



# NHSMUN

National High School Model United Nations

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# A Note on the NHSMUN Difference

Esteemed Faculty and Delegates,

Welcome to NHSMUN 2027! We are Armen Bagdassarian and Sabeeh Mirza, and we are elated to serve as this year's Secretaries-General. Thank you for choosing to attend NHSMUN, the world's largest and most diverse high school Model United Nations conference. As a space for collaboration, consensus, and compromise, NHSMUN strives to transform today's brightest thinkers, speakers, and collaborators into tomorrow's leaders. We believe that an emphasis on education through simulation is paramount to the Model UN experience.

**Realism and Accuracy:** Although a perfect simulation of the UN is never possible, we believe that one of the core educational responsibilities of MUN conferences is to educate students about how the UN System works. We strive to invite real UN, NGO, and field experts into each committee through our committee speakers program. Moreover, we arrange meetings between students and the actual UN Permanent Mission of the country they are representing. These exclusive resources are only available due to IMUNA's formal association with the United Nations Department of Global Communications and consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. No other conference goes so far to deeply immerse students into the UN System.

**Educational Emphasis:** At the heart of NHSMUN lies education and compromise. Part of what makes NHSMUN special is its diverse delegate base. As such, when NHSMUN distributes awards, we strongly de-emphasize their importance in comparison to the educational value of Model UN. In particular, our daises look for and promote constructive leadership and diplomacy that strive toward consensus, as real ambassadors do in the United Nations.

**Research and a Dedicated Staff:** Our staffers care deeply about delegates' experiences and what they take away from their time at NHSMUN. Our Directors spend over six months preparing Background Guides, in addition to Update Briefs written to reflect the rapidly changing nature of the topics to be discussed. Our staffers are trained rigorously to provide the best conference experience possible. Our daises provide thoughtful comments on submitted position papers. Our staff aims to tailor the committee experience to delegates' reflections and research, but also to facilitate an environment where all delegates' thoughts can be heard.

**Empowering Participation:** The UN relies on the voices of all of its member states to create resolutions. This is our philosophy at NHSMUN too. Our Rules of Procedure and our staff focus on making every voice in the committee heard, regardless of country assignment or skill level. Additionally, unlike many other conferences, we also emphasize delegate participation after the conference. Delegates spend countless hours researching topics critical to the UN and broader international sphere.

Delegates, it is our sincerest hope that your time at NHSMUN will be thought-provoking and stimulating. NHSMUN is an incredible time to learn, grow, and embrace new opportunities. We look forward to seeing you work both as students and global citizens at the conference.

Best,

**Armen Bagdassarian**  
*Secretary-General*

**Sabeeh Mirza**  
*Secretary-General*

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# Position Paper Requirements

Delegate research and preparation is a critical element of attending NHSMUN and enjoying the debate experience. We have provided this Background Guide to introduce the topics that will be discussed in your committee. We encourage and expect each of you to critically explore the selected topics and be able to identify and analyze their intricacies upon arrival to the conference.

The task of preparing for the conference can be challenging. To assist delegates, we have updated our [Beginner Delegate Guide](#) and [Advanced Delegate Guide](#). These guides contain more detailed instructions on how to prepare a position paper and excellent sources that delegates can use for research. Use these resources to your advantage. They can help transform a sometimes overwhelming task into what it should be: an engaging, interesting, and rewarding experience.

To accurately represent a country, delegates must be able to articulate its policies. Accordingly, NHSMUN requires each delegation (the one or two delegates representing a country in a committee) to write a position paper for each topic on the committee's agenda. More information about how to write and format position papers can be found in the [Research Guide](#). To summarize, position papers should be structured into three sections.

**I: Topic Background** – This section should describe the history of the topic as it would be described by the delegate's country. Delegates do not need to give an exhaustive account of the topic, but rather focus on the details that are most important to the delegation's policy and proposed solutions.

**II: Country Policy** – This section should discuss the delegation's policy regarding the topic. Each paper should state the policy in plain terms and include the relevant statements, statistics, and research that support the effectiveness of the policy. Comparisons with other global issues are also appropriate here.

**III. Proposed Solutions** – This section should detail the delegation's proposed solutions to address the topic. Descriptions of each solution should be thorough. Each idea should clearly connect to the specific problem it aims to solve and identify potential obstacles to implementation and how they can be avoided. The solution should be a natural extension of the country's policy.

Each topic's position paper should be **no more than 10 pages long** double-spaced with standard margins and 12 point font size. This is a maximum; **3–5 pages per topic is often a suitable length**. The paper must be written from the perspective of your assigned country and should articulate the policies you will espouse at the conference.

Each delegation is responsible for submitting position papers on or before **February 26, 2027**. If a delegate wishes to receive detailed feedback from the committee's dais, their position paper must be submitted on or before **February 5, 2027**. The papers received by this earlier deadline will be reviewed by the committee dais and returned before February 26. Instructions on how to submit position papers will be shared directly with faculty advisors.

Submission instructions for position papers will be sent to faculty advisers via email. If delegations are unable to submit their position papers on time, please contact us at [nhsmun@imuna.org](mailto:nhsmun@imuna.org).

**Delegations that do not submit position papers will be ineligible for awards.**

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## Committee History

On January 1, 1975, the UN General Assembly created the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), originally called the United Nations Habitat and Human Settlements Foundation (UNHHSF).<sup>1</sup> The committee was constructed to control the rapid growth of cities while providing safe and adequate protection. In 1977, UN Resolution 32/162 transformed the Committee on Housing, Building, and Planning into the Commission of Human Settlements. Then, in 2002, UNHHSF and the Commission on Human Settlements and Habitat merged into UN-Habitat, an independent committee headed by the Executive Director and managed by the Secretariat. The committee's mission is to “promote socially and environmentally sustainable human settlements, development, and the achievement of adequate shelter for all.”<sup>2</sup>

UN-Habitat is structured into three main bodies: the Governing Council, Secretariat, and the Committee of Permanent Representatives. UN-Habitat contains 193 member states from Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>3</sup> It also has an Executive Board of 36 member states. These member states are elected by the UN-Habitat assembly and convene triannually to oversee ongoing operations.<sup>4</sup> The Committee of Permanent Representatives meets every two years in an open-ended manner to prepare for the session and a high-level mid-term review meeting.<sup>5</sup> UN-Habitat's headquarters are located in Nairobi, Kenya. However, it also has two other regional offices in Fukuoka, Japan, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.<sup>6</sup> Since May 2019, the member states of UN-Habitat have met every four years in Mexico. These assemblies usually evaluate previous projects completed between committee meetings to discuss results and possible improvements.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, UN-Habitat's mandate is based on the 2020-2023 Strategic Plan. This broad mandate is separated into four paths of action: “Reduced spatial inequality and poverty in communities across the urban-rural continuum; enhanced shared prosperity of cities and regions; strengthened climate action and improved urban environment; and effective urban crisis prevention and response.”<sup>8</sup> Because UN-Habitat is a subsidiary organ of the UN General Assembly, it collaborates with governments, UN agencies, civil society organizations, foundations, academic institutions, and the private sector.

The committee has raised awareness on urban development issues at many levels and highlighted the importance of addressing urban poverty reduction strategies. According to the UN-Habitat's 2020 annual report, the committee worked on 71 projects designed to help countries adapt to and recover from socioeconomic conditions imposed by the global pandemic.<sup>9</sup> This was successfully completed with 250 partners, who helped promote the rights and needs of marginalized groups, including the urban poor, women, children, and disabled individuals. Each day, the importance of UN-Habitat's work on urgent issues is highlighted, and they will continue to launch these essential missions.

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1 “History, Mandate & Role in the UN System: UN-Habitat,” United Nations Human Settlements Programme, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://unhabitat.org/history-mandate-role-in-the-un-system>.

2 “Background,” United Nations Human Settlements Programme, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://evaw-un-inventory.unwomen.org/en/agencies/un-habitat>.

3 “Our Structure,” United Nations Human Settlements Programme, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://unhabitat.org/our-structure>.

4 “Executive Board,” United Nations Human Settlements Programme, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://unhabitat.org/governance/executive-board>.

5 “Committee of Permanent Representatives,” United Nations Human Settlements Programme, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://unhabitat.org/governance/committee-of-permanent-representatives>.

6 “Regional Offices,” United Nations Human Settlements Programme, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://mirror.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=22>.

7 “General Concept,” United Nations Human Settlements Programme, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://unhabitat.org/results-based-management/4-1-general-concept>.

8 “Programmes,” United Nations Human Settlements Programme, accessed September 13, 2021, <https://unhabitat.org/programmes>.

9 “Annual Report 2020,” United Nations Human Settlements Programme, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://unhabitat.org/annualreport/domain-of-change-4.html>.

TOPIC A

UN-HABITAT | NHSMUN 2027

# Women's Land and Property Rights



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# Introduction

**T**oday's world faces many interconnected challenges. The effects of poverty, war, climate change, food insecurity, and homelessness are seen across news feeds, TikToks, and walks down city blocks. When faced with a tangled web of crises, it can be difficult to know where to begin. This guide focuses on a topic that has the potential to make positive economic, environmental, and social change at the national and household levels: women's land ownership.

Land ownership is a complex term that can have different definitions across geographical and cultural contexts. Generally, land ownership is based on a blend of legal structures, like formal land titles, and customary practices, like cultural norms.<sup>1</sup> Land can be owned by one person or a whole community, such as an indigenous tribe. Additionally, land rights can take many forms, including the right to access the land, use its resources, exclude others from doing so, or transfer the land rights to someone else.<sup>2</sup>

Land ownership is crucial for both individual households and entire countries. When people have rights to their land and property, they can farm it for food security, use the land as collateral to open a business or pay for a better education, and are less vulnerable to displacement during times of conflict or environmental disaster.<sup>3</sup> Nations benefit from secure land ownership too. Governments rely on property taxes to pay for infrastructure improvements and fund essential community services. Altogether, land and property can make up 75 percent of the wealth for both a nation and a household, yet only 30 percent of the global population has legally registered rights to land and homes.<sup>4</sup>

This percentage is even smaller among women. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, women own less than 20 percent of property in developed countries and only around 10 percent in developing countries.<sup>5</sup> Women are routinely disadvantaged in both formal and customary systems of land ownership.<sup>6</sup> In a study of 164 countries, only 52

countries guarantee a woman's legal right to access, own, and control land.<sup>7</sup> And in places that rely on customary systems of land ownership, traditional practices, norms, and power dynamics often exclude women from agency over land, prioritizing male relatives.<sup>8</sup>

If land ownership is a way to empower people – enabling economic growth, personal security, and social resilience – legal and cultural systems systematically disempower women across the globe. Barriers to women's land ownership are not only a consequence of strong historic and cultural norms and prejudices but also a key leverage point in creating a more just, equitable future for all.

## History and Description of Issue

### ROOTS AND RULES: THE LEGAL FRAMEWORKS BEHIND WOMEN'S LAND OWNERSHIP

To understand women's land ownership, the legal systems that shaped many of today's institutions must be examined. The very idea of land ownership, as it is often formalized into law today, was not present in many places before the age of European colonization. It was not a universally agreed-upon belief that a piece of land could be an individual person's property. For many Indigenous communities, both historically and in the present day, land is a living being that humans

can live alongside but cannot own.<sup>9</sup> Yet when European nations colonized much of Asia, Africa, and the Americas between the 15th and 19th centuries, they brought with them and enforced a highly capitalist vision of land ownership. This system interacted with customary inheritance practices in ways that often increased gender inequalities.

The British Empire, which by 1913 ruled over 400 million people, operated under the law that once a woman got married, her property, including any land she owned, came under her husband's control and became legally his.<sup>10</sup> The American colonies, and later the United States, modeled their own property laws after this system.<sup>11</sup>

These beliefs and practices continued to spread. In many parts of Africa, colonial administrations replaced communal and family-based land systems with individual land ownership, known as titles. While communal and family-based systems did not always provide women with equal land rights, individual titles were placed almost exclusively in the hands of men. In Uganda, a British colony from 1894 to 1962, formal land titling shifted authority away from a family structure where a man acted as a “responsible representative” for his whole family, toward a

system where an individual man alone held full authority to use, sell, and control land.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the British Empire's formal land titling laws weakened checks that had sometimes protected women and children from land grabbing, forced eviction, or dispossession after a spouse's death or divorce.<sup>13</sup>

While many countries once under colonial rule have gained their independence, the tension between formal land ownership laws and customary practices remains a key barrier to women's land ownership. Today in North America and Europe, a person's rights to land typically depend on a formal legal title, which is a concept recognized and enforced by courts.<sup>14</sup> But much of the world continues to heavily rely on customary systems, where land ownership is based on family and community ties and enforced by tradition and local leaders as opposed to courts. In reality, most countries' land systems are some blend of the two, shaped by the ongoing relationship between law and local custom.<sup>15</sup>

This blend can create a problem: even when formal laws exist to protect women's land rights, those laws do not always translate into practice. Statutory law can only protect women's land rights if the law is actually enforced. Enforcement



Communal farm in the Philippines

Credit: Keith Anthony S. Fabro for Mongabay

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is often difficult, since justice systems can be costly and difficult to access, while high land values create strong incentives for illegal land theft.<sup>16</sup> Even when a statutory law is recognized and enforced, cultural and social norms may discourage women from exercising their legal rights if they fear retribution for acting outside their traditional gender roles.<sup>17</sup>

Customary systems vary widely, but many are rooted in cultural or religious institutions. For example, some tribal systems as well as Islamic law generally treat men as the default owners of property.<sup>18</sup> Dispute resolution under these customary systems is typically male-dominated as well, leaving women dependent on male relatives to advocate for land rights on their behalf.<sup>19</sup> These customary processes are often cheaper and more accessible than the formal legal system. As a result, they can end up being the only real option available to women, despite being patriarchal in nature. For example, Jebbeh Deborah, a 65-year-old woman from Liberia, was denied farmland that she inherited from her father because her brothers did not recognize her claim. After participating in a land-rights education program, she used what she learned to assert her inheritance rights and gain control of the land.<sup>20</sup>

Even when statutory laws promoting women's ownership exist, complexities in the legal system can create barriers for women. Land registration is often complicated, slow, and expensive. Women often face extra hurdles: paperwork that only allows the husband in a marriage, land offices that are culturally off-limits for women to enter alone, or requirements that a woman

get a male relative's consent before completing a land transaction.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, enforcement is frequently controlled by the very people who benefit from women not owning land. Land administration bodies and courts are often male-dominated, and enforcement fails not just because of "tradition," but because the men in charge of enforcing new laws have little incentive to give up their own power.<sup>22</sup> In other words, statutory laws intended to increase women's land ownership can only fulfill that objective when they are implemented in a cultural context that is willing to empower women.

Colombia shows what that readiness can look like. In 1994, the country overhauled how land got redistributed, attempting to remedy a system where, historically, only the elite owned land.<sup>23</sup> Though the reform did not have an explicit gender equality motivation, the restructuring gave policymakers a rare chance to build gender equity into the system from the ground up, rather than trying to add women's land rights to a structure resistant to change. The new framework required that any land given to couples be jointly titled in both spouses' names, and prioritized distributing land to female-led households and unmarried women.<sup>24</sup> With these interventions and the strong push for cultural change behind them, women's overall share of land allocations grew by more than 30 percent.<sup>25</sup>

In response to gaps, a number of reform models have emerged that attempt to bridge formal law and customary practice rather than treating them as separate battles. Mozambique, for example, has taken a hybrid approach toward increasing women's land ownership. The country's 1997

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*Women often face extra hurdles: paperwork that only allows the husband in a marriage, land offices that are culturally off-limits for women to enter alone, or requirements that a woman get a male relative's consent.*

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Land Law allows customary law to govern land ownership unless those traditional practices violate the constitution's gender equality principle.<sup>26</sup> In practice, this means women can apply for individualized land rights and have a right to use and benefit from land owned by their husband's family.<sup>27</sup> That said, education is critical. Women, especially in rural areas, are often unaware of this formal law, meaning that customary systems that exclude women from land ownership continue.<sup>28</sup>

Kenya's USAID-backed Women's Property Ownership and Inheritance Rights Project took a different approach. Rather than relying only on courts, this program worked with tribal elders who often facilitated land decisions. Where court action was still necessary, the project sometimes helped cover legal costs, which had the added effect of introducing communities to the formal justice system as a genuine option for resolving these disputes.<sup>29</sup>

Increasing women's land ownership cannot be solely law-based or culture-based. Real progress toward closing the gender gap in land ownership requires addressing formal law, customary practice, and the barriers to accessing both.

## **MARRIAGE, GENDER ROLES, AND INHERITANCE**

Marriage is a critical intersection for law, culture, and land ownership. Gender roles and land rights do not operate independently of each other; they impact one another. When gender roles keep women from owning land, that exclusion continues. Women without land also tend to have less influence in the decisions that shape their communities. Women who do hold property rights tend to be more active participants in community life, and the surrounding institutions become more responsive to women's needs as a result.<sup>30</sup>

Marriage has long functioned as the main gateway through which women access land. This pattern shows up globally, not just historically. When formal property laws intersect with

marriage and inheritance customs, women frequently lose rights. Many legal and cultural systems still center land inheritance around a "head of household," a role that often skips over both wives and daughters entirely.<sup>31</sup> Customary systems create a similar dynamic in a different way. Land is typically allocated to a family unit as a whole, with women holding only secondary rights to use that land for farming or other purposes, dependent on their relationship to the family's male head. If that relationship changes, through marriage, divorce, or widowhood, a woman's access can change with it.<sup>32</sup> Whether the barrier comes from formal law or customary practice, tying land access to marital status leaves women vulnerable in two overlapping ways: inside their own homes, and within their broader communities.

Inside the home, insecure property rights can increase women's vulnerability to forms of violence and exploitation. Land and property access is one of the most difficult barriers to address globally, and it is closely tied to violence against women and girls. This includes partner violence, property grabbing targeting widows, and even sexual extortion by land officials from women trying to secure land titles.<sup>33</sup> But land rights can work as protection, too. Owning property increases a woman's status and bargaining power at home, which can shift household dynamics and reduce a family's tolerance for abuse. It also creates an exit option for women caught in abusive relationships. Owning property signals enough economic independence to leave.<sup>34</sup> Research shows that, across 22 countries, women who owned assets and had more education were consistently less vulnerable to gender-based violence.<sup>35</sup>

Land ownership often involves more people than the couple within a household. A marriage connects two whole families, so land tied to that marriage becomes both families' business. This is especially relevant when the marriage ends through death and divorce. Women often lack the financial resources to assert a claim to land, especially when doing so risks family conflict or

the loss of a family's social and economic support altogether.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes the threat goes beyond losing familiar support and becomes active land grabbing. In Zimbabwe, roughly 587,000 widows were counted in the 2012 census, with most women over 60 widowed. Without a husband, families have evicted thousands of widows from their homes and land every year, leaving them without shelter, income, or a support network. This is sometimes compounded by harassment blaming the widow for her husband's death.<sup>37</sup> Some interventions have attempted to prevent this. Rwanda's USAID-funded Land Project ran a radio campaign deliberately framed around "gender-equal land rights" rather than "women's land rights." This is a small wording shift meant to defuse men's fear that a program benefiting women meant a loss for them.<sup>38</sup>

Much of this research assumes a single husband and wife, but many family structures do not fit that model. Land systems built only around monogamous marriage often leave those structures unprotected. For example, about eleven percent of people in sub-Saharan Africa live in polygamous households, where at least one family member has more than one spouse or partner.<sup>39</sup> In this marital structure, wives are

especially vulnerable to unequal land rights since customary systems generally allocate each wife her own plot of land. When land is scarce, a husband taking a new wife may carve her portion out of an existing wife's land. In Burundi, the law doesn't recognize polygamous marriage at all, meaning only the first wife's children have any legal right to inherit. This leaves later wives with no option but to appeal to clan elders for protection, a gap that has been linked to rising poverty and food insecurity among these families.<sup>40</sup> Cases like this are a reminder that land reforms designed only around a "standard" family can end up recreating the very insecurity they're meant to fix.

Not every land system has excluded women, though some have centered them. Indigenous cultures that did this, though, were often targeted by colonial powers. For example, in the Haudenosaunee, an alliance of six indigenous American tribes across upper New York state, women traditionally held central political, social, and economic authority. Family lines began with a female ancestor, and all of her female descendants lived together for life in a shared longhouse under the authority of a Clan Mother, with husbands moving in to join them.

*Minangkabau girls wearing traditional clothes in an event*

*Credit: Fajar.adjay*



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Colonization imposed European patriarchal norms on this structure, introducing capitalist ideas about land and labor that diminished women's traditional influence.<sup>41</sup> Some women-led systems have persisted despite this pressure. The Minangkabau of West Sumatra, Indonesia, maintain a system where land passes down through the female line: daughters inherit ownership, while sons receive only usage rights. This system has endured for generations, coexisting alongside Indonesia's customary, Islamic, and civil legal systems, even though male relatives are still often involved in decisions about how inheritance is actually carried out.<sup>42</sup> Ultimately, women's land rights remain insecure when they depend on marriage or a relationship with a male relative. Effective reforms must therefore protect women as landholders in their own right while accounting for the diverse family and inheritance systems through which land is actually transferred.

## **ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY AND FOOD SECURITY**

At the same time, a direct link between land ownership and both food security and broader economic security can be found. In the developing world, land is often the most important asset for households and individuals that rely on agriculture for their livelihoods.<sup>43</sup> While food insecurity and malnutrition are global problems, they have a profound effect on the rural poor and on women in particular.<sup>44</sup> There is a distinction between land ownership and land usage: while owning land means it is recognized as one's property, using land means

being the one to farm it, live on it, or work it day to day. Importantly, land usage does not always imply land ownership, especially for women. In Africa, women account for 70 percent of all food production, yet few of these women own the land on which they produce food<sup>45</sup>.

This gap between who works the land and who owns it is global in scale. FAO data from 2018 show that fewer than 15 percent of agricultural landholders worldwide are women, ranging from roughly 5 percent in the Middle East and North Africa to 18 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>46</sup> Because many women farm land without having their rights formally documented, governments and development organizations have sometimes responded by expanding programs to increase land registration. The natural fix is to formalize land rights, since secure ownership is strongly associated with higher agricultural productivity. But formalization alone can backfire. When food security programs document land rights without accounting for women, titles are frequently registered to the head of household – usually a man – which can weaken women's claims rather than strengthen them. Post-independence land registration in Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe followed exactly this pattern.<sup>47</sup>

India illustrates the same dynamic. Male migration to cities and non-farm jobs has left many farms dependent on women, who now manage fields, livestock, and household food security and are estimated to perform more than 75 percent of agricultural activities. Yet only about one in eight agricultural landholders in India is a woman, according to PM-KISAN

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*Male migration to cities and non-farm jobs has left many farms dependent on women.*

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data, with land still registered largely in the names of fathers, husbands, and sons. Women cultivate the land but lack legal control over it, and the consequences are concrete. Without title, women farmers struggle to access bank loans, crop insurance, subsidies, and institutional support. India's legal framework has tried to close this gap – the 2005 amendment to the Hindu Succession Act made daughters equal owners in ancestral property. This is a right courts have since reinforced as belonging to daughters by birth. In practice, however, social norms often override the law. Some daughters relinquish their claims to preserve family peace, others are pressured by relatives who view property rights as a threat to settled arrangements, and some never learn they hold the right at all.<sup>48</sup>

The stakes of closing this gap extend far beyond the women themselves. Countries where women lack land ownership rights have, on average, 60 percent more malnourished children.<sup>49</sup> Where women do control land, the benefits ripple outward through the household. Female landholding in Central America is associated with higher food consumption and greater child educational attainment, children of landowning mothers in Nepal are significantly less likely to be severely underweight, and the assets a woman brings into marriage correlate with greater household spending on food, education, healthcare, and children's clothing.<sup>50</sup> Securing and recognizing women's land rights raises agricultural productivity and shifts household decision-making toward shared control. This increases the total resources a family can devote to nutrition and food security.<sup>51</sup> Households with legally documented ownership are more likely to invest in their land and plan for its long-term use, raising productivity. If women had the same access to productive resources as men, agricultural output could rise by as much as 30 percent, reducing the number of hungry people worldwide by 12 to 17 percent.<sup>52</sup> Many women already farm the land but lack the ownership rights, credit, agricultural resources, and decision-making authority needed to use it as

productively as possible.

Land ownership impacts economic security as much as food security. Even where women supply much of the agricultural labor, business deals for the sale of crops are overwhelmingly signed with men. A 2013 World Bank report concluded that women's weaker rights over land and other productive assets lead investors to deal primarily with men.<sup>53</sup> The economic value of land, however, reaches well beyond cultivation. Secure land rights generate income through rent or sale, serve as a key input for enterprise development, and can function as collateral for loans that might allow a woman to open her own business, for example.<sup>54</sup> These are benefits that women cannot fully capture without legally and socially recognized rights to land they own.<sup>55</sup>

There are also hidden costs that reveal how much ownership shapes economic behavior. Experimental work in Benin found that women use more of their labor than men toward “guard labor” – effort spent simply preventing threats to land they cannot securely claim.<sup>56</sup> The benefits of secure land ownership can be seen in Ghana. With their land secured, women shifted away from guard labor toward off-farm work, which raised their business profits.<sup>57</sup> Security of ownership, in other words, does more than protect a plot of ground. It releases labor and capital that would otherwise be spent defending a claim, freeing women to make strides toward broader economic advancement.

## **POVERTY, URBAN CONTEXTS, AND INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS**

Land ownership discussions often center on rural environments, where the connection to agricultural production makes the stakes especially visible. But the same issues, insecurity, exclusion, and dependence on marital or family status, follow women into cities too. According to the UNHCR's 2020 Global Trends in Forced Displacement report, 82.4 million people were displaced worldwide that year, nearly half of them women and girls.<sup>58</sup> Whether

displacement is caused by conflict, fragility, or climate change, people increasingly end up in informal urban settlements or areas where housing has been built on land its occupants have no legal claim to. They may also end up in housing that does not comply with formal planning and building regulations. This shift complicates women's access to housing and property in several overlapping ways, including substandard housing, frequent eviction, disputes over land and property, and the loss of assets.<sup>59</sup> Displaced people in general are less likely than host communities to have formal rental contracts.<sup>60</sup> In Somalia, for example, displaced women in urban areas report feeling insecure in their property rights and struggle to get legal help through either public or customary dispute-resolution systems.<sup>61</sup> Without formal rental contracts, eviction risk can be severe, especially for women. In a survey of Venezuelan migrants and refugees, households with no rental agreement were evicted at roughly twice as often as those with a written contract. More than 80 percent of women had no agreement for the housing they lived in, far outpacing men in that same vulnerable, contract-less category.<sup>62</sup> Much of this is compounded by something as basic as documentation. Women in lower-income

countries are eight percent less likely than men to have an official ID. If a woman is displaced without legal identification in her own name, accessing housing or services in a new city becomes even harder.<sup>63</sup>

This urban vulnerability isn't limited to displaced populations. It is a broader pattern within informal settlements.<sup>64</sup> More than 1.6 billion people worldwide lived in informal settlements as of 2024, and women are consistently overrepresented within them. Across a 59-country survey spanning Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Southern Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, women aged 15–49 were overrepresented in slums and informal settlements in 80 percent of the countries studied.<sup>65</sup> Because informal settlements exist outside formal legal systems, land and home ownership within them tends to run on customary norms carrying exclusionary risks.

When informal tenure does get secured, whether through governments recognizing customary rights or through informal systems that emerge to document land claims and transactions, the effects can be significant. Families with secured tenure can make structural improvements to their homes and advocate for better public



*An informal settlement in Manila, the Philippines*

*Credit: Anton Zelenov*

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services, leading to real gains in sanitation and living conditions. In India specifically, women with secure urban tenure report higher self-esteem, greater participation in local governance and committees, and a greater willingness to invest in their homes.<sup>66</sup> Tenure security consistently expands women's influence and decision-making power, regardless of setting.

These urban informal-settlement dynamics have also helped fuel a newer movement: gender-responsive urban planning, which designs cities around women's needs, safety concerns, and mobility patterns rather than defaulting to assumptions built around men's lives. To increase women's land ownership, gender-responsive urban planning suggests strategies like requiring joint titles for husbands and wives in all new housing developments.<sup>67</sup> Paperwork and bureaucracy tend to shut out women who are uneducated or illiterate. Thus, minimizing that burden is itself treated as a gender-responsive design principle.<sup>68</sup> Land ownership often only reaches women when systems are deliberately designed with them in mind or specifically reformed.

## Current Status

### ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE IMPACTS

Climate change doesn't affect everyone equally, and land ownership is one of the sharpest dividing lines in who bears the cost. By 2050, climate change is projected to push up to 158

million more women and girls into poverty than men and boys. Women's weaker land rights are a key reason why: without secure tenure, they have fewer resources to fall back on when disaster hits, and fewer legal footholds to rebuild afterward.

When a climate disaster hits, those living in poverty and without formal land rights are often most vulnerable to displacement. Oftentimes, these climate migrants wind up living in informal settlements where they yet again do not have formal rights to their land or home. As previously discussed, women are overrepresented in informal settlements throughout the globe, many of which are located in floodplains and other high-risk areas, and thus leave women vulnerable to a secondary displacement. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 2022 report flags secure land and housing rights, including women's tenure rights specifically, as a key factor in climate resilience for exactly this reason.<sup>69</sup>

But relocation and displacement from climate change is not the whole story. Migration takes resources such as money, legal status, social networks. Without land ownership, women often lack the means to leave, even when staying is dangerous. Researchers call this "involuntary immobility."<sup>70</sup> In coastal Senegal, young men often migrate to fish in Mauritania while women, tied to land-based fish processing, stay behind as local stocks and biodiversity collapse. In Bangladesh, women were more likely to remain in place during cyclones, partly out of fear for their safety in evacuation shelters and a sense of duty to protect the household and livestock.<sup>71</sup> In both

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*By 2050, climate change is projected to push up to 158 million more women and girls into poverty than men and boys.*

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cases, their immobility is not a choice but the product of gender roles and land systems that give women less to leave with and less to return to.

It is also important to note that immobility and migration are not polar opposites in the context of climate change and women's land ownership. Instead, they often compound one another. A 2025 study of Nairobi's Muruku informal settlement shows this clearly. After the 2024 Ngong River floods, the Kenyan government demolished more than 20,000 homes without offering resettlement, displacing residents who were already living at risk because they lacked formal tenure.<sup>72</sup> It was the lack of formal tenure that allowed the government to demolish homes without providing much support in return, claiming those families were illegal occupiers. Though the government promised USD 75 to those who they displaced, recipients of the stipend claim the amount was not nearly enough to rebuild a life.<sup>73</sup> Women faced heightened sexual exploitation, lost identity documents, and had disease exposure while being shut out of the decision-making about their own recovery.<sup>74</sup>

The relationship between women's land ownership and climate change is not always one of increasing vulnerability and harm. In fact, expanding women's land ownership can help create a more sustainable future. Studies from Ecuador, Mexico, Nepal, and Peru link secure land tenure to lower deforestation and more successful reforestation. In Uganda and Ethiopia, secure land rights predict a greater investment in soil conservation.<sup>75</sup> Women make up roughly 45 percent of the agricultural labor force in rural areas globally. Evidence from Benin and Rwanda shows secure property rights drive greater investment in climate-smart agriculture.<sup>76</sup> That said, some climate action projects could weaken women's land rights. Certain green projects rely on the land, but the project developers may consult and compensate only the person listed as its formal owner, usually a man. Thus, some projects could utilize land that women unofficially own if a man just gives permission, depriving

women of farmland, forests, water, or income. This is also seen with Indigenous communities, where those who are on the land are not always properly consulted for these projects. One recent advancement occurred in 2025, when the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) issued guidance on gender-responsive national climate plans. They recommended guaranteeing women's land-tenure and access rights in community forestry and involving Indigenous and rural women in land-based climate programs. The guidance gives governments a current framework for treating land rights as part of climate adaptation and mitigation rather than as a separate gender issue.<sup>77</sup>

Environmental disasters and women's land ownership can be seen as turning points rather than just a setback. Post-disaster reconstruction sometimes creates rare openings to fix land systems that were unequal to begin with. After the 2004 tsunami, Indonesia's Aceh land administration reconstruction project introduced joint land titling for married couples. Before the project, less than 4 percent of titles were jointly held and most land was registered to husbands alone. By 2009, the project's final year, roughly 45 percent of the nearly 100,000 titles distributed were registered to women or jointly held.<sup>78</sup> Rebuilding, in other words, doesn't have to mean rebuilding the same inequities.

## **POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS TO INCREASE WOMEN'S LAND OWNERSHIP**

When thinking about promising interventions to increase women's land ownership, solutions such as laws, treaties, and international targets hold great importance. These macro-level approaches have real strengths: they can set binding, measurable national commitments and mobilize resources at a scale no local campaign can match. But their central weakness is implementation. A right that exists on paper doesn't automatically translate into a right people can exercise, especially where it contradicts customs.

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals give this work a global benchmark. SDG 5 (achieving gender equality) includes indicator 5.a.1, which specifically tracks the proportion of the agricultural population with ownership or secure rights to land, by sex, and the share of women among landholders.<sup>79</sup> It is one of the few SDG indicators built to make women's land exclusion visible in numbers. According to the latest Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) data from July 23, 2026, "Data from 78 countries reveals a widespread lack of secure land rights for both men and women in agricultural households, with women being less likely to own land than men in most countries. In nearly 90 percent of these countries, less than half of women have secure land rights, and men are often at least twice as likely to own land."<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, Indicator 5.a.2 measures women's disadvantages in their legal rights to land ownership. Recent data reveals a stark gender disparity, showing that only 15 percent of surveyed countries offer high or very high protection of women's land rights, while 61 percent offer low, very low, or no protection at all. That protection also varies sharply by region. Europe, Latin America, and Asia generally have strong inheritance laws and spousal consent requirements, while Western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa lag behind. Legal safeguards are especially scarce in Western Asia, though sub-Saharan Africa has made some progress through quotas for women's participation in land administration, even if implementation remains slow.<sup>81</sup>

UN-Habitat operationalizes this largely through the Global Land Tool Network (GLTN), an alliance of more than 75 partners that develops pro-poor, gender-responsive land tools rather than relying solely on formal individual titling.<sup>82</sup> In Zambia, this work has issued 1,882 new customary land occupancy certificates to women since 2016 through direct community participation, reducing land disputes and giving women documented security they didn't have before.<sup>83</sup>

UN Women runs parallel work through its Flagship Programming Initiatives, which name "women's secure land tenure is increased" as an explicit outcome target.<sup>84</sup> One concrete tool coming out of that work is the Land Governance Charters UN Women has helped establish in Senegal, the Central African Republic, and Mali. These participatory instruments are where communities and local authorities jointly identify land-access barriers and build them into a land-action plan, with processes that specifically include women's participation.<sup>85</sup>

Even well-designed laws run into trouble without support, though. Tanzania has equal-rights land legislation, yet customary norms still historically limited rural women's actual ownership and control of land in practice. This is why external programs there have had to work through processes at the community level rather than relying on the law by itself.<sup>86</sup> This is the recurring flaw of top-down reform: a law passed without community buy-in or cultural fit tends to sit unenforced. This is especially true in places where customary or religious authorities, not the state, are who people actually turn to for land decisions. As of 2025, however, Tanzania has made great strides in securing both legal and cultural support. The country's first female president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, was officially elected and launched the Revised National Land Policy of 1995, which removes some of the most threatening barriers to women enjoying full rights to land.<sup>87</sup>

Bottom-up approaches start from the opposite assumption: that women themselves, not outside authorities, are best positioned to identify what is blocking their land rights and design something that will hold in their community. Their advantage is durability; solutions built with women's input from the outset and paired with community education are far more likely to survive after the funding or attention moves on. Their limitation is scale: local change is slow, resource-intensive, and hard to replicate uniformly across regions.

The Huairou Commission is the clearest model of

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this approach. This is a women-led movement of grassroots groups across more than 38 countries that explicitly centers grassroots women as decision-makers rather than beneficiaries, including on its own governing council.<sup>88</sup> In Kenya, Huairou's local affiliate, Shibuye, facilitated dialogues in 2018 between 30 grassroots women leaders and their County Assemblies. 63 county assembly members worked directly with those women to help secure land rights.<sup>89</sup> In Chad, a campaign that mobilized more than 25,000 rural women across seven provinces to advocate with one voice led authorities to allocate 300 hectares of land to 18 women's groups.<sup>90</sup> Neither of these started with a law, but with organizing.

The strongest interventions tend to combine both approaches: global-level commitment paired with local-level organizing. The Stand for Her Land campaign is an important example. The World Bank, International Land Coalition, Global Land Tool Network, Landesa, Habitat for Humanity International, and the Huairou Commission jointly founded this campaign to close the gap between global commitments like the SDGs and what is actually happening on the ground. It works simultaneously at multiple levels, through country-based coalitions and global advocacy on one end, and through direct partnership with women's organizations and women leaders on the other. It has the explicit goal of helping women organize and advocate for their own land rights at the community, country, and global level, rather than having rights delivered to them from above.

Whichever combination of approaches is used, one design principle cuts across all of them: women are not a single, uniform group. Landesa's research on this is direct. Solutions that do not account for how land rights intersect with other identities risk overlooking or actively harming the women who are already most marginalized, including Indigenous women, migrant women, and women from minority ethnic or religious groups. Landesa specifically flags marital status – and whether that status is legally or socially recognized – as one of the most consistent

factors shaping whether a woman can actually hold secure land rights in practice.<sup>91</sup>

## **CASE STUDY: WOMEN'S LAND OWNERSHIP IN POST-GENOCIDE RWANDA**

Rwanda's current system of women's land ownership cannot be understood without examining the lasting effects of the 1994 genocide. For most of Rwanda's modern history, land inheritance ran through men. Under customary and early statutory practice, land passed from father to son. If a husband died, his wife had no legal claim to the land they'd shared; instead, it belonged to his male relatives. Widows and daughters without a male heir in the family were frequently and legally disadvantaged, with husbands' relatives able to seize land the moment there was no man left to defend a woman's claim to it.<sup>92</sup> The 1994 genocide upended this system by force of circumstance rather than policy. In just a few months, roughly 800,000 people were killed, and the country was left with a population where women, many of them widows, made up a substantial majority of household heads and were suddenly responsible for land they had no legal right to hold. The old inheritance rules became unsustainable at national scale. A country largely dependent on agriculture couldn't function with a majority of its farmers legally barred from owning the land they were farming.

Rwanda's government responded with fast and thorough legal reform. The 1999 Succession Law was the first to explicitly grant women equal inheritance rights to land, formalizing what had previously been, at best, informal or inconsistent practice.<sup>93</sup> It was followed by the 2003 Constitution, the 2004 National Land Policy, and the 2005 Organic Land Law, which together built out a legal framework requiring land to be registered and treating women's and men's rights to that land as equal, regardless of how the land was acquired.<sup>94</sup> Here, land reform was a national necessity given that Rwanda, trying to recover from a devastating genocide, could not afford to

A tea grower in Rwanda

Credit: Wood Wildlife  
Photography



leave half its population legally landless.

But like most land ownership interventions, and especially those with a top-down approach, the way these policies manifested on the ground is complicated. On one hand, the law worked. Women's land ownership in Rwanda is now relatively high, although complete equality has not been achieved. According to data reported in the OECD's 2025 Rwanda profile, 31 percent of women in the country owned land in 2023, compared with 39 percent of men.<sup>95</sup> Out of everyone who owned land, 46 percent were women.<sup>96</sup> Rwanda's 2024 National Gender Statistics Report, published in 2025, presents another measure of progress: 94.8 percent of women farmers had access to land, compared with 93.7 percent of men.<sup>97</sup>

Rwanda's experience should also be understood within its regional context. In 2026, FAO reported that men were more likely than women to own or control agricultural land in 28 of the 32 Sub-Saharan African countries it studied.<sup>98</sup> In more than 40 percent of those countries, the gender gap in ownership or secure rights was particularly pronounced, while half lacked

laws that adequately protected women's land rights. Rwanda's strong legal framework and relatively high rates of women's access therefore represent significant regional progress, although the remaining difference between women's and men's ownership shows that formal reform has not produced complete equality. 2026 is also the United Nations' International Year of the Woman Farmer, which identifies secure land tenure, access to finance, technology, and participation in agricultural decision-making as priorities for women farmers.<sup>99</sup> The remaining challenges for women in agriculture have subsequently gained renewed international attention.

Rwanda has also continued modernizing its land-administration system. Electronic land titles allow approved documents to be delivered digitally, while an automated Land Dashboard provides current information about land ownership, transactions, values, and land use. By early 2025, the average processing time for land-service applications had fallen from 24 days in 2023 to approximately 14.5 days.<sup>100</sup> Women's reported satisfaction with land-document services reached 63.4 percent in 2024, compared with 58.5 percent among men.<sup>101</sup> These developments

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may make it easier to register inheritances, correct records, and monitor land transactions, although they should not be presented as the cause of ownership levels recorded before their introduction.

However, research shows a persisting disparity between legal equality and full equality in practice. In a district-level study of Nyagatare, nearly half of respondents reported that sons were still favored over daughters in land inheritance despite the law saying otherwise.<sup>102</sup> Pressure from male relatives may therefore prevent women from claiming land to which they are legally entitled.

The gap is especially significant for women in informal marriages, meaning unions not officially registered with the state. Rwanda's protections for joint ownership primarily benefit legally married spouses, while women in informal unions may have greater difficulty establishing claims to land registered in their partners' names. One study found that Rwanda's land tenure reform was associated with a reduction in documented land ownership for women in informal marriages.<sup>103</sup> Formalization may therefore harm women whose relationships or land claims are not recognized by the registration system.

Rwanda remains both a success story and a warning about the limits of formal reform. Its laws and registration programs have brought women substantially closer to equal land ownership, and newer digital systems may make land administration faster and more transparent. However, unequal ownership rates, informal marriages, family pressure, and the digital divide continue to affect whether women can exercise their rights in practice. Rwanda's current challenge is not merely to place women's names on titles, but to ensure that all women can understand, defend, and independently exercise the rights those titles represent.

## Bloc Analysis

### POINTS OF DIVISION

While many states broadly support women's rights to land and property, the mechanism to expand these rights can vary heavily. Some countries prioritize legal reforms, including equal inheritance laws, joint titling, and national land-registration programs. For many states, explicit legal reforms are the most efficient way to enshrine rights and ensure that they are durable across time. Furthermore, legislatively supported land rights often lend themselves to clearer implementation by allowing for uniform interpretation. Others support more gradual reforms that account for religious, customary, and social structures to drive change. This approach works to ensure support from those at the heart of property decisions, though it may face difficulties as it comes to implementation and buy-in. Finally, some countries have made little to no progress in supporting women's property rights. This is not inherently attributed to misogyny or sexism but often is the consequence of poor enforcement mechanisms or other, more pressing, priorities. It is important to note that many countries share characteristics with more than one bloc. Delegates should carefully research their country's priorities to determine which approach best represents its position. They should consider not only how much legal protection their country currently provides, but also which reforms it would support through UN-Habitat.

### FORMAL LEGAL REFORM AND REGISTRATION

Progress on women's land rights rarely happens because of unprompted, widespread cultural shifts. This bloc includes countries that use a law, a titling program, or a market shift to increase women's land ownership. Countries in this bloc believe that governments should use formal law to create change rather than waiting for social

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norms to change first. They may support equal inheritance rights, joint registration of marital property, spousal consent before land is sold, and gender-disaggregated land records. The World Bank highlights Latin America and the Caribbean, East Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa as showing significant legal improvement over time because of deliberate policy interventions designed to increase women's land ownership.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the lever pulled was land titling. Throughout the 1990s, governments across the region ran state-led programs to formalize informal land holdings and expand land markets.<sup>104</sup> But these programs didn't start out with gender equality in mind. Most assumed the family farm belonged to the male head of household, rather than considering whether a couple might own land jointly.<sup>105</sup> It took feminist research and advocacy to force joint titling onto the agenda. Once it did, the share of women benefiting from these titling programs climbed well past what women had received under earlier agrarian reforms.<sup>106</sup> Women in Latin America are more likely to acquire land through inheritance than through marriage or purchase.<sup>107</sup> Because of these experiences, countries in this bloc may view gender-sensitive registration as a tool for correcting inequality. However, these experiences demonstrate that titling programs must deliberately record women as individual or joint owners.

East Asia's lever was different; land reform occurred alongside major economic transitions. Vietnam's 1993 Land Law turned land into a tradable asset for the first time, and its later land reforms went a step further, requiring that households hold their titles jointly.<sup>108</sup> Research using Vietnam's Household Living Standards Survey found that when women held land solely or jointly, women were more likely to be self-employed, and families were less vulnerable to poverty.<sup>109</sup> This kind of evidence, which connects women's land ownership with household economic security. Indonesia implemented similar legal measures after finding gender gaps in its own titling projects.<sup>110</sup> In both places, legal

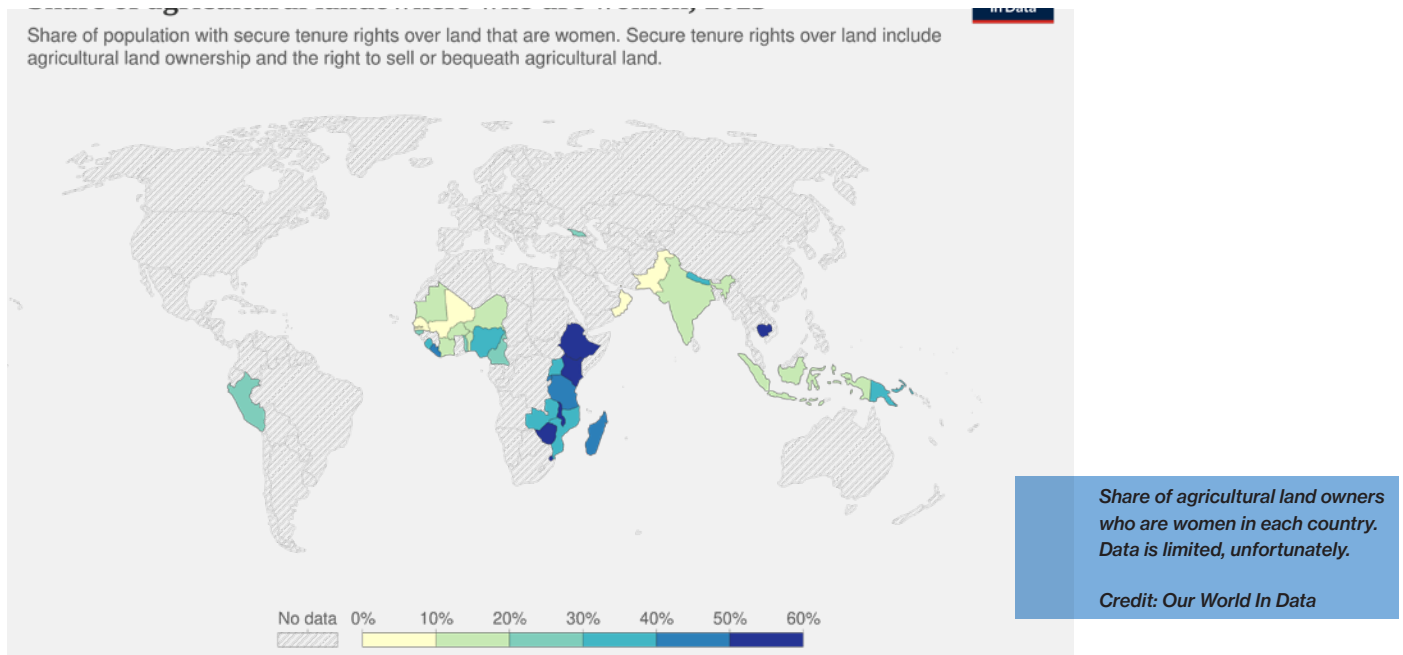
reform didn't wait for social norms to catch up. Governments changed the formal rules first, creating space for cultural practices to change over time.

Sub-Saharan Africa's story is more complicated because legal improvements are not as clear in practice. Women still own a small fraction of the land they farm. World Bank data show that the region reduced legal restrictions on women's property rights and decision-making by more than half between 1960 and 2010. However, substantial gaps between the written law and reality on the ground. For this reason, members of this bloc may support international funding not only for passing laws but also for registration offices, legal assistance, public education, and gender-disaggregated monitoring.

Registration systems, local officials, family practices, and public awareness determine whether a woman can exercise her rights. This bloc would therefore support strong national legal standards paired with funding, technical assistance, and monitoring to close the gap between law and practice.

## **CULTURALLY GROUNDED REFORM**

Countries in this bloc recognize the importance of women's economic security but argue that land and inheritance reforms must be developed domestically and account for national religious, customary, and family-law systems. Many states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) illustrate this position, although the region contains considerable legal and political diversity. Over the last forty years, MENA countries have made significant gender equality strides in education, where gender gaps in primary and secondary school enrollment have narrowed considerably and women are enrolling in universities at higher rates.<sup>111</sup> Yet this progress has not produced comparable equality in land and property ownership. The region has some of the lowest levels of female agricultural landholding worldwide, and women are two



to three times more likely than men to face property loss following a divorce or the death of a spouse.<sup>112</sup>

The root of this challenge often lies in a combination of legal rules, enforcement gaps, and family practices. Many legal codes in the region are influenced by Islamic inheritance rules under which daughters generally receive a smaller prescribed share than sons.<sup>113</sup> However, the content and application of inheritance law vary among countries, and women may also face pressure to surrender even the share they are legally entitled to receive.

In this context, changes to legal frameworks may be understood as challenges to religious authority, cultural identity, or national sovereignty. Members of this bloc may therefore resist a UN framework that requires every country to adopt identical inheritance rules, even if they support measures that ensure women receive their existing legal shares.

However, the region is not a monolith. Tunisia, for example, offered a glimpse of potential change in 2018 when its cabinet approved a bill requiring equal inheritance shares for men and women.<sup>114</sup>

Though the proposal met with significant public opposition and has yet to pass, it contributed to a larger domestic debate about reform.<sup>115</sup> Advocates have noted that only one in eight Tunisian women owns a home and one in seven owns land. These voices demonstrate that reform may be pursued through domestic efforts led by women within their own communities. Even if their efforts have not yet produced equal-inheritance legislation, they have expanded national debate about women's property rights.

Countries in this bloc may support practical steps that strengthen women's land rights without immediately changing religious or customary inheritance laws. These steps could include recording women's existing property, protecting women from being pressured to give up inheritances, requiring their consent before a family home is sold, teaching women about their legal rights, and including women in local land decisions. These countries may prefer community dialogue and voluntary international assistance over external pressure. This bloc, therefore, prioritizes nationally led, culturally grounded reform and warns that externally imposed legal models may generate resistance

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or remain unenforced.

## MINIMAL OR SLOW REFORM

Countries in this bloc are those that ultimately lack a defense of women's property rights, or have been slow to implement reforms. The motivation for this is not necessarily an attempt to restrict women's rights. Rather, for many countries, expanding rights is a slow, arduous process. Not only is it a lengthy process to pass laws and change existing statutes, but convincing local governments and bodies to aid in enforcement is another, oftentimes monumental, task. Policies in this bloc are those that may support a woman's right to own property, but lack enforcement. Countries in this bloc may also have no explicit protections or rights enshrined for women. While countries in the prior bloc may be taking active efforts to support women's rights on the local, grassroots, level, countries in this bloc are likely to have hit a standstill or face some form of gridlock. Countries in this bloc may include Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Equatorial Guinea.

One example can be seen with Libya. Although women have statutory and legal rights to land, this is often extremely minimal in practice. More specifically, a strict belief that property should follow the family line, which is traced through paternity, has created a standard that property should remain with men.<sup>116</sup> Reforms were promising in the latter half of the 19th century, though, as rights continued to expand in civil codes. Furthermore, grassroots movements gained momentum and popularity in trying to combat stigma.<sup>117</sup> The largest issue for Libya, however, was the start of the 2011 Arab Spring, a set of pro-democracy uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa. While the uprising overthrew the dictatorship, it also fractured any semblance of political stability, leading to an immense power vacuum. As the government collapsed, so too did civil codes, laws, and any semblance of progress and improvement. Furthermore, as the country began to reform and

stabilize, concessions with conservative factions were critical to patch fragmentation. This meant that women's rights and broader property equality was sidelined as the focus shifted to protecting the country as a whole.

Ultimately, countries in this bloc are not inherently opposed or combative to expanded women's property rights. That being said, a combination of legislative and cultural barriers will make reform difficult and complicated, requiring careful, targeted reform.

## Committee Mission

In this committee, delegates will work to close one of the widest and most overlooked and consequential gaps in the fight for gender equality: women's land ownership and property rights. UN-Habitat is mandated by the General Assembly to promote sustainable towns, cities, and human settlements, a mandate that includes land, tenure, and property rights as core building blocks of adequate shelter.<sup>118</sup>

UN-Habitat has decades of experience translating that mandate into practice through the Global Land Tool Network, which develops gender-responsive land tools for women living in contexts – like informal settlements, rural areas, and places where customary tenure systems reign supreme – that formal titling systems have historically left out.<sup>119</sup> But delegates should understand the limits of this committee's authority. UN-Habitat cannot pass binding law, rewrite a state's inheritance code, or override customary tenure; land law remains within national sovereignty. This committee's power lies in setting frameworks, sharing tools, funding pilot programs, and building the cooperation that drives momentum in places ready to make change.

Delegates should take an intersectional approach, weighing the cultural, socioeconomic, and legal context of their country to design interventions that are nuanced and sustainable.

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Strategies must consider how to monitor success and plan for mechanisms to engage diverse stakeholders, especially the women of these communities themselves.<sup>120</sup> The SDGs offer concrete indicators that can serve as inspiration: Indicator 5.a.1 measures women's tenure through legal documentation and rights to sell and bequeath land; Indicator 5.a.2 tracks whether countries have adopted the reforms (joint registration, spousal consent, equal inheritance, funding, customary-law protections, and women's participation in land institutions) that make those rights real.<sup>121</sup>

Ultimately, this committee's task is not to declare that women deserve land rights. Rather, it is to figure out, region by region and law by law, how to close the distance between what is written into law and what is actually lived out in community norms. In other words, your work lies in the murky space between – the gap between a right on paper and a woman's real ability to claim, use, and hold onto the land she owns, in whatever way she sees fit. The strongest resolutions will pair legal or institutional recommendations with genuine respect for cultural customs and concrete strategies for community buy-in. The key is to collaborate closely with those for whom your resolutions are designed, working alongside women who are striving to secure their land and property and recognizing them, not as passive beneficiaries, but as the key knowledge holders and agents of change.

TOPIC B

# Urban Disaster Preparedness

UN-HABITAT | NHSMUN 2027



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# Introduction

**T**oday's disasters are becoming increasingly urban. As more than half of the world's population now lives in cities, a single earthquake, flood, or hurricane can disrupt millions of lives within hours. The UN's 2025 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction found that direct disaster losses now average USD 202 billion each year.<sup>122</sup> The Emergency Events Database has recorded 11,360 separate natural disasters worldwide between 1995 and 2022, with Asia experiencing both the highest frequency of disasters and the highest number of casualties of any region.<sup>123</sup> As weather events become more intense, a natural disaster can devastate the people, infrastructure, and communities that lie in its path. These direct losses include destruction of infrastructure and, in some cases, loss of human life. Indirect impacts push the total even higher, exceeding roughly USD 2.3 trillion.<sup>124</sup> These may be long-term reductions in business output and essential public services.

As natural disasters become more common and urban populations grow, countries will continue to be affected in different ways at varying speeds. Cities in the fastest growing regions must absorb new residents more quickly than they can extend their infrastructure systems or emergency response plans. In some cities, population growth has outpaced the urban planning process, placing a strain on response and recovery plans. On the other hand, older, slower growing cities can rely on what was built decades ago.<sup>125</sup> In this sense, some cities have the capacity to prepare for and respond to hazards, while others do not. These differences are not fixed. A city with strong institutions today may become more vulnerable if its infrastructure worsens. Another may rapidly improve through investment, technological innovation, or effective planning.

Urban disaster preparedness extends far beyond emergency response. A city's ability to withstand and recover from disasters is shaped by factors such as infrastructure, governance, inequality, access to technology, and international cooperation. While every country faces different risks and capacities, all must confront the same challenge: reducing disaster risk before crises strike. The committee must identify practical, long-term solutions that strengthen resilience

while recognizing the different circumstances and resources of each member state.

## History and Description of the Issue

### RISK-INFORMED PLANNING

Historically, urban planning has focused on developing cities, expanding transportation, and improving public services. However, planning has become more centered around reducing disaster risk and mitigating the impact of natural hazards, especially in rapidly-developing cities. As cities continue to expand, their infrastructure systems face increased pressure. This poses a risk for cities that are vulnerable to floods, earthquakes, cyclones, wildfires, and other disasters.

Amid the growing risks of disasters, 187 countries met in Sendai, Japan, to discuss specific strategies. After the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) 2015-2030 was adopted and gained international attention, DRR became a crucial part of urban planning.<sup>126</sup> This is a central approach to reducing the risks associated with rapid urban development and

Urban planning museum in Shanghai

Credit: Ekrem Canli



disaster exposure.<sup>127</sup> DRR considers economic conditions, the ability of governments to respond, and environmental issues that worsen the effects of those disasters. It is not a one-size-fits-all solution, but can be applied to countries' situations. When incorporated into urban planning, DRR has had success in minimizing the impact of disasters.

Hazard mapping technologies and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) have become extremely important in helping urban planners understand the complex urban risk environments.<sup>128</sup> GIS visualizes information about road structures, population density, and elevation. Hazard mapping technologies use satellites and other tools to predict disasters within a given city.<sup>129</sup> Combined, GIS and hazard models help find vulnerabilities and support planning decisions. These technologies help to design cities that minimize the impact of future disasters and provide risk assessments and informed land-use decisions.<sup>130</sup>

Risk assessments combine a variety of information and reports, giving governments and cities recommendations for the most vulnerable

areas and structures. These assessments can guide investment priorities, zoning decisions, and identification of vulnerable infrastructure. Zoning and land use more broadly determine how cities choose to expand and develop.<sup>131</sup> Cities utilizing zoning and planning can mitigate future disaster losses by developing away from high-risk areas. These can include floodplains, unstable hillsides, active fault lines, and coastal storm surge zones.<sup>132</sup> Restricting development in these areas and preserving natural buffers can significantly reduce future exposure and avoid post-disaster rebuilding. Zoning also considers what types of development can survive in certain areas of risk. For example, zoning rules can encourage hospitals and other critical facilities to be in lower-risk areas. The Sendai Framework specifically calls on member states to incorporate disaster risk into all new zoning and building codes.

Furthermore, modern risk-informed planning has shifted to incorporate climate projections rather than solely relying on historical disaster patterns. Rising sea levels, changing rain patterns, droughts, and heat waves have all drastically altered the reality of urban planning and DRR.

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Planners are required to design infrastructure more capable of withstanding predicted future conditions, as opposed to past averages.<sup>133</sup>

Land-use decisions are also essential for the protection of natural ecosystems. Wetlands, rivers, and urban green spaces can actually reduce the severity of disasters.<sup>134</sup> Nature-based solutions have been increasingly recognized as cost-effective DRR approaches. For example, wetland restoration can help soil or vegetation absorb rain water, mitigating flood risk. Reforestation stabilizes slopes, fights against erosion, and minimizes the risk of landslides.<sup>135</sup> However, each city faces different challenges that require specific nature-based solutions. For example, inland cities experience flash flooding and extreme heat, while coastal cities suffer from storm surges and rising sea levels.<sup>136</sup>

As cities become more advanced, the infrastructure that supports residents and businesses is critical to include in risk-informed planning. Transportation networks, power grids, water systems, communication technology, and healthcare all contribute to the hazard level and the ability to respond to disasters.<sup>137</sup> However, as a result of risk assessments, resilient and longstanding infrastructure is being integrated into urban planning. This includes roads that remain passable after floods. These roads are elevated above expected flood levels, include drainage systems, and use flood-resistant materials. Earthquake-resistant bridges are better able to resist shaking by using flexible materials designed to absorb shocks, including dampers to reduce vibrations. They are also reinforced along the supports and foundations. Backup water systems and emergency power for hospitals can also help to mitigate the impact on other services.<sup>138</sup> Together, these measures ensure that essential services remain operational during disasters, reducing casualties and accelerating recovery.

The importance of risk-informed urban planning will continue to grow as urban populations expand and climate change intensifies. With the

formative elements of the Sendai Framework, combined with the research done by the World Bank and IPCC, there has been a recent push for risk-informed planning. However, it remains a low priority for many developers and urban planners. By investing in DRR, cities can reduce vulnerabilities before the disasters occur. While advances in planning and technology have strengthened disaster risk reduction, their success ultimately depends on governments' ability to implement, coordinate, and enforce these strategies.

## GOVERNANCE AND POLICY

Government institutions ultimately control how a city responds to a disaster. While natural disasters have worsened in recent years, weak policy and institutions have also played a major role in increasing the damage and effects of these disasters.<sup>139</sup> As urban populations grow, governments face immense pressure to make sure cities can handle disasters while still providing essential services. This requires strong coordination between government agencies to make effective decisions about how land is used and where buildings and people are located. It is also crucial to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of these agencies when putting new policies into practice.<sup>140</sup> For example, the Sendai Framework emphasizes how inefficient government processes such as poor coordination and decision-making can make disaster reduction and recovery more difficult.

As part of disaster preparedness, governments create plans that assign responsibilities, distribute resources, and encourage community involvement.<sup>141</sup> Officials in departments such as transportation, public health, and housing must work together. This cooperation is important for creating plans and projects that focus on disaster-resilient infrastructure.<sup>142</sup> For example, individual failures in the Türkiye-Syria 2023 earthquakes worsened conditions after the disaster. Damage to transportation infrastructure made search and rescue efforts more difficult.

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Disrupted communication networks also slowed the government's ability to pass emergency laws and provide aid.<sup>143</sup> Subsequently, the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) has emphasized the importance of strong coordination between government agencies.<sup>144</sup> Urban development is highly interconnected, meaning that damage to one part of a city can affect many others. This can increase the overall impact of a disaster.

Governments are responsible for the groups responsible for creating building regulations. Because of this, governments must prioritize updating building codes. For example, Nairobi's population has grown over 600 percent since the 1960s. If a fast-growing city does not update its building rules or has weak enforcement, people can end up facing many more risks. Over the last 20 years, Nairobi has experienced numerous collapses and fires, with 60 percent of its population living in slums. While urban disasters have triggered the damage seen in the city, the scale of that destruction stems mostly from weak building regulations and poor construction. Nairobi illustrates the unequal impact of urban disasters on developing countries, which have accounted for 90 percent of disaster-related fatalities since 1990.<sup>145</sup>

The 2017 Mexico City earthquake demonstrated the devastating consequences of corruption and poor coordination in DRR. An investigation found that at least 28 collapsed buildings showed evidence of corruption in the permitting and inspection process.<sup>146</sup> This fraud included the falsification of documents and approval of unsafe structures. As a result, buildings that should

have withstood the earthquake failed instantly. Corruption can undermine regulations with devastating consequences. Usually, the faking of documents or permits is a result of lengthy approval times and outdated building codes. Thus, many developers will pay bribes to speed up stalled applications or forge documents. Much of the damage in the Mexico City earthquake could have been avoided if developers had followed updated building regulations, if the government had enforced them, and if officials had not accepted bribes. In order to ensure rules are being followed, a strong, low-corruption government must prioritize DRR.<sup>147</sup>

Strong policy frameworks are equally important in reducing disaster risk. Effective disaster preparedness policies need clear objectives and assigned responsibility. Governments have many responsibilities, which must be handed out across departments. These include risk assessments, building code enforcement, evacuation planning, and more. Local governments must clearly assign who is responsible for broader disaster preparedness tasks. When responsibilities are clearly defined, it reduces repeated work and improves coordination overall. Furthermore, public-private partnerships can provide governments with important resources when theirs might be limited. These include technical expertise, financing, and implementation support for their projects.<sup>148</sup> Overall, no single policy framework can work everywhere. Therefore, governments must adapt to balance international best practices to fit their own local needs.

Financing is another important governance issue. Disaster preparedness often requires

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*Over the last 20 years, Nairobi has experienced numerous collapses and fires, with 60 percent of its population living in slums.*

large investments in research and infrastructure upgrades.<sup>149</sup> The Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) emphasizes that investing in resilience should not be seen as optional spending.<sup>150</sup> Instead, it should be treated as a long-term part of a country's development. Studies have shown that investing in disaster preparedness is often significantly more cost-effective than financing recovery and reconstruction efforts.<sup>151</sup> Nonetheless, many low- and middle-income cities usually lack the financial capacity to build or improve existing infrastructure.

Infrastructure issues hit countries within Asia and the Pacific especially hard. Many cities in these regions grew rather quickly without building strong infrastructure that could handle worsening disasters. Additionally, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other natural disasters are far more common within these regions. Annual losses from these disasters have been estimated at more than USD 170 billion.<sup>152</sup> This amount is over half of the GDP for some of these countries, creating a cycle of “reactive recovery,” which refers to poorly rebuilding infrastructure that economies depend on following natural disasters, instead of strengthening them beforehand. This process

ends up costing countries more in the long run. Reactive recovery goes beyond these regions as well. Globally, less than four percent of global climate financing has gone to resilience and risk-informed planning.<sup>153</sup> This represents a lack of global action to prevent disasters before they happen, instead of just reacting after the damage is done.

National budgets and public-private investment are two of the most important funding sources for DRR. Insurance also plays a major role, helping to protect infrastructure, along with international aid, which helps build financial and political support for these efforts. Together, these resources have helped the world respond to disasters more effectively.<sup>154</sup>

Moreover, the public's trust in their government can have a large effect on how well disaster preparedness works. When communities trust their politicians, they are more likely to follow safety campaigns and risk reduction measures more seriously.<sup>155</sup> Regarding financing, taxes for preparedness programs are easier to gain public support for when there is transparency and accountability behind them. Focusing on planning ahead and sharing information about past initiatives helps keep this process transparent



*A wrecked boat in the wake of a major storm in Thailand*

*Credit: PattayaPatrol*

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from start to finish. Furthermore, accountability mechanisms help ensure that investments in resilience are being used effectively and that policies achieve what they set out to do.

Effective governance also depends on meaningful community participation. Local communities have valuable knowledge on hazard patterns, recovery strategies and the usual course of events.<sup>156</sup> When communities are involved, public support has the potential to spark a shift towards resilience-based solutions.<sup>157</sup> As the cost of these programs can often fall on the public, it is crucial to have their support in creating new initiatives. The Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) Risk-Informed Development Guide argues that development decisions are most effective when they actively involve the vulnerable populations in identifying risks and designing solutions.<sup>158</sup> As communities become more aware of efforts planned around risks, they will be more cautious and prepared.

Addressing inequality has become increasingly important to prevent the uneven impact of natural disasters on poorer communities. Governments that focus on initiatives to decrease economic inequality tend to see better results after a disaster has hit. Targeting inequality can help improve a country's ability to recover from disasters and limit the suffering of their most vulnerable populations. However, this can be very hard to achieve. Rapid urbanization continues to outpace what governments can manage, and political instability makes it hard to secure funding to keep DRR a priority.

## **INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS AND URBAN DISASTER PREPAREDNESS**

Informal settlements are one of the clearest examples of how urban disaster preparedness and equity are connected. These are areas where people build homes without official permission or government planning. Currently, it is estimated that over 1.1 billion people live within these

informal settlements.<sup>159</sup> The World Bank notes that informal urban growth is one of the biggest patterns shaping 21st century urbanization.<sup>160</sup> These communities are frequently located on land that is undesirable and unregulated. These include floodplains, steep hillsides, riverbanks, or new land that has been built on water. These lands are usually cheaper, allowing for informal settlements and slums to pop up without notice.

Informal settlements are especially vulnerable to disaster impacts. They lack the physical planning and infrastructure needed to survive disaster impacts. This includes drainage, paved roads, fire safety, and reinforced buildings, among many others.<sup>161</sup> In Cape Town, researchers have found that the dense, makeshift construction found within informal settlements actually limits the natural drainage and slows floodwater absorption. This can make disasters such as storms and floods even more damaging for people living in these settlements.<sup>162</sup> The same pattern can be seen with fire risk as well. One study looked at informal settlements in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and found similar results. In these communities, fires spread easily because of the materials homes are built with. Additionally, due to limited roads and city planning, fire response has a difficult time arriving on site and containing the flames.<sup>163</sup> This highlights the additional risk disasters pose to informal settlements when there is limited government oversight or organization.<sup>164</sup>

Many informal settlements lack legal recognition from their governments. This limits these communities' access to formal protections and resources. Residents frequently lack secure land tenure, meaning long term legal rights to the land they live on. Because of this, governments tend to avoid investing in improvements, since doing so might make an unauthorized settlement seem officially accepted.<sup>165</sup> This creates a situation where the communities most at risk cannot receive the money and resources they need. The UN-Habitat's Slum Upgrading initiative was created to help fix this issue. It works to bring basic services such as clean water and electricity

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to informal settlements that the government does not already provide. Many communities have seen this as a positive alternative to demolition or relocation.<sup>166</sup>

Investing in informal settlements before a disaster hits is cheaper than attempting to rebuild afterward. This has been a major driving force behind DRR efforts. The World Bank has emphasized that investments in resilient infrastructure result in long-term economic benefits. This is because it reduces the recurring costs of recovery, which can be especially high for informal settlements.<sup>167</sup> Despite this, informal settlements remain chronically underfunded. UN-Habitat's most recent World Cities Report found that informal settlements and slums continue to bear the majority of climate-related disasters.<sup>168</sup> This problem gets even worse because these settlements are often located in environmentally sensitive areas, such as floodplains or steep hillsides. Because of this, up to 167 million homes could be threatened or destroyed by 2040. To put this into perspective, that is about 8.5 times the number of housing units in Tokyo, the most populated city in the world.<sup>169</sup>

Informal settlements' high exposure to disasters also uncovers deeper systemic inequalities. When regular housing markets become too expensive for low-income residents, unregulated land becomes the only available option.<sup>170</sup> The United Nations estimates that the number of people living in slums has increased from 895 million to 1.1 billion over the past two decades.<sup>171</sup> The World Bank defines a slum as a group of individuals living under the same roof without one or more basic needs. These include water,

sanitation, food, or security. Slums are most severe in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In 2022, nearly half the urban population in these areas lived in slums. This is more than twice the global average of 23 percent.<sup>172</sup>

In addition to the lack of infrastructure within slums, which makes it much harder for communities to recover from disasters, inequality also operates through access to information. Many slums lack access to early warning systems, emergency services, and evacuation routes. This means that low-income communities are frequently the last to receive critical information. As a result, these communities are unable to escape dangerous conditions or call for help. This contributes to higher rates of death and injury in these areas.<sup>173</sup> Further, low-income households in these settlements are far less likely to have insurance, savings, or access to credit.<sup>174</sup> This makes it harder for them to rebuild their lives following disasters. Moreover, families can also face higher medical bills, less household wealth, and worse mental health.<sup>175</sup> This highlights the additional burden that these communities must face during and after disaster strikes.

The mental health burden from living in informal settlements is severe and underaddressed. A study of people living in slums in Bangladesh's Khulna division found that roughly 84 percent of respondents showed signs of depression and 72.7 percent screened positive for anxiety.<sup>176</sup> Compared to the global 5.7 percent depression rate and 4.4 percent anxiety rate, the rates from the Bangladeshi slum show a broader issue that needs to be addressed.<sup>177</sup> The most common stressors leading to these high rates are

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*Slums are most severe in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In 2022, nearly half the urban population in these areas lived in slums.*

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overcrowding, financial instability, and insecure housing. All these factors define daily life for many in these communities. In South Africa, 72 percent of women living in informal settlements reported moderate to high levels of depression symptoms. This is more than double the 26.4 percent of women living outside these areas who struggle with the same issues. This again shows the impacts that these informal settlements have on mental health.<sup>178</sup>

A lack of disaster preparedness is not the only problem that informal settlements face. These areas tend to trap people in poverty and make it harder for them to improve their situations. These issues are only worsened when disaster might strike. This adds pressure to possible infrastructure projects, as individuals already struggle just to evacuate or rebuild their communities. Following a disaster, the immediate response may be to focus on rebuilding physical structures. Yet, it is important to address the social and economic issues that exist and are passed down generationally through consistent poverty.

## EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Effective emergency response stems from two important factors. These factors are strong investment in disaster preparedness, and a city's ability to protect lives. No matter how deadly a disaster may be originally, the true cost for a community would not be understood until days or weeks after the initial event. While countries cannot control when disaster strikes, they can help prevent needless suffering and death through having strong emergency response systems. This includes warning systems that activate in time, trained first responders, and available communication networks. Many of these factors are harder to maintain within urban environments, especially slums and informal settlements.<sup>179</sup> The World Bank has emphasized that effective disaster recovery in cities depends on more than just physical infrastructure. It also relies heavily on their ability to mobilize under

pressure. This includes building, testing, and maintaining working systems before a disaster occurs. It also means having the needed resources and first responders to rebuild and save citizen lives after disaster strikes.<sup>180</sup>

Early warning systems are the foundation of an effective emergency response. Their importance to cities has largely grown following increased urbanization and climate change. One of the core global goals of The Sendai Framework is to identify the universal availability of multi-hazard early warning systems. These systems are one of the most cost-effective for governments to reduce the impact of disasters.<sup>181</sup> In recent years, UNESCO has worked to expand early warning systems to include more hazard types through the Early Warning Initiative. This includes developing systems for floods, droughts, wildfires, and glacial melt. This provides urban planners a broader picture of issues their city may face.<sup>182</sup> The plan launched in 2022 and set a five-year goal of ensuring that every person on earth is covered by some form of early warning system. It also emphasizes addressing income inequality.<sup>183</sup> Despite all of these efforts to increase access to early warning systems, a 2025 progress review on the Sendai Framework's early warning target found that there were still major gaps. The issue is that response systems are not well connected, and many vulnerable or low income populations do not have access to them.<sup>184</sup>

The coordination challenge of urban emergency response is as difficult as the technical one. Disaster response in a city requires seamless interaction between fire, law enforcement, medical, and transportation departments. If each department has its own command structure and communication networks, they may find it difficult to work with one another. This leads to overall inefficiency.<sup>185</sup> Research on urban emergency management systems has found that coordination, specifically between public and private actors, can often be the weakest link in the response chain.<sup>186</sup> Hurricane Katrina in 2005 is an extreme example of this type of

failure. When the major hurricane hit the city of New Orleans, many communication systems between agencies were incompatible. This meant that police officers, firefighters, and community members were unable to reliably communicate about rescue efforts. Additionally, once the storm hit, first responders were unable to share information, which led to an information vacuum that needed federal response.<sup>187</sup> As previously mentioned, local authorities often have the most knowledge of their city. If this knowledge is suddenly unavailable, it makes it difficult to apply federal aid to these cities. Due to these issues, Hurricane Katrina resulted in more than USD 200 billion lost and 1,400 casualties. This makes it a prime example of why coordination is vital to ensure efficiency under pressure.<sup>188</sup>

As technology reshapes what is possible in emergency response, it is important to learn from previous disasters. Smart city infrastructure allows urban emergency managers to monitor disaster conditions all in one place, rather than relying on separate reports from different regions and agencies. This includes sensor networks, Internet of Things (IoT) devices, and real-time data collection.<sup>189</sup> A study of smart city security applications found that integrated

sensor systems allow for faster responses than traditional emergency communication methods.<sup>190</sup> Integrated sensor systems allow for shared access and communication between environmental monitors, structural monitors, and emergency response systems. Artificial intelligence and machine learning are increasingly being added to these systems to help assess damage, allocate resources, and locate survivors right after a disaster.<sup>191</sup> This has automated, and will continue to automate, tasks that previously required days of human labor. The deployment of 5G networks and edge computing in cities has further sped up these capabilities. Edge computing is a way of processing data close to where it is created, instead of sending it to a data center or the cloud. Research by Nearby Computing on smart city emergency response found that edge computing is more efficient in the context of a crisis or a disaster. This is because it allows for faster data collection and analysis.<sup>192</sup> Increased data sharing and new technologies have helped with DRR. By continuing to study and invent new technologies, cities can tackle issues associated with informal settlements, government corruption, and climate change much more easily.



A US airman participating in a training exercise in Germany

Credit: U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Demi M. Ebert

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Global failures in disaster emergency response are not only due to a shortage of technology or resources but also due to the lack of coordination and communication. To solve these issues, cities must focus on implementing new technologies in ways that are accessible to all. The World Bank has consistently argued that investing in disaster preparedness pays off far more than reactive recovery. This is only if disaster preparedness involves coordinated agencies and strong communication methods.<sup>193</sup>

## Current Status

### CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION

Climate change worsens the challenges of urban disaster that cities already deal with. This makes climate change adaptation a major priority for cities. One of the clearest examples of these changing risks is in how climate change is changing the behavior of tropical storms. The IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) details how intense tropical cyclone activity has increased in some regions since 1970. The report attributes this increase to human-caused greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>194</sup> Additionally, a larger share of storms are now reaching Category 3 to 5 intensity.<sup>195</sup> These rapid-intensification events have become more common in the Atlantic and Northwest Pacific basins. According to NOAA's Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory, warmer air holds more moisture, allowing storms to produce heavier rainfall.<sup>196</sup> This means that as global temperatures rise, so does the risk for more intense storms. Climate models project that tropical cyclone rainfall rates could increase by roughly 14 percent globally under only two degrees Celsius of warming.<sup>197</sup> Rapid intensification is especially important for cities because storms can strengthen so quickly that communities have little time to prepare and react.

Another example of a climate-altered disaster is

rising sea levels. Sea-level rise is best understood as the shrinking of coastal land. The IPCC's Coastal Cities and Settlements assessment finds that even a mild 0.15 meter rise in average global sea level increases the population exposed to a coastal flood by around 20 percent.<sup>198</sup> The exposed population doubles at 0.75 meters of sea-level rise and triples at 1.4 meters.<sup>199</sup> The AR6 even reports that between 4 and 72 million people could be displaced globally by coastal flooding within the next 100 years.<sup>200</sup> This is after accounting for safety and evacuation measures. That range could grow to between 49 and 250 million people if no additional coastal protection is built beyond our current infrastructure. Land loss is made worse by subsidence. This is the sinking of coastal land, separate from the ocean rising. A 2024 study of 32 major US. coastal cities actually found that subsidence will expose an additional 388 to 536 square miles of land by 2050.<sup>201</sup> For urban planners, this means that current city maps are not stable. There must be constant revisions to account for rapid coastal flooding and subsidence.<sup>202</sup>

Climate change is not just damaging urban infrastructure directly. It is also pushing more people into cities that are often unprepared to receive them. The United Nations finds that climate-related migration takes place within national borders and rarely across them. As rural residents leave areas increasingly exposed to climate hazards, many move to cities expecting greater safety and economic opportunity. Instead, they often arrive in places that lack the housing, infrastructure, and public services needed to support a rapidly growing population. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Center estimates that 23.1 million people were displaced by weather-related events between 2010 and 2019 alone. Many of these migrants end up in informal settlements, where they remain highly exposed to climate risks. A study of drought-driven migration to Pune, India, found that migrants fleeing drought were especially likely to settle in informal neighborhoods. Many of these migrants who fled drought in their home region

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were eventually hit by urban flooding after arrival. A similar pattern emerged in Ethiopia, where a multi-year drought collapsed the local farmer economy and pushed displaced herders into informal settlements on the outskirts of Jigjiga.<sup>203</sup>

For many people, migration does not end their exposure to climate hazards. Instead, it replaces one form of climate vulnerability with another. Climate change continues to drive urbanization. To keep up, cities must develop strong policies and urban planning to endure population growth.

There are many different ways cities can adapt to climate change. Nature-based solutions are important, as they are often the cheapest to implement change at the community level. However, the benefits can be limited if they are not paired with the proper research to back them up.<sup>204</sup> Community-based strategies are also valuable in climate adaptation. These are often cheap to scale, but they must have a high buy-in from the local community. Building code enforcement helps people displaced by hazards to rebuild more safely. Further, migration-informed urban planning is another major tool that helps improve urban disaster preparedness. This means factoring in numbers on expected migration patterns when planning settlements.

Another method is heat action planning. These are strategies for cities to respond to extreme heat events. Climate zone-specific cooling strategies are helpful in mitigating the effects of such events. One-size-fits-all approaches do not always work. In some cases, they can cause more harm. Instead, cities must focus on getting cooling systems that work, even during power

outages or extreme weather events.<sup>205</sup> Finally, risk-informed investments help cities cater to the specific needs of a certain community. This is the investment of funds into projects that reduce climate threats and help communities. These are starting points for solution and initiative development, and do not encompass all possibilities for mitigating climate change.

## **CASCADING INFRASTRUCTURE FAILURES**

Many modern cities run on “interlocking systems,” meaning that city infrastructure systems are no longer separated. For example, governments try to link power, water, communication, and other services to make management easier. This can be seen in a city like New York, whose interlocking systems became critical during Hurricane Sandy. Storm surges flooded the subway tunnels and electrical substations in Lower Manhattan. This led to power outages for tens of thousands of buildings, shut down the subway system, and left hospitals running on backup generators.

Every city has a different level of interconnectivity. Interlocking systems have many potential benefits when used in early warning systems. These include cutting down human error and enabling warning messages to help communities react to hazards. But as these systems become more popular, it is important to also address their vulnerabilities. The success of a city's infrastructure can change depending on how a disaster is defined. What might just be a storm in one city could be a tragedy in another due to cascading failures.

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*A similar pattern emerged in Ethiopia, where a multi-year drought collapsed the local farmer economy and pushed displaced herders into informal settlements.*

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“Cascading failure” describes a domino effect in which the failure of one system causes other interconnected systems to fail. This happens because modern infrastructure is built on networks that work alongside one another rather than alone. Researchers generally identify four main types of interdependence between infrastructure systems:<sup>206</sup>

Physical interdependency exists when one system depends on the physical output of another. For example, power plants require water for cooling, meaning a disruption to the water supply can also disrupt electricity generation.<sup>207</sup>

Cyber interdependence is when one system depends on information or data provided by another. This includes communication networks, digital control systems, and other information technologies that coordinate essential services.<sup>208</sup>

Geographic interdependency exists when two systems are located close enough together that a single event can damage both at the same time. For example, a flood may simultaneously disable a power station, a road network, and a telecommunications facility.<sup>209</sup>

Logical interdependency includes all remaining forms of dependency that are not physical, cyber, or geographic. These relationships are often shaped by policies, economic ties, or social and organizational connections.<sup>210</sup>

The reason this classification matters is that each type needs a different solution. For example, physical interdependencies are addressed by proper backup precautions.<sup>211</sup> This means building backup generators or even fully duplicating power systems in case of an emergency. Disruption in one system can also cause disruption through multiple links rather than one.<sup>212</sup> For example, if a flooded substation loses power, a water treatment plant can shut down. This could then result in the hospital across town losing its ability to safely operate, as it depended on that water plant for drinking water and sterilization. Many of these links can be

damaged without anyone realizing, which is why these physical failures can be so dangerous.

Winter Storm Uri is one of the clearest recent examples of a cascading failure caused by physical interdependency. In February 2021, freezing temperatures disrupted power generation across Texas, United States. This left more than 10 million people without electricity for up to several days.<sup>213</sup> These power outages then spread to other critical systems. Natural gas production fell by nearly half as gas wells and processing equipment also depended on electricity to operate. With less fuel available, additional power plants were forced offline, creating a cycle that worsened the effects of the blackouts.<sup>214</sup>

These failures continued beyond the energy sector. Water treatment plants also lost power, disrupting water services for 49 percent of Texans.<sup>215</sup> At the height of the crisis, the Texas electric grid came within minutes of falling below 59 Hz. This is the point at which the entire interconnected grid could have shut down instead of operating through these blackouts.<sup>216</sup> The storm ultimately caused an estimated \$130 billion in economic losses, far exceeding the costs that may have been needed to prevent this cascading failure. Winter Storm Uri demonstrates how a single infrastructure failure can rapidly spread across interconnected systems. This makes overall resilience more difficult and preventive investment essential rather than optional.

Puerto Rico experienced the same issues, caused by geographic interdependency failures. In 2017, Hurricane Maria destroyed nearly 80 percent of the island’s communication and transportation lines. This left all 3.4 million residents without power.<sup>217</sup> Remote areas of Puerto Rico went up to eleven months without power due to the destruction of one area’s concentrated power infrastructure. Nearby water treatment and distribution systems collapsed as well. As a result, 66 percent of the population lost access to drinkable water, and up to 95 percent

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of cell communication went offline as well.<sup>218</sup> Losing access to these resources in a single storm greatly disrupted Puerto Rican society.

Physical interdependency also contributed to Hurricane Maria's destruction, especially in the health sector. As hospitals lost power and generators lacked the needed fuel, medical operations could not be performed.<sup>219</sup> Most of the storm's 2,975 excess deaths were a result of disrupted medical services. Five years later, a category 1 storm triggered another island-wide blackout, within 10 minutes of landfall.<sup>220</sup> This was an example of a geographic interdependency. The same winds and flooding directly damaged infrastructure, cell towers, and transmission lines at once, as they were in the same place. Many catastrophes trigger multiple types of cascading failures. Puerto Rico's infrastructure failures are also an example of why it is important to immediately correct points of system failure following disaster.

There are many ways to go about mitigating the potential harms from each type of infrastructure interdependency. One strategy that might prove helpful is decentralization incentives. These are rewards designed to motivate governments or organizations to distribute resources instead of centralizing them. Infrastructure that is clustered and scaled will have larger impacts if it is damaged. These incentives can help spread out infrastructure which would limit damages and casualties. Another helpful tool is interdependence mapping requirements. These are laws which require cities to identify and publicly document which of their critical systems are failing. This increases transparency and motivates governments to improve their infrastructure. This ties back to Puerto Rico's infrastructure failures, and how a second storm caused worse damage than Hurricane Maria because they had not properly identified the issue. Overall, it is important to note that each city, system, and region requires a tailored effort to ensure that solutions are applicable to them.

## **CASE STUDY: 2026 VENEZUELA EARTHQUAKES**

On June 24, 2026, two earthquakes measuring 7.2 and 7.5 in magnitude struck northern Venezuela. The earthquakes were just 39 seconds apart and were the most powerful seismic event to hit the country in more than 125 years. The center of the earthquakes was nearly 100 miles west of Caracas. But, the worst destruction was in the capital and in the coastal region of La Guaira, where around 80% of buildings collapsed. By late July, more than 5,000 deaths had been confirmed. Also, tens of thousands remain injured or missing. This, in itself, caused an infrastructure failure due to geographic interdependence, shutting down much of Caracas. More than 600 aftershocks continued to threaten already weakened structures. The disaster also triggered the same type of physical-interdependency cascade seen during Winter Storm Uri in Texas.

Power was disrupted across Venezuela. The UN's Humanitarian Coordination Office reported that many hospitals lost power as well, which deepened the need for medical response.<sup>221</sup> More than 400 schools and water systems were damaged or destroyed. UNICEF flagged this loss as a distinct crisis due to education failures and dehydration.<sup>222</sup> Most water treatment and pumping infrastructure was dependent on electricity that was no longer available. Due to this, survivors in La Guaira had to use improvised showers and toilets on the beach amid these water shortages.<sup>223</sup> These cascading infrastructure failures occurred due to a physical interdependency.

Humanitarian responders strongly warned that displacement after the earthquake would produce a secondary wave of waterborne illness and infectious disease.<sup>224</sup> As survivors crowd into unsanitary shelters, water and sanitation systems are damaged, and waste disposal systems shut down, disease spreads quickly. By early July, aid organizations were already reporting a surge in chronic illness and diarrhea in earthquake-

Search and rescue efforts in Venezuela

Credit: U.S. Marines 24MEU by Cpl. Daniel Garcia



affected communities. This confirmed the prediction by humanitarian responders.<sup>225</sup> The collapse of basic public health systems made the disaster's impact on Venezuela even worse. These effects are continuing to worsen, even long after the shocks stopped.

The earthquake highlights the need for capacity building and how unregulated urban growth can cause serious issues. This refers to the process of strengthening overall infrastructure, systems, and communities over time. 40 to 50 percent of Caracas' nearly 5 million residents live in informal settlements called "barrios." These areas are mostly self-built housing constructed from unreinforced cinder block without formal foundations. They are frequently found on steep hillsides around the capital. Following the disaster, it was confirmed that these homes, with weak bases and floors, mostly collapsed. The affected region did not have adequate earthquake building codes, as this required funding from the Venezuelan government that was not provided. Another reason, however, is the decades of corruption in the government. There is a clear gap between the regulations on paper, which the Venezuelan government boasts,

and the effort to actually enforce these rules. This has led to greater neglect of these informal settlements.

In 2005, Japan's international development agency, JICA, completed a detailed risk assessment of Caracas.<sup>226</sup> The report calculated that a full preparedness plan could have reduced the numbers of heavily damaged buildings from around 10,000 to around 1,300 and could have reduced casualties in a 1967-scale earthquake scenario from approximately 4,900 to about 400. The plan would have cost an estimated USD 2.8 billion over 16 years. However, the Venezuelan government never implemented this plan, despite the country's well-documented 50–60 year recurrence cycle between major seismic events.<sup>227</sup>

The earthquake did not just damage buildings. Instead, it created a chain reaction through the interdependent power, water, and health systems within an already failing system. It exposed informal settlement patterns that should have been addressed before the crisis happened. Now, these issues demand more direct action after a disaster. Infrastructure cannot be fixed

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without financial and political reform. This reform depends on sustained international cooperation, technical assistance, and financing support, since Venezuela's government could not deliver it alone. It is important to remember that none of these issues exist in isolation. Instead, they stem from multiple factors and require the efforts of multiple countries and strategies to solve them.

## Bloc Positions

### POINTS OF DIVISION

When it comes to urban disaster preparedness, countries have very different needs, values, and events that shape their capacity for disaster preparedness. Countries are separated into groups based on what resources they have to react to an urban disaster. These resources stretch from natural protections and remedies, all the way to political and institutional resources. Many states are in different stages of perfecting their emergency response systems, and would therefore benefit from information sharing and diplomacy with countries that are at a similar stage. This does not mean that these groups of countries, or blocs, are correlated with development, but rather capacity to handle an emergency. The difference is how a country has allocated its money, responded to research, and structured its governance. These blocs are an excellent tool in guiding research and building solutions that will move the world towards a resilient state.

### STATES WITH HIGH CAPACITY FOR DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Regardless of development, this bloc feels that building and controlling the sensing and alerting infrastructure is the best practice to reduce disaster losses. The clearest example of this logic is the layered alert architecture built after major seismic events in Japan in February 2007, where a national system transmits a

warning to local authorities and the public within seconds.<sup>228</sup> This is done by coordinating satellite transmission, sirens, and forced broadcast interruption across multiple agencies, requiring nuanced technologies and systems.<sup>229</sup> The J-alert system cooperates with major mobile network operators.<sup>230</sup> Utilizing major networks and creating interconnected systems are a major priority of countries in this bloc. Due to this prioritization, countries in this bloc will have advanced goals or high achievement in loss reduction, as backed by Japan's 97 percent reduction in disaster deaths since the 1960s.<sup>231</sup>

In Daegu, South Korea, the government has built an IoT-based rainwater pumping station that helps predict reservoir-level fluctuations through automated analysis.<sup>232</sup> Newer radar-based urban flood-monitoring technology that was developed by South Korea's Institute of Civil Engineering and Building Technology has been framed as a high-precision, transferable product.<sup>233</sup> This means that their extremely accurate, and well-tested system can be shared across regions with similar landscapes, given the proper time and finances. In a bloc with these priorities, countries will focus on co-creating advanced technological initiatives that will model and build off of the examples provided. Not only will collaboration be focused on sharing these systems, but proposing new systems that are internationally-focused, spanning from countries like Japan and South Korea all the way to the Netherlands, who all value a highly innovative approach to disaster preparedness.

This bloc draws on the logic of the European Commission's INFORM Risk Index, which ultimately measures a country's "coping capacity." This index covers both institutional and infrastructure components of risk adaptation. Countries in this bloc score high in both, allowing them to prioritize innovation and pushing the limits. These countries may be assistive to countries with less capacity, as they have strategies, finances, and technology to offer.

## STATES WITH MEDIUM CAPACITY FOR DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Many of these countries have vastly different geographic profiles, as seen by the differences between the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Haiti, but they have made clear that their fastest route to resilience can be assistance with resources. These countries have institutions that are capable enough to design real disaster risk reduction frameworks. In a country like Tuvalu, which has run essentially the same negotiating play for over three decades, the use of a coalition like the Alliance of Small Island States can be of great assistance in building investor relations.<sup>234</sup> They have laid out specific goals and uses for these investments, like securing the 1.5 degrees Celsius target in the Paris Agreement and pushing for a specific USD 300 billion annual increase in global climate finance through the New Collective Quantified Goal.<sup>235</sup> With specific milestones, countries in this bloc will create specific funding plans that will fall on existing and newly developed support systems.

Bangladesh illustrates the similar goal-oriented financial planning, but with a more domestic capacity behind it. Its Cyclone Preparedness

Program, founded in 1972 after Cyclone Bhola killed over 500,000 people, now runs on roughly 76,000 community volunteers and has cut cyclone mortality by more than 99 percent between the 1970s and 2000s. This is exemplified by a 26 person death toll in the 2020 Cyclone Amphan. More recently, Bangladesh has leveraged this record of success to advocate internationally, helping secure the Loss and Damage fund at COP28 through leadership in the Climate Vulnerable Forum. In this context, Bangladesh's climate-justice advocates framed loss and damage finance access as a legal right, a view that many countries in this bloc would share. Bangladesh treats its own adaptive success as evidence that finance works and should be scaled. States within this bloc share similar viewpoints and priorities, whether they are experiencing floods, earthquakes, or monsoons, that financial accountability is the best way to build DRR in a high-risk country.

## STATES WITH LOW CAPACITY FOR DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

At its core, this bloc advocates for hands-on help in closing the gap between DRR commitments that already exist on paper and the enforcement

*Kibagare informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya*

*Credit: Ninara*



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capacity to make them real. There is less focus on pure compensation or cutting-edge technology and more on the specific negotiating terms of deals and creating an environment where promises are delivered. In a country like Kenya, where roughly 70 percent of urban settlement is unregulated and highly vulnerable, Japan's J-Alert system cannot be applied to a society in this environment. Instead the national government has been calling on international partners to help with building-code regulation, which has more appropriately addressed their situation. Community-level adaptation initiatives in Kibera, one of Africa's largest informal settlements at roughly 0.8 square miles, have been an exemplar in real absorptive and adaptive capacity building. On the contrary, Korogocho, another Nairobi settlement, shows that these locally-led efforts have been left out of the formal urban planning process, and have called on international mediators to increase dialogue between communities and policymakers in the wake of planning failures. Kenya, alongside countries like Nigeria, Nepal, and Uganda, have learned that the gaps between idealistic coalitions and actual productivity are the biggest hindrance to forward progress.

Myanmar shows an extreme version of why this bloc prioritizes basic infrastructure and holistic solutions, as their most lacking resource is institutional continuity. Before Cyclone Nargis in 2008, which killed roughly 140,000 people, Myanmar had no dedicated disaster management institution.<sup>236</sup> This institution was established in 2011 under a transitional civilian government.<sup>237</sup> A 2022 law now requires humanitarian organizations operating in Myanmar to disclose staff and funding, and it also restricts engagement with local actors. As there are even more reported arrests for non-compliance and frequently delayed travel authorizations, there has been an increase in complications for basic relief delivery during Cyclone Mocha in 2023 and the 2025 Mandalay earthquake.<sup>238</sup> Myanmar was operating under the basic regional disaster-management framework from

ASEAN. All of these issues had snowballed into a lack of disaster preparedness because of the lack of holistic support given appropriately to Myanmar.<sup>239</sup> Countries in this bloc believe that states with high risk to natural disasters and that lack basic government and physical infrastructure require a tailored approach. Inadequate infrastructure could describe many countries across the world, but the nuance of this bloc lies in a priority on getting real solutions with phased plans and strong partnerships.

## Committee Mission

Established by the General Assembly in 1978 and elevated to a full UN program in 2002, UN-Habitat's mandate is to promote socially and environmentally sustainable human settlements. The mandate is primarily done through the 2016 New Urban Agenda's call to make cities inclusive, resilient, and sustainable.<sup>240</sup> Urban disaster preparedness sits at the very middle of the mandate. A city cannot be resilient if it does not withstand the vulnerabilities it will inevitably and increasingly face. A city cannot be inclusive or safe if its poorest and most exposed residents absorb most of the damages in the event of a disaster-preparedness failure. UN-Habitat is not asked to solely solve disaster response, but to help cities grow in a way that does not create larger catastrophes for themselves.

UN-Habitat is a normative and technical body, not an enforcement one. There are no legal mechanisms to compel states to adopt building codes or relocation plans; instead, this body works on information-sharing, partnerships, and building incentives.<sup>241</sup> Ultimately, UN-Habitat's role is not to respond after disasters occur, but to help governments reduce risk before disasters happen by strengthening urban planning, resilience, and institutional capacity. Moreover, UN-Habitat still depends heavily on voluntary contributions from member states and donors, making it hard to complete the ambitious New Urban Agenda.<sup>242</sup> This does not mean that

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proposed solutions should not be ambitious. Instead, solutions should be well-thought-out and adaptive to the committee's real-life constraints. Because urban disaster preparedness is a complex and long-term challenge, meaningful progress requires solutions that are inclusive, ambitious, and practical. Effective policies must be realistic enough to implement while addressing the structural causes of disaster risk. Lasting resilience will depend on coordinated efforts across multiple sectors and levels of government, making comprehensive and well-designed initiatives essential.

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# Research and Preparation Questions

*Your dais has prepared the following research and preparation questions as a means of providing guidance for your research process. These questions should be carefully considered, as they embody some of the main critical thought and learning objectives surrounding your topic.*

## TOPIC A

- 1 How does your country legally define land ownership, land access, and secure tenure, and what rights do women possess under those definitions?
- 2 What legal, customary, religious, economic, or administrative barriers prevent women in your country from owning, inheriting, controlling, or transferring land?
- 3 Which women face the greatest barriers to secure land and property rights in your country, including widows, Indigenous women, displaced women, women in informal unions, rural women, or LGBTQ+ individuals?
- 4 How effective have land registration, joint-titling, equal-inheritance, or community-based programs been in your country, and what implementation problems remain?
- 5 How can governments protect women whose land claims are customary, collective, informal, or undocumented without weakening Indigenous and community-based tenure systems?
- 6 What safeguards should governments adopt to prevent climate projects, conservation programs, urban development, disasters, or forced displacement from depriving women of land and housing?

## TOPIC B

- 1 How can a country build effective disaster response systems when corruption has undermined trust and enforcement in the past?
- 2 Governments often announce disaster preparedness plans that are never fully carried out, sometimes from lack of money, sometimes to look responsible without doing the work. What could push governments toward real action instead of promises on paper?
- 3 Why do cascading infrastructure failures, where one system's collapse triggers others, cause so much damage during urban disasters? What separates the mitigation systems that have worked from the ones that have failed?
- 4 What causes informal settlements to form in the first place? If we address those root causes, can we prevent new settlements from forming and reduce the disaster risks that come with the ones that already exist?
- 5 Climate change is making some disasters worse, but human decisions, like where cities allow building, also increase risk. How can planners tell these two causes apart, and why does that distinction matter for building the right solution?
- 6 What lessons can the world learn from the 2026 Venezuela earthquakes? Could the damage have been prevented, and if so, what does that say about how countries should prepare before the next disaster strikes?

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## TOPIC A

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Layla Sastry holds a Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Studies and Anthropology from Tufts University. She began her career with the Smithsonian Science Education Center, helping high schoolers explore and design solutions to sustainability issues in their communities. In her current role at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, she works at the intersection of climate change and urban planning, supporting research and programming to help cities respond to climate risks and build sustainable futures. Outside of work, Layla enjoys surfing, knitting sweaters, and watching copious amounts of reality TV. She lives and works in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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Henry Michael is a sophomore at Fordham University studying business and real estate. He has been involved with Model UN for six years now. Throughout his involvement, he has attended over 18 conferences, and chaired four. He has won a multitude of awards, including best delegate and best dais. For his high school Model UN program, he was a Teacher's Assistant for the introduction class, leading over 40 freshmen through their first look at Model UN. He has also debated at conferences in Vancouver, Canada, DC, California, and of course, New York!

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