

Towards Climate Justice: Establishing Safe, Resilient and Sustainable Habitats for the Present and Future Generations

Kariuki Muigua

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Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper discusses how the ideal of safe, resilient and sustainable habitats can be achieved. The paper argues that establishing safe, resilient and sustainable habitats and human settlements is key in fostering climate justice. In particular, the paper notes that human habitats and settlements are fuelling environmental threats including climate change while also being vulnerable to the adverse impacts of the climate crisis. The paper argues that climate change is devastating human settlements with adverse impacts on the vulnerable including the urban poor who lack access to adequate, safe and affordable housing. In light of these concerns, the paper discusses how safe, resilient and sustainable habitats can be established for present and future generations towards climate justice.

1.0 Introduction

The right to housing is a fundamental human right that has been recognised at all levels. For example, at the global level, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*¹ stipulates that every person has the right to an adequate standard of living including the right to housing². Further, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*³ urges all states to recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living including

* PhD in Law (Nrb), FCI Arb (Chartered Arbitrator), OGW, LL. B (Hons) Nrb, LL.M (Environmental Law) Nrb; Dip. In Law (KSL); FCPS (K); Dip. in Arbitration (UK); MKIM; Mediator; Consultant: Lead expert EIA/EA NEMA; BSI ISO/IEC 27001:2005 ISMS Lead Auditor/ Implementer; ESG Consultant; Advocate of the High Court of Kenya; Professor of Environmental Law and Conflict Management at the University of Nairobi, Faculty of Law; Member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) [December, 2025].

¹ United Nations General Assembly. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*. New York: United Nations General Assembly, 1948

² *Ibid.*, article 25 (1)

³ United Nations General Assembly, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 993, p. 3, 16 December 1966

housing⁴. In addition, at a national level, the *Constitution of Kenya*⁵ provides that every person has the right to accessible and adequate housing⁶.

The rapid growth of cities and human settlements globally is crucial in fostering the right to housing. For example, it is estimated that currently, more than half of the world's population lives in cities⁷. According to the United Nations, human settlements are the cornerstone of human existence, shaping how we live, work, and connect with each other and the environment⁸. Human settlements and habitats provide shelter which is among the most fundamental human needs⁹. Further, it has been argued that human settlements drive human potential, innovation, creativity and societal progress¹⁰.

Despite their role in ensuring that the right to housing is achieved, it has been argued that human settlements and habitats are facing mounting challenges including increased pressure on the environment and accelerated demand for basic services, infrastructure, jobs, land, and affordable housing, particularly for the nearly 1 billion urban poor who live in informal settlements¹¹. Consequently, it has become vital to build safe, resilient and sustainable habitats. This goal is enshrined under the United Nations *2030 Agenda for*

⁴ Ibid, article 11 (1)

⁵ Constitution of Kenya., 2010., Government Printer, Nairobi

⁶ Ibid., article 43 (1) (b)

⁷ Monitoring Human Settlement Indicators., 'A Short Guide to Human Settlements Indicators Goal 11+' Available at <https://www.local2030.org/library/296/A-short-guide-to-Human-Settlements-Indicators-Goal-11.pdf> (Accessed on 08/12/2025)

⁸ United Nations., 'Human Settlements' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/human-settlements> (Accessed on 08/12/2025)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities' Available at <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/sustainable-development-goals/why-do-sustainable-development-goals-matter/goal-11> (Accessed on 08/12/2025)

*Sustainable Development*¹² which seeks to ensure that human habitats are safe, resilient and sustainable¹³.

This paper discusses how the ideal of safe, resilient and sustainable habitats can be achieved. The paper argues that establishing safe, resilient and sustainable habitats and human settlements is key in fostering climate justice. In particular, the paper notes that human habitats and settlements are fuelling environmental threats including climate change while also being vulnerable to the adverse impacts of the climate crisis. The paper argues that climate change is devastating human settlements with adverse impacts on the vulnerable including the urban poor who lack access to adequate, safe and affordable housing. In light of these concerns, the paper discusses how safe, resilient and sustainable habitats can be established for present and future generations towards climate justice.

2.0 Climate Injustices in Human Habitats

It has been argued if not appropriately designed, human settlements can fuel climate injustices with severe impacts on vulnerable populations¹⁴. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the impacts of climate change such as sea level rise, floods, droughts, storms and spread of tropical diseases have costly impacts on basic services in cities and human settlements including infrastructure, housing, human livelihoods and health¹⁵. In particular, it has been argued that due to high concentration of people, infrastructure, housing and economic activities, cities are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change and natural disasters¹⁶. For example,

¹² United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 08/12/2025)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Cities and Climate Change' Available at <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/resource-efficiency/what-we-do/cities-and-climate-change> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities' Available at <https://www.unep.org/explore-topics/sustainable-development-goals/why-do-sustainable-development-goals-matter/goal-11> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

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in most cities in developing countries, the size and vulnerability of informal settlements, generally built in unstable areas such as coastal zones, flood-prone planes and ravines, and geologically unstable slopes, greatly increases their vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters with adverse consequences on the urban poor¹⁷.

It has been argued that urban areas are highly vulnerable to rising sea levels, heatwaves, flooding, and other extreme weather events that disrupt infrastructure, health, housing, and livelihoods thus causing climate injustices¹⁸. According to the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), most of the world's urban areas are located along coastlines, where rising sea levels and storms threaten inhabitants and infrastructure with flooding and strong winds¹⁹. In addition, it has been pointed out that more than 1 billion people globally living in urban slums and informal settlements are vulnerable to climate change since many of them live along waterfronts and riverbanks prone to flooding²⁰.

Human habitats especially cities are therefore highly vulnerable to climate change. Adverse climatic events such as extreme temperatures, floods, storms and sea-level rise in human settlements cause climate injustices since they disproportionately impact the urban poor and people in informal settlements despite their little contribution to the climate crisis²¹. With the world witnessing a rapid pace of urbanisation, it has been argued that climate change may cause hundreds of millions of urban residents – and in particular the poorest and most marginalized – increasingly vulnerable to adverse events

¹⁷ Bigio, A., 'Cities and Climate Change' Available at <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/wbcitiescc.pdf> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

¹⁸ Cities and Climate Change., Available at <https://unccelearn.org/course/view.php?id=21&page=overview&lang=en> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

¹⁹ UN-Habitat., 'Cities and climate change' Available at <https://unhabitat.org/cities-and-climate-change#:~:text=Cities%20are%20critical%20actors%20in,with%20flooding%20and%20strong%20winds.> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ UN-Habitat., 'Global Report on Human Settlements' Available at <https://www.unccelearn.org/wp-content/uploads/library/un-hab58.pdf> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

such as floods, landslides, extreme weather events and other natural disasters²². Most of the world's urban centres (especially those in developing countries) are already vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and other natural and human-made hazards particularly those located in coastal areas, delta regions and Small Island Developing States²³. This causes climate injustices due to impacts on human health with disproportionate impacts on the poor. For example, climate change has led to an increase in health problems including malaria, meningitis, and dengue fever that affect human habitats in both urban and rural areas²⁴. Climate change also causes disruption of infrastructure and basic services including water, energy, sanitation and education in informal settlements thus contributing to injustices²⁵.

In addition to being vulnerable to climate change, cities and human settlements are also among the main contributors to the climate crisis. For example, it has been argued that cities are a key contributor to climate change since urban activities are a major source of greenhouse gas emissions²⁶. It is estimated that urban areas are responsible for 70 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, with transport, buildings and infrastructure being among the largest contributors²⁷. According to UN-Habitat, rapid urbanization, population growth, economic development and rising prosperity are expected to contribute to increased emissions in cities thus worsening the climate crisis²⁸.

²² Ibid

²³ United Nations Climate Change., 'Human Settlements and Adaptation' Available at <https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/nwpstaging/Pages/HS-page.aspx> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

²⁴ Mosha. A.C., 'The Effects of Climate Change on Urban Human Settlements in Africa' Available at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-90-481-9867-2_5 (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

²⁵ Climate Change Adaptation Human Settlements., Available at https://www.dffe.gov.za/sites/default/files/reports/research/ccaq/Itas_ph2factsheet4climateadaptati on_humansettlements.pdf (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

²⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Cities and Climate Change' Op Cit

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ UN-Habitat., 'Cities and climate change' Op Cit

In light of the foregoing, it has been argued that climate change is a major global concern that is impacting the Sustainable Development of human settlements globally²⁹. Consequently, establishing safe, resilient and sustainable habitats is a vital global agenda towards climate justice. It has been argued that establishing sustainable human settlements that can cope with the impacts of climate change is key in ensuring that growth and urbanisation is not compromised and the rising global population can live and thrive in safe habitats³⁰. It is therefore imperative to establish sustainable habitats towards climate justice.

3.0 Establishing Safe, Resilient and Sustainable Habitats for Climate Justice

In light of their extreme vulnerability to climate change, it is imperative to establish safe, resilient and sustainable habitats. This ideal is envisaged under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 which seeks to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable³¹. In order to achieve this goal, SDG 11 urges all states to undertake relevant measures including ensuring access to adequate, safe and affordable housing; ensuring sustainable transport systems in cities and human settlements; nurturing green urban spaces; and integrating resource efficiency, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and disaster risk reduction in urban development processes³².

In addition, the *New Urban Agenda*³³ adopted by UN-Habitat lays out standards and principles for the planning, construction, development, management and improvement of urban areas towards establishing safe, resilient and sustainable habitats³⁴. The New

²⁹ Kumar. A et al., 'Climate change vulnerability, adaptation, and human settlements' Available at <https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/61137/climate-change-vulnerability-adaptation-and-human-settlements/magazine> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

³² Ibid

³³ United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)., 'The New Urban Agenda' Available at https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/12/nua_handbook_14dec2020_2.pdf (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

³⁴ Ibid

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Urban Agenda sets out a long-term vision and stipulates priorities and actions towards sustainable urban development, in addition to providing tools that can be applied at the regional, national, subnational and local levels, allowing governments and other relevant stakeholders to meet context specific urban needs and challenges³⁵. The Agenda has been described as an accelerator towards achieving the SDGs particularly SDG 11 which aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable³⁶.

At a continental level, African Union's *Agenda 2063*³⁷ seeks to realize the ideal of modern, affordable and liveable habitats in Africa³⁸. In order to achieve this goal, Agenda 2063 seeks to ensure that every citizen in Africa has affordable and sustainable access to quality basic services such as decent affordable housing, access to adequate and clean water and sanitation, transport among others³⁹. It also seeks to ensure that African cities are well planned with modern mass transit systems, while rural communities are connected to the rest of the economy through road, energy, mobile communication networks, water, sanitation and hygiene systems⁴⁰. Actualising the goals and aspirations of Agenda 2063 is therefore key towards establishing safe, resilient and sustainable habitats in Africa.

Building inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable habitats is therefore a key agenda both globally and in Africa. In order to realise this goal, there is need to enhance access to adequate, safe and affordable housing particularly for urban residents⁴¹. The rapid pace of urbanisation, poor urban planning and poverty has resulted in many residents living in slums and informal settlements often in precarious conditions including extreme

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Africa Union., 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-framework_document_book.pdf (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Op Cit

vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters⁴². As a result, it has been argued that access to adequate and affordable housing is crucial in promoting socially and economically diverse habitats and neighborhoods, in which residents have access to quality facilities, services, amenities, and employment opportunities for their health and development⁴³. Governments have been urged to establish appropriate policies and enhance investments in adequate, safe and affordable housing towards fostering sustainable habitats⁴⁴.

Further, it is imperative to enhance access to basic urban services. Basic urban services refer to essential civil services that are required by urban residents in order to live healthy and prosperous lives⁴⁵. These services include water supply, sanitation services, infrastructure, electricity, housing, and waste management⁴⁶. It has been argued that effective and efficient access to basic urban services is a pre-condition for inclusive, equitable and sustainable urban growth⁴⁷. With challenges related to urban poverty, enhancing access to basic urban services is key in ensuring that all citizens can live in safe, resilient and sustainable habitats⁴⁸. It is therefore necessary to foster access to basic urban services including through providing adequate and safe water and sanitation services especially for the urban poor, strengthening urban solid waste management, enhancing access to clean and sustainable sources of energy in cities and human

⁴² United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 'The New Urban Agenda' Op Cit

⁴³ UN-Habitat., 'The Global Housing Affordability Challenge' Available at https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/06/urban_data_digest_the_global_housing_affordability_challenge.pdf (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Nallathiga. R., 'Access to Basic Urban Services and Human Development: An analysis of the Indian States' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339325095_Access_to_Basic_Urban_Services_and_Human_Development_An_analysis_of_the_Indian_States (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Underprovision of Basic Urban Services., Available at <https://encyclopedia.uia.org/problem/underprovision-basic-urban-services> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

⁴⁸ Ibid

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settlements, providing sustainable transport systems and ensuring availability of education and health services⁴⁹.

In addition, it is of utmost importance to build green spaces in cities and human settlements⁵⁰. These include urban forests, green roofs, green walls, urban parks and gardens, and engineered wetlands and storm water ponds⁵¹. It has been argued that green spaces provide critical ecosystem services including water purification, improving air quality, providing space for recreation, and climate mitigation and adaptation⁵². Green spaces support biodiversity, mitigate the impacts of noise and air pollution while also protecting residents from the adverse impacts of extreme weather events such as heatwaves and flooding⁵³. Nurturing green spaces is therefore vital towards establishing safe, resilient and sustainable habitats.

Integrating climate resilience and disaster management strategies in cities and human settlements is also necessary towards establishing safe, resilient and sustainable habitats⁵⁴. The consequences of climate change and disasters including rising sea levels, increased precipitation, inland floods, more frequent and stronger cyclones and storms, and periods of more extreme heat and cold are fuelling climate injustices since they disproportionately impact vulnerable populations including the urban poor⁵⁵. It is therefore necessary to put in place effective governance and institutional capabilities to anticipate and respond to the impacts of climate change and disasters while also

⁴⁹ United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 'The New Urban Agenda' Op Cit

⁵⁰ World Health Organization., 'Urban Green Spaces: A Brief for Action' Available at <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/344116/9789289052498-eng.pdf> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² European Commission., 'Green Infrastructure' Available at https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/green-infrastructure_en (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

⁵³ World Health Organization., 'Urban Green Spaces: A Brief for Action' Op Cit

⁵⁴ De Genaro Chiroli et al., 'Integrating Resilience and Sustainability: A systematic Analysis of Resilient Cities Using ISO 37123' Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2212420923004405> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

⁵⁵ United Nations-Habitat., 'Climate Change' Available at <https://unhabitat.org/topic/climate-change> (Accessed on 09/12/2025)

harnessing opportunities provided by nature-based solutions and low-carbon development towards reducing the vulnerability of cities and human settlements to climate change and disasters⁵⁶.

4.0 Conclusion

In light of the impacts of climate change and disasters in cities and human settlements, establishing safe, resilient and sustainable habitats is vital towards climate justice. Achieving this goal involves fostering access to adequate, safe and affordable housing, providing access to basic urban services, nurturing green spaces in cities and human settlements and integrating climate resilience and disaster management in cities and human settlements⁵⁷. Establishing safe, resilient and sustainable habitats is a vital goal that should be pursued globally towards climate justice for the present and future generations.

⁵⁶ United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 'The New Urban Agenda' Op Cit

⁵⁷ Ibid

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