



From Vancouver 1976 to Vancouver 2006

A critical look back from the nongovernmental perspective

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*For Han van Putten.
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Thirty-two years after the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements held in Vancouver, Canada, it is imperative to undertake an evaluation and critical reflection of the way in which the contents of the Vancouver Declaration have been applied and how they have been modified over the course of these three decades.

This article aims to contribute to that objective from the perspective of one of the actors that—as part of organized civil society—has carried out active follow-up of the emblematic events convoked by the United Nations, as well as permanent accompaniment of the popular habitat processes to which we are committed.

Vancouver '76: A Fertile Dialogue

Many of those who attended the Habitat Forum, held parallel to the official Vancouver Conference already had five, ten or even more years of experience in research, reflection and concrete practice linked to the accelerated urbanization processes developing in many regions of the planet. Some of us were already participating in actions promoted by the first NGOs dedicated to the habitat field which emerged in the 1960s through diverse circumstances and initiatives.

Upon inauguration of the Habitat Forum, these backgrounds allowed participants to quickly identify with each other and join forces, proceeding to rapid integration of a very active group that adopted the name *Third World* and immediately focused on formulating a position text to enrich the original draft of the declaration to be submitted by the Forum to the official Conference.

The draft Habitat Forum Declaration to the United Nations Conference, adopted through a process of consensus among participants, stated that:

“The objectives of the Habitat Conference will only be fulfilled if it addresses itself to the fundamental causes of the most serious of the human settlements problems.”¹

This referred primarily to the extreme deprivation where, by then, more than 900 million persons lived, according the World Bank estimates of the time.

“We advocate not only greater equality among nations but also and foremost greater equality among people.”²

The Vancouver Declaration responds to these statements, affirming that:

“Attention must also be drawn to the detrimental effects of transposing standards and criteria that can only be adopted by minorities and could heighten inequalities, the misuse of resources and the social, cultural and ecological deterioration of the developing countries.”³

And goes even further by recognizing that:

“Adequate shelter and services are a basic human right which places an obligation on Governments to ensure their attainment by all people, beginning with direct assistance to the least advantaged through guided programs of self-help and community action.”⁴

One of the themes that inspired greatest interest in Forum debates was that of popular participation in decisions.

“All governments should establish, at all levels of decision making, a framework wherein people and communities can make the maximum number of decisions for themselves and be given the means to implement them.”

Ordinary people should be enabled to take part in the decision making concerning all questions which affect their lives. This principle should not only be observed by governments, but should also be at the basis of the decisions made by powerful economic forces which at present are subject to insufficient control.”⁵

Upon analyzing the documents prepared by the Secretariat of the Conference, as the basis for the debates of the governmental representatives, some participants in the nongovernmental Forum opposed that participation be established as condition for receiving assistance. A group or community participates, we said, when it organizes to

¹ Statement to the UN Conference, Third Draft, 31 May 1976, mimeograph.

² Ibid.

³ Vancouver Declaration, Guidelines for action, paragraph 7.

⁴ Ibid, para. 8.

⁵ Statement to the UN Conference.

demand justice and, in the case of human settlements, when it makes decisions and assumes control of the habitat processes.

In a text I prepared on the issue as member of the Mexican Planning Society delegation, and which I had the opportunity to read in the Forum plenary, I questioned the position that made it necessary to have power in order to participate, when “the only viable route to build a just society is to reach power in order to participate.”⁶

I also posed the need for a change of attitude regarding popular urbanization processes, given that their qualification as “irregular” implied –and today more than ever continues to imply– blaming the inhabitants for the problems faced by said processes. “What is the irregularity in this, the fact that the poor must recur to illegal routes to provide themselves with a roof or that the legislation in force in a country (...) does not consider their most evident economic and social realities?”⁷

The official Conference, for its part, also treated in-depth the role of popular participation in the processes of producing and managing human habitat. The final document recognizes that:

“Public participation should be an indispensable element in human settlements, especially in planning strategies (...). It should influence all levels of government in the decision-making process to further the political, social and economic growth of human settlements.”⁸

It is also established, in attention to the Forum proposal, that:

“To be effective, public participation requires the free flow of information among all parties concerned and should be based on mutual understanding, trust and education.”⁹

Going a step further, it poses that:

“...governments should establish mechanisms for popular participation that contribute to developing awareness of people’s role in transforming society.”¹⁰

Regarding land, the nongovernmental Forum Declaration demanded that governments play a key role to preserve its social function:

⁶ Enrique Ortíz, *Participación de la población en el mejoramiento de la calidad de vida en países dependientes*, in Planificación Núm. 18 (Mexico City: Sociedad Mexicana de Planificación, 1976).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Report of the Third Commission, 1976*. Recommendation E.1 (b): Role of public participation.

⁹ Recommendation E.3 (b): Reciprocal action.

¹⁰ Recommendation E.5 (b): New forms of participation.

“Land use and ownership policies should guarantee public control of land in the public interest. Owners of land shall not profit from an increase in the price of land that results from public investment in infrastructure.”¹¹

Here again, a similar response was given to these and other social concerns. Among the recommendations regarding land issued by the Conference to the governments,¹² those such as the following are most notable:

“Land is a limited resource whose management should be subject to public oversight or control in the interest of the nation.”¹³

“Change in the use of land, especially from agricultural to urban, should be subject to public control and regulation.”¹⁴

“The unearned increment resulting from the rise in land values resulting from change in use of land, from public investment or decision or due to the general growth of the community must be subject to appropriate recapture by public bodies”¹⁵

Attention to the lowest income groups was another issue of great interest for Forum participants who worked in analysis of spontaneous settlements, or experimented with new approaches such as organized social production through partnership processes such as cooperatives, or worked in areas of rural housing or participative upgrading of slums.

One of the stars of the Forum was John Turner, who, since the mid-1960s, had been studying and writing on the spontaneous urbanization processes in outlying districts of Lima. Turner arrived at Vancouver already well recognized for his work. As keynote speaker and advisor to Forum and Conference organizers, Turner had a strong impact on the debates and resulting resolutions.

Turner recognized that the residents are the primary actors in the process of inhabiting, and they should therefore have the freedom to make the decisions suitable to their habitat, which becomes impossible when said decisions are centrally controlled by public entities. Turner called for support for these processes through a set or network of specialized services that may be combined at the user’s will, and not offered in obligatory packages. These services should be governed by two criteria: needs must be self-defined by the user, and nonauthoritarian and open rules must regulate the use of the network.¹⁶

While the Latin American organizations present in Vancouver broadly coincided with his recognition of the productive potential of the decision-making role inhabitants should have

¹¹ Statement to the UN Conference, third draft.

¹² Theme 10d of Conference recommendations for national action.

¹³ Recommendation D.1: Land resource management.

¹⁴ Recommendation D.2: Control of land use changes.

¹⁵ Recommendation D.3: Recapturing plus value.

¹⁶ Cited in Jean Robert, *Trust People* (Mexico City: Habitat International Coalition, 1996), pp. 43–46.

regarding their habitat and housing, and the necessary flexibility, trust in the user, and de-bureaucratization with which the popular habitat support institutions should operate, the organizations differed with several of Turner's proposals. In particular, Turner did not address the structural causes that originate precarious settlements, or the question of the real power of the inhabitants to procure dignified habitat for their families.

“What degree of control and freedom do our inhabitants truly have when they build their houses? They of course have the freedom to choose the degree of segregation and insecurity most convenient for them.

What do they really control? They control their exploited labor which they can contribute for free on Sundays; they control the tools () and waste materials, and they control their own pockets, the only source of finance within their reach.”¹⁷

Two years later, interpretations would trivialize and distort Turner's proposals: the sites and services programs and the directed self-construction programs, both promoted by multilateral financial institutions in the so-called Third World countries. His idea of networks of specialized support services for individual self-producers was taken up many years later by some transnational cement corporations, transforming it into big business.¹⁸

Another central and certainly more-significant difference emerged between the individualized proposal that Turner recognized and promoted in relation to inhabitants' decisions regarding their housing, and the orientation that characterized the most-advanced Latin American proposals dating back to the 1960s, based on social organization and collective decision making and control practices within habitat processes.

The 1968 Housing Law in Uruguay that opened the way to mutual-aid and collective-ownership housing cooperatives; the organized consolidation experiences of the Chilean squatter settlements and the country's own cooperative experience prior to the dictatorship; the Peruvian *Pueblos Jóvenes* program that focused on social integration of urban inhabitants to address their infrastructure, urban facility and housing problems; and the first cooperatives and organized rural and urban experiences in Mexico, were some testimonies of the budding trend. These and other examples, and the fraternal debate within the Forum, would produce a coming-together of positions that would become evident in the work Turner undertook in later years as an active HIC member for the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, in which he highlighted the creative and productive capacities of the self-managed organizations.

What was taken from all of this by the official Conference? The Habitat I final document recognizes that:

¹⁷ “Hacia la Implementación de un sistema popular de producción de vivienda,” in *Suplemento Dinámica Habitacional* (Mexico City: Centro Operacional de Vivienda y Poblamiento, 1975), p. 1.

¹⁸ Holsim and Cemex develop programs applied through their distributors that include technical advisory (in design, budgeting, and construction), credit, and sale of materials and components adequate for popular housing.

“The so-called ‘informal sector’ has proved its ability to meet the needs of the less advantaged in many parts of the world, despite the lack of public recognition and assistance.”¹⁹

It also recognizes that:

“The majority of dwellings being built in the third world today are being provided by the occupants for themselves....”

And recommends that:

“A major part of housing policy efforts should consist of programs and instruments which actively assist people in continuing to provide better quality housing for themselves, individually or cooperatively.”

Among the measures proposed to achieve this is:

“Stimulation of cooperatives for housing, infrastructure and services.”²⁰

Although sparse, these paragraphs recognized both the individual and collective habitat production processes and issued precise recommendations to governments to support them.

Despite the different focuses of the Conference and the Forum, the examples outlined above illustrate basic convergence in Habitat I of expositions of the issues and proposals by both parties. This allowed the generation of agreements and consolidation of important progress in the treatment of the grave urbanization and housing problems.

The United Nations Center on Human Settlements was created on the official front, and numerous civil organizations emerged in parallel, some of which were international, such as Habitat International Council, the organization that later would alter its name to Habitat International Coalition (HIC). The importance given by Habitat I to planning, to reform and creation of new public institutions responsible for management and finance of human settlements, and to design of operative instruments, also had its social counterpart with the emergence in all the regions of NGOs specialized in the theme, of social organizations and movements, and of research projects to explore the causes of problems and orient ways to confront them.

Over the course of the following years, many of the social actors who participated in the Forum have been able to maintain, broaden, deepen and replicate its proposals. They have also created new organizations which in alliance with the urban social movements have been working in the promotion and defense of those proposals in the face of the gradual abandonment of the platforms adopted in Vancouver by the governments and the

¹⁹ Recommendation C.8: Construction by the informal sector.

²⁰ Recommendation C.10: a, b, c. Aided self-help.

international organisms themselves, primarily the development finance entities emerged from Bretton Woods,²¹ whose subordination to the dominant economic interests of the wealthy countries and transnational corporations has been proverbial.

From Vancouver to the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless: New challenges and hopes

The effort to place Habitat I recommendations into practice faced the difficulties of growing poverty, changes of government, bureaucratization and technocracy, created interests, and the magnitude of the challenges at hand. But it also originated multiple social initiatives, perhaps modest in their scopes and numbers, but sufficient to place into march the construction of a more creative and permanent process.

These efforts and hopes have increased thanks to the development of two strategic fields: the struggle for full enjoyment of human rights—civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental—and the struggle for democratization of all the processes involved in habitat production and management.

In 1966, within the framework of the United Nations, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was signed, guaranteeing the human right to housing along with other rights linked to habitat.

The inherent characteristics of human rights—universality, interdependence and indivisibility—impede the restriction of this right to those persons who can pay for it, and obligate the conception of the right to housing in its territorial expression with the other recognized human rights. These characteristics also demand that it be linked with its physical, social, cultural and environmental context. Finally, and fundamentally, they establish obligations on the part of States and foment co-responsible action by society to guarantee its enjoyment.

From the United Nations organization itself, a theme of profoundly political character, thereby, was introduced, in contrast with the treatment limited to the technical-financial perspective that had been developed by the entity responsible since its foundation for addressing the human settlements theme.

This new perspective would obligate a more in-depth look at the structural causes of the problems, and would lead to rethinking the city, places, and housing from the guiding principles of human rights: free determination; equality and nondiscrimination; equity, in particular gender equity; solidarity and cooperation; responsibility according to capacity and resources; participation; attention to vulnerable persons and collectives; transparency; and accountability.

²¹ The International Monetary Fund, World Bank, International Finance Corporation and Regional Development Banks.

In this new perspective, the social and nongovernmental organizations took a far-reaching step in conjunction with the preparatory process toward the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, proclaimed in 1982 by the United Nations General Assembly to be celebrated in 1987, just over a decade after the Vancouver Conference.²²

The Habitat International Council (HIC) seized upon the occasion to organize a series of activities. Under the coordination of John Turner, the advisory of Yves Cabannes, and the active support of the HIC NGO Habitat Project steering group, 341 experiences were documented of NGOs and community-based organizations in 75 countries, with the purpose to make known the contributions and enormous potential of communities in production and improvement of their neighborhoods and housing. Of these, 20 were selected for in-depth case studies. And thanks to the support of Habitat Forum Berlin, posters were elaborated with a visual synthesis of the most relevant cases from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Bertha Turner gathered these materials together and edited them in the book *Building Community*,²³ with prologue by Dom Helder Camara. John Turner wrote the introduction in which he highlighted the people's potential, including their capacity to produce more with less and to build living communities. This demands local autonomy and institutional supports that at the same time guarantee spaces of freedom for community self-management, without this implying State abandonment of its responsibilities.²⁴

Turner also drafted the conclusions, in which he insists on the essential change necessary in the role of public entities, from providers of finished housing to promoters of programs to support the self-managed community-based organizations in the production of their homes and neighborhoods, while also highlighting the strategic NGO role in said processes.²⁵

The results of this enormous HIC effort, which involved innumerable actors throughout the world, and its concern for the increased number of forced evictions that were taking place as well as its conviction to work to realize the fundamental right of all persons to adequate and accessible housing with basic services, led HIC to convoke a gathering in April 1987 in Limuru, Kenya,²⁶ attended by 57 NGOs and social organizations from 40 countries. Participants reflected on HIC's role vis-à-vis the housing problems; its relations with the social-based organizations, governments, and international cooperation entities; the importance of undertaking research to reinforce its work, and the formulation of a plan of action. The results of these reflections were synthesized in the Limuru Declaration.²⁷ This

²² Resolution adopted by the General Assembly resolution A/37/221, 37th session, 20 December 1982, at: <http://www.un-documents.net/a37r221.htm>.

²³ Bertha Turner, ed., *Building Community, a Third World Case Book* (London: Building Community Books, 1988), at: <http://www.communityplanning.net/JohnTurnerArchive/pdfs/CommunityBuildingConc.pdf>.

²⁴ Ibid. 13–16.

²⁵ Ibid. 169–81.

²⁶ This HIC-organized event was held immediately prior to the Global NGO Forum convoked by the United Nations Center on Human Settlements (Habitat) at its headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya.

²⁷ HIC, *The Limuru Declaration*, Limuru, Kenya, April 1987, at: <http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/Limuru%20Decl%201987.pdf>.

process led HIC to transform itself into a true global network. It changed its name to Habitat International Coalition, opened its membership and Board to the regional networks and social and nongovernmental organizations from the non-industrialized countries, and relocated its Secretariat headquarters to one of them.

Subsequent debates within the Habitat Forum held in June of that same year in Berlin led HIC to change its constitutive bases to reflect the changes and to focus its objective on:

“... the recognition, defense and full implementation of the right of everyone to a secure place in which to live in peace and dignity, in all countries.”²⁸

HIC, thereby, established the human rights linked to habitat, and in particular the already-recognized right to adequate housing, as the central focus of its daily action.

A Fork in the Road. Consequences of the Washington Consensus

According to the United Nations General Assembly resolution, the immediate objective of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless was to:

“Demonstrate by the year 2000 ways and means of improving the shelter and neighbourhoods of the poor and disadvantaged.”²⁹

The UN affirmed that the International Year was not simply a momentary event but rather an action program to culminate in the year 2000. The theme of the Year was, in fact, “Housing for All by the Year 2000.”

The rich diversity of organizational experiences of habitat production originating from very diverse corners of the planet, many of them undertaken with the support of certain public programs and NGOs, contributed a substantive, viable and concrete proposal for addressing this challenge to the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless.

What interfered with those goals and impeded the opening and strengthening of firm support to organized social production and management of human settlements and housing?

In the late 1980s, with the fall of the Berlin wall, the path was opened to reinforcement of trends running in the opposite direction and which led to the imposition of policies that conceive housing as commodity or merchandise, the city as paradise of financial and real-estate speculation, and common and limited goods—land, water, and even air—as products subject to the rules of the market and scarcity.

²⁸ *HIC Constitution*, June 1988.

²⁹ A/37/221, op. cit.

The Washington Consensus³⁰--advanced in the 1990s by the multilateral development-finance institutions—and the origin of neoliberal policies—brought very grave consequences, by increasing poverty, exclusion, inequality, and devastation of nature.

The Washington Consensus can be summarized in 10 points:

The **first three points**: fiscal discipline, reorganization of public expenditure and tax reform, led to (1) the cancellation of direct participation of states in production of housing and other habitat components in favor of private initiatives and interests; (2) the fragmentation of policies through focalized criteria, and (3) the decrease of fiscal resources designated to address the housing needs of low-income sectors.

The **fourth point**: liberalization of interest rates, coupled with decreased subsidies, unregulated commercialization of land, and wage control policies oriented to lower real wages, impeded (contrary to neoliberal postulates) access of large population sectors to the market-produced housing.

The **following three** recommendations from the list: competitive exchange rates, liberation of international trade, and opening to direct foreign investment, favored the flow of capital, materials, components and projects from the exterior to local markets, primarily affecting small and mid-sized producers and professionals.

The privatization policy, **eighth** on the list, contributed to the handling of land as a scarce commodity, to the subordination of the right to housing to economic interests, and to the discouragement of organized social production of habitat through individualization of housing problems, solutions and ownership.

Deregulation, proposed in the **ninth point**, led to the elimination of urban development planning areas and programs, to the conversion of housing institutions into second-grade finance institutions and, consequently, to the reduction or elimination of the social, technical and administrative supports previously oriented to social producers.

Firmly established property rights, rounding out the list was the **tenth point**—promoted by the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto—to limit tenure options to individual private property and leave the poor outside of all consideration of the social function of property and, therefore, in vulnerable conditions, subject to the pressures of the real-estate market and mortgage brokers.

The consequences of these policies have been the disorderly growth of cities and the massive production of tiny individual houses that neither make a city, nor build citizenship. Another consequence has been the disappearance and cancellation of supports to

³⁰ List of policies designed to open new spaces to the global expansion of large corporations. It is not a consensus reached among countries but rather between multilateral institutions (IMF, World Bank), the United States Congress, and other entities and experts with headquarters in Washington D.C.

participatory social habitat production and management processes, and even their criminalization and forced eradication.

Nothing could be further from the practices and proposals developed by organized civil society since the 1960s! Nothing of these Washington Consensus positions could contribute to realize the goal of guaranteeing access of all persons to housing by the year 2000.

The multilateral financial institutions assumed the task of promoting these policies through the negotiations related to the foreign debt of the developing countries, imposition of structural adjustments, conditioning of credit lines for urban development and housing. Correspondingly, these institutions have produced and widely disseminated documents that conceptually and technically sustain their policy assumptions and recommendations. One of these, published by the World Bank in 1993,³¹ translated the expanded postulates of the Washington Consensus into very specific recommendations for the housing sector, significantly contributing to radical policy changes in this field. It abandoned the state's role as housing provider in exchange for a facilitator role, limited, of course, to facilitate private mercantile production of habitat.

The Mexican case clearly illustrates this impact. Eight years after publication of this document, the recommendations established in one of its appendices³² was adopted point-by-point for determination of the central objectives and strategies of the 2001–2006 Housing Sector Program.³³ This program paradoxically contributed to construct a housing commodity-production industry. While very successful and productive, it forgot the social producers and left half of the country's population—those living below the poverty line—outside of access to the market. The only World Bank recommendation that was not fulfilled would be that of focalized programs oriented to the poorest sectors.

The neoliberal globalization process driven by the continually fewer and more-powerful transnational corporations gradually revealed more and more clearly the existence of two antagonistic projects: That of money, expressed in the networks and nodes of control of virtual space, and that of actual places and people.

The Earth Summit

³¹ The World Bank, *Housing: Enabling Markets to Work: a World Bank Policy Paper* (Washington: World Bank, 1993), with technical annexes, at: http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2002/02/27/000178830_98101911194018/Rendered/PDF/multi0page.pdf.

³² Ibid. Technical Supplement 2: Enabling the Housing Sector to Work. 113-144.

³³ "Resumen ejecutivo," *Programa Sectorial de Vivienda 2001–2006* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Desarrollo Social, Comisión Nacional de Vivienda, 2001).

Beginning in the early 1990s, the preparatory process of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, popularly known as the Earth Summit, mobilized and connected a multitude of actors committed to a diverse array of activities.

This time, we would not reach Rio each on our own, as in Vancouver, but instead organized and with established alliances among social actors from diverse parts of the world. From the beginning of the preparatory process, the Earth Summit opened a challenge for those of us working in the habitat field, given that the urban theme had not been positioned before then as a relevant topic.

From multiple fronts—in the official preparatory committees and in multiple spaces created by governments or, autonomously, by academic or civil society actors—work was developed to introduce the habitat theme within the debates. In a world undergoing accelerated urbanization, cities could no longer be ignored, in particular when they suffer not only severe environmental problems, but also increasing precariousness and gaping needs affecting hundreds of millions of people, in particular in the so-called Third World countries. Cities also demanded a place in the forefront of the world’s attention given the urgency and the possibility to advance in construction of conditions to guarantee that their future growth not occur at the cost of the countryside, ecological protection areas, other cities, or future generations.

The Brazilian Forum for Urban Reform, the Continental Front of Communal Organizations, and Habitat International Coalition, together with other interested organizations, prepared a text that was debated during the NGO Forum held parallel to the United Nations Conference. The final document produced through this process would be titled the “Treaty for Just, Democratic and Sustainable Cities, Towns and Villages,”³⁴ and would constitute the beginning and the foundation of a broad process of intellectual work and social struggle to promote the right to the city and to a healthy environment in the world.

The formulation of the “Treaty” integrally addressed rural and urban settlements, overcoming the partial visions of both the radical conservationists and the social strugglers for adequate housing. Progress, thereby, made toward an integral and complex vision of the theme that required rethinking of the countryside-city relationship and linking sectoral themes with high social impact, such as housing, to the framework in which they are located (rural or urban), and to their environmental surroundings.

Based on three principles: (1) the right to citizenship, (2) democratic management at the local level and (3) the social function of property, Treaty signatories aimed to contribute:

“(...) to the advancement of social movements for building a life with dignity in cities, towns and villages, widening the environmental, economic, social, cultural and political rights of the residents. It will contribute to changing the

³⁴ “Treaty for Just, Democratic and Sustainable Cities, Towns and Villages,” *HIC News*, No. 9 (June 1992), at: http://www.hic-al.org/documento.cfm?id_documento=1296.

management of these settlements and improving quality of life, creating an environment to be enjoyed by present and future generations.”³⁵

This early document already linked social, economic and environmental themes with human rights themes (those established and others yet to be recognized). This would later be retaken by the networks that promoted the Treaty and by many other committed actors in national processes, such as the Brazilian process, which, in 2001, won adoption of one of the most-advanced urban-management instruments in the world, “The City Statute,” as well as international processes such as that developed through the World Social Forum framework that promotes the formulation of a World Charter for the Right to the City (see section titled: Beginnings of the 21st Century: Forums and Definitions).

Another very relevant result of the Rio Summit was the realization that the relation between what happened in the nongovernmental forum and the official conference was more difficult to establish than in previous events, due to the physical distance between them and restrictions imposed by security pretexts and official postures. The routes through which to promote our proposals would no longer depend on the reduced spaces that intergovernmental conferences concede to invited NGOs. New forces were now underway: one afternoon, as the Summit was underway, tens of thousands of members of Brazilian urban social movements marched down from the *favelas*, joining forces with promoters of the Treaty, to ratify and advance the Treaty as part of their own demands.

Habitat II: A New Challenge

Twenty years after Vancouver, the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) was held. The central themes were: housing for all, and sustainable human settlements in an urbanizing world. The Habitat Secretariat called on the governments to organize national committees that should include the participation of all the actors, and the Secretariat opened important spaces in the preparatory committees as well as in the Conference itself for nongovernmental actors to interact with governments.

Han van Putten, then President of HIC and representative of this Coalition to the Preparatory Committee, affirmed in a letter directed to the NGOs participating in the process that:

“In no other preparatory meeting of any UN conference have NGOs been such full partners as in PrepCom 2 of Habitat II. No governmental delegate questioned the right of the NGOs to take part in the discussions of the Committee and its working groups in conditions of equality with the governments. The NGOs were formally invited to designate representatives to the Informal Working Group in charge of elaborating the draft Global Plan of Action.”

The draft of this plan was, in fact, highly influenced by the trends toward privatization and reduction of the state role to that of process facilitator.

³⁵ Ibid.

As noted in van Putten's letter, some NGO initiatives were able to introduce certain important changes in the various chapters of the Habitat Agenda proposal. Among these stand out the recognition of the primary responsibility of governments to fulfill the goals established by the Conference, thereby increasing the relevance of the states' role, which the preparatory drafts elaborated by the Habitat Secretariat rather had reduced mainly to that of market facilitator.

The NGOs also achieved the integration within the Habitat Agenda of several articles oriented to facilitate communities' housing production and access to land.³⁶

It would be more difficult in Habitat II to stand against the texts and positions of certain governments seeking to reverse the recognition already achieved at Vancouver, namely adequate housing and related services as basic human rights, with corresponding obligations on states and successive governments. This theme, as we will see below, converted into the focus of the activities and demands of the networks, organizations and social movements participating in the preparatory process, the Conference and parallel forum.

It became even more impossible to achieve clear establishment within the Agenda of the immediate causes of the growing habitat problem in the world and the impacts of the neoliberal economic model being forcibly imposed. The noted letter by Han van Putten addresses this controversy.

The amendment proposed by the NGOs expressed:

"We recognize that a primary cause of the problems faced by human settlements (...) is the current economic system with its unfair trade exchange terms, debt burdens, socially unjust structural adjustment systems, and emphasis on profit and unlimited growth as guiding principles."

Due to the opposition of the United Kingdom and other countries, the proposal was softened as follows:

"It is recognized that the problems faced by human settlements (...) have been exacerbated by, among other factors, economic inequalities at the international level, debt burdens of many countries, negative social effects, of certain elements of structural adjustment programs and unsustainable development models."

Finally, none of these texts appears in the preamble of the Habitat Agenda, although it does state that:

³⁶ The Habitat Agenda: Goals and Principles, Commitments and Global Plan of Action (Habitat II), Istanbul, Turkey, June 1996, paras. 73, 74, 79, at: <http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/Habitat%20II%20&%20Ist%20Decl%20EN.pdf>.

“Large sections of the world’s urban population live in inadequate conditions and are confronted with serious problems, including environmental problems that are exacerbated by inadequate planning and managerial capacities, lack of investment and technology, and insufficient mobilization and inappropriate allocation of resources, as well as by a lack of social and economic opportunities.”³⁷

A marvel of linguistic and ideological conjuring!

In defense of the right to housing

Some of the most noteworthy of the multiple causes defended by the social and civil organizations in the Habitat II process were those related to: (1) recognition and full realization of the right to the city and to adequate housing; (2) recognition of and support to social production of habitat; (3) democratization of territorial management; (4) the role of organized civil society and the responsibility of the state as guarantor of justice, equity, democracy, and responsible and sustainable use of resources; and (5) new modalities of finance, and mobilization of social resources.³⁸

On the first of these, for some international organizations, Habitat II appeared to be the great opportunity to advance in the proposal and negotiation of an International Convention on the Right to Housing and of measures and instruments to facilitate a guarantee of the full exercise and realization of this right. This was anticipated in light of the advances that already had been achieved to date in the recognition, definition and establishment of standards through the United Nations for respect, protection and fulfillment of the human right to adequate housing, binding on a significant number of countries. The strategies to be followed to achieve this objective had been discussed at PrepCom I, held at Geneva in 1994.

It was, therefore, a great shock to encounter at PrepCom 2, held in Nairobi in May 1995, the active rejection of the official United States delegation and that of some other countries to recognition of the right to housing as a basic human right, as established already in the Vancouver Declaration and international treaty law.

This forced us, from that moment on, to concentrate the majority of our energies on what we considered had been already-secured thirty years before: The recognition itself of this right in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and further operationalized at Vancouver, which, for us, was the foundation upon which the Habitat Agenda should be built.

³⁷ Ibid. paragraph 8 (fragment)

³⁸ Some relevant documents are compiled in Victor Delgadillo, *Habitat II: Declarations, Commitments and Strategies for Action* (Mexico City: Habitat International Coalition, 1998). Documents available there include, most notably: “People towards Habitat II. Position document of the nongovernmental and community-based organizations” (1996). HIC, 24–64. “Diez postulados hacia Hábitat II,” (1995). [Declaración de la Red Viviendo y Construyendo de CYTED \[Centro de la Vivienda y Estudios Urbanos, a.c.\] en Hábitat II](#), 71–75; “Reforma Urbana y Hábitat II,” (1995). V Encuentro del Frente Continental de Organizaciones Comunes, 77–79. “Vivienda para todos: Reto a los gobiernos del mundo,” (1996). HIC, 95–99.

This position of the United States government obligated us to concentrate efforts in the preparation of documents and declarations, lobbying and negotiation of proposals with undecided governments, construction of alliances and implementation of joint actions with other international, regional and local networks, interaction with UN human rights bodies, public protest actions, including the collection of more than 700,000 signatures of support and denouncement of the grave social impacts of forced evictions and other practices in violation of this right delivered to the Habitat II Secretariat during the Conference in Istanbul.³⁹

The lobbying work carried out by many HIC members throughout the world, taking advantage of their participation as national committees members, was very significant within this process. During the final discussion of the issue in the Conference, at least six delegations had included HIC-associated NGO representatives as advisors. This, and the firm solidary position of some European Union countries, the World Forum of Parliamentarians, and the Group of 77, in the end facilitated the inclusion of the right to housing in the Declaration of Governments and in the Habitat Agenda. The Declaration—the sole document that establishes commitments accepted by the participating governments—states as follows:

“We reaffirm our commitment to the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as provided for in international instruments. To that end, we shall seek the active participation of our public, private and nongovernmental partners at all levels to ensure legal security of tenure, protection from discrimination and equal access to affordable, adequate housing for all persons and their families.”⁴⁰

The Habitat Agenda, for its part, includes multiple mentions of rights throughout its various sections, with special reference of the right to housing in accordance with the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Nondiscrimination and equality are emphasized as fundamental guiding principles of the right to housing, as well as the rights to free expression and information,⁴¹ to education,⁴² to health,⁴³ to employment,⁴⁴ and to development.⁴⁵ The right to housing is clearly expressed in several paragraphs⁴⁶ as is the right to not be forcibly evicted.⁴⁷

³⁹ The campaign to collect a million signatures for the human right to housing was organized by People’s Decade for Human Rights Education (PDHRE), HIC, COHRE and Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA).

⁴⁰ Governmental Declaration on Human Settlements (1996). Istanbul. Paragraph 8.

⁴¹ Ibid., paras. 182, 190.

⁴² Ibid., paras. 116, 182.

⁴³ Ibid., paras. 2, 3, 36, 43, 116.

⁴⁴ Ibid., paras. 116, 117, 118, 160.

⁴⁵ Ibid., paras. 4, 23, 24, 121.

⁴⁶ Ibid., paras. 11, 26, 39, 61.

⁴⁷ Ibid., paras. 40, 61, 98.

The Declaration also considers women's rights,⁴⁸ children's rights,⁴⁹ rights of the family,⁵⁰ of indigenous people,⁵¹ of the disabled and of vulnerable groups in relation to habitat.⁵² Many other paragraphs include specific recommendations for the implementation of these rights.

Despite the dispersed and disarticulated form in which references to human rights appear in the Habitat Agenda, it cannot be forgotten that all human rights are inextricably linked among themselves. In fact, the characteristics inherent to all human rights are their integrality, indivisibility and interdependence. The right to a dignified and adequate place in which to live, the right itself to housing, reaches far beyond four walls and a roof, and in one way or another touches the whole of all human rights: civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental.

The inclusion and the wording of the texts on human rights contained in the Habitat Agenda are to a large degree fruit of the work of multiple actors and social networks specialized in the fields of the city, housing, women, youth, children, the disabled, the indigenous, and the so-called fourth world, which, conscious of said characteristics, were able to join forces during the negotiations that led to the final draft of the Agenda.

Other relevant themes in the Habitat Agenda

The right to the city, widely mentioned in the preparatory events and NGO documents, was not reflected in any explicit form in the Habitat Agenda, given its lack of recognition as such by the United Nations. The theme of social production of habitat, despite the large number of contributions, experiences and proposals collected during the preparatory process, was not developed beyond the already-mentioned contributions, in large part due to the illusion planted in those days by the multilateral institutions that the market, facilitated by decided governmental action, would take charge of resolving the housing problem.

The catastrophic results of the neoliberal policies and their impact on increasingly precarious human habitat conditions, clearly evident by the dawn of the 21st Century, would focus new relevance on both of the above themes. They would be taken up with new energy by the social organizations and movements from a sphere far from the United Nations: that of the World Social Forum.

The recommendations outlined in the Habitat Agenda related to the city and habitat in general, in addition to providing follow-up to Agenda 21, focused primarily on technical and financial aspects and the concentration of actions between the public and private sectors. The three P's of public-private-partnerships would be the slogan to which multilateral

⁴⁸ Ibid., paras. 26, 78, 119, 182.

⁴⁹ Ibid., paras. 13, 26, 43, 94, 160, 190.

⁵⁰ Ibid., paras. 31.

⁵¹ Ibid., paras. 40, 122.

⁵² Ibid., paras. 43, 96.

finance agencies would later reduce the complex approach demanded by implementation of the Habitat Agenda.

Democratic management of territory is not absent from the Habitat Agenda. On the contrary, several paragraphs of the Global Plan of Action are dedicated to the theme of participation. But little is said of the levels of decision and control to which this participation should reach to guarantee the profound democratization of the urban development planning, budgeting, administration, follow-up and evaluation processes.

The theme of finance and resource mobilization is addressed in the Habitat Agenda in a broad and innovative form. Some of the themes proposed by the social organizations and NGOs are reflected in the Agenda, although there is a lack of more in-depth understanding of the processes of social production and management of habitat and of the need to strengthen the popular economy in articulation with said processes.

Some social contributions and expressions linked to Habitat II

The need to reach consensus among participating governments regarding the wording of the Habitat Agenda generated several contradictions which are reflected in its extension and complexity. The Agenda is in fact integrated by various agendas: that of the governments, the private agenda, and the social agenda. To facilitate its consultation and follow-up by the NGOs and social organizations, HIC organized parts of the Agenda in a handbook that facilitates rapid location of issues of their interest.⁵³

In close relation with these themes of interest, HIC and several Latin American networks⁵⁴ had been interacting and formulating position documents. The first version of a document, titled "People Towards Habitat II," was discussed at a meeting organized by HIC at Havana, in March 1995. The text, structured around five thematic focuses, was debated and enriched by 150 participants from 36 countries from each of the world's continents.

The new version was presented for further discussion in a workshop organized in February 1996 in Berlin. This version incorporated a section of strategic commitments and lines of action which we continue to defend and advance today.⁵⁵

Not everything was debate, document preparation, struggle, lobbying and negotiation. The NGOs, community based organizations, and social movements generated multiple opportunities and occasions in which to exchange and celebrate their achievements, strengthen their networks, and show off their creativity. A very meaningful example was the

⁵³ Ana Elizabeth Basurto, *Habitat Agenda Handbook* (Mexico City: Habitat International Coalition, 1999), at: <http://www.hic-net.org/document.php?pid=2387>.

⁵⁴ Red Viviendo y Construyendo del Programa Iberoamericano de Ciencia y Tecnología para el Desarrollo (CYTED); Secretaría Latinoamericana de Vivienda Popular (SELVIP); Redes de Mujeres Hacia Hábitat II and Frente Continental de Organizaciones Comunales.

⁵⁵ HIC, "People Towards Habitat II" Nongovernmental and community-based organizations position paper (1996), at: <http://www.hic-net.org/document.php?pid=2773>.

“A City for Life” gathering held in Quito, Ecuador in November 1995.⁵⁶ More than 1,100 persons from 15 Latin American and Caribbean countries participated in this event with the objective to prepare the regional proposal to be presented in Istanbul. The gathering included 35 workshops and the inauguration of a traveling exhibit of panel illustrations of close to 300 habitat experiences grouped around some 20 themes. The exhibit was displayed at the NGO Forum in Istanbul and later traveled to several other countries.

Another vigorous collective experience that culminated in Istanbul brought together the slogans and messages of organizations from all over the world in one large banner for a massive march from Galata Bridge to the official Habitat II Conference in a call for the recognition, respect, protection and fulfillment of habitat-related human rights. The march, headed by two popular masked superheroes, [Super Barrio Gómez](#) of Mexico and Super Pinei of The Philippines, and halted by Turkish police forces as it crossed the bridge. Nevertheless, it expressed the harmony of the popular struggles and demands and their increasing articulation.

That experience also demonstrated the lengths to which the totalitarian market model will go to demonize all that is public and community-driven. It was necessary to later organize the covert “landing” of Super Barrio at the Conference site, in order for him personally to deliver to the Minister of Cooperation of The Netherlands a book on popular habitat experiences and the Declaration of the Latin American participants, who met in the Forum parallel to the Conference.

These fears, derived from the one-way-only and triumphant thinking behind the attempts to regulate the lives of our peoples in the 21st Century are, in turn, behind the difficulties of putting into practice the set of recommendations included in the Habitat Agenda, outside of those oriented to strengthen the market.

Habitat II follow-up: a limited and limiting process

In the program of UN-Habitat, the application of the Habitat Agenda soon was reduced to promotion of two international campaigns: security of tenure, and urban governance. The first hid behind its indolent name the theme of the right to housing and other rights, poverty and evictions. The second hid the fears of the beneficiaries of the economic model vis-à-vis the demands derived from social needs, impoverishment, exclusion and the lack of opportunities.

The Habitat Center of the United Nations assumed the task (without the resources to do so) to promote these campaigns, appealing to the good will of governments and other actors, whose albeit-weak responses contributed to give the campaigns some visibility. Few countries kept their national committees organized and active, despite Habitat Center recommendations to maintain and reinforce the committees after the Istanbul Conference with the purpose to follow up on application of the Habitat II recommendations.

⁵⁶ Organized locally by the NGO *Ciudad* with the contribution of members of HIC and other regional and local organizations.

The rural sphere was no longer even mentioned. Habitat II began this process of forgetting when it declared itself the “City Summit” and adopted and promoted the concept that cities are the “true motor of development,” within which, in congruence with the neoliberal economic globalization project, the majority of resources and institutional supports are concentrated.

For their part, the most active civil society organizations sought ways to assure continuity of their work. As soon as October 1996, in conjunction with the HIC Annual Meetings, HIC’s Latin American Network undertook various workshops to follow up on the agreements it adopted in Istanbul.⁵⁷ HIC international and other actors also prepared a series of follow-up proposals to be presented in Nairobi during the 16th session of the UN Human Settlements Commission held one year after Habitat II. For its part, the International Facilitating Group prepared a report that included the results of a consultation and a brief guide to orient NGO participation in the Commission’s meeting.⁵⁸

Parallel NGO and governmental meetings were still held at that time with moments sought for dialogue between them. We traveled to Nairobi with that purpose, only to find ourselves looking in the mirror. The meeting programmed between NGOs and governments was attended by only one governmental representative, a member of the Mexican embassy designated to coordinate the meeting.

We were left with no response regarding the concrete application to be given to the six strategic lines considered in the Habitat Agenda:

- **Decentralization** of its fulfillment: To whose benefit? Only the private sector, as has been the case? What resources and capacities would be decentralized in the local powers and in the communities when the central governments have abandoned their roles? What role should states fulfill: only that of market facilitators or that of guarantors of distributive justice? Do the wealthy countries retain any responsibility?
- **Partnership of actors**: Public-private partnership or institutional spaces for co-responsible and concerted action between all the actors? If the partnerships are among equals, will the subsidiary commitment of the States prevail vis-à-vis the most disfavored groups or will all be left to the invisible hand of the market?
- **Development of facilitative instruments**: Who facilitates who? The NGOs playing the role of cheap intermediaries facilitating the poverty alleviation programs designed by the multilateral institutions, or the NGOs and the governments facilitating social initiatives and enterprise with adequate supports, instruments and programs?

⁵⁷ Victor Delgadillo, *Reunión de la Red Latinoamericana de la Coalición Internacional para el Habitat* (1998), pp. 145–56.

⁵⁸ IFG, 1997. *Habitat Agenda Follow-up*.

- **Capacity building:** Are the poor subject or object of training? Are only the inhabitants subject to training and capacity building, or also the professionals and functionaries? Would it be possible to propose instead mutual and interactive training linked with concrete practice?
- **Participation:** At what level and with what object? As free labor to cheapen costs and broaden market niches? To legitimize decisions and policies through public consultation? Or instrument to influence decisions and policies through proposals? To control processes and evaluate public performance?
- **Construction of informational networks:** To guarantee access to information, or as discriminatory exercise?⁵⁹

Although current trends respond to these questions overwhelmingly in favor of the economic interests, the social movements and those who support participative habitat processes continue to deepen their questioning of dominant policies by placing into practice alternative options, formulating and negotiating proposals, and applying social pressure in response to the closure of spaces of dialogue, cancellation of supports, and criminalization of their actions.

The Millennium Goals: Renewed narrowing of the habitat concept and discouragement of social efforts

In the year 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the so-called Millennium Goals, which in the habitat sphere reduce even further the reaches of the tenure security and urban governance campaigns. Goal 7 proposes to “reduce to half the percentage of persons who lack clean drinking water, between 2000 and 2015” and “considerably improve the lives of at least 100 million slum inhabitants by the year 2010.” The first appears easy to achieve at least in the urban sphere in which 95% of the population “has access to improved water sources,” although the trends in absolute terms point toward duplication of the number of persons without access to the same, from 108 to 215 million between 1990 and 2010,⁶⁰ which would certainly complicate fulfillment of the goal in the poorest countries.

In reference to the second noted point, between 2000 and 2020, the number of urban slum inhabitants is projected to grow by an estimated 600 million persons, leaving the goal of improving habitat conditions of only 100 million slum inhabitants highly insufficient. But even that limited goal comes up against the negligence of many governments and powerful interests that restrain its fulfillment.

The Millennium Goals reduce the complex habitat issue, but also the comprehension itself of the profound causes of the problems and subsequently the strategic vision to address them. There is no investment to resolve the root causes of social exclusion and increasing

⁵⁹ Enrique Ortiz, *Strategies for Habitat II Implementation* (Nairobi: HIC, 1997).
⁶⁰ UN-Habitat, *The State of the World's Cities Report 2006/7* (Nairobi: UN-Habitat, 2006), p. 76.

inequality but rather only to compensate some of their most visible effects, through individualized pittances that generate greater passivity, dependence and social fragmentation.

Poverty is statistically abated by injecting resources—in many cases, crumbs—in categories that are, in fact, important for survival: food, health, basic education, and even housing, but little is done to address the structural causes that generate it, to truly strengthen the popular economy and community organization, and to rebuild social fabrics.

We thus see how preference is given to allocate contracts for even the smallest infrastructure works, social facilities or housing to private companies rather than hand over control of resources to the organized community to strengthen its own initiatives, its productive, financial and management capacity, its autonomy, and the construction of mutual aid networks and economic complementation.

The so-called struggle against poverty is, therefore, accompanied in the facts by measures that tend to individualize the problems and the solutions; that appropriate the scarce economic surplus of the poor; that appropriate their know-how and cancel their possibilities for productive insertion in society, by prioritizing and facilitating privatization of the social programs—in particular, housing programs—and discouraging and even impeding collective self-management and all form of organized social production.

Beginnings of the 21st Century: Forums and Definitions

Civil Society spaces:

In January 2001, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the Social Forum emerged with the slogan: *another world is possible*, conceived by its Brazilian organizers as an open space “of encounter and reflection, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences, and linkages for effective action of civil society groups and movements opposed to neoliberalism and to world domination by capital and any form of imperialism, and committed to the construction of a planetary society oriented to establish fruitful relations within humanity and between the same and the earth.”⁶¹

The World Social Forum opened as an autonomous world process and as a space propitious to construction of another globalization: of solidarities and hopes; diversity, pluralism and inclusion; and of mutual understanding and recognition. For the social and nongovernmental organizations and movements working in the habitat field, it would represent a privileged space in which to gather, exchange, concert actions, and construct alliances.

It is within this context that the initiative to promote the right to the city emerged through a broad social process that now “agglutinates” international and regional networks, social and

⁶¹ Organizing Committee of the World Social Forum, “World Social Forum Charter of Principles,” 2001.

nongovernmental movements and organizations, academic and professional entities, and outstanding individuals from multiple regions, countries and locations of the world.

The WSF framework also fostered agreements achieved oriented to open spaces for the self-managed processes of housing and neighborhood improvement. In the Latin American case, a joint strategy has been established to influence public policies in the matter.

But the greatest potential of the WSF lies in the possibilities of interaction and linkage with committed organizations and persons in other fields of action. The Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus Tent, organized by various networks and organizations committed to diverse themes during the Nairobi Forum in 2007,²⁵ is an example of the creative and synergetic interaction fostered by the WSF.

The projection of the Forum as open space and its purpose to create linkages among organizations and movements to increase social resistance to the dehumanizing processes prevailing in our world today, stimulate the formation of a critical mass that will surely contribute to imagine and to open viable spaces toward that *other world* we believe is possible.

Official spaces:

In 2002, the restructuring of what is now called the United Nations Habitat Program separated the directive functions of the Human Settlements Commission from the encounters with other actors, producing the figure of the World Urban Forum.⁶² Parallel gatherings would no longer be held, but rather alternating events, limiting organized civil society efforts to broadly interact with governments and international institutions, and thereby limiting their possibilities to influence their decisions and policies.

This is entirely incongruous, to say the least, when the states have abandoned their roles as providers and governments have shrunk and reduced their regulations and controls, leaving new and heavy responsibilities in society's hands.

Rights are always accompanied by responsibilities. In turn, shouldn't new responsibilities be accompanied by new rights? Today's organized and responsible society should have the ineludible right to participate at the highest level in the decisions that affect its life, including in the establishment of policies and design of instruments, programs and budgets, and in follow-up and evaluation of public performance.

The second World Urban Forum was held in Barcelona in 2004, partially coinciding with the Universal Forum of Cultures. The dialogues: "From marginalization to citizenship," and "City and citizenship of the 21st century," both convoked by Jordi Borja, were held in these two

⁶² General Assembly resolution 56/206, 1 January 2002 determined that the Urban Forum would be "A non-legislative technical forum in which experts can exchange views in the years when the Governing Council (of the United Nations Human Settlements Program) does not meet," at:
http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/52/206&Lang=E.

events, respectively. The first was organized with support from the HIC office for Latin America, for which 41 cases of social production and management of habitat were selected from throughout the regions to be presented in the exhibit organized by the WUF and later published in book form.⁶³ Community representatives were invited from nine of the cases so that they themselves could present them within the WUF dialogues. In his prologue to the book, Jordi Borja reflects on the WUF dialogue:

The voice of the protagonists of difficult building processes of city and citizenship. The voice of those who make city out of exclusion, who make themselves citizens out of the initial denial of their condition on the part of the institutions of the formal city. The voice of those who make city from their homes and their neighborhood outside city walls, who conquer power out of their self-organization, who create more just and warmer relational models than those of the world that initially excluded them.”⁶⁴

These vibrant presentations were attended by more than 250 persons and offered high-quality proposals with the legitimacy earned by the fact that they already had been placed into concrete reality with demonstrable success. But despite all this, they had no significant impact on the debate and the generation of new options.

In the habitat field, the new *facilitator* state appears more interested in facilitating the large real-estate businesses than the enormous effort of rural and urban inhabitants to realize their right to a place to live. The World Urban Forum figure has thereby come to resemble more and more a business fair than an indispensable political space in which to work out our conflicts and co-responsibly establish agreements.

That was the status of affairs in which we reached the third World Urban Forum organized in 2006 in Vancouver to commemorate 30 years since the Conference that originated this long process of thinking human habitat. This multitudinous event was attended by more than 10,000 persons from all corners of the earth and all sectors involved in habitat issues. The Forum included six dialogues, 13 roundtables, and 160 self-managed gatherings. It was a true Tower of Babel, in which much was said and little was heard by those who actually make the decisions.

Two years after that event, the same market-facilitating policies continue to prevail and strengthen, propitiating commodity-housing and cities with higher energy use and growing land costs pretending to become sustainable and inclusive.

This article expands on ideas I was able to express at the WUF inaugural event at the invitation of the United Nations. Simultaneous to this ceremony, a rally was held at the entrance to the Forum gathering protests and demands of tenants, homeless persons,

⁶³ Habitat International Coalition, *From marginality to citizenship. 41 cases of Social Production and Management of Habitat* (Mexico: HIC, 2005).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 11

victims of the privatization of social housing in developed countries, indigenous persons stripped of their lands, Hurricane Katrina victims, and persons evicted from their homes in multiple corners of the world.

Later in the course of Forum activities, the Civil Society Roundtable on “Achievements and Struggles” discussed the human rights impact of forced evictions and displacements, support for collective initiatives, the effects of privatization, and the participation of persons affected by disasters. Within that event, the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing Miloon Kothari, denounced governments’ loss of control over land and housing s behind speculation, the land cartels, and the large beneficiaries of real-estate business and, consequently, the increase of evictions and increasing precariousness of popular habitat in the world.

The events organized by important networks of inhabitants such as Shack Dwellers International (SDI) and by social and nongovernmental movements and organizations such as HIC presented experiences and proposals regarding the strategic role that may be played by organized inhabitants, women and human rights activists to overcome the grave and growing problems of contemporary habitat.

What real impact did these and the many other expressions from the Vancouver WUF have on those who define the policies promoted through the multilateral institutions? Apparently very little, and we have reached the point at which the confrontation becomes more evident each day between two options of future: on the one hand, the option of money and economic globalization driven by a fistful of large transnational and multinational corporations, sustained in the “utopia” of infinite growth and accumulation and that views poverty as emerging market and the excluded as outcasts, and, on the other, the possibility emerging from the clamor of those dispossessed from their lands and those who have gained awareness of the possibility to build from their places and communities a viable and equitable world with room for all worlds. A world that necessarily must learn to live with less so that there be enough for everyone.

One of these has the force of power, of money, of control of the means with which to convince the rest, and of arms. The other barely has hope, but also has the number and the transformative potential that begins to manifest itself in millions of small initiatives, albeit localized and disperse. One of these appears to be headed over a cliff, while the other is just being born.

A Vancouver newspaper contrasted my speech to the opening plenary with that dictated by the U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Alphonso Jackson, revealing how the ideals regarding progressive and collective solutions from the Vancouver 1976 Conference have been reduced to discussions of the free market and real-estate markets. According to Mr. Jackson, housing ownership would “make our cities stronger, safer and more prosperous.” Jackson emphasized that his work was to realize President Bush’s vision of a

“society of owners,” which would be able to create stability, financial independence and freedom.⁶⁵

The grave financial crisis lived today in the United States, and which is already impacting the rest of the world, is consequence of the speculative and irresponsible management of the financial system that led to massive allocation of sub-prime mortgages to persons without solid credit histories.⁶⁶ This crisis clearly reveals that the dream of ‘all owners’ does not make cities more safe and prosperous or their inhabitants more financially stable.⁶⁷ That deregulation and the unrestricted free market end up reverting and demanding urgent and highly expensive State and taxpayer intervention. That not all works well in the project of money, and it is high time to seriously consider other options not based on almighty profit, but rather on work, solidarity and mutual support.

Final Reflections

This long but still-superficial overview, starting from the foundational encounter of Vancouver 1976 through the following three decades, outlines the undeniable existence of two conflicting trends.

One of them has emerged out of social practice, with consistently firm postulates, which have enriched and diversified it and added complexity through concrete practice. And that, despite its weakness and having had everything against it for decades, has known how to sustain itself, to carry out experiences that wager in favor of the construction of new paradigms and establish increasingly broad and consistent alliances, linkages, and spaces to promote them.

The other, held up by economic and political power, has gradually narrowed its understanding of the problem, homogenizing its proposals and experiences, and reducing the reach of its interventions until focusing them on the most evident and grave consequences of its own “development model.” From a model imposed by those who the poet Octavio Paz would call “the worshipers of the stupid and suicide religion of infinite progress,”⁶⁸ which today faces the grave consequences of the degradation of nature and explosion of poverty and inequality in the world. Model that today has run face-first into the mirror of its own ghosts, born out of the relaxation of the regulatory role of the state and the unlimited freedom it has given to the market.

At this crossroads, many questions and decisions remain pending. In the narrow field of this article, three questions remain open, upon the responses to which will depend the

⁶⁵ Frances Bula, “Forum hears contrasting ideas on solving housing problems,” *The Vancouver Sun* (20 June 2006), in *HLRN News*, at: <http://www.hlrn.org/news.php?id=pXFtaQ==#U0DasGcU91s>.

⁶⁶ High-risk loans compensated through variable interest rates (or combined fixed-variable rates) and with the possibility to contract second mortgages, making them unpayable.

⁶⁷ Over one million families have lost their homes and more than a million more are at serious risk of the same.

⁶⁸ Julio Scherer, “Entrevista a Octavio Paz,” *Revista Proceso* (Mexico, November 1993).

immediate viability of improving the habitat of those who have been marginalized from the decisions and excluded from the goods, services and opportunities generated by the whole of social effort.

Will the will exist to rebuild the bridges and the spaces that connect the initiatives and proposals that emerge out of organized social practice with the institutional decisions and practices of the international organisms and the governments?

Will the political will exist to hear and open options that strengthen the autonomy and the productive and management capacity of those who lack a dignified roof and a secure place in which to live?

Will the social will to influence public policy persist or has the time come to break paths and assume new challenges?

²⁵ AHURA, Amnesty International, Brot fur die Welt, Dignity International, Equalinrights, European Anti-poverty Network (EAPN), Fédération Internationale de Droit de l'Homme (FIDH), Food First International Action Network (FIAN), Groupe Lotus, Habitat International Coalition (HIC), Habitat International Coalition (HIC), Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO Cooperation), Lutheran World Federation, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), Mazingira Institute, OXFAM, Social Watch, Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM), The Lutheran World Federation, Youth in Unity for Voluntary Action (YUVA).