

## **NGO News - October 1996**

This issue contains views and reports from different NGO groups and individuals on the recent Habitat II Conference, NGO Forum and related events. It is not comprehensive, but it does illustrate both the enthusiasm and the seriousness with which the global NGO community participated in the Habitat II process. Some follow up events are already being planned or considered. These are also covered in this issue. The next session of the Commission on Human Settlements will be of special interest to readers. This issue compiled by Rooftops Canada Foundation.

### **On the Successes of Habitat II**

#### **- Personal views from Han van Putten, ex-Secretary of the NGO International Facilitating Group**

**Partnership:** The most outstanding characteristic of Habitat II was the breakthrough it achieved in the field of participation and partnership. In no previous UN conference had NGOs so much influence on the decisions. In the first session of the Preparatory Committee, NGOs were tolerated as participants in working groups; in the second session, they were officially appointed as members of the Informal Drafting Group charged with making a first draft of the Habitat Agenda; from then on, they could take part in the discussions in almost all committees and working groups.

A new set of informal ad hoc rules for NGO participation was agreed upon at PrepCom3. These were also applied and even somewhat elaborated during the Conference itself. In view of their ad hoc character, it is by no means certain, however, that they will be automatically applied in all future UN Conferences.

Another innovation, Committee 2, the "Partnership Committee", in which government delegates exchanged views with major groups, was a qualified success. Its positive effect was the emphasis it gave to the principle of partnership as a guideline for the follow-up of the Conference and the implementation of the Habitat Agenda. The session with NGOs was however disappointing. NGOs missed the opportunity to come forward with suggestions or raise questions about NGO involvement in the follow-up of the Conference. Future such encounters between governments and NGOs should be more structured and better prepared.

A positive side-effect of the Conference was the interest and enthusiasm it created among NGOs in Turkey. More than 1200 of them associated themselves with the NGO Host Committee. In several cities, local NGO Councils for Habitat II were established. By involving the NGOs of Turkey in the Habitat II discussions, the NGO Host Committee has strengthened the civil element in Turkish society. The continuation of activities in this direction merits international support.

**The NGO Forum:** NGO forums are chaotic by nature. Taking this into account, the Istanbul Forum was a success in spite of the late start of its preparations and the modest financial support it received. Thanks are due to its Director, Jan Birket-Smith for an outstanding job, as well as the Turkish conference organizers who generously provided the necessary assistance.

The International Facilitating Group attempted to give the Forum a structure. About 1000 of 8000 participants attended one of the training/information sessions on the relations between the

UN and NGOs, and between the Conference and the Forum. Working groups prepared the NGO input to Committees 1 and 2. A "core Programme" provided for daily briefings and information sessions on the main themes of the Conference. Many NGOs came to Istanbul with full programmes of their own. In total, about 1700 meetings took place, among which were quite a few of a cultural nature.

Human Rights: The police incidents during the Forum made many participants doubt (again) whether Turkey had been the right choice for the Conference. The wording in housing rights (in the Habitat Agenda) was much more positive than had been feared during the preparatory process.

Beyond Istanbul: The conference was only a first step. Strictly speaking, government have no obligation to carry out any of the decisions they have taken in Istanbul. It is not necessary, however, for NGOs to watch passively how the Habitat Agenda will slowly disappear into oblivion. On the contrary, now that they are gradually obtaining the position of partners in the Habitat process, they are under the moral obligation to help it move forward in the right direction. What can they do?

- At the national level: National Habitat II committees which were set up in the preparatory process of the Conference should continue to function and be set up where they do not yet exist. Participation in such committees should not prevent NGOs from taking, where necessary, an independent critical attitude.
- At the international level: One of the few ways the UN can put pressure on member governments to carry out conference decisions is to ask them to report periodically on the progress they are making in the implementation. The Habitat Agenda announces that the UN Centre for Human Settlements will "review, monitor and assess the progress in implementing the goals of adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development in all countries", but how this will be done is far from clear.

A monitoring system worthy of that name therefore badly needs additional data provided by NGOs. How NGOs will carry out this task will depend on how the monitoring system will be carried out. This will be discussed at the next session of the Commission on Human Settlements. Complications will arise because while the monitoring process will be coordinated by UNCHS, but other UN agencies also have roles to play. E.g. the task of monitoring the implementation of the right to housing will involve the UN Commission on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Human settlements NGOs might also consider setting up their own "Habitat Watch" paralleling the "Social Watch" set up after the Copenhagen Social Summit.

- Work with UNCHS: A proposal discussed in Istanbul to change the composition of the Commission on Human Settlements so that half of its members would henceforth be representatives of the partners (NGOs, local authorities and the private sector) was not approved, but the Commission has been asked to review its working method in order to involve the relevant partners in its work.

## **Women and the Habitat II Process**

### **- Women and Shelter Network**

The Women and Shelter Network is part of the Coordinating Committee of the women's Super Coalition, an alliance of four networks also including the International Council of Women, GROOTS and WEDO. This alliance gave women a strong voice at the Habitat II conference and NGO Forum. Events organized by the Super Coalition included an opening plenary, a tent with daily activities hosted by different regions from around the world, workshops and daily debriefings to link women's lobbying efforts in the governmental Conference. An exhibition of successful projects reflecting women's perspectives, and a photo contest and exhibit were also organized. Women also made several of the NGO presentations to Committee 2 of the Conference.

Overall, the Super Coalition succeeded in making women's voices a decisive component in the development of the Habitat Agenda, but only after a struggle to defend positions already adopted within the PrepComs and other UN conferences. The final wording of the Habitat Agenda emphasizes the participation of women in various aspects of human settlements development.

### **Women Won in Istanbul**

#### **- Women's Environment and Development Organization, Report dated 14 June 1996**

Women won in Istanbul. The Second UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), convened in Turkey from 3-14 June 1996, was the testing ground for primarily male decision-makers to reaffirm the consensus agreement crafted in Beijing at the Fourth World conference on Women. In solving the stand-off on human rights and reproductive health, governments stood up for women and stood behind the decisions taken by their predominantly female delegations in Beijing in the face of a strong challenge by a handful of conservative Member States and the Holy See observer.

The Habitat Agenda had already agreed to "reaffirm the results" of Beijing and all other relevant UN conferences in the Preamble section of the document (para 6) during the third Preparatory Committee for the conference, held at UN Headquarters in New York from 5-16 February 1996. But, when framing the Goals and Principles in the Habitat Agenda, governments were faced with a choice to support language from the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 or the stronger Beijing text. While the final text reflects some compromise on Beijing paragraph 9, it does not alter the strong declaration that it is the duty of States to protect and promote all human rights and fundamental freedoms including the right to development.

The attachment of the "right to development" from the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) held in Copenhagen in 1995 (para 22) after "fundamental freedoms" in two places in the Habitat text can be seen as a victory for the G77 delegations which pushed hard for the recognition of this and other economic justice issues.

The addition of "sovereign right" to sovereign "responsibility" in paragraph 22 combines Cairo language with Beijing. The phrase "regardless of political, economic or cultural systems" was deleted after "State" from the sentence "it is the duty of every State to promote all human rights." The broader description from Beijing of "religious, ethical and cultural background" was ultimately used in this paragraph, which includes "the philosophical convictions of individuals and their communities". This expression embraces pluralism and would include secularists, humanists, feminists and/or any other philosophical conviction that, as such, would warrant

respect.

The rest of the "package" was successfully resolved so that a strong health paragraph is included. ... Twelve countries and one observer announced reservations on the contentious paragraphs on the family, and reproductive and sexual health. The small number of reservations reflects growing inter-governmental and international support for the Cairo and Beijing agendas.

Follow-up: ...some of the action strategies women plan to use to see that the words in this agenda get translated into action [include]:

We will use "organizing hooks" in the Habitat Agenda on the critical issues that we worked so hard with governments to establish. We will link Habitat II to the Beijing platform for Action implementation through the Huairou Commission, the Contract with the World's women Campaign, the one-year Beijing anniversary report on government implementation and action plan development for Beijing implementation. [Note: The Huairou Commission was established with the support of Dr. N'Dow to monitor UNCHS women's programs and action towards gender equality.]

Copies of the WEDO report can be obtained from:

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### **NGO Challenges for Habitat II Follow-up - Habitat International Coalition, HIC News, October 1996**

The integration of NGOs in many national preparatory committees for Habitat II, and within many official government delegations in Istanbul, demonstrates the increased acceptance by many governments of the indispensable role being filled by the NGO sector in the human settlements field. At the international level, the recognition given to NGOs as partners in Habitat II is most significant. HIC members were key participants in the discussion of the Habitat Agenda text, and directly contributed to the final wording on the right to housing, evictions and peoples' production of housing.

The challenge for us is now to take full advantage of the opportunities gained for NGOs within the Habitat II process at all levels. NGOs must assume key positions within the implementation of the National Plans of Action and of the Habitat Agenda. Many governments are preserving and expanding the spaces opened for NGOs within the process. Pressure needs to be applied to others to assure that NGO participation was not just a cosmetic ploy before the eyes of the international community.

At the international level, NGOs must be prepared to present their views on NGO integration into the work of the Commission on Human Settlements as called for in the Habitat Agenda.

### **Housing Rights and Habitat II**

## **- HIC Housing Rights Committee**

Some of the main successes achieved by NGOs at Habitat II centred around their key role in defending the right to housing as a basic human right.

Starting at PrepCom II, a few countries began to question the existence of the right to housing. Intensive work at PrepCom III by NGOs, CBOs and many others including the Global Parliamentarians and governmental groups such as the EU and the Group of 77 resulted in a small group of countries being isolated in their views.

By the afternoon of June 6, in the context of the final debates on the Habitat Agenda, the "right to adequate housing" for everyone and "the commitment of governments to respect its full implementation" were fully recognized. The focus then shifted to putting this recognition in detailed text in all the main sections of the Habitat Agenda.

It is unfortunate that the massive social energy set off by the Habitat II process had to focus so much attention on recognizing the right instead of more discussion on concrete ways to implement the right. This does not take away from the achievements reached:

1. Awakening the consciousness of millions at an international level about housing rights in general
2. Managing to maintain the ground and not move backwards in the recognition of the basic right to housing
3. NGOs contributing to concrete recommendations about ways to define the basic right to housing.

## **Evictions Continue**

### **- YUVA, "Beyond Settlements" Habitat II Newsletter, Aug. 1996**

"Finis." Habitat II is over. And even before the ink was dry on the Habitat Agenda, residents of shanty settlements in Karachi, Manila and pavement dwellers in Mumbai (Bombay) were ruthlessly evicted. The impolitic actions underlined once again the yawning chasm between international instruments and their justiciability at national and local government levels.

Promises to keep... President Ramos of Philippines ordered the eviction of 16,000 squatter families before the Asia-Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) meeting in November. The drive began with 200 poor families being evicted on June 26-28, 1996 in downtown Manila. [Less than two weeks after the end of Habitat II.]

Approximately 32,000 families in Mumbai were evicted by the municipality. Most of these were carried out after the Chief Minister of Maharashtra expressed displeasure at the proliferation of "illegal structures".

In plugging the leakage of the right to housing from the Habitat Agenda, a crucial battle for the rights of the marginalised was won. The war to assure its fulfilment continues.

## **Announcements**

### **NGOs Prepare for CHS 16**

NGOs have begun to organize for their participation at the Commission for Human Settlements session in late April 1997 in Nairobi. A group of NGOs meeting in New York at the time of the UN General Assembly debate have taken the initiative to organize NGO meetings prior to the CHS session. For more information contact:

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The Habitat International Coalition, HIC, will also be holding its annual meeting on the Saturday before the CHS starts. For more information, contact:

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**ACHR Newsletter:** The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) newsletter has published a special Habitat II issue for June 1996. It features articles focusing on the past 20 years of urban housing for the poor in Asia. Using the Habitat 1976 meeting as a starting point, the edition includes reflections from a variety of actors in Thailand, Pakistan, Japan, Nepal, Korea, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and India. Views from the grass roots - peoples' stories from urban Asia are also highlighted. There is an article on the founding of the International Homeless Peoples' Federation, a report on the Asian women and Shelter Network and an update on housing rights and evictions in Asia. Contact:

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**Million Signatures Campaign:** The People's Decade for Human Rights Education (PDHRE), HIC, COHRE, and YUVA spearheaded the One Million signatures Campaign for the Human Right to Housing in the weeks prior to Habitat II. The campaign was co-sponsored by 500 social justice organizations from 72 countries which helped collect signatures. Approximately 700,000 signatures were presented to Dr. Wally N'Dow, Habitat II Secretary General at a June 10 press conference in Istanbul. In receiving the signatures, Dr. N'Dow noted the importance of the right to housing. The campaign to collect one million signatures is continuing. To date, it has shown that human rights are a common platform that can bring together a wide range of civil society groups. For more information, contact:

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