Summary (1 para.)

International migrants are increasingly moving to cities because of the socio-economic opportunities they offer and the strong diasporic social networks that exist within them. Cities also benefit from the arrival of newcomers as they bring new skills and knowledge and make urban areas more culturally vibrant and diverse, as well as increasing city revenue. However, in contexts where local governments are not engaging in providing solutions for such flows, due to various reasons, the large influx of people can pose major challenges with regard to the provision of housing and other public services, with direct socio-economic consequences to local governments. In these situations, migrants are often the first to be excluded. This policy brief explains why access to adequate and affordable housing is the key to migrants’ inclusion in society as it acts as a vector to fulfilling their rights to employment, education and health, and facilitates their interaction with ‘host’ communities.

Context

As people come together to live, work, and find opportunities in cities, economic integration, high urbanisation and migratory flows have made cities hubs of diversity and innovation, thus transforming local governments into key stakeholders on the global migration stage. Generally, national governments manage the overall migration flows and related legal frameworks that attempt to govern this issue. However, since the majority of new arrivals settle within cities it is often local governments that assume the social and economic impacts of their presence.

Cities around the world are facing a persistent challenge delivering sufficient housing supply to meet an ever-growing demand spurred by natural population growth, rural-to-urban migration and increasingly, the urbanisation of international migration flows. It is estimated that in 30 years, nearly two-thirds of the population will live in urban areas; and by only 2030, 3 billion people will require access to adequate and affordable housing.¹

Migratory influxes often create social, cultural and economic challenges to origin, transition and host communities. From a social and economic standpoint, refugees and migrants often compete with local inhabitants in access to resources such as health, education and other social services and employment opportunities, that can be limited in host countries. These conditions often result in refugee and migrant communities being excluded from many of the opportunities that cities can offer. Migrants often face discrimination in regard to the right to adequate housing and provision of basic and social services, such as healthcare, affordable housing, lack of employment and education. Despite these challenges, effective policy interventions and preventative strategies such as promoting and offering access to integration

services such as adequate housing, health screening and mental health services, education and language courses and employment, can enable origin, transition and host cities to capitalise and benefit from migration in the long-term.

Recent international agendas such as the New Urban Agenda (NUA)\(^2\) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)\(^3\), together with UN-Habitat’s official position on Housing: the “Housing at the Centre Approach”\(^4\), all recognise that access to adequate housing for all, as both a basic human right and a core component of urbanisation, is fundamental to making cities more sustainable and inclusive for all. This is reflected in SDG 11.1 in particular: “By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, and upgrade slums.”

**The Right to Adequate Housing**

The right to adequate housing is recognised in international human rights law as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living.\(^5\) It is a universal right for everyone, *regardless of their migration status*, as is reiterated in the NUA. In order for housing to be considered ‘adequate’ it must meet seven minimum criteria: 1) security of tenure; 2) availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure; 3) affordability; 4) availability; 5) accessibility; 6) location; and 7) cultural adequacy.

**Main Findings**

Migrant groups living in cities tend to experience more difficulties in accessing housing compared to native-born populations. Due to already-constrained local resources, they face greater obstacles in accessing public housing and housing benefits, meaning that they rely more heavily on private-rented accommodation. Some of the consequences of this are:

i) **Migrants are prone to poor and overcrowded living conditions:** In private rental housing, migrants can easily be discriminated against, especially when they are uninformed of their rights. Additionally, they often face greater difficulties affording adequate housing. Due to these factors, migrants are more prone to living in poor quality housing and overcrowded conditions. Overcrowding affects migrant workers in particular as they are more likely to live in ‘tied’ accommodation provided by their employer.

ii) **Migrants are more vulnerable to forced evictions and homelessness:** Migrants tend to lack awareness of their rights in destination countries, making them more vulnerable to forced evictions. As they are also more likely to work in irregular employment with an uncertain income, this can put them at greater risk of being evicted. These factors affect undocumented migrants especially as they are often unable to engage in formal employment and access housing through formal markets. Undocumented migrants may also fear turning to service providers for support in case they are imprisoned or deported, making them more vulnerable to homelessness.

iii) **Migrants are often spatially segregated:** Inadequate planning, combined with sudden and unpredictable influxes of migrant groups contributes to their long-term social and spatial segregation in cities. Unable to access adequate and affordable housing, migrants use any

\(^{2}\) [http://nua.unhabitat.org](http://nua.unhabitat.org)  
\(^{3}\) [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300)  
\(^{4}\) [https://unhabitat.org/housing-at-the-centre-of-the-new-urban-agenda/](https://unhabitat.org/housing-at-the-centre-of-the-new-urban-agenda/)  
\(^{5}\) UDHR, 1948.
available land to settle, often in peripheral urban areas lacking proper tenure and ownership, and often prone to natural hazards. As these areas tend to have poor accessibility, migrants living there also have limited access to employment, education and health, and limited interaction with ‘host’ communities.

iv) Migrants are often not included in decision-making processes: As local and national authorities often lack the financial resources and technical skills to facilitate migrant inclusion in planning, migrants do not tend to be considered in decision-making and participatory processes.

v) The socio-economic costs born from the failure to address migration at the local level will be carried by local governments: Cities can benefit from centralised coordination and management mechanisms which can ensure that resources are mobilised in a way that optimises well-being and provides clear and coherent integration pathways. Local authorities have a unique capacity to bring actors together, define roles and responsibilities and establish mechanisms for information-sharing and joint action. Cities can choose to harness the potentials that migrants can bring in generating revenue and making cities more inclusive, or bear the socio-economic costs of not doing so, with increasing homelessness and unemployment rates, among many other socio-economic burdens.

Recommendations to Local Governments

1.1. Local governments should consider innovative and sustainable housing development and finance solutions that cater to groups in vulnerable situations such as migrants, thus making the housing market more inclusive and affordable for all.

1.2. Local urban planning should promote well-located, mixed-use neighbourhoods for all, including migrants. Decision-making processes linked to planning and design should follow a participatory approach, thus fostering social and spatial integration and interaction with ‘host’ communities and migrant groups.

1.3. Ensure that local housing standards and building codes enable all groups of migrants to have the same level of health and safety standards as nationals and avoid discrimination.

1.4. Promote the use of urban renewal and the use of vacant housing stock, where available, for housing groups in a vulnerable situation.

1.5. Promote conditions to ease migrants’ access to public housing, such as awareness raising, multilingual services, reporting mechanisms for discriminatory practices etc.

1.6. Join existing global and regional programmes working towards local migration governance with a focus on human rights, urban policy and housing policy, or generate new ones. An example is the Mediterranean City-to-City Migration (MC2CM) project.6

6 https://icmpd.org/mc2cm