

A new urban agenda?

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SUMMARY: What the UN terms “The New Urban Agenda” is being developed – with the intention of having it approved by national governments at Habitat III, the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in October 2016. But it does not need to develop a comprehensive list of goals and commitments because these are already in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement. So the New Urban Agenda can focus on who will address these goals in urban areas, how and with what support. But it needs to recognize how much the SDG and Paris Agreement commitments depend on urban governments and on low-income urban dwellers whose unmet needs the SDGs are meant to address. It is also necessary to acknowledge how important strong local democracies have been in successful cities, and how new urban agendas got buy-in from local governments in the past – for instance through participatory budgeting, Healthy Cities principles and the Making Cities Resilient campaign. So national governments need to agree on an urban agenda that urban governments and urban poor organizations buy into. This requires national governments to shift their attention from defining goals of good intention; early drafts of the New Urban Agenda have lots of “we commit...” and “we will...”). What is needed is to create or enhance the institutional and governance basis for achieving these goals in each urban centre – with no urban dweller left behind!

I. WILL HABITAT III GET BUY-IN FROM LOCAL ACTORS?

The text for what is termed “The New Urban Agenda” is being prepared for agreement by national government representatives at Habitat III, the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in Quito in October 2016. The most pressing issue for this Agenda is not so much in what it says. We can predict with some certainty that there will be ringing endorsements for urban centres to be resilient, sustainable, safe and inclusive... Ideally, it will be shorter and more coherent than its predecessor, the Habitat Agenda endorsed at Habitat II in 1996, which ran over 100 pages.⁽¹⁾

But what will determine the significance of any new urban agenda is whether it is relevant to urban governments and urban dwellers, especially those whose needs are not currently met, and gets their buy-in. This means that it has to be clear and relevant to the billion or so people living in poor-quality housing with inadequate provision for basic services. It needs to be relevant to mayors, as well as to other urban politicians, civil servants and other civil society groups. And what it recommends has to be within their capacities.

But the New Urban Agenda has one great advantage that can help ensure that it is effective. The much-needed goals (including goals on climate change) have already been agreed – within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement.⁽²⁾ So the drafting of the New Urban Agenda does not have to repeat these. It can focus on the international and national frameworks to support these local groups to meet these goals and targets.

But will UN member states endorse an agenda that supports this local relevance with needed strategies, plans and resources? If they do, they will have to go far beyond the SDGs, which are full of goals and targets (i.e. what has to be done), but very weak on how, by whom (in each locality) and with what support. They will have to focus on building or strengthening the institutional, governance and financial frameworks rather than another long (and not new) list of commitments that mostly repeat what is in the SDGs.

1. This document shows all the difficulties in getting agreement from so many governments. It actually has the word “sustainable” used more than 200 times and applied to a wide range of poorly defined concerns including “sustainable economic growth”.

2. The Paris Agreement came out of the Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in December 2015 – see <http://newsroom.unfccc.int/paris/>. Other relevant recent agreements include the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (on financing the Sustainable Development Goals) and the Agenda for Humanity from the World Humanitarian Summit.

3. See the paper by Lucy Earle listed on the back page.

4. Steffen, Will, Katherine Richardson, Johan Rockström, Sarah E Cornell, Ingo Fetzer, Elena M Bennett, Reinette Biggs, Stephen R Carpenter, Wim de Vries, Cynthia A de Wit, Carl Folke, Dieter Gerten, Jens Heinke, Georgina M Mace, Linn M Persson, Veerabhadran Ramanathan, Belinda Reyers and Sverker Sörlin (2015), "Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet", *Science* Vol 347, No 6223.

5. As described in the paper by Clare Herrick listed on the back page.

6. See the paper by David Satterthwaite listed on the back page.

7. See Parnell, Susan (2016), "Defining a Global Urban Development Agenda", *World Development* Vol 78, pages 529–540.

8. Campbell, Tim (2003), *The Quiet Revolution: Decentralization and the Rise of Political Participation in Latin American Cities*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 208 pages. See also many city case studies in *Environment and Urbanization* – for instance on Ilo, Manizales, Rosario, Curitiba, Porto Alegre, etc.; and Goldfrank, Benjamin (2011), *Deepening Local Democracy in Latin America; Participation, Decentralization and the Left*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 299 pages.

But there are so many groups or sectors with legitimate claims to having their views represented and who are pressing for additions to the draft. The livelihoods and health of almost all the planet's population are influenced by urbanization and urban areas – including most rural households that depend on urban areas for access to markets, goods and services and often for part of their incomes. Those who fight for the needs of children, youth, people with disabilities, older age groups, and those facing discrimination based on gender, ethnic group, migrant status and/or simply on the grounds of having low incomes or living in informal settlements will want their concerns represented. Associations and networks of local governments will come with legitimate demands for inclusion – their members have a huge role in implementing the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. So too will organizations and federations of "slum"/shack dwellers; indeed they are a voice for the billion or so urban dwellers whose needs have not been met and for whom meeting most SDG targets is particularly urgent. The humanitarian agencies are now acknowledging how much they need to learn to work in urban areas with urban governments.⁽³⁾ The civil society networks and groups working on climate change adaptation and mitigation and on other pressing global environmental issues also have to be considered;⁽⁴⁾ these critical concerns were unforeseen by Habitat I and ignored by Habitat II. Public and environmental health issues in urban areas have also received very inadequate attention.⁽⁵⁾ And there are many other legitimate claims for attention in any urban agenda – including, for instance, public space, culture, nutrition, links with rural and peri-urban areas, and urban agriculture. The internet and social media have created new platforms – unavailable at the time of Habitat I and II – for a range of voices to contribute to the process. Can all these groups' concerns be represented without producing another long and often unimplementable list?

II. THE NEED FOR A NEW URBAN AGENDA

If we look at all that has not been accomplished over the 40 years since Habitat I, the first UN Conference on Human Settlements, it is clear that we need new urban agendas. Who would have thought that 40 years after Habitat I around a billion people would still be living in informal settlements? Or that there would still be vast deficits in the supply of safe sufficient water and good-quality sanitation for urban residents,⁽⁶⁾ especially given that all the governments attending Habitat I had made commitments to water and sanitation for all by 1990? Will Habitat III be any more effective than Habitat I and II in actually generating the needed action?⁽⁷⁾ There are still many "old" urban agendas that urgently need attention – not only the universal provision for safe sufficient water and good sanitation, but also the upgrading of informal settlements at scale, and land use management in the public interest, as strongly recommended at Habitat I. Any serious attempt to develop a new urban agenda has to think hard about the delivery failures of recent decades.

III. LEARNING FROM NEW URBAN AGENDAS OF THE PAST

Can we learn from examples of new urban agendas that have managed to be effective in the past 40 years? Some of these agendas have had considerable influence, drawing in large numbers of urban governments. Five of them – the Healthy Cities movement, Local Agenda 21, participatory budgeting, Making Cities Resilient and the Carbons Climate Registry – focused on urban areas. They included clear, simple and relevant guidelines for urban governments that got buy-in from thousands of such governments around the world. Their success was due in part to their encouragement of do-able local actions, partly because what they addressed were local issues relevant to local governments that were also supported by much of the electorate.

Two other examples have relevance here. The first are the **new urban agendas** developed by (newly elected) city governments in many Latin American countries, as most countries moved from dictatorships to democracies, with strong local democracy, elected mayors and city councils, and commitments to transparency. In some countries (for instance Colombia and Brazil) this was supported by decentralization that actually increased the funding available to city and municipal governments. In most cities, the proportion of the population with piped water, regular solid waste collection and connection to sewers went up significantly. Upgrading informal settlements became the norm.⁽⁸⁾

The second is the **presence of more and more federations of slum/shack dwellers** formed to take action and to encourage local government to work with them. They formed their own international umbrella group, Slum/Shack Dwellers International, in 1996, and some of their leaders were present at Habitat II. But the number of national slum/shack dweller federations has grown to over 30 nations and we also have all the evidence of what

9. See <http://www.sdinet.org>. See also over 50 papers published in *Environment and Urbanization* on the work of these federations; search for “federations” at <http://eau.sagepub.com/>

10. <http://www.achr.net/activities-de.php?id=1>; see also six papers examining different aspects of this initiative in *Environment and Urbanization* (2012), “Addressing poverty and inequality – new forms of urban governance in Asia”, Vol 24, No 2.

11. See the papers by Robert M Buckley and Lena Simet and by Michael A Cohen listed on the back page.

12. See the paper by Robert M Buckley and Lena Simet listed on the back page.

13. Bartlett, Sheridan and David Satterthwaite (editors) (2016), *Cities on a Finite Planet: Towards Transformative Responses to Climate Change*, Routledge, London.

they can do. Wherever possible they build or improve housing and provide sanitation – and work with local government (which allows a much larger scale of impact). They undertake surveys of all informal settlements in cities to give them a strong base for identifying priorities and negotiating with local government and utilities. The foundation for these federations is community-managed savings groups where most savers and savings group managers are women.⁽⁹⁾ From 2009, the Asian Coalition for Community Action has also served as a strong example of how to catalyse community initiatives (over 1,000 initiatives in 165 cities in 19 countries all over Asia). The Coalition also helps each initiative join with others in its city to press local government to work with it.⁽¹⁰⁾

IV. THE BASIS FOR A NEW URBAN AGENDA

The new urban agenda needs to consider the right issues (and avoid the wrong ones!). It also needs to generate a transformative vision, to be politically astute and to be supported by appropriate data.

a. The right ingredients

The new urban agenda needs to engage deeply with the pressing issues facing cities in the 21st century. The importance of well-functioning cities for economic success is now finally widely accepted. Such cities yield enormous returns to nations and to private enterprises – and also to citizens, as deficits in infrastructure and service provision are addressed and as prosperity is combined with inclusion.⁽¹¹⁾ A “new” urban agenda would recognize this, contribute to stronger urban economies, reduce distortions that plague mobility, and help increase the supply and reduce the cost of land for housing, supported by a rethink of regulations and subsidies. All this would be an investment with a high rate of return.⁽¹²⁾

Any contemporary urban agenda has to include a strong climate change agenda. There are so many synergies among good local development, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. All are concerned with reducing local risks to life and health – even as they view the risks and responses through different lenses.⁽¹³⁾

Most citizens would like to achieve the win-win – prosperity with inclusion. For low-income groups, this requires them to be organized and linked together with others who benefit from public goods and services. And it is necessary to seek accountability and transparency from local government. Inclusive prosperity also needs local governments that recognize how much public investments benefit private enterprises (for instance in the increases in land value from infrastructure provision) and, in a fair society, for private enterprises to pay for the benefits they receive.

Meeting these needs would support local governments to have the capacity to promote and protect the common good – from universal provision of infrastructure and services to pollution control to effective and accountable policing. This now also extends to integrating disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation and climate change mitigation into ideas of the common good.

b. A transformative vision

The current revised zero draft of the New Urban Agenda presents three transformative visions: sustainable and inclusive prosperity and opportunities for all; sustainable urban development for inclusion and poverty eradication; and environmentally sound and resilient urban development.

In urban areas, so much of “what needs doing” to meet all needs, eliminate poverty, achieve inclusion and leave no one behind (as demanded by the SDGs) depends heavily on the competence, capacity and accountability of urban (metropolitan, city, municipal) government. We know from experience that urban investments and urban governance can help address the pressing social, economic, environmental and ecological issues outlined in the SDGs, both in urban areas and in their links with surrounding rural areas. As such they can achieve transformative outcomes. To achieve these goals across national territories also requires the support of higher levels of government. As the transformative vision is currently presented, it risks treating the elements of its vision in isolation from each other. And it gives too little attention to addressing the urban governance transformation that is required to achieve the goals.

c. Political astuteness

Meeting SDG commitments to inclusion in urban centres comes up against powerful politics at play that rejects inclusion in favour of elite coalitions, growth first and disregard for the environment. Will strong commitments to inclusion and greater equality in urban development over-

14. See the paper by Gordon McGranahan, Daniel Schensul and Gayatri Singh listed on the back page.

15. Banana, Evans, Patrick Chikoti, Chisomo Harawa, Gordon McGranahan, Diana Mitlin, Stella Ntalishwa, Noah Schermbucker, Farirai Shumba and Anna Walnycki (2015), "Sharing reflections on inclusive sanitation", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 27, No 1, pages 19–34.

16. See the paper by David Simon and Susan Parnell and by David Simon and the five cities were Bangalore or Bengaluru, Cape Town, Gothenburg, Manchester and Kisumu.

17. See reference 16.

18. See the papers by Clive Barnett and Susan Parnell and by David Simon and co-authors listed on the back page.

19. See the paper by Michael A Cohen listed on the back page.

20. See reference 19, page 44.

21. Watson, Vanessa (2014), "African urban fantasies: dreams or nightmares?", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 26, No 1, pages 215–231. See also the paper by Robert M Buckley, Achilles Kallergis and Laura Wainer listed on the back page.

22. See also Bhan, Gautam (2009), "This is no longer the city I once knew". Evictions, the urban poor and the right to the city in Millennial Delhi", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 21, No 1, pages 127–142.

23. See the paper by Robert M Buckley, Achilles Kallergis and Laura Wainer listed on the back page, page 119. See also Cain, Allan (2014), "African urban fantasies: past lessons and emerging realities", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 26, No 2, pages 561–567.

come this?⁽¹⁴⁾ An urban agenda has to deliver on three levels of inclusion: removing discriminatory exclusion (for instance, denying migrants the right to settle in the city, buy property, send children to government schools and have access to services); ensuring that prevailing institutions support the agenda (regulating markets and providing services that reflect the needs of disadvantaged groups); and ensuring that human rights are fully met. The SDGs place much emphasis on universal access to goods and services, and universality is a critical component of inclusion.⁽¹⁵⁾

For cities that have innovated in these areas, their government's responses to democratic pressures have been important. As described earlier, a lot of the innovation has been in Latin America, where it is associated with elected mayors and city governments. Innovations in the "bottom-up" agenda in countries around the world have also been driven by the organizations and federations of slum/shack dwellers, but have at the same time depended on local civil servants and politicians who have been prepared to listen to them and work with them, through what might be termed the co-production of the SDGs. This co-production requires and involves contributions from almost all sectors – and local government taking a key role in making sure these are coherent and coordinated. It often needs cooperation between neighbouring local governments.

d. Appropriate data

Then there is the contentious issue of the indicators that can best be used to monitor and report on progress on the SDGs. A study looking at whether governments in five cities had the data required to report on the SDGs found that each faced problems in providing all the data required, and each proposed various changes to maximize the local relevance of particular targets and indicators.⁽¹⁶⁾

There is a large gap between most SDG goals and the data needed to monitor SDG performance, in terms of both what data are collected (or could be collected) and at what level. Much of the data required to monitor SDG progress needs to be available for each small area unit, street or ward to inform local government policies and investments. To address water and sanitation deficits, you need to know exactly where these are. Yet most data sources (for example, national sample surveys) only provide data for national and regional levels or aggregated for all urban areas – and even where disaggregation is available, national statistical agencies may not make this readily available to local governments. Recommendations for SDG indicators may mention the importance of disaggregation by geographic location, but they need to be more specific on what level of disaggregation is needed to support local governments to address the SDGs.

The indicators that are chosen and the data sources that are used will influence how the SDGs are actually addressed and monitored.⁽¹⁷⁾ Here again is the issue of the difference between data to aid local decisions and data for comparing cities. There is not much point in having national data on distance to public transit and green spaces; this kind of information is needed for each city and city district.

Finally, there is the limitation in data-gathering capacity at national level. Many recommendations call for data on key indicators to be updated every year and available for each locality, but it is not feasible to undertake a census every year. There is therefore the need to recognize and support cities in collecting relevant data.⁽¹⁸⁾

e. Avoiding the wrong agendas

Can Habitat III produce a new urban agenda that is relevant and implementable?⁽¹⁹⁾ Habitat I and II had very little influence. Michael A Cohen notes how current trends suggests that "*in the future cities will become more unequal, larger in population with greater demand for essential services, more spread out in terms of urban form, increasingly difficult and expensive to provision, less productive because of the need for increasing amounts of infrastructure, and at high risk of climate change impacts.*"⁽²⁰⁾

In so many cities, migrants are still viewed negatively as encroachers, even as the economy of the city and the services enjoyed by the middle class depend on them. Middle-class groups see themselves as the rightful owners of the city and want policies and investments that address their priorities. These have helped spawn plans for exclusionary "world class cities" and gated cities.⁽²¹⁾ In these cities, low-income residents are seen as illegal and criminal, encroachers harming the image of the city and its capacity to attract new investment.⁽²²⁾ There are also the "*sudden, extraordinarily large*" publicly funded housing programmes in so many nations. These ignore all the lessons from the 1970s, which pointed to their ineffectiveness in reaching low-income groups with housing that meets their needs. In many nations, billions of dollars of public money is being spent on these.⁽²³⁾

V. MOVING FORWARD?

We want a new urban agenda that is concise and clear; that focuses not so much on what must be done but on how goals already committed to can be implemented – and by whom and with what funding; that recognizes how much almost all (local and global) goals depend on competent, effective urban governments that work with their citizens and support those living in informal settlements; and that gets their buy-in.

We can learn from the power and reach of the Healthy Cities movement, Local Agenda 21, participatory budgeting, Making Cities Resilient and the Carbons Climate Registry, all of which helped influence local urban agendas without much external support, because they were clear and concise and because local governments and/or local civil society could see the value of applying them.⁽²⁴⁾

We also need more attention to some of the old agendas – especially the practices of functioning local democracies that respond to and work with their citizens to address the exclusions.⁽²⁵⁾ The SDGs have ambitious political goals and targets regarding inclusion, empowerment, equality and indivisibility that need to be operationalized. The relevant practices include addressing political exclusion through innovations like participatory budgeting and co-production of services with slum/shack dweller organizations and federations, and making real the right of all to inhabit the city and have access to its services, public spaces and labour markets. The right to the city is also the right to hold the city government to account, and to kick it out if it does not deliver. The right to the city depends on the exercise of collective power of urban residents to reshape the process of urbanization through engagement with the state.⁽²⁶⁾ So much can be done if local citizens and their organizations see local government as a valuable partner that responds to their needs. But for this to bring benefits to low-income groups, they have to be organized.

So much of the innovation in social policies was born in democratic municipal governments. This continues today. Utrecht and some other Dutch cities are trying out a scheme that guarantees a basic income for welfare recipients.⁽²⁷⁾ Many cities in Europe and some in North America have greatly increased support for bicycle use and increased the percentage of trips made by bicycle – which brings multiple benefits to bicyclists and to the city. Many local governments have enhanced or increased public space. Yet so much of the innovation is never documented because it is seen as the normal functioning of an effective local government.⁽²⁸⁾

What is also noteworthy is that many cities with functioning local democracies have innovated in climate change mitigation even though this brings no immediate benefits to the city (although the co-benefits of this are increasingly recognized). It seems that city governments that deliver on local needs can also get popular support for contributing to addressing pressing global issues.⁽²⁹⁾

One area in much need of innovation is the provision of opportunities for youth. A supplement in *The Economist*⁽³⁰⁾ noted that globally, youth have never been better educated, but so few opportunities exist for them in labour markets. How can a new urban agenda work for them, providing real opportunities for paid work and for learning at scale so that all the drive and innovation that youth can bring will be channelled into activities that benefit all? There is much to be done to which they can contribute – in upgrading, building materials production, data gathering, city greening, etc.

Another area where innovation is needed is working across sectoral boundaries. So many international funders come with their own agenda, often focused on one particular issue – for instance one particular disease or intervention. There is a reluctance to cross sectoral boundaries; a former head of research at UN-Habitat refused to work on health issues because he claimed that was the World Health Organization's responsibility. Yet attention to environmental and public health is essential to all urban agendas.

24. For more detail see David Satterthwaite's editorial listed on the back page.

25. This is highlighted by the paper by Gordon McGranahan, Daniel Schensul and Gayatri Singh listed on the back page.

26. Harvey, D (2008), "The Right to the City", *New Left Review*, Vol 53, September–October, pages 23–40.

27. Boffey, Daniel (2015), "Dutch city plans to pay citizens a 'basic income' and Greens say it could work in the UK", *The Guardian*, 26 December.

28. Hardoy, Jorgelina and Regina Ruete (2013), "Incorporating climate change adaptation into planning for a liveable city in Rosario, Argentina", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 25, No 2, pages 339–360; also Hardoy, Jorgelina, Vanessa Herrera and Daniela Mastrangelo (2016), "Rosario, Argentina", in Sheridan Bartlett and David Satterthwaite (editors), *Cities on a Finite Planet: Towards Transformative Responses to Climate Change*, Routledge, London.

29. Bartlett, Sheridan, David Satterthwaite, Debra Roberts, Jan Corfee-Morlot, David Dodman and Jorgelina Hardoy (2016), "Cross-city Analysis", in Sheridan Bartlett and David Satterthwaite (editors), *Cities on a Finite Planet: Towards Transformative Responses to Climate Change*, Routledge, London.

30. *The Economist*, 23 January 2016, available at <http://www.economist.com/printedition/2016-01-23>.

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