

Putting implementers at the centre of Habitat III; the role of local governments

Key questions for Habitat III

The key question for Habitat III in 2016 (the third UN Conference on Human Settlements) is how to get action on all the urgent human settlements issues by all levels of government and by international agencies. It can draw on the examples of Habitat I and Habitat II and produce another long list of what should be done such as the 44 page Vancouver Declaration and Recommendations for National Action in 1976 and the 109 page Habitat Agenda in 1996. If it does so, there will be much repetition even if issues such as climate change now need far more attention. Ways need to be found to reinvigorate key goals and targets from the past – for instance the strong commitment made by all government representatives at Habitat I in 1976 to demand attention to universal provision for water and sanitation – if possible by 1990.¹ So Habitat III also needs to consider why the commitment of governments to such goals in previous conferences did not produce the needed responses.

But a more original and perhaps more useful approach would be to focus on **who** needs to act to address relevant recommendations from Habitat I and II (and for achieving the Millennium Development Goals) and **what support they need** to do so. Local governments are central to addressing the key environmental and development issues that confront us all today, including those articulated at Habitat I and II. This becomes evident as global discussions shift from ‘what must be achieved’ (as in the Millennium Development Goals) to ‘how will they be achieved’ and ‘who has to act’ to ensure they are achieved. The actual measures needed to meet most of the Millennium Development Goals and most of the recommendations from Habitat I and II depend on local governments. In many of the countries with the best performance in meeting these goals and recommendations, much of this is because of more competent, accountable and better resourced local governments. So a focus is needed on **who** needs to act. Managing a rapidly urbanizing world so it is accompanied by better living conditions and less environmental degradation depends on local governments. Addressing the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions globally and delink development from rising emissions requires leadership, support and action from local governments. Building resilience to the direct and indirect impacts of climate change depends on locally rooted understandings of risk and vulnerability that local governments have to lead and act on. So too does effective disaster risk reduction – as recognized by the United Nations in its Making Cities Resilient Programme. And underpinning all this is the need for governments to involve and engage their citizens in the above and be accountable to them – and again local government is central to such an engagement.

¹ The 1976 Recommendations for National Action from Habitat II included: “Safe water supply and hygienic waste disposal should receive priority with a view to achieving measurable qualitative and quantitative targets serving all the population by a certain date; targets should be established by all nations and should be considered by the forthcoming United Nations Conference on Water. In most countries urgent action is necessary to adopt programmes with realistic standards for quality and quantity to provide water to urban and rural areas by 1990 if possible... (and) adopt and accelerate programmes for the sanitary disposal of excreta and waste water in urban and rural areas.”

The role of local governments in meeting the MDGs (and the recommendations from Habitat I and II)

It is from local governments that much of the innovation in the last 150 years in reducing poverty and developing more participatory forms of governance have come. In what are today the world's wealthiest nations with the highest average life expectancies, local governments had central roles in dramatically reducing hunger and infant, child and maternal mortality rates. Also in significantly improving the lives of 'slum' dwellers and ensuring universal provision for piped water supplies and provision for sanitation – i.e. the very Goals whose achievement is sought today in low- and middle-income nations. This is not to claim that it is only local government that has to achieve all the above. As discussed in more detail below, success here depends on bringing private sector interests on board and encouraging their innovation and working with civil society. In most nations, it depends too on higher levels of government supporting stronger, more competent and accountable local governments. It will depend on international agencies demonstrating a new capacity to work with local governments. But in the end, so much of what is done (or not done) to address the key concerns from Habitat I, Habitat II and the MDGs depends on local government.

Why local government gets forgotten in international agendas

The role of local governments in key UN Conferences (and in drafting their recommendations) has always been ambiguous. It is national governments that are represented at these Conferences even if on occasion a local government representative may be included on a national delegation. There was even a time when local governments got classified as part of civil society. Yet so much of what is recommended by these Conferences fall within the responsibilities and duties of local government. Even today, when there are global discussions of climate change adaptation and its financing (within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change), the central role that local governments have or need to have gets forgotten. In addition, international aid agencies and development banks have struggled to find ways in which they can support local governments but this too needs the approval of national governments. No national government will want to relinquish control of international funding to allow external funding agencies to work direct with local governments.

Significantly improving the lives of slum dwellers; what roles for local government?

Habitat I and II and the Millennium Development Goals support 'slum' upgrading. This is hardly surprising when around a billion people live in informal settlements lacking basic infrastructure and services. Most of the elements of an effective 'slum' upgrading initiative fall within the jurisdiction of local governments – the consultation with the inhabitants about what needs to be done and the allocation of responsibilities, the measures needed to transfer tenure, the household surveys and settlement mapping needed to support the construction of needed infrastructure and services... Of course the tasks that fall to local government will differ within different national frameworks – for instance extending piped water or electricity may be the responsibility of a national or regional government or a private enterprise. But it falls to local government to initiate and to manage the whole process – first and foremost engaging with the residents and their organizations to develop an upgrading plan and its management that matches their needs and capacities and then bringing in and coordinating all the different government departments and agencies and where needed contractors. What has gone almost unnoticed is the extent of the improvement in provision for water, sanitation and solid waste collection and the scale of 'slum' upgrading in many Latin

American and some Asian nations – in which local governments had central roles. There is actually much to celebrate in the innovation shown by different local governments that could be highlighted in Habitat III. But if it is national governments that prepare the documentation, these often get missed.

Local governance and citizen-civil society-government partnerships

One of the more dramatic changes in urban governance since Habitat II is the expansion in the number of federations or networks of slum or shack dwellers and the partnerships they form with local governments. This was already an important issue at Habitat II in 1996, which was also the year that five national federations of slum/shack dwellers formed Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) to give them a stronger collective voice. But the number of such federations has grown since then, as have the scale and scope of their partnerships with local governments. Rather than being seen as a threat, local governments have recognized the value of working with them – for instance in mapping and profiling all informal settlements in cities, in improving provision of water and sanitation, in upgrading informal settlements, in building new houses and in implementing disaster risk reduction. In many cities in Asia and some in Africa, there are National or City Funds managed by the Federations to which local governments contribute. Learning from these experiences to date and considering how local governments can enhance and expand such partnerships is a key issue for Habitat III.

Delinking a high quality of life from rising greenhouse gas emissions

The urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions globally means that all nations and localities need to take this seriously, even if low-income nations and localities generally have very low emission levels per person. Cities are often seen as the main drivers of rising emissions. Yet the concentration of people and enterprises (and their wastes) in cities provides many opportunities for greater energy and water efficiency, waste reduction and other measures that reduce emissions. Among cities with high living standards, figures for per capita greenhouse gas emissions vary by a factor of 10 or more. So cities with high living standards are not necessarily cities with excessive greenhouse gas emissions. There are also many local governments in low-, middle- and high-income nations that have shown leadership in reducing greenhouse gas emissions – often going far beyond what national governments are doing on this.

Building each locality's resilience to disasters and climate change

The risks facing any city from the direct or indirect impacts of climate change and other disasters (for instance earthquakes) are so rooted in local contexts – the site, geography, climate, population, layout, economic base... and in the quality of housing, infrastructure and services and of land-use management. So it is also rooted in the quality of local government. Successful climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction – which itself needs a capacity to change as risks change – depends on local governments. While many particular responses depend on others – businesses, households and communities – it needs local government to encourage and coordinate these and weave them into a coherent adaptation strategy. It also needs local governments with a capacity to work with neighbouring local governments as much risk reduction depends on coordinated responses across many neighbouring jurisdictions.

Who acts for the public good?

The last ten years have brought a greater appreciation of the key links between urbanization and economic growth. The importance of cities for successful national economies is better understood and city governments have also responded by considering how their city can be made more attractive to private investment. But cities that are attractive to such investment also need to be attractive to their employees and their families. A focus by local governments only on economic growth forgets how much the quality of life and good health depend on local governments acting in the public good (and doing so in ways that are accountable to the public). There are many cities that have shown how economic success can be combined with a higher quality of life for all city residents. Here too is a key issue for Habitat III.

So the priority for Habitat III should be to

- 1: learn from what works on the ground in addressing the key global agendas noted above (and learn from the local governments and other local groups that made it work)
- 2: ensure that these implementers have central roles in Habitat III
- 3: develop national and international frameworks to catalyse and support such local action.

Could Habitat III not also innovate by being the first of the global UN Conferences to accord local governments the attention that they deserve in implementing the recommendations that came from Habitat I and II, the Millennium Development Goals – and the emerging post-MDG framework?