



# Collaborations, Connections and Communities: The Global Community-Led Housing Programme

**Briefing Paper: Knowledge and Transnational Collaboration**

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## About World Habitat

World Habitat is an independent charity which aims to fight global housing poverty. Through its three main programme areas – Community-Led Housing, Homelessness and the World Habitat Awards – the charity aims to solve housing issues around the world by sharing ideas which work. The charity was originally named Building and Social Housing Foundation. World Habitat, based in Leicester, UK, is recognised by the Department of Public Information of the United Nations. Since 2006 the charity has held Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, reflecting its work in support of the goals of UN-HABITAT.

## About the Author

Dr Tom Moore is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography & Planning at the University of Liverpool. He has research interests in housing studies and community planning and has published widely on the formation, development and impacts of community-led housing globally. His related publications in this area can be [found here](#). Tom is the Programme Director of the University of Liverpool's MA in Housing & Community Planning.



## About the GCLH Programme

Community-led housing approaches are growing in global importance and prominence, tackling problems associated with housing affordability, inequities in land ownership, and community disempowerment in the management and ownership of housing and land. Beginning in 2018, World Habitat's Global Community-Led Housing (GCLH) Programme has supported the promotion and development of community-led housing internationally. In particular, the Programme has sought to target parts of the world where community-led housing is less developed and to support the exchange of ideas, solutions and good practice between these locations and areas where community-led housing may be more established.

To deliver on this, World Habitat committed to a series of partnerships, actions and interventions, including the development of peer-to-peer networks and partnerships, support for the creation and development of learning tools and resources, and direct financial support to community-led housing advocates and organisations. The overall purpose of these interventions was to enhance knowledge and understanding of community-led housing, to develop and impact upon policy for community-led housing, and to enhance conditions for the acquisition of land and finance.

This briefing paper presents findings from qualitative research conducted with 18 individuals representing collaborators and participants in the Global Community-Led Housing Programme. The organisations collaborating in the Programme represented a mix of new and emerging community-led housing initiatives and more established groups and advocates. Interviews were conducted between September and December 2021. The purpose of the research was to explore the impacts and outcomes of the Programme, the extent to which the Programme's objectives were delivered upon, and priorities for future refinement of Programme objectives and implementation.

The theme of this paper is Knowledge and Transnational Collaboration. An additional briefing paper on Policy, Land and Finance is also available.



## Introduction and background

Developing a knowledge base amongst communities, advocates, funders and local governments can be crucial for the growth and development of community-led housing initiatives. In the GCLH Programme, World Habitat made a number of commitments to enhance and support knowledge and awareness of community-led housing, including:

- Funding for and participation in the CoHabitat Network, a global network of community-led housing groups and advocates led by the NGO urbaMonde.
- Supporting the organisation and delivery of events, peer-to-peer exchange visits, and tools and resources where knowledge and good practice is exchanged.
- Funding and advisory support for geographically-specific networks, such as the MOBA Network in Central and South Eastern Europe.

The impact of these commitments to peer-to-peer exchange and the development of tools and resources are discussed below.

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## Peer-to-peer exchanges

Peer-to-peer exchanges in the GCLH Programme were facilitated through global networks, such as the CoHabitat Network, and more geographically-specific networks such as the MOBA Network. In addition, other activities arranged by World Habitat outside the GCLH Programme, such as the annual World Habitat Awards, provided a basis for subsequent exchanges within the parameters of the GCLH Programme.

Partners, collaborators and participants of and in World Habitat/CoHabitat networks are diverse not only in terms of geography but in terms of their origins, ranging from local groups with histories in self-organisation and left-wing political movements, to groups founded by built environment professionals, and advocacy agencies that seek to mobilise and connect different interest groups in the fields of housing, community development, and land rights. Similarly, World Habitat and other agencies that lead transnational knowledge exchange such as the Center for CLT Innovation were often viewed simultaneously as funders and leaders of peer-to-peer exchange, and as peers in their own right with whom solidarity could be developed. Interviewees did not speak of World Habitat solely or merely as a funding agency which provided funds and imposed funding requirements, but as a partner and collaborator with shared commitments to development of community-led housing.

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Despite this diversity, interviewees valued transnational knowledge sharing. One stakeholder in the Global North commented that *“it sparks critical thinking about how you might apply what you’re hearing about in other contexts to your own”*, while a stakeholder in the Global South argued that *“Poverty can be spelt differently but it means the same thing. The challenges of housing are the same, the challenges of finance and evictions are the same, they face the same bulldozers we face. People are angered by the same issues.”*

A key feature of the GCLH Programme was to connect established examples of community-led housing with initiatives emerging in new contexts. One example lies in the exchanges between the Caño Martín Peña CLT in Puerto Rico and Catalytic Communities in Brazil where knowledge exchanges began in 2019 to discuss the potential applicability of the CLT model to Rio. While the initial and specific exchange was organised by the Lincoln Institute rather than the GCLH Programme, the Brazilian group originally connected with the Caño Martín Peña CLT as a consequence of the latter winning a World Habitat Award in 2016. Subsequently, due to the success of the knowledge exchanges, World Habitat has provided funding through the GCLH Programme to support the advancement of CLTs in Rio. These exchanges were felt to be particularly influential as the CLT model is otherwise commonly found in Global North contexts, which were felt to have clear distinctions compared to its application in informal settlements.

While connecting new initiatives with established examples of community-led housing in other countries formed a key part of the GCLH Programme, for some emerging groups the most valuable opportunities lay in connectivity with others in contexts where community-led housing is new and unfamiliar to funders, communities and Government actors. This was particularly the case in the context of the MOBA network in Croatia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Serbia and Slovenia, where activists were brought together by grants and support through the GCLH Programme. Members of this network collaborated together to apply for seed funding on a collective basis, to develop joint financing proposals and mechanisms, and to share particular skills and strengths of different groups, helping to fill knowledge or capacity gaps across their network. This highlights that the advantages of peer-to-peer exchanges do not lie solely in the transmission of case studies and ‘good practice’, but in the practical exchange and sharing of skills and specific forms of knowledge that groups can use to progress their initiatives.

Platforms such as the CoHabitat Network and the MOBA Network were also thought to cultivate shared identities and alliances, helping to create and amplify a collective voice for community-led housing. This was perceived as beneficial for two key reasons.

First, participants spoke of the unifying potential of collaborative networks that brought together individuals and projects that may otherwise be working in isolation from one another. This was cited as particularly beneficial for those working in contexts where community-led housing is new and unfamiliar, and where advocates may encounter frustrations and difficulties in progressing their initiatives as a result.



Second, and related, global alliances were perceived to enhance the reputation and legitimacy of community-led housing, particularly in contexts where strategic and policy support may be lacking. Legitimacy was derived both from association with a global organisation such as World Habitat and from association with established examples of community ownership. The development of these associations and connections was thought to help legitimise approaches to housing production and consumption that may be unfamiliar in some local contexts. It is in this way that the GCLH Programme has helped to create a global agenda for community-led housing, helping to raise the profile of this form of housing provision by highlighting the scale and breadth of this activity globally.

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## Tools, Resources and Events

In addition to peer-to-peer exchanges, the GCLH Programme also led to the creation and development of a number of resources and tools that aimed to support knowledge sharing and enhance the promotion and presence of community-led housing globally.

This included funding for the CoHabitat Network to develop an online database of community-led housing projects. The value placed on this resource varied. Many participants noted that it was useful for understanding the spread of community-led housing models and for identifying new connections for knowledge sharing events and activities. For others, while this documentation was seen as valuable for representing the breadth of community-led housing activity, there were views that it was a more passive approach to enabling knowledge and networking compared to more active facilitation of connections between projects brokered by organisations such as World Habitat. These views were not intended to diminish the value of online databases, but more reflected particular desires for specialised and focused knowledge exchange to overcome the particularities of social, legal, political and economic contexts, which may vary by geography. Those that expressed a preference for more 'active' forms of knowledge exchange commented positively on World Habitat and urbaMOnde's facilitation of transnational co-operation through annual meetings between global partners and regional events.

The GCLH Programme was also praised by participants for supporting the documentation of community-led housing experiences. The CoHabitat Network, financially and philosophically supported by World Habitat, produced a research project on the resilience of community-led housing during the Covid-19 pandemic. This piece of research was thought to be valuable for communicating the strengths and advantages of community-led housing models, and it was felt that the rapid undertaking of a research project during the pandemic was made possible by the pre-existing connections and relationships that existed between network partners.

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The GCLH Programme also supported the publication of the *On Common Ground* book, which chronicles the global experience and development of community-led housing. Seed funding was provided to the Center for CLT Innovation for the book project. This funding was identified as critical to the publication of the book, as additional funding was leveraged from other sources partly as a consequence of World Habitat's initial seed funding. Of critical importance here is the contribution that this chronicle, directly supported by World Habitat, makes to not only promote community-led housing but to do so in different languages, translating material which extends access to material and broadens the educational potential of the work.

While the knowledge exchange activities of the Programme were affected by Covid-19, the hosting of online webinars and social media campaigns were also valuable elements of the GCLH Programme, helping to disseminate information about community land trust models and to share good practice. However, face-to-face and in-person interactions – whether through annual CoHabitat Network meetings, international peer exchange visits, or through regional hub meetings – were highly valued and many participants expressed hope that these would be maintained when the impacts of the pandemic subside and in future iterations of the GCLH Programme.

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## Conclusion

- Peer-to-peer exchanges are important to emerging and established community-led housing initiatives. While peer-to-peer support often involves connecting new initiatives with established examples of community-led housing, connectivity between groups in similar and shared contexts is also important.
  - Participation in regional and global alliances is perceived to attach legitimacy to community-led housing in areas where the concept is new or unfamiliar. Despite the diversity of initiatives and geographic contexts, participants in the GCLH Programme felt a shared identity related to community and democratic ownership of land and housing.
  - The GCLH Programme has played a crucial role in funding and supporting the development of resources that can broaden knowledge and awareness of community-led housing in different contexts, and in widening access to these resources.
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