



**The Global Housing
Continuum**
A global tool
for local action

Guide to creating Housing Continuum Snapshots



At its core, a housing continuum is an idea. It is a map to navigate the complex global housing landscape.

Like any map, the housing continuum is a schematic representation of reality rather than an exact reproduction of it. Representations of a housing continuum are commonly used by practitioners and policymakers in organizations and governments, especially in the United States, Canada and Europe, to communicate and situate interventions within broader housing systems. Housing continuum models are not well-known outside of these high-income countries, however, and they remain largely absent from academic discourse. Recognizing this gap, Habitat for Humanity developed a global version of the housing continuum to support our international advocacy work and to serve as a resource for our federated global network of national organizations in more than 60 countries.

The Global Housing Continuum introduces three key innovations. First, it places incremental housing at the center of the continuum, recognizing that the majority of the world's housing and settlements are produced and improved progressively by residents themselves. This approach is prevalent in low- and middle-income countries but is also present in other contexts around the globe. Second, it

simplifies existing models by reducing the number of categories from seven or nine in many existing models to five – Homelessness, Transitional, Incremental, Social and Market – and by prioritizing clarity and usability over excessive typological detail. Third, the model introduces additional analytical layers of information through the Housing Continuum Snapshot, transforming the continuum into a more powerful tool for analysis, strategy and coordination.

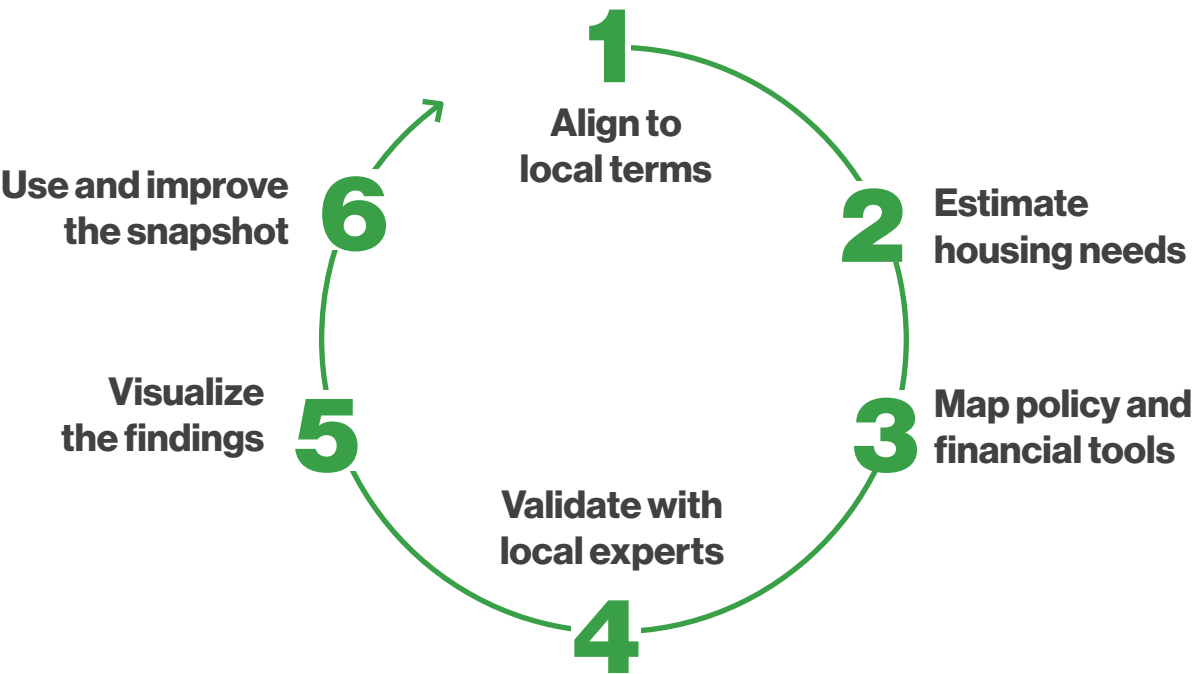
The scale of the global housing crisis – affecting at least three billion people – demands renewed efforts for a better understanding of the challenges, clearer diagnoses, and stronger coordination among multiple stakeholders. The continuum situates a range of different forms of housing along a spectrum, ranging from “housing as a service,” such as responses to homelessness, to “housing as an asset,” including market-enabled solutions. It provides a visual tool that translates technical housing concepts into an accessible and intuitive format without sacrificing analytical rigor, and as such it is intended for specialist and non-specialist audiences alike.

Developing a housing continuum for a specific country, region or city can create a powerful tool that sparks informed dialogue, facilitates clearer insights, and drives action toward more effective housing solutions.

Habitat for Humanity International has used this framework to develop national “snapshots” that highlight housing needs alongside the existing tools to solve them. As a leading global housing organization, we hope that this tool will be adopted widely by governments, practitioners and communities to deepen understanding of housing needs and assess how well current policies and funding commitments respond to those needs.

The practical guidance presented here explains how to develop a contextually relevant snapshot using the housing continuum. It outlines each step and gives recommendations so that any interested stakeholder can leverage available data to assess the broad spectrum of housing conditions, identify needs across the continuum, and map existing solutions with the aim of ensuring everyone has a decent place to live.

Main steps in the process of producing a Housing Continuum Snapshot



Step-by-step guide

Step 1: Align to local terms

At its core, the housing continuum is built around five categories that apply across all contexts, from high-income settings like the United States to low-income settings such as Papua New Guinea. A defining feature of this framework is the inclusion of an “Incremental” category. This is essential because most of the world builds, improves and expands housing incrementally at the household level, and this process exists in every income setting, even if the scale and formality vary.

Global Housing Continuum with brief descriptions



To enable comparison between contexts, all continuum snapshots should follow this standard structure. Definitions and subcategories may be adapted, however, to reflect contextual realities, such as national housing systems, legal frameworks, vernacular building practices or prevailing policy language. Any adaptations should be clearly documented and justified to maintain transparency and comparability.

Creating a contextual narrative is also important to describe key highlights of the national housing market and briefly explain how local terminology maps onto the continuum categories. This ensures that the continuum remains both globally coherent and locally meaningful.

Step 2: Estimate housing needs

For this exercise, “housing need” is defined as the population currently requiring housing solutions within each category of the continuum. The objective is to assemble the best publicly available data to produce a clear diagnostic of the present distribution of housing needs, organized into five standardized categories. Below is a quick summary of what each category entails. For more detailed descriptions, refer to the full report.



Homelessness: Includes people without shelter or living in emergency or temporary accommodation, including homelessness support services.



Transitional: Includes people requiring short-term housing or humanitarian shelter. A good estimate will include the total number of forcibly displaced populations (both refugees and the internally displaced).



Incremental: Includes people living in informal settlements or inadequate housing that requires upgrades.



Social: Includes people unable to access adequate housing through the market and requiring significant support.



Market: Includes people who can access adequate housing through the open market with limited support; it excludes full-market-rate housing and luxury housing.

Geographic coverage may be regional, national or at the city level, depending on who is developing the snapshot and for what purpose. To ensure consistency and comparability, the unit of analysis should be people, not households or housing units. Any data reported at the household or unit level should be converted into population estimates using the nationally reported average household size from the most recent national census or household survey. This ensures that all categories of the continuum are expressed in comparable population terms. The reference year should always be the most recent year with reliable data. These parameters help ensure that the snapshot presents the clearest possible narrative of current housing needs.

Step 2a: Identify the most useful data sources

Data collection should start with official data sources. International organizations and development banks are great resources, because they often clean and structure the data in ways that are easier to consult than the primary data sources from national statistics offices.

A few simple criteria can help guide this selection:

Source credibility: Prioritize population and housing censuses; nationally representative household surveys; and reports from housing authorities, government agencies, central banks or international organizations. If the data collection process is aided by artificial intelligence tools, it is imperative to review and validate the automated output against primary data sources.

Coverage: Favor data that reflects the broader context you are investigating. If your snapshot focuses on a city, then focus on data from within that city. If your snapshot focuses on a national analysis, focus your data collection on national sources, not local or subregional sources. Whenever higher-level data is not available, data at a lower scale may be useful to inform estimates.

Recency: Use the most recent reliable data available to ensure the snapshot reflects current conditions. As a general rule, data should not be older than 10 years, which is the standard frequency of national censuses and household surveys.

Clarity and consistency: Prioritize — when available — data that aligns with a single continuum category to avoid overlap and prevent double-counting. When such data is not available, document your decision and validate it with experts (see **Step 4**).

These criteria help ensure that the continuum is grounded in the strongest available evidence while remaining transparent about its limitations.

Recommended sources of data by housing continuum category



Homelessness: Enormous data collection challenges hinder accurate measurements of homeless populations. Not many countries have begun collecting homelessness data through national population censuses, but when it is available, consulting this data is the first step. Figures often underestimate the scale of need, so whenever possible, it is useful to consult civil society organizations and NGOs working on homelessness, especially those operating shelters or programs, who may have more realistic accounts.

Useful sources:

Global Homelessness Data Map by IGH¹
UN-HABITAT Urban Indicators Database²



Transitional: The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, is a primary source for estimating populations potentially requiring transitional housing, particularly forcibly displaced people. UNHCR consolidates updated data from key international sources on forcibly displaced individuals for most countries, which includes refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced populations and stateless individuals. National disaster response agencies regularly report on shelter services rendered after disasters due to environmental hazards and storms. NGOs compile data on shelter provided in humanitarian settings, in addition to shelter provided after disasters caused by environmental events.

Useful sources:

UNHCR’s Refugee Population Statistics Database³



Incremental: In countries where informal settlements are a widespread reality with insecure tenure conditions, these figures may provide an excellent estimate. Wherever “qualitative housing deficits” are calculated, these can represent the best estimate for this category. As both indicators (tenure insecurity and qualitative housing deficit) may overlap, it is recommended to use one or the other to avoid double counting. It may be helpful to introduce a simple prioritization rule (e.g., classify according to primary deprivation or most binding constraint) to ensure consistency across countries and improve comparability.

Useful sources:

CAHF country profiles⁴
Anuario de Vivienda LAC⁵
OECD Affordable Housing Database⁶
UN-HABITAT Urban Indicators Database⁷



Social: This category of housing is usually prioritized by government subsidies, so the best source of data are estimates available for the target population of government subsidies. Where data on quantitative housing deficits are available and disaggregated by income level or housing segment, these can be used to estimate the population requiring social housing. If such disaggregation is not available, estimates may be derived by identifying the share of the population within income groups that cannot afford market-rate housing, using official statistics; academic research; or reports from housing ministries, housing institutes or financial institutions.

Useful sources:

CAHF country profiles⁸
Anuario de Vivienda LAC⁹
OECD Affordable Housing Database¹⁰
UN-HABITAT Urban Indicators Database¹¹



Market: This category refers to housing needs currently met by market-enabled solutions, with limited support from external sources such as government, civil society or other organizations. Where data on quantitative housing deficits are available and disaggregated by income level or housing segment, these can be used to estimate the population requiring market-enabled housing. If such disaggregation is not available, estimates may be derived by identifying the share of the population within income groups that cannot afford market-rate housing but may be able to access housing with less support or smaller government subsidies.

Useful sources:

CAHF country profiles¹²
Anuario de Vivienda LAC¹³
UN-HABITAT Urban Indicators Database¹⁴

1 <https://ighomelessness.org/global-homeless-data/>
2 <https://data.unhabitat.org/pages/housing-slums-and-informal-settlements>
3 <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>
4 <https://housingfinanceafrica.org/countries/>
5 <https://anuarioviviendalac.com/>
6 <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/oecd-affordable-housing-database.html>
7 <https://data.unhabitat.org/pages/housing-slums-and-informal-settlements>
8 <https://housingfinanceafrica.org/countries/>
9 <https://anuarioviviendalac.com/>
10 <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/oecd-affordable-housing-database.html>
11 <https://data.unhabitat.org/pages/housing-slums-and-informal-settlements>
12 <https://housingfinanceafrica.org/countries/>
13 <https://anuarioviviendalac.com/>
14 <https://data.unhabitat.org/pages/housing-slums-and-informal-settlements>

Step 2b: Estimate population size for each continuum category

Convert data reported in housing units or households into population estimates using the national average household size from the most recent census or household survey. All assumptions and conversion factors should be documented and explicitly mentioned. It should be acknowledged that household size may vary across housing conditions (e.g., between informal and formal housing), introducing a degree of uncertainty into these estimates.

Step 2c: Address and document data limitations, uncertainty and undercounting

Keep a record of all data used, noting potential gaps, undercounts, overlaps or inconsistencies across sources. No dataset will perfectly capture reality, but acknowledging limitations is essential. List the sources and annotate their years of publication. Remind users that the goal of the snapshot is not precise measurement but a high-level, illustrative depiction that can inform action.

Step 3: Map policy and financial tools

Once housing needs have been estimated, conduct a high-level scan of housing policies, programs and financial instruments. This review should draw primarily on official government portals, legal and regulatory documents, program operating guidelines, and information published by implementing agencies. For country-level analysis, prioritize nationally implemented instruments with broad coverage, rather than localized or pilot initiatives.

Include a brief description of each tool identified, its primary objective, the implementing institution, the year it initiated, and a link to an official source. The mapping should be comprehensive enough to capture the main instruments shaping housing outcomes while remaining focused on those most relevant to the continuum.

Each initiative, whether policy tools or financial mechanisms, can then be mapped as serving one or more categories of the continuum based on its primary target population and intended outcome. While some will span multiple categories, classification should reflect the program's main objective, with cross-cutting coverage noted clearly. Policies may also be categorized by type: regulatory frameworks, implementation programs or planning tools.

Step 4: Validate with local experts

To strengthen the accuracy and credibility of the continuum, include a round of stakeholder validation. Share a draft with colleagues and recognized housing experts, and invite input from government counterparts, civil society organizations and practitioners. Their feedback can help verify population estimates, surface new data sources, clarify definitions, and identify overlooked groups or blind spots. It is critical to validate the selection of key policy and financial tools and how they are mapped across continuum categories. Practitioners working in shelters, upgrading initiatives, social housing or market-based programs can offer grounded insights on how housing needs manifest in practice. Incorporating this feedback ensures the final continuum reflects the best available data and real-world conditions while also building shared ownership and increasing the likelihood that the snapshot will inform policy and program decisions.

Step 5: Visualize the findings

After all this work, it is easy to forget that the most important outcome of the snapshot is its simplicity. Dedicate focused time to the graphic representation to ensure it is clear, concise, nonredundant and as intuitive as possible. The final product should allow users to understand the full picture at a glance. For this reason, it is essential that all layers of information fit into a single visual, enabling viewers to see needs, policies and gaps simultaneously. A well-designed, streamlined graphic enhances usability, strengthens communication, and increases the likelihood that the continuum will be understood and used as intended. We strongly encourage using the templates created for this purpose, which are available at habitat.org/continuum.

Step 6: Use and improve the snapshot

After creating the visual, teams should review it holistically to identify how housing needs align – or fail to align – with existing policies, programs and financing mechanisms, revealing gaps such as underinvestment, duplication or fragmentation. Sharing the snapshot widely with government, civil society, communities, private actors, donors, communities and other development partners builds a common language, supports coordinated action and generates valuable feedback. Consider including time to solicit expert feedback again in order to revise and perfect the snapshot. Public presentations, policy briefs, workshops and any conversation can be an opportunity to invite feedback and encourage wider engagement, allowing stakeholders to challenge assumptions and contribute new insights or data. Treating the continuum as a living tool that is updated as conditions evolve or new information emerges enhances its relevance over time and increases the likelihood that it will meaningfully guide policy, investment and program design.

Habitat for Humanity International is ready to assist those interested in creating or updating a snapshot.

For questions, reach out to advocacy@habitat.org. Use this address to share your final snapshots with our team.

Guiding principles for developing a Housing Continuum Snapshot

The Global Housing Continuum is a tool designed for use across diverse contexts while preserving a global framework. Adapting it to successfully capture local realities requires flexibility in interpretation paired with expert judgment. Because housing systems are complex and data environments vary widely, developing a Housing Continuum Snapshot cannot rely on rigid instructions alone. Guiding principles are essential; they provide the orientation needed to apply the framework consistently while allowing for the flexibility and contextual nuance that real-world housing systems demand. They also help ensure that the continuum is approached with transparency, collaboration and a shared understanding of purpose — qualities that strengthen both the analysis and the dialogue it is meant to support.

Regardless of who is developing a Housing Continuum Snapshot — government officials, communities, practitioners, researchers or interested individuals — the following principles should guide its development:

1. Embrace imperfection and prioritize transparency.

No country, city or region has perfect housing data. The goal is not precision at all costs, but clarity about what is known, what is estimated, and where gaps remain. A snapshot built with transparent assumptions is far more valuable than one that waits for perfect data.

2. Focus on a moment in time.

The continuum captures housing need today. It is a snapshot, not a forecast. This grounding in present conditions allows policymakers and practitioners to identify immediate gaps, misalignments, and opportunities in policy and funding.

3. Allow for contextual adaptation.

While the five core categories remain consistent, countries can add other layers of information to reflect their own housing systems, legal frameworks and cultural realities. Adaptation and flexibility are encouraged.

4. Encourage collaboration and validation across the housing system.

The tool is most effective when it draws on the knowledge of a wide range of actors, including government,

civil society, academia, the private sector and communities. Collaboration strengthens data quality, improves interpretation and builds shared ownership of the findings.

5. Prioritize people, not units.

Housing systems have different units of measurement (individuals, households or units). The snapshot centers on individuals whose lives are shaped by housing conditions. This principle ensures that the analysis remains people-centered.

6. Maintain curiosity and a learning mindset.

The snapshot is not just a technical tool; it is a lens for inquiry. Approach the process with curiosity about how the housing system functions, where it breaks down, and why certain needs persist. Curiosity leads to better questions, and better questions lead to better solutions.

7. Build for replicability and iteration.

A continuum should be easy to update as new data become available. Treat it as a living tool that evolves, rather than a one-off report. Replicability strengthens comparability across years and across countries.

Limitations and potential uses of the Global Housing Continuum and snapshots

Some limitations:

- **The continuum is not a ladder.** Its linear arrangement might seem to imply a hierarchy or value statement, giving the wrong impression that there is a progression from “worse” options on the left to “better” options on the right.
- **Terms are inherently contextual, and some flexibility is necessary.** Terms and concepts carry different meanings across contexts, so the same framework will not fit every geography perfectly.
- **The framework is not a strict taxonomy of typologies.** Some common housing interventions or projects may fit more than one category – even noncontiguous ones.
- **Market-rate housing is excluded.** By design, the framework focuses on housing assistance options for low-income or vulnerable populations and therefore does not represent the entire housing market.
- **There are diverse tenure types across the continuum.** Unlike previous North American and European models, this framework does not differentiate between rental and ownership.

- **Sustainability is treated as a cross-cutting dimension.** The framework does not single out “sustainable housing” as a separate category and sees it as transversal.
- **Housing needs are not measurements, but estimates based on available data.** The layer of the Snapshot that reveals how many people need each housing type is based estimates that illustrate broad magnitudes and trends, not exact counts.
- **The continuum is more useful as a diagnostic tool than for planning purposes.** The data assessing the population in need for each housing category is mostly focused on current housing stock data, rather than projections of future need.

Some uses:

- **Advocacy:** Because this tool summarizes complexity without sacrificing the accuracy needed to support decision-making, it can support a wide range of advocacy efforts.
- **Communication:** The housing continuum facilitates collective conversations, allowing people

with different backgrounds and perspectives locate what they mean by “housing”.

- **Analysis:** By juxtaposing several layers of information in one image, Snapshots capture the housing landscape at once, allowing patterns and gaps to become immediately visible.
- **Fundraising:** Helps practitioners articulate clearer, more compelling value propositions by showing where resources are needed most and how proposed interventions fit within the broader picture.
- **Coordination:** Supports coalition building by helping all parties to acknowledge where each actor operates and to visualize areas of overlap.
- **Strategy:** The continuum helps practitioners identify programmatic priorities and more intentionally align their interventions within the broader housing system.

Core categories



Homelessness services

Solutions and support services mainly provided through government or civil society organizations to people without accommodation, with temporary accommodation, or living in severely inadequate accommodation. This category also includes services to prevent homelessness and protect against eviction, such as rental assistance and legal support.

Common housing interventions

- Homeless shelters.
- Supportive housing.
- Homelessness prevention and eviction protection (rental assistance and legal support).
- Encampment support and services.



Transitional shelter

Transitional shelter solutions provided mainly to internally displaced populations, or IDPs, and refugees via humanitarian actors and interventions in response to crisis, be it conflict or disasters. Many of these interventions are designed as temporary, but they often become long-term or permanent in protracted crises. This category includes nonconventional housing structures such as tents, container housing and mobile home campgrounds.

Common housing interventions *mainly humanitarian-led*

- Refugee, IDP and emergency shelters in situ or off site.
- Temporary housing arrangements.
- Mobile homes or nonconventional structures and campgrounds.



Incremental housing

Progressive, resident-driven processes – often self-built – that improve housing gradually over time by addressing qualitative housing deficits. These include informal settlement upgrading (most common in low- and middle-income countries); neighborhood revitalization (as commonly used in the United States); land titling and regularization of existing settlements; planned urban expansions (often delivered through sites-and-services programs); structural and nonstructural repairs and repurposing of buildings; core housing designed for progressive expansion; and creating new housing units through the addition or subdivision of existing units.

Common housing interventions *mainly resident-led*

- Participatory slum upgrading and neighborhood revitalization.
- Land titling and regularization.
- Sites and services and planned urban expansions.
- Core housing.
- Structural and nonstructural repairs .
- Building repurposing.
- Unit subdivisions and accessory dwelling units.



Social housing

A range of housing solutions heavily supported or constructed by government, civil society organizations or organized communities. Although this category is primarily intended for low-income or vulnerable populations, social housing may serve broader populations in some contexts. It includes public housing and non-market alternatives such as cooperative housing, community land trusts, shared-equity models, and other collectively owned or managed housing.

Common housing interventions

mainly government or CSO-led

- Deeply affordable homeownership.
- Social rentals.
- Public housing.
- Cooperative housing.
- Shared housing, collaborative housing and cohousing.
- Community land trusts.



Market-enabled solutions

A range of solutions to facilitate the delivery of affordable housing options, which may receive government support but are primarily delivered by developers through market channels. This category includes rent-to-own schemes, microfinance products, micromortgages, and prefabrication and technology-driven solutions for market-based mass production of affordable homes. Market-rate housing and luxury housing are excluded from this category.

Common housing interventions

mainly developer-led

- Affordable homeownership.
- Rent subsidies and rent-to-own arrangements.
- Microfinance and micromortgages.
- Prefabrication solutions.
- Inclusionary zoning.

The Global Housing Continuum

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Keep learning about the Global Housing Continuum

Visit habitat.org/continuum to explore the Global Housing Continuum website and access the full **Continuum Toolbox**, including:

- *Making Sense of the Global Housing Continuum*
- *Glossary: Toward a Common Vocabulary*
- *Guide to Creating Housing Continuum Snapshots*
- *Examples of common housing interventions across the continuum*
- *Templates Adapting the Global Housing Continuum*
- *Full report: The Global Housing Continuum*

You can also explore the **Snapshot Library**, which features the Global Housing Continuum Snapshot alongside a growing collection of national-level snapshots from different countries.



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