

# Accessibility of international housing authorities for engaging in housing research

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## Keywords

Housing; international housing authorities; housing standards; adequate housing

## Abstract

*Purpose:* This study attempted to ascertain what is regarded by international housing authorities as 'adequate housing' in their respective regions.

*Methodology:* Non-probability sampling was undertaken to identify 199 countries and an attempt was made to engage in conversation regarding housing in their regions.

*Findings:* It was found that a quarter of potential contacts were uncontactable. The majority (67,9%) could be contacted through their official contact channels, but were unresponsive, undelivered, or simply acknowledged via automation with no further interaction. Only 7,1% of potential contacts engaged in any interaction following from the attempted contact.

*Practical implications:* International agreement on what is to be regarded as 'adequate housing' will not be reached while most housing authorities are not open to communication.

## 1. Introduction

Housing authorities worldwide are confronted with a broad variety of housing problems and concerns. Such problems and concerns are in all likelihood connected and should therefore not be considered in isolation (Baker and Lester 2017). In addition, a number of topics in the real estate and housing sector merit further investigation research (Marshall 1969). It would therefore be highly beneficial for the various international housing organisations and departments to interact and learn together and from another. This research attempted to gain relevant insight and knowledge from international housing authorities and organisations, but instead discovered the difficulties of engaging with international housing authorities.

## 2. Literature review

According to international human rights law adequate housing every person is entitled to an adequate standard of life, and all member states of the United Nations (UN) have ratified one or more treaty that mentions adequate housing, and/or international declarations, plans of action or conference outcome documents that commits signatories to protection of the right to adequate housing (UN HABITAT 2009). All member states of the UN agree that access to adequate housing is a basic human right (South African Human Rights Commission 2018; UN HABITAT 2009), that is interdependent on and indivisible of other human rights (South African Human Rights Commission 2018). This is reiterated in article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDR) as well as Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (South African Human Rights Commission 2018). International treaties that mention the right to adequate housing as part of human rights include (UN HABITAT 2009):

- The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human
- The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- The 1951 Convention Relating to Status of Refugees (art. 21)
- International Labour Organization's 1962 Convention No. 117 concerning Basic Aims and Standards of Social Policy (art. 5 (2))

- The 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (art. 5 (e)(iii))
- The 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (art. 17)
- The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (arts. 14 (2) and 15 (2))
- The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (arts. 16 (1) and 27 (3))
- The International Labour Organization's 1989 Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (arts. 14, 16 and 17)
- The 1990 International Convention of the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (art. 43 (1)(d))
- The 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (arts. 9 and 28)

Regional aspects that recognise the right to adequate housing include (UN HABITAT 2009):

- European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers (1977)
- African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990)
- Revised European Social Charter (1996)

It is also implied in (UN HABITAT 2009):

- European Convention for the Promotion of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950)
- European Social Charter (1961)
- The American Convention on Human Rights (1969)
- The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981)

On a national level several constitutions specifically state the protection of the right to adequate housing. Legal court systems have also had to deal with cases regarding the enjoyment of housing – including aspects like protection of tenancy, forced evictions or even sociological aspects like discrimination (UN HABITAT 2009). A sample of the mention of adequate housing in specific national constitutions also include (UN HABITAT 2009):

- Constitution of Mexico 1917 (as amended in 1983), Article 4  
“...the right to enjoy decent and proper housing.”
- Constitution of Portugal 1976 (fourth revision based on Constitutional Law No. 1/97 of 20 September 1997)  
“All have the right ... to a dwelling of adequate size that meets satisfactory standards of hygiene and comfort and preserves personal and family privacy.”
- Constitution of the Russian Federation 1993, Article 40  
“...the right to a home.”
- Constitution of South Africa 1996, Article 26, Housing  
“... the right to have access to adequate housing.”
- Constitution of South Africa 1996, Article 28, Children  
“... the right to ... shelter...”

It is therefore generally acknowledged that access to adequate housing is a universal and international problem. It is expected that housing considered to be ‘adequate’ will differ between geographical regions, environmental and physical environments, and will also be influenced by social, cultural and economic factors (Ibem et al. 2015) and differences in urban frameworks and densities (South African Cities Network 2011). However, the obligation on each member state to satisfy the fundamental minimum of the basic rights that had been agreed to remains (McLean 2018). There is debate on whether such a fundamental core is universal in nature, or open for interpretation according to local definitions (McLean 2018). Again, whether different or similar in nature, it would be beneficial to have discussions and research with different housing organisations and departments.

### 3. Methodology

The research made use of non-probability sampling: The initial sample included all 195 UN member states plus 4 non-members - Vatican City, Palestine, Kosovo, and Taiwan (United Nations 2022). The names of these countries were then combined with terms that relate to:

- “housing” - including “housing”, “residential” or a translation of the word “housing” into the local language.
- and
- “authority” - including “authority”, “department”, “regulation”, “body” and “national”

Thereby a database was constructed of all the specified authorities in charge of housing in each country. The internet was then scoured for an official website or online presence for these authorities for each country, and this was used to collect official contact information or contact methods for each authority. The biggest limitations of this study were:

- The study was limited to online communication only - not only because of the charges for international telephone calls, but also due to restrictions as this study was undertaken in the midst of the Covid pandemic in 2020.
- The study was greatly limited to the English language. Where possible, website interpreting and text translation was used to comprehend aspects that were not in the English language. It was also attempted to have the salutations of communication in the local language, but the language of communication still remained in English.

The authorities in the various countries were contacted during the time period June 2020 to August 2020. In some of the 199 countries multiple authorities are involved in housing. Some are based on geographical area delineation such as individual authorities for Australian states and territories, individual authorities for Canadian provinces, and separate authorities for Belgian regions and languages. Sometimes the authorities referred the request for information to other branches or authorities. A total of 210 organisations in 199 countries were approached. In countries with multiple organisations the country might therefore be represented in multiple categories in the results below.

### 4. Results

In 13 of the 199 countries no or limited viable information could be found on the authorities or organisations in charge, or information was in a local language other than English, making it difficult to verify:

- |                                |                 |   |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| • Burundi                      | • Eritrea       | • Mexico                                |
| • Central African Republic     | • Guinea-Bissau | • Democratic People’s Republic of Korea |
| • Chad                         | • Kyrgyzstan    | (North Korea)                           |
| • Democratic Republic of Congo | • Liberia       | • Oman                                  |
|                                | • Mauritania    |   |

No website or online presence could be found for four (1,8%) of potential contacts:

- Andorra
- Chile
- Comoros
- Honduras

For a further two countries (0,9% of potential contacts) from South American countries no English translation could be made as the website content was not in a text format recognised by automatic translators.

- Argentina
- Colombia

Similarly, a website error occurred for a further 12 (twelve) or 5,4% of potential contacts representing 25% each of the continents of Africa and Europe and 50% from Central and South America:

- Algeria
- Angola
- Bangladesh
- Barbados
- Brasil
- Burkina Faso
- Cuba
- Gabon
- Montenegro
- Nicaragua
- Nigeria
- Papua New Guinea

For 25 organisations from 23 countries – thus 11,2% of all potential contacts – no online contact details like e-mail or online contact forms could be found:

- Australia – Victoria and Tasmania
- Bhutan
- Bosnia & Herzegovina
- Cabo Verde
- Cameroon
- Canada – Nunavut Housing, Newfoundland and Labrador Housing company, and Manitoba Housing
- Greece
- Guatemala
- Guinea
- Japan
- Malawi
- Mali
- Namibia
- Pakistan
- Panama
- Peru
- Republic of Korea (South Korea)
- Tonga
- Turkiye (Turkey)
- Turkmenistan
- Tuvalu
- Vatican City

This was made up by 40% Central and South American contacts, with a further 25% from North America 17% from Oceania, 13% from Asia, 10% from Europe and 7,4% from Africa. In total, 168 contacts (75% of all potential contacts) from 158 countries were contacted. Of these, 17 of the queries – equivalent to 7.6% of contacts – were returned as undeliverable. The reason for non-delivery was given as error (1), mailbox full (1), blocked (3), or undelivered (12).

- Albania
- Antigua and Barbuda
- Benin
- People's Republic of China
- Cote d'Ivoire
- Egypt
- El Salvador
- Equatorial Guinea
- Grenada
- Haiti
- Iran
- Malaysia
- North Macedonia
- Palestine
- Saint Kitts and Nevis
- Senegal
- Tajikistan

For more than half of the contacts – 123 (54,9% of potential contacts) from 115 countries – an official authority with some form of official contact (whether via e-mail or via online form) could be found but attempted contact was met with no response or any indication of receipt of such correspondence. This was spread among continents with 24,4% from Africa as well as 24,4% from Europe (including 1,63% from Great Britain), 14,6% from both Asia and Central and South America, 11,4% from Oceania, 8,1% from the Middle East region 4,9% from the Caribbean or Atlantic Isles, 4,1% from North America and 1,6 from Great Britain.

- Afghanistan
- Argentina
- Australia (NSW, Queensland, Australian Capital Territories, National Housing Research Institute)
- Austria
- Azerbaijan
- Bahamas
- Bahrain
- Finland
- France
- Republic of the Gambia
- Georgia
- Germany
- Ghana
- Guyana
- India
- Indonesia
- Iraq
- Ireland
- Malta
- Marshall Islands
- Mauritius
- Federated States of Micronesia
- Republic of Moldova
- Monaco
- Mongolia
- Morocco
- Mozambique
- Myanmar

- Belarus
- Belgium (Brussels and Flemish areas)
- Belize
- Bolivia
- Botswana
- Brunei
- Bulgaria
- Cambodia
- Canada (Yukon, Prince Edward Island, Northwest Territories, New Brunswick, and Alberta)
- Croatia
- Cyprus
- Djibouti
- Dominica
- Dominican Republic
- Eswatini
- Ethiopia
- Fiji
- Seychelles
- Sierra Leone
- Singapore
- Slovakia
- Solomon Islands
- Somalia
- South Africa
- South Sudan
- Spain
- Sri Lanka
- Sudan
- Suriname
- Israel
- Italy
- Jamaica
- Jordan
- Kazakhstan
- Kenya
- Kiribati
- Kosovo
- Kuwait
- Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos)
- Lebanon
- Lesotho
- Libya
- Liechtenstein
- Lithuania
- Luxembourg
- Madagascar
- Maldives
- Switzerland
- Syrian Arab Republic
- Tanzania
- Thailand
- Timor-Leste
- Togo
- Trinidad and Tobago
- Tunisia
- Uganda
- Ukraine
- United Arab Emirates
- Nauru
- Nepal
- Niger
- Palau
- Paraguay
- Philippines
- Portugal
- Qatar
- Romania
- Russian Federation
- Rwanda
- Saint Lucia
- Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
- Samoa
- San Marino
- Sao Tome and Principe
- Saudi Arabia
- Serbia
- United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- Uruguay
- Uzbekistan
- Vanuatu
- Bolivian Republic of Venezuela
- Viet Nam
- Yemen
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

For 12 contacts (5,36% of total potential contacts) from 10 of the countries, an official acknowledgement of receipt of the correspondence was received, but no further correspondence followed.

- Austria
- Canada (National, Nova Scotia, British Columbia)
- Costa Rica
- Czechia
- Denmark
- Ecuador
- Iceland
- Poland
- Slovenia
- Sweden

For 12 (5,36%) of the contacts from 9 of the countries, some form of correspondence was received. Some acknowledged the mail but declined participation, some sent official documentation but declined further correspondence, and others attempted to forward it to the correct department within the organisation. This was constituted by 33,3% from Oceania, 25% from Europe and North America respectively and 16,7% from Asia.

- Australia (National Department, Western Australia, South Australia)
- Belgium (Wallonia)
- Canada (Quebec, Ontario)
- The Netherlands

- New Zealand
- Norway
- Singapore
- Taiwan
- United States of America

Active engagement and agreement to participate in research was received from four (1,8%) contacts from four different countries: three from Europe and one from North America.

- Canada (Saskatchewan)
- Estonia
- Hungary
- Latvia

No contact could be established with any countries from Africa, the Caribbean and Atlantic Isles, Middle East, Central America or from Great Britain:

- From the African continent 16,6% had no information, 1,85% no website, 9,3% had a website error and 7,41% no e-mail. The remainder was contacted, but 9,3% was undelivered and 55,6% were unresponsive.
- From the Caribbean and Atlantic Isles, 54,6% were unresponsive, 36,4% undelivered and 9,1% had a website error.
- From the Middle East – 76,7% of potential contacts were unresponsive, 15,4% undelivered and 7,7% with no information available.
- From Central America 25% had respectively no website, no online contact methods, website error, and no response.
- Great Britain was 100% unresponsive.

For Europe, only 18% could not be contacted – comprising of 2% with no website, 10% no online form or e-mail, 4% undelivered and 2% with website error. While 56% were unresponsive and 14% merely acknowledged, 6% interacted to some extent and a further 6% actively engaged. Asian countries were mainly unresponsive (60%), while 33,3% were uncontactable – 6,7% with no information, 13,3% no online contact methods, 10% undelivered and 3,3% website error.

This means that 25% of potential contacts had no or inaccessible online presence, no contact information available, or no way to contact them online. This somewhat relates to the internet penetration rate that indicates 37.5% of the world did not have access to the internet (Statista 2022) even if it can be expected that this percentage applies more to general public than the internet penetration rates of official or government entities. It also means that a quarter of the potential contacts regarding housing were inaccessible.

## 5. Conclusion

The majority of potential contacts (67,7%) did have contact information, but apart from some automated responses, no further correspondence or contact was made. For two thirds of potential contacts, official contact regarding housing and housing accessibility could be made, but such contact was unreciprocated. Only 7,1% of potential contacts were accessible and engaged in any conversation or interaction regarding international learning with regards to housing.

While housing is an international concern and there is considerable scope for countries and regions to learn from one another, it is difficult to do so when housing authorities are not open to communication. This study has found that access to housing authorities and organisations is greatly restricted, and it is therefore not surprising that access to housing remains a concern of global importance.

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