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Habitat III and the New Urban Agenda: Global negotiations, local implications

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Leaders from cities around the world will convene in Quito, Ecuador, October 17–20 for the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development. This watershed event is also known as Habitat III — the third summit of UN-Habitat, the United Nations program that oversees work related to housing, human settlements, and urban issues. The main outcome of Habitat III will be an international policy and action framework known as the New Urban Agenda that will guide efforts to promote sustainable development in cities worldwide for the next two decades.

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) calls for local and national governments to take a broad approach to sustainable urban development. The NUA is rooted in the historical mission of UN-Habitat, which was established in 1978 with a mandate to “promote socially and environmentally sustainable human settlements development and the achievement of adequate shelter for all.” The NUA is also informed by recent international negotiations and agreements aimed at responding to global challenges, most notably the Sustainable Development Goals (the centerpiece of the United Nations’ *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*) and the work of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The NUA recognizes the key role that cities play in the global movement for sustainability, and the critical need to address the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of urban growth worldwide.

Background and context

The first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Habitat I, was held in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1976. At that time governments were

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Quito, Ecuador. Photo by author.

beginning to grapple with the challenges associated with rapid urbanization around the world, especially the issue of informal settlements in many large urban areas in developing nations. Twenty years later, in 1996, the Habitat II conference in Istanbul, Turkey, resulted in a document known as the Habitat Agenda, which focused on “ensuring adequate shelter for all” and making human settlements safer, healthier, and more sustainable.

In the 20 years since the Habitat Agenda was adopted, much progress has been made on improving the quality of housing and living conditions for residents in cities around the world. But the trend toward urbanization is increasing — by 2030 it is predicted that 60 percent of the world’s population will live in cities — and problems associated with urban areas such as poverty, inequality, solid waste generation, and greenhouse gas emissions are becoming more evident and urgent. This year’s Habitat III conference will mark an important shift in the focus of the international movement for sustainable cities, as government leaders and urban advocates from around the world meet in Quito to adopt a broader, more comprehensive strategy to advance social equity and economic prosperity while reducing the environmental impacts of cities.

The NUA has drawn inspiration and rationale from the inclusion of an urban-focused goal in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were adopted in September 2015. Goal 11 of the SDGs is to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable,” and it incorporates 10 targets that address issues such as affordable housing, public transportation, green and public spaces, disaster risk reduction, air quality, and waste management. The NUA also builds on recent global negotiations to combat climate change, acknowledging that cities are the world’s largest generators of greenhouse gas emissions and that reducing emissions from urban transportation and energy use in buildings is key to the solution to climate change.

The NUA is not a binding agreement; rather it will provide policy guidance in the areas of urban spatial planning and fiscal management. It calls for strengthening the linkages between national urban policy and local government planning, and encourages voluntary monitoring and reporting of progress by cities and national governments.

Preparations for Habitat III and the drafting of the New Urban Agenda

The preparatory process for Habitat III began two years ago with the first of three official meetings convened by the Habitat III Secretariat. These sessions of the Preparatory Committee, commonly called the PrepCom, took place in

New York City in September 2014; in Nairobi, Kenya, in April 2015; and in Surabaya, Indonesia, in July 2016. In addition, national and city governments and civil society groups around the world, to provide input on the NUA from a variety of stakeholders, have hosted a number of semi-official events. Regional meetings have been convened in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe and North America; and thematic meetings have focused on a range of topics relevant to sustainable urban development, such as renewable energy, public spaces, informal settlements, and financing mechanisms.

The World Urban Campaign, a coalition of 136 organizations around the globe coordinated by UN-Habitat, convened 26 stakeholder forums called “Urban Thinkers Campuses.” These multi-day events, organized by non-governmental organizations and universities, were designed to gather broad public input on various themes related to the social, economic, and physical aspects of cities. Themes addressed in the Campuses included migration, women and gender issues, children and youth issues, public health, housing, urban slums, safety, technology, and art. Each Urban Thinkers Campus event produced a report to inform the development of the NUA. In addition, the World Urban Campaign compiled the recommendations of all 26 Campus events into a document titled “The City We Need 2.0.” This report sets forth a collective vision for a new urban paradigm, based on the contributions of more than 7,800 participants representing 124 countries and 2,137 organizations, according to the document’s preamble.

In addition to extensive participation in both formal and informal events leading up to Habitat III, stakeholder groups working in areas related to housing, urban planning, and sustainable development have provided comments on the outputs of the PrepCom meetings and evolving content of the NUA. Among the most actively involved organizations are United Cities and Local Governments, Slum Dwellers International, ICLEI, Local Governments for Sustainability, Habitat for Humanity International, and the International Organization of Migration. The American Planning Association, through its International Division, has also participated in the preparatory process, co-sponsoring side events to the PrepCom meetings and providing comments on the outcomes of the PrepCom sessions.

The NUA document itself is being drafted by representatives from a core group of United Nations member states (countries) known as the Habitat III Bureau. The member nations of the Bureau are Chad, Chile, Czech Republic, Ecuador, France, Germany, Indonesia, Senegal, Slovakia, and the United Arab Emirates. The initial version of the

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document, known as the “zero draft,” was released in May 2016. After receiving comments from UN member nations, other UN agencies and interested stakeholder groups, the Bureau issued revisions of the document in June and July. Following the third and final PrepCom meeting in Surabaya, Indonesia, the Habitat III Bureau published the “Surabaya draft” of the New Urban Agenda on July 28. The final draft, which has been agreed on by UN member states and will be presented for discussion and adoption at the Habitat III conference in Quito in October, was released on September 10.

Content of the Draft New Urban Agenda

The draft NUA seeks to transform “the way cities and human settlements are planned, financed, developed, governed, and managed.” It articulates a vision for a better urban future based on the concept of “cities for all.” Cities are envisioned as places where all inhabitants have the right to adequate housing, safe and clean water and sanitation, access to goods and public services, and freedom from discrimination. The NUA vision for the world’s cities addresses social inclusion and equality, civic engagement and political participation, economic prosperity and sustainable growth, efficient use of resources, sustainable consumption and production patterns, and conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems.

The draft document establishes a number of principles to guide work toward sustainable urban development, including poverty reduction, education, food security, health, affordable housing, and the elimination of violence. It emphasizes the role of national governments in defining and enacting policies for urban growth and management that are responsive to local conditions, and the importance of coordination between national, sub-national, and local governments.

The implementation section of the NUA seeks to strengthen urban governance, including legal and policy frameworks, administrative and management systems, and urban spatial planning. It also includes an emphasis on effective financing mechanisms, recognizing that cities will need to identify new means for financing improvements to municipal services as well as both existing infrastructure and new infrastructure to support sustainable transportation and renewable energy.

Lastly, the draft NUA calls for voluntary and participatory monitoring and tracking of progress in implementing the agenda’s goals and objectives, to be carried out by national governments in coordination with local and sub-national governments. UN member states are called upon to report to the UN General Assembly every four years on

progress in implementing the NUA. The final section of the document includes actions to strengthen the UN-Habitat program through increased financial resources and development of organizational capacity.

Implications for the San Francisco Bay Area

Although UN-Habitat has historically focused on issues of rapid urbanization in developing countries — and while much of the background work for Habitat III has sought to address urban conditions and challenges in the world’s less affluent areas — many of the principles and goals articulated in the NUA are very relevant to, and timely for, the metropolitan Bay Area. While many cities of the greater San Francisco area have been successful in achieving progress toward sustainability on a number of different fronts, there is much that remains to be done.

In particular, affordable housing remains a major challenge for our region, and cities and towns must define new ways to deliver and finance housing in adequate supply to meet an increasing demand and at adequate levels of affordability for all segments of the population. Use of private vehicles and greenhouse gas emissions from transportation remain high and must be reduced in order to meet regional targets for halting climate change. Poverty, declining cultural diversity, and displacement of low-income residents are growing concerns for many Bay Area jurisdictions. The global mandate of the NUA requires that we continue to explore solutions to these challenges through policy and regulatory reform, public outreach and participation, and innovative financing strategies.

Everything considered, the potential is great for Bay Area cities to lead the charge for collaboration with our federal government on urban sustainability policy and strategy, as is called for in the NUA. Just as cities in the United States have taken a proactive role in addressing climate change in the absence of national commitments, those local governments that have been innovators in advancing sustainability could partner with the White House Office of Urban Affairs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development to promote a national urban policy framework.



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