Habitat International Coalition (HIC)

HIC is a growing independent alliance of international nongovernmental and community based organizations from over 60 countries. Initially founded as the Nongovernmental organization (NGO) Committee for the 1976 United Nation Conference on Human Settlements in Vancouver, HIC continues to function as a platform for the formulation of NGOs' strategies and policies in the field of human settlements. During the late 1960s HIC became a truly global organization with members of developing nations constituting the majority on its Board. In recognition of gender perspectives, its Women and Shelter Network was created during this same time.

HIC sees housing as an instrument; for the promotion of justice, equality and peace; of the expression of diverse cultures of self-determination of individuals and communities; of fighting against discrimination, alienation and disorganization; and, of regeneration of ravaged environment and societies all over the world, within the perspective of the living earth as a home for all of us.

HIC considers that issues of human settlements, environment and development are interrelated, and shares the concern of those who advocate worldwide measures to protect life on earth and to ensure sustainable use of its resources.

HIC acts as an international pressure group, and often finds itself in the role of spokesperson in defense of specific groups whose inadequate housing or actual homelessness is compounded by evictions, misappropriation of land or buildings, and unstable political situations. HIC promotes awareness about human settlement problems among the public and in forums at all political levels, exchanges information on problems and solutions, undertakes research, sponsors seminars and conferences, and acts as a contact between NGOs, international organizations and donor agencies with specific interest in human settlements.

The August 1981 resolutions of the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, explicitly condemning forced evictions and requesting the UN Centre for Human Rights to prepare a paper focused on the right to adequate housing; and, the December 1991 adoption of the "General Comment on the Right to Housing" by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights illustrate the strength of the Coalition's influence and importance of its mandate.

Poverty, environment and urbanization

Poverty is not the cause of environmental degradation. Poverty itself is the result of economic disparities within and among peoples and nations. The ever-widening gap between rich and poor is compounded by the escalating worldwide environment crisis. Action against environmental problems, including poverty, confronting us is needed. This challenge calls for a critical examination of economic, social, political and ideological conditions constraining the potential for change.

Central to the present global crisis is a development strategy characterized by an indiscriminate focus on economic development. People are central to the process and partners in sustainable development. Planning in whatever forms must respect the right of people to live and work where they have created a social and cultural milieu. Policies should promote strategies for people centred development thus shifting from the focus on economic growth.

Global trends demonstrate a clear deterioration of housing conditions. Not a single country has reached the position of being able to offer adequate housing conditions for all its citizens. Over one billion people, one fifth of the world's population presently live in inadequate and unhealthy housing, and ten percent of those lack any actual physical shelter at all.

It is important to recognize that changes due to the urbanization process have environmental consequences
and do not necessarily work to the advantage of the poor in any national or regional situation. Throughout the world the urban environment crisis has reached acute proportions. This situation is not new, but the international economic crisis and the structural adjustment policies advocated by international institutions have impacted very strongly on the populations of Third World cities. The majority of their inhabitants do not have the prospect of a health life, they do not have access to basic services including safe drinking water and sanitation, and they rarely have access to education, effective health care or secure shelter. Most often they live in unsafe sites; in low lying or flood prone areas, on steep slopes subject to landslides, close to major transportation arteries or off loading areas subject to noise and vehicular exhaust fumes, or in the immediate vicinity of hazardous industries.

The situation is becoming worse in the absence of enabling national social policies and diminishing economic opportunities. Yet, It is these very people, the poorest who are not serviced by the infrastructure of the city, who against all odds improve their environmental conditions while creating their settlements, and who contribute much to the economic growth of cities, nations and regions.

The right to a secure place to live

The right to housing as a basic human right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, now ratified by more than 100 countries. While all human rights are clearly indivisible and interdependent, the right to housing is a right that everyone is involved with directly and confronts and experiences every day.

HIC appeals to all those concerned with the environmental crisis to learn support to the struggle for the implementation of the right to housing and a dignified and environmentally sound habitat. Such a right is not one more additional issue related to the environment, it is a fundamental issue that nations must incorporate in a visible manner within their agenda for environment and sustainable development.

Gender perspective

Women play a leading role in local struggles for housing and services, and against evictions, because they are the ones most affected. The maintenance of shelter, basic services such as water, fuel, food preparation, physical hygiene and health care, household and clothing cleanliness are largely women's responsibility. These functions are vital to the economic base of society, and yet go unrecognized because in themselves they are not considered economically productive.

Because they manage the subsistence of their families in the local environment, women also manage ecosystems. In using and maintaining water, fuel and food resources for their families, women are often the first victims of environmental degradation, but also the ones who have the knowledge and skills to prevent it.

When urban services are not provided, it is the women who suffer most because they have to fill the gap. In looking after the needs of their families. This is why women increasingly play the key role in community-based organizations of the urban poor. Similarly, they play a key role in local struggles to protect the environment, water and forest resources in particular. Women are often the main actors in local environmental organizations.

These organizations, and women's struggles to manage and improve their neighbourhoods and local environments, must be recognized and supported. They must be given representative status in local governance, and women's priorities must become a basis for policy. Women themselves must take on leadership roles in environmental management. Only recognition of the role of both women and subsistence in our economies will give us sustainable development.

The programme of activity required is enormous in physical resources and labour needs as well as economic terms. All cannot be undertaken immediately, and some actions logically follow or even depend on the completion of others. In HIC's view the first priority should be given to developing and upgrading the basic environmental infrastructure of existing human settlements. The initial step must ensure effective resource allocation to guarantee safe drinking water, coupled with effective sanitation and solid waste disposal, provision of energy needs basic to food preparation and warmth, and construction of basic transport route facilities.

In HIC's view any effective programme of action should have specific, measurable targets. Its components would include the following aspects amongst others; human resource development inclusive of capacity
building for effective management of human settlements and land resources; direct exchange of information and effective transfer of infrastructural technologies for settlements of both rural and urban areas; Implementation of resource planning in disaster prone areas inclusive of environmental Impact assessments regarding physical disasters and environmental health risks and epidemics; and creation of employment opportunities which are based on a full assessment of available resources and utilize traditional skills, international cooperation for both financing and provision of expertise in upgrading informal settlements; assistance in applying new strategies (or gaining access to shelter; and, adoption and Implementation of appropriate and affordable techniques, codes, and regulations regarding shelter are vital.

As peace is a condition for the development of any human activity. Including the improvement of settlements. HIC supports efforts, which are aimed at the establishment of a worldwide system of peace and security with justice.