



Habitat International Coalition

Statement at Habitat III: Toward a Human Rights Habitat

Habitat International Coalition (HIC)—the global movement of over 400 organizational Members working to realize the human rights to habitat: land, housing, and related rights—was formed out of the great convergence at the first Habitat Conference at Vancouver in 1976.¹ Over the past 40 years, HIC has remained inspired by, and committed to upholding the Habitat Agenda and developing it in the normative framework of human rights so as to meet the habitat challenges of the day.

At this Habitat III Conference, we all come together once again at a crisis point.

Since Habitat II, our Members have witnessed an acceleration of gross housing and land rights violations, including violent forced evictions and land grabbing across the globe. These have been made worse by the global financial crisis, with large banks and equity investors reshaping our cities in a neoliberal, market-driven pattern, exacerbating disparities and warping the housing rights vision advanced at Habitat II. As a result, we see instead mass displacement and growing inequality in and around cities across the planet, with private interests driving vulnerable people from their homes and lands. These “urbanization” phenomena are related to mass displacement from rural areas in many countries, where large corporations and investors are buying up or leasing land and dispossessing people from their homes and sources of livelihood, echoing the serious crime of population transfer.

Our human habitat currently also faces a multitude of converging crises: the breakdown of politics; flagrant disrespect for human rights and general principles of international law; unprecedented waves of displacement, migration and refugees; unregulated markets and cyclical financial disasters; ominous climate change; disparity of wealth and income that is greater now than ever in recorded history; alien food systems and malnutrition; population explosion in the absence of adequate policy discussion; insufficient decent work opportunities; and unbalanced urbanization that both drives and embodies these crises and challenges. The Habitat III outcome document should be a global agenda fit for the purpose of resolving these challenges and crises facing human habitat. However, with the loss of the scope and concept of the human habitat,² this “New Urban Agenda,” conceived as guidance solely for seizing advantages from urbanization, addresses only a part of the habitat challenge facing the world today.

The Habitat process, at its inception, had reflected the 1972 Stockholm realization that: “We belong to a single planet. We are one, inescapably one.”³ It provided a hopeful sign that we had reached a moment at which morality, self-interest, and evidence-based knowledge coincided to guide necessary action with a forecast behavioural change. We recall the spirit of Vancouver (1976) and the commitments made in Istanbul (1996). However, without seriously evaluating the implementation of those promises, this Habitat process could not—would not—learn from, and build upon the efforts toward that pledged transformation.

For example, the Vancouver Plan of Action especially recognized that:

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 homes and their land, or to entrench privilege and exploitation.⁴

We need only to look around us to find that this warning has gone largely unheeded. In fact, the multiple global crises tell us that the 2016 “New Urban Agenda” has not begun to address this persistent political reality. The promised new era eludes us still, and today’s world is grossly out of balance. As the Habitat I visionary Barbara Ward also warned the Vancouver Conference plenary, “Where private interest tips the balance, we are deferring the costs and correctives to future generations.”⁵

At Habitat III, HIC once again calls upon all states to uphold their Habitat I and II commitments and their binding human rights obligations. While the Habitat III outcome document includes some positive text and developments, it ignores the historic commitments made in Vancouver and Istanbul, including to “protect from and remedy forced evictions,”⁶ “combat homelessness”⁷ and to achieve “the progressive fulfillment of the human right to adequate housing.”⁸ In essence, Habitat III has narrowed the Habitat Agenda’s scope, as also reflected in its title: “New Urban Agenda.” It also posits a worldview of an exclusively urban future, without addressing structural causes of unbalanced urbanization and inadequate housing, or attempting to address them. Critical issues such as city-region food systems, agroecology, and small farmers’ rights; the crucial role of the social-solidarity and care economy; regulation of financial and housing markets; land grabbing and protection of communities’ land rights; and the need to question the current macroeconomic framework and foreign policies that promote the violation of human rights, have not been adequately addressed. Explicit references to the need for strengthening democratic processes and institutions have been removed from previous drafts.

While HIC welcomes the inclusion of “special attention...to...countries and territories under foreign occupation,” this Agenda offers no effective measure to resolve this illegal situation, or the warring destruction of human habitats. The Sustainable Development Goals left this particular gap, which Habitat III failed to fill. We are disappointed also about the omission of key constituencies such as LGBTQI2S and the neglect of half of humanity that is still rural and often pays the price for uncontrolled and resource-intensive urbanization and consumption. Such exclusion does not align with the commitment of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda to “leave no one behind.” The absence of an accountability-and-reparations framework in the “New Urban Agenda,” especially for victims of forced evictions, displacement, war, occupation, and protracted crises, is also a grave shortcoming.

It is perhaps too late to rectify the text of the “New Urban Agenda.” However, in order for it to be meaningful and truly transformational, it must adopt the human rights framework and the corresponding legal obligations of states in its implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This necessitates the development of human rights indicators explicitly aligned with the relevant norms, in order to achieve sustainable development for both urban and rural areas and to “end poverty in all its forms and dimensions.”⁹ Otherwise, this Agenda will remain merely an aspirational document without any incentive to operationalize it, or mechanisms to monitor and evaluate performance. Effective implementation, monitoring, and evaluation should align with the unitary system of international law norms and standards,

including the Paris Agreement on climate change and the 2030 Agenda in the new UN Sustainable Development System, and integrated with the UN Human Rights System.

As we create our collective vision for the future, beyond Habitat III, HIC reiterates the need for states—through all spheres of government—to harmonize the implementation of their international law obligations and, correspondingly, fulfill their cumulative Habitat Agenda commitments; actively and effectively consult and involve civil society, peoples’ movements, local communities and democratic local governments; adopt a just macroeconomic order (as pledged at Habitat II); and incorporate and implement human rights principles of environmental sustainability, gender equality, nondiscrimination, accountability, reparations for harm done, inter-generational equity with a strong focus on the rights of women, children, youth, and older persons, as well as persons with disabilities, sexual minorities, indigenous peoples, small farmers/peasants, pastoralists, forest-dwellers, and fishers, among others.

HIC, along with other social movements, civil-society organizations, and community groups around the world reaffirms its commitment to continue the struggle for, and advocate the right to the city within a human rights habitat, enabling realization of “buen-vivir” (*sumak kawsay*)¹⁰ for all, irrespective of, and beyond the Habitat process and government authorization. We still seek real, community-based and people-centered solutions to the multiple crises facing human habitat, prioritizing local innovation so that the costs and correctives are not deferred to today’s youth and future generations.

Beyond Habitat III, states, through all spheres of government and authorities, must embrace strategies and policies that regulate global financial transactions; end or limit opaque speculative financial instruments; steeply tax real estate speculation; regulate rents; enhance the social tenure, production, and financing of housing and habitat; and prevent privatization of the commons, which is subject to attack under the neoliberal development model.

We still need a New Habitat Agenda, not merely a new “urban” agenda, and one that recognizes that urbanization in its current form is not inevitable or sustainable. We need a *New Habitat Agenda* that respects the habitat metabolism in the physical environment in both rural and urban areas. We need a New Habitat Agenda that recognizes the continuum of human habitat experience, respecting and securing multiple forms of housing and land tenure, where partnerships prioritize people and the public interest and states support the social production of habitat. We need a New Habitat Agenda that recognizes and celebrates, not criminalizes, social movements and popular participation, and enables the coproduction of knowledge, emphasizing local solutions and innovation.

We still aspire to live in human rights states composed of their peoples, territory and democratic institutions.¹¹ In order to realize that habitat vision, our communities insist: “nothing about us without us.”

Quito, 16 October 2016

Endnotes:

¹ HIC's genesis actually dates back to the proposals of civil society at the foundational United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, at Stockholm, 1972; however, the formal agreement of its founders in the original name of the Habitat International Council, before eventually taking on the name of "coalition," reflecting the civil-society nature of the organism.

² Defined as "a regional and cross-sectoral approach to human settlements planning, which places emphasis on rural/urban linkages and treats villages and cities as two [points on] a human settlements continuum in a common ecosystem," The Habitat Agenda, A/CONF.165/14, 14 June 1996, para. 104, at:

<http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/Habitat%20II%20&%20Ist%20Decl%20EN.pdf>.

³ As characterized by Habitat Conference visionary Barbara Ward in her address to the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Vancouver, June 1976, video at: <http://habitat76.ca/2016/09/barbara-ward-speech-habitat-i-1976/>.

⁴ *Ibid.* Preamble, paragraph 3.

⁵ Ward, *op. cit.*

⁶ The Habitat Agenda, *op. cit.*, paras. 40n, 61b, and 98b.

⁷ Istanbul Declaration, para. 4; The Habitat Agenda, paras. 8; 11; 38; 40(l); 61(c)(iv), 61 (d); 115; 119(k) and 204(y).

⁸ Mentioned 61 times in the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements, para. 8, and The Habitat Agenda, *Ibid.*

⁹ "Our principles and commitments," New Urban Agenda, 10 September 2016 version, para. 14.

¹⁰ Buen vivir, or good living, is a principle based on the concept of *sumsak akwsay* in Qichua language and cosmology, which includes a worldview centered on the human being as part of a natural and social environment.

¹¹ See Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933), Article 1, defining the criteria of statehood, at: http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/Montevideo_Convention.pdf.