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A New Urban Agenda: the missing dimensions

A briefing on the formulation of a “New Urban Agenda” at *Habitat III* in 2016

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Introduction

In June 2016, the United Nations will convene the 3rd UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, also known as *Habitat III*, which will set the agenda for international cooperation on urban issues for the next 20 years. In preparation for the formulation of this “New Urban Agenda”, UN-Habitat has invited Member States to prepare National Habitat Reports that consider the progress made on urban issues in the 20 years since the *Habitat II* Agenda was set in 1996 and that lay out each Member State’s vision for the future.

The Global Urbanist has produced this briefing to assist Member States and other stakeholders as they formulate their reports and their visions of this agenda. These stakeholders include Member States’ national governments, their respective National Habitat Committees, the various Regional Habitat Committees, the UN-Habitat Governing Council and UN-Habitat itself, its Habitat Agenda Partner networks, the United Nations General Assembly, and others. This briefing also draws attention to priority areas which might otherwise be overlooked by this process, whether because the organisations involved do not have the mandates necessary to address these areas, because of lack of awareness in particular circles, or for any other reason.

Its central message is that while we might wish that urban development efforts are always “win-win” for all affected constituencies, this is rarely true in reality. The New Urban Agenda has a responsibility to acknowledge those who frequently “lose out” during such efforts by providing mechanisms at the

local, national and international levels to make the protection and enforcement of their rights and entitlements a routine matter, for the betterment of development outcomes for all constituencies affected by such efforts.

Using this document

The Global Urbanist offers this briefing for the benefit of Member States, their National Habitat Committees and other stakeholders in their efforts to contribute to the *Habitat III* agenda-setting process, and our team remains available for any further clarification, comment or advice, contactable in the first instance via the email address above. Should National Habitat Committees find this briefing of such value, they are invited to consider including some or all of this briefing, as presented here or in modified form, within the body of their National Habitat Reports or as attached additional material, and we will be able to help with this if desired.

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Preface: avoiding tick-a-box thinking

National Habitat Committees have been advised to draft their National Habitat Reports according to guidelines set out in a document entitled *Guidelines and Format for the Preparation of National Reports* (hereafter the *Guidelines*). While these *Guidelines* aim to be comprehensive, with responses requested on thirty issues across six key topics, it is important that guidelines presented in this way do not cause National Habitat Committees to lapse into tick-a-box thinking, especially with each of the thirty items allotted equal weighting. A sufficient or indeed a “new” urban agenda will not arise simply by responding on each item at face value and leaving it at that. Committees need to read between the lines of the thirty items and discern for themselves what important issues relevant to their own national contexts may be missing. We urge committees to develop their own individual visions for the future of their cities above and beyond the items expressed in the *Guidelines*, and impress this vision upon the texture of their own National Habitat Reports, speaking out where the *Guidelines* have been silent.

Gaps in the agenda

The extent to which important issues might be missing from the agenda implied by the *Guidelines* may be seen if one considers the type of approach they embody. It should be fairly clear that the *Guidelines*

embody a *technocratic* approach to urban development, in which progress is sought largely through the application of technical expertise. It invites committees to consider a plethora of issues in the areas of planning, environment, transport, housing, etc., but without explicit attention paid to the interactions between these sectors. This is typical of an approach seen throughout local governments and the international development industry in which urban areas are considered no greater than the sum of their parts, and development efforts within urban areas reduced to a smattering of individual interventions enacted from within sectoral “silos”. The problem with this approach is the frequent failure to acknowledge that within urban areas the contributions made by each technical sector must be planned, developed and deployed simultaneously and in close cooperation to succeed in the long term, just as they are for new projects in the world’s most developed cities.

When sectoral interventions in cities proceed in isolation, they often come undone in the face of the conflicts and tensions that arise between them. This is partly because the *technocratic* approach fails to recognise the nature of cities as *political* spaces. Here we mean *political* in its broadest sense—the acknowledgement that cities above all comprise differences of opinion, the conflicting priorities of diverse stakeholders, and the potential for misalignments between their interests. In contrast to the *technocratic* approach which attempts to overlook or discount these conflicts, the *political* approach to urban development issues seeks achievement precisely through the democratic and participatory resolution of these different concerns. The *technocratic* approach remains a very necessary component of urban development efforts, and the issues raised within the *Guidelines* are still of great importance to the success of cities. But they do neglect another entire sphere of action within which development efforts must be applied to fulfil any urban agenda, namely the *political* sphere.

Cities are the sites of perennial social and political debate, of tensions between the needs and interests of the different stakeholders and constituencies they comprise. Some of these arise at the most primordial levels of political discourse, for example the recognition of different constituencies’ civil and civic rights, the equitable distribution of public assets and public investment, the management of natural resources, and the preservation of different communities’ identities. Thankfully this only occasionally erupts into violent conflict, which this briefing is not particularly concerned with. Nevertheless it is important to understand that conflicts of some form are always inherent to urban areas, and that addressing these is a permanent component of urban development efforts. Policy mechanisms must exist at the local, national and international levels to make resolving such conflicts sustainably and equitably a routine matter, so as to improve development outcomes for all constituencies affected by such efforts. And we are concerned that this urgent necessity is not reflected at all in the *Guidelines* offered to Member States.

It is understood that international organisations such as UN-Habitat do not have the mandate to address matters of domestic politics, which such conflicts usually are. But we would also argue that it will prove impossible to construct any (new) urban agenda without addressing this *political* dimension of cities. This is because unresolved political conflicts in urban areas have massive detrimental impacts on the efficiency of other, more *technocratic* urban development efforts, such as the effectiveness of

spatial planning, the financing of investments in housing, infrastructure and services, and the growth and performance of urban economies. These conflicts and tensions may be found to arise in very similar manners in cities throughout the world, indicating that a strong global policy framework is needed to help all cities understand and deal with these realities successfully. It becomes imperative that the New Urban Agenda be one that acknowledges both *technocratic* and *political* challenges, and that each National Habitat Committee play a role in ensuring that it does, in ways that are appropriate to the political challenges arising in their own national contexts.

Winners and losers

Without sensationalising the notion of conflict in urban areas, it is essential that the *Habitat III* agenda acknowledge the reality that conflict arises frequently within cities, and we would encourage National Habitat Committees to examine their own cities through this lens. Only an approach that acknowledges the political dimension of cities avoids the idle assumption that development efforts are always “win-win” for all and identifies the concrete losses and gains that accrue to the various groups touched by such efforts. The conflicts arising in urban areas, even in the midst of urban development initiatives themselves, always produce at least a few “losers” amongst the “winners”, and routinely very many more than a few. There will always be some segment of the population deprived, even if only “temporarily”, of the benefits generated by any particular initiative. Any New Urban Agenda must therefore include mechanisms to systematically identify these segments and provide them with systematic means of support, protection and redress during their period of deprivation.

We might all like to believe in the “trickle down” theory of development, the idea that improving development outcomes for higher- or middle-income constituencies will, in the fullness of time, improve development outcomes for poorer constituencies as well, or in other words that “a rising tide lifts all boats”. Yet as we all know, the deprived segments of urban populations are rarely simply “temporarily” deprived—they are very often repeatedly, routinely, frequently, chronically, systematically deprived. Much deprivation of this nature becomes a trap: poorer constituencies find themselves deprived of basic needs, yet by the same token deprived of the resources necessary to satisfy these basic needs by themselves. There is growing evidence that this is a significant global problem, seen in the rising levels of inequality in many urban areas, in the long-term decline of real wages in cities such as those of North America, and in what economists dub the African “urbanisation without growth” phenomenon. The trickle-down effect seems to be trickling down onto a glass ceiling, below which are a growing number of urban citizens in a state of chronic deprivation, never experiencing the benefits of this “trickle”.

Discriminatory cities

If the same poor constituencies are repeatedly deprived by processes of urbanisation and urban development, the result is that such cities have become *discriminatory* against those poor constituencies. This is the phenomenon that we believe has become commonplace today—the

phenomenon of the *discriminatory city*.

This is very much a form of *discrimination* akin to discrimination against other vulnerable constituencies such as women or ethnic and religious minorities, and produced by very similar processes. In concrete terms, a *discriminatory city* arises whenever urban development decisions made by governments and other large stakeholders—about public and private investments, spatial planning, the management of resources, etc.—are systematically and persistently biased, consciously or unconsciously, in favour of the immediate needs and interests of higher and middle-income constituencies, and/or against the immediate needs and interests of lower-income constituencies.

We realise that authorities cannot address the interests of all constituencies all the time, but nor can it be acceptable to fail to address the interests of certain some constituencies every time. Especially when these lower-income constituencies make up a plurality or even the majority of a city's population, as they do within many lower- and middle-income Member States' cities. To be clear, we are not trying to accuse any particular government or organisation of conscious discrimination against segments of their constituencies, though that accusation may occasionally be levied by various parties. Rather, the phenomenon of the *discriminatory city* emerges as an outcome of the persistent unresolved conflicts that we allude to above.

To illustrate something of the scale of the issues we are talking about, consider the World Bank, one of the most important organisations involved in supporting urban development efforts internationally. Given their extraordinary intellectual capacities, as well as their frequent implied support of the “trickle down” theory of development, one might expect that they would be the first to ensure that there are only winners, and no losers, resulting from their efforts. Yet its own internal Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) has determined that even the World Bank's efforts (usually conducted in partnership with Member State governments) have resulted in depriving many vulnerable constituencies of adequate housing, services and livelihoods on a grand scale. As the IEG reported in 2010, “the scale of involuntary resettlement induced by World Bank projects is quite substantial ... the resettlement induced each year by new projects affects an average of 166,500 additional persons. Since the resettlement process lasts several years, IEG estimates that at any given time involuntary resettlement affects over 1 million people, two-fifths of which are likely to be physically displaced and three-fifths economically affected by active Bank-financed projects.”

Multiply these impacts produced by the World Bank by the activities of all other organisations and governments involved in urban development, and by the various other forms of deprivation that exist, and the number of deprived urban citizens that exist at any one point in time may be counted in the tens of millions, perhaps in the hundreds of millions. This is too significant a proportion of the world's urban population for any New Urban Agenda to ignore.

An agenda for ending discriminatory development

Once again, we believe it is essential that the *Habitat III* agenda acknowledge the political reality that conflict arises frequently and routinely within urban areas and between urban constituencies, that it gives rise to a phenomenon of discriminatory development across many cities internationally, and therefore that policy frameworks must exist at the local, national and international levels to resolve it sustainably and equitably in an equally routine manner, for the benefit of development outcomes for all urban constituencies. We urge National Habitat Committees to hear this message, to reflect upon how this occurs within their own borders, and impress these reflections upon the *Habitat III* process through their own National Habitat Reports and other agenda-setting contributions.

We would like nevertheless to make several recommendations of a global nature, articulated below around three priority areas: democratisation, accountability and statistical capacities. We remain available to help National Habitat Committees adapt these recommendations to their own contexts, and to develop their own recommendations on how to address these and other issues based on their own domestic experiences, should our advice be desired.

Democratisation

The first priority area is to continue the work of democratising urban development efforts. Much of this democratisation agenda is already present in the *Guidelines* provided to National Habitat Committees, and much progress has already been made in perhaps a majority of Member States, especially in the areas of decentralisation and participation. However our concern is that the way this agenda is commonly understood in government circles is vastly incomplete, causing it to be implemented with effectively one hand tied behind its back.

Opportunities for democratic participation and inclusive governance in urban issues are almost always circumscribed to specific sites or policy areas, and these limits are often so tightly drawn that they undermine the objectives of the whole enterprise. For example, residents in overcrowded areas may be allowed to participate in the re-planning of their own neighbourhoods, but without being given access to enough land or finance that they may actually finally alleviate their overcrowding. Participatory budgeting schemes may allow communities to allot city revenues to expenditure items according to priorities of their own choosing, but without giving them the power to choose to levy further taxes on themselves to increase those revenues overall, and thus fund enough items to address all their basic needs.

These restrictions on the scope for participatory decision-making are usually imposed to prevent the democratic will of participating communities from coming into conflict with the interests of other stakeholders that local authorities wish to preserve. This does not mean that the potential for conflict is thus prevented from undermining development outcomes. In fact the exact opposite is true. By preventing opposing stakeholders from meeting to understand and explore each other's interests in an

open, accountable and transparent forum, an opportunity for constructive dialogue between competing interests is lost, and the conflicts continue to go unspoken and unresolved, undermining whatever development outcomes were intended when participatory decision-making was originally introduced.

The two examples noted above hint at the two directions the *democratisation* component of the *Habitat III* agenda needs to be advanced towards. First, we need to expand participation into processes of spatial planning at much larger scales, up to and including the spatial planning of the metropolitan region that surrounds a city's urban core. This will give transparency to the process of allocating a region's scarce land resources across all of the constituencies and activities that require it, and allow their conflicting demands to be satisfied on an equitable basis. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the agenda needs to expand participation much more systematically into issues of revenue generation, including vastly expanded rights to self-impose new taxes to finance projects considered of urgent need by participating communities. This shifts the focus from unhealthy conflict over limited government resources towards a healthy dialogue on how to expand those resources equitably and voluntarily. Cities in many Member States have already seen the benefits of allowing their citizens to self-impose new levies for vital projects; we would urge those Member States to help these benefits proliferate through their contributions to the *Habitat III* agenda-setting process.

Expanding democratic participation in these two directions is not an attempt to reduce the possibility for conflict but rather to deal with it constructively and routinely. It also improves the ability of participatory processes to help resolve two of the most difficult and universal challenges in urban development: access to land, and the scarcity of government finances.

Accountability

This *democratisation* agenda is already widely understood, and the New Urban Agenda is well primed to address it, despite its substantial omission from the *Guidelines*. What is however almost entirely missing from the New Urban Agenda and the *Guidelines* is any prospect of improving accountability on these issues, which the following recommendations seek to address.

At the local and national levels, we must begin by propagating awareness of the systemically discriminatory nature of urban development, which we can do first and foremost by putting the ambition of ending discrimination in our cities at the core of the *Habitat III* agenda. With this achieved, we will then need to develop training and capacity-building programmes within Member States to build awareness of these issues amongst national and local authorities, and amongst the various other large stakeholder groups involved in making major urban development decisions. Member States should be supported by organisations such as UN-Habitat in the development and implementation of these programmes.

We must work towards establishing, through national and international legislation, a prohibition on

discrimination against the urban poor and similar constituencies, alongside our existing prohibitions on discrimination against groups such as women or ethnic and religious minorities (to repeat our previous examples). We can begin (for example within UN-Habitat or the offices of the Special Rapporteurs) to catalogue specific forms of systemic discrimination against various vulnerable urban constituencies, such as arise in spatial planning, in the allocation of public investments, in the elaboration of individual development projects, and in their approval and implementation. We can begin to include, in national legislation and in local policy documents, regulations prohibiting these specific forms of discrimination individually.

These efforts need to be reinforced by improvements in the judicial sector. Just as we must develop training and capacity-building programmes amongst national and local authorities, so must we improve awareness and capacities amongst all levels of domestic judiciaries, so that they effectively enforce the laws, regulations and international covenants that already exist, and those we would hope to introduce. Once again, Member States should be supported in this effort by UN-Habitat and similar agencies.

This needs to happen at the international level as well. The core international legislation governing rights for urban constituencies is the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*, to which 161 Member States are currently bound. However an effective accountability mechanism has never been built for this covenant in the way that the UN Human Rights Committee has been empowered to enforce the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)* by the ratification of the *First Optional Protocol to the ICCPR*. An equivalent mechanism for the *ICESCR*, the *Optional Protocol to the ICESCR* has been drafted, which 45 Member States have signed but which only 13 Member States have ratified: Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ecuador, El Salvador, Finland, Gabon, Mongolia, Montenegro, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and Uruguay. We applaud these 13 Member States for the leadership they have shown on this supremely important issue, and call on all other Member States to prove their own ongoing commitment to the economic, social and cultural rights of their citizens by doing likewise. It must become a priority matter for the *Habitat III* Agenda that all Member States sign and ratify this protocol, giving real teeth to the *ICESCR* for the first time in history, and finally establishing an enforceable international right to adequate housing and urban services.

Member States should also commit to bolstering the numbers and the offices of the UN Special Rapporteurs on the right to adequate housing and other economic, social and cultural rights protected by the *ICESCR*, to ensure that the benefits of the *Optional Protocol to the ICESCR* for urban constituencies become ubiquitous. This should be matched by a commitment to hold international organisations themselves, such as the World Bank as indicated by its own IEG, to account in their handling of the economic, social and cultural rights of those affected by their interventions. Member States should demand that international development agencies such as the World Bank comply with their own policies regarding the rights of vulnerable constituencies to participation, inclusion, compensation and redress. International agencies must be made to prove their commitment to

vulnerable constituencies by finally placing these concerns at the core of their project design activities (as indeed must local authorities), costing them completely in their project plans, and systematically providing sufficient funding to beneficiary countries to fulfil the burdensome responsibilities that these policies imply. These policies can no longer be considered auxiliary or “tacked on” to the other development efforts of these agencies, nor shifted unilaterally onto the already strained budgets of lower-income Member States.

Statistical capacities

To understand our progress on any of these issues will require enormous improvements in the way we monitor urban areas, collect data within them and produce aggregate statistics for them. Current proposals to improve the Global and Local Urban Observatory (GUO/LUO) programme must be pushed much further and supported with much higher levels of funding to become a truly authoritative monitoring organ. The GUO/LUO programmes must be elevated from an ad hoc voluntary programme to a permanent and systematic process of urban data collection at the local, national and international levels, equivalent to the World Bank data programme for national and international economic indicators, or the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Health Observatory for national and international health censuses. The GUO must be capable of driving the expansion of urban statistical efforts across all Member States, applying and extending existing statistical methodologies in scientifically robust ways, just as at the World Bank and WHO. The GUO must prove equal to the criticisms levied at existing urban indicator programmes, and not be satisfied with simply apologising for their limitations.

These programmes must not only monitor access to basic services such as “adequate” housing or “improved” water sources, but must also systematically monitor infringements of urban rights such as numbers of citizens forcibly evicted or economically deprived. They must therefore be created fully independent of domestic or international influence, to provide confidence in the objectiveness of their reporting. They must be funded on a permanent basis just as national statistical offices are, and Member States with insufficient means should be supported by donor Member States in this requirement, even if only for the monitoring and evaluation of all the other urban development efforts they already fund without the backing of sound statistics.

National Habitat Committees should be aware that it has long been known in academic circles that urban poverty and other deprivations in urban areas are systematically underestimated by existing development indicators, often because of censuses and statistical methodologies which have been designed around stereotypes of rural poverty, broadly ignorant of the realities of poverty and deprivation in urban areas. It is essential then that even existing statistical efforts be redesigned around contemporary knowledge of these realities.

Finally, as the bedrock on which the entire New Urban Agenda will rest, we urge the following. Donor Member States need to stop undermining UN-Habitat and recognise that it exists to fulfil an essential

function that no other international organisation fills, namely of addressing the complexity of the development challenge facing our urban areas. Whatever the shortcomings of the agency as it is currently constituted, the world's cities need an agency capable of implementing and monitoring the New Urban Agenda, whether that described in this briefing, or whatever other form it ultimately takes. Donor Member States need to commit their considerable talents and financial resources to developing it into the international agency our cities deserve, one with the legal mandate, the expertise, and the muscle to lead the implementation of whatever New Urban Agenda we finally agree upon, just as agencies such as WHO enjoy the resources necessary to fulfil their considerable mandates.

Coda: Not just a “pro-poor” problem

While the matters we have drawn attention to are *political* in nature and cannot be addressed by a simply *technocratic* agenda, none of this is *ideological*. The same discriminatory processes occur in cities throughout the world, under political regimes of all stripes—democratic, autocratic, left, right, liberal, conservative, centralised or decentralised. What we have attempted to argue is that these potential areas of conflict are an irremovable aspect of all urban areas, part of the nature of cities themselves. While they operate at the local level, the way they occur in parallel in cities in every Member State indicates that they are in fact universal, global phenomena.

It is not only out of concern for vulnerable constituencies that Member States and their National Habitat Committees should address the issues raised in this briefing. Even if one is persuaded that the trickle-down theory doesn't work, there is still a trickle-up effect that does take place. This is the fact that the *deprivations* experienced by one segment of the population “trickle up” to affect the quality of development outcomes for other segments of the population. This is true in economic terms but may be seen quite readily in the area of environmental health. For example, the lack of waste and sanitation services in one area of a city often produces unsanitary conditions in other parts, causing outbreaks of disease in adjacent waterways, farmlands and food supplies, and thus amongst other (wealthier) constituencies. A lack of energy provision in cold-climate cities may force one segment to depend on crude fossil fuels for heat, creating toxic levels of air pollution for all segments. A lack of public transport coverage for one segment of the population causes them to rely on inefficient road-based informal transport alternatives, worsening traffic and congestion throughout the entire city.

These two examples show that when looking at a city-wide scale level, deprivations experienced by one large segment of the population come at a very high cost for other constituencies. More examples of how the failure to address the needs of the urban poor undermines our ability to address the needs of other constituencies should readily come to the minds of National Habitat Committees.

Thus, we urge Member State to use this opportunity to design the New Urban Agenda explicitly to address the issues of discrimination and deprivation occurring in cities across the world, and to work together to address them now, at the *Habitat III* conference in 2016, and in the following 20 years.

About the authors

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