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The New Urban Agenda: A solid foundation for concrete actions?

This month, government representatives from around the world will gather in Quito, Ecuador for the Habitat III summit to commit to the sustainable development of cities and human settlements. The summit will finalise the New Urban Agenda, an integrated vision of planned urbanisation, placing urbanisation at the forefront of national priorities and financing for the next 20 years.

Habitat III

From 17 – 20 October 2016, government representatives from around 200 countries will gather in Quito, Ecuador for the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, referred to as the Habitat III summit, to reinvigorate the global political commitment to the sustainable development of cities and human settlements. Given the rapid demographic changes in the 20 years since Habitat II in 1996, there is indeed a need to revisit the global approach to urban policy.



City populations outpacing capacity

As of 2015, 54% of the world's population were already residing in urban areas and this high rate of urban growth is set to continue in the coming years – especially in Africa and Asia – and is expected to outpace the capacity for service delivery in cities. Unlike past urbanisation experiences in Western and East Asian countries, the urban expansion we are witnessing today is not driven by economic growth. Instead, it is associated with increasing poverty and informality in urban centres.

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This rapid urban transformation has given rise to a complex set of interrelated policy challenges as governments attempt to ensure public service provision while harnessing the economic potential of cities. The Habitat III summit has the difficult task of developing an appropriate framework for dealing with these policy questions – one that will effectively address the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities – arising from urbanisation.

Will Habitat III live up to this ambitious goal? Our analysis of the process thus far suggests that the summit presents a fantastic vision of future cities but the real task of operationalising and localising the policy recommendations still lies ahead.

The New Urban Agenda

The product of the three-day summit – a policy document referred to as the New Urban Agenda (NUA) – will guide global urban development efforts for the next 20 years. Much of the significance of the NUA, is derived from the breath of the underlying discussions and preparation. The document is the output of a behemoth preparatory process that started with the first of three preparatory committee meetings held in September 2014. Since then, the preparatory process has resulted in 22 issues papers, four regional meetings, seven thematic meetings, 10 policy unit papers, two dozen multiday stakeholder forums, nine online discussion forums as well as the production of national reports on urbanisation and planning by each country.

Following the release of the initial zero-draft NUA in May 2016, the final version of the document was agreed to after four iterations of informal intergovernmental and stakeholder consultations.

Localising the SDGs and global climate pledges

Habitat III comes on the back of two high-profile international policy agreements – the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and the Paris Agreement, a global climate change deal arising out of COP21. There is substantial overlap across these three policy agendas.

The importance of cities for global policy efforts is explicitly highlighted by SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), however the urban dimension of sustainable development and climate change mitigation extends beyond its purview. Indeed, the success of both the SDGs and the Paris Agreement rests on local-level implementation by cities and local authorities. Habitat III therefore serves as an opportunity to “localise” and reinforce the implementation of these pledges.

An ambitious vision: socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable cities

The final draft NUA is a 24-page document presenting a vision

The final draft NUA is a 27-page document presenting a vision of how urbanisation can contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. The expectation is that this vision will be officially adopted in Quito.

In line with any UN agreement, the NUA is exceedingly sweeping and ambitious. The document outlines a fantastic vision of future cities that promote their social functions, participatory governance, gender equality; economic growth; integrated urban and territorial development; urban mobility; disaster risk reduction and the protection of ecosystems.

To achieve this vision, the NUA sets out three guiding principles and identifies specific priorities and actions under each of these three areas:

- Poverty Reduction and Inclusiveness;
- Sustainable Economic Growth; and
- Environmental Sustainability.

To ensure effective implementation, the NUA endorses a fundamental paradigm shift in “the way we plan, finance, develop, govern, and manage cities and human settlements” and outlines specific pledges related to urban governance, spatial planning and finance.

Highlighting an integrated approach to urbanisation

The most important attainment of the NUA is the establishment of an integrated approach to urbanisation based on the three pillars of sustainable development – social, economic and environmental – highlighting both the challenges and opportunities associated with urban expansion. This constitutes a significant step forward from Habitat II, which placed much less emphasis on the economic potential of cities.

Another central and related message is that appropriate urban planning and design can enable cities to tap into their economic potential and finance their own growth. The general emphasis on urban planning and design of the NUA has also been commended. In a recent interview, Joan Clos, the executive director of UN Habitat argued that this constitutes a break with the widely adopted free market/deregulated approach to managing urbanisation, which has resulted in urban sprawl and limited benefits for urban residents.

While the NUA is a long-term vision, it is also likely to have an immediate impact on practice in the global development community, by pushing urbanisation to the forefront of national priorities and financing. This is reinforced by the NUA being explicitly grounded in both the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.

A concrete vision?

Unlike the SDGs and Paris Agreement, the NUA is not legally binding. It certainly outlines an ambitious vision for cities, but it lacks an implementation plan to operationalise its commitments. The final discussions in Quito are therefore anticipated to focus on how to implement the vision. In anticipation of the summit, various stakeholders – countries, cities, NGOs etc. – have been invited to declare specific

cities, NGOs etc. – have been invited to declare specific commitments to the implementation of the NUA through an online portal called the Quito Implementation Plan, which will be presented at the conference.

Even so, given the ambitious nature of the summit, it can be said individual uncoordinated commitments alone will fall short of its envisaged global policy shift. Accordingly, the general sentiment is that a more streamlined approach on the global, national and local level is required to ensure the implementation and success of the NUA.

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Notably, the most concrete reference to local policy – the development of National Urban Policies (NUPs) supported by UN Habitat – has been amended to “developing and implementing urban policies at the appropriate level”, which raises some questions on whether NUPs remain a priority.

A conference on cities without city governments

Concerns regarding the operationalisation of the NUA also reveal a slight paradox of the Habitat III process; while the summit aims to shape the future of the world’s cities, local and city governments have been given very limited decision-making power in the process. Many observers have argued that this will make it difficult to accomplish its ambitious goals.

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Earlier versions of the NUA promoted a very prominent role for local authorities, even suggesting a change in their status in the UN system. This has been watered down in the final version, emphasising instead collaboration between local and central governments, a sentiment that was not strongly reflected in the NUA process itself.

Besides participating in the general preparatory process, local governments have not been given much say on the final document, since it is an agreement among national governments. In fact, the participation status of cities had to be debated, before they were eventually given a seat at the table in Quito. This reflects the general lack of power of local authorities to influence global affairs, including the SDGs and climate change negotiations.

Notwithstanding, the leaders of cities across the world have taken a more proactive approach and have begun forming global networks with the aim of increasing their international leverage. Organisations such as the United Cities and Local Governments have engaged with the Habitat III process by coordinating the inputs of local governments. This offers some

coordinating the inputs of local governments. This offers some hope that the views of local governments will be heard in Quito and reflected in the NUA.

High hopes for the summit in Quito

Despite the criticisms of the NUA and preparatory process, it should be acknowledged that reaching a consensus on the final draft document is a major achievement. Especially following the multiple iterations and last minute negotiations.

When the various stakeholders converge on the Ecuadorian capital this week, they will have the opportunity to focus on developing action plans for making the already agreed vision of the NUA a reality.

With a broad range of participants expected at the conference – including central and local governments, private sector, and civil society – the final summit certainly offers a suitable setting for such a debate. Whether this will result in productive discussions and concrete implementation solutions remains to be seen.