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The New Urban Agenda is the outcome document agreed upon at the Habitat III cities conference in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016. It will guide the efforts around urbanization of a wide range of actors — nation states, city and regional leaders, international development funders, United Nations programmes and civil society — for the next 20 years. Inevitably, this agenda will also lay the groundwork for policies and approaches that will extend, and impact, far into the future. See the final version of the New Urban Agenda here.

Who wrote the New Urban Agenda?

The preparatory process along the road to Quito influenced the formulation of the New Urban Agenda, which was unveiled as a “zero draft” in May 2016 and kicked off what ended up being four months’ worth of political negotiations on the new strategy. Those negotiations resulted in a series of additional drafts, available here.

That preparatory process also included an extensive series of official and semi-official events, including regional meetings, thematic meetings and “Urban Thinkers Campuses” for stakeholder input. In addition, from August 2015 to February 2016 a group of 200 experts, known as “policy units”, came up with important recommendations for the drafting and implementing of the New Urban Agenda. Those recommendations, too, were open to broad public comment.

While reflecting the ideas hashed out in the global dialogue that leads up to the October 2016 event, eventually the Habitat III Bureau (composed of 10 U. N. member states) and Secretariat were the ones to write the zero draft. Its terms were subsequently negotiated by the 197 nations that make up the United Nations; the result was adopted in Quito.

What was the old urban agenda?

The United Nations’ current thinking on global urbanization is summed up in the Habitat Agenda: Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements, the outcome document agreed upon in 1996 at the Habitat II conference. It called for adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements in an urbanizing world.

Since then, over 100 countries have adopted constitutional rights to adequate housing, a major success of the Habitat Agenda. At the same time, however, international aid organizations and bilateral development agencies have steadily reduced their investments in cities and slashed their urban programmes. These are trends that have challenged the full implementation of the Habitat Agenda.

What has been the legacy of this previous agenda?

Within the United Nations, the Habitat Agenda's influence has been wide-ranging over the past two decades. Its main provisions worked their way into the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000 with a target of achieving "cities without slums". The MDGs' focus on eradicating poverty and ensuring environmental sustainability closely correlated with the Habitat Agenda.

Since then, major United Nations gatherings on sustainable development, such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 and Rio+20 in 2012, have consistently reaffirmed the core tenets of the Habitat Agenda.

Current discussions around the Post-2015 Development Agenda, too, draw on the principles of the Habitat Agenda. For example, "Realizing the Future We Want For All", the 2012 report to the secretary-general by a U.N. task team, noted that **by 2050, "70 per cent of the world's population will be living in cities."** That report also highlighted the development challenges inherent in rapid urbanization.

Finally, the follow-up development agenda to the MDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also include prominent reference to the spirit of the Habitat Agenda. The urban-focused **SDG, Goal 11**, can also be seen as an extension of an idea first set out by the Habitat Agenda.

What does the New Urban Agenda cover?

The New Urban Agenda, coming on the heels of the crystallization of the Post-2015 Development Agenda, seeks to create a mutually reinforcing relationship between urbanization and development. The idea is that these two concepts will become parallel vehicles for sustainable development.

The agenda thus seeks to offer guidelines on a range of "enablers" that can further cement the relationship between urbanization and sustainable development. This includes, on the one hand, "development enablers" that seek to harness the multiple, often chaotic forces of urbanization in ways that can generate across-the-board growth — national urban policy; laws, institutions and systems of governance; and the broad urban economy.

"Operational enablers", on the other hand, aim to bolster sustainable urban development — or to allow it to take place at all. When implemented, they result in better outcomes for patterns of land use, how a city is formed and how resources are managed. The New Urban Agenda underscores three operational enablers, collectively being referred to by the UN-Habitat leadership as the "three-legged" approach: local fiscal systems, urban planning, and basic services and infrastructure.

What priorities guide the New Urban Agenda?

Beyond the specific technocratic solutions of economics and governance, several core ideas form the ideological underpinnings of the New Urban Agenda. Democratic development and respect for human rights feature prominently, for instance, as does the relationship between the environment and urbanization.

Similarly, the New Urban Agenda includes significant focus on equity in the face of globalization, as well as how to ensure the safety and security of everyone who lives in urban areas, of any gender and age. Risk reduction and urban resilience likewise play prominent roles. And the new agenda places key importance on figuring out how to set up a global monitoring mechanism to track all of these issues and concerns although the specifics on this remain up in the air pending debate by the U. N. General Assembly in 2017-18.

Meanwhile, the core issues of the Habitat Agenda — adequate housing and sustainable human settlements — remain on the table, as the number of people worldwide living in urban slums continues to grow. Indeed, in the time since the Habitat Agenda was adopted the world has become majority urban, lending extra urgency to the New Urban Agenda.

There is also an increasing recognition that cities have morphed into mega-regions, urban corridors and city-regions whose economic, social and political geographies defy traditional conceptions of the “city”. The New Urban Agenda thus was forced to address these trends in urbanization while also recognizing that cities and metropolitan areas are the major drivers of national economies.

Is the New Urban Agenda a binding agreement for member states?

No. As an “agenda” it provides guidance to nation states, city and regional authorities, civil society, foundations, NGOs, academic researchers and U. N. agencies in their thinking about cities, urbanization and sustainable development. But guidance is not binding.

This arrangement is different from, for example, the December 2015 climate negotiations in Paris, which aspired to result in a legally binding agreement.