

UN Habitat III: Shaping the urban agenda

The United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (UN Habitat) will hold its third biennial meeting from 17 to 20 October 2016 in Quito (Ecuador), gathering nearly 200 national government delegations, as well as different stakeholders. The conference aims to deliver a new global urban agenda and the means to implement it. Rapidly growing urbanisation, especially in developing countries, makes the creation of socially inclusive, resilient, economically prosperous, and energy-efficient cities a major global challenge. Achieving the entire 2030 Agenda will largely rely on the actions undertaken to address the demands of growing cities.

Trends in urbanisation

In 2008, rapidly increasing urban populations outnumbered those in rural areas. By the end of 2050, it is estimated that two thirds of humanity will live in cities. While urban areas account for more than 70 % of world gross domestic product (GDP), illustrating cities' key role in the world economy, they also concentrate a number of environmental and social challenges. Growing [income inequalities](#) affect urban residents in both developing and developed countries – 24 % of the EU urban population lives on the edge of poverty and social exclusion. These income inequalities transform urban geography, leading to spatial stratification of cities along socio-economic lines that further aggravates social exclusion, a vicious circle stressed in a [2015 OECD report](#). In the developing world, [800 million people](#) live in [slums](#). These informal living spaces lack basic services, such as water or electricity, are overcrowded and located in insecure areas with insufficient public space and infrastructure. Rapid urbanisation places severe pressure on water supplies, sewage systems, and the environment. The global urban surface makes up only around 3 % of land, but cities consume 60-80 % of the energy resources. Although the nature of cities in different parts of the world varies, all cities face serious environmental sustainability challenges. These include the highest air pollution in highly industrialised and motorised middle income cities; the worst environmental health conditions in and around the housing of the urban poor in least-developed countries; and the highest greenhouse gas emissions per person in cities in wealthy countries.

UN Habitat in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The growing relevance of urbanisation to the international agenda is underlined by successive UN Habitat conferences (Habitat I in 1976 (Vancouver) and Habitat II in 1996 (Istanbul)) and, from 2002, the elevation of the UN habitat body to a fully fledged UN programme.

The [United Nations Human Settlements Programme](#) (UN Habitat) promotes a [range of regional and global projects](#) – city planning, infrastructure development, participatory slum upgrading, urban legislation and risk management, and sustainable urbanisation. Overall spending on all projects in 2013-2014 was US\$336 million, representing a 24 % decrease in expenditure compared to the previous two-year period.

The [2030 Agenda](#), with its stand-alone [Sustainable Development Goal 11](#) dedicated to cities and the inherent urban dimension of other SDGs, confirms this trend. The SDG 11 targets aim to improve, by 2030, several concrete aspects of the urban environment; in particular: housing; access to public spheres and basic services; sustainable transport; resilience; environmental impact of cities; and municipal planning.

The New Urban Agenda

Fruit of a laborious negotiation process during the three preparatory committee meetings (held in New York (September 2014), Nairobi (April 2015), and Surabaya (July 2016)), the [new Urban Agenda](#) was agreed, and awaits formal adoption at the Habitat III conference. The 24-page text sets the framework for global action



towards achieving SDG 11 – making cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. The new Urban Agenda addresses planning, design, financing, developing and managing cities and other human settlements, aiming to end poverty and hunger, reduce inequalities, promote sustainable economic growth and achieve gender equality. The document, very broad in scope, formulates a shared vision built in particular upon core pillars:

- the right to adequate housing to be progressively achieved by national, regional and local housing policies offering a variety of housing options for different income groups including those in the most vulnerable situations;
- universal access to drinking water and sanitation as well as other public goods and services, such as sustainable energy, education, and health care;
- promotion of participatory and civic engagement; prioritising equality; and fostering pluralistic and cohesive societies;
- public green spaces, promoting the political objective of an inclusive, participatory and fair society;
- increased resilience and responsiveness to natural and man-made hazards and fostering mitigation and adaptation to climate change;
- protecting and restoring ecosystems, changing sustainable production and consumption patterns, including environmentally sound waste management and rehabilitation of water management, sustainable transport infrastructures, prioritising public transport and non-motorised options over private motorised transport;
- supporting local authorities to enhance their capacity in financial planning and management and their involvement in sub-national, national governance and global networks.

European Parliament position

As early as its [resolution](#) prepared for the UN Habitat II conference in June 1996, the European Parliament emphasised the right to adequate and affordable housing, urging the European Union to support international recognition of the right to housing at the Habitat II conference. Members have also stressed the need for urban policies integrating environmental, social, economic and cultural aspects and their support for decentralisation and strengthening the role of local authorities, including as recipients of international grants. In its resolution of October 2015 on [the role of local authorities in developing countries in development cooperation](#), the Parliament expressed its concern regarding excessive urbanisation that undermines sustainable development and poses a key challenge for local and regional authorities to provide new urban populations with basic public services, access to education, transport and job opportunities. Members also asked the Commission to support African cities in preparing for Habitat III, and for a stand-alone target in the post-2015 SDG Agenda. In its resolution [EU and the global development framework after 2015](#), the EP also mentioned the dangers of excessive urbanisation, and stressed the need to promote sustainable development by balancing regional development; by promoting the development of smaller towns and cities; and by preventing the excessive growth of big cities. During a seminar in June 2016, Parliament's [Urban Intergroup](#) recognised the importance of the involvement of local and regional authorities in the Habitat III conference.

A European Parliament delegation will participate in the Habitat III conference.

In its [conclusions of 12 May 2016](#), the Council set out the EU's key objectives and priorities for the Habitat III conference. The new Urban Agenda should promote inclusive and safe, green and resilient, prosperous and innovative, and well-governed cities. The Agenda should include references that explicitly link policy frameworks with financial means of implementation and efficient and an inclusive follow-up and review mechanism. The Council stressed that the [European Urban Agenda launched in May 2016](#) could become a key delivery instrument of the new Urban Agenda.

Stakeholders' reactions

The [Second World Assembly of Local Authorities](#) gathered over 100 mayors from around the globe on 15 May 2016, and called on UN member states for a more equitable relationship with their national counterparts, and in particular institutionalized local government participation in Habitat III. The deletion of the 'special status' to be awarded to local authorities from previous drafts of the Urban Agenda [met](#) with great disappointment. Gender advocacy organisations [acknowledged](#) the gender-sensitive language of the latest draft of the Agenda. However, some [observers](#) note the outdated approach to gender, in which women are presented as part of vulnerable groups, which undermines female roles as decision-makers, entrepreneurs and leaders.