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The UN's Habitat III Conference

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The UN's Habitat III Conference

GIVING CITIES A VOICE IN THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

Cities are increasingly seen as being on the frontline of the struggle for sustainable development. However, their crucial role is not matched by equivalent political influence. At the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development in October, member states should include city networks in decision-making and implementation.

Habitat III, the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, takes place in Quito, Ecuador, from 17 to 20 October 2016. The conference is the first after a year, 2015, of significant breakthroughs for cities and local governments in the international political arena. Four international events

RECOMMENDATIONS

The governments of UN member states should:

- Recognize the importance of cities and local governments in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Work for the formal inclusion of cities and local governments in the negotiation and monitoring of the New Urban Agenda.
- Consider how to improve subnational governments' access to international funds for sustainable development.
- Consider promoting specific proposals from the agendas of the city-to-city networks at the Habitat III conference.

Since Habitat II in 1996, the global urban population has outstripped the rural population, and climate change has risen on the global agenda

Like state governments, cities and local governments differ hugely in resources and ideological orientations, but collectively they emphasize a more pragmatic approach when comparing themselves to national governments.

recognized the importance of cities and the need to engage them for the implementation of the post-2015 agenda: the Sendai Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction; Financing for Development in Addis Ababa; the Climate Conference COP21 in Paris; and maybe most importantly, the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2015-30, including the landmark stand-alone SDG 11: 'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'.

As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon has said, cities are on the frontline where the struggle for sustainable development will be won or lost. The majority of the global population lives in urban areas, including one billion living in informal settlements, poverty has become an urban phenomenon, cities produce most of the greenhouse gas emissions, and they are increasingly vulnerable to disasters and the effects of climate change. All of this is reflected in the SDG 11, but it is not clear who shall do what to remedy the problems. International actors and national governments have to take action, but local governments are closer to the people and the problems on the ground, such as flooding, mudslides and congestion. Provision of basic services such as water, sewerage, transport, energy and waste management, which are part and parcel of sustainable development, is usually the responsibility of subnational levels of government. Therefore national governments need these to implement national plans.

Independently of their national governments, more and more cities are taking initiatives for low-carbon and other forms of sustainable development. They engage in an increasing number of networks that facilitate the sharing of experience, approaches, tools and technologies, as well as initiatives to generate

THE THREE MOST INFLUENTIAL CITY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT NETWORKS

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)
UCLG is a network of local and regional governments and their national associations. It covers 240,000 cities, towns, regions and metropoles, organized in six regional associations plus Metropolis, a network of 140 metropoles. UCLG promotes the interests of subnational governments internationally, advises the UN on local governments, and facilitates exchanges to strengthen the capacities of local governments broadly. UCLG has had a leading role in the Global Task Force in the preparation of the SDGs.

ICLEI – local governments for sustainability
ICLEI is a network of more than 1,000 cities and towns (with 20% of the world's population), which, since the Rio Conference in 1992, has worked on climate change and broader sustainability issues. It is the focal point for local governments in UN's climate convention secretariat and provides direct assistance to local and national governments. Through research, knowledge exchange, alliances, and advocacy, ICLEI works to strengthen the role of local governments in the global regime of sustainability.

C40 – City Climate Leadership Group
C40 is a relatively exclusive network of currently 80 megacities and 'innovative cities' (representing 25% of global GDP). C40 helps cities develop climate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and climate risks by facilitating exchange, research, and cooperation in fields such as water, waste, transportation, energy, and buildings. Philanthropies Bloomberg and Realdania are among the strategic sponsors, and C40 works closely with Clinton's Climate Initiative.

resources for sustainable urban development (see box). City networks argue that, if cities and local governments are given substantial responsibility in the implementation of the SDGs, they need capacities and resources from national governments, but they should also have a voice in the formulation of international policies. The more precise future role of cities and local governments is likely to be an important issue at Habitat III.

Habitat III

Since Habitat II in 1996, the global urban population has outstripped the rural population, and climate change has risen on the global agenda. Habitat III, which falls in the first year of the post-2015 agenda, is a very important event for the implementation of the SDGs. A UN-wide secretariat is organizing the Habitat III process with an elaborate series of preparatory thematic and regional meetings involving states, civil-society organizations, the private sector and city-led networks.

However, the UN member states are in the driver's seat. Only they can vote at the conference. The ten member states in the 'oversight bureau' (Senegal, Chad, the UAE, Indonesia, the Czech Republic, Chile, Hungary, Ecuador, Germany and France) are responsible for developing the 'zero draft' of the New Urban Agenda. This agenda will constitute the international framework and mechanisms to guide sustainable urban development for the next two decades, including the political role of cities and local governments. The Bureau will present the zero draft in late April, after which negotiations will start. If cities and local governments collectively want to influence the outcome, they will have to convince the governments of the UN's member states to represent their interests and vote in their favour.

Sitting at the table, or standing in the hallway?

So far, the preparations for the conference have not been too promising for the future political role of cities, and the representation of cities and local governments at Habitat III is proving to be a divisive issue. Some UN member states have resisted giving cities access to the negotiating table. However, as the United Cities and Local Governments organization (UCLG) argues, the city networks' agendas are not related to domestic affairs but are local responses to global challenges. Like other networks, the UCLG propagates the principle of subsidiarity, the idea that issues should be dealt with by the lowest possible competent authority.

After a long hiatus, in December 2015 the UN General Assembly finally decided the formal procedures for

The dynamic megacity of Jakarta is struggling with problems of flooding, land subsidence and rising sea-levels © Roanne van Voorst

Habitat III. The General Assembly gave observer status to local governments on a par with accredited NGOs and other representatives of civil society. In addition, the General Assembly has conceded two special hearings in New York for local authorities in May and June, after the 'zero draft' of the New Urban Agenda is revealed.

UCLG, however, wants a special status for local authorities, since the city is their political domain. One of the aims of the organization is to achieve the formal inclusion of local authorities in the High-Level body that will review implementation and make decisions in the twenty years following the drawing up of the New Urban Agenda, that is, up until the next Habitat conference in 2036.

Pushing priorities

The city networks want the UN member states to strengthen local and regional levels of government and provide them with sufficient resources and capacities to fulfil their role in the pursuit of the sustainable development goals. This means, for example, giving them direct access to international funds and credits for climate change mitigation activities, as well as greater capacity to manage land and finances, taxation, planning etc. For this to work, the networks propagate effective multi-level governance arrangements with coordination and clear distribution of responsibilities between international, national, regional, metropolitan and local levels of government.

Despite a considerable overlap, the agendas for Habitat III of the most important city networks differ in emphasis, reflecting the different mandates and aims of the latter:

- For ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainable Development, it is important that the urban sustainability goal (SDG 11) becomes a mandatory vision of the New Urban Agenda. Furthermore, this organization is focusing on rural–urban linkages and wants international action to strengthen research on the implications of urbanization for the surrounding regions.
- The C40 City Climate Leadership Group has not yet been vocal about its priorities, but representatives have stated that climate change mitigation and adaptation should be the basis of the New Urban Agenda, with an eye to the possible 'co-benefits' between climate action, development and urbanization.
- UCLG, with its much broader governance agenda, wants Habitat III to focus on
    1. 'intermediate'-size cities where resources and capacities are few and population growth will be high in 2015-30;
    2. the integration of informal systems of service provision and better collaboration between formal and informal systems;
    3. gender equality in sustainable development;
    4. inclusiveness and ensuring the 'right to the city' for all citizens; and
    5. issues of urban violence.

Together, these agendas point to the importance of combining social and environmental sustainability issues, which should be one of the hallmarks of the New Urban Agenda. Like state governments, cities and local governments differ hugely in resources and ideological orientations, but collectively they emphasize a more pragmatic approach when comparing themselves to national governments. They are already taking responsibility and initiatives for sustainable development independently of central governments, and giving cities and local governments more voice internationally would build on and strengthen the current momentum.

This DIIS brief is based on the DIIS Report 2016:04 *Urban Governance and Sustainable Development: Cities on the Agenda.*

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Cover photo: Eviction of Kampung Pulo, Jakarta, as part of a flood mitigation project © Rudolft Abdul Muiz

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