HABITAT III – TOWARD A "NEW URBAN AGENDA"

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Introduction

Twenty years ago, in 1996, following on from the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development ("Rio Conference") and the General Assembly resolution A/RES/47/180, an ambitious Urban Agenda was set. The aim was to boost the sustainable development of human settlements. HABITAT II, the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements – also known as the "City Summit" – was held in Istanbul, Turkey, and marked a turning point in worldwide urban development. The conference resulted in two main outcomes: the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda. The Istanbul Declaration was to promote socially and environmentally sustainable cities embarking on a search for experience and best practice that demonstrate practical ways of meeting the challenges of urbanisation. With the Habitat Agenda, the international community set twin goals to ensure that cities are inclusive and that the needs of the urban poor in terms of shelter are given priority. Further achievements of HABITAT II were the coining of a global action plan toward sustainable human settlements, the endorsement of universal goals of ensuring adequate shelter for all, and the commitment by States to make human settlements safer, healthier and more liveable. To achieve these goals, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS, UN-HABITAT) – initially established in 1978 as a result of the First UN Conference on Human Settlements and Sustainable Urban Development (HABITAT I) in 1976 – had its status upgraded to a stand-alone programme within the United Nations in 2001[1].

Since 1996, the world has changed tremendously, and so too the factors that shape the development of cities and urban areas. Ongoing urbanisations, technological progress, the way we communicate, work, produce and consume, continued ageing of many populations, and changing values and priorities determining urban development require the review of objectives, goals and strategies at global, regional and national level at appropriate intervals. In 2013, the United Nations General Assembly decided [2] to convene the "Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development" (HABITAT III). The conference will take place from 17–20 October 2016 in Quito, Ecuador. The road map to HABITAT III began after the 7th World Urban Forum in 2014, with the first 'PrepCom' in New York, followed by four high-level regional meetings and seven thematic meetings. The final and third 'PrepCom' will be held in Indonesia in July 2016. The objective of HABITAT III is to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable urban development, assess accomplishments to date, address poverty, and identify and address new and emerging challenges. HABITAT III offers a unique opportunity to discuss the important challenge of how cities, towns and villages are planned and managed, in order to fulfill their role as drivers of sustainable development. It is expected to result in a concise, focused, forward-looking and action-oriented outcome document: the New Urban Agenda.

The New Urban Agenda will be shaped by changes experienced by the world's cities since HABITAT II. It will be based on the Istanbul Declaration and will also refer to the main outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference document, "The Future We Want", and the follow-up process, which culminated in the adaptation of "The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" in 2015 3. The 2030 Agenda comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals, one of which relates explicitly to cities (Goal 11: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable").

To shape the New Urban Agenda at global level, the United Nations Regional Economic Commissions and the United Nations Human Settlements Programmed (UN-Habitat) Regional Offices, in coordination with the HABITAT III Secretariat and in consultation with other UN agencies and stakeholder organisations and experts, have prepared regional reports for five regions: Europe (pan-European region, including North America); Latin America and the Caribbean; West Asia (the Arab countries); Africa; and Asia and the Pacific. The regional reports look back on changes and trends since HABITAT I in Vancouver in 1976, with particular emphasis on the 20 years since HABITAT II in Istanbul in 1996.

The European Regional Report

The HABITAT III Regional Report on housing and urban development for the UNECE region, entitled "Towards a city-focused, people-centred and integrated approach to the New Urban Agenda"), was drafted by a group of experts under the auspices of the UNECE. The region covered in the HABITAT III Regional Report comprises 56 states in North America, Europe and Central Asia. The UNECE region is home to 1.3 billion people, some 17% of the total global population. It contains at least 263 cities of 500 000 or more inhabitants, and contributes to more than 40% of the world's GDP. The regional report was presented and discussed at the "European Habitat" (europeanhabitat.com), which took place from 16–18 March 2016 in Prague. This event was an official part of preparations for HABITAT III. The topic of the European Habitat conference in Prague was "Housing in Liveable Cities". Together with the regional report, the Prague Declaration, which was the main outcome of the conference, constitutes the regional input to HABITAT III. In addition, the "Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing", adopted by the UNECE Committee on Housing and Land Management in 2014, endorsed by the UNECE Commission Session in 2015 and submitted to HABITAT III, is another essential strategic document for urban development in the region.

Trends And Patterns Of Urbanisation And Demography

Urbanisation will continue. By 2050, almost three quarters (66%) of the world's population will live in urban areas. The UNECE region currently has a large proportion of its population living in its cities – between less than 50% in Central Asia and up to more than 80% in North America and Western Europe. The region's urban population is growing, albeit slowly.

Urban growth, growing inequalities and lack of affordability of housing lead to segregation and subsequent urban sprawl. To prevent this, States should promote strategic planning of human settlements. Cooperation in urban planning and management between different levels of governments, and participation in planning by all key stakeholders and the inhabitants, including local NGOs, should be encouraged. This entails enacting measures at national and local levels to ensure that policies are appropriate for each scale of governance, thereby guaranteeing the most effective results. In order to raise sufficient funds and increase economic growth, Public, Private, People's Partnerships (PPPPs) should be encouraged. This will allow for the public and private sectors to work together, benefiting both parties.

In the region, one can witness a general tendency towards urban sprawl, not only in cities experiencing population growth. This poses problems, such as high levels of car dependency, soil sealing, and expenditure for sustaining oversized infrastructure. Moreover, there is a countervailing trend towards shrinking cities within less successful and more remote regions. Such cities are losing population due to outmigration, which often goes along with ageing, as young and highly qualified leave. Almost all of the world's countries that are currently experiencing population shrinkage, or are expected to do so, are situated in the UNECE region.

Additional challenges for cities are posed by rapidly ageing population mainly in Western, Central and Eastern Europe, and in Russia, particularly in regard to diminishing local tax revenues, impacts on health care, the welfare system, the provision of services, transportation, adapted housing, and accessibility of public space. At the same time, Central Asian countries in the region are experiencing growth in the young population, which poses difficulties related to providing jobs and housing.

Within the urban population, there is a trend towards urban concentration and agglomeration into super-cities, i.e. clusters of thriving cities in close proximity to one another, such as the metropolitan regions from Boston to Washington, or London through the Randstad and the Ruhrgebiet, to the cities of Northern Italy. Migration is a key issue throughout the region. Its magnitude and significance has increased in the past 20 years. Migrants settle mainly in large cities. This has led to urban polarisation, as best-performing cities or neighbourhoods tend to attract population growth, youth and economic activities, leaving other areas in a state of economic stagnation and demographic shrinkage which, in turn, reduces opportunities for positive social interaction and cohesion.

Migration has led to increased diversity in many cities, a process that boosts social innovation, but also brings challenges for social cohesion. To lower migratory pressure on cities and allow them to plan and manage urbanisation processes, vibrant rural areas can play an important role. There is a continuing need for policy to address the integration of migrants into human settlements, particularly cities.

The Economy Of Cities

A substantial part of the region has, over the last few decades, undergone economic transition from centrally planned to market economies. In general, large and capital cities have prospered, with GDP returning to pre-1990 levels, while smaller ones have done less well. Economic restructuring during the transition held huge challenges for old industrial cities, in particular in Eastern Europe and the CIS States.

Although the manufacturing industry has declined in the region in the 20 years since HABITAT II, it remains important. There is a shift to cleaner, greener manufacturing that has smaller spatial demands. The rise of the knowledge economy in North America and Europe, built on a digital revolution, is bringing about massive opportunities and challenges for cities. Changing manufacturing and the growing knowledge economy demand different forms of space and use that better suit the new conditions of economic production, social requirements and cultural institutions. While globalisation remains significant, the local qualities of cities become ever more important.

Technical innovation offers new opportunities for urban planning and development, land use (e.g. driverless vehicles), interaction with the public (e.g. crowd sourcing), public participation in decision-making and transparency of urban management. However, data privacy, security and ownership are challenging the capacity of governments to utilise these technical innovations.

The global financial and economic crisis that started in 2008 has led to more inequality in the region, lowering the income of a substantive part of the population, and affecting many aspects of people's lives. The increasing duality of the labour markets changes the patterns of employment, favouring those who create more added value against traditional, low value-adding jobs, significantly contributing to increase of social inequalities. Lack of affordability of housing is a critical matter, leading to problems of accessibility to adequate housing, and increased spatial segregation in cities. Despite being a prosperous part of the world, homelessness and informal settlements are issues in the UNECE region, although they are less acute than in other regions. In some cities, a lack of public spaces and of public transport deprives the residents of amenities and a standard of living that should be available to all. The re-emergence of informal housing is anticipated, as those who cannot get into the housing market find themselves relegated to living in slums with poor infrastructure. The housing sector needs to respond to these changes, securing new sites for housing provision, and meeting new aspirations, such as energy efficiency and customer adjusted design, along with the provision of additional services (e.g. for elderly, homeless and migrant people).

The past two decades have witnessed a general trend towards increasing home ownership and reinforcing housing markets in the region. The total stock of, and investment in, social and public housing is decreasing. The total stock of social housing in advanced economies has been reduced, while the former public housing in the countries with economies in transition has largely been privatised. In general,

the housing sector has seen limited engagement of national authorities in the market, but increased involvement of the private sector, both profit and non-profit organisations. Generally, the process of privatisation of housing in transition economies was too fast for many local governments and individuals (especially owners) to adapt to. In the eastern part of the region, the phenomenon of "poor owners" has become endemic, as a result of the privatisation of public housing, a lack of maintenance, and energy inefficiency. Delays caused by collective decision-making by owners of large housing estates, whether in 'affluent' or 'poor' areas, have increased costs and often resulted in the deterioration of apartment blocks, particularly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Social interactions in cities have changed over the past 20 years. There has been, on the one hand, a tendency to develop closed communities and shopping malls, and, on the other, a reaffirmation of the central role of public spaces as frameworks for innovation and social interaction.

Many of the factors that support equity in a city also support the health and well-being of all its citizens. These include access to housing, transportation, energy and water supplies, public services, public participation in decision-making, availability and access to safe and healthful food, green spaces and the reduction of emissions. There is a growing recognition of these issues in countries throughout the region.

Environment and Risk

Concerns about environmental problems and quality of life are increasing among the public and governments of all scales in the region. The region is among the largest emitters of greenhouse gases per capita, particularly in cities and urban areas. Urban development and housing are significant contributors to climate change and pollution, as cities consume almost 80% of energy; 70% of the greenhouse gas emissions are produced in the cities. Environmental threats are often also health threats: more than 90% of citizens in the UNECE region are exposed to annual levels of outdoor fine particulate matter above the air quality guidelines of the World Health Organisation. Adapting to and mitigating environmentally negative effects can include measures to reduce overall CO_2 emissions, to ensure that homes are energy-efficient. There is a need to limit the negative impact of housing on the environment and enhance the energy efficiency of the housing sector. Numerous programmes have taken initiatives to improve urban environmental conditions and the impact of cities on the global climate.

Air pollution, flooding and heat waves are the most prevalent environmental issues of the region, with cities being most vulnerable. Disaster risk reduction is an issue more pressing in some parts of the UNECE region, with additional threats of earthquakes, landslides, volcanic eruptions and wildfires, which have a negative impact on the quality of life in urban areas and, in some circumstances, imperil lives.

Urban sprawl has resulted in growing consumption of land and pressure on green spaces. The extension of road networks and increasing traffic congestion have further affected the availability of urban land and contributed to urban emissions. Focus should also be placed on more efficient and environmentally friendly public transport systems. Housing stock should be made less vulnerable to natural and manmade disasters.

Governance

Since HABITAT II, there has been an increase in the importance of the role of local governments, with a corresponding growth in that of city networks, electronic access to information, and public participation. Urban governance has experienced decentralisation in some parts of the region, although there is a wide variety of governance modes and institutional structures across the individual countries. These differences reflect both the local context and the history. Municipalities in the western part of the UNECE region benefit from a strong institutional tradition that has been built over several centuries. Those in the countries with transition economies are working to raise their capacities to address multiple challenges simultaneously. Successful governance modes and institutional structures often cannot be simply transplanted from one part of the region to another; the context is crucial.

In many countries, national governments concentrate on formulating policies and legislation, establishing norms and standards, and providing subsidies for housing and infrastructure. In most of the countries, the management of urban planning issues is in the hands of local governments within the framework of larger territorial strategies.

The private sector plays a central role in the development and transformation of urban areas, and in the financing and realisation of housing, urban infrastructures, urban services and even urban management. In general, an erosion of the public sphere was observed since HABITAT II, resulting in more opportunities and responsibilities for the private sector.

The growing use of e-Government, e-Governance, e-Participation and e-Inclusion at city level has been driven by the supply of new information and communication technology (ICT) services. Local authorities' capacity to maximise the benefit of the digital revolution without undermining their democratic mandate is a challenge that remains to be addressed. The progress of e-Governance is variable and in some countries – for instance, in Central Asia – it is underdeveloped.

Outlook and Future Trends

The cities of the UNECE region are subject to the processes of urban concentration, sprawl and shrinkage brought about by market forces and events such as the multiple financial, economic and migration crisis. In some parts, clusters of the most successful cities are coalescing into urban areas or super-cities with many millions of inhabitants. In an era of ageing and migration, favouring compactness over sprawl is

not only a managerial issue for the city; it is a key means to supporting equity, integration and cohesion in society.

Across the region, the shift to a post-industrial, knowledge economy, and the increasingly important role of services, are changing the structure and character of the economy, introducing demands for enhanced qualifications from the labour market and placing different spatial demands on the city. The knowledge economy and the digital revolution flourish around centres of scientific and educational excellence, and are placing new demands on the physical structure of the city.

ICTs play a growing role in the development of smart, sustainable cities, with initiatives aimed at sustaining and improving quality of life in urban areas. The digital revolution has brought many opportunities for individuals, communities and companies, but also a variety of challenges, particularly in the area of urban data management (privacy, security, defence of public interests, etc.). Progress in technologies and the availability of data are rapidly changing our life and its organisation. Urban planning and management should adopt latest technological innovations and use available data. This requires educating and building the capacity of urban managers and decision-makers. The security concern related to the abundance of open data also needs to be addressed. Also, there should be harmonisation between countries in terms of the data collected and the standards for it. Countries with transition economies will require even more technical assistance to overcome the technological and digital divide in urban planning and management between countries.

Social and spatial inequality within and among the cities in the region has been growing, making high quality urban areas affordable only to the most affluent. This is a result of demographic and economic processes and their territorial and spatial manifestations, such as urban sprawl, concentration and shrinkage. The demographic ageing in many countries and the recent wave of migration exacerbate the complexity of the growing inequalities.

There is widespread consensus for inter-governmental action on the environment and climate change. In the cities of this region, this will mean an accelerated trend to further curbing pollution and faster de-carbonising urban development and life, requiring more stringent environmental regulations and high volumes of public and private investment.

International standards in housing and international development are driving action towards resilient, connected, spatially and socially integrated and compact cities in an equitable partnership with rural areas for the overall achievement of sustainable development. There is a trend towards people-centred and integrated planning through urbanism, the active process by which cities are designed, developed and managed.

These aims and processes will continue to require collaboration, consensus and positive action among national and city governments, technical stakeholders and the communities they serve and lead. Addressing these ever more complex social, economic and environmental challenges will require new paradigms and a redoubling of effort from the governance systems to achieve sustainable urbanisation.

Key Directions to Address the Challenges

State actors and relevant stakeholders, such as regional and local authorities and international organisations in the UNECE region, need to address the above challenges and to pro-actively seize emerging opportunities, in particular through:

- Elaborating country-specific policy guidance and recommendations on challenges related to housing, urban development and land management in the UNECE region through regional and thematic studies;
- Harmonising methodologies and definitions in the area of housing and land management at the regional and international levels, and supporting the development of common terms, language definitions and standards;
- Promoting national urban policies conducive to balanced urbanisation and their translation to localised urban legislation and regulations, promoting strategic planning of human settlements, enacting measures at national and local levels to ensure that policies are appropriate for each scale of governance, thereby guaranteeing the most effective results;
- Strengthening the use of spatial planning and design of urban extensions, ensuring participation in planning by all the key stakeholders and the inhabitants;
- Introducing effective financial systems on municipal level, ensuring that the local governments of the cities can implement the plans elaborated and support equitable and sustainable development of the human settlements;
- Stressing that approaches will have to be locality-specific to address the diversity of the countries, economies, societies and cultures in the UNECE region;
- Promoting innovative and productive cities to increase their attractiveness with a focus on innovation, inclusiveness, improvement of youth perspectives and job creation through entrepreneurial-friendly environments;
- Promoting green and compact and resilient cities by increasing urban resource efficiency i.e. consumption of energy, water and land, reducing waste, improving air quality and by improving cities' resilience to flood, heat-waves and natural hazards;
- Promoting inclusive cities by addressing the multiple aspects of urban poverty and exclusion. Cities are places where disparities and inequalities are concentrated, but they are also places of tolerance where different cultures may co-exist, where ethnic diversity may become a source of innovation and renewal, where social mobility is possible;
- Promoting the improvement of access to basic services allowing sustainable growth and job creation. The empowerment of women and better gender equality will be crucial;

- Promoting good urban governance by supporting and building capacity of local authorities appears as a key element for the sustainable development of urban areas. This is done by empowering all relevant levels to tackle social, economic, environmental and demographic urban development challenges in an integrated manner; establish legislative frameworks and consolidate shared knowledge basis;
- Where necessary, action shall focus on sustainable urban planning and design, as well as capacity building and institutional support to strengthen and enhance decentralisation processes.

The HABITAT III Conference has the convening power to bring together all relevant actors to address the complex challenges to sustainable urban development and to achieve the outlined objectives. Solutions can only be found by bringing together State actors, multilateral organisations, local governments, private sector and civil society. All together will shape and, hopefully, implement the New Urban Agenda.

Notes
1 General Assembly resolution A/56/206
2 United Nations General Assembly: Resolution 66/207, 2013
3 United Nations General Assembly: Resolution 70/1, 2015

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