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What did we learn from Habitat I and II?

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Convened every 20 years, the major global conferences on human settlements constitute remarkable milestones in the evolution of urban practices and ideas but ahead of Habitat III, ***Daniel Biau,*** *former Deputy Executive Director of UN-Habitat, assesses the achievements of the meetings and asks what we need from the gathering in Quito*

Daniel Biau, former Deputy Executive Director of UN-Habitat

In 1976, at the time of the founding conference on human settlements (Habitat I) in Vancouver, the global population numbered 4.1 billion, 1.4 billion (38 percent) of them in urban centres. At the time of the Istanbul Summit in 1996, there were 5.8 billion inhabitants, 2.6 billion (45 percent) of them urban, and in the year of Habitat III, 2016, the planet's population has risen to 7.3 billion with 4 billion (55 percent) city dwellers.

The global urban population will have increased from 750 million in 1950 (30 percent of the total) to 6.4 billion by 2050 (66 percent of the total). Humanity will have transformed from predominantly rural to predominantly urban in just one century, a real revolution. Whereas the urban transition is almost complete in Europe and America (North and South), it is fully under way in Africa and Asia. This transition is not only demographic; it is also economic, with most countries seeing a shrinking share for agriculture as a proportion of GDP, the monetarisation and financialisation of the economy and an expansion of services. It is reflected by significant social changes with growing inequalities between rich and poor, the rise of the middle classes and a general urbanisation of lifestyles. How have the earlier meetings sought to tackle this?

Habitat I: the alarm call

The reports of the Vancouver Conference (June 1976) predicted these changes in the preamble of the Vancouver Declaration which states that “the unacceptable living conditions in human settlements are likely to be aggravated by inequitable economic growth and uncontrolled urbanisation unless positive and concrete action is taken at national and international levels”.

The first action is to “adopt bold, meaningful and effective settlement policies and spatial planning strategies (…) considering human settlements as an instrument and object of development”. The Conference recommends a more equitable distribution of the benefits of development, the planning and regulation of land use, environmental protection, the integration of women and young people and the resettlement of persons displaced by natural or man-made disasters. This holds good today.

The guidelines for action define the various elements of a policy on human settlements. Emphasis is placed on social integration, the reduction of disparities between rural and urban areas, organised urbanisation, the establishment of minimal and progressive rules and community participation. The Declaration stipulates that “access to adequate housing and services is a fundamental human right” and that “governments must help local authorities to participate to a greater degree in national development”–subjects which are highly current today. It stresses that “land use must be subject to public control”, an idea that fell from favour in the 1990s.

Planning urban expansion

The main outcome of the Conference is a series of 64 recommendations for National Action, grouped together into an “Action Plan”. The policies advocated attach great importance to spatial population distribution and public participation. With hindsight, the section on institutions is certainly the most debatable as it recommends the creation of ministries and specialised financial institutions for human settlements. This occurred in a number of countries, with disappointing results.

The substance of the Vancouver Action Plan is set out in sections B (Settlement planning), C (Housing, infrastructure and services) and D (Land). In Section B, we find a mix of outmoded top-down planning and visionary statements. All kinds of planning are recommended, from national to district level, including in rural, temporary and even “mobile”

areas! However, the improvement of existing human settlements is not forgotten. Particular attention “should be paid to major clearance operations which should only be undertaken when conservation and rehabilitation are not feasible and relocation measures have been put in place”.

The paragraph on urban expansion recommends, first, legislation and the creation of institutions tasked with managing land acquisitions and land development and, second, a mobilisation of fiscal and financial resources to allow the integrated development of essential services. Yet the question of who the urban planners are, or should be, is not addressed.

Among the priority objectives identified are: “ensuring security of land tenure for informal settlements and providing serviced sites intended specifically for construction by the informal sector”.

There are also excellent recommendations on national housing policies (providing developed land that is partially or fully subsidised, offering alternative solutions including renting, promoting assisted self-build programmes) and infrastructure policies (introducing a pricing system designed to ensure more equitable access, minimising environmental impact, prioritising the supply of drinking water and waste disposal, encouraging public transport and energy efficiency).

Proactive land policy

Section D on land starts by stating that “private ownership contributes to social injustice” and that “public control of land use is therefore indispensable”. It recommends a proactive land policy based on zoning, land reserves, compensated compulsory purchase, the redistribution of land taxes, the recovery of land profits from public investment and, where appropriate, public ownership.

The outcome documents of the Vancouver Conference, which reflect a Keynesian consensus that was to disappear with the end of the Cold War, stand good today in a number of areas.

However, above all, Vancouver was an alarm call, issued by the then Secretary-General of the UN Kurt Waldheim, who noted that “one third or more of the entire urban population of the developing world lives in slums and squatter settlements”. The Secretary-General of the Conference, Enrique Peñalosa, echoed this, stating that “the paramount question is whether urban growth will continue to be a spontaneous chaotic process or be planned to meet the needs of the communities”.

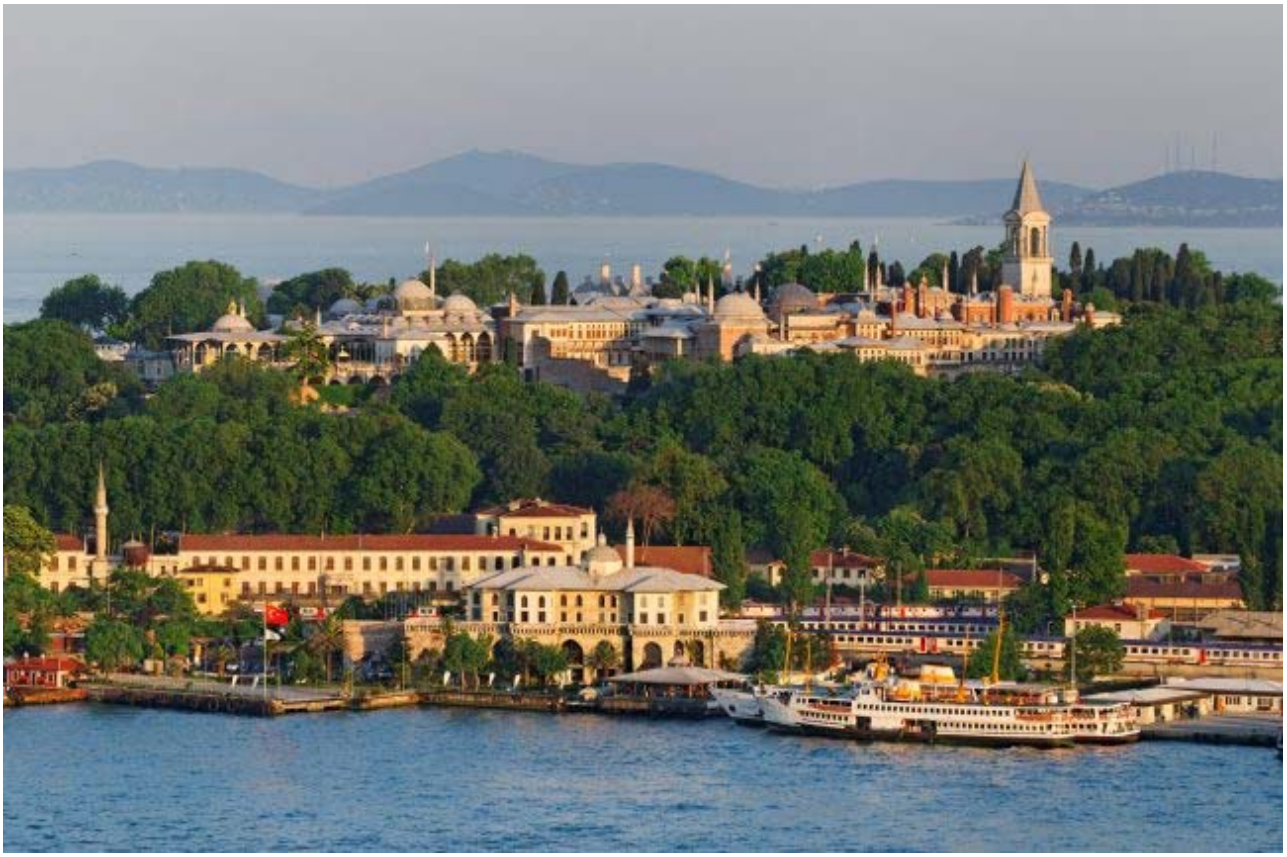
Habitat II: the emergence of governance

The Istanbul Conference (June 1996) prompted heated debate in the course of its two-year preparation process. It involved 20,000 participants over a two-week period and produced a weighty “Habitat Agenda” which was hotly negotiated, paragraph by paragraph, word by word, in particular between the European Union and the G-77.

The Istanbul Declaration set out the two themes of the Conference: housing and urbanisation. It reaffirms the right to adequate shelter and adopts the principles of partnership (i.e. between government and other urban stakeholders) and

participation (on the part of the populations concerned). This was an entirely new idea. The signatory States add: "Recognising local authorities as our closest partners, and as essential in the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, we must […] promote decentralisation through democratic local authorities and work to strengthen their financial and institutional capacities […] while ensuring their transparency ". Governance and participatory demography were the key ideas to come out of the Istanbul Summit and were validated by the UN General Assembly.

The Habitat Agenda has four chapters: Preamble, Aims and Principles, Commitments and Global Plan of Action The commitments detail the content of the Istanbul Declaration, including with regard to gender equality, a theme systematically promoted by all UN bodies. As with most UN resolutions, these commitments were to be met by the 171 signatory governments to widely varying degrees. It is more useful to go through the Plan of Action and the Implementation Strategies set out in the three main sections.



Istanbul played host to Habitat II in 1996

The right to housing

The first substantive section is entitled: "Adequate shelter for all", which was the first theme of the Conference. Most of the actions recommended remain relevant to this day: guaranteeing security of tenure, providing targeted assistance, supporting the various components of the housing sector, adopting facilitation policies, taking the homeless, refugees and displaced persons into consideration, establishing an appropriate legal, financial and regulatory framework, encouraging self-build projects and community participation, developing land information and land tax, ensuring access to basic infrastructures and services (this subject was to form the subject of International Guidelines adopted in 2009,

fully 13 years later), drawing up development plans to ensure the provision of serviced plots and public spaces, increasing land use density, developing public transport.

It is all there. All or nearly all: the issues of financing for housing and services are only addressed superficially while the improvement and eradication of slums are strangely absent. It was not until the Millennium Declaration (September 2000) that improved living conditions for slum-dwellers again became a Development Goal. Regulated land management was no longer a priority in 1996, while housing financing and municipal finances were obscured behind a very general call for the mobilisation of resources

Environmental sustainability

The second substantive section is entitled: “The sustainable development of human settlements in an increasingly urbanised world” (UN jargon for “sustainable urbanisation”), which was the second theme of the Conference. This important section has the distinct air of a catch-all; it suffers from the chronic affliction found in many UN texts: that of “multi-editing” (numerous interveners adding sentences and paragraphs in a disjointed way, their contributions included in the interests of consensus).

The recommended actions are not very original. They include management of the environment, waste, health risks (in particular air and water pollution), the needs of vulnerable persons, the need for appropriate densities and mixed land use, legal and fiscal frameworks, public-private partnerships, improved urban security. They refer to the need for integrated urban and regional policies and new methods for the planning, design, development, regeneration and management of cities, without dwelling on this topic (which was to form the subject of International Guidelines adopted in 2015). They highlight the fact that the current “dependence, in most urban centres, on non-renewable energy sources can lead to climate change, air pollution and consequent environmental and human health problems”. It is therefore necessary to “promote the use of renewable and safe sources of energy” and to “encourage the use of non-motorised or low-energy transport systems” (something that COP21 later held back from recommending!) It is also necessary to take disaster prevention and vulnerability reduction measures. All the subjects appear to be covered, therefore, but in a sector-focused and non-prioritised manner.

Priority for governance and institutional development

It is for this reason that the secretariat and negotiators felt it necessary to add a third substantive section, not anticipated at the beginning, entitled “Capacity-building and institutional development”. This section, which could have been called “Urban governance” is without doubt the most innovative section in the Plan of Action. It starts by recommending “the effective decentralisation of responsibilities, policy management, decision-making authority, and sufficient resources, including revenue collection authority, to local authorities, closest to and most representative of their constituencies […] “.

Decentralisation was later to form the subject of International Guidelines, discussed at length and adopted in 2007. The same section boldly adds that it is necessary to “Encourage institutionalisation of broad-based participation […] in

decision-making and management processes at the local level" and to establish "regular and broad-based consultative mechanisms for involving civil society in decision-making".

It underscores the importance of "information systems for networking, for accessing resources in a timely manner [the Internet is cited] and for the exchange, transfer and sharing of experience, expertise, know-how and technology […]". It calls for training and institutional development and raises the specific features of metropolitan management: "the lack of a metropolitan-wide authority or effective metropolitan-wide cooperation creates difficulties in urban management".

The section recommends that cities should "Create a legislative framework and adopt organisational structures that ensure coordinated, efficient and equitable service delivery, resource mobilisation and sustainable development throughout metropolitan areas".

It should be borne in mind that all these recommendations were negotiated and adopted unanimously by the Member States of the UN at a time when governance was still a taboo term. In fact, Istanbul promoted the paradigms of the 1990s, those of the market economy ("allowing the land markets to work") and also good governance and participatory democracy, when nations were entering a globalised world that generated new opportunities and heightened risks. It was a world in which the room for manoeuvre for national action was more limited than it had been in 1976. These shifts had a direct impact on the policies, strategies and practices seen in human settlements throughout the world UN-Habitat took on a new dimension at the beginning of the century, creating the World Urban Forum whose biennial sessions afford numerous stakeholders on the urban scene the opportunity to take stock of these changes.

Habitat III: renewing the commitments

We must hope that the new Urban Agenda will constitute a practical guide used by governments to review and strengthen their national urban policies (NUPs).

We know that good governance must be participatory, responsible and transparent and that an urban policy must be built on three essential pillars: a partnership-based institutional system, a facilitating regulatory framework and effective financial instruments. NUPs must be implemented through the application of various strategies on urban land, housing, infrastructures and services. Local strategies, territorial and environmental plans and urban planning operations then provide a means of transforming the built space at individual city level, at the initiative of local government. This should be remembered at Quito.

One can attempt to group the anticipated Habitat III recommendations into three categories. The first includes recommendations designed to update the concepts governing urban development. Adaptation to climate change, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, resilience to disasters, energy efficiency and mobility, the challenges of decentralisation and participation, metropolitan management: all are the priorities to be revisited (among others).

Towards consensus on urban forms?

The second category includes the means of implementation, policies, plans and financing. As indicated above, Istanbul contributed little to the key subjects of municipal finances and housing financing. Quito should address this ongoing

shortcoming.

Finally, the third category includes urban planning per se, the organisation of space, urban forms. It will be necessary to reach consensus on urban compactness and density, the prevention of urban sprawl, connectivity and multimodal transport, urban expansion, public spaces, the polycentric development of conurbations, urban corridors and mega-regions… all subjects absent from Habitat II and which recall the debates of the 1970s.

In terms of the long period of global urbanisation, there is only a short step between Vancouver and Quito, but the challenges persist, all the more so as the international community has made a commitment to "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" by 2030 (Sustainable Development Goal 11, September 2015). It is to be hoped that Habitat III results in a realistic and prioritised Action Plan and that these actions are effectively implemented in practice.

The UN statistical data on urbanisation–the only data to be recognised internationally–are available at esa.un.org/unpd/wup and are updated every two years.

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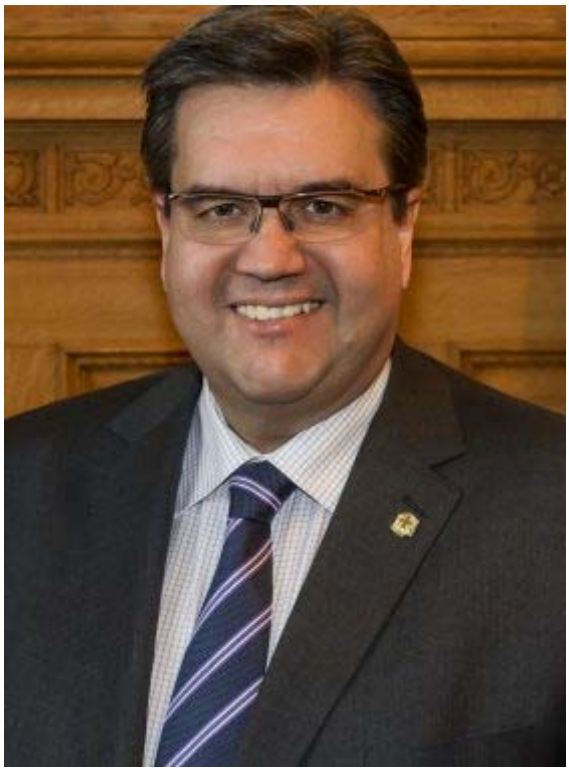

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