

HABITAT III

'Habitat III' is the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, to take place in 2016. This was decided in General Assembly Resolution 66/207. Resolution 67/216 decided on modalities, preparatory activities and format of the conference.

It will be one of the first global conferences after the Post 2015 Development Agenda. It is an opportunity to discuss and chart new pathways in response to the challenges of urbanization and the opportunities it offers for the implementation of the sustainable development goals. The conference promises to be unique in bringing together diverse urban actors such as governments, local authorities, civil society, the private sector, academic institutions and all relevant interest groups to review urban and housing policies affecting the future of cities within an international governance architecture, with a view to generate a 'New Urban Agenda' for the 21st century which recognizes the ever-changing dynamics of human civilization.

AFTER FORTY YEARS...

The United Nations General Assembly convened the Habitat I conference in Vancouver in 1976, as governments began to recognise the need for sustainable human settlements and the consequences of rapid urbanisation, especially in the developing world. At that time, urbanisation and its impacts were barely considered by the international community, but the world was starting to witness the greatest and fastest migration of people into cities and towns in history as well as rising urban population through natural growth resulting from advances in medicine.

The Vancouver commitments were reconfirmed twenty years later, at the Habitat II conference in Istanbul. World leaders adopted the Habitat Agenda as a global plan of action for adequate shelter for all, with the notion of sustainable human settlements driving development in an urbanising world.

Forty years later, there is a wide consensus that the towns and cities structure, form and functionality need

to change as societies change. The legacy of the city of the twentieth century, in terms of spatial pattern, is growth outside their boundaries to satellite or dormitory towns and suburban neighbourhoods. Cities have continued to expand outwards beyond their peri-urban areas, often due to weak urban planning, poor urban management, land regulation crises, and real estate speculation factors. In 2010, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) reported that more than 827 million people were living in slum-like conditions.

It is now well understood that slums and the related informal settlements are a spontaneous form of urbanization, consisting of a series of survival strategies by the urban poor, most borne out of poverty and exclusion.

THINK ... AND ACT ... URBAN

Throughout modern history, urbanization has been a major driver of development and poverty reduction. Governments can respond to this key development opportunity through Habitat III by promoting a new model of urban development that is able to integrate all facets of sustainable development to promote equity, welfare and shared prosperity.

It is time to think urban: how to mobilise the global community and focus all levels of human settlements, including small rural communities, villages, market towns, intermediate cities and metropolises for demographic and economic growth. Habitat III can help systematise the alignment between cities and towns and national planning objectives in their role as drivers of national economic and social development.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF URBANIZATION

Advances in technology, realignment of global power relations, changes in demographic profiles, recognition of emerging resource constraints as well as the reassertion of questions of rights and justice in the global

development world have triggered a profound systemic change. The new international order provides more room for cities and regional economies to contribute to national development through direct participation in the global economy.

Habitat III offers Member States an opportunity to discuss a New Urban Agenda that will focus on policies and strategies that can result in effectively harnessing the power and forces behind urbanization.

Key elements to consider at Habitat III for creating a pattern of sustainable urban growth?

- a) **National Urban Policy.** This establishes a connection between the dynamics of urbanization and the overall process of national development.
- b) **Laws, institutions and systems of governance.** These create the normative basis of action, the operational principles, organizational structures and institutional and societal relationships underlying the process of urbanization.
- c) **Urban economy.** While there is a strong positive correlation between economic growth and urbanization, this potential relationship is not spontaneous and self-generating. Habitat III could be the means to place the central pillars for robust urban economic development.

There are also some operational factors to take into account which maximize the advantages of the urbanization process:

- a) **Urban Planning.** The vision of the city, its physical configuration, the definition of technical solutions, and environmental considerations are all determined through urban/regional planning. A reinvigorated urban planning will optimize economies of agglomeration, promote sustainable density, encourage social diversity and mixed-land uses, foster inclusiveness, maximize heterogeneity, promote liveable public spaces and vibrant streets, and thus make the city more functional, maintaining environmental balances.
- b) **Local fiscal systems.** To change from being instruments of revenue generation and budget management to vectors of change which generate real development outcomes.
- c) **Investment in urban basic services.** Proper planning allows for less costly provision of basic services such as water and sanitation, higher resilience, climate change mitigation and adaptation, poverty reduction and pro-poor policies.

What will Habitat III offer?

- 1) Rethink **the Urban Agenda.** By embracing urbanization at all levels of human settlements, more

appropriate policies can embrace urbanization across physical space, bridging urban, peri-urban and rural areas, and assist governments in addressing challenges through national and local development policy frameworks.

- 2) **Integrate Equity to the Development Agenda.** Equity becomes an issue of social justice, ensures access to the public sphere, extends opportunities and increases the commons.
- 3) **Foster national urban planning and planned city extensions.**
- 4) **Decide how relevant sustainable development goals will be supported** through sustainable urbanization.
- 5) Align and strengthen **institutional arrangements with the substantive outcomes of Habitat III**, so as to ensure effective delivery of the new Urban Agenda.
- 6) **Revise and renew UN-Habitat's mandate** to ensure that it is fit for purpose. **UN-Habitat is ready** to join efforts with Governments and Habitat Agenda partners to promote a new model of urban development for the twenty-first century.

Key points to remember

- 1) Only a UN conference has the **convening power** to bring together the actors you need to achieve these objectives. Solutions for the complex challenge of urbanization can only be found by bringing together member states, multilateral organisations, local governments, private sector, civil society.
- 2) Habitat III will guarantee outcomes take place within the **sustainable development goal framework**. It stands to be the first implementing conference of the post 2015 agenda.
- 3) An inter-governmental process links results with national legislation.
- 4) A successful UN conference can provide a tremendous boost and ownership to implementation.