets fail to provide affordable alternatives and because planning regulations impose requirements that low-income households

[28] Ananya Roy, “Urban informality: toward an epistemology of planning”, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 71. No. 2 (Spring 2005).

[29] See https://onu-habitat.org/index.php/el-futuro-de-la-humanidad-sera-urbano?fbclid=IwAR140e_zmyUasKWGqxQv_gcvXglad1Ypyrs35qUaVcMyHA89WDzmPFsdle8_aem_AfRRfBKW0X0hALGDdjlLJXLpVeXJaPRZL1uMKPzBqhxdNGMPQuGZXmrLILzNWBq7Lfo.

[30] See https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/more-60-cent-world%E2%80%99s-employed-population-are-informal-economy.

cannot realistically satisfy. According to several studies of informal urbanization in Latin America, informal settlements are adaptive responses to housing shortages and unequal social, economic and political structures, rather than simply evidence of poverty or marginality.[31] Adequate local governance regarding informal settlements is necessary to prevent poverty.

41. While informality often provides the only available pathway to housing and livelihoods, it also exposes residents to multiple forms of insecurity. Informal settlements are frequently characterized by insecure tenure, heightened vulnerability to forced evictions, environmental hazards, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to public services, financial systems and social protection. Informality therefore creates a paradox: although it enables millions of people to survive within cities, it simultaneously prevents them from fully enjoying the rights associated with urban citizenship.

42. Contrary to common assumptions, informality is not a low-cost solution to poverty. On the contrary, households living in informal conditions frequently incur higher economic, social and environmental costs while receiving fewer public services and weaker legal protections. Informality is not a preferred choice but the only available alternative. Consequently, policies aimed at reducing urban informality should not focus primarily on stricter enforcement or eviction, but rather on addressing the structural factors that generate informality in the first place, including unaffordable land prices, insufficient affordable housing, exclusionary planning regulations and unequal access to urban opportunities. Informal settlements should be treated as rights-bearing communities, "not anomalies that must be eradicated".[32]

D. Privatization and the transformation of public space

43. The transformation of public space has become another defining feature of contemporary urban development. Traditionally conceived as places of civic life, social interaction and democratic participation, many urban public spaces have increasingly been reshaped by processes of privatization, commercialization and securitization. As cities compete to attract investment, tourism and private capital, public spaces are often redesigned to maximize commercial value, sometimes at the expense of their social and inclusive functions.[33]

44. These transformations have significant implications for poverty in cities. The growing reliance on public-private partnerships, privately managed public spaces and commercial urban redevelopment has contributed to new forms of spatial exclusion.[34] Public squares, streets and parks are increasingly replaced or complemented by privately owned commercial environments, such as shopping centres, where access is regulated through economic, behavioural or security criteria. As a result, urban space becomes progressively segmented according to patterns of consumption and purchasing power.

45. For many low-income households, public space is not merely a place of leisure but an essential economic resource. Streets, sidewalks and open public areas provide the physical space in which millions of people earn their livelihoods through street vending, waste collection, informal services and other survival activities. Increasing

[31] Milena Rincón Castellanos and Jaime Hernández-García, "Urbanización informal en Bogotá, entre la teoría y la política urbana", *Revista Brasileira de Gestão Urbana*, vol. 14 (2022).

[32] Submission from the Office of the Ombudsman of Colombia.

[33] Luis Alfonso Escudero Gómez, "The reconfiguration of urban public-private spaces in the mall: false security, antidemocratization, and apoliticalization", *Sustainability*, vol. 13, No. 22 (2021).

[34] Mariem Ali Abdeldayem, Ayman Mohamed Assem and Karim Bayoumi Ibrahim, "Public space privatization: a catalyst for urban spaces gentrification", *ARChive-SR*, vol. 10, No. 1 (2026).

restrictions on the use of public space – including stricter licensing requirements, exclusionary urban design, anti-vending regulations and privatization – often disproportionately affect these workers. Rather than addressing the structural causes of informality and poverty, such measures may criminalize informal livelihoods and deprive already vulnerable populations of their principal source of income.[35]

IV. Structural drivers of poverty in cities

46. It is important to identify the main structural factors that contribute to poverty in cities. Without attempting to provide an exhaustive account, the factors set out below may be highlighted.

A. Poor governance and urban inequalities

47. From a human rights perspective, urban poverty constitutes not only the deprivation of many human rights but also the manifestation of unequal power relations that shape access to urban resources, opportunities and decision-making. The persistence of urban poverty is therefore closely linked to the way cities are governed, planned and financed. Decisions concerning land use, housing, infrastructure, public investment and service provision determine who benefits from urban development and who remains excluded from it. Understanding urban poverty consequently requires examining the structural mechanisms through which urban policies, markets and institutions contribute to the production and reproduction of inequality.

48. Cities are not merely physical spaces where poverty becomes visible; they are also political spaces where decisions regarding land use, public investment, infrastructure, housing and service provision determine how opportunities and resources are distributed. Urban poverty is therefore not solely the result of market forces or demographic change but is also shaped by institutional choices. In many contexts, these decisions are increasingly influenced by powerful economic interests, particularly those linked to the real estate, financial and infrastructure sectors.

49. Contemporary urbanization has increasingly been characterized by the growing financialization of land and housing, transforming urban space into a vehicle for capital accumulation and economic competitiveness. As several scholars have observed, urban development is frequently driven by the objective of maximizing land values and attracting investment rather than by the realization of the economic and social rights of all inhabitants. Urban regeneration projects may modernize infrastructure and stimulate economic growth, but they may also trigger conflicts over access to strategically located land, particularly where long-established low-income communities occupy areas that subsequently become attractive for commercial or residential development. Urbanization has increasingly become a mechanism of capital accumulation through land valorization and real estate development, shifting the role of the city from a space of citizenship towards one of investment and economic profitability.

50. The concentration of economic power may also facilitate forms of institutional capture that influence urban governance and the allocation of public resources. Public investment frequently tends to be concentrated in city centres, financial districts and flagship regeneration projects targeting middle- and high-income populations, while peripheral neighbourhoods and informal settlements continue to receive

[35] Cities Alliance, “Public space as a driver of equitable economic growth: policy and practice to leverage a key asset for vibrant city economies”, 2018.

comparatively lower levels of investment. Such patterns contribute to unequal access to housing, employment opportunities, public transport, healthcare, education and other essential services, thereby reinforcing existing socioeconomic disparities.

51. UN-Habitat has identified growing intra-urban inequalities as one of the principal threats to social cohesion and sustainable urban development.[36] Spatial segregation not only reflects existing inequalities but also reproduces them over time by limiting access to economic opportunities, quality education, healthcare, public transport and other essential services. In many high-income countries, residential segregation continues to generate unequal access to employment and public services, often along racial or ethnic lines. In many cities, meanwhile, affluent and middle-income populations increasingly live, work and consume in separate urban environments from lower-income communities, resulting in highly unequal access to infrastructure, public amenities and opportunities.

B. Lack of access to housing

52. Lack of access to adequate housing is one of the principal factors in urban poverty. Adequate housing is also a social determinant of health. Housing is not merely a physical structure but a place to live in peace and dignity, and it allows access to employment, education, healthcare, public transport, social networks and other essential services. Consequently, inequalities in access to housing often translate into broader inequalities in the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, leading to poverty.

53. According to international law, adequacy of housing depends on a number of elements, including security of tenure, habitability, availability of services, affordability, accessibility, location and cultural adequacy.[37] Several contributions to the present report emphasized that many people live in housing that is formally available but materially inadequate. Dwellings may be overcrowded, poorly ventilated, affected by dampness or mould, insufficiently heated or cooled, inaccessible for persons with disabilities, or unsuitable for older persons and people with chronic illnesses.[38] Many studies have identified persistent barriers to accessing adequate housing, including unaffordable prices, restrictive contractual requirements, discriminatory practices, insecure informal rental arrangements and inadequate housing conditions characterized by dampness, inadequate insulation, insufficient ventilation and inadequate heating.[39]

54. In market-driven economies, land values and housing prices further reinforce housing exclusion by functioning as powerful economic filters. Rising property values contribute to the spatial concentration of wealth and poverty, producing neighbourhoods that differ markedly in terms of infrastructure, public services, educational opportunities, green spaces and overall quality of life. These processes not only reflect existing inequalities but also contribute to their long-term reproduction through increasingly unequal urban environments.

55. Increasingly, however, urban scholars and international organizations argue that planning systems must move beyond purely economic objectives and incorporate principles of social inclusion, spatial justice and equitable access to opportunities. Ensuring that housing, infrastructure and essential services are distributed fairly

[36] UN-Habitat, *World Cities Report 2022, Envisaging the Future of Cities* (Nairobi, 2022).
[37] Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, general comment No. 4 (1991); and A/HRC/7/16, para. 5.
[38] Submission from Co2gether.
[39] Submission from European Anti-Poverty Network Portugal.

across urban territories is therefore not only a planning and policy objective but also a prerequisite for reducing poverty and realizing the human rights of all urban inhabitants.

C. Costs and location

56. Urban poverty is not simply characterized by insufficient income; it also reflects the unequal distribution of the costs associated with urban life. One of the least visible dimensions of urban poverty is that people in situations of poverty frequently pay proportionally more than wealthier individuals to access essential goods and services while often receiving services of lower quality. As a result, poverty is not only reproduced through limited income but also through the cumulative financial burden imposed by the functioning of urban systems themselves.

57. Often, groups experiencing poverty are pushed to peripheral areas of cities, generally to afford housing costs. This often places them further from their employment, schools, healthcare facilities and other services. The resulting commuting costs consume a disproportionate share of household income while requiring long travel times that reduce opportunities for education, family life and paid work. The World Bank has similarly emphasized that inadequate mobility constitutes one of the principal barriers to employment and social inclusion in contemporary cities.[40] Hence, the spatial location of housing becomes a determining factor in shaping opportunities and life outcomes.[41] In addition, it should be noted that, because of entrenched social norms and economic structures under which women are assigned primary responsibility for caregiving, women, particularly mothers and single-parent households, continue to assume a disproportionate share of unpaid caregiving responsibilities, reducing opportunities for paid employment, career advancement and income generation, thereby reinforcing gender inequalities and increasing the risk of poverty among women.[42]

58. Locations with high concentrations of people living in situations of poverty and low-income households generally receive less attention and investment, and services are often of lower quality. Underresourced schools, for instance, are often characterized by particularly high dropout and school failure rates, which act as a major mechanism of exclusion and perpetuation of poverty and inequality, especially for marginalized groups, including minorities and Roma.[43]

59. Hospitals, specialist services and better-equipped medical facilities are frequently concentrated in wealthier neighbourhoods, while vulnerable communities experience shortages of healthcare personnel, higher staff turnover, longer waiting times and greater administrative barriers. Inadequate housing conditions, insecure employment and other social determinants of health further increase the healthcare needs of low-income populations while simultaneously reducing their access to appropriate services.

60. Limited financial resources often prevent households from purchasing goods in bulk or accessing affordable financial products, forcing them instead to rely on small purchases or high-interest informal credit. Inflation disproportionately affects low-income households because food, energy and other essential goods represent a much

[40] See https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/09/20/mobility-and-economic-inclusion-are-key-to-productive-cities-in-the-21st-century.

[41] See https://otle.transportes.gob.es/informes-anuales-monograficos/informes-monograficos/pobreza-transporte/3/1.

[42] Submission from Make Mothers Matter.

[43] Submission from Fundación Secretariado Gitano.

larger share of their household expenditure.[44] Similarly, where formal water, sanitation or electricity networks are unavailable or unreliable, such as in informal settlements, households frequently depend on informal providers that charge significantly higher prices for services of lower quality. One study shows, for instance, that the price of water purchased from water vendors in the peri-urban areas of Woldia, Ethiopia, can be up to 1,645 per cent higher than the price paid by those who have private water pipes.[45] These additional costs reduce households' capacity to invest in education, health or productive activities, thereby reinforcing cycles of poverty.[46] In Ecuador, in 2024, national drinking water coverage reached only 76.5 per cent and sanitation coverage 56 per cent, with substantial regional disparities. Nearly half of the country's potable water is lost because of operational failures, reducing the capacity of service providers to expand access in underserved urban areas.[47]

D. Financialization of housing

61. At the same time, spatial segregation is closely linked to broader processes such as the financialization of housing, speculative land markets and unequal access to land.[48] Low-income households are frequently pushed towards peripheral areas, informal settlements or environmentally hazardous locations, while central and well-serviced urban areas become increasingly inaccessible. The consequences extend beyond housing, affecting access to education, healthcare, employment, transportation, water and sanitation, thereby contributing to the intergenerational reproduction of poverty and inequality.

62. Over the past decades, the progressive financialization of housing and urban land has transformed housing from a social good into an increasingly attractive financial asset. As investment flows into real estate markets, rising land values and speculative practices have significantly reduced housing affordability, particularly for low- and middle-income households. This financialization has been identified as one of the principal threats to the realization of the right to adequate housing, leading to displacement, evictions and unprecedented levels of residential exclusion.[49] These dynamics are particularly visible in rapidly urbanizing regions of the global South, where limited supplies of affordable housing have contributed to the continued expansion of informal settlements, especially in Africa and South Asia.

63. Human rights mechanisms emphasize that combating urban poverty requires addressing the spatial dimensions of exclusion. Recommended measures include inclusive land-use planning, the development of affordable housing in well-located areas, the prevention of discriminatory zoning practices, the upgrading of marginalized neighbourhoods and the promotion of social and spatial integration. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that urban development policies do not reinforce existing patterns of segregation but instead contribute to more equitable access to urban resources, services and opportunities.

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[44] Banco de la República de Colombia, "Mitos y realidades de la política monetaria – ¿Cómo afecta la inflación a la población más pobre?", 6 August 2024.

[45] Fentaw Baye, "Exploring urban infrastructure challenges in informal peri-urban Woldia: barriers, implications, and informal strategies", *Frontiers in Sustainable Resource Management*, vol. 4 (2025).

[46] Thalita Salgado Fagundes and others, "Exploring water affordability through subsidy policies", *Water Research*, vol. 286 (November 2025).

[47] Submission from the Water Regulation and Control Agency, Ecuador.

[48] See report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing on the financialization of housing (A/HRC/34/51).

[49] Ibid.

E. Insecurity of tenure

64. A significant proportion of people experiencing poverty live in informal settlements characterized by insecure tenure, inadequate housing conditions and limited access to essential services. Rapid urbanization, insufficient affordable housing and exclusionary land and planning policies have led millions of households to rely on informal forms of occupation that are often not recognized by law. As a result, residents remain vulnerable to eviction, exclusion from public services and the constant threat of displacement.

65. The Special Rapporteur on adequate housing has emphasized that security of tenure is a core component of the right to adequate housing and should not be limited to formal ownership. Diverse forms of tenure, including rental arrangements, customary rights, collective tenure and rights of use, should receive legal recognition and protection.[50]

66. The guiding principles on security of tenure for the urban poor[51] stress that governments should address the root causes of tenure insecurity rather than focusing exclusively on formal titling programmes. Particular attention should be paid to informal settlements, where residents frequently lack legal recognition, despite having established long-standing social and economic ties to their communities. Access to water, sanitation, electricity, social protection and other essential services should not depend on land ownership or formal registration status. The guiding principles further encourage in situ upgrading, community-led mapping and enumeration processes,[52] and participatory urban planning aimed at strengthening existing communities rather than displacing them.

67. Access to land constitutes a cross-cutting dimension of tenure security. Land should fulfil a social function, and people living in poverty require secure access to land not only for housing but also for livelihoods and economic activities.[53] Policies aimed at improving tenure security should therefore include protection against forced evictions,[54] recognition of collective, informal and other forms of land tenure, and measures to prevent speculative pressures that disproportionately affect low-income communities.

68. In this context, it is important to highlight that housing and land tenure should not strictly be limited to formal private ownership but should include a wide range of statutory, customary, informal and collective arrangements that provide people with stable access to housing and land.

F. Labour precarity, the platform economy and new forms of urban poverty

69. Contemporary urban labour markets have undergone profound transformations driven by subcontracting, labour market flexibilization and the rapid expansion of the

[50] Many declarations and guidance recognize the multiple forms of tenure, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, and the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security.

[51] See report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing (A/HRC/25/54, sect. II).

[52] Sheela Patel and Carrie Baptist, “Documenting by the undocumented”, *Environment and Urbanization*, vol. 24, No. 1 (2012).

[53] See guiding principles on security of tenure for the urban poor in the report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing (A/HRC/25/54, sect. II).

[54] Basic principles and guidelines on development-based evictions and displacement.

platform economy. While these developments have created new forms of employment and facilitated access to labour markets for some workers, they have also increased economic insecurity and weakened traditional labour protections for many others. Business risks are increasingly transferred from employers to individual workers through forms of self-employment, temporary contracts and algorithmically managed work, often reducing access to social security, collective bargaining and employment benefits.[55]

70. Cities have become the principal arenas for the expansion of these new labour models. Delivery workers, ride-hailing drivers, domestic workers and others engaged in digitally mediated work increasingly perform their activities under conditions characterized by unstable incomes, fluctuating demand and limited social protection. These forms of employment disproportionately affect groups that are already exposed to structural inequalities, including young people, migrants and women, thereby reinforcing existing patterns of poverty in cities and labour market exclusion.

71. While digital platforms may create new economic opportunities, they also raise important human rights concerns regarding fair remuneration, occupational safety, working conditions and access to social protection. The challenge for public authorities is therefore to avoid hindering technological innovation and ensure that new forms of employment remain compatible with international labour standards and the effective enjoyment of economic and social rights.

72. Several States have begun adapting their legal frameworks to respond to these challenges. Portugal, for example, has amended its Labour Code to establish a legal presumption of an employment relationship for digital platform workers, thereby strengthening access to labour rights, social security and employment protection while reducing informal employment.[56]

G. Criminalization of homelessness and poverty

73. In many jurisdictions, activities necessary for the survival in cities of people in situations of poverty, such as sleeping, resting and begging in public spaces, collecting recyclable materials, informal work or erecting temporary shelters, result in fines, eviction, detention or other sanctions.[57] Instead of tackling the structural causes of poverty and homelessness, people in situations of vulnerability are dehumanized, stigmatized, displaced and rendered invisible, including for the purpose of providing a better image of the city for tourists and for mega events and international political gatherings. Laws targeting vagrancy, begging or informal economic activities frequently reproduce historical patterns of discrimination and exclusion. Similarly, “hostile” urban design and architecture further exclude and discriminate against people who are living in poverty and homeless, preventing them from using public space for fundamental needs, such as sleeping, based on their socioeconomic status.

74. This inefficient and short-sighted approach contributes to entrenching poverty by generating debt, criminal records, repeated interactions with law enforcement and

[55] See report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights on digital welfare states and human rights (A/74/493) and report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights entitled “The working poor: a human rights approach to wages” (A/78/175); and Digital Future Society, *El futuro del trabajo en la era digital: el auge de las plataformas laborales* (2019).

[56] Submission from Portugal.

[57] See study by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights and the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing entitled “Breaking the cycle: ending the criminalization of homelessness and poverty” (A/HRC/56/61/Add.3 and A/HRC/56/61/Add.3/Corr.1).

barriers to accessing housing, employment and social protection. It also generates higher costs compared with the cost of addressing the underlying causes, including by providing affordable housing and social services and developing adequate policies.

75. Efforts to combat homelessness should prioritize rights-based responses by removing administrative barriers to accessing public services, ensuring universal access to healthcare, regardless of legal or administrative status, prohibiting hostile architecture and punitive ordinances, and developing housing-led solutions tailored to the needs of persons experiencing homelessness.

V. A human rights-based approach to urbanization

76. In a context of accelerating global urbanization, integrating human rights into urban governance is an essential prerequisite for building cities that are inclusive, sustainable, resilient and socially just. This vision is reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 11, and the New Urban Agenda.

77. Because decisions on land use, urban development, infrastructure and public services directly affect people's lives and rights, residents must be able to participate freely, actively, meaningfully and effectively in all related decision-making processes. It is widely acknowledged that involving people affected by poverty in shaping policies and overseeing their implementation makes public action more effective, legitimate and inclusive.[58] While participation should be ensured for everyone, poverty and various forms of vulnerabilities often reflect intersecting forms of inequality that disproportionately affect specific population groups.[59] Therefore, particular attention needs to be paid to the inclusion of groups and communities that may be in situations of historical or social disadvantage, marginalization and exclusion, such as people living in poverty, those living in informal settlements, women, migrants, ethnic minorities, Indigenous Peoples, older persons and persons with disabilities.

78. As discussed, urban areas often experience sociospatial segregation, resulting in unequal access to resources, infrastructure, services and economic opportunities. Policies related to zoning, housing, land use and evictions can reinforce exclusion by concentrating groups in situations of vulnerability in disadvantaged areas. A human rights-based approach therefore requires not only preventing direct discrimination but also identifying and addressing indirect and structural forms of discrimination. This includes tackling the underlying causes of urban inequalities linked to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, disability, age, migration status and socioeconomic status.[60]

79. Urban laws and policies should address the root causes of discrimination and inequality while promoting human rights and the empowerment of all residents. A human rights-based approach places human dignity at the centre of urban development, seeking not only to address poverty, inadequate housing and exclusion, but also the underlying factors that sustain them, such as discriminatory land policies, housing financialization, insecure tenure, segregation and unequal power relations. This perspective aligns with analyses developed by several United Nations human rights mechanisms that urban inequalities are the result of political, economic and institutional choices, not inevitable processes.

[58] See, among others, submissions from Brazil, El Salvador and Maldives; and from United Cities and Local Governments and AGE Platform Europe.

[59] See, among others, submissions from Brazil, Portugal and Uruguay; and from HOGAR SÍ.

[60] See, among others, submissions from El Salvador and Maldives; and from the Public Defence Office of the City of Buenos Aires.

80. Accountability is a key element of the social contract between authorities and their constituency. Public authorities must be able to justify their decisions, and urban governance processes should be transparent, accessible and subject to public scrutiny. In this context, accessible and equitable mechanisms for the resolution of disputes between authorities and inhabitants need to be put in place. Moreover, monitoring tools should be put in place to evaluate the efficiency of policies and local government action in achieving the results that are sought. The development of human rights indicators[61] is an important step, as seen in the city of York, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland,[62] or Gwangju, Republic of Korea.[63]

81. Empowerment represents another essential component of the human rights-based approach. Beyond the formal legal recognition of rights, this approach is aimed at strengthening the capacity of individuals and communities to understand, claim and exercise their rights. In the urban context, this includes ensuring access to information, supporting community organizations, strengthening the capacities of local stakeholders, and enabling residents to participate actively in the governance of their cities. Political, social and economic empowerment thus emerges as a fundamental condition for building more inclusive and equitable cities.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

82. **Urbanization is not a neutral demographic process but a political and policy-driven transformation that profoundly shapes the distribution of opportunities, resources and rights within society. While cities can be powerful engines of prosperity, innovation and human development, the evidence presented in this report demonstrates that poorly planned urbanization, exclusionary development models, spatial segregation and the criminalization of poverty can reinforce deprivation, inequality and intergenerational disadvantage. Whether urbanization serves as a pathway out of poverty or a mechanism for its entrenchment depends largely on the choices made by national and local authorities. Therefore, the role of local authorities is fundamental in these cases.**

83. **Only through inclusive, participatory and equitable urban governance can cities fulfil their potential as spaces where all residents can enjoy their human rights and live in dignity, and contribute to the elimination of poverty.**

84. **The Special Rapporteur recommends, as a first step, that States and local governments:**

(a) **Integrate and localize international human rights norms, and guidance and recommendations provided by human rights mechanisms in national, regional and local legislation, as well as all policies and programmes, including those regarding spatial segregation,[64] security of tenure of people living in poverty,[65] evictions,[66] the responsibilities of local and other subnational**

[61] See https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-and-mechanisms/human-rights-indicators.
[62] York Human Rights City Network, “Human rights in York: the state of the city”, No. 10, 2025.
[63] See https://www.uclg-cisdp.org/sites/default/files/Human_Rights_City_of_Gwangju_1.pdf.
[64] See report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing entitled “Spatial segregation and the right to adequate housing” (A/HRC/49/48).
[65] See guiding principles on security of tenure for the urban poor in the report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing (A/HRC/25/54, sect. II).
[66] See, in particular, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, general comment No. 7 (1997); and basic principles and guidelines on development-based evictions and displacement.

governments in relation to the right to adequate housing, [67] **and the financialization of housing;**[68]

(b) **Adopt human rights-based urban planning frameworks that prioritize affordable housing, inclusive public services, secure tenure and protection against forced displacement, particularly for groups living in situations of poverty;**

(c) **Consider the effective implementation of the New Urban Agenda and localization of the Sustainable Development Goals in line with human rights standards, and embed the principle of "leave no one behind" in all urbanization processes, including in digital transformation initiatives, by measures to address the digital divide, including affordable Internet access, digital literacy programmes and alternative non-digital channels for accessing public services;**

(d) **Ensure that the protection and promotion of human rights, non-discrimination, accessibility, social inclusion and poverty reduction are systematically incorporated into university curricula, professional accreditation standards and continuing education programmes for urban planners, architects, engineers, surveyors and public officials. Urban development should be assessed not only for its economic efficiency but also for its impact on the enjoyment of human rights by all residents;**

(e) **Combat spatial segregation by ensuring equitable investment in infrastructure, transportation, education, healthcare, digital connectivity and economic opportunities across all neighbourhoods, including peripheral and informal settlements;**

(f) **Adopt planning, zoning and housing policies that facilitate a social mix to prevent the spatial concentration of poverty and promote mixed-income, inclusive neighbourhoods that provide equitable access to public services, employment opportunities, green spaces and public transportation;**

(g) **Ensure universal access to essential services, including water, sanitation, energy, healthcare, education, transport and digital connectivity, through affordable tariffs, targeted subsidies and fee exemptions for low-income households, while ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of these services;**

(h) **Guarantee the right to adequate housing for all by expanding affordable public housing, combating residential segregation, preventing forced evictions, addressing discrimination in housing markets and integrating housing policies with transport, employment and social protection;**

(i) **Require human rights and poverty impact assessments for urban development projects. Large-scale infrastructure projects, urban regeneration schemes and mega events should be subject to ex ante and ex post assessments of their potential impact on housing affordability, displacement, segregation, livelihoods, access to services and the rights of marginalized groups;**

[67] See report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing (A/HRC/28/62).
[68] See report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing (A/HRC/34/51).

(j) **Replace punitive approaches to homelessness, informal work and poverty with rights-based social protection measures, supportive housing programmes and the meaningful participation of affected communities in urban decision-making, and consider the recommendations provided to halt the criminalization of poverty and homelessness.**