Habitat International Coalition (HIC) Statement
Housing and Land Rights Days (HLRD) 2008

The United Nations has proposed the slogan “Harmonious Cities” for World Habitat Day 2008. As the UN General Secretary stated in his message for WHD 2008 “Cities have tremendous potential to be places where balanced development prevails, where diverse people live in harmony, and where healthy living conditions coexist with low levels of energy consumption, resource use and waste.”

For HIC, the huge potential of the city lies primarily with the people. Behind each act of balanced development has always been, and will always be a citizen initiative, a claim for equity. These are struggles that we mount across the world, taking into consideration the diversity of each local context, to define and implement the “Right to the City” built upon criteria of sustainability and social justice to ensure the equitable use and enjoyment of the city. These are struggles that we articulate in solidarity with others in rural areas also for their right to access land and water.

The UN’s call has led us to search for an illustration to reflect the WHD 2008 theme. The painting of an abstract butterfly entitled “Harmonious City” by Cuban artist Fabian Muñoz Diaz depicts such harmony in its composite colors, while also reflecting some of the complexities found in cities: Their segregation into two or more wings, their ghettos, the self-isolated rich and the poor, black barriers to access the urban space with no other option than marginalization. The aggression of the blazing background in different shades of red may represent real estate interests that call our attention to the fact that “harmonious” cities must stand away from private business to serve all inhabitants.

This fiery context is becoming more complex. The real estate bubble is bursting with astronomic social costs, still not fully conveyed in the media. Pundits are too concerned with who is going to assume the payment for the financial disaster and the ideological pursuit of “market confidence.” In a coordinated effort by the Coalition and many other partners, we must monitor and address the consequences, of these repeated expressions of expulsion and inequity.

Violations of the human rights to habitat (access to land, housing, water, and services) continue to afflict the most-vulnerable groups, through all types of eviction and dispossession generated by the privatization of habitat, by the real estate interests, in post-natural disaster resettlement phases, and by armed conflicts, wars and occupation. For the third consecutive year, the Coalition has published a map of these violations.

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1 See the complete statement:
On Monday, 6 October, the official UN celebration for “harmonious cities” will begin in Angola, and will proceed to the World Urban Forum in Nanjing (China), in November. As HIC already has informed UN-Habitat directly, we are very troubled that a global meeting was called to discuss themes of “harmonious cities” in countries where human rights—in particularly, housing rights—are flagrantly violated, and where cities multiply with a perspective of short-term, unsustainable development. A “harmonious city”, rather, means harmonizing human rights obligations of the state in legislation and policies of both central and local authorities. Thus, achieving a truly “harmonious city” goes far beyond a disingenuous slogan, and means a call for more-serious work to be shared between authorities and the people within the framework of the human right to adequate housing.

We invite you to join the call to respect, protect and fulfill human rights and to ensure urban alternatives that respect peoples’ capacities to build habitat where to live in peace and dignity. This requires, in turn, the duty of states and cities to break down policy and spatial barriers and to enable the harmonious city to emerge as a sustainable habitat that reflects its most human nature and meets the most-urgent needs.

_Davinder Lamba, President_  
_Ana Sugranyes, General Secretary_  
_Joseph Schechla, coordinator, Housing and Land Rights Network_  
_Lorena Zárate and Enrique Ortíz, HIC Latin America_