Habitat III and the Right to the City – Why we need a new urban paradigm

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The UN system will also need to tackle the current urbanization patterns and challenges, making the right to the city a key issue on the international agenda and not just something that is discussed sporadically, every twenty years.

After almost three years, including the last four months of intense and not always easy negotiations, the text of the so-called New Urban Agenda (NUA) is finally ready for approval during the UN third Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in Quito, Ecuador (Habitat III). Some voices are quite satisfied with both the process and the outcome so far, while others are not. Some voices are optimistic about the implementation and follow-up measures that have been established; others are not. What is certainly clear is that the general balance cannot be framed in a categorical all or nothing formulation.

Throughout the process, several civil society organizations, including Habitat International Coalition (HIC)[1] and the Global Platform for the Right to the City (GPR2C)[2] in partnership with United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)[3], have participated at several of the preparatory steps, such as the regional and thematic official meetings, multiple editions of the Urban Thinkers Campuses and the General Assembly of Partners. At the same time, our members were engaged in the Policy Units responsible for drafting the substantive inputs for the New Urban Agenda's first Draft (May 2016), and we collectively reviewed and provided feedback on many of the subsequent versions as well as the Issue Papers released since May 2015.

For over a year now, we strongly campaigned for the explicit inclusion of the right to the city[4] as the cornerstone of the NUA, gaining support from some countries and strong opposition from others. This concept actually became one of the key hot topics during the debates and negotiations that ended up with the current consensual formulation. Thank to international mobilization and tireless advocacy activities at multiple levels, its definition and many of its main principles and contents are now part of the shared vision in the Quito Declaration (paragraphs 11-13) that the world leaders will subscribe later in October, making this the first time that this concept is included on an international agenda signed by national governments at the UN level.

The synthetic definition refers to the equal use and enjoyment of cities and human settlements, seeking to promote inclusivity and ensure that all inhabitants, of present and future generations, without discrimination of any kind, are able to inhabit and produce just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements, to foster prosperity and quality of life for all. They also recognize the efforts of some national and local governments to enshrine this vision, referred to as right to the city, in their legislations, political declarations and charters.

Among the key more specific components is worth mentioning:

- The respect and guarantee of all human rights and gender equality for all;
- The social function of land, the public control of gentrification and speculation processes, and the capture and distribution of land value increments generated by urban development;
- The promotion and support of a broad range of housing options and security of tenure arrangements, including the social production of habitat and rental, collective and cooperative models;
- The prevention of forced evictions and displacements, as well as tackling homelessness and combating its criminalization;
- The relevance of quality public spaces for several aspects of the urban life;
- The recognition of the contributions from the informal sector and the social and solidarity economy to the urban economy as a whole;
- The commitment to a sustainable and responsible management of natural, heritage and cultural goods, and;

- The integrated vision of the territory beyond the urban-rural divide, understanding regions interactions and responsibilities beyond administrative boundaries.

Although all the references to ‘democracy’ have been removed from the text after the first draft, there are several mentions to the promotion of substantial citizen’s and social participation in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of public policies and national and local budgets. The need of a greater inter-institutional coordination inside and between the different government sectors is also mentioned, as well as the recognition of the key role of subnational and local governments in advancing towards more inclusive, participatory and sustainable cities.

But we are not naïve and we know that having those values and commitments in paper will not be enough. We also know that many of those values and commitments were already enshrined in the Habitat Agenda (1996) and even before, as part of the Vancouver Declaration (1976). It will take not only inter-institutional coordination (as the NUA now recommends) but also long-term vision and policy coherence between economic (including financial and fiscal), political, social, cultural and environmental measures that today are not aligned in terms of their goals and means, and that result in contradictory and even counterproductive outcomes.

For decades now several voices have been claiming for a paradigm change to understand cities, human settlements and territories as common goods - for the present and the future generations - that are co-created and should be co-managed. One key component of that paradigm change will be to truly put people at the center, promoting, respecting and guaranteeing human rights for all, enhancing social participation at the decision making and public policies implementation processes, to strengthen democracy, transparency and accountability. Activists, communities and grassroots organizations are key protagonist of the current progressive transformations our human settlements are facing and they should be recognized and supported as such.

A real change of paradigm will necessarily include a serious questioning of the current production, distribution and consumption patterns, of goods and services in general and of human settlements in particular. The mantra of the ‘sustained economic growth’, repeatedly mentioned in the NUA, is clearly not compatible with the social justice and the planetary boundaries. It will also require a cultural change and a profound revision of our values and symbols that put greed and profit above everything else.

Many organizations and some local governments around the world consider that, as a political and programmatic agenda, the right to the city offers concrete instruments to reshape human settlements as common goods and collective creation. Moving towards the implementation of the paradigm on cities and territories as rights, and not as commodities, will certainly require fundamental changes in the conceptions, knowledge, attitudes and practices of a wide range of actors and institutions at multiple levels.

Some of those will include of course the political will, democratic behaviours and skills of public servants at national, subnational and local levels. It will also require a profound transformation of the current curricula and professional experience of the many fields related to human settlements: architects, engineers, urban planners, lawyers but also economists, policy makers and diplomats. The business schools will need to incorporate human rights and territorial and sustainability approaches if we really want to put people and nature at the center of our concerns and actions.

Given the current urban, housing and land crisis, we have no time to wait to make the changes on the ground. As we see it, the ‘success’ of the Habitat III Conference should be measure by the concrete policies to address the shockingly growing inequality and spatial segregation at local, national and international level.

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[2] The Global Platform for the Right to the City (GPR2C), launched in 2014 by an initiative from HIC and the Polis
Institute from Brazil, seeks to promote the adoption of commitments, policies, projects and actions by the United Nationssystem and national and local governments aiming at developing inclusive, safe, democratic and sustainable cities and human settlements. Among the GPR2C members and partners there are several international organizations such as Action Aid, Cities Alliance, the Committee on Social, Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the Intercontinental Network for the Social and Solidarity Economy (RIPESS), the International Fund for the Development of the Cities (FMDV), the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, Habitat for Humanity, the Huairou Commission, the International Alliance of Inhabitants (IAI), Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI), Techo, Women in Cities International (WICI), Women in Informal Employment, Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), the Avina and the Ford Foundations; as well as several Brazilian organizations including the National Forum for Urban Reform (FNRU), the National Front of Mayors (FNP), the Association of Municipalities (ABM) and the Institute for Urbanistic Law (IBDU). For more information visit: [http://www.right2city.org/](http://www.right2city.org/)


[4] The French philosopher, geographer and sociologist Henri Lefebvre first coined this concept while he was a professor at Nanterre University studying the urbanization process in the late 1960s. According to his conceptualization, the right to the city, as a collective and complex right, is linked to the need of democratizing the urban life, not only by accessing to what already exists but transforming and renewing it. The fulfillment of the social function of land and property and the right to participate at the decision making process were key elements in his prolific work. For more references see the book edited by Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse and Margit Mayer (2012) Cities for People, Not for Profit. Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City, Routledge, NYC.