

Radically democratic housing in hard times: towards a collective glossary



Advancing housing justice is directly related to making housing more accessible and affordable to all, in light of the historic and structural inequalities that shape our present and that make current housing systems exclusionary, extractive, exploitative and enclosed. To change such a structure, a clear pillar of housing justice is to democratise the production and management of housing, through fostering democratic structures that open up decision-making and agency and recognise and support non-speculative forms of city-making. Organised communities around the world have advanced approaches that, in practice, contribute to democratising the production and management of housing, such as collective savings groups; community-led forms of housing like cooperatives, community land trusts, or collective housing; participatory upgrading processes; and inclusive forms of public housing.

In the same manner that the housing systems currently in place reflect wider structural limitations and shortcomings, the democratic practices, values, and principles at the core of such housing initiatives have the potential to contribute to a broader democratisation process that goes beyond housing systems. In a moment characterised by rising authoritarianism, shrinking of civic space and disinformation, this connection between democratising housing and democratising through housing provides a useful lens through which to explore ways of contesting economic, political, and social systems that deepen social and climate injustices. This glossary, “Radically democratic housing in hard times”, is conceived as a sense-making tool to map and link different approaches, practices and concepts for democratising housing and democratising through housing, with a particular focus on the tactics and methodologies that housing movements are putting forward.

Conceived as open and non-exhaustive (in perpetual construction), the glossary serves as an entry-point for the key question, “what could radically democratic housing look like?” Reflecting on two additional questions (“how can housing processes be democratised?” and “how can housing processes contribute to democratise societies?”) we have mapped and captured different parameters for what we mean with democratising housing and democratising through housing, which lead us to key terms that speak to concrete experiences. In this sense, instead of being a list of cases and examples, we envision the glossary as an analytical tool that allows us to identify these practices, describe the strategies and values behind them and visualise how they relate to each other. With this in mind, we have also decided to capture language variations, with specific terminology used in different parts of the world, such as different names used to describe community-led practices for auto-construction, such as *mutirão*.

As already stated, this is an exercise that is never complete, remaining open for further additions and modifications, serving as a conversation starter that hopefully can be helpful for different interest groups in the housing space, as well as those less familiar with these discussions.



1. Autogestão: Collective self-management strategy from Brazil that has been recognised and supported by housing policy frameworks. It's built around the leadership and self-organisation of the community to make decisions and manage strategies to respond to their housing needs, including the control of public funds to be allocated to projects.

2. Collaborative housing: A form of housing development and management that includes some degree of collaboration between the residents for the management and maintenance of the housing. Living in collaborative housing is based on principles of mutual aid and solidarity.



4. Community Land Trusts: Community Land Trusts (CLTs) are a collective ownership model whose primary purpose is to maintain affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families and individuals. In CLTs, the homes are owned by the residents and the land is owned by the community through the trust.



3. Commoning: Commoning practices are committed to the non-commodification of common resources and services, which should have their use and management guided by the fulfilment of their socio-environmental functions. They are based on self-management and direct democracy mechanisms that strengthen the community, also opening space to experiment with new forms of public-community collaboration (such as service provision and cultural facilities).

5. Community-led housing: A community's meaningful agency over the housing process: the control, management, and ownership of housing, and the land upon which it is built, being in the hands of a participatory and democratic institution whose principal aim is to fulfil its members' housing needs.





6. Community savings: Collective saving schemes, usually led by women and other marginalised groups, that are set up as a strategy to support their members working together to address specific challenges, and finance building projects from individual housing units to collective community spaces. These schemes are the foundation of many federations of slum/ shack dwellers and have played a role in changing relations of these groups with local and often national governments.

8. Co-production: A concept which encompasses bottom-up collaboration and co-management processes aimed at reinvigorating local democratic engagement, including civil society organisations, academia, third-party facilitators or advocacy organisations, and government organisations.



10. Formação/Formación Política: A process through which housing social movements involve members to reflect on their rights and collective mechanisms to advance them.



7. Cooperatives: Forms of community-led housing based on collective ownership of the land, housing units, or both. A group of households come together to pool their resources - whether savings, labour, or otherwise - to purchase and build housing that is then owned by the collective, usually through the establishment of an organisation that can formally represent the cooperative. Cooperatives usually include affordability mechanisms that restrict the price at which a housing unit can be sold.

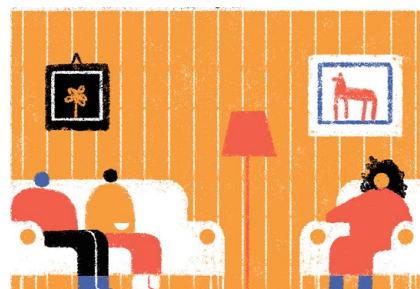


9. Democratic management of cities: A principle recognised in Brazil's City Statute (2001) which foresees the participation of the population and associations representing various segments of the community in the formulation, execution, and monitoring of urban development plans, programs, and projects. This can be through instruments such as collegiate urban policy bodies, debates, public hearings and consultations, and popular initiatives for bills and urban development plans, among others.



11. Housing Assemblies: A body made up of inhabitants that comes together to influence policy on housing for a specific district or local area. They can influence public policy processes and can take part in consultations and policy drafting processes.

12. Mutirão: A Brazilian term coming from the indigenous Tupi-Guarani language, which alludes to the idea of collective world. In the realm of housing, it alludes to a collective organisation to build houses and common spaces.



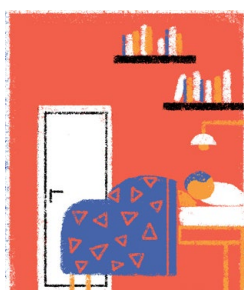
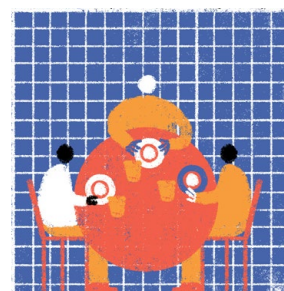
13. Ocupação / Ocupaciones / Occupations: Terminology used in Brazil and other countries (instead of “invasion”, which tends to criminalise direct action) to articulate the role that the occupation of land and buildings has in advocating for a wider set of rights and transformations.

14. Participatory upgrading: The participation of residents in improving their environments and in decision-making regarding this (design, planning, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring), with the necessary material, economic, and legal resources to do so. This includes coordination between the population and institutions, with training, consultation, and co-management.

15. Re-blocking: Ways through which informal settlement communities redesign their settlements to enable access to basic services as well as tenure regularisation.



16. Renters'/tenants' unions: Collective organisation of renters to advocate for better conditions within the realm of rental housing, denounce abusive and criminal practices, and organise and call for systemic changes and policies to guarantee affordable housing to all. Organisational practices and strategies can include assemblies, disseminating information, political and legal capacity building, rent strikes, protests and others.



17. Right to adequate housing: Adequate housing was recognised as part of the right to an adequate standard of living in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.



18. Social Production of Habitat: A form of housing production where all non-market processes are carried out under the initiative of inhabitants. This involves having management and control that generates and/or improves adequate living spaces, housing and other elements of physical and social development, preferably without—and often despite—impediments posed by the State or other formal structure or authority.

DEMOCRATISING HOUSING

Terms related to tactics and practices being implemented as to further democratise housing systems

By enabling horizontal and collective decision-making led by communities

By expanding space for residents' needs and aspirations, particularly those most affected by decision-making

By distributing access and control of resources in ways that fulfil the social functions of land and property as understood and defined by communities

By opening channels for citizen participation in planning/urbanism

By opening way for other forms of property beyond private, such as through collective property

By putting residents in control of the economy of housing

By ensuring every one in-need of housing can meaningfully participate in fulfilling their needs and aspiration

Capturing land and housing value within resident-led communities

Prioritising access to land to resident-led housing



Re-blocking

Autogestão

Community-led housing

Social production of habitat

Participatory upgrading

CLTs

Collaborative housing

Housing cooperatives

DEMOCRATISING THROUGH HOUSING

Terms related to the linkages between challenges affecting housing systems and socio-economic challenges contributing to current democratic deficits and crises

Occupations

Formação política

Housing assemblies

Right to adequate housing

Democratic management of cities

Commoning / coproduction

Deliberative decision-making

Mutirão

Mingas

Community savings

By nurturing channels for self organization and leveraging horizontal and collective decision-making

By expanding the kinds of actors that participate in decision-making, with a particular focus on expanding decision-making for those most affected and concerned by the decisions and processes in hand

By contesting the concentration of property and resources (extractivism and exploitation)

By allocating resources to the fulfilment of social, economic and cultural rights

By integrating housing into city-making (residents decide on city-wide uses)

By placing shared values of care, solidarity and justice at the heart of housing

By materialising and operating generative and non-extractive housing economies

By preventing state capture through the financialisation of real estate development and housing policies



CHALLENGES TO HOUSING AND DEMOCRATISATION

Lanlordism

Exclusion

Exploitation

Extractivism

Discrimination

Shrinking of civic space

Criminalisation of movements

Capture

Retreating role of the State

Power imbalance

Division / Misinformation



The Hub for Housing Justice is a collaborative initiative led by a group of civil society networks and research organisations. This document is part of the first set of **Provocations** produced by the Hub to collaboratively shape agendas that advance housing justice. During the first half of 2025, four working groups facilitated exchanges on each of the propositions of the housing justice framework. Each group, steered by members of the Hub's partner organisations and open to the participation of all key allies, explored what the propositions mean for the housing justice community and how they can provide a framework for action. The resulting first set of Provocations are creative and collective documents that reflect the takeaways from these dialogues and the experiences, lessons, and recommendations highlighted throughout the exchanges.

The Housing Justice Provocations Series has been edited by the Hub for Housing Justice Secretariat, currently hosted by the International Institute for Environment and Development, IIED.

Design and illustrations: Ottavia Pasta

How to cite this document:

Hub for Housing Justice (2025) *Radically democratic housing in hard times: towards a collective glossary*. Housing Justice Provocations Series.

Participants of the '**Radically democratic forms of housing production**' working group and contributors to this provocation included:

Sophia Torres

Habitat International Coalition / Global Platform for the Right to the City

Yiorgos Papamanousakis

World Habitat

Paula Sevilla Núñez

International Institute for Environment and Development

Raquel Jesse, Pathfinders

CIC-NYU

Marcelle Mardon

International Institute for Environment and Development

Rowan Mackay

Architecture Sans Frontières UK

Lauren Royston

Socio-Economic Rights Institute

Fernando Marani

Pathfinders, CIC-NYU

Andrew Maki

Justice & Empowerment Initiatives

Ana Fernandes

Lugar Comum, UFBA

