Introduction

This publication brings together several articles on the Habitat Conferences (Vancouver 1976, Istanbul 1996 and Quito 2016) produced by Habitat International Coalition (HIC) during the 1976-2016 period. We hope they will serve as a reference for Members, Friends and HIC Partners for the Habitat III conference and in the near future. We also include the HIC historical overview and the statement on Habitat III preparations signed by 146 networks, civil society organizations, movements, research centers and individuals from 35 countries. We take this opportunity to invite Members, Friends and HIC Partners to send your contributions for the forthcoming publication on HIC presence at Habitat conferences, which will also serve to celebrate these first 40 years of struggles for the rights related to habitat.

HIC General Secretariat

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HICstory 1976-2016

The Habitat International Coalition (HIC) is the global network for rights related to habitat. Through solidarity, networking and support for social movements and organizations, HIC struggles for social justice, gender equality, and environmental sustainability, and works in the defence, promotion and realization of human rights related to housing and land in both rural and urban areas.1

Habitat International Coalition is the offspring of an NGO committee formed to help organize and coordinate the NGO input into the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in Vancouver in 1976. This committee begun to work after the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, where the active engagement of many NGOs and other civil society groups working on housing issues set a precedent that was then followed at other global UN conferences from the early 1970s to the present. After Habitat I, this committee recognized the need for continued encouragement and support for NGOs and CSOs to pressure governments and international agencies to follow up the recommendations they had officially endorsed at the 1976 conference. It also sought to represent NGO interests at the new UN agency set up after Habitat I, which was initially called the UN Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) and later the UN Human Settlements Programme. At the time, HIC adopted the name of Habitat International Council.

Between 1976 and 1987, HIC grew mainly with civil society organizations based in the North. During this period, many CSOs and social movements from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean developed innovative ways of working with low-income groups and their community organizations to improve housing conditions or to put pressure on governments to address housing needs. In 1985, HIC launched a project to document what CSOs were doing in this field, and this resulted in the production of a catalogue of many innovative projects and a book on “building community”.

As part of the preparations for the UN International Year of Shelter for the Homeless in 1987, HIC Members organized a conference in Limuru, Kenya, bringing representatives from over 40 civil society groups from Africa, Asia and Latin America and many international NGOs. This provided the opportunity to discuss how to make HIC more representative of NGOs and CSOs from these regions. Those discussions stimulated a new structure for HIC, with a clear commitment to everyone’s right to a secure place to live in peace and dignity.

During the 80s and 90 HIC lead diverse fact finding missions to denounce violations of the right to housing in Santo Domingo (1988); Seoul (1990); Hong Kong (1990); Narmada (1992); Panama (1992); Managua (1992); Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (1993); Rio de Janeiro (1994), Kobe (1995); Istanbul (1996) and Lima (1998).

During the UN’s Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, much of HIC’s efforts within the NGO Global Forum were focused on the Urbanization Forum, where more than 140 organizations from around the world signed the statement Towards Just Democratic and Sustainable Cities, Towns and Villages. In 1993 HIC begun the preparatory process for the NGO forum at the second UN Conference on Human Settlements (the “UN City Summit”) in Istanbul in 1996. A
highlighted achievement of this process was the inclusion the Right to Housing in the Habitat Agenda and the adoption of General Comment No. 4, on the Right to Adequate Housing.

Parallel to this course of action a revision of HICs structure, strategy and mission took place, ending in 1997 with the adoption of a new Constitution, which was later amended by the 2013 General Assembly. Later in 2014, the General Assembly approved the first part of HIC’s By Law.

The coordination of the World Assembly of Urban Inhabitants in 2000 brought the voices of grassroots and urban social movements to define a common strategy to mobilize struggles worldwide. During the 2002 World Social Forum, civil society representatives developed the World Charter for the Right to the City as an instrument to strengthen popular urban processes, the vindication of rights, and the articulation of struggles. The Right to the City goes beyond the conventional focus on improving peoples’ quality of life based on housing and the neighborhood, to encompass quality of life and democracy at the scale of the city and its rural surroundings, as a mechanism for protecting the population that lives in cities or regions with rapid urbanization processes. This implies initiating a new way of promoting, respecting, defending and fulfilling the civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights guaranteed in regional and international human rights instruments.

HIC has supported and participated in all World Social Forums such as WSF 1, 2, 3, 5 and 12 in Porto Alegre (2001, 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2012); WSF 4, Mumbai (2004); WSF 6, Bamako, Caracas and Karachi (2006); WSF 7, Nairobi (2007); WSF 9, Belém (2009); WSF 11, Dakar (2011); WSF 13 and 14, Tunis (2013 and 2015); and WSF 15, Montreal (2016). HIC has also been active in the World Urban Forums in Nairobi (2002); Barcelona (2004); Vancouver (2006); Nanjing (2008); Rio de Janeiro (2010); Naples (2012); and Medellin (2014). In recent years, HIC has committed its full support to the World Social Urban Forums in Rio de Janeiro (2010); Naples (2012); as well as to the Alternative and Popular Urban Social Forum in Medellin (2014). HIC has also coordinated efforts with United Nations Special Rapporteurs on Adequate Housing for the regional consultations on Women and Adequate Housing and the realization of fact finding missions in addition to its participation in several UN conferences and global processes (Millenium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals and UNs Climate Change Conference).

40 years old Habitat International Coalition now faces Habitat III calling for (1) the integrity of the Habitat II (Istanbul, 1996) commitments and modalities; (2) upholding the Habitat II-established principle to be inclusive; (3) maintaining the Habitat Agenda, not pursuing a narrower “urban agenda”; and (4) ensuring that human rights and good governance approaches continue to anchor and guide global human settlement policy and corresponding commitments.

HIC has also been a founding member and essential part of a number of initiatives and networks, such as HIC Women and Shelter Network (HIC-WAS), later named Women and Habitat Network (HIC-WAH); HIC Housing and Sustainable Environment (HSEN), or the ongoing Global Platform for the Right to the City (GPR2C) and the Social Production of Habitat Platform (SPH platform), to name a few.
The number of HIC Members has grown steadily from 72 members in 2007 to over 400 in 2016 while the number of HIC Friends has grown from 7 to over 60 in the same period. This global Coalition and the contributions of Members and Friends have allowed HIC to multiply its work in all regions, thanks also to an enhanced coordination of all HIC Reference Centers (Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, Africa Focal Points, Housing and Land Rights Network, Presidency and General Secretariat), a growing number of alliances with partners and institutions and generous donations by multiple funders.

It is with this vast social base and experience that HIC faces its 40th anniversary and the next 40 years, aiming to deepen and make its four fundamental objectives tangible for all: (1) Fight against violations of all rights related to habitat; (2) Promote and implement the Social Production of Habitat; (3) Defend the right to a healthy environment; and (4) Advance towards gender equality and equity, with greater knowledge and experience over the previous 40 years, and with greater relevance to current and emerging challenges during the next 40.

Endnotes

1 For more information visit http://www.hic.gs.org/index.php
From Vancouver 1976 to Vancouver 2006

A critical look back from the nongovernmental perspective by Enrique Ortíz Flores (September 2008)

For Han van Putten.
Founder and former president of Habitat International Coalition (HIC),
untiring colleague,
convinced promoter of dialogue with the international bodies.

Thirty-two years after the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements held in Vancouver, Canada, it is imperative to undertake an evaluation and critical reflection of the way in which the contents of the Vancouver Declaration have been applied and how they have been modified over the course of these three decades.

This article aims to contribute to that objective from the perspective of one of the actors that—as part of organized civil society—has carried out active follow-up of the emblematic events convoked by the United Nations, as well as permanent accompaniment of the popular habitat processes to which we are committed.

Vancouver '76: A Fertile Dialogue

Many of those who attended the Habitat Forum, held parallel to the official Vancouver Conference already had five, ten or even more years of experience in research, reflection and concrete practice linked to the accelerated urbanization processes developing in many regions of the planet. Some of us were already participating in actions promoted by the first NGOs dedicated to the habitat field which emerged in the 1960s through diverse circumstances and initiatives.

Upon inauguration of the Habitat Forum, these backgrounds allowed participants to quickly identify with each other and join forces, proceeding to rapid integration of a very active group that adopted the name Third World and immediately focused on formulating a position text to enrich the original draft of the declaration to be submitted by the Forum to the official Conference.

The draft Habitat Forum Declaration to the United Nations Conference, adopted through a process of consensus among participants, stated that:

“The objectives of the Habitat Conference will only be fulfilled if it addresses itself to the fundamental causes of the most serious of the human settlements problems.”

This referred primarily to the extreme deprivation where, by then, more than 900 million persons lived, according the World Bank estimates of the time.

“We advocate not only greater equality among nations but also and foremost greater equality among people.”

The Vancouver Declaration responds to these statements, affirming that:

“Attention must also be drawn to the detrimental effects of transposing standards and criteria that can only be adopted by minorities and could heighten inequalities, the misuse of resources and the social,
cultural and ecological deterioration of the developing countries." Ω

And goes even further by recognizing that:

“Adequate shelter and services are a basic human right which places an obligation on Governments to ensure their attainment by all people, beginning with direct assistance to the least advantaged through guided programs of self-help and community action.” Ο

One of the themes that inspired greatest interest in Forum debates was that of popular participation in decisions.

“All governments should establish, at all levels of decision making, a framework wherein people and communities can make the maximum number of decisions for themselves and be given the means to implement them. Ordinary people should be enabled to take part in the decision making concerning all questions which affect their lives. This principle should not only be observed by governments, but should also be at the basis of the decisions made by powerful economic forces which at present are subject to insufficient control.” Ω

Upon analyzing the documents prepared by the Secretariat of the Conference, as the basis for the debates of the governmental representatives, some participants in the nongovernmental Forum opposed that participation be established as condition for receiving assistance. A group or community participates, we said, when it organizes to demand justice and, in the case of human settlements, when it makes decisions and assumes control of the habitat processes.

In a text I prepared on the issue as member of the Mexican Planning Society delegation, and which I had the opportunity to read in the Forum plenary, I questioned the position that made it necessary to have power in order to participate, when “the only viable route to build a just society is to reach power in order to participate.” Ω

I also posed the need for a change of attitude regarding popular urbanization processes, given that their qualification as “irregular” implied—and today more than ever continues to imply—blaming the inhabitants for the problems faced by said processes. “What is the irregularity in this, the fact that the poor must recur to illegal routes to provide themselves with a roof or that the legislation in force in a country (…) does not consider their most evident economic and social realities?” Ω

The official Conference, for its part, also treated in-depth the role of popular participation in the processes of producing and managing human habitat. The final document recognizes that:

“Public participation should be an indispensable element in human settlements, especially in planning strategies (…). It should influence all levels of government in the decision-making process to further the political, social and economic growth of human settlements.” Ω

It is also established, in attention to the Forum proposal, that:

“To be effective, public participation requires the free flow of information among all parties concerned and should be based on mutual understanding, trust and education.” Ω

Going a step further, it poses that:

“…governments should establish mechanisms for popular participation that
contribute to developing awareness of people’s role in transforming society.”

Regarding land, the nongovernmental Forum Declaration demanded that governments play a key role to preserve its social function:

“Land use and ownership policies should guarantee public control of land in the public interest. Owners of land shall not profit from an increase in the price of land that results from public investment in infrastructure.”

Here again, a similar response was given to these and other social concerns. Among the recommendations regarding land issued by the Conference to the governments, those such as the following are most notable:

“Land is a limited resource whose management should be subject to public oversight or control in the interest of the nation.”

“Change in the use of land, especially from agricultural to urban, should be subject to public control and regulation.”

“The unearned increment resulting from the rise in land values resulting from change in use of land, from public investment or decision or due to the general growth of the community must be subject to appropriate recapture by public bodies ....”

Attention to the lowest income groups was another issue of great interest for Forum participants who worked in analysis of spontaneous settlements, or experimented with new approaches such as organized social production through partnership processes such as cooperatives, or worked in areas of rural housing or participative upgrading of slums.

One of the stars of the Forum was John Turner, who, since the mid-1960s, had been studying and writing on the spontaneous urbanization processes in outlying districts of Lima. Turner arrived at Vancouver already well recognized for his work. As keynote speaker and advisor to Forum and Conference organizers, Turner had a strong impact on the debates and resulting resolutions.

Turner recognized that the residents are the primary actors in the process of inhabiting, and they should therefore have the freedom to make the decisions suitable to their habitat, which becomes impossible when said decisions are centrally controlled by public entities. Turner called for support for these processes through a set or network of specialized services that may be combined at the user’s will, and not offered in obligatory packages. These services should be governed by two criteria: needs must be self-defined by the user, and nonauthoritarian and open rules must regulate the use of the network.

While the Latin American organizations present in Vancouver broadly coincided with his recognition of the productive potential of the decision-making role inhabitants should have regarding their habitat and housing, and the necessary flexibility, trust in the user, and de-bureaucratization with which the popular habitat support institutions should operate, the organizations differed with several of Turner’s proposals. In particular, Turner did not address the structural causes that originate precarious settlements, or the question of the real power of the inhabitants to procure dignified habitat for their families.
“What degree of control and freedom do our inhabitants truly have when they build their houses? They of course have the freedom to choose the degree of segregation and insecurity most convenient for them.

What do they really control? They control their exploited labor which they can contribute for free on Sundays; they control the tools ( ) and waste materials, and they control their own pockets, the only source of finance within their reach.”

Two years later, interpretations would trivialize and distort Turner’s proposals: the sites and services programs and the directed self-construction programs, both promoted by multilateral financial institutions in the so-called Third World countries. His idea of networks of specialized support services for individual self-producers was taken up many years later by some transnational cement corporations, transforming it into big business.

Another central and certainly more-significant difference emerged between the individualized proposal that Turner recognized and promoted in relation to inhabitants’ decisions regarding their housing, and the orientation that characterized the most-advanced Latin American proposals dating back to the 1960s, based on social organization and collective decision making and control practices within habitat processes.

The 1968 Housing Law in Uruguay that opened the way to mutual-aid and collective-ownership housing cooperatives; the organized consolidation experiences of the Chilean squatter settlements and the country’s own cooperative experience prior to the dictatorship; the Peruvian Pueblos Jóvenes program that focused on social integration of urban inhabitants to address their infrastructure, urban facility and housing problems; and the first cooperatives and organized rural and urban experiences in Mexico, were some testimonies of the budding trend. These and other examples, and the fraternal debate within the Forum, would produce a coming-together of positions that would become evident in the work Turner undertook in later years as an active HIC member for the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, in which he highlighted the creative and productive capacities of the self-managed organizations.

What was taken from all of this by the official Conference? The Habitat I final document recognizes that:

“The so-called ‘informal sector’ has proved its ability to meet the needs of the less advantaged in many parts of the world, despite the lack of public recognition and assistance.”

It also recognizes that:

“The majority of dwellings being built in the third world today are being provided by the occupants for themselves....”

And recommends that:

“A major part of housing policy efforts should consist of programs and instruments which actively assist people in continuing to provide better quality housing for themselves, individually or cooperatively.”

Among the measures proposed to achieve this is:

“Stimulation of cooperatives for housing, infrastructure and services.”
Although sparse, these paragraphs recognized both the individual and collective habitat production processes and issued precise recommendations to governments to support them.

Despite the different focuses of the Conference and the Forum, the examples outlined above illustrate basic convergence in Habitat I of expositions of the issues and proposals by both parties. This allowed the generation of agreements and consolidation of important progress in the treatment of the grave urbanization and housing problems.

The United Nations Center on Human Settlements was created on the official front, and numerous civil organizations emerged in parallel, some of which were international, such as Habitat International Council, the organization that later would alter its name to Habitat International Coalition (HIC). The importance given by Habitat I to planning, to reform and creation of new public institutions responsible for management and finance of human settlements, and to design of operative instruments, also had its social counterpart with the emergence in all the regions of NGOs specialized in the theme, of social organizations and movements, and of research projects to explore the causes of problems and orient ways to confront them.

Over the course of the following years, many of the social actors who participated in the Forum have been able to maintain, broaden, deepen and replicate its proposals. They have also created new organizations which in alliance with the urban social movements have been working in the promotion and defense of those proposals in the face of the gradual abandonment of the platforms adopted in Vancouver by the governments and the international organisms themselves, primarily the development finance entities emerged from Bretton Woods, whose subordination to the dominant economic interests of the wealthy countries and transnational corporations has been proverbial.

From Vancouver to the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless: New challenges and hopes

The effort to place Habitat I recommendations into practice faced the difficulties of growing poverty, changes of government, bureaucratization and technocracy, created interests, and the magnitude of the challenges at hand. But it also originated multiple social initiatives, perhaps modest in their scopes and numbers, but sufficient to place into march the construction of a more creative and permanent process.

These efforts and hopes have increased thanks to the development of two strategic fields: the struggle for full enjoyment of human rights—civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental—and the struggle for democratization of all the processes involved in habitat production and management.

In 1966, within the framework of the United Nations, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was signed, guaranteeing the human right to housing along with other rights linked to habitat.

The inherent characteristics of human rights—universality, interdependence and indivisibility—impede the restriction of this right to those persons who can pay for it, and obligate the conception of the right to housing in its territorial expression with the
other recognized human rights. These characteristics also demand that it be linked with its physical, social, cultural and environmental context. Finally, and fundamentally, they establish obligations on the part of States and foment co-responsible action by society to guarantee its enjoyment.

From the United Nations organization itself, a theme of profoundly political character, thereby, was introduced, in contrast with the treatment limited to the technical-financial perspective that had been developed by the entity responsible since its foundation for addressing the human settlements theme.

This new perspective would obligate a more in-depth look at the structural causes of the problems, and would lead to rethinking the city, places, and housing from the guiding principles of human rights: free determination; equality and nondiscrimination; equity, in particular gender equity; solidarity and cooperation; responsibility according to capacity and resources; participation; attention to vulnerable persons and collectives; transparency; and accountability.

In this new perspective, the social and nongovernmental organizations took a far-reaching step in conjunction with the preparatory process toward the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, proclaimed in 1982 by the United Nations General Assembly to be celebrated in 1987, just over a decade after the Vancouver Conference.Ω

The Habitat International Council (HIC) seized upon the occasion to organize a series of activities. Under the coordination of John Turner, the advisory of Yves Cabannes, and the active support of the HIC NGO Habitat Project steering group, 341 experiences were documented of NGOs and community-based organizations in 75 countries, with the purpose to make known the contributions and enormous potential of communities in production and improvement of their neighborhoods and housing. Of these, 20 were selected for in-depth case studies. And thanks to the support of Habitat Forum Berlin, posters were elaborated with a visual synthesis of the most relevant cases from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Bertha Turner gathered these materials together and edited them in the book Building Community, Ω with prologue by Dom Helder Camara. John Turner wrote the introduction in which he highlighted the people’s potential, including their capacity to produce more with less and to build living communities. This demands local autonomy and institutional supports that at the same time guarantee spaces of freedom for community self-management, without this implying State abandonment of its responsibilities.Ω

Turner also drafted the conclusions, in which he insists on the essential change necessary in the role of public entities, from providers of finished housing to promoters of programs to support the self-managed community-based organizations in the production of their homes and neighborhoods, while also highlighting the strategic NGO role in said processes.Ω

The results of this enormous HIC effort, which involved innumerable actors throughout the world, and its concern for the increased number of forced evictions that were taking place as well as its conviction to work to realize the fundamental right of all persons to adequate and accessible housing with
basic services, led HIC to convoke a gathering in April 1987 in Limuru, Kenya, attended by 57 NGOs and social organizations from 40 countries. Participants reflected on HIC’s role vis-à-vis the housing problems; its relations with the social-based organizations, governments, and international cooperation entities; the importance of undertaking research to reinforce its work, and the formulation of a plan of action. The results of these reflections were synthesized in the Limuru Declaration. This process led HIC to transform itself into a true global network. It changed its name to Habitat International Coalition, opened its membership and Board to the regional networks and social and nongovernmental organizations from the non-industrialized countries, and relocated its Secretariat headquarters to one of them.

Subsequent debates within the Habitat Forum held in June of that same year in Berlin led HIC to change its constitutive bases to reflect the changes and to focus its objective on:

“... the recognition, defense and full implementation of the right of everyone to a secure place in which to live in peace and dignity, in all countries.”

HIC, thereby, established the human rights linked to habitat, and in particular the already-recognized right to adequate housing, as the central focus of its daily action.

A Fork in the Road. Consequences of the Washington Consensus

According to the United Nations General Assembly resolution, the immediate objective of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless was to:

“Demonstrate by the year 2000 ways and means of improving the shelter and neighbourhoods of the poor and disadvantaged.”

The UN affirmed that the International Year was not simply a momentary event but rather an action program to culminate in the year 2000. The theme of the Year was, in fact, “Housing for All by the Year 2000.”

The rich diversity of organizational experiences of habitat production originating from very diverse corners of the planet, many of them undertaken with the support of certain public programs and NGOs, contributed a substantive, viable and concrete proposal for addressing this challenge to the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless.

What interfered with those goals and impeded the opening and strengthening of firm support to organized social production and management of human settlements and housing?

In the late 1980s, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the path was opened to reinforcement of trends running in the opposite direction and which led to the imposition of policies that conceive housing as commodity or merchandise, the city as paradise of financial and real-estate speculation, and common and limited goods—land, water, and even air—as products subject to the rules of the market and scarcity. The Washington Consensus --advanced in the 1990s by the multilateral development-finance institutions--and the origin of neoliberal policies—brought very grave consequences, by increasing poverty, exclusion, inequality, and devastation of nature.
The Washington Consensus can be summarized in 10 points:

The first three points: fiscal discipline, reorganization of public expenditure and tax reform, led to (1) the cancellation of direct participation of states in production of housing and other habitat components in favor of private initiatives and interests; (2) the fragmentation of policies through focalized criteria, and (3) the decrease of fiscal resources designated to address the housing needs of low-income sectors.

The fourth point: liberalization of interest rates, coupled with decreased subsidies, unregulated commercialization of land, and wage control policies oriented to lower real wages, impeded (contrary to neoliberal postulates) access of large population sectors to the market-produced housing.

The following three recommendations from the list: competitive exchange rates, liberation of international trade, and opening to direct foreign investment, favored the flow of capital, materials, components and projects from the exterior to local markets, primarily affecting small and mid-sized producers and professionals.

The privatization policy, eighth on the list, contributed to the handling of land as a scarce commodity, to the subordination of the right to housing to economic interests, and to the discouragement of organized social production of habitat through individualization of housing problems, solutions and ownership.

Deregulation, proposed in the ninth point, led to the elimination of urban development planning areas and programs, to the conversion of housing institutions into second-grade finance institutions and, consequently, to the reduction or elimination of the social, technical and administrative supports previously oriented to social producers.

Firmly established property rights, rounding out the list was the tenth point—promoted by the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto—to limit tenure options to individual private property and leave the poor outside of all consideration of the social function of property and, therefore, in vulnerable conditions, subject to the pressures of the real-estate market and mortgage brokers.

The consequences of these policies have been the disorderly growth of cities and the massive production of tiny individual houses that neither make a city, nor build citizenship. Another consequence has been the disappearance and cancellation of supports to participatory social habitat production and management processes, and even their criminalization and forced eradication.

Nothing could be further from the practices and proposals developed by organized civil society since the 1960s! Nothing of these Washington Consensus positions could contribute to realize the goal of guaranteeing access of all persons to housing by the year 2000.

The multilateral financial institutions assumed the task of promoting these policies through the negotiations related to the foreign debt of the developing countries, imposition of structural adjustments, conditioning of credit lines for urban development and housing. Correspondingly, these institutions have produced and widely disseminated documents that conceptually and technically sustain their policy assumptions and recommendations. One of these, published by the World Bank in 1993, translated the expanded postulates of the
Washington Consensus into very specific recommendations for the housing sector, significantly contributing to radical policy changes in this field. It abandoned the state’s role as housing provider in exchange for a facilitator role, limited, of course, to facilitate private mercantile production of habitat.

The Mexican case clearly illustrates this impact. Eight years after publication of this document, the recommendations established in one of its appendices was adopted point-by-point for determination of the central objectives and strategies of the 2001–2006 Housing Sector Program. This program paradoxically contributed to construct a housing commodity-production industry. While very successful and productive, it forgot the social producers and left half of the country's population—those living below the poverty line—outside of access to the market. The only World Bank recommendation that was not fulfilled would be that of focalized programs oriented to the poorest sectors.

The neoliberal globalization process driven by the continually fewer and more-powerful transnational corporations gradually revealed more and more clearly the existence of two antagonistic projects: That of money, expressed in the networks and nodes of control of virtual space, and that of actual places and people.

The Earth Summit

Beginning in the early 1990s, the preparatory process of the UN Conference on Environment and Development, popularly known as the Earth Summit, mobilized and connected a multitude of actors committed to a diverse array of activities. This time, we would not reach Rio each on our own, as in Vancouver, but instead organized and with established alliances among social actors from diverse parts of the world. From the beginning of the preparatory process, the Earth Summit opened a challenge for those of us working in the habitat field, given that the urban theme had not been positioned before then as a relevant topic.

From multiple fronts—in the official preparatory committees and in multiple spaces created by governments or, autonomously, by academic or civil society actors—work was developed to introduce the habitat theme within the debates. In a world undergoing accelerated urbanization, cities could no longer be ignored, in particular when they suffer not only severe environmental problems, but also increasing precariousness and gaping needs affecting hundreds of millions of people, in particular in the so-called Third World countries. Cities also demanded a place in the forefront of the world’s attention given the urgency and the possibility to advance in construction of conditions to guarantee that their future growth not occur at the cost of the countryside, ecological protection areas, other cities, or future generations.

The Brazilian Forum for Urban Reform, the Continental Front of Communal Organizations, and Habitat International Coalition, together with other interested organizations, prepared a text that was debated during the NGO Forum held parallel to the United Nations Conference. The final document produced through this process would be titled the “Treaty for Just, Democratic and Sustainable Cities, Towns and Villages,” and would constitute the beginning and the foundation of a broad process of intellectual work and social
struggle to promote the right to the city and to a healthy environment in the world.

The formulation of the “Treaty” integrally addressed rural and urban settlements, overcoming the partial visions of both the radical conservationists and the social strugglers for adequate housing. Progress, thereby, made toward an integral and complex vision of the theme that required rethinking of the countryside-city relationship and linking sectoral themes with high social impact, such as housing, to the framework in which they are located (rural or urban), and to their environmental surroundings.

Based on three principles: (1) the right to citizenship, (2) democratic management at the local level and (3) the social function of property, Treaty signatories aimed to contribute:

“(…) to the advancement of social movements for building a life with dignity in cities, towns and villages, widening the environmental, economic, social, cultural and political rights of the residents. It will contribute to changing the management of these settlements and improving quality of life, creating an environment to be enjoyed by present and future generations.”

This early document already linked social, economic and environmental themes with human rights themes (those established and others yet to be recognized). This would later be retaken by the networks that promoted the Treaty and by many other committed actors in national processes, such as the Brazilian process, which, in 2001, won adoption of one of the most-advanced urban-management instruments in the world, “The City Statute,” as well as international processes such as that developed through the World Social Forum framework that promotes the formulation of a World Charter for the Right to the City (see section titled: Beginnings of the 21st Century: Forums and Definitions).

Another very relevant result of the Rio Summit was the realization that the relation between what happened in the nongovernmental forum and the official conference was more difficult to establish than in previous events, due to the physical distance between them and restrictions imposed by security pretexts and official postures. The routes through which to promote our proposals would no longer depend on the reduced spaces that intergovernmental conferences concede to invited NGOs. New forces were now underway: one afternoon, as the Summit was underway, tens of thousands of members of Brazilian urban social movements marched down from the favelas, joining forces with promoters of the Treaty, to ratify and advance the Treaty as part of their own demands.

Habitat II: A New Challenge

Twenty years after Vancouver, the second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) was held. The central themes were: housing for all, and sustainable human settlements in an urbanizing world. The Habitat Secretariat called on the governments to organize national committees that should include the participation of all the actors, and the Secretariat opened important spaces in the preparatory committees as well as in the Conference itself for nongovernmental actors to interact with governments.

Han van Putten, then President of HIC and representative of this Coalition to the Preparatory Committee, affirmed in a letter directed to the NGOs participating in the process that:
“In no other preparatory meeting of any UN conference have NGOs been such full partners as in PrepCom 2 of Habitat II. No governmental delegate questioned the right of the NGOs to take part in the discussions of the Committee and its working groups in conditions of equality with the governments. The NGOs were formally invited to designate representatives to the Informal Working Group in charge of elaborating the draft Global Plan of Action.”

The draft of this plan was, in fact, highly influenced by the trends toward privatization and reduction of the state role to that of process facilitator. As noted in van Putten’s letter, some NGO initiatives were able to introduce certain important changes in the various chapters of the Habitat Agenda proposal. Among these stand out the recognition of the primary responsibility of governments to fulfill the goals established by the Conference, thereby increasing the relevance of the states’ role, which the preparatory drafts elaborated by the Habitat Secretariat rather had reduced mainly to that of market facilitator.

The NGOs also achieved the integration within the Habitat Agenda of several articles oriented to facilitate communities’ housing production and access to land.

It would be more difficult in Habitat II to stand against the texts and positions of certain governments seeking to reverse the recognition already achieved at Vancouver, namely adequate housing and related services as basic human rights, with corresponding obligations on states and successive governments. This theme, as we will see below, converted into the focus of the activities and demands of the networks, organizations and social movements participating in the preparatory process, the Conference and parallel forum.

It became even more impossible to achieve clear establishment within the Agenda of the immediate causes of the growing habitat problem in the world and the impacts of the neoliberal economic model being forcibly imposed. The noted letter by Han van Putten addresses this controversy.

The amendment proposed by the NGOs expressed:

“We recognize that a primary cause of the problems faced by human settlements (…) is the current economic system with its unfair trade exchange terms, debt burdens, socially unjust structural adjustment systems, and emphasis on profit and unlimited growth as guiding principles.”

Due to the opposition of the United Kingdom and other countries, the proposal was softened as follows:

“It is recognized that the problems faced by human settlements (…) have been exacerbated by, among other factors, economic inequalities at the international level, debt burdens of many countries, negative social effects of certain elements of structural adjustment programs and unsustainable development models.”

Finally, none of these texts appears in the preamble of the Habitat Agenda, although it does state that:

“Large sections of the world’s urban population live in inadequate conditions and are confronted with serious problems, including environmental problems that are exacerbated by inadequate planning and managerial capacities, lack of investment and technology, and insufficient mobilization and inappropriate allocation of
resources, as well as by a lack of social and economic opportunities.”

A marvel of linguistic and ideological conjuring!

In defense of the right to housing

Some of the most noteworthy of the multiple causes defended by the social and civil organizations in the Habitat II process were those related to: (1) recognition and full realization of the right to the city and to adequate housing; (2) recognition of and support to social production of habitat; (3) democratization of territorial management; (4) the role of organized civil society and the responsibility of the state as guarantor of justice, equity, democracy, and responsible and sustainable use of resources; and (5) new modalities of finance, and mobilization of social resources.

On the first of these, for some international organizations, Habitat II appeared to be the great opportunity to advance in the proposal and negotiation of an International Convention on the Right to Housing and of measures and instruments to facilitate a guarantee of the full exercise and realization of this right. This was anticipated in light of the advances that already had been achieved to date in the recognition, definition and establishment of standards through the United Nations for respect, protection and fulfillment of the human right to adequate housing, binding on a significant number of countries. The strategies to be followed to achieve this objective had been discussed at PrepCom I, held at Geneva in 1994.

It was, therefore, a great shock to encounter at PrepCom 2, held in Nairobi in May 1995, the active rejection of the official United States delegation and that of some other countries to recognition of the right to housing as a basic human right, as established already in the Vancouver Declaration and international treaty law.

This forced us, from that moment on, to concentrate the majority of our energies on what we considered had been already-secured thirty years before: The recognition itself of this right in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and further operationalized at Vancouver, which, for us, was the foundation upon which the Habitat Agenda should be built.

This position of the United States government obligated us to concentrate efforts in the preparation of documents and declarations, lobbying and negotiation of proposals with undecided governments, construction of alliances and implementation of joint actions with other international, regional and local networks, interaction with UN human rights bodies, public protest actions, including the collection of more than 700,000 signatures of support and denouncement of the grave social impacts of forced evictions and other practices in violation of this right delivered to the Habitat II Secretariat during the Conference in Istanbul.

The lobbying work carried out by many HIC members throughout the world, taking advantage of their participation as national committees members, was very significant within this process. During the final discussion of the issue in the Conference, at least six delegations had included HIC-associated NGO representatives as advisors. This, and the firm solidary position of some European Union countries, the World Forum of Parliamentarians, and the Group of 77, in the end facilitated the inclusion of the right
to housing in the Declaration of Governments and in the Habitat Agenda. The Declaration—the sole document that establishes commitments accepted by the participating governments—states as follows:

“We reaffirm our commitment to the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as provided for in international instruments. To that end, we shall seek the active participation of our public, private and nongovernmental partners at all levels to ensure legal security of tenure, protection from discrimination and equal access to affordable, adequate housing for all persons and their families.”

The Habitat Agenda, for its part, includes multiple mentions of rights throughout its various sections, with special reference of the right to housing in accordance with the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Nondiscrimination and equality are emphasized as fundamental guiding principles of the right to housing, as well as the rights to free expression and information, to education, to health, to employment, and to development. The right to housing is clearly expressed in several paragraphs as is the right to not be forcibly evicted.

The Declaration also considers women’s rights, children’s rights, rights of the family, of indigenous people, of the disabled and of vulnerable groups in relation to habitat. Many other paragraphs include specific recommendations for the implementation of these rights.

Despite the dispersed and disarticulated form in which references to human rights appear in the Habitat Agenda, it cannot be forgotten that all human rights are inextricably linked among themselves. In fact, the characteristics inherent to all human rights are their integrality, indivisibility and interdependence. The right to a dignified and adequate place in which to live, the right itself to housing, reaches far beyond four walls and a roof, and in one way or another touches the whole of all human rights: civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental.

The inclusion and the wording of the texts on human rights contained in the Habitat Agenda are to a large degree fruit of the work of multiple actors and social networks specialized in the fields of the city, housing, women, youth, children, the disabled, the indigenous, and the so-called fourth world, which, conscious of said characteristics, were able to join forces during the negotiations that led to the final draft of the Agenda.

Other relevant themes in the Habitat Agenda

The right to the city, widely mentioned in the preparatory events and NGO documents, was not reflected in any explicit form in the Habitat Agenda, given its lack of recognition as such by the United Nations. The theme of social production of habitat, despite the large number of contributions, experiences and proposals collected during the preparatory process, was not developed beyond the already-mentioned contributions, in large part due to the illusion planted in those days by the multilateral institutions that the market, facilitated by decided governmental action, would take charge of resolving the housing problem.
The catastrophic results of the neoliberal policies and their impact on increasingly precarious human habitat conditions, clearly evident by the dawn of the 21st Century, would focus new relevance on both of the above themes. They would be taken up with new energy by the social organizations and movements from a sphere far from the United Nations: that of the World Social Forum.

The recommendations outlined in the Habitat Agenda related to the city and habitat in general, in addition to providing follow-up to Agenda 21, focused primarily on technical and financial aspects and the concentration of actions between the public and private sectors. The three P’s of public-private-partnerships would be the slogan to which multilateral finance agencies would later reduce the complex approach demanded by implementation of the Habitat Agenda.

Democratic management of territory is not absent from the Habitat Agenda. On the contrary, several paragraphs of the Global Plan of Action are dedicated to the theme of participation. But little is said of the levels of decision and control to which this participation should reach to guarantee the profound democratization of the urban development planning, budgeting, administration, follow-up and evaluation processes.

The theme of finance and resource mobilization is addressed in the Habitat Agenda in a broad and innovative form. Some of the themes proposed by the social organizations and NGOs are reflected in the Agenda, although there is a lack of more in-depth understanding of the processes of social production and management of habitat and of the need to strengthen the popular economy in articulation with said processes.

Some social contributions and expressions linked to Habitat II

The need to reach consensus among participating governments regarding the wording of the Habitat Agenda generated several contradictions which are reflected in its extension and complexity. The Agenda is in fact integrated by various agendas: that of the governments, the private agenda, and the social agenda. To facilitate its consultation and follow-up by the NGOs and social organizations, HIC organized parts of the Agenda in a handbook that facilitates rapid location of issues of their interest.

In close relation with these themes of interest, HIC and several Latin American networks had been interacting and formulating position documents. The first version of a document, titled “People Towards Habitat II,” was discussed at a meeting organized by HIC at Havana, in March 1995. The text, structured around five thematic focuses, was debated and enriched by 150 participants from 36 countries from each of the world’s continents.

The new version was presented for further discussion in a workshop organized in February 1996 in Berlin. This version incorporated a section of strategic commitments and lines of action which we continue to defend and advance today.

Not everything was debate, document preparation, struggle, lobbying and negotiation. The NGOs, community based organizations, and social movements generated multiple opportunities and occasions in which to exchange and
celebrate their achievements, strengthen their networks, and show off their creativity. A very meaningful example was the “A City for Life” gathering held in Quito, Ecuador in November 1995. More than 1,100 persons from 15 Latin American and Caribbean countries participated in this event with the objective to prepare the regional proposal to be presented in Istanbul. The gathering included 35 workshops and the inauguration of a traveling exhibit of panel illustrations of close to 300 habitat experiences grouped around some 20 themes. The exhibit was displayed at the NGO Forum in Istanbul and later traveled to several other countries. Organized locally by the NGO Ciudad with the contribution of members of HIC and other regional and local organizations.

Another vigorous collective experience that culminated in Istanbul brought together the slogans and messages of organizations from all over the world in one large banner for a massive march from Galata Bridge to the official Habitat II Conference in a call for the recognition, respect, protection and fulfillment of habitat-related human rights. The march, headed by two popular masked superheroes, Super Barrio Gómez of Mexico and Super Pinei of The Philippines, and halted by Turkish police forces as it crossed the bridge. Nevertheless, it expressed the harmony of the popular struggles and demands and their increasing articulation.

That experience also demonstrated the lengths to which the totalitarian market model will go to demonize all that is public and community-driven. It was necessary to later organize the covert “landing” of Super Barrio at the Conference site, in order for him personally to deliver to the Minister of Cooperation of The Netherlands a book on popular habitat experiences and the Declaration of the Latin American participants, who met in the Forum parallel to the Conference.

These fears, derived from the one-way-only and triumphant thinking behind the attempts to regulate the lives of our peoples in the 21st Century are, in turn, behind the difficulties of putting into practice the set of recommendations included in the Habitat Agenda, outside of those oriented to strengthen the market.

Habitat II follow-up: a limited and limiting process

In the program of UN-Habitat, the application of the Habitat Agenda soon was reduced to promotion of two international campaigns: security of tenure, and urban governance. The first hid behind its indolent name the theme of the right to housing and other rights, poverty and evictions. The second hid the fears of the beneficiaries of the economic model vis-à-vis the demands derived from social needs, impoverishment, exclusion and the lack of opportunities.

The Habitat Center of the United Nations assumed the task (without the resources to do so) to promote these campaigns, appealing to the good will of governments and other actors, whose albeit-weak responses contributed to give the campaigns some visibility. Few countries kept their national committees organized and active, despite Habitat Center recommendations to maintain and reinforce the committees after the Istanbul Conference with the purpose to follow up on application of the Habitat II recommendations.

The rural sphere was no longer even mentioned. Habitat II began this process of forgetting when it declared itself the “City
Summit" and adopted and promoted the concept that cities are the “true motor of development,” within which, in congruence with the neoliberal economic globalization project, the majority of resources and institutional supports are concentrated.

For their part, the most active civil society organizations sought ways to assure continuity of their work. As soon as October 1996, in conjunction with the HIC Annual Meetings, HIC’s Latin American Network undertook various workshops to follow up on the agreements it adopted in Istanbul. HIC international and other actors also prepared a series of follow-up proposals to be presented in Nairobi during the 16th session of the UN Human Settlements Commission held one year after Habitat II. For its part, the International Facilitating Group prepared a report that included the results of a consultation and a brief guide to orient NGO participation in the Commission’s meeting.

Parallel NGO and governmental meetings were still held at that time with moments sought for dialogue between them. We traveled to Nairobi with that purpose, only to find ourselves looking in the mirror. The meeting programmed between NGOs and governments was attended by only one governmental representative, a member of the Mexican embassy designated to coordinate the meeting.

We were left with no response regarding the concrete application to be given to the six strategic lines considered in the Habitat Agenda:

- Decentralization of its fulfillment: To whose benefit? Only the private sector, as has been the case? What resources and capacities would be decentralized in the local powers and in the communities when the central governments have abandoned their roles? What role should states fulfill: only that of market facilitators or that of guarantors of distributive justice? Do the wealthy countries retain any responsibility?

- Partnership of actors: Public-private partnership or institutional spaces for co-responsible and concerted action between all the actors? If the partnerships are among equals, will the subsidiary commitment of the States prevail vis-à-vis the most disfavored groups or will all be left to the invisible hand of the market?

- Development of facilitative instruments: Who facilitates who? The NGOs playing the role of cheap intermediaries facilitating the poverty alleviation programs designed by the multilateral institutions, or the NGOs and the governments facilitating social initiatives and enterprise with adequate supports, instruments and programs?

- Capacity building: Are the poor subject or object of training? Are only the inhabitants subject to training and capacity building, or also the professionals and functionaries? Would it be possible to propose instead mutual and interactive training linked with concrete practice?

- Participation: At what level and with what object? As free labor to cheapen costs and broaden market niches? To legitimize decisions and policies through public consultation? Or instrument to influence decisions and policies through proposals? To control processes and evaluate public performance?
Construction of informational networks: To guarantee access to information, or as discriminatory exercise? Although current trends respond to these questions overwhelmingly in favor of the economic interests, the social movements and those who support participative habitat processes continue to deepen their questioning of dominant policies by placing into practice alternative options, formulating and negotiating proposals, and applying social pressure in response to the closure of spaces of dialogue, cancellation of supports, and criminalization of their actions.

The Millennium Goals: Renewed narrowing of the habitat concept and discouragement of social efforts

In the year 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the so-called Millennium Goals, which in the habitat sphere reduce even further the reaches of the tenure security and urban governance campaigns. Goal 7 proposes to “reduce to half the percentage of persons who lack clean drinking water, between 2000 and 2015” and “considerably improve the lives of at least 100 million slum inhabitants by the year 2010.” The first appears easy to achieve at least in the urban sphere in which 95% of the population “has access to improved water sources,” although the trends in absolute terms point toward duplication of the number of persons without access to the same, from 108 to 215 million between 1990 and 2010, which would certainly complicate fulfillment of the goal in the poorest countries.

In reference to the second noted point, between 2000 and 2020, the number of urban slum inhabitants is projected to grow by an estimated 600 million persons, leaving the goal of improving habitat conditions of only 100 million slum inhabitants highly insufficient. But even that limited goal comes up against the negligence of many governments and powerful interests that restrain its fulfillment.

The Millennium Goals reduce the complex habitat issue, but also the comprehension itself of the profound causes of the problems and subsequently the strategic vision to address them. There is no investment to resolve the root causes of social exclusion and increasing inequality but rather only to compensate some of their most visible effects, through individualized pittances that generate greater passivity, dependence and social fragmentation.

Poverty is statistically abated by injecting resources—in many cases, crumbs—in categories that are, in fact, important for survival: food, health, basic education, and even housing, but little is done to address the structural causes that generate it, to truly strengthen the popular economy and community organization, and to rebuild social fabrics.

We thus see how preference is given to allocate contracts for even the smallest infrastructure works, social facilities or housing to private companies rather than hand over control of resources to the organized community to strengthen its own initiatives, its productive, financial and management capacity, its autonomy, and the construction of mutual aid networks and economic complementation.

The so-called struggle against poverty is, therefore, accompanied in the facts by measures that tend to individualize the problems and the solutions; that appropriate the scarce economic surplus of the poor; that appropriate their know-how
and cancel their possibilities for productive insertion in society, by prioritizing and facilitating privatization of the social programs—in particular, housing programs—and discouraging and even impeding collective self-management and all form of organized social production.

Beginnings of the 21st Century: Forums and Definitions

Civil Society spaces:

In January 2001, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the Social Forum emerged with the slogan: another world is possible, conceived by its Brazilian organizers as an open space “of encounter and reflection, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences, and linkages for effective action of civil society groups and movements opposed to neoliberalism and to world domination by capital and any form of imperialism, and committed to the construction of a planetary society oriented to establish fruitful relations within humanity and between the same and the earth.”

The World Social Forum opened as an autonomous world process and as a space propitious to construction of another globalization: of solidarities and hopes; diversity, pluralism and inclusion; and of mutual understanding and recognition. For the social and nongovernmental organizations and movements working in the habitat field, it would represent a privileged space in which to gather, exchange, concert actions, and construct alliances.

It is within this context that the initiative to promote the right to the city emerged through a broad social process that now “agglutinates” international and regional networks, social and nongovernmental movements and organizations, academic and professional entities, and outstanding individuals from multiple regions, countries and locations of the world.

The WSF framework also fostered agreements achieved oriented to open spaces for the self-managed processes of housing and neighborhood improvement. In the Latin American case, a joint strategy has been established to influence public policies in the matter.

But the greatest potential of the WSF lies in the possibilities of interaction and linkage with committed organizations and persons in other fields of action. The Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus Tent, organized by various networks and organizations committed to diverse themes during the Nairobi Forum in 2007, is an example of the creative and synergetic interaction fostered by the WSF.

The projection of the Forum as open space and its purpose to create linkages among organizations and movements to increase social resistance to the dehumanizing processes prevailing in our world today, stimulate the formation of a critical mass that will surely contribute to imagine and to open viable spaces toward that other world we believe is possible.

Official spaces:

In 2002, the restructuring of what is now called the United Nations Habitat Program separated the directive functions of the Human Settlements Commission from the encounters with other actors, producing the figure of the World Urban Forum. Parallel gatherings would no longer be held, but rather alternating events, limiting organized civil society efforts to broadly interact with
governments and international institutions, and thereby limiting their possibilities to influence their decisions and policies.

This is entirely incongruous, to say the least, when the states have abandoned their roles as providers and governments have shrunk and reduced their regulations and controls, leaving new and heavy responsibilities in society’s hands.

Rights are always accompanied by responsibilities. In turn, shouldn’t new responsibilities be accompanied by new rights? Today’s organized and responsible society should have the ineludible right to participate at the highest level in the decisions that affect its life, including in the establishment of policies and design of instruments, programs and budgets, and in follow-up and evaluation of public performance.

The second World Urban Forum was held in Barcelona in 2004, partially coinciding with the Universal Forum of Cultures. The dialogues: “From marginalization to citizenship,” and “City and citizenship of the 21st century,” both convoked by Jordi Borja, were held in these two events, respectively. The first was organized with support from the HIC office for Latin America, for which 41 cases of social production and management of habitat were selected from throughout the regions to be presented in the exhibit organized by the WUF and later published in book form. Community representatives were invited from nine of the cases so that they themselves could present them within the WUF dialogues. In his prologue to the book, Jordi Borja reflects on the WUF dialogue:

“The voice of the protagonists of difficult building processes of city and citizenship. The voice of those who make city out of exclusion, who make themselves citizens out of the initial denial of their condition on the part of the institutions of the formal city. The voice of those who make city from their homes and their neighborhood outside city walls, who conquer power out of their self-organization, who create more just and warmer relational models than those of the world that initially excluded them.”

These vibrant presentations were attended by more than 250 persons and offered high-quality proposals with the legitimacy earned by the fact that they already had been placed into concrete reality with demonstrable success. But despite all this, they had no significant impact on the debate and the generation of new options.

In the habitat field, the new facilitator state appears more interested in facilitating the large real-estate businesses than the enormous effort of rural and urban inhabitants to realize their right to a place to live. The World Urban Forum figure has thereby come to resemble more and more a business fair than an indispensable political space in which to work out our conflicts and co-responsibly establish agreements.

That was the status of affairs in which we reached the third World Urban Forum organized in 2006 in Vancouver to commemorate 30 years since the Conference that originated this long process of thinking human habitat. This multitudinous event was attended by more than 10,000 persons from all corners of the earth and all sectors involved in habitat issues. The Forum included six dialogues, 13 roundtables, and 160 self-managed gatherings. It was a true Tower of Babel, in which much was said and little was heard by those who actually make the decisions.
Two years after that event, the same market-facilitating policies continue to prevail and strengthen, propitiating commodity-housing and cities with higher energy use and growing land costs pretending to become sustainable and inclusive.

This article expands on ideas I was able to express at the WUF inaugural event at the invitation of the United Nations. Simultaneous to this ceremony, a rally was held at the entrance to the Forum gathering protests and demands of tenants, homeless persons, victims of the privatization of social housing in developed countries, indigenous persons stripped of their lands, Hurricane Katrina victims, and persons evicted from their homes in multiple corners of the world.

Later in the course of Forum activities, the Civil Society Roundtable on “Achievements and Struggles” discussed the human rights impact of forced evictions and displacements, support for collective initiatives, the effects of privatization, and the participation of persons affected by disasters. Within that event, the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing Miloon Kothari, denounced governments’ loss of control over land and housing s behind speculation, the land cartels, and the large beneficiaries of real-estate business and, consequently, the increase of evictions and increasing precariousness of popular habitat in the world.

The events organized by important networks of inhabitants such as Shack Dwellers International (SDI) and by social and nongovernmental movements and organizations such as HIC presented experiences and proposals regarding the strategic role that may be played by organized inhabitants, women and human rights activists to overcome the grave and growing problems of contemporary habitat.

What real impact did these and the many other expressions from the Vancouver WUF have on those who define the policies promoted through the multilateral institutions? Apparently very little, and we have reached the point at which the confrontation becomes more evident each day between two options of future: on the one hand, the option of money and economic globalization driven by a fistful of large transnational and multinational corporations, sustained in the “utopia” of infinite growth and accumulation and that views poverty as emerging market and the excluded as outcasts, and, on the other, the possibility emerging from the clamor of those dispossessed from their lands and those who have gained awareness of the possibility to build from their places and communities a viable and equitable world with room for all worlds. A world that necessarily must learn to live with less so that there be enough for everyone.

One of these has the force of power, of money, of control of the means with which to convince the rest, and of arms. The other barely has hope, but also has the number and the transformative potential that begins to manifest itself in millions of small initiatives, albeit localized and disperse. One of these appears to be headed over a cliff, while the other is just being born.

A Vancouver newspaper contrasted my speech to the opening plenary with that dictated by the U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Alphonso Jackson, revealing how the ideals regarding progressive and collective solutions from the Vancouver 1976 Conference have been reduced to discussions of the free market
and real-estate markets. According to Mr. Jackson, housing ownership would “make our cities stronger, safer and more prosperous.” Jackson emphasized that his work was to realize President Bush’s vision of a “society of owners,” which would be able to create stability, financial independence and freedom.

The grave financial crisis lived today in the United States, and which is already impacting the rest of the world, is consequence of the speculative and irresponsible management of the financial system that led to massive allocation of sub-prime mortgages to persons without solid credit histories. This crisis clearly reveals that the dream of ‘all owners’ does not make cities more safe and prosperous or their inhabitants more financially stable. That deregulation and the unrestricted free market end up reverting and demanding urgent and highly expensive State and taxpayer intervention. That not all works well in the project of money, and it is high time to seriously consider other options not based on almighty profit, but rather on work, solidarity and mutual support.

Final Reflections

This long but still-superficial overview, starting from the foundational encounter of Vancouver 1976 through the following three decades, outlines the undeniable existence of two conflicting trends.

One of them has emerged out of social practice, with consistently firm postulates, which have enriched and diversified it and added complexity through concrete practice. And that, despite its weakness and having had everything against it for decades, has known how to sustain itself, to carry out experiences that wager in favor of the construction of new paradigms and establish increasingly broad and consistent alliances, linkages, and spaces to promote them.

The other, held up by economic and political power, has gradually narrowed its understanding of the problem, homogenizing its proposals and experiences, and reducing the reach of its interventions until focusing them on the most evident and grave consequences of its own “development model.” From a model imposed by those who the poet Octavio Paz would call “the worshipers of the stupid and suicide religion of infinite progress,” which today faces the grave consequences of the degradation of nature and explosion of poverty and inequality in the world. Model that today has run face-first into the mirror of its own ghosts, born out of the relaxation of the regulatory role of the state and the unlimited freedom it has given to the market.

At this crossroads, many questions and decisions remain pending. In the narrow field of this article, three questions remain open, upon the responses to which will depend the immediate viability of improving the habitat of those who have been marginalized from the decisions and excluded from the goods, services and opportunities generated by the whole of social effort.

Will the will exist to rebuild the bridges and the spaces that connect the initiatives and proposals that emerge out of organized social practice with the institutional decisions and practices of the international organisms and the governments?

Will the political will exist to hear and open options that strengthen the autonomy and the productive and management capacity
of those who lack a dignified roof and a secure place in which to live?

Will the social will to influence public policy persist or has the time come to break paths and assume new challenges?

Endnotes

Links are available in the digital version of this document: http://www.hic.gs.org/content/24%20English%20final_Vancouver_1976-2006.pdf
Civil Society Statement on World Habitat Day 2014 regarding preparations for Habitat III

Text signed by 146 networks, civil society movements, universities and individuals from 35 countries (December 10 2014).  

The General Assembly of the United Nations announced 2016 as the year to host the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, also known as Habitat III. Habitat III’s first preparatory meeting was held in New York in September 2014.

For civil society organizations internationally, this conference means the possibility of a New Habitat Agenda, not only a New Urban Agenda. It should consider both rural and urban areas as one continuous territory, while focusing on the realization of the right to adequate and decent housing and habitat. It will also identify international standards to promote: first, the right to the city, land, and territory; second, quality transportation for safe and inclusive urban mobility; third, environmentally-friendly usage and production of energy, and lastly, a sense of community.

In 1976, the Habitat I Conference in Vancouver adopted the Declaration on Human Settlements. Although the Conference occurred during a period of rapid urbanization, the participants never lost sight of the rural-urban relationship. The Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in 1996 also achieved significant advances regarding the right to housing in the Habitat Agenda, due largely to civil society participation.

Despite these achievements, we cannot ignore the current processes of speculative urban developments, financialisation of housing, property and mortgages, as well as land grabbing witnessed around the world. These processes often violate basic human rights and lead to sprawl of cities and social segregation with serious impact on human lives, nature and territories. Moreover, it violates the right of all people to live in peace, dignity and safety without discrimination.

For our organizations, the symbiotic relationship between rural and urban areas cannot be ignored. The policies of recent decades have sought to weaken rural areas and empty their populations in favor of big agribusiness, often promoted by multinational corporations. This has allowed cities to grow at the expense of rural land. We disagree with the hegemonic model of development from which these policies are derived; they are the cause of the seizure of territories of communities, indigenous, autochthones peoples, original inhabitants and peasants, as well as the destruction of their habitat and sources of income. These policies have also increased criminal violence that provokes mass migrations, increased poverty, and a loss of cultural and community practices. All this makes life difficult for those not concentrated in the cities.

These dire consequences require that the discussions, proposals and resolutions of Habitat III focus primarily on human rights and the state obligations which result from them. Alternative proposals from grassroots and civil society organizations should be considered in Habitat III, such as:
- The evaluation of the implementation of the Habitat II Agenda and its corresponding Global Plan of Action;

- The promotion of measures to overcome inequalities, discrimination, segregation and lack of opportunity to habitat and adequate and decent living conditions in both the city and country;

- The development of proposals to create tools for: participatory planning and budgeting, institutional support for the social production of habitat, democratization of territorial management areas, citizen control, coordination with planning actors of the public sector, habitat production and management, as well as the recognition of the social function of property.

All this, among other things, is made explicit and developed in the framework of the Right to the City that endorses struggles, experiences and expectations of urban residents as subjects of law.

At the same time, HABITAT III should encourage measures that promote responsible production and consumption, avoiding distortions of the “green economy”. In the new agenda, there must be tools to prevent and compensate for human rights violations related to habitat, particularly the dispossession of territories, evictions and forced displacement of populations caused by megaprojects and infrastructure works. It should also emphasize the enforcement of existing rules which guarantee these rights that states ignore or distort systematically (disregard toward the right to consultation and free consent, absence of public demonstrations, evaluation of social impacts, and abuse of the concept of public utility among others). Finally, in HABITAT III, beyond the plan to construct resilient cities, measures must be designed to address the root causes of environmental degradation and climate change. These measures question the economic development models that are based on unlimited growth, which rarely take into account social and cultural factors.

None of this will be possible if, in HABITAT III, civil society does not participate equally with respect to the other actors. This is especially important for issues such as representation in national committees, access to information, and the inclusion of their concerns and proposals on national and international debates throughout the process. In order to guarantee social participation in HABITAT III, methods must be produced to facilitate appropriate conditions in the planning, during, and after the conference. All must have access to information and logistical support for all social proposals during each phase of the process. It is important to note that social participation must reflect gender equity, facilitation of various age groups, inclusion of people with disabilities, and representatives of indigenous peoples, with respect for their customs.

It is essential that the new Habitat Agenda include the participation of social movements and civil society organizations. It should address the diversity of interests and practices. Therefore, we demand that this international effort recognizes innovations by the popular sector, which frequently faces opposition and even criminalization, in order to achieve more just, democratic and sustainable cities in which human rights are fulfilled. We wish to build another possible city and another possible world.

Endnotes

HIC Basics: Restoring Human Rights and Habitat to the Habitat III Process and New Habitat Agenda

Habitat International Coalition (HIC)\(^1\) has consistently called for the integrity of the Habitat II (Istanbul, 1996) commitments and modalities, especially as the world advances toward Habitat III (the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development). This requires:

- Upholding the Habitat II-established principle to be as inclusive as possible;
- Maintaining the Habitat Agenda, not pursuing a narrower “urban agenda”;
- Ensuring that human rights and good governance approaches continue to anchor and guide global human settlement policy and corresponding commitments.

The various Habitat III preparations, reporting and deliberation processes and contents officially have avoided (1) a faithful evaluation of commitments made at Habitat II; (2) a review of housing rights and good-governance practices consistent with those essential aspects of the Habitat II promise, while taking into consideration the lessons learned and conceptual clarity gained since Habitat II; and (3) realistic preparation for the emerging human settlement-development challenges that light the way toward improving “balanced rural and urban development,” as pledged since Habitat I (Vancouver, 1976).\(^2\)

No programme, campaign, or periodic report of UN-Habitat or the United Nations (UN) Secretary General so far has reviewed or evaluated the commitments of Habitat II, and the UNHabitat-proffered national Habitat III reporting guidelines deliberately omitted these essentials. By design, the Habitat III process has missed the opportunity to assess the Habitat Agenda’s strengths and weaknesses, or consider the relevant norms that have developed over the past 20 years. Instead, a willful amnesia about the holistic Habitat Agenda and an exclusively “urban” focus have prevailed, dividing and alienating constituencies, while culling them in favor of a narrower set of interests. The spirit of Vancouver and the achievements of Istanbul are now at stake.

Promises, Promises

HIC has upheld the Habitat Agenda faithfully since 1976 and, over the last 20 years, has cautioned against the erosion and abandonment of the core human rights commitments and recognized obligations enshrined in Habitat II. As in many serial UN policy conferences, this erosion is leading Habitat III’s standard to be inferior to the one before. That could have been avoided by critically reviewing the performance of the Habitat II commitments, considering most of them the foundation of the eventual Habitat III’s pillars.

The promises that governments made and development partners shared at Habitat II are classified in the outcome “Commitments” and “Global Plan of Action.”\(^3\) States and governments reaffirmed their obligations to the full and progressive realization of the human right to adequate housing 61 times in the Habitat II outcome document.\(^4\) Among the specific commitments corresponding to this legal obligation was the states’ pledge to protect from, and redress forced evictions.\(^5\) In 1996, governments also explicitly committed to
combat homelessness. Neither core commitment is mentioned in the UN-Habitat national Habitat III report guidelines, nor reflected in the proposed New Agenda drafts.

However, these priorities have not waned. The Habitat Agenda commitments were, at once, varied and inter-related. Their progressive nature augured hope for a better living environment by:

- Ensuring gender equality
- Protecting the environment
- Practicing international cooperation
- Maintaining just macroeconomic policies
- Recognizing habitat’s urban and rural scope
- Promoting community-based land management
- Ensuring participatory governance in all spheres
- Promoting land markets that meet community needs
- Involving multiple sectors and partnering with civil society and communities
- Adopting innovative instruments that capture gains in land value and recover public investments
- Increasing housing affordability through subsidies and other innovative forms of assistance, including support for self-built housing.

The official refusal so far to evaluate implementation—or even recall—Habitat II commitments has generated questions about the credibility and implementation of any new Agenda.

Beyond that fatal flaw, the so-called "new urban agenda," so far neglects the former promise of balanced development of all human habitats, and promotes only urbanization and city "growth" as the drivers of the world’s economic development in a homogenized future. Thus, greater urbanization has been presented mainly as unstoppable, without recognition of the human choices responsible for it. This has fostered a vision of a depopulated, mechanized and extractivist countryside, devoted to the exclusive prosperity of cities, without regard for rural habitats and populations, including peasants, farmers, forest dwellers, and indigenous peoples.

Against this vision, HIC joins several states and blocs in reiterating that not all sustainable development belongs to cities. The Coalition advocates the indivisibility of human rights, which calls for balanced development (and balanced investment) in both urban and rural areas, as pledged in Habitat II, and as a needed alternative to a projected uniquely urban future. However, Habitat III organizers and followers assert a vision that evades the negative aspects of urbanization such as private interests dictating the price and terms of access to land; impoverished people forced to move to cities; chronic homelessness and landlessness, housing inequity, and increased evictions and displacement.

These violations of housing and land rights existed in the past, and have been further exacerbated by more-intensive climate change, conflicts, occupations, wars, protracted crises, fragile states, and the greatest displacement of people since the World Wars. The current Habitat III discourse avoids all of these, ignoring their root causes, despite the opportunities left by gaps in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Yet these problems are colossal, despite pledges to solve the dilemmas, as already discussed 40 years ago. Rather than facing the urgent and obvious tasks of fulfilling the human right to adequate...
housing, ending homelessness and banning and remedying forced evictions amid swelling human displacement, a domineering urbanite ideology is masking them behind a narrower, more divisive and inoperable “urban agenda” and accompanying business model.

HIC also supports inputs from civil society partners that deserve inclusion in a New Habitat Agenda, welcoming inclusion of social-solidarity economy, the social regulation of real estate markets, stronger commitments to gender equality and women’s rights, ensuring easy access and full participation for people with disabilities, protecting the right to a healthy environment, and calling for effective measures to end the destruction of habitat by conflict, occupation and war, among others.

HIC hopes that states would insist that a New Habitat Agenda replaces the narrow proposed “new urban agenda” and conscientiously reflect greater coherence with universal needs and urgencies, current global policy processes and standing commitments, including the long promised habitat approach and pledge to balanced rural and urban development within a framework of human rights and related international norms. So, as contributors to this new global policy, we all have to put the New Agenda back on a principled human-rights-habitat track, while also addressing certain shortcomings of previous Agendas. With greater knowledge and experience over 40 years, we can develop a New Habitat Agenda with greater relevance to current and emerging challenges during the next 20 years.

Greater Clarity and Lessons Learned since 1996

Habitat III could live up to its title (i.e., upholding the “habitat” concept) if it were to build on the Habitat II commitments and findings from their performance evaluation, while aligning the New Habitat Agenda explicitly with the over-arching frameworks of the new Paris Agreement on climate change, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and the World Humanitarian Summit outcomes. The Habitat Agenda promised a “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.” Pursuing that vision would be more coherent with these over-arching policy instruments than a purely “urban” one.

During the Habitat II Agenda’s implementation period, states, governments, UN bodies and other development partners, including civil society and social movements, have developed and further clarified concepts and practices inspired by Habitat Agenda processes. Meanwhile, these concepts and their operation have evolved to inform Habitat III. While it remains within the competence of Habitat Agenda Partners to inventory these good practices and concepts, HIC has identified the following key elements that it expects to be among the New Habitat Agenda commitments:

Right to the city, its elements and derivations: Although predating Habitat I, the concept of the “right to the city” has evolved in the form of the “Global Charter for the Right to the City,” numerous local charters, the United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) “Charter Agenda on Human Rights in the City,” regional iterations of the concept, a prolific literature on both
its theory and practice, urban social movements asserting the claim of a right to the city and the formation of the current Global Platform for the Right to the City.24 Articulations of the elements of the right to the city are found also in such related expressions as: “human rights city,” “human rights in the city,” “human rights habitat” and “rights of the city.”25 These approaches contextualize human rights and corresponding obligations of the state, through all spheres of government, and add a spatial-justice dimension to already-codified human rights. While the human rights and good-governance practices characterizing this mode of local development are not the entitlement of city dwellers alone, HIC envisions their application to ensure “the right to the city within a human-rights habitat.”

Democratic local governments are still our closest partners in implementing the New Habitat Agenda, as pledged at Habitat II. We seek that partnership not merely with local “authorities,” but actual local “governments” in the participatory-democratic sense. HIC shares the vision of governments operating within “spheres,” not stratified tiers, which aligns with the international law view of the state as a legal personality constituting of territory, people, and the whole of its constituent institutional parts, whereby all government spheres share common but differentiated obligations.

Social production of habitat is also a time-honoured concept, but, more importantly, it is the dominant form of housing production in the built environment of many cities and human settlements, especially in the developing world. The social production of habitat (SPH) encompasses all nonmarket processes carried out under inhabitants’ initiative, management and control that generate and/or improve adequate living spaces, housing and other elements of physical and social development, preferably without—and often despite impediments posed by—the state, or other formal structures or authorities.26 The SPH experience provides a basis for fulfilling the human right to adequate housing and corresponding obligations to extend urban planning and other support to communities engaged in SPH, as well as illustrates the related concepts of public-popular partnership (PPP) and public-private-popular partnership (PPP). HIC echoes the call from the Urban Thinkers Campus on “Housing in the City We Need” for state-supported, socially produced housing and habitat.27

Habitat metabolism: Equitable, ethical, rule-based, and people-centered development planning and democratic management can optimize economies of agglomeration, promote sustainable density, encourage social diversity and mixed land uses, foster inclusiveness, maximize heterogeneity, guarantee equal opportunity, promote livable public spaces, ensure vibrant and safe streets and, thus, make human settlements more equitable, functional, democratic and environmentally balanced. A needed planning-and-administrative vision broader than the touted “urban agenda” considers the habitat “metabolism,” addressing and treating a human settlement or city as a living organism, and seeks to sustain it.

Infrastructure, resource use and efficiency, production, environment viability and human wellbeing are key elements of such a metabolism. This vision becomes more conceivable—indeed indispensable—in light of efforts to maintain city-region food
systems, labor markets and transport systems, reconsidering the defunct segregating distinctions of “rural” and “urban,” and enabling an approach to villages or city-regions as functional metabolisms.

The social function of land and property has been the subject of increased policy debate and reform over the years since Habitat II. In practice, the social function of a thing is its use or application to the benefit of the greater society, in particular, prioritizing those with the greatest need. Thus, the social function of land, property, a good, resource or service is realized when it is applied to satisfy a general social need or the unmet need of a segment of society. The social function of—and human right to—land and property in human settlement development is a policy principle that can ensure more-equitable distribution of benefits of an economic system and habitat metabolism. Its application is the subject of much contemporary practice and, in certain countries, is ordained as a constitutional requirement.

Value sharing, variously expressed, is not a new concept, but its expression reflects the Habitat II commitment to apply “innovative instruments that capture gains in land value and recover public investments.” Several states and cities have developed corresponding programs, projects, institutions and legislation to operationalize the social application of the appreciation in value or capital gain from a change in zoning, use, sale or development of public land or property. A portion of the added value derived from public land or property becomes a public asset considered to be a “socially produced” value. Applying the social function of that property, such assets create value that redounds to the welfare of the community or municipality, with the function of distributing its benefits to needy citizens, and/or for other public purposes.

Local economic and fiscal systems have to evolve from being mere instruments of revenue generation and budget management to vectors of change that generate real development outcomes. Fiscal systems and services must realize their social function also in support of people-centered development. Public and private investment must uphold “fundamental principles and basic rights at work,” and investment policies must purposefully generate decent work, ensuring adequate housing and human well-being. Value produced must be recovered sufficiently to finance and promote equal and equitable access to public services, continuous improvement of living conditions and fully and progressively realize the human right to adequate housing, while preventing evictions and displacement. Rule of law and accountability for violations of habitat rights, in particular the human rights to adequate housing, land, water, sanitation, a healthy environment, public goods and services, and related process rights must be organic to the Habitat III commitments. The practice of forced evictions; displacement; population transfer, including the implantation of settler colonies in occupied territories; demographic manipulation; land grabbing; and other gross violations, grave breaches, and crimes
have continued with impunity in every region since Habitat II. Any development agenda that upholds the world order must put an end to these wholly unsustainable models, destructive behaviours and breaches of existing norms, while ensuring reparation for victims, and affected persons and communities.\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{Extraterritorial obligations} to respect, protect and, in certain cases, fulfill human rights form one dimension\textsuperscript{36} of the duties of states, including local governments and authorities, under both treaties and peremptory norms of international law. The New Habitat Agenda should enshrine the human right to adequate housing, the human right to water and other habitat-related substantive and process human rights domestically. Meanwhile, states and their constituent bodies also bear obligations to apply these norms through their international relations, transactions and the regulation of transnational third parties.

\textit{Moving Forward}

Since 1996, new and growing challenges and issues apply to human settlement and deserve addition to the New Habitat Agenda. The patterns of urbanization, new policies and dissenting voices, as well as environmental conditions, have created new urgencies for the New Habitat Agenda to address:

\textit{Distribution of economic values}, not merely growth, is the critical measure of development, as well as policy and governance success. Unregulated private interests continue to hoard the world’s wealth and natural resources. The world now has more billionaires than ever before.\textsuperscript{37} If only one-fifth of the wealth possessed by the world’s 1,225 billionaires were allocated for human settlement upgrading, the net USD 1 trillion could solve the problem of informal settlements and inadequate housing well within the Habitat III period. States and governments would fail in their duties to impoverished citizens if they did not commit to a wealth-redistribution scheme in Habitat III. In any event, the urban poor will invest another USD 1 trillion of their own resources in the social production of habitat in even less time. Well managed and supported, the proceeds would create millions of jobs, ensure dignified living conditions, realize human rights, and improve human well-being. Income inequality has been characterized as the “defining challenge of our time.”\textsuperscript{38} At Habitat III, states must not fail to rise to this challenge by deferring to the market and its consequences as if “inevitable.”

\textit{Resilience}: Climate change has raised the priority of disaster preparedness and risk reduction in human settlements, as well as the capacity to sustain and recover from various shocks. Resilience of human settlements and inhabitants is more vital also in light of cyclical crises such as those in finance, food and other resource distribution. Human settlements and their inhabitants are compelled to be more resilient, in order to survive the shocks that have manifested since Habitat II, as well as those anticipated in the period of the New Habitat Agenda. However, as much a virtue resilience may be, it must not become a substitute to sustainable development, or another pretext to shift the onus onto victims of human-made crises and violations of their human rights, expecting them and their defenders, as well as philanthropists and other donors, to bear the consequences incessantly without resolving the root causes of shocks and crises, including through the accountability and liability of responsible
parties, while ensuring remedy and reparations for victims.\textsuperscript{39}

Urbanization is not inevitable: The realization of global development, as any outcome, is about facing dilemmas by making and acting on choices. Since Habitat II, certain parties have promoted the axiom that urbanization is “inevitable.”\textsuperscript{40} Such ideology dismisses human responsibility, suggesting that the forces and factors of urbanization are involuntary, or the consequence of some force majeure. It also dismisses the causal and liability issues of duress and distress migration to cities, due to a failure to honor the commitment to “balanced rural and urban development.” Urbanization is not self-executing. Rather, it is the consequence of human choice and corresponding action. The fact and nature of urbanization are outcomes of human political will, among other conscious choices.

Urbanization is only one deliberate policy choice among others. With the currently dominant market-driven urbanization model, real or imagined opportunities also are not self-executing. The distribution of urban wealth and poverty become systemic, but also grounded in deliberate policy choices. Development processes, including urban development, thus, are no more inevitable than they are linear, or always forward moving, nor are they irreversible, without alternative, or exempt from needed restraint.

Focus on marginalized individuals, groups and communities: HIC is gratified at the drafts of the eventual New Habitat Agenda pledging to “leave no one behind” and “reach the furthest behind first,” consistent with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. While these are not new commitments, they are clearer in their articulation, taking on new meaning in light of the current patterns of environmental and human-made disasters, including violations of habitat rights cited here. In all cases and processes, implementation will require sufficient emphasis on remedy and prevention, spatial justice, and strict nondiscrimination. By definition, an urban-centric agenda cannot achieve such ends.

Follow-up and Review

The Habitat II commitments, although never properly operationalized, monitored or evaluated, have provided a firm basis for further development of the principles and commitments for a better world with a New Habitat Agenda in 2016. Those promises stand to be improved and developed as proposed above, this time with national targets to be monitored and assessed during the coming 20 years through a multi-stakeholder platform operating under the new UN Sustainable Development System.

The opportunity also presents itself finally to reform UN-Habitat accordingly, aligning it with the triple (security, development and human rights) chartered purposes of the UN. Applying the preceding decades of normative development and practical experience within the current over-arching global policies, a New Habitat Agenda must avoid repeating the legacy of broken promises, missing historic opportunities, and squandering the efforts and resources invested in Habitats I and II, and in this Habitat III process.

Endnotes

\textsuperscript{1} Habitat International Coalition (HIC) is a global network of about 400 organizations working in over 120 countries on habitat and related human rights issues. For more information, see: www.hic-net.org
For instance, the 2030 Agenda recognizes that foreign and military occupation impedes sustainable development, but offers no goal, target or indicator to address this distorting and wholly illegal root cause. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/RES/70/1, 21 October 2015, para. 35, at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/summit.


24 See Global Platform for the Right to the City at: http://www.righttothecityplatform.org.br/.


26 For more information and cases, go to HIC general website and HIC - HLRN website.


30 Also known as “plusvalía,” “mais-valia,” and “land-value capture” in much of the urban-development literature.

31 The Habitat Agenda, para. 76(h).


33 As the ILO has defined, at: http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang-en/index.htm.


36 In addition to domestic, individual and collective dimensions of duty under treaty and erga omnes obligations.

Habitat III’s Seven Deadly Sins of Omission

By Joseph Schechla, coordinator of Habitat International Coalition Housing and Land Rights Network (HIC HLRN)

“Everything has been thought of before, but the problem is to think of it again.”
Johann Wolfgang Goethe

By the time of this writing, the engagement of civil society in the Habitat Agenda has gone through several progressive stages. Forty years of experience has taught us much about the possibilities, the needs and the expectations of a global Habitat Agenda. The 1st UN Habitat Forum at Vancouver in 1976 was an epiphany. It set several landmarks.

Despite the hazards of global politics and the nature of government decision making, Habitat I left us with a standard that was without precedent. It enshrined solemn commitments of states and their governments to face the diverse challenges of housing humanity in human settlements in complementary fashion. It comprised a set of common promises to pursue “balanced rural and urban development,” reflecting the understanding that all human settlements are somehow linked. Habitat I also promised that governments would innovate ways to return socially produced values, including the use of the people’s lands and resources, that would ensure equitable distribution and funding for social purposes.

It was a time of significant normative development. Following ten years after the adoption of the two Human Rights Covenants (1966), Habitat I formed one of the first international conferences to include the newly independent states of Africa. It was also the first UN conference officially attended by the Palestine Liberation Organization. The architecture and symbolism of the public forum in 1976 also reflected the presence of Canada’s indigenous peoples, who hosted the events on their ancestral land.

Evolution

Clearly, much of the world has changed since then. Clearly much has not. However, on the subject of civil society involvement in the Habitat Agenda, Vancouver was an important landmark. Many of the “unofficial” participants found common cause in the form of a civic platform that later became the Habitat International Coalition (HIC). The founders of HIC dedicated their efforts to supporting—and further developing—the Habitat Agenda, which is a commitment that endures until today.

What was different and improved at the time of the Habitat Agenda’s renewal at Istanbul in 1996 was a lively presence of organized civil society with a rich background of following the Habitat Agenda and supporting its further development. While the Habitat II Agenda reaffirmed many of the same wise commitments of Habitat I, including those cited above, the new Habitat Agenda went further to align with human rights obligations as a core feature of Habitat II, acknowledging 11 standing human rights treaties at the time of its adoption.

In essence, Habitat II’s further achievements were: (1) an affirmation of the centrality of human rights, in particular the progressive
realization of the human right to adequate housing (as provided in international instruments) in all human settlements and (2) recognition of the principles of good governance in balanced rural and urban development. Those two pillars of the Habitat II Agenda are reflected in the Istanbul Declaration and Habitat II Agenda. Other detailed commitments demonstrate the continuity and integrity of the 1st UN Habitat Forum (Vancouver, 1976) and Habitat II (Istanbul, 1996).

Habitat II also enshrined a definition of the established concept of habitat 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 ends [points] of a human settlements continuum in a common ecosystem” (H2, para. 104).

Moving forward toward Habitat III, we can boast a much broader civil society engagement than ever before, both inside and outside the official processes. However, where is the integrity of the Habitat Agenda commitments? Through the myriad processes leading up to Quito’s October 2016 summit, it has become clear that civil society will have to play an assertive role to anchor the Habitat values and commitments (enshrined in Habitat II) that constitute an inviolable minimum for the next 20-year Agenda.

As in all serial UN policy conferences, we now face the real hazard that states and their followers will push for a standard inferior to the one before. However, for most of global civil society, including social movements, grassroots groups and other stakeholder constituencies, the Habitat II commitments should be the foundation of a current review and the eventual Habitat III construct.

However, this vision is not shared among the leadership of UN-Habitat, the agency that bears the primary responsibility as steward of the Habitat Agenda. The current mantra of UN-Habitat is a call for only a “new urban agenda,” neglecting the formerly sworn balanced development of all human habitat. Rather, urbanization and city growth are promoted as the drivers of economic development and the world’s future priority objective of homogenization. In fact, the pursuit of privatizing the habitat have been the long-standing UN-Habitat advice to governments, ever since the agency admitted abandoned the Habitat Agenda shortly after it was born.

In fact, whether anyone were to consult the annual report of the UN Secretary General, “The Coordinated implementation of the Habitat Agenda,” or the regular General Assembly’s 2nd Committee reports entitled “Implementation of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II),” it is not possible find mention of the commitments from Habitat II, or any reference to their implementation. Accordingly, UN-Habitat and its UN oversight functions have equally forsaken the Habitat Agenda.

The newly branded “urban agenda” promises to replace the intentionally forgotten Habitat II without looking back. However, a reading of the preceding Habitat Agenda’s is not only essential to the current Habitat Debate, it is also revealing of how the expenditure of so many resources in the Habitat III processes are required to reinvent the proverbial wheel. However, dropping diverse human habitat for an exclusive “urban agenda” involves
reinventing a wheel that does not quite complete a circle.

This new and myopic perspective also promises to harm global civil society as a whole. While the agendas and declarations emanating from so many regional and thematic meetings are already cooked before the opening session, the participation of civil society in the expression of Habitat III priorities has been anemic. Further, the executive committee of constituency chairs at the official General Assembly of Partners (GAP) recently resolved not to offer input into the Habitat III Agenda, but rather to position itself as a pool of implementers of the yet-unseen outcome.

The promotional “new urban agenda,” with its dismissal of core human rights Habitat commitments, is even more worrying for the harm it augurs for social solidarity among civil society streams. Deliberately dropping the rural, peri-urban and other landed human habitat’s from Habitat III poses the biggest hazard to human habitat and civil society’s representation in it. For example, the small farmers and indigenous peoples—supposed Habitat Agenda Partners—are alienated from the debate.

Obvious lessons of civil society over the past 14 years of deliberating the “Right to the City” have taught that an exclusive “urban” focus is potentially divisive. In 2009, CSO and social movements tried to avert this self-defeating and opponent-serving course of broken solidarity and messaging at the 2009 Belém WSF. There participants produced a convergence document and a message that they carried also to the WSF at Dakar 2011). In these documents urban, rural and indigenous organizations pledged not to work at cross purposes, but to develop needed mutuality of understanding, solidarity and strategic objectives.

In the current Habitat process, civil society should reflect on and renew that commitment to treat our human habitat as an integral whole, developing cooperation, value sharing and complementarity. Abandoning the Habitat Agenda for a set of principles that stop at the city limits is not the process—or world—we need.

A reading of the foregoing Habitat Agenda commitments, as well as a review of Habitat Agenda-inspired civil society commitments also reveals several critical issues and values that remain neglected in the current process toward Habitat III. These can be summarized in a few prerequisites for the future of human habitat development.

Seven Deadly Sins of Omission

HIC has been vocal in the Habitat III forums and explicit in writing about the need for a rigorous monitoring-and-evaluation process to learn the lessons of Habitat II implementation. Likewise, the Coalition also has pointed out the need for the new Habitat Agenda to commit to a monitoring-and-evaluation mechanism for the next 20 years, as well as applying standard evaluation criteria, as HIC has expressed in Habitat III Basics.3

These key shortcomings have enabled the current amnesia about the spirit and content of the successive Habitat Agendas. They also join what can be understood as the seven deadly sins of Habitat III omission manifesting in both process and content.

Mindful of these, we now can offer a brief inventory of missing-but-indispensable contents and approaches for the new Agenda. If the new Agenda is to be taken
seriously, it is indispensable the Habitat III address the following:

(1) The financialization of housing, land and habitat: This looms as one of the most egregious omissions in the current deliberations, despite the tragic lessons learned—but never applied—from the North American mortgage crisis and consequence crisis of the global financial system. HIC has joined other networks and civil society groups in an open letter to the Habitat III organizers to correct this glaring omission.

(2) A review of population policy (such as it exists): The Policy Papers and UN-Habitat messaging reiterate the presumed “inevitability” of population growth and movement that call for much greater urbanization. However, the world has not undergone a review of population policies since the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), at Cairo, (1994). The now-forgotten ICPD program of action sought to integrate population and development strategies and manage population to ensure sustained economic growth and “eradicate poverty” (Principle 7). That international policy document recognized the inextricable links between population policy and development success; however, the absence of explicit recognition of this link in the Habitat III inputs suggests little or no attention in the outcome document, unless this course conscientiously changes.

(3) Incorporation of universal and interdependent human rights and corresponding obligations at the core of Habitat III: A reflection of normative development since 1996 would serve the Habitat Agenda drafters to find coherence with international law as it currently stands. However, the relevant international law dimensions are absent from the Habitat III documents and the discourse to date. At a minimum, Habitat III should recognize the common (but differentiated) obligations of all spheres of government to respect, protect and fulfill human rights, including central institutions, local authorities and local governments, where they actually exist. In particular, this would reaffirm the key Habitat Agenda commitment to the full and progressive realization of the human right to adequate housing, including its expressions as developed since 1996. This promise—indeed obligation—of states would take into consideration the “right to the city,” along with “human rights cities,” “rights of the city,” “urban rights,” “human rights habitat,” etc. In this connection, too, any reference to, or version of the “right to the city” slogan and/or principles would be wholly inadequate if it did not also express the “city” or urbanized habitat as an integral part of the “human rights habitat,” which is the more-embracing concept and less-divisive and nondiscriminatory context that the one singling out city dwellers. This approach also must include a reaffirmation of the (broken) promise of Habitat II to combat homelessness and to prevent and redress forced evictions.

(4) The consequences of conflict, occupation and war on the human habitat: It is unconscionable that the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda recognizes the great challenge of “foreign and military occupation” as an obstacle to development, but offers no goal, target or indicator toward its elimination. The UN response to this plight also is woefully lacking if it does not also develop the UN Charter-based principle of implementing human rights for both the preventive and remedial dimensions for which the norms were
codified. Habitat III also must take lessons from other sectors and normative precedents that recognize the need for strengthening policy coherence “by fostering coordination of policies and actions taken in the fields of humanitarian assistance, development and human rights.”

(5) **Combatting corruption in urbanization and human-settlements development:** Some authors have warned that any ambition for urban development can succeed only when corruption is effectively tackled. Similarly, the global fight against corruption critically depends on cities. It is imperative that the fight against the devastating functions and consequences of corruption form a priority for human settlements development in the coming decades. The Habitat III “issue paper” and draft policy “framework” paper on urban governance admit that “local corruption constitutes one of the big scourges of the urbanising world.” However, this is only a belated starting point for any practical commitment in a New Habitat Agenda.

(6) **The “habitat metabolism” concept and approach must be shared and adopted:** The integrated and organic approach to human settlements as the living entities that they are calls for approach habitat as any metabolism. In human settlement development, management, governance and planning, the habitat metabolism is the subject of a holistic vision that addresses and treats a human settlement as a living organism and seeks to sustain it. Infrastructure, resource use and efficiency, production, environment viability and human well-being are key elements of a habitat metabolism. This would include the recognition of the nature of including city-region food systems, security and sovereignty; infrastructure; resource planning, use and management; energy; labour movements and patterns; water systems; transport, etc., which attributes are far more than just “urban” in nature.

(7) **Proper monitoring-and-evaluation methods and mechanisms:** With this omission in Habitat II and the silence about it in Habitat III so far, we return to our point of departure. The greatest lessons learned in implementing Habitat II over the past 20 years have been squandered by UN-level dismissal of its commitments. In this sense, Habitat II management has tossed out the Habitat II baby with so much Habitat III bath water. The official refusal to date to evaluate implementation—or even recall—Habitat II commitments has generated questions as to credibility of a new Agenda, by any name, if it faces the same amnesia in future. Rigorous follow-up processes for H3 are needed to avoid the Agenda-performance failures of the past. HIC and others have proposed drawing on the example of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) mechanisms, which involve a civil International Planning Committee and a Civil Society Mechanism. However, this requires urgent deliberation before an outcome document results by repeating this grave omission.

**Conclusion**

Each of these seven deadly sins of Habitat III omission deserves a policy paper, deliberation process and ultimate coverage in the New Habitat Agenda. However, the Habitat III organizers, in particular UN-Habitat leadership and the Habitat III Secretariat, are not listening to reason. Unless they do, posterity will not remember them kindly.
As usual, these omissions put an even greater onus on civil society, for they are the publicly interested parties who can envision the need and foresee the hazards. Until now, as evidenced by the inert stance of the GAP, much of civil society and other stakeholder constituencies have expressed more concern about positioning and presence in the meetings. Much less effort has been spent on the needed content and substance of the global policy. With only a few months remaining till October 2016, the time for correction is now.

Endnotes


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

7. Habitat Agenda, op. cit., paras. 40n, 61b, and 98b.


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