



**Habitat**  
for Humanity®

**Empty Spaces  
to Homes**

# Empty Spaces to Homes First Progress Report

Reporting Period October – December 2024

Habitat for Humanity International, Europe and the Middle East  
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[habitat.org](https://www.habitat.org)



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## 1. Introduction

This is the first report we are presenting to introduce our project and team, provide an overview of our work, and share what has been accomplished so far, along with our plans for the future. We will keep you updated on our progress and key developments on a quarterly basis moving forward.

## 2. About ESTHer (Empty Spaces to Homes)

The Empty Spaces to Homes (ESTHer) project, launched in January 2024, is tackling the housing crisis across Europe. Backed by the Laudes Foundation and led by Habitat for Humanity International, alongside Habitat for Humanity Great Britain and Poland, ESTHer focuses on transforming empty and unused buildings into affordable, sustainable homes. By reimagining existing spaces, the project not only helps address housing shortages but also cuts down on carbon emissions—a win for people and the planet.

In many parts of Europe, including the countries where ESTHer is working, affordable housing is in short supply. Challenges like inequality, underfunding, and a lack of social housing leave many struggling to find safe, stable places to live. To make matters worse, older, energy-inefficient homes are driving up energy bills and deepening energy poverty, especially for vulnerable groups.

Here's where ESTHer comes in: with up to 12% of housing in these regions sitting vacant—often owned by local governments—the project is turning these spaces into carbon-neutral homes. By doing so, it's addressing housing exclusion, inequality, and environmental issues all at once, with a special focus on those who need it most, like young adults, the elderly, and people experiencing homelessness.

### What is our ultimate goal?

The ESTHer project is a pilot initiative designed to prove the concept of converting empty spaces into affordable housing. Through this pilot, we aim to demonstrate that the concept works, serves as a good practice, and can be replicated in other regions.

Our goal is to secure commitments from 50 European cities to enact policies requiring commitment that empty spaces be converted into affordable and energy-efficient housing within 5 years following their policy change.

This goal is gaining momentum as we continue to share our results and successes.

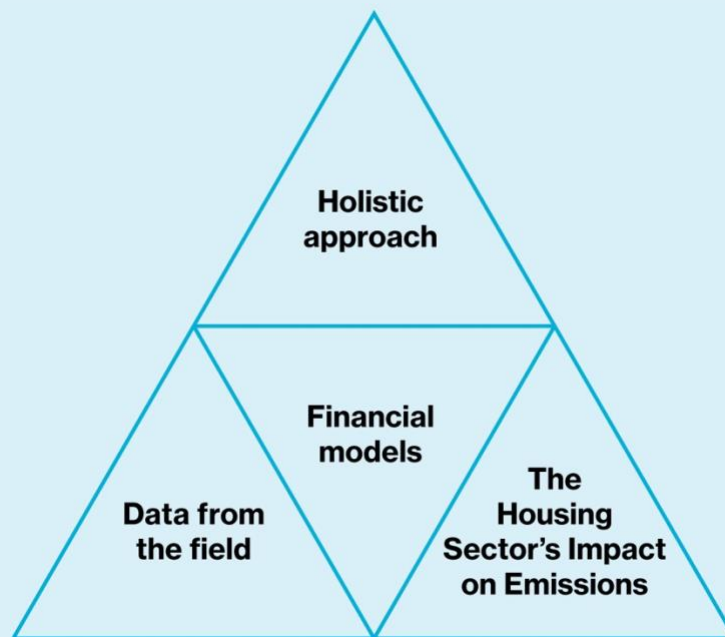
### ESTHer's work is built on five key pillars:

- 1. Research** provides a deep dive into the housing landscape, creating reports that highlight the potential of vacant properties. This includes studying financial and governance models to find out the best ways to bring these empty spaces back to life.
- 2. Financial Model Development** identifies and analyzes existing financial models related to housing while designing and recommending new financial models to support the conversion of empty spaces into affordable housing. These models aim to cover both the initial transformation and the long-term upkeep, ensuring the homes remain affordable and sustainable in the future.
- 3. Demonstration Builds (on the ground reconstruction)** showcase on the ground how unused spaces can become energy-efficient, affordable housing units, addressing critical issues such as housing affordability, homelessness, and overcrowding. Demonstration builds are already in progress and will be piloted in Great Britain and Poland. Part of this activity is to measure how much carbon dioxide will be saved by repurposing instead of building anew.
- 4. Stakeholder Engagement** is of great importance in the project and even beyond as collaboration is key! Project brings together policymakers, housing experts, civil society organizations, and local communities to align on shared goals. By working together, ESTHer project is creating stronger partnerships and ensuring solutions are practical, sustainable, and widely supported.
- 5. Policy Advocacy** focuses on driving systemic change by influencing housing policy at local, national, and EU levels, with a focus on social rental agencies and governance improvements.

The ESTHer project takes a holistic approach to transforming empty spaces into homes, offering a unique methodology that not only adds significant value but also bridges a critical

gap in implementation practices. This comprehensive approach is illustrated in the diagram below, which highlights financial models as key tools to ensure the financial sustainability and viability of these transformations. These models are designed to be replicable, providing a blueprint that can be applied in other cities of Europe.

A core component of the project focuses on influencing policy by gathering field data directly from construction sites. This includes detailed information on the use of various materials and precise measurements of carbon emissions throughout the reconstruction process, ranging from the production and transportation of materials to their application on-site. Measuring and addressing carbon emissions is central to the project, as respecting planetary boundaries is one of its fundamental pillars. By fully analyzing the environmental impact of emissions, the ESTHer project demonstrates its commitment to sustainability while showcasing how reconstruction can be a more environmentally responsible alternative to new construction. This data-driven approach underpins the project's broader goals of advancing sustainable housing solutions and driving systemic change.



### 3. Who we are?

Habitat for Humanity International is the leading organization facilitating the entire ESTHer project, ensuring that the implementation aligns with the timeline and meets the quality of deliverables and outcomes. Habitat for Humanity Great Britain and Habitat for Humanity Poland are the implementing countries, conducting market research on empty spaces mapping, overseeing the reconstruction process, and developing step-by-step toolkits for converting empty spaces into affordable housing units. The team is further empowered by advocacy managers, content coordination leads with strong housing expertise, and is supported by a communications and dissemination team working closely with the advocacy team to ensure the project is recognized, disseminated, and replicated in various settings.



**Figure 1**

Project team at the Kick-Off meeting last summer 2024



**Figure 2**

Project team at the in-person project meeting in January, 2025

## 4. What Have We Achieved So Far?

### Building Knowledge for Change (Research)

- **Research on Social Housing Landscape in our target countries:**

In order to provide a strong foundation for sustainable and inclusive housing solutions in ESTHer target countries, where the reconstructions will take place (Great Britain, Poland, and Hungary or Croatia), research is underway to analyze the landscape of empty spaces by mapping vacant properties, suggesting incentives to encourage their reuse, and tackling barriers in the real estate sector. It will also explore ways to finance housing by identifying funding strategies, reviewing existing financial tools, and looking into new and creative solutions. Additionally, key players in the housing sector will be identified to ensure the needs of vulnerable groups are met effectively. Full reports will be due in February 2025.

- **Research on the Environmental aspect:**

In collaboration with the London School of Economics, we are studying how the environmental impact of converting empty commercial spaces into homes compares to building equivalent new structures. The research will also estimate the broader environmental impact if an approach like Empty Spaces to Homes were adopted on a larger scale, such as converting 10% of vacant non-residential properties owned by public sector organizations into housing. Additionally, the research will explore how the Empty Spaces to Homes program can be optimized to maximize carbon savings and mitigate climate change impacts through sustainable housing practices. The full report will be available in February 2025.

- **Carbon Reduction Methodology:**

A comprehensive Life Cycle Carbon Assessment framework is being developed to measure and mitigate carbon emissions in retrofits, aligned with EU sustainability goals. The results will include a review of existing Life-Cycle Assessment (LCA)<sup>1</sup> methodologies and requirements for measuring carbon footprints in construction, along with templates for collecting project data. A detailed methodology for calculating carbon footprints across all stages of building reconstruction will be developed, accompanied by key performance indicators aligned with EU regulations and national regulations. This will be finalized by early 2025.

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<sup>1</sup> Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) of carbon footprint is a method that evaluates the total carbon emissions associated with each stage of a building's life—from material production, transportation, and construction to its operation, maintenance, and end-of-life disposal—helping identify areas for environmental impact reduction.

## Driving Policy Change (Advocacy)

- To drive meaningful and lasting change, we recognize the importance of advocating for our solutions with key stakeholders, including policymakers and decision-makers. This year, we have developed a comprehensive advocacy strategy and action plan to influence housing policies at both the national and EU levels. Our efforts are focused on engaging with stakeholders at European, national, and local levels to ensure that our solutions are recognized and supported.
- As part of our advocacy efforts, the ESTHer project is actively involved in **organizing and participating in events to promote our approach**. This includes hosting key events such as the Habitat for Humanity (HFH) Housing Forums, HFH Housing Days, policy roundtables, project closing conferences, and webinars. In addition, we attend events organized by other organizations, focusing on EU and national-level conferences related to energy efficiency, Just Transition, energy poverty, decarbonization of the building sector, the Social Climate Fund, and Energy Performance of Building Directive implementations. Specific events of interest include the International Social Housing Festival, WUF (World Urban Forum), COP (Climate Change Conference), and UN-ECE (United Nation Economic Commission for Europe) conferences, where we aim to raise awareness of the ESTHer approach and its potential impact.
- **Stakeholder engagement** is another critical component of our advocacy strategy. We work to establish and join national coalitions, promoting our approach within existing coalitions where Habitat for Humanity organizations are already members. At the EU level, we are focusing on creating an Affordable Housing Community of Practice to bring together key actors in the sector. Additionally, we engage in bilateral discussions with key stakeholders, such as municipalities, NGOs, and corporates, to build support for our approach and ensure that it is widely recognized and adopted.
- **Direct advocacy activities** are a key element of our ongoing work up until now and in the future. We closely monitor policy processes at the local, national, and EU levels, using available opportunities such as online policy consultations, policy roundtables, and individual meetings with policymakers to promote the ESTHer approach.

## Building our brand

- As part of building our brand, we are focusing on creating a visual identity for our project that will help us communicate effectively who we are, what we do, and thus amplify the impact of our activities. Therefore, we cooperate with external graphic designers who helped us develop a strong visual identity and everything needed for that. This includes creating a project logo, icons, and templates for Word and PowerPoint to effectively

present project results. We will also be making a promotional video to explain the project concept, along with social media templates.

- Within the first year of the project, we have developed a comprehensive strategy along with an action plan. It is of immense importance to have the strategy document clearly aligning project communication goals and messages to be delivered to different audiences.
- Our goal is to raise awareness, not just among experts but also among the public. This is essential because vulnerable groups in society benefit directly from what we create and stand for. By communicating thanks effectively to all the assets we have and will create, we are helping people recognize the importance of Empty Spaces and the value it brings to everyone.

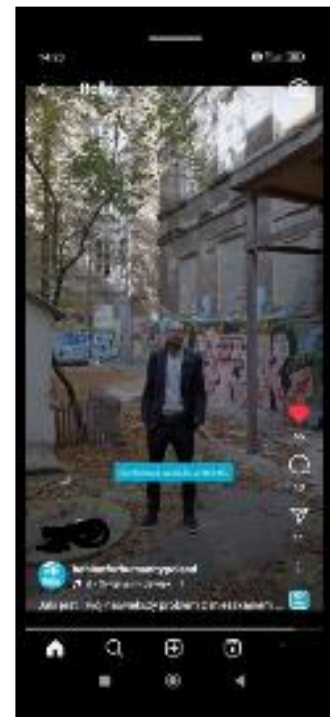


Figure 1

Screenshots from the reels published on HFH Poland's Instagram account. Project team members interviewing public about their opinions on Empty Spaces.

Figure 2

Screenshot from the promotional video recorded at the first meeting of the Empty Spaces to Homes National Coalition of Partners in Poland.

## Stronger Together: Partnerships for Progress (Community Engagement)

- On a European level, we established an informal group of peer organizations, the so-called Community of Practice (CoP), which prime topic focus is on converting vacant real estate into affordable housing and exploring transformative governance models like social rental agencies<sup>2</sup>. This CoP offers a unique opportunity to collaborate with like-minded organizations and experts who share a passion for addressing the growing need for affordable housing and, at the same time, addressing the decarbonization of the housing sector. In the CoP, we share knowledge and best practices to foster a learning environment and facilitate the dissemination of valuable information among members. We support national and regional advocacy efforts by collaborating to influence policies and practices. And we aim to develop joint project proposals and secure funding opportunities by leveraging collective expertise and resources to implement impactful housing initiatives.
- On a national level, we established National coalitions of partners both in Poland and Great Britain. The aim of these coalitions is to create a network of stakeholders who can collaborate on developing solutions for affordable housing, influence policies at national and local levels, and collectively advocate for change.
- See the Annex 3 and 4 to find out more about the members of the CoP and national coalitions.

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<sup>2</sup> Social Rental Agency (SRA) - a non-profit intermediary that negotiates between property owners and households in need of housing. To the owners, it guarantees regular rent payments and proper use of the housing unit in exchange for a discounted rent. For tenants, it offers long-term and affordable leases, up to 10 years, and apartments in good conditions (source: [Introducing Social Rental Agencies in Poland | Habitat For Humanity](#))



**Figure 5**

Members of the Empty Spaces to Homes National Coalition of Partners in Poland at the first meeting (2024)



**Figure 3**

The deputy minister of housing, Mr. Tomasz Lewandowski at the first meeting of the Empty Spaces to Homes National Coalition of Partners in Poland



**Figure 4**

Representatives of the Empty Spaces to Homes National Coalition of Partners in Poland holding models of letters spelling out the word 'Pustostany,' which translates to 'Empty Spaces' in English.



**Figure 5**

Workshop at the first meeting of the Polish Empty Spaces to Homes Coalition. The Institute of Urban and Regional Development (IRMiR) presenting among others about the social housing landscape in Poland.

## Measuring Impact – A Data-Driven Approach

- At ESTHer, measuring impact and collecting data for future informed policy change is a top priority. Thus, data collection and development of project customized Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) along with data trackers were important milestones achieved in the first year of the project duration. This platform serves as the basis for evidence-based solutions and actionable recommendations. To systematically track progress and assess effectiveness, we have developed a comprehensive framework of measurement, evaluation, and assessment of our progress. The full matrix of KPI is available in Annex 2.

## Amplifying Our Impact (Communication and Outreach)

- Strengthening our visual identity and brand presence has been a key priority in raising awareness and building trust in our program. By enhancing our credibility and visibility, we aim to engage all stakeholders, including policymakers and the general public. Our efforts have included active participation in prominent conferences such as Urban Future 24, UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) in Geneva, and WUF (World Urban Forum) in Cairo, which provided valuable platforms to showcase our work and connected us with influential partners, stakeholders and government representatives. Additionally, we have developed a suite of branding and promotional materials—including brochures, videos, and a dedicated project website—to further amplify our message and extend our outreach.

## And why do we do all of this?

The answer to this is, as we have noted at the beginning of this report, to reach our ultimate goal which is to secure commitments from 50 European cities to convert their empty spaces into housing by 2030. Moving forward, we will focus on publishing policy briefs, attending key EU events, and continuing direct engagement with decision-makers as important part of the systemic change process.

## 5. What is Ahead of Us?

### Transforming Spaces, Transforming Lives (Demonstration Builds)

- The **Empty Spaces to Homes** project includes **demonstration builds** as part of its strategy to showcase how vacant or underutilized spaces can be transformed into affordable, sustainable housing. These demonstration projects serve as real-world examples, providing proof of concept for innovative renovation and conversion approaches.
- Demonstration builds are scheduled to commence in 2025 in Great Britain and in Poland. And our partners are actively engaged in planning the reconstructions, securing finances, and laying the groundwork for implementation.
- **Great Britain (GB):** GB is in early discussions with councils in Bristol (South West England) and Carmarthenshire (Wales) to explore partnerships for converting empty spaces. In Greater Manchester (North West England), they are collaborating with Greater Manchester Community Led Homes, Shelter, and individuals with lived experience of homelessness to complete similar projects. Additionally, GB is assessing the potential for converting a building in Watford into temporary accommodation.
- **Poland (PL):** The demonstration site is a former laundry building in Bytom, a two-story structure protected by the historical monuments conservator. Currently in poor and unusable condition, the building will be renovated to include six apartments, with ground-floor units designed for people with disabilities. The architectural design includes the expansion of the two-story building, the installation of photovoltaic panels, and the incorporation of a heat pump. Building materials from in-kind donations will be utilized for the renovation. All materials impacting the building's external appearance must receive approval from the conservator.
- These demonstration builds will serve as proof of the ESTHer concept, testing both the financial models and the social aspects of converting empty spaces into affordable housing.
- Key mechanisms, such as establishing Social Rental Agencies, will be implemented to ensure that the new housing meets affordability and accessibility standards. This phase will validate our approach and provide a blueprint for scalable and sustainable solutions.

## BEFORE



## & AFTER



Figure 6

Empty Spaces reconstruction - Great Britain (before)

Figure 7

Empty Spaces reconstruction - Great Britain (after)

## Financial models

- Our research is currently focused on assessing existing financial mechanisms in social housing, with an emphasis on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of converting empty spaces into affordable homes. This includes analyzing the legal changes required to enable such activities in the selected countries. The insights gained from this research will shape the development of innovative financial models and actionable recommendations.
- A key part of our future activities in this regard involves educating institutional investors to recognize the social value and financial viability of long-term investments in transforming empty spaces into homes. We aim to influence a diverse range of investors—such as

development banks, angel investors, and sustainable investment funds—to allocate more resources toward renovating empty spaces for use as affordable housing solutions. By doing so, we are fostering a financial ecosystem that supports scalable and sustainable impact.

## Housing Solutions for a Greener Tomorrow (Sustainability and Innovation)

- To advance sustainability and innovation in housing solutions, we will develop a Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) Carbon Footprint Methodology aligned with EU regulations. Having already conducted a comprehensive review of existing LCA methodologies, we are now leveraging these findings to create a tailored framework specifically designed to measure the LCA of converting empty spaces into homes.
- This methodology will be incorporated into a user-friendly Excel tool, which will serve as a comprehensive platform for consistently applying LCA principles across all stages of building (re)construction. The tool will enable detailed quantification and analysis of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and their associated impacts by capturing key data on energy use, material flows, and waste generation. By offering stakeholders actionable insights, the tool will facilitate sustainable decision-making and advance alignment with climate impact reduction goals.
- To ensure successful implementation, we will roll out capacity-building initiatives, including targeted training programs for stakeholders. These efforts will equip participants with the knowledge and tools necessary to integrate sustainability into housing solutions, driving greener, more innovative approaches to addressing the housing crisis.

## Ongoing Advocacy

- Advocacy remains a cornerstone of our efforts as we continue to champion affordable housing solutions at local, national, and EU levels. We will develop targeted policy recommendations and leverage the current momentum surrounding the preparation of the EU Affordable Housing Action Plan to drive meaningful change.
- As part of our advocacy strategy, we aim to organize a high-level policy event in Brussels. This event will serve as a platform to engage policymakers, stakeholders, and influencers, fostering dialogue and collaboration on advancing affordable housing initiatives.
- Our advocacy efforts will also include ongoing collaboration with national coalition members and active engagement with members of our regional Community of Practice (CoP) on affordable housing. By maintaining strong partnerships and building on collective expertise, we aim to influence policies and initiatives that advance sustainable, affordable housing solutions for all.

**This initiative is made possible thanks to the support of its partners, whose contributions help drive systemic change in housing solutions. This support enables work addressing the urgent challenges of affordability, sustainability, and inclusivity, creating impacts that millions of people can benefit from.**

**Thanks to their generosity and shared vision, we are not only addressing immediate housing needs but also building a foundation for long-term, scalable solutions that contribute to a fairer and more sustainable future.**

**Our partners inspire us to continue striving for meaningful change, and we are deeply honoured to have them as allies in this journey. Thank you for making this critical work possible.**







# Thank You!