

Egyptian NGOs, Thinking outside the Habitat III Box

One of the most-daunting challenges in the process toward the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Human Settlement [Urban] Development (Habitat III) is sorting the mounds of information, knowledge and messaging from the diverse sources. Soon this articulation will form the broad contours of the New Habitat Agenda—what UN-Habitat is promoting as its “urban” agenda—to be adopted at the October 2016 Habitat III conference at Quito, Ecuador.

Governments, UN specialized agencies and an array of [14 Habitat Agenda stakeholder groups](#) are assimilating also a 40-year accumulation of concepts, terms, principles and lessons that will culminate in an agreed text enshrining the priorities, needs and committed actions in human settlements (habitat) management and development for the next twenty years.

A cross-section of those stakeholders once formed the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) at the first Habitat Forum (1976) to uphold the visionary Habitat Agenda through Habitat II (1996) and, now, toward Habitat III. HIC’s Housing and Land Rights Network Coordinator Joseph Schechla observed that “Local organizations, social movements and close allies always have been indispensable to the Habitat Agenda and the Habitat Debate, counting among the most-active, most-innovative and most-productive contributors.”

However, in Egypt, a burst of public attention, thinking and commitments on habitat issues brought together at the [Egyptian Urban Forum](#) three months ago has contrasted with its stalled follow-up. The Ministry of Housing and UN-Habitat/Cairo were supposed to reconstitute a National Habitat Committee that would collaborate on Egypt’s National Habitat III Report, finally replacing the [government draft](#) submitted within the official deadline last year. (Across the region, only [Algeria](#), [Palestine](#) and [Turkey](#) have submitted Habitat III reports so far.) The Habitat III Secretariat has announced that it would recognize only National Habitat III Reports produced through a [National Habitat Committee](#) comprised of Habitat Agenda stakeholders. (Some are [exceptions](#) to that rule.)

Reviving the process, a group of CSOs in Egypt known for thinking outside the box has innovated civic engagement in the Habitat III process with a view toward 2016. Over the past summer, ten organizations met in Cairo to consider their own reporting contribution. Their initiative began with a review of the Habitat processes since 1976 and the standing [commitments under Habitat II \[Arabic\]](#). In late August, they adapted the UN-Habitat’s formal outline of the reporting [guidelines](#), in order to be compatible with, and parallel to the presumed system-wide standard.

However, since that standard omits mentioning or evaluating the performance of the still-standing [Habitat II commitments \[Arabic\]](#), the CSOs came up with a hybrid approach that captures the Habitat II commitments as much as possible within each of the broad outlines of the UN-Habitat-proffered guidance. Using a [template \[Arabic\]](#) that frames that outline, while merging both the Habitat II commitments and the relevant human rights norms, the ten

organizations have distributed reporting responsibilities to contribute sections of an evaluative Habitat III report corresponding to the CSOs' respective competence.

This CSO nucleus expects to have a draft outcome to share at the Arab Interministerial Forum on Housing and Urban Development, when it convenes at Cairo on 20–22 December 2015.

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