

Key Insights and International Trends from WUF13

The WUF (World Urban Forum) provides an excellent opportunity to meet professionals from around the world, discuss current urban issues, and reflect on the global challenges facing our cities. Through participation in several sessions and exchanges with colleagues from Latin America, the MENA region, Africa, Asia, North America, and Europe, it was possible to identify the following cross-cutting issues related to housing:

a. The shift from quantitative to qualitative housing questions

The world is increasingly shifting its focus from quantitative to qualitative housing-related challenges. Over the past two decades, much attention has been devoted to questions such as: How many housing units need to be built? How can these units be delivered through mass production? Today, however, attention is increasingly directed toward questions such as: How can quality of life be enhanced through housing? Which qualitative aspects of housing should be prioritized?

While these questions have long been considered in some contexts – particularly in the Western world – the notable shift is occurring in developing countries, where such concerns are becoming increasingly relevant. This transition reflects not only changing perspectives among different generations regarding cities and human settlements, but also the growing importance of emerging issues worldwide, such as mental health and well-being in urban environments.

b. The emergence of investment in the “living” sector

Following this shift, a new trend in urban investment is emerging: investment in the “living” sector. Rather than focusing exclusively on traditional real estate and infrastructure investments, this approach emphasizes housing as a high-quality living environment. The private sector is increasingly investing in innovative housing models that respond to global demographic transformations, including population ageing, new family structures, and migration. The emphasis is on providing a comprehensive living experience rather than simply constructing housing units.

c. The importance of long-term urban narratives

Across many sessions, it was emphasized that although each context faces unique challenges, housing policies and strategies often share common characteristics. Cities that demonstrate successful outcomes tend to have one important factor in common: they do not rely solely on isolated innovative projects or ad hoc interventions. Instead, they develop a coherent long-term vision or storyline through which various initiatives – even short-term ones – contribute to a broader development agenda.

The challenge for municipalities is therefore to develop innovative approaches that encourage investors to commit to long-term local investments. At the same time, cities must mobilize the financial resources, expertise, and knowledge required to define and implement these strategic narratives effectively.

d. The growing role of university–government partnerships

University–government partnerships are becoming increasingly important in localizing global development goals and facilitating knowledge transfer and exchange. In many contexts, universities are playing a growing role in supporting municipalities and systematically strengthening the capacities of local government staff. Without partnerships with local universities – which possess both contextual knowledge and connections to global debates and research – municipalities may struggle to respond effectively to the needs and expectations of their residents.

Within the context of these lessons learned, the theme “Housing the World” proved to be a highly appropriate title for WUF13. Housing challenges are simultaneously local and global in nature. Events such as the World Urban Forum help illuminate shared challenges and provide opportunities to build bridges between cities, fostering knowledge exchange and collaborative solutions across regions and continents.

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