

# ON THE FRONTLINES OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS: THE CASE FOR ACTION ON GLOBAL HOMELESSNESS



# DEPAUL

Homelessness has no place

# ON THE FRONTLINES OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS: THE CASE FOR ACTION ON GLOBAL HOMELESSNESS

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Cover image: Depaul International and Vincentian Foundation's housing programme, Onward Home. Image credit: Vincentian Foundation.

**“The Secretary-General calls on governments to adopt rights-based data systems, end criminalization, invest in permanent and affordable housing, and integrate prevention across health, education, justice, and social protection systems.”**

**UN-HABITAT, OCTOBER 2025**

Homelessness is a global problem which has a catastrophic impact on individuals, families and communities. Global estimates of the scale of homelessness vary widely due to the challenges that we describe in [this report](#), but if the global population of people estimated to be living on the streets or in temporary shelter were counted as a single country, they would number in the hundreds of millions - comparable in size to the United States of America.

Homelessness is overlooked in international development responses, despite being one of the most visible consequences of extreme poverty. It is also largely absent from international development strategies, work programmes and funding mechanisms of key sectors despite clear intersections. To demonstrate this, we have analysed the intersections with three key areas: health, education, and climate action, and call on actors in these sectors to account for homelessness in their strategies and funding.

Structured global coordination has transformed efforts on these issues. In sectors such as education, health and climate, international attention and financing has advanced cooperation on cross-border matters, filled gaps left by domestic budgets, acted as a catalyst for innovation, and provided coordination on standards and policy responses which have strengthened national action. The same could be achieved in tackling homelessness.



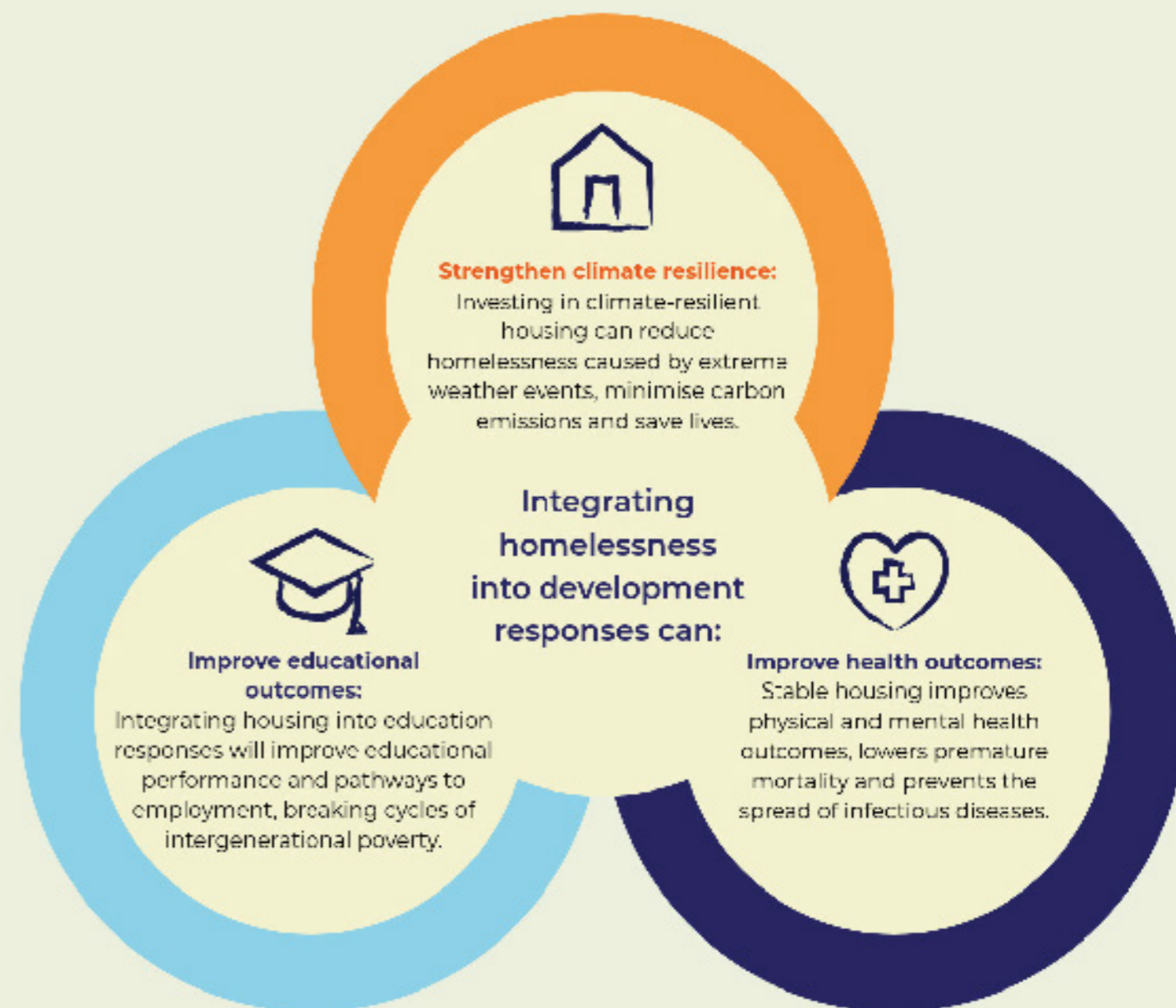
## THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND HOMELESSNESS

The UN highlights that “the climate crisis is also a housing crisis.” Climate change is a central priority for governments and funders globally. Addressing it is embedded across the Sustainable Development Goals, with SDG 13 explicitly focused on climate action. In 2023, international climate-related development finance reached USD 51.9 billion, making it one of the largest and fastest-growing areas of investment.

Each year, the UN estimates that more than 20 million disaster-related displacements occur as people are forced to leave their homes due to hazards stemming from extreme weather events, including heavy rainfall, prolonged droughts, desertification, environmental degradation, sea-level rise and cyclones.<sup>2</sup>

### The intersection

Climate change intersects with homelessness in two critical ways. First, climate impacts are a major driver of housing instability, displacement and pressures on housing supply, contributing to rising homelessness in many

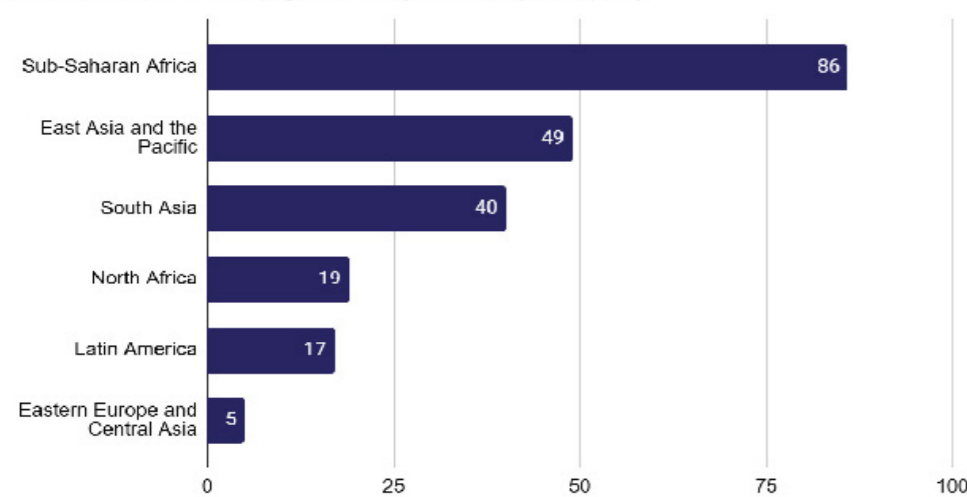


contexts. Second, people already experiencing homelessness are among the most exposed to the harms of a changing climate. The recent report of the UN Secretary-General on the global housing crisis notes that “although few nations have historically tracked these drivers systematically, recognition of the links between environmental shocks, conflict-related displacement and homelessness is growing.”<sup>3</sup>

- **Housing supply:** Disruptions to housing markets are contributing to rising homelessness across the world. Climate change is also reshaping migration patterns as people move away from areas affected by environmental shocks. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre recorded more than 32 million disaster-related internal displacements in 2022, mostly in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>4</sup> The World Bank projects that by 2050, climate change could drive up to 216 million internal movements. Displaced people frequently move to cities where housing supply and support systems are already strained, compounding the risk of homelessness and its consequences.<sup>5</sup>

- **Weather:** Extreme weather events destroy or damage housing which reduces supply, increasing homelessness. Floods, droughts, storms, wildfires and extreme temperatures are causing homelessness in multiple contexts. For example, the 2022 floods in Pakistan affected 33 million people, and an estimated 70% of those internally displaced were without adequate shelter for weeks. By early 2023, thousands of families remained homeless, struggling not only with the loss of housing but also livelihoods and access to essential services.<sup>6</sup>
- **Conflict:** In conflict-affected contexts, the risks are further intensified. In Colombia, where more than 8 million people are displaced due to decades of violence, tens of thousands of people have fled to the southern town of Mocoa in search of safety and affordable accommodation. In April 2017, Mocoa received almost half its typical monthly rainfall in a single day, causing deadly landslides which swept away most of the town. Around 80% of those affected were the victims of previous conflict illustrating how climate shocks intersect with other vulnerabilities to entrench poverty and homelessness.<sup>7</sup>

Internal climate migrants by 2050 (millions)



Source: World Bank 2021

### Case study: climate justice in action

The Philippines, one of the countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, experiences increasingly intense and frequent typhoons. These storms, fuelled by global warming, leave behind massive destruction of homes and livelihoods, and cause catastrophic loss of life. Yet the people who suffer the most from these disasters are often those who contribute the least to global emissions. They are families already living in poverty, forced to settle in unsafe coastal and low-lying areas, and left without the means to recover when disaster strikes.

In 2013, Super Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) devastated the Philippines, claiming over 6,000 lives and leaving more than 4 million people displaced.<sup>8</sup> Entire communities were destroyed, and countless families, lacking secure land or financial resources, were ultimately forced to return to unsafe “no-build” zones. In response, the Vincentian Missionaries Social Development Foundation, Inc. launched a project to help disaster-affected families achieve secure, stable, and climate-resilient housing through community-driven land acquisition and home development. The urgency of this work deepened when a series of typhoons hit the Philippines in quick succession during the COVID-19 pandemic. With government resources focused on public health and emergency relief, many families were left without the support needed to rebuild safe and permanent homes. Initially focusing on post-rehabilitation efforts in Eastern Samar and Davao de Oro, the initiative has since expanded to multiple disaster-affected areas, including Cebu, Quezon City, Sorsogon, and Catanduanes. This initiative embodies climate justice in action – empowering communities most affected by the climate crisis to rebuild their lives with dignity and security. Through partnerships with local government, civil society, and the private sector, families organise themselves into savings groups, enabling them to collectively purchase land

and build safe homes. Over 1,000 families now participate in savings schemes, and community groups have acquired more than two hectares of land for housing.

A crucial collaboration with Base Bahay Foundation, a partner organisation specialising in eco-friendly, disaster-resilient housing, has brought innovative, sustainable construction to the project. Base Bahay’s technology uses alternative, low-carbon materials that are both environmentally responsible and able to withstand extreme weather, helping to reduce emissions while protecting lives and livelihoods.

Such efforts demonstrate the power of collective action and local collaboration in addressing the root causes and consequences of homelessness linked to climate impacts. By providing secure housing and empowering communities to take ownership of their recovery, the programme prevents families from becoming permanently homeless and helps them begin to rebuild their lives with resilience and hope.

Though modest in scale, the project demonstrates what is possible when collaboration, innovation, and commitment to climate justice come together. It offers a scalable, replicable model showing how targeted investment in community-led, resilient housing can transform lives, strengthen local capacity to withstand future climate shocks, and achieve lasting climate justice.

## Impact of climate change on people experiencing homelessness

Those with the fewest resources to adapt are the most exposed to climate impacts.

- **Extreme heat:** The climate crisis is intensifying extreme heat and making it more frequent, with 2024 being the hottest year on record.<sup>9</sup> Between 2000 and 2019, heat contributed to an estimated 489,000 deaths annually, with 45% occurring in Asia and 36% in Europe.<sup>10</sup> Urbanisation magnifies these risks. The UN Secretary-General has issued a call to action on extreme heat, noting that cities are heating up at twice the global average due to rapid urbanisation and the urban heat island effect.<sup>11</sup> People experiencing homelessness are disproportionately vulnerable, with evidence showing higher risk of hospitalisation associated with even moderately high temperatures in individuals experiencing homelessness.<sup>12</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) notes that physiological factors (such as underlying health status) and exposure factors (including socio-economic conditions) increase vulnerability to heat. Urban and rural poor (including people experiencing homelessness) are more exposed to overheating due to lack of shelter and limited access to cooling.<sup>13</sup> In California, unhoused individuals were found to be 26 times more likely to be hospitalised for heat-related illness between 2017–2021.<sup>14</sup> FEANTSA highlights that people experiencing homelessness are more susceptible to a wide range of heat-related health impacts including dehydration, heatstroke, and the worsening of existing cardiovascular, respiratory, and renal diseases, while having very limited capacity or resources to cope.<sup>15</sup> Without explicit adaptation measures, avoidable deaths and heat-related health burdens among large homeless populations will continue to escalate.
- **Extreme weather events:** People living on the street are among the most directly exposed to the immediate consequences of storms, floods, and cold snaps, with the absence of safe shelter leaving them highly

vulnerable to environmental extremes. Unlike the housed population, they have little protection against wind, rain, or temperature fluctuations, and temporary shelters often provide inadequate insulation, ventilation, and sanitation. During climate-related emergencies, these conditions can accelerate the transmission of infectious diseases, as overcrowding, poor air quality and limited hygiene amplify existing health risks.

- **Air pollution:** The WHO estimates that 99% of the global population breathe air exceeding guideline limits, contributing to 4.2 million premature deaths in 2019, 89% of which occurred in low- and middle income countries.<sup>16</sup> For people living on the street, exposure is intensified by their reliance on outdoor environments, often near busy roads or industrial zones. Elevated rates of asthma and chronic obstructive lung disease, coupled with increased exposure to air pollutants like ozone and particulate matter, heighten health and mortality risks for people experiencing homelessness.<sup>17</sup> A study in California found that over 60% of unhoused individuals regularly spent time adjacent to major roadways, resulting in continuous exposure to particulate matter and vehicle emissions. In Salt Lake County, Utah, nearly 90% of people experiencing homelessness sought medical attention for conditions associated with poor air quality.<sup>18</sup> In the UK, an estimated 29,000–43,000 people die annually from human-made air pollution, and people sleeping rough are disproportionately concentrated in polluted urban areas.<sup>19</sup>

### Cross-sectoral benefits of integration

Recognising homelessness as a frontline climate resilience issue creates opportunities to prioritise prevention for populations most at risk of displacement, and enables governments to achieve multiple gains across health, housing, and development sectors:

- **Economic efficiency:** Preventing displacement from leading to homelessness and investing in resilient housing avoids spiralling costs associated with emergency responses. The UN advises that investment

in new carbon-neutral, climate-resilient social housing is critical, alongside retrofitting existing social housing.<sup>20</sup> A study in the Netherlands found that the combined value effect of refurbishing an affordable housing dwelling, including a 20% improvement in energy efficiency, would more than pay for the retrofit.<sup>21</sup> Retrofitting social housing delivers a range of benefits, including improved indoor air quality and protection against respiratory risks.<sup>22</sup> Improving housing stock in this way can also reduce housing-related inequalities and help alleviate energy debt, which Impact on Urban Health notes is the fastest-rising form of household debt.<sup>23</sup>

- **Protecting health:** Stable housing is a foundational climate adaptation measure: it reduces mortality and illness linked to heat, air pollution and extreme weather, easing pressure on health systems. Research indicates that reducing PM2.5 levels in line with WHO guidelines across 65 major cities

could prevent 650,000 deaths annually.<sup>24</sup> Including people experiencing street homelessness within air-quality, heat-response and climate-health strategies is essential to ensure those most exposed benefit from these gains.

- **Climate-resilient housing:** Investment in sustainable, affordable housing simultaneously reduces carbon emissions and shields vulnerable populations from climate shocks. According to the Mahila Housing Trust, sustainable housing links climate action with social resilience by providing safe, affordable, and environmentally-friendly homes that meet immediate needs while supporting long-term stability. Through innovative, energy-efficient design and climate-resilient features, such housing can reduce energy costs for residents, strengthen protection against natural disasters, and help vulnerable communities adapt to the growing impacts of climate change.<sup>25</sup>

## SPOTLIGHT: INTER-AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK (IDB) – CLIMATE-RESILIENT AND INCLUSIVE HOUSING FOR VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

The IDB is advancing a portfolio of operations to expand access to equitable, sustainable and climate-resilient housing for low-income and marginalised groups across Latin America.

In Ecuador, for example, the IDB is financing a USD 106.1 million loan, accompanied by up to USD 1.6 million in non-reimbursable financing, as part of the Conditional Credit Line for Investment Projects (CCLIP) approved in November 2023. The programme seeks to reduce housing deficits among populations living in poverty or vulnerability, including migrant communities. The programme aims to:

- increase access to affordable, sustainable and universally accessible housing for households with quantitative housing deficits;
- improve the quality and climate-resilience of existing substandard housing;
- strengthen the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (MIDUVI) to implement long-term housing policy.<sup>26</sup>

In Brazil, the IDB has approved a USD 150 million loan to improve living conditions for vulnerable families in Paraná state. The programme will construct approximately 5,600 homes with climate-resilient design and basic service connectivity, and reclaim unoccupied high-risk land using nature based solutions. Institutional strengthening is a core component, including research to improve the financial sustainability of the state housing company and the integration of green infrastructure for social housing and urban resilience.

Paraná is experiencing climate-related increases in severe rainfall, humidity, wind and temperature events. The programme therefore directly links social inclusion and risk-reduction, while contributing to subnational and national climate commitments.<sup>27</sup>

Across both countries, IDB support is shifting housing policy to systemic, climate-aligned, equity-based housing systems. The IDB notes that by using “environmental sustainability criteria to develop social housing, the state supports the economical and efficient use of natural resources, helps make communities more liveable, and lessens local pollution, among other benefits.”

## Global funding gaps and opportunities

[Our analysis](#) of OECD DAC funding found that climate finance rarely addresses homelessness directly. In 2022, OECD DAC countries delivered USD 54.6 billion in climate finance, with USD 15.6 billion flowing to infrastructure in 2023, but little of this investment accounts for the intersections with homelessness outlined above.

There is evidence that carbon mitigation and decarbonisation efforts in the building sector can be misaligned with advancing the right to housing and social equity.<sup>28</sup> Current housing regimes and retrofit programmes often fail to prioritise those with the greatest vulnerability — including low-income, poorly housed and unhoused populations — while better-off households disproportionately benefit from energy efficiency subsidies and climate aligned housing initiatives.<sup>29</sup> Without explicit equity and justice strategies, climate policies risk deepening existing housing inequalities. There are clear opportunities to change this. For example, by integrating homelessness into national climate strategies, National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), governments could ensure that climate adaptation and mitigation plans explicitly protect people living on the street — principally by supporting them into housing — to reduce exposure to severe climate impacts. Targeted investment could also be directed to ensure housing solutions are climate-resilient, reducing the incidence of homelessness created or exacerbated by extreme weather events.

In 2023, climate funding from philanthropic organisations surged 20% to USD 15.8 billion, with at least USD 600 million going specifically to adaptation and resilience.<sup>30</sup> Philanthropies are already shaping resilience agendas, as demonstrated by the USD 50 million adaptation and resilience fund launched in 2023 to support vulnerable communities in LMICs, with funders including the Rockefeller Foundation, ClimateWorks Foundation, Quadrature Climate Foundation and others.<sup>31</sup>

People without stable housing bear some of the greatest burdens of the climate crisis, facing

disproportionate exposure to extreme heat, air pollution, storms and flooding, while contributing least to global emissions. There is a clear opportunity in how governments, international agencies and philanthropists resource climate action in ways that better target and prioritise people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

To achieve this, decisive action is needed to:

1. **Recognise homelessness as a climate justice priority** within national climate strategies, NDCs, and NAPs, ensuring that the most exposed populations are explicitly protected.
2. **Invest in climate-resilient housing** that is sustainable, affordable and inclusive of the most marginalised communities.
3. **Direct climate-health funding** to address the disproportionate risks faced by people experiencing homelessness, particularly from extreme heat, air pollution, infectious disease, and climate-driven disasters.
4. **Leverage philanthropy's catalytic role** by embedding homelessness within rapidly expanding adaptation and resilience portfolios, amplifying social equity alongside environmental impact.
5. **Champion the inclusion of homelessness** as a key priority within global climate-focused events and processes such as the World Urban Forum, Regional Climate Weeks and COP31.

By embedding homelessness into climate responses, the international community can advance climate justice in practice, saving lives, preventing displacement, reducing economic losses, and strengthening resilience. Recognising people at risk of or experiencing homelessness as a key population in climate action is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic opportunity to create more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable societies in the face of escalating climate risks.

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#### ABOUT DEPAUL INTERNATIONAL

Depaul International oversees a group of leading homelessness charities, working across the world since 1989 with a mission to end homelessness, supporting the most marginalised and improving the lives of those affected by homelessness.

**Depaul International**  
 55 Westminster Bridge Road  
 London  
 SE1 7JB  
**Tel:** +44 (0)20 3948 9872  
**Email:** [info@depaulinternational.org](mailto:info@depaulinternational.org)  
**Website:** <https://int.depaulcharity.org/>

#### ABOUT THE ADVOCACY TEAM

The Advocacy Team helps clients deliver impactful research, policy, and advocacy projects. We specialise in resource mobilisation, policy analysis, and political campaigning. Our research team works with philanthropies, NGOs, UN bodies, and others to produce rigorous analysis and research reports, and our public affairs team leads creative, effective campaigns. Equity drives everything we do, from the issues we champion to how we work. We're a proud multi-lingual, international team partnering with organisations across the UK, Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and beyond.

#### Authors

Areeshya Thevamanohar, Lorriann Robinson, Mathilde Benguigui, Selena Cai, Annie Morris, Justine Trumper, Dan Jones, Mark Robinson, Ewan Day-Collins

#### Advisors, reviewers and contributors

Robert Lewis-Lettington (UN-Habitat), Ignacio Eissman (Ciscal), Brian Robinson (Oak Foundation), Yasmine Cajuste (Famvin Homeless Alliance), Julia Wagner and Pete Mackie (Institute of Global Homelessness), Ruth Owen (FEANTSA)

#### Editing and design

Caitlin Disken, Brianna Barnes



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