



Housing and Land Rights Network Habitat International Coalition

From Habitat to Conquest

Housing and Land Rights Network statement on the occasion of World Habitat Day 2018

As we pause to reflect on this World Habitat Day, we consider the meaning and significance of the subject of “habitat.” The term’s literal meaning is found in any dictionary—including the [HICtionary](#)—the natural home or environment of an animal, plant, or other organism. Habitat is the natural environment of any organism, the place that is natural for the sustainable life and growth of an organism and a place where a living thing lives and can find food, shelter, protection and mates for reproduction. It also has come to mean the place where a person or thing is usually found.

Human habitat, therefore, is the natural environment, natural element, natural territory, natural surroundings, natural terrain, home, domain, haunt, habitation, abode, or, in some senses, stomping grounds. For people, habitat is a person’s usual or preferred surroundings.

Etymologically, “habitat,” in its original Latin, derives from the verb “it inhabits,” 3rd singular present indicative of *habitāre*, frequentative of *habēre*, meaning to have, or to hold. Any visitor to the ruins on Pompéï will note the welcoming slogan at the door of the town’s 1st Century brothel: “*Hic habitat felicitas*” (“happiness resides here”). (Of course, any seeming reference to the much later-established Habitat International Coalition is, in this case, purely coincidental.)

In Arabic, for example, the term المونل (*al-maw’il*) comes to us in two expressions found in the chapter of the Qur’ān, entitled “The Cave” (verses 58 and 78). In the context of the first occasion, *al-maw’il* (habitat) [means](#) the place to which a person has resorted and survived, a refuge. The second occasion is [interpreted](#) as a reference to the origin, the place to which something or someone is due, or belongs, that is appropriate to the intended purpose.

In the environmental sense, habitat is any of six earthly climatic zones: grasslands (or savanna), temperate (coniferous or deciduous) forest, tropical rainforest, desert, polar ice and tidepools. All living organisms have adapted over time to the conditions of the habitat in which they live. Evolving technologies have enabled humans and certain other species to adapt across habitats. Of course, urbanization, with its intense patterns of production and consumption, has transformed these natural habitats further.

In the context of development, planning and governance, the Habitat II Agenda defines the habitat as the subject of a “regional and cross-sectoral approach to human settlements [that] places emphasis on rural/urban linkages and treats villages and cities as two [points] of a human settlements continuum in a common ecosystem” ([para. 104](#)). With this scope in mind, the serial Habitat Agendas have emphasized this integrated approach, even despite efforts to narrow the scope in the unfortunately titled “New Urban Agenda.”

Whether in the narrow and proximate sense, or in the wider environmental scope, habitat is that which is all around us, human made or natural. In the important field of its administration and governance, the Habitat Agenda has issued us a stark warning in its first iteration, in 1976. The Vancouver Declaration and Action Plan issued a stark warning: “The ideologies of States are reflected in their human settlement policies. These being powerful instruments for change, they must not be used to dispossess people from their land or entrench privilege and exploitation.” It adds: “The human settlement policies must be in conformity with the declaration of principles and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” ([para. 3](#)).

That basic commitment of states and their corresponding obligations under international law and the UN Charter form the field of our reflection each World Habitat Day on the state of our natural and habitual abode. While the HLRN Violation Database (VDB) serves as the central tool for that assessment, this year we cannot avert our gaze from the state of the habitat of those caught in conflict and under occupation. While these crucibles of habitat policy vary in their methods “to dispossess people from their land or entrench privilege and exploitation,” they also reveal striking similarities and continuity of practice across the geographical spectrum.

Consistent with HLRN practice since the establishment of the VDB, this World Habitat Day report reviews cases entered over the past four years. The emerging patterns, especially in the four featured cases, demonstrate the systematic nature of dispossession and destruction of human habitat carried out behind the mask of state ideology.

Our standard normative framework of international law, simultaneous with global policy commitments such as those enshrined in the NUA and 2030 Agenda, then lends itself to conclusions that invoke the language of that supposedly unitary system, including international criminal law. This year’s brief retrospective on the habitat policies affecting people under foreign occupation and alien domination in Kurdistan, Palestine, Tibet and Western Sahara tells a common story of how individual governments and the international community have failed to “beat swords into plowshares,” but rather deformed the sacrosanct norms governing our habitat into the pernicious weapons of conquest.

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