

HIC Expectations of Habitat III

The Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, “Habitat III,” will gather states and diverse development actors in 2016, and will be the first global conference after setting the post-2015 Development Agenda. While welcoming the Habitat III process, Habitat International Coalition (HIC) and its civil society Members have deep concerns and expectations: Habitat III must commit to progress built on, but well beyond Habitat II and the previous MDGs so that states and development actors meet the demands and challenges of the future development to ensure social justice, build democracy and respect the environment in human settlements.

Through the Habitat III process, HIC seeks a “New Habitat Agenda”—not merely an “urban” agenda—for the 21st Century that recognizes the ever-changing dynamics and continuity of human civilization and the built environment, respecting the urban-rural continuum, realizing greater autonomy, human dignity, meaningful participation and responsible citizenship at the local level of human settlements. Formulating and implementing such an agenda is possible only if it transforms inhibiting political structures, private interests, parochial and patriarchal attitudes and power relations.

Where we come from

Since Habitat I in Vancouver (1976), we have witness a narrowing of the agenda, equivocating state commitments to change and perceptible government unwillingness to operationalize the rights-based commitments and include civil society and, especially, residents as an equal stakeholder in all negotiations and planning processes concerning them. After four decades, we should be counting forward progress; however, with countervailing ideologies taking center stage, we cannot.

The original commitments in the 1976 Vancouver Declaration recognized the vital links between rural and urban areas, seeking to assure orderly urbanization and arrange for balanced occupation of rural space.¹ That Declaration also reaffirmed basic rights consistent with human needs, well-being and social justice, and called for combating harmful behaviors such as the waste and misuse of resources²; practices that heighten inequalities,³ [the causes of] involuntary migration, politically, racially, and economically motivated; and relocation and expulsion of people from their national homeland,⁴ including that the illegality of settler colonies in occupied territories.⁵

Habitat I enshrined promising commitments toward the improvement of human settlements, reconfirmed twenty years later at the Habitat II conference, in Istanbul (1996). The process also embraced the inputs of engaged civil society in the deliberations. With this eminently participatory process, world leaders formally adopted the Habitat II Agenda as a global Plan of Action (PoA) for adequate shelter for all, repeatedly reaffirming the human right to adequate housing as provided in international instruments, along with the notion of “sustainable” human settlements as a driver of development that should fulfill basic human rights to shelter, health, decent work and the continuous improvement of living conditions.⁶

Reviewing progress five years after Habitat II, in June 2001, states convened in a special General Assembly session, re-emphasizing that rural and urban areas are economically, socially and environmentally interdependent. They prefaced the outcome document, *Declaration on Cities and Other Human Settlements in the New Millennium*, by “Welcoming progress in implementing the Habitat Agenda.”⁷ However, a retrogressive trend already was weakening

commitments, reneging on obligations to operationalize human rights to the detriment of the most-vulnerable populations. Already at the second PrepCom the Istanbul+5 review (2001), some states pressed the new UN-Habitat Executive Director to call up UN Security in full riot gear to prevent NGOs from entering the plenary room in Nairobi.

By now, the adjective “sustainable” has shed its ostensible meaning, instead euphemizing “business as usual.” Tragically, the world now witnesses cases of “sustainable” genocide, which is the assured practice of continuing to cause serious harm to members of the affected group. The next Habitat conference has to reconsider critically the assumptions behind current practice, terminology and discourse, deterring—rather than dismissing—harmful practices in the name of “development.”

Habitat III: Where are we going?

The GA’s resolution outlining Habitat III and preparation modalities recalled an operative portion of the 1996 PoA, but excluded the subsequent paragraphs committing states to environment-related aspects of habitat that recognized “the need for an integrated approach to the provision of those environmental services and policies that are essential for human life.”⁸ This apparent selectivity is emblematic of the hazards and challenges that the world’s inhabitants face in the Habitat III process and its potentially retrogressive outcomes. It is imperative that civil society promote an agenda that best conveys the full concerns and defines the needed state commitments to manage human settlements with human rights criteria, despite the emerging “urbanist” ideology, narrowing of the Habitat Agenda and states’ retreat from related obligations and governments’ deference to private interests.

Key Issues and Values at Stake

In this critical context, HIC seeks a New Habitat Agenda that upholds states’ commitment to ensure human settlement development and management with certain key issues and values, including:

- **Urbanization is not inevitable:** Urbanization and burgeoning cities are not self-executing. They are the consequence of human choice and corresponding action. The fact and nature of urbanization are the outcomes of human political will, among other conscious choices. The current, unsustainable patterns of urbanization have continued by conscious choices, consistent with deference to market drivers and ineffective policy alternatives.
- **Alternative habitat planning:** Equitable, ethical and people-centered development planning that ensures density with human dignity and environmental protection, maximizes heterogeneity, encourages social diversity and mixed-land uses, fosters inclusiveness, accommodates diverse tenure systems, guarantees equal opportunity, promotes livable and equally accessible public spaces, and, thus, makes human settlements more functional, more democratic and more environmentally balanced.
- **Social production of habitat:** As the majority of housing, especially in urban centers, emerges from social production, for this form of production to be orderly and technically sound requires a measure of urban planning and other technical support that public institutions, regulation and policy should support, not criminalize. In social production, the element of the human right to adequate housing that is access to services, illustrates the need for state measures to ensure popular access to urban planning.
- **Social function:** Realizing the social function of property, human settlements and the city protects and prioritizes the commons and collective goods over private interests, involving the pursuit of socially just and environmentally sustainable use of urban space.

- **Local fiscal systems** have to change from being instruments of revenue generation and budget management to vectors of change that generate real development outcomes. Habitat-related investments must uphold basic human rights principles, and capital gains created by development of state/people's lands and properties must be recovered sufficiently to finance and promote equal access to public services, continuous improvement of living conditions and adequate housing by right, prioritizing the most vulnerable.
- **Investment in basic services:** Proper planning and management of public goods and services allows for the constant improvement and provision of affordable basic services such as water and sanitation, higher resilience, climate-change mitigation and adaptation, poverty reduction and pro-poor policies. A challenge remains to ensure that the provision of such basic services is not denied on any arbitrary basis of discrimination, including tenure status.
- **Accountability for violations of human rights**, in particular the human rights to housing, land, water and sanitation, public goods and services and the related process rights, must be built into the Habitat III commitments. Habitat III must firmly commit to ensuring that violators, including perpetrators of forced evictions, are held to account and liable, and that persons subject to such gross violations⁹ enjoy full reparations.¹⁰
- **Distribution of economic values**, not merely growth, is a critical measure of development, as well as a measure of policy and governance success, including for the legitimacy of global governance. Without transversal policies of redistribution of wealth at place at local, national, regional and global levels, the growth = equity equation is a very dangerous fallacy that encourages the destruction of the planet and the majority of those on it, without questioning the current model of production, accumulation and irresponsible consumption.

HIC Expectations

1. At Habitat III, we expect **states to commit to deep structural changes in patterns of production, consumption, wealth distribution and human settlement management and in the ways that territories and natural resources are used and appropriated.**
2. Habitat III should **provide an instructive and specialized reference for the review of a generation of habitat-related human rights commitments and developments** at Vienna+25 (anticipated in 2018) **and the adoption of the Social Development Goals.**
3. Habitat III should **ensure participatory processes and opportunities to rethink human habitat** as a place to realize all human rights and to ensure the collective well-being of all inhabitants. This process should enable the **convergence of all stakeholders, including civil society, in the process** to formulate more-appropriate development, governance and resource-use policies and practices across physical space, bridging urban, peri-urban and rural areas, and assist central and local governments to address challenges through national and local development policy frameworks.
4. All parties engaged in Habitat III preparations and outcomes have a responsibility to **integrate equity into the human settlements-development agenda**, including adoption of commitments to the key issues and values cited above. Habitat III must address income inequality as the “defining challenge of our time” and ensure that its participating states meet this challenge, **no longer deferring to the formal market** to provide solutions to human needs and uphold human rights.

5. Habitat III should recognize and foster **national and local spatial planning and planned human settlements as a public good and service integral to realizing the human right to adequate housing**. A human rights—and corresponding state obligations—approach, perforce, engages development partners into popular-sector partnerships in the process of social production of habitat.

6. This is the process to **guide UN-Habitat reform in alignment with its Charter-based mandate and function**. A reformed UN-Habitat would operationalize that commitment, playing a combined norm-based and technical role of stewardship vis-à-vis states and governments toward implementing their human rights and other binding treaty obligations in the specialized field of physical planning and human settlements development. The Habitat III Agenda should be of sufficient quality and specificity so that it serve as a Guidance Note for all UN specialized organizations and related agencies.

Many assumptions of the past are exposed to much-closer scrutiny. With all of its supposedly greater efficiencies, global urbanization and the spread of assertive “urbanization” ideology continue without social-justice criteria to homogenize human settlements in some places; marginalize, punish and dispossess people in others. The increasingly common scene in urban spaces of every region has people and communities resisting failed economic development models. They are building barricades, rising up against forced eviction, still fighting apartheid, reclaiming lands, resisting population transfer, building their housing beyond the formal market, insisting on social justice and finding their own alternatives. Habitat III should have them take the floor as a primary reference. At Habitat III, state representative should not only hear from victims of powerful development interests, they must listen intently to them to inform a New Habitat Agenda.

¹ “The Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements,” 11 June 1976, Guideline for Action 5.

² Ibid., General Principle 12 and Guideline for Action 7.

³ Ibid., Guideline for Action 7.

⁴ Ibid., preamble.

⁵ Ibid., General Principle 5.

⁶ Ibid., Guidelines for Action 8–12. Edited to be consistent with the treaty obligations of states under Article 11, Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).

⁷ “Declaration on Cities and Other Human Settlements in the New Millennium.” A/RES/S-25/2, 16 August 2001, at: www.unhabitat.org/istanbul%2B5/A_RES_S25_2.doc and http://hq.unhabitat.org/declarations/documents/The_Habitat_Agenda.pdf.

⁸ A/RES/676/216, op. cit., preamble, selectively recognizing paragraphs 134–37.

⁹ UN Commission on Human Rights, affirmed that “the practice of forced eviction constitutes a gross violation of human rights, in particular the right to adequate housing.” “Forced evictions,” resolution 1993/77, 10 March 1993.

¹⁰ Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law,” A/RES/60/147, 21 March 2006.