

## Habitat III's Seven Deadly Sins of Omission

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“Everything has been thought of before, but the problem is to think of it again.”

*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe<sup>1</sup>*

By the time of this writing, the engagement of civil society in the Habitat Agenda has gone through several progressive stages. Forty years of experience has taught us much about the possibilities, the needs and the expectations of a global Habitat Agenda. The 1<sup>st</sup> UN Habitat Forum at Vancouver in 1976 was an epiphany. It set several landmarks.

Despite the hazards of global politics and the nature of government decision making, Habitat I left us with a standard that was without precedent. It enshrined solemn commitments of states and their governments to face the diverse challenges of housing humanity in human settlements in complementary fashion. It comprised a set of common promises to pursue “balanced rural and urban development,” reflecting the understanding that all human settlements are somehow linked. Habitat I also promised that governments would innovate ways to return socially produced values, including the use of the people’s lands and resources, that would ensure equitable distribution and funding for social purposes.

It was a time of significant normative development. Following ten years after the adoption of the two Human Rights Covenants (1966), Habitat I formed one of the first international conferences to include the newly independent states of Africa. It was also the first UN conference officially attended by the Palestine Liberation Organization. The architecture and symbolism of the public forum in 1976 also reflected the presence of Canada’s indigenous peoples, who hosted the events on their ancestral land.

### Evolution

Clearly, much of the world has changes since then. Clearly much has not. However, on the subject of civil society involvement in the Habitat Agenda, Vancouver was an important landmark. Many of the “unofficial” participants found common cause in the form of a civic platform that later became the Habitat International Coalition (HIC). The founders of HIC dedicated their efforts to supporting—and further developing—the Habitat Agenda, which is a commitment that endures until today.

What was different and improved at the time of the Habitat Agenda’s renewal at Istanbul in 1996 was a lively presence of organized civil society with a rich background of following the Habitat Agenda and supporting its further development. While the Habitat II Agenda reaffirmed many of the same wise commitments of Habitat I, including those cited above, the new Habitat Agenda went further to align with human rights obligations as a core feature of Habitat II, acknowledging 11 standing human rights treaties at the time its adoption.

In essence, Habitat II’s further achievements were: (1) an affirmation of the centrality of human rights, in particular the progressive realization of the human right to adequate housing (as provided in international instruments) in all human settlements and (2) recognition of the principles of good governance in balanced rural and urban development. Those two pillars of the Habitat II Agenda are

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reflected in the Istanbul Declaration and Habitat II Agenda. Other detailed commitments demonstrate the continuity and integrity of 1<sup>st</sup> UN Habitat Forum (Vancouver, 1976) and Habitat II (Istanbul, 1996).

Habitat II also enshrined a definition of the established concept of habitat as a “regional and cross-sectoral approach to human settlements planning, which places emphasis on rural/urban linkages and treats villages and cities as two ends [points] of a human settlements continuum in a common ecosystem” (H2, para. 104).

Moving forward toward Habitat III, we can boast a much broader civil society engagement than ever before, both inside and outside the official processes. However, where is the integrity of the Habitat Agenda commitments? Through the myriad processes leading up to Quito’s October 2016 summit, it has become clear that civil society will have to play an assertive role to anchor the Habitat values and commitments (enshrined in Habitat II) constitute an inviolable minimum for the next 20-year Agenda.

As in all serial UN policy conferences, we now face the real hazard that states and their followers will push for a standard inferior to the one before. However, for most of global civil society, including social movements, grassroots groups and other stakeholder constituencies, the Habitat II commitments should be the foundation of a current review and the eventual Habitat III construct.

However, this vision is not shared among the leadership of UN-Habitat, the agency that bears the primary responsibility as steward of the Habitat Agenda. The current mantra of UN-Habitat is a call for only a “new urban agenda,” neglecting the formerly sworn balanced development of all human habitat. Rather, urbanization and city growth are promoted as the drivers of economic development as the world’s future priority objective of homogenization. In fact, the pursuit of privatizing the habitat have been the long-standing UN-Habitat advice to governments, ever since the agency admittedly abandoned the Habitat Agenda shortly after it was born.

In fact, whether anyone were to consult the annual report of the UN Secretary General, “The Coordinated implementation of the Habitat Agenda,” or the regular General Assembly’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Committee reports entitled “Implementation of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II),” it is not possible find mention of the commitments from Habitat II, or any reference to their implementation. Accordingly, UN-Habitat and its UN oversight functions have equally forsaken the Habitat Agenda.

The newly branded “urban agenda” promises to replace the intentionally forgotten Habitat II without looking back. However, a reading of the preceding Habitat Agenda’s is not only essential to the current Habitat Debate, it is also revealing of how the expenditure of so many resources in the Habitat III processes are required to reinvent the proverbial wheel. However, dropping diverse human habitat for an exclusive “urban agenda” involves reinventing a wheel that does not quite complete a circle.

This new and myopic perspective also promises to harm global civil society as a whole. While the agendas and declarations emanating from so many regional and thematic meetings are already cooked before the opening session, the participation of civil society in the expression of Habitat III priorities has been anemic. Further, the executive committee of constituency chairs at the official General Assembly of Partners (GAP) recently resolved not to offer input into the Habitat III Agenda, but rather to position itself as a pool of implementers of the yet-unseen outcome.

The promotional “new urban agenda,” with its dismissal of core human rights Habitat commitments, is even more worrying for the harm it augurs for social solidarity among civil society streams. Deliberately dropping the rural, peri-urban and other landed human habitat’s from Habitat III poses the biggest hazard to human habitat and civil society’s representation in it. For example, the small farmers and indigenous peoples—supposed Habitat Agenda Partners—are alienated from the debate.

Obvious lessons of civil society over the past 14 years of deliberating the “Right to the City” have taught that an exclusive “urban” focus is potentially divisive. In 2009, CSO and social movements tried to avert this self-defeating and opponent-serving course of broken solidarity and messaging at the 2009 Belém WSF. There participants produced a [convergence document \[English\]](#) and a [message](#) that they carried also to the WSF at Dakar 2011 [[English](#)]). In these documents urban, rural and indigenous organizations pledged not to work at cross purposes, but to develop needed mutuality of understanding, solidarity and strategic objectives.

In the current Habitat process, civil society should reflect on and renew that commitment to treat our human habitat and an integral whole, developing cooperation, value sharing and complementarity. Abandoning the Habitat Agenda for a set of principles that stop at the city limits is not the process—or world—we need.

A reading of the foregoing Habitat Agenda commitments, as well as a review of Habitat Agenda-inspired civil society commitments also reveals several critical issues and values that remain neglected in the current process toward Habitat III. These can be summarized in a few prerequisites for the future of human habitat development.

### **Seven Deadly Sins of Omission**

HIC has been vocal in the Habitat III forums and explicit in writing about the need for a rigorous monitoring-and-evaluation process to learn the lessons of Habitat II implementation. Likewise, the Coalition also has pointed out the need for the new Habitat Agenda to commit to a monitoring-and-evaluation mechanism for the next 20 years, as well as applying standard evaluation criteria, as HIC has expressed in [Habitat III Basics](#).

These key shortcomings have enabled the current amnesia about the spirit and content of the successive Habitat Agendas. They also join what can be understood as the [seven deadly sins](#) of Habitat III omission manifesting in both process and content.

Mindful of these, we now can offer a brief inventory of missing-but-indispensable contents and approaches for the new Agenda. If the new Agenda is to be taken seriously, it is indispensable the Habitat III address the following:

(1) The **financialization** of housing, land and habitat: This looms as one of the most egregious omissions in the current deliberations, despite the tragic lessons learned—but never applied—from the North American mortgage crisis and consequence crisis of the global financial system. HIC has joined other networks and civil society groups in an open letter to the Habitat III organizers to correct this glaring omission.<sup>2</sup>

(2) A review of **population policy** (such as it exists): The Policy Papers and UN-Habitat messaging reiterate the presumed “inevitability” of population growth and movement that call for much greater urbanization. However, the world has not undergone a review of population policies since the

International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), at Cairo, (1994). The now-forgotten ICPD program of action sought to integrate population and development strategies and manage population to ensure sustained economic growth and “eradicate poverty” (Principle 7).<sup>3</sup> That international policy document recognized the inextricable links between population policy and development success; however, the absence of explicit recognition of this link in the Habitat III inputs suggests little or no attention in the outcome document, unless this course conscientiously changes.

(3) Incorporation of **universal and interdependent human rights and corresponding obligations** at the core of Habitat III: A reflection of normative development since 1996 would serve the Habitat Agenda drafters to find coherence with international law as it currently stands. However, the relevant international law dimensions are absent from the Habitat III documents and the discourse to date. At a minimum, Habitat III should recognize the common (but differentiated) obligations of all spheres of government to respect, protect and fulfill human rights, including central institutions, [local authorities and local governments](#), where they actually exist. In particular, this would reaffirm the key Habitat Agenda commitment to the full and progressive realization of the human right to adequate housing, including its expressions as developed since 1996. This promise—indeed obligation—of states would take into consideration the “right to the city,” along with “human rights cities,” “rights of the city,” “urban rights,” “human rights habitat,” etc. In this connection, too, any reference to, or version of the “right to the city” slogan and/or principles would be wholly inadequate if it did not also express the “city” or urbanized habitat as an integral part of the “human rights habitat,” which is the more-embracing concept and less-divisive and nondiscriminatory context that the one singling out city dwellers. This approach also must include a reaffirmation of the (broken) promise of Habitat II to combat homelessness<sup>4</sup> and to prevent and redress forced evictions.<sup>5</sup>

(4) The **consequences of conflict, occupation and war** on the human habitat: It is unconscionable that the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda recognizes the great challenge of “foreign and military occupation” as an obstacle to development, but offers no goal, target or indicator toward its elimination. The UN response to this plight also is woefully lacking if it does not also develop the UN Charter-based principle of implementing human rights for both the preventive and remedial dimensions for which the norms were codified. Habitat III also must take lessons from other sectors and normative precedents that recognize the need for strengthening policy coherence “by fostering coordination of policies and actions taken in the fields of humanitarian assistance, development and human rights.”<sup>6</sup>

(5) **Combatting corruption** in urbanization and human-settlements development: Some authors have warned that any ambition for urban development can succeed only when corruption is effectively tackled. Similarly, the global fight against corruption critically depends on cities.<sup>7</sup> It is imperative that the devastating functions and consequences of corruption form a priority for human settlements development in the coming decades. The Habitat III “[issue paper](#)” and [draft policy “framework” paper](#) on urban governance admit that “local corruption constitutes one of the big scourges of the urbanising world.” However, this is only a belated starting point for any practical commitment in a New Habitat Agenda.

(6) The “**habitat metabolism**” concept and approach must be shared and adopted: The integrated and organic approach to human settlements as the living entities that they are calls for approach habitat as any metabolism. In human settlement development, management, governance and planning, the habitat metabolism is the subject of a holistic vision that addresses and treats a human settlement as a living organism and seeks to sustain it. Infrastructure, resource use and efficiency, production, environment viability and human well-being are key elements of a habitat metabolism.<sup>8</sup> This would

include the recognition of the nature of including city-region food systems, security and sovereignty; infrastructure; resource planning, use and management: energy; labour movements and patterns; water systems; transport, etc., which attributes are far more than just “urban” in nature.

(7) Proper **monitoring-and-evaluation** methods and mechanisms: With this omission in Habitat II and the silence about it in Habitat III so far, we return to our point of departure. The greatest lessons learned in implementing Habitat II over the past 20 years have been squandered by UN-level dismissal of its commitments. In this sense, Habitat II management has tossed out the Habitat II baby with so much Habitat III bath water.<sup>9</sup> The official refusal to date to evaluate implementation—or even recall—Habitat II commitments has generated questions as to credibility of a new Agenda, by any name, if it faces the same amnesia in future. Rigorous follow-up processes for H3 are needed to avoid the Agenda-performance failures of the past. HIC and others have proposed drawing on the example of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) mechanisms, which involve a civil International Planning Committee and a Civil Society Mechanism. However, this requires urgent deliberation before an outcome document results by repeating this grave omission.

## Conclusion

Each of these seven deadly sins of Habitat III omission deserves a policy paper, deliberation process and ultimate coverage in the New Habitat Agenda. However, the Habitat III organizers, in particular UN-Habitat leadership and the Habitat III Secretariat, are not listening to reason. Unless they do, posterity will not remember them kindly.

As usual, these omissions put an even greater onus on civil society, for they are the publicly interested parties who can envision the need and foresee the hazards. Until now, as evidenced by the inert stance of the GAP, much of civil society and other stakeholder constituencies have expressed more concern about positioning and presence in the meetings. Much less effort has been spent on the needed content and substance of the global policy. With only a few months remaining till October 2016, the time for correction is now.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> “Alles Gescheidte ist schon gedacht worden, man muß nur versuchen es noch einmal zu denken.” Harald Fricke, ed., *Johann Wolfgang Goethe: Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche* [Frankfurter Ausgabe]. I. Abt., Bd. 13, Reflexion-Nr. 1239 (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> “Habitat for People - Not Profit!,” 31 January 2016, at: <http://www.hlrn.org/news.php?id=pm5sZg==#.VtoML9tukcQ>.

<sup>3</sup> “Report of the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 5-13 September 1994),” A/CONF.171/13, at: <http://www.un.org/popin/icpd/conference/offeng/poa.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Istanbul Declaration, para. 4; Habitat Agenda, paras. 8; 11; 38; 40(l); 61(c)(iv), 61 (d); 115; 119(k) and 204(y).

<sup>5</sup> Habitat Agenda, op. cit., paras. 40n, 61b, and 98b.

<sup>6</sup> “Framework for Action for Food Security and Nutrition in Protracted Crises,” (CFS-FFA), CFS 2015/42/4, July 2015, at: [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs1415/FFA/CFS\\_FFA\\_Final\\_Draft\\_Ver2\\_EN.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs1415/FFA/CFS_FFA_Final_Draft_Ver2_EN.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Dieter Zinnbauer, “Corruption: Habitat III’s Elephant in the Room,” *Citiscopes* (1 February 2016), at: <http://www.hlrn.org/news.php?id=pm5tZw==#.VtoTVttukcQ>.

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- <sup>8</sup> Joe Ravetz, *City Region 2020: Integrated Planning for a Sustainable Environment* (London: Earthscan, 2000); Sabine Barles, “[Urban Metabolism of Paris and its Region](#),” *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, Vol. 13, No. 6 (2009), pp. 898–913; Paul H. Brunner, Hans Daxbeck, and Peter Baccini, “[Industrial Metabolism at the Regional and Local Level: A Case Study on a Swiss Region](#),” in Robert U. Ayres and Udo E. Simonis, ed., *Industrial Metabolism: Restructuring for Sustainable Development* (Tokyo, Paris, New York: United Nations University Press, 1994); Fredrik Burström, Nils Brandt, Björn Frostell and Ulf Mohlander, “[Material Flow Accounting and Information for Environmental Policies in the City of Stockholm. Analysis for action: support for policy towards sustainability by material flow accounting](#)”; Hans Daxbeck, Christoph Lampert, Leo Morf, Richard Obernostere, Helmut Rechberger, Iris Reiner and Paul H. Brunner, [The Anthropogenic Metabolism of the City of Vienna. Regional and National Material Flow Accounting: From Paradigm to Practice of Sustainability](#); Marina Fischer-Kowalski, “[Society's Metabolism: Origins and Development of the Material Flow Paradigm](#),” proceedings of the ConAccount workshop 21–23 January 1997 (Leiden: Wuppertal Institute, 1997); Fredrik Burström and Jouni Korhonen, “[Municipalities and industrial ecology: Reconsidering municipal environmental management](#),” *Sustainable Development*, Vol. 9, Issue 1 (February 2001), pp. 36–46; Mireille Faist Emmenegger, and Rolf Frischknecht, « [Métabolisme du Canton de Genève - Phase 1](#) » (Uster: ESU Service (2003); Mark Hammer, Stefan Giljum, Fed Luks and Matthias Winkler, [Die ökologische Nachhaltigkeit regionaler Metabolismen: Materialflussanalysen der Regionen Hamburg, Wien und Leipzig](#),” *Natur und Kultur*, Vol. 7, No. 22 (2006), pp. 62–78.
- <sup>9</sup> Joseph Schechla, Habitat II Baby, Habitat III Bathwater,” *HLRN News* (10 August 2015), at: <http://www.hlrn.org/news.php?id=pm1kYw==#.VtoWoNtukcQ>.