

Habitat II Baby, Habitat III Bathwater

Wading through the Habitat III messaging and knowledge products

By Joseph Schechla, Habitat International Coalition – Housing and Land Rights Network

The substantive debate toward the 2016 [Habitat III](#) Conference is warming up. The disappointment that states earlier expressed at [PrepCom2](#) (Nairobi, April 2015) for slow progress in producing the draft material for the outcome document has subsided. The rich content of 22 [Issue Papers](#), so far, has superseded some of the discussion over process and defined the emerging contours of the new Habitat Agenda. Beyond that visible horizon, however, lie several content, methodology, process and ideological concerns that remain to be reconciled in advance of the crowning October 2016 event at Quito, Ecuador.

At this writing, the [Issue Papers](#) (in English) on 22 habitat themes under six broad headings have been published and vetted through an [e-discussion](#) that concluded on 31 July. That conversation will carry on now in other forms, forums and mechanisms, including the corresponding Policy Units of volunteer experts and numerous public events that span the coming year. This review of the Issue Papers prognosticates many features of that ensuing debate that the Issue Papers and other official Habitat III messaging have provoked, either by their content, or by their very omission.

Process, Method, Content

The Issue Papers identify many challenges, threats and opportunities in human settlement development in the coming 20 years of Habitat III implementation. The current generation of Habitat International Coalition (HIC), which civic initiative sprang out of [Habitat I](#) (1976), has reviewed the 22 thematic papers as an indicator of the current discourse, finding them to be “essential reading.” At the same time, HIC has cautioned that anything short of wide and effective participation in the debate and a review of [Habitat II commitments](#) would render the Habitat III process in doubt. Those two indispensable values still remain at stake.

This HIC position arises not from some nostalgic attachment to the spirit and content of that participatory, principled and productive Habitat II, 20 years ago, but from standard evaluation practice in any development effort. Like the official Habitat III messaging, overall, the Issue Papers make little mention of the current Habitat Agenda. In fact, that subject of inquiry is made majestic only by its conspicuous absence.

The 22 Issue Papers have demanded a great deal of time and resources from many concerned parties. Even if it means running the risk of Issue Paper fatigue, a parallel evaluative reporting process is equally essential. The review of the Habitat II commitments and the assessment of their implementation are *glocal*, required both at global and local levels. The 22 Issue Papers reflect the global and thematic perspective, but largely without mentioning what went before.

Meanwhile, the long-promised [National Habitat Reports](#) would be the natural locus of that inquiry in the local context. However, the UN-Habitat national reporting criteria have [disregarded](#) the Habitat II commitments. As a whole, the 22 new Issue Papers faithfully uphold that amnesiac approach.

The official approach to Habitat III is managing the headlong discourse so as to capture the latest technical knowledge in a field self-acclaimed as “urban.” Since the early internal discussions within UN-Habitat, this has been branded as aiming toward a “New Urban Agenda.” However, any review of what has gone before in the two rounds and 40 years of global habitat policy reveals that this mislabels the intended broader content and scope.

Habitat = urban +

Although consistent with the omission of the standing commitments, the Papers still do not justify narrowing the subject to only an “urban” agenda. The principles and issues laid out in the Issue Papers actually make a strong conceptual case for restoring the “Habitat” Agenda’s inclusivity. If forty years of commitments bear any relevance to, or integrity with the present process, the core [Habitat II](#) promise of “balanced rural and urban development” should be remembered (Habitat II Agenda, ¶ 43k, 75, 76m, 107, 109, 126, 156, 163–69).

Owing to popular demand, the Issue Papers included No. 10 on [Urban-Rural Linkages](#). However, even that iteration makes no mention of the corresponding Habitat II commitments or their outstanding implementation status today. Nonetheless, in light of the Issue Papers as a whole, the exclusively “urban” Habitat III messaging and approach—in both word and deed—appear more and more untenable as a global policy premise or functional reality. In the Papers 1 – [Inclusive Cities](#) and 10 – [Urban-rural Linkages](#), even Paper 8 – [Urban and Spatial Planning and Design](#), the more-inclusive “habitat” approach is evident and unavoidable. In this sense, the narrative of the Papers does not change the practical imperative of more-integrated human settlement planning and administration, but indicates that Habitat III branding has to comply.

Whither democracy and human rights?

The Issue Papers also confirm the abandonment of the normative and human rights approach of foregone habitat policy theory. The two quintessential contributions of Habitat II were its committed approach to both human rights and good governance. While the Habitat II Agenda cited the human right to adequate housing (HRAH) 61 times throughout the consensus document, no Issue Paper treats the prolific normative development of HRAH since 1996.

Likewise, the states and other stakeholders at Habitat II pledged that democratic local authorities would be “our closest partners” in implementation (Istanbul Declaration, ¶ 12). In 2015, both HIC and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) had to remind Issue Paper 6 – [Urban Governance](#) readers of that established principle and that Habitat III has to put local democracy at the heart of the new agenda. The relevant Issue Paper does cite the Habitat II reference to “local democratic rule,” but does not elaborate on either the specificity offered in the current Habitat Agenda or the exponential development of the theory and practice of “[the right to the city](#)” and related movements ever since. [UCLG](#) argues that

“no solution, however technically sound and well-financed, will be sustainable if it does not have the support and ownership of the communities in which it is implemented. In order to foster and strengthen local democracy, the Habitat III Agenda should recognize local governments as the key agents in constructing democratic legitimacy at local level.”

The “Slum Problem”

The UN-Habitat-led Issue Paper 22 – [Informal Settlements](#) discussion has not made sufficient reference to foregoing Habitat II commitments, nor has it kept up with the forensic times. It avoids the policy-related genesis of slums and defers to circumstantial, secondary factors for the formation of slum communities. A hint of causality arises from the Paper’s admission that governments have been disengaging from the provision of affordable housing, but the concomitant privatization, real-estate speculation and financialization, as well as UN-Habitat’s neoliberal policy advice, are not acknowledged factors (p. 5).

Without attempting to identify the genesis of slums or the factors that necessitate them, Paper 22 picks up the story in the middle, purveying the pathology of slums and observing that they “affect prosperity of cities and their sustainability,” as if informal settlements in cities are alien and extraneous encumbrances (p. 4). A corrective view has been expressed by Egypt’s current Minister of Urban Renewal and Informal Settlements when debunking a suggested contradiction between urban renewal and informal settlements. She [noted](#) that “Cairo is two-thirds informal neighborhoods. So if we’re going to talk about the formal part of the city or the informal part, it’s one city.”

Paper 22 refers to “unjustified evictions,” but omits their human rights classification as a [gross violation](#), the need to criminalize the practice, the Habitat II commitment to “protect from and remedy” forced evictions (H2: ¶ 40n, 61b, 98b) and the entitlements of [reparations](#) in their event. These normative points are still needed to cover informal settlements at all.

The Papers also would benefit from recognition of the need to implement the human right to participation and the related entitlement to free, prior and informed consent ([FPIC](#)) in cases of development, in general, and slum upgrading, in particular. If the human rights method conscientiously had been applied, the gender component also would not be missing in the Paper, but instead note that the impacts of inadequate living conditions are most severe for women.

Emerging Urbanist Ideology

Although the Papers avoid calling all ominous and life-degrading human-settlement phenomena as “inevitable,” the assumption nonetheless prevails throughout the Papers that certain trends are irreversible and remain immune to any prospect of mitigating them, except for only their direst consequences. Examples are the predicted [three-fold territorial enlargement](#) of urbanization (cities) by 2030, the burgeoning growth in population, the continued destruction of the atmosphere *et al.* The Papers identify these looming problems and note current and needed innovations. However, they do not cover structural obstacles, but conclude with apparent serenity at current trends in technical adjustments to ensure some measure of urban comfort for those who can afford them.

The body of Issue Papers reveals the need also for an additional Issue Paper on population trends (growth, ageing, youth bulge) and related global and state-level policies (or lack thereof). That would complete the picture and address some of the causes and consequences behind the looming assumption that current trends are, perforce, immutable. The global challenges of (1) *eliminating* disparity and (2) accountability for injustice and its manifestations (e.g., forced eviction) are lost amid the technical detail.

Macroeconomic policies are not mentioned at all, despite the repeated Habitat II commitment to take that decisive factor into consideration in all related fields of policy, housing affordability, finance, land tenure, *et al.* (H2: ¶ 40, 62, 65, 67, 115, 186, 189, 201). The apparent ease at abandoning such visionary Habitat II commitments has weakened the otherwise-valuable content of the Issue Papers and the

Habitat III discourse, in general. That omission is also creating the need to reinvent the wheel of Habitat issues, with all the cognitive and cost inefficiencies that that process implies.

“Everything already has been thought of before, one just has to try to think of it again.”

—[Johann Wolfgang von Goethe](#)

Conclusion

While the Issue Papers could not conceivably cover all relevant issues, they largely have succeeded to identify many, while catalyzing debate around both those issues and the ones left out. Although they mostly have omitted any reference to, or evaluation of Habitat II commitments that theoretically still are in effect, the Papers have pointed out important trends that a Habitat Agenda observer can interpret. However, any faithful review and updating of the sustainable human settlement agenda must not throw out the Habitat II baby with so much Habitat III bathwater.

Indeed, all of the recent Issue Papers and the further discourse would benefit from a regimen of both maintaining integrity with, and challenging Habitat II issues and commitments adopted in 1996. The apparent structural forgetfulness about what went before is closely related to the other gaps wanting to be filled: The Papers succeed in presenting problems and posing solutions; however, they need a greater emphasis on root causes and the normative aspect of remedial responses, including the applicable international norms—not least including Habitat II commitments—that would cure, prohibit, seek to prevent and/or avoid many of the problems identified. The debate still faces the need to ask—and answer—those hanging questions: What caused this? Shouldn't there be a law? What are the consequences for people? Who is responsible for the remedy?

While the Habitat III Issue Papers are indispensable reading for the rich descriptive and analytical substance they contain, these other issues remain on the table, conspicuous by their absence. The needed debate over standing commitments and curative responses still needed eventually would propel the importance, relevance and legitimacy of the Habitat III processes. The coming phase of Habitat III discourse could achieve that tall order through the rigorous deliberation that should ensue. We also rely on the constructive inputs of inveterate HIC Members and officers, along with the contributions of fellow civil society and local-democracy partners, to complete the story toward a serious New Habitat Agenda in 2016.

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