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# Urban Transformations: The New Urban Agenda - Challenges, opportunities and DPU contributions to a new framework for a sustainable future

By Barbara Lipietz



The last sixteen months have seen the consolidation of a global framework for our common future, under the aegis of various members of the United Nations family. Agreement on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 set the tone with their ambition of “transforming our world” and “leaving no one behind”, laying out the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Close on its heels came the Conference of Parties (COP21) that, through the Paris Agreement, sought to develop a new international climate accord, with an indicative commitment towards the reduction of global warming emissions and climate change. Earlier the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (March 2015) focused specifically on global action to reduce disaster risk and build resilient futures to meet the Agenda for Sustainable Development. The World

Humanitarian Summit in May 2016 sought to reconcile growing humanitarian needs with commitments to the SDGs. Meanwhile, the Third Financing for Development Conference (Addis Ababa, July 2015) aimed to activate the funding commitments and mechanisms to support the global framework in the making.

As 2016 draws to a close, the latest cog in this evolving global framework is set to be finalised in Quito, Ecuador. In October, the global community will be congregating for the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development - or Habitat III - aiming to sign off on a ‘New Urban Agenda’ (NUA). Twenty years after its predecessor Habitat II, it is hoped this latest conference will enshrine the new global development and climate agendas into a set of formal international commitments, thus focusing attention on the steps necessary

for implementation of those pledges. In particular, there is an expectation that the NUA will articulate the positive role urbanisation can play within a sustainable development framework. This, in a context where the urban population is set to double by 2050, fuelled in part by conflict- and climate change-induced migration; where poverty remains a persistent concern and socio-economic and spatial inequality is on the rise; where climate change has become a key framing reference and issues of safety and security have been propelled onto the agenda, prompting calls for a recognition of ‘the right to life’.

*Cover Image:* Freetown, Sierra Leone. Photo by Michael Walls

*Below:* The Session of Inhabitants at Africities VII. Photo by Barbara Lipietz.





*Above:* Hargeisa, Somaliland. Photo by Michael Walls.

As the pace of negotiations quickens and the minutiae of the NUA are scrutinised and debated by a multitude of stakeholders, it is worth revisiting DPU's inputs into the emerging framing document. The DPU's participation in the Habitat III process has taken on four different incarnations, which reflect the multiplicity of entry points and processes hoping to set the tone for a transformative agenda. These inputs also provide an indication of the range of work currently on going in the DPU.

First has been the DPU's co-ordination (with the Korean Research Institute for Human Settlements) of Habitat III's Policy Paper No.7 on the economy. Chaired by **Le-Yin Zhang** and supported by **Prof Julio D. Davilã**, the complex task involved the steering of 20 'Experts' from diverse regional settings, heralding wide-ranging theoretical standpoints and positions on the urban economy best able to support the implementation of the SDGs. Experts included representatives from WIEGO, Action Aid and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, spanning interests in, and concerns with, productivity and climate compatible economic development

across the formal and informal economy continuum, incorporating class and gender dimensions.

The Policy Unit's final draft, with its focus on promoting livelihoods, the creation of productive jobs and supporting the informal economy displays a clear coherence, carried into policy recommendations. Such coherence is in itself a feat, given the diversity of viewpoints represented across the Experts table. However, reflection from the DPU team involved in the process highlighted how the goal of producing a strong, consistent message on the economy and its centrality to the NUA overshadowed the potential to explore alternative avenues, such as the economy's role in mitigating climate change and responding to decarbonisation and other resource constraint imperatives. Similarly, more specific references to rights and intersectional social identities in a putatively inclusive economy were eschewed, with the directive that such concerns were to be addressed in other Policy Papers. This last point raises important procedural as well as conceptual questions regarding the drafting of the NUA and the possibilities opened up – or indeed closed down – in the

process; a point we return to below.

A second direct DPU input, developed in partnership with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), pertained to the inclusion of food and nutrition needs into the NUA. In this instance, **Prof Yves Cabannes** participated in the Expert Group Meeting on Integrating Food into Urban Planning. The collaborative FAO-DPU proposal sought to impress upon the NUA a systems approach to food, considering the food chain from seed to table (production, agro-processing, transport, storage, marketing, consumption, waste), combined with an urban metabolism perspective connecting food to the rest of the urban system, specifically through the food-water-energy nexus. The proposal, including planning instruments such as food asset mapping, was integrated into the NUA Zero draft and the commitment to promoting "... *the integration of food and nutrition needs of urban residents, particularly the urban poor...*" has been retained in the Agenda's latest (Surabaya) version.



Above: Modern housing developments in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Photo by DPU.

A third DPU contribution to shaping conversations around the Agenda has been the drafting of Chapter 5 of UN-Habitat's World Cities Report 2016 on sustainable development (UN Habitat, 2016). **Vanesa Castàn Broto** led this input in partnership with Linda Westman and supported by **Liza Griffin** and Elizabeth Rapoport. Two 'City Leaders' meetings (in Toronto, September 2014 and at the UN in New York in July 2015) helped cement city Mayors' interest and to gain inputs from them. The chapter is notable for anchoring the NUA's faith in urbanisation's transformative potential within the notion of *just sustainabilities* – a concept that emphasises the interdependence of justice and equity in the process of environmental planning and management towards sustainable cities (Agyeman, 2003, 2013; Rydin, 2013). The chapter highlights four pillars of just sustainability policies: *improving people's quality of life and wellbeing; ensuring justice and equity in terms of recognition, process,*

*procedure and outcome; meeting the needs of both present and future generations; and recognising ecosystem limits and the need to live within such limits* (UN-Habitat, 2016: 86).

The chapter sets a positive tone, emphasising innovations by community groups, local governments and businesses in actualising just sustainability principles across cities and territories. Such actions successfully weave in equitable responses to public services, environmental risks (from pollution to climate change effects), minimising the negative impacts of urbanisation on biodiversity and ecosystems, and responding to the call for decarbonisation and resource-use rationalisation. However challenges remain, including in the realm of financing and supportive multi-actor governance systems for just sustainability transitions. Recognising the fundamental 'solidarity of environmental and socioeconomic governance of urban and rural areas', the chapter is ultimately a call to acknowledge just sustainability as a human rights approach to cities and human settlements that beckons democratic and participatory

management, unlocking in the process the creative potential of multiple "mediators of change" (ibid: 99).

The above call resonates strongly with DPU's twofold final inputs into the NUA: a critical engagement with national and regional reports towards Habitat III, developed in cooperation with Habitat International Coalition (HIC). This work sought to interrogate these key mechanisms feeding into the NUA - from the vantage point of Habitat II's (admittedly diluted) rights-based commitments, and civil society-led struggles for the right to the city. In the first instance, a DPU team comprising **Alexandre Apsan Frediani**, **Barbara Lipietz** and **Rafaella Simas Lima** (with inputs from **Caren Levy**, **Prof Adriana Allen** and **Vanesa Castàn Broto**) reviewed eight country reports, made public in February 2015 and available through HIC and DPU networks (Frediani et al., 2015). The objective was to interrogate the process and content of these national reports to help identify potential entry points for civil society engagement around the NUA.

On the process side, findings highlighted UN-Habitat's scant official guidance in the

formulation of national reports, especially on multi-stakeholder participation. From a civil society perspective, and with the exception of Brazil, this has translated into disappointing levels of participation, often limited to consultation, while in many cases outright exclusion of key stakeholders was a feature. On the content side, the national reports reviewed did provide relatively broad coverage of challenges facing their respective urban areas, along with encompassing visions to be included in the NUA. Some of these referenced (directly or indirectly) right to the city aspirations or included other nods to rights-inspired (or Habitat II) pledges. However, our review also highlighted frequent incoherence between stated challenges or, indeed, between challenges and aspirations, the latter often presented in the form of a check-list. In turn, and problematically, this reflected weak normative reporting on Habitat II's commitments and implementation – a point repeatedly challenged by HIC since 2013 and picked up by Michael Cohen (2016) and others.

Building on the above findings, the

DPU's additional collaboration with HIC sought to explore what a civil society response to regional reporting would resemble. The rationale behind this was that the official Regional reports, compiled by the five UN Regional Economic and Social Commissions with UN-Habitat (in collaboration with the Habitat III Secretariat) and bringing together national reports at the regional scale, would be unlikely to capture the concerns and vision of civil society groups, including those engaged with rights-based agendas. Accordingly, the DPU, steered by an advisory committee of civil society networks, grass-roots movements and academics spanning the African continent, helped coordinate an Africa Regional Dossier (Frediani et al., 2016). This dossier highlights key issues that, from a civil society perspective, require either greater visibility or else general reframing in the NUA. Beyond a reliance on selected interviews, the Dossier built on two pan-African civil society gatherings organised in Johannesburg in November/December 2015: the Global Platform on the Right

to the City's regional meeting and the Session of Inhabitants coordinated by the International Alliance of Inhabitants at Africities VII.

Unsurprisingly, civil society concerns collected in the preliminary Africa Region Dossier, have reflected dominant issues raised within the NUA, including concerns with Africa's infrastructure gap, the lack of economic opportunity (especially for youth), security, urban conflict, and climate change; along with a recognition of the diversity of human settlements along the urban-rural continuum. Most significantly however, the dossier highlighted a critical fault-line in current development processes that promote urbanisation, infrastructure development and economic growth over and above the right of citizens to 'stay put' - let alone, their right to adequate shelter and livelihoods opportunities. Evictions, and concerns around land grabbing featured at the top of civil

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*Below: Street traders in Dharavi, Mumbai, India.  
Photo by Gynna Millan.*



society's preoccupations, across the urban, peri-urban and rural human settlement continuum and across the continent. In turn, this focus and the broader protection of rights and entitlements of cities and human settlements' most vulnerable citizens represents, arguably, a key alternative frame for prioritising emerging development priorities across the NUA.

Finally – and intimately related – the Dossier pointed to the on-going deficit, at the continental scale, in democratic governance mechanisms able to identify such policy priorities for the NUA. Despite decentralisation processes (often occasioned under the impulse of Habitat II), social movements and community members' access to decision-making spaces have remained limited, under-capacitated and, too often, severely constrained – especially for women and youth, who represent significant social actors in poorer African communities. In the context of on-going formal commitments to participatory processes – including within the NUA – such persistent discrepancies are sobering. Moreover as the Dossier emphasises, they represent an immense wasted opportunity in terms of channelling localised, bottom-up and sustainable responses to Africa's (unevenly) swelling and diverse human settlements.

DPU's multi-layered inputs into the NUA, spanning institutional, 'blue-sky' and 'struggle-based' advocacy, thus speaks to the variety of entry points and processes hoping to set the tone for a transformative urban agenda. Twenty years after Habitat II's Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements and 40 years after the first Habitat Agenda was launched in Vancouver in 1976, will the 'New Urban Agenda' agreed in Quito deliver on the radical promise of change inherent in its name? Will it confirm the emerging global governance framework and offer transformative guidance to the diverse actors involved in the making of human settlements? In particular, will it be endorsed by local governments and those local populations whose needs are currently not met – both stakeholders who have the most at stake in the successful implementation of the NUA? As this DPU News goes to press, two versions of the Zero Draft and, in late July, the Surabaya Draft mentioned above, have been made available for public comment; and whilst final negotiations may still throw up surprises, it is reasonable now to make preliminary remarks.

In terms of format, the Draft NUA represents a substantially condensed document compared to its predecessor, with

the latest running over 22 pages and 165 paragraphs. It remains nonetheless rather unwieldy, given its stated ambition to serve as an action-oriented document. Content-wise, the latest draft is to be commended for referencing strong, progressive, concepts, enshrined in the rights-based principles of the United Nations Charter. These include, amongst others, the (reiterated) commitments to sustainable development, climate change mitigation and risk reduction through "*sustainable, people-centred, age and gender responsive and integrated approaches to urban and territorial development*" (HABITAT III, 2016a: 3); integration of food and nutrition into planning, including a systems and urban metabolism perspective; a call for productivity, along with recognition and support for the informal sector, and the social and solidarity economy. "*Arbitrary forced evictions*" are mentioned three times in the latest draft, and explicit recognition of the "*social and ecological function of land*" and the prevention of land speculation feature in the document's opening pages. Meanwhile, local tax systems are buttressed and land value capture mechanisms appear (re)valorised; idem with the multiple forms of human settlements across the urban-rural continuum, instead of an earlier primary focus on cities. Reference to participatory governance and processes feature throughout, often ensconced with notions of belonging, recognition and empowerment, especially of more vulnerable groups. Even the right to the city, finds its place in the NUA:

*"We anchor our vision in the concept of cities for all, referring to the equal use and enjoyment of cities, towns, and villages, 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, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements, as a common good that essentially contributes to prosperity and quality of life. Cities for all is also recognised as the Right to the City in some countries, based on a people-centred vision of cities as places that strive to guarantee a decent and full life for all inhabitants."* (HABITAT III, 2016a: 2).

The above sentence, drawn from the opening vision, provides a particularly artfully crafted example of the inevitable compromises between signatory nation states at the heart of the NUA. In some instances though, the compromise is rather less promising, as in the commitment only

to "*progressively achieve the full realisation of the right to adequate housing*" (ibid: 2) – a nod to Habitat I's progressive thrust and its subsequent refutation by certain member states, including the United States. In fact, a critical reading of the NUA points to the multiple levels of contradictions running through the document – between key commitments, and between these and implementation proposals. For instance the recognition of the social value of land sits uncomfortably with the call for 'competitive' urban economies and for housing and public spaces to act as drivers of economic growth, or indeed with the limited challenge to the financialisation of land and housing markets. Ultimately, the NUA lacks clear guidance as to how the inevitable contradictions thrown up by complex development processes are to be addressed in practice. The Africa Dossier calls for a clear prioritisation and protection of rights and entitlements of human settlements' most vulnerable citizens, along with a commitment to the distributive goals of sustainable development; the *Just Sustainability* paradigm equally propelled equity as the cornerstone of sustainable development. A bolder and more incisive NUA would provide just such a firm and transformative 'line in the sand' to safeguard just and sustainable urban futures.

The Surabaya Draft also makes commendable and oft-reiterated core commitments to "*sustainable and inclusive urban economies*" and to human settlements in which all people "*are able to enjoy equal rights and opportunities*", "[*leav[ing] no one behind ending poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including the eradication of extreme poverty, [and] by ensuring equal rights and opportunities*". It further commits to achieving environmental sustainability and "*building urban resilience, reducing disaster risks, and mitigating and adapting to climate change*" (ibid: 3).

Yet, here as well, there is little in the way of articulating the connections between the NUA's key principles, raising concerns that one of the three pillars of sustainable development will trump the others in practice. This lacuna is disappointing given the established corpus of reflexion and policy formulation on sustainable development. The Surabaya Draft as it stands represents a missed opportunity to further articulate a strong message about the generative interdependence of the three components of (just) sustainable development; namely the complex inter-relations between social, environmental and

economic justice. More pointedly still, the current draft beckons a stronger focus in the final iteration on the varied, localised ways in which multiple stakeholders can be supported in acting upon such interconnections.

The lack of a concerted resolution on the key development paradigm underpinning the NUA reflects to some extent the silo nature of the Agenda's preparations. As the DPU's experience in the Economic Policy Unit exemplifies, inputs into the NUA have undoubtedly been inclusively organised in terms of geographic representation and in terms of vantage points onto key focus areas. But they have also tended to be sectorally organised – with little encouragement of integrated thinking. Yet, transformative discourse and practice requires thought across boundaries and from trans-disciplinary perspectives. On that front, there is much to ponder about the ways in which official conversations around the formulation of the NUA have promoted the perpetuation of silo thinking at the expense of strategic approaches able to catalyse synergies across development concerns and actors – resulting in better use of scarce resources.

There is more to say too about the ways in which some of the official NUA processes have (un)wittingly facilitated the engagement of some actors above others. The time-frames for responses on draft policy papers, the visa and resource requirements associated with attendance at regional or thematic meetings, have been particularly challenging for many poorly-resourced civil society organisations – despite some notable efforts to provide updates on the various NUA strands in an open and transparent fashion. Problematic also has been the lack of clear guidance for encouraging recalcitrant nation states to involve diverse civil society groups in the formulation of national reports. These should have been the spaces of choice for much needed conversations (and potential recalibrations) around just and sustainable development trajectories; indeed the space to catalyse reflections on localised resolutions to the inevitable contradictions and interdependencies in the development of just sustainabilities.

Notwithstanding these gaps, the NUA drafting process and the prospect of Habitat III have undeniably promoted discussion involving a wide range of actors and at multiple scales – well beyond the various invited avenues for engagement. Indeed the closed nature of some national

reporting processes have, for example in Chile, catalysed the development of alternative, civil-society-led reporting processes. Meanwhile, civil society groups, local government networks, and other actors have seized the opportunity to construct or extend alternative platforms of engagement. The initiation of regional dossiers is one example, but others include attempts to create networks of progressive municipalities (with for instance a focus on migrants, TIPPs, or the commons). Such networks are fertile grounds for the sharing of aspirations and alternative paradigms towards sustainable economies, social and solidarity trajectories of development, such as: the right to the city, the commons, urban agriculture or, again, revisiting rural-urban linkages or the notion of risk. They are also key platforms in the search for and consolidation of alliances between social movements, universities, progressive local government and economic actors. This indirect generative dimension of the Habitat III process is perhaps its greatest achievement to date – and is unlikely to come to a halt in Quito.

**For more information on DPU's critical engagement with national and regional reports towards Habitat III, developed with HIC (Habitat International Coalition) see <https://www.bartlett.ucl.ac.uk/dpu/habitat-III>.**

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