

Urban programming case study: Poland, Great Britain, Hungary and Croatia

Empty Spaces to Homes – ESTHer

Model Intervention: Tackling Climate Through Adequate Housing

Country Overview of Urban Housing

Urban housing in Poland, Great Britain, Hungary, and Croatia faces serious affordability challenges due to systemic inequalities, underinvestment, and limited social housing models. These factors increase the risks of poverty and social exclusion, with overcrowded households affecting even middle-income families. In 2022, nearly 50% of young adults (ages 18-34) in the EU still live with their parents, while homelessness impacted over 4.1 million annually.

Energy-inefficient housing exacerbates energy poverty, particularly affecting women-led households. Despite approximately 30 million unoccupied homes across Europe, these remain untapped. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these trends, highlighting the need for innovative housing solutions like repurposing vacant real estate to create affordable, sustainable homes. ESTHer (Empty Spaces to Homes) is a three-year project launched in January 2024, funded by the Laudes Foundation, and led by Habitat for Humanity International with partners Habitat for Humanity Great Britain and Habitat for Humanity Poland. Some activities within the Empty Spaces to Homes initiative have also received financing from M&G, which has also provided financial support for prior activities that laid the groundwork for the ESTHer project.

Detailed Overview of Project Area/Problem

The ESTHer project addresses severe housing shortages in Hungary, Poland, Croatia, and Great Britain, where vulnerable populations struggle with homelessness, energy poverty, and inadequate housing. While local governments own up to 12% of unoccupied housing stock, these properties remain vacant due to financial and legal barriers. In Great Britain, 7,000 vacant commercial buildings could be converted into 19,500 residential units. Similarly, in Poland, 12.1% of flats are empty, reflecting significant opportunities for affordable housing development.

The project's primary goals include addressing the dual challenge of housing affordability and energy poverty, particularly for women-led households and older adults living alone. Additionally, ESTHer seeks to create sustainable housing models by revitalizing vacant spaces while preserving architectural heritage and enhancing neighborhood resilience. Coalitions will be built to align stakeholders, promote best practices, and secure policy reforms supporting social rental agencies and affordable housing governance.

Project Intervention

Esther will convert vacant spaces into carbon-neutral, affordable homes in Hungary, Croatia, Poland, and Great Britain. It includes several key components: research, financial model development, demonstration builds, stakeholder engagement, and policy advocacy.

Research will involve creating baseline housing reports, analyzing existing financial and governance models, and mapping empty spaces in selected cities. Financial models will be developed to support capital mobilization and scaling of affordable, carbon-neutral housing. Demonstration builds will repurpose empty spaces to provide affordable housing

for vulnerable populations, with additional funding required from public-private partnerships. Stakeholder engagement will involve forming alliances with key sector players and policymakers to foster successful housing solutions. Policy advocacy will focus on influencing housing policy at local, national, and EU levels to support sustainable housing frameworks.

Effect on Target Groups/Communities

ESTHer aims to alleviate the severe housing crisis in its target areas by creating affordable, sustainable housing for vulnerable populations. By converting vacant spaces, ESTHer directly reduces homelessness and overcrowding while addressing broader challenges of energy poverty and housing insecurity.

Overcrowding often leads to deteriorating living conditions that contribute to poor health outcomes, including respiratory infections and mental health issues stemming from stress and lack of privacy. Homelessness exacerbates these issues, reducing access to essential services and increasing social and economic vulnerabilities. Energy poverty, driven by high energy costs and inefficient housing, disproportionately affects women-led households and seniors living alone. Many families must choose between heating their homes and meeting other essential needs, creating a cycle of poverty and poor health outcomes.

By providing affordable, energy-efficient homes, ESTHer improves the quality of life for residents, supporting their economic independence and enhancing long-term stability. In addition to housing, ESTHer offers financial literacy programs and tools to help families navigate housing regulations. This holistic model empowers vulnerable populations while promoting more resilient urban communities, ultimately reducing the social and economic disparities caused by inadequate housing.

Project Innovation

The ESTHer project's innovation lies in its dual focus on social housing affordability and environmental sustainability. Traditional housing solutions often emphasize new construction, overlooking the potential of repurposing existing vacant properties. ESTHer's approach prioritizes converting vacant spaces into residential units, thus reducing the whole-life carbon footprint and lowering overall development costs. The project uniquely addresses housing affordability by leveraging existing real estate and integrates gender-specific considerations into its housing models. Women, particularly in vulnerable households, face significant challenges related to energy poverty and housing insecurity. ESTHer ensures these gender-specific issues are considered, fostering more equitable outcomes.

Moreover, ESTHer combines affordability and sustainability in a holistic approach, addressing both issues simultaneously. By preserving historical buildings and revitalizing neighborhoods, the project not only provides affordable homes but also stimulates local economies and creates jobs, attracting further investment into these communities.

Global relevance of community-level impact

The ESTHer project's focus on repurposing vacant spaces directly contributes to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

SDG 11: ESTHer enhances housing affordability and quality, fostering inclusive and resilient urban areas. The project's strategic policy advocacy aims to influence national and EU policies to support sustainable housing solutions, driving systemic change.

SDG 13: By promoting carbon-neutral retrofitting of vacant buildings, ESTHer reduces embodied carbon and conserves natural resources. The project will develop methodologies to assess and mitigate CO2 emissions throughout the renovation process, contributing to climate action.

SDG 17: ESTHer's efforts to build public-private partnerships and national coalitions promote collaboration and knowledge sharing, essential for scaling affordable housing solutions.

Additionally, the project's attention to gender-specific challenges aligns with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), ensuring that women benefit from improved housing conditions.

Moving Forward

The ESTHer project builds on Habitat for Humanity's proven model of transforming vacant spaces into homes, showcasing significant potential for scaling and replication. To expand its impact, ESTHer will implement pilot projects with demonstration builds, conduct research, and develop practical toolkits addressing legal, financial, and design challenges related to repurposing vacant spaces. These toolkits will be designed for broad exploitation by stakeholders both within and beyond the project countries. Policy advocacy efforts at EU, national, and municipal levels will continue to support the uptake of affordable housing solutions. The project's community of practice and national coalitions will facilitate knowledge sharing and cross-sectoral collaboration, providing a platform for learning and involvement. Interested parties can support ESTHer by engaging in toolkit development, policy advocacy, and capacity-building efforts. Additional investments from both public and private sectors will help scale the model and replicate its success across various regions, ensuring sustainable housing solutions for all.

Visual Documentation

