

Habitat III – a critical review of the New Urban Agenda

↳ By Wolfgang Amann and Sandra Jurasszovich

The New Urban Agenda, which was decided in the United Nations Habitat III Conference in October 2016 in Quito, tries to give an answer to the massive global trend of urbanisation. Only a couple of decades ago the biggest part of the global population lived in villages. Only a few years ago, the 50 percent mark of the world's population residing in urban areas was exceeded. By 2050 it is predicted that 70% of the population will live in urban areas.

Regions are affected differently by this development. Many highly-developed countries of the northern hemisphere are already today highly urbanised, and show only small further increases in the urbanisation ratio. By contrast, the global trend becomes a paradigm shift in many less developed countries and those areas with high demographic dynamics. The biggest part of population growth in those areas will happen in cities. And it is questionable if the cities are sufficiently equipped to keep pace with this demographic pressure.

Focal areas of the New Urban Agenda are ecological sustainability, urban resilience and inclusion. The Agenda details what was decided in 2015 with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly Goal 11 "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". The ambitious specific targets of SDG Goal 11 for the short period until 2030 are:

- access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, including slum upgrade,
- safe, affordable, accessible, sustainable and inclusive transport systems,
- universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces,
- participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning,

- protection of the cultural and natural heritage,
- reduced human damage caused by disasters,
- reduced environmental impact of cities, e.g. in relation to air quality and waste management,
- strengthening of national and regional development planning to improve economic, social and environmental links between urban and rural areas,
- implementation of suitable integrated policies and plans,
- support of least developed countries.

Reflecting the complexity of urban structures, the new Agenda covers a broad set of topics:

1. Responsibilities, law enforcement, good governance

The New Urban Agenda urges the leading role of national governments in the definition and implementation of inclusive and effective urban policies and legislation for sustainable urban development (para. 15). On the other hand, the equally important contributions of sub-national and local governments across administrative borders are highlighted (para. 15, 90).

The private sector is generally addressed ... *to apply their creativity and innovation toward solving sustainable development challenges in urban areas, acknowledging that private business activity, investment, and innovation are major drivers of productivity, inclusive growth and job creation...* (para. 133).

Little space is given to legal issues and law enforcement. Only para 111 refers to *adequate and enforceable regulations in the housing sector*

(...) resilient building codes (...) land use by-laws (...) and planning regulations, with a single focus on *combating and preventing speculation, displacement, homelessness, and arbitrary forced evictions*. To achieve effective public administrations e-government and science-policy interfaces in urban and territorial planning and policy formulation are promoted (para. 156, 157).

The term "good governance" is not mentioned in the New Urban Agenda. And only occasionally aspects of effective policy and administration are addressed, such as ... expenditure control instruments ... tendering processes, procurement mechanisms ... preventive anti-corruption measures (para. 138). In the context of financing the proposed measures, a number of coherent recommendations are given (see section q).

Obviously, the New Urban Agenda frequently refers to other approved UN documents, such as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015), the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning (2015) or the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (2015). Several paragraphs are dedicated to the implementation of the Paris Agreement of November 2015, particularly regarding the support of the poorest and most vulnerable countries in climate change mitigation and adaptation (para. 142-146). In the final paragraphs (para. 128-129, 165, 170-172) the Agenda defines a mandate of UN HABITAT for its future activities.

Following the provisions of the Paris Agreement (2015) the New Urban Agenda calls for support for cities in less developed countries and the development of instruments for financial transfers.

2. Urban planning

Planning can be assumed to be the bracket to include all the subsequently mentioned

requirements within the New Urban Agenda. Cities are required to develop their urban planning capacities to achieve the comprehensive targets.

Paragraph 94 summarizes the approach of integrated planning ... *that aims to balance short-term needs with long-term desired outcomes of a competitive economy, high quality of life, and sustainable environment*. It is about flexible plans ... *in order to adjust to changing social and economic conditions over time* ... by systematic evaluation and technological innovations. Paragraph 51 details the aspired urban spatial frameworks ... *including urban planning and design instruments that support sustainable management and use of natural resources and land, appropriate compactness and density, polycentrism, and mixed uses, through infill or planned urban extension strategies as applicable, to trigger economies of scale and agglomeration, strengthen food system planning, enhance resource efficiency, urban resilience, and environmental sustainability*. One of the following paragraphs highlights ... *the need to guide urban extension prioritizing urban renewal by planning for the provision of accessible and well-connected infrastructure and services, sustainable population densities, and compact design and integration of new neighbourhoods in the urban fabric, preventing urban sprawl and marginalization* (para. 52). The smart city approach is addressed, ... *which makes use of opportunities from digitalization, clean energy and technologies, as well as innovative transport technologies* (para. 66). Finally, the Agenda demands participation in planning and urban decision making (para. 41, 81).

3. Regional cooperation

The Agenda requires interaction between cities, their hinterland and rural areas concerning migration, traffic, and economic development, suggesting ... *long-term urban and territorial planning processes ... considering the urban-rural continuum at the local and territorial scales, and including the participation of relevant stakeholders and communities* (para. 72). Inter-municipal cooperation mechanisms are promoted ... *based on functional territories and urban areas as effective instruments to perform municipal and metropolitan administrative tasks* ... (para. 96). Cooperation and mutual support among different scales of cities is encouraged (para. 95).

4. Inclusion, equality, gender issues, anti-discrimination, participation

Inclusion is one of the hot topics in the New Urban Agenda and mentioned not less than 36 times,

with a specific focus on women and girls, children and youth, older persons and persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and local communities. Repeatedly, the request on inclusion goes hand-in hand with the call for equal rights, anti-discrimination action and participation (e.g. para. 13, 26, 34), as well as the SDG goal 1 to *end poverty in all its forms anywhere* (para 14, 25). It is also often linked to migration, fair treatment of refugees and internally displaced persons (para 28) or informal work (para 59). Inclusion is closely linked with participation of the population in decision making processes, the New Urban Agenda intends to be ... *participatory, and people-centred* (para. 16).

Some few paragraphs link the topic to housing policies (para. 32). Challenges of informal settlement upgrade is frequently cited, other more specific policies such as measures against homelessness or housing first programmes only occasionally (para. 108).

5. Youth, age, education, health

Proposed policies targeting young people are often linked to gender and age responsive measures, but with hardly any specification. Few recommendations concern *access to education and skills development* (para. 61)

The New Urban Agenda frequently refers to the challenges of an aging urban society and calls for age-sensitive inclusive policies. This also includes *age- and gender-responsive housing policies* (para. 32), but with hardly any specification concerning e.g. assisted living, provision of homes for the elderly or technological solutions such as ambient assisted living. Health issues focus on safe drinking water, sanitation, clean air and social infrastructure (e.g. para. 13, 55), but with hardly any further specification.

6. Economy, industry, prosperity

The New Urban Agenda claims prosperity for all (para. 15). It requires ... *vibrant, sustainable, and inclusive urban economies, building on endogenous potential, competitive advantages, cultural heritage and local resources, as well as resource-efficient and resilient infrastructure, promoting sustainable and inclusive industrial development* ... (para. 45). It calls for ... *enhanced productivity* (para. 50) ... *through the promotion of full and productive employment, decent work, and livelihood opportunities ... by providing the labour force with access to income-earning opportunities, knowledge, skills and educational facilities that contribute to an innovative and competitive urban economy* ... (para. 56).

Employers receive far less attention. The Agenda suggests an ... *enabling, fair, and responsible business environment, based on the principles of environmental sustainability and inclusive prosperity, promoting investments, innovations, and entrepreneurship ... businesses and enterprises in the social and solidarity economy, operating in both the formal and informal economies* (para. 58).

There is hardly any mention of large scale industries or the benefits of re-industrialisation of urban areas. The economic theory behind the Agenda seems single-sided, as it proposes ... *urban economies to progressively transition to higher productivity through high-value-added sectors, promoting diversification, technological upgrading, research, and innovation, including the creation of quality, decent, and productive jobs, including through promoting cultural and creative industries, sustainable tourism, performing arts, and heritage conservation activities* ... (para. 60).

7. Technical infrastructure

Technical infrastructure, i.e. roads, energy, IT technology, water, sanitation, is crucial for the functioning of urban areas. Its development, maintenance and protection against natural and man-made disasters and terrorism is therefore a focus area of the New Urban Agenda. It promotes ... *adequate investments in protective, accessible, and sustainable infrastructure and service provision systems for water, sanitation, and hygiene, sewage, solid waste management, urban drainage, reduction of air pollution, and storm water management* (para. 119) and requires ... *universal access to safe and affordable drinking water and sanitation, as well as equal access for all to public goods and quality services in areas such as ... infrastructure, mobility and transportation, energy* ... (para. 13, similar in 34). Propositions on energy infrastructure is very much focussed on renewable sources (see heading I).

8. Resilience, disaster risk reduction, security

Resilient cities may be achieved with ... *disaster risk reduction and management* (para. 13, 14) ... *shifting from reactive to more proactive ... approaches* (para. 78), anticipating post-disaster recovery and integrating ... *lessons from past disasters and new risks into future planning* (para. 78). In this context, the UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 is cited (para. 77)

Urban safety target ... *crime and violence prevention, including terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism* ... (para. 103).

9. Affordable and adequate housing

The commitment to ... *cities for all, inclusivity, just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient, and sustainable* ... (para. 11) locates housing in the very centre as a matter of course.

The Agenda stipulates a ... *right to adequate housing for all* (para. 13, 105) and ... *equal access for all to ... adequate and affordable housing* (para. 14, similar in para. 33), ... *based on the principles of social inclusion, economic effectiveness, and environmental protection* (para. 106).

Obviously, housing policy should be people-oriented. The Agenda requires the ... development of integrated and age- and gender-responsive housing policies ... provision of adequate, affordable, accessible, resource efficient, safe, resilient, well-connected, and well-located housing (para. 32).

Housing policy should provide ... *increased security of tenure for all ... within the continuum of land and property rights* ... (para. 35) and ... *prevent arbitrary forced evictions, and ... should ... focus on the needs of the homeless, persons in vulnerable situations, low income groups, and persons with disabilities* (para. 31). In this context, the Agenda contains many references to informal settlement upgrade.

Social and affordable housing construction is promoted within urban planning strategies ... *that facilitate a social mix* (para 46, 99) ... *and encourage mixed-income development to promote social inclusion and cohesion* (para. 106). The Agenda encourages the development of ... *policies, tools, mechanisms, and financing models that promote access to a wide range of affordable, sustainable housing options including rental and other tenure options, as well as cooperative solutions such as co-housing, community land trust, and other forms of collective tenure* ... (para. 107).

Requirements on quality housing focus on ... *planned urban extensions, infill, prioritizing renewal, regeneration, and retrofitting of urban areas ... avoiding spatial and socio-economic segregation and gentrification* (para. 97). *Peripheral and isolated mass housing developments detached from urban systems ... should be avoided* (para. 112).

10. Land use, real estate

The ecological and social function of land is valued higher than its economic functions. Sustainable land use should combine ... *urban extensions with adequate densities and compactness preventing and containing urban sprawl, as well as preventing unnecessary land use change and the loss of productive land and fragile and important ecosystems* (para. 69). Populations should be served with ... *equitable and affordable access to ... affordable serviced land* (para. 34) and ... *secure land tenure* (para. 14).

The real estate sector is invited ... *to enhance coordination of their urban and rural development strategies and programmes to apply an integrated approach to sustainable urbanization* (para. 82), but at the same time there is concern about ... *preventing land speculation* (para. 14).

11. Mobility, traffic

Similar to other areas of urban life, the Agenda claims mobility as a universal right (e.g. in para. 13, 50) in order to achieve ... *the benefits of connectivity* (para. 54). Urban mobility should be ... safe, age- and gender-responsive, affordable, accessible, and sustainable urban mobility ... accessible safe, efficient, affordable, and sustainable infrastructure for public transport ... (para. 114).

At the same time, there is concern about the negative effects of motorised traffic. It is pursued to reduce ... *the financial, environmental, and public health costs of inefficient mobility, congestion, air pollution, urban heat island effect, and noise* (para. 54). Road safety should be enhanced (para. 113).

The Agenda pledges a better ... *coordination between transport and urban and territorial planning departments* (para. 117). Financing instruments should be developed and expanded, enabling cities to improve their transport and mobility infrastructure (para. 118).

12. Energy, energy efficiency, ecological sustainability

Similar to housing and mobility, the Agenda makes a claim for a ... *universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services* (para. 121). However, following the provisions of the Paris Agreement of 2015 all proposed measures focus on renewable sources and energy

efficiency, always in the light of affordable costs (e.g. para. 34, 54, 79). Urban form, infrastructure, building design and construction modes are addressed as major drivers of resource efficiencies (para. 44, 75).

Ecological sustainability is addressed in a rather general mode, e.g. with the vision of cities and human settlements that ... *protect, conserve, restore, and promote their ecosystems, water, natural habitats, and biodiversity, minimize their environmental impact, and change to sustainable consumption and production patterns* (para. 13). A little bit more specific are the provisions of paragraph 76 concerning the ... *sustainable use of natural resources ... resource-efficiency of raw and construction materials ... development of sustainable and resilient buildings ... prioritizing the usage of local, non-toxic and recycled materials* (para. 76).

13. Public space

The comprehensive functions of public space concerning ecology, social life, societal and economic development are highlighted. The Agenda calls for the ... *creation and maintenance of well-connected and well-distributed networks of open, multi-purpose, safe, inclusive, accessible, green, and quality public spaces* (para. 67), ... *including streets, sidewalks, and cycling lanes, squares, waterfront areas, gardens, and parks that are multi-functional areas for social interaction and inclusion, human health and well-being, economic exchange, and cultural expression and dialogue among a wide diversity of people and cultures* (para. 37), ... *sustainably leveraging their potential to generate increased social and economic value, including property value, and to facilitate business, public and private investments, and livelihood opportunities for all* (para. 53), ... *free from crime and violence, including sexual harassment and gender-based violence, considering the human-scale and measures that allow for the best possible commercial use of street-level floors, fostering local markets and commerce, both formal and informal, as well as not-for-profit community initiatives, bringing people into the public spaces, promoting walkability and cycling towards improving health and well-being* (para. 100).

14. Arts, architecture, cultural heritage

Hardly any provisions in the New Urban Agenda concern contemporary culture (para. 26, 124), arts or architecture. Building design is only mentioned in the context of housing costs and resource efficiencies (para. 44).

By contrast, the protection of the cultural heritage is one of the focus areas. Paragraph 38 aims to ... *safeguard and promote cultural infrastructures and sites, museums, indigenous cultures and languages, as well as traditional knowledge and the arts ... as a way to strengthen social participation and the exercise of citizenship.* The cultural heritage should be leveraged ... *for sustainable urban development ... innovative and sustainable use of architectural monuments and sites with the intention of value creation, through respectful restoration and adaptation* (para. 125)

15. Research, data-based decision-making

The contemporary saying that *you can't manage what you don't measure*, has been taken seriously in the New Urban Agenda. The requirement for ... *high-quality, timely, and reliable disaggregated data* (para. 104), *statistical capacities* (para. 158/159) and ... *enhancement of open, user-friendly, and participatory data platforms* (para. 160) is repeatedly addressed.

16. Implementation

The New Urban Agenda is a soft tool with no legislative power amongst the UN member states. It relies upon the willingness of global stakeholders to be implemented. The fact that the New Urban Agenda is a non-binding agreement is clearly an obstacle to its implementation, it obviously trusts the power of facts and the dynamics arising from urbanisation. The countries are requested ... *to report on the progress of the implementation of the New Urban Agenda every four years* (para. 166-168), there ought to be a ... *voluntary, country-led, open, inclusive, multi-level, participatory, and transparent follow-up and review of the New Urban Agenda* (para. 161/162).

17. Financing of measures

A crucial aspect of implementation is financing. The Agenda addresses both public and private sources.

Public financing includes budgetary funds and transfers from developed to less developed countries as well as fiscal measures.

One popular fiscal measure is land value capture, by mobilizing ... *endogenous resources and revenues generated through the capture of benefits of urbanization, as well as the catalysing effects and maximized impact of public and private investments in order to improve the financial conditions for urban development ...*

(para. 132). Increasing ... *land and property value generated as a result of urban development processes, infrastructure projects, and public investments ...* should be captured and shared by means of ... *land market regulations* (para. 137). Capacity development programmes are promoted ... *on the use of legal land-based revenue and financing tools as well as on real estate market functioning for policymakers and local public officials focusing on the legal and economic foundations of value capture, including quantification, capturing, and distribution of land value increments* (para. 152).

Other recommendations on fiscal strategies seem somehow contradictory. Whereas an expansion of the public revenue base is proposed, neither ... *women and girls, children and youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and local communities, and poor households ...* should be ... *disproportionately affected* (para. 134).

The Agenda proposes a number of measures to promote sound public finance and debt management. It recommends ... *appropriate financial intermediaries for urban financing, such as regional, national, sub-national, and local development funds or development banks ...* and promotes ... *risk mitigation mechanisms ...* to ... *reduce the cost of capital and to stimulate the private sector and households to participate in sustainable urban development* (para. 139). It also proposes ... *sound and transparent systems of financial transfers from national government to sub-national and local governments* (para. 135) and the ... *development of vertical and horizontal models of distribution of financial resources to decrease inequalities across sub-national territories, within urban centres, and between urban and rural areas* (para. 136).

Public financing should be allocated primarily to ... *affordable and sustainable housing* (para. 106) ... *including rental and other tenure options* (para. 107), but obviously also to technical and social infrastructure and other public service obligations.

Addressing financing issues, the private sector comes into play, particularly concerning ... *the development of appropriate and affordable housing finance products* (para. 140). The Agenda encourages ... *the participation of a diverse range of multilateral financial institutions, regional development banks, and development finance institutions; cooperation agencies; private sector lenders and investors, cooperatives, money lenders, and microfinance banks to invest in affordable and incremental housing in all its forms* (para. 140, similar in para 142) ... *recognizing that housing enhances*

capital formation, income, employment generation, and savings (para 46).

18. What is under-represented or missing...

The comprehensive approach of the New Urban Agenda is remarkable and courageous. Nevertheless, a substantial number of white spots can be detected. Insufficient attention is awarded e.g. to the following topics:

- There are very few mentions of the effectiveness of policy making and legislation, law enforcement, public administration and compliance.
- There is hardly any consideration of democratic rules and self-organisation of people (communitarianism), which is a precondition of inclusion and for participation in political decision making processes.
- Hardly any remarks on the evolution of civil society can be found, e.g. concerning the promotion of registered or informal associations.
- There is a lot of text covering our aging society, but no concrete measures regarding accommodation and care of elderly people are proposed.
- Very few remarks concern education, and none are dedicated to higher education, universities, research and development, despite being a core competence of urban agglomerations.
- The focus on people-oriented policies seems responsible for lack of attention to the urgently needed re-industrialisation of cities and employer-oriented measures. Housing for all and mobility and infrastructure for all require first and foremost jobs for all.
- The growing energy hunger of cities is hardly mentioned. A change of energy supply to re-newable sources is desirable, but our large urban agglomerations require large-scale solutions.
- There is no consideration of the concept of sufficiency, i.e. the voluntary or directed reduction of consumption of goods and resources in order to mitigate climate change and to avoid pollution.
- Cooperation with the private sector is mentioned repeatedly. But the private sector was hardly present at the Habitat III conference. The crucial role of the real estate industry in the development of our cities, in capital formation and in providing accommodation for all is scarcely reflected.

- The promising approaches of public-private-partnerships (PPP) were widely discussed during the Habitat III conference (leading to aspirations for public-private-people-partnerships), but cannot be found in the Agenda.
- The crucial role of architecture, contemporary art and beauty for the development of urban structures, for the appearance of identity and the constitution of civil society is not at all reflected. Reference to cultural heritage is not enough. Vibrant arts are needed.
- Even though it is repeatedly stated that cities must be inclusive, targets and propositions regarding equal rights and treatment of gay, lesbian and transsexual people are never mentioned because of resistance of some very conservative countries during the long pre-paratory process of the New Urban Agenda. Also, a general “right on cities” was not enforceable.
- Although, the official title of the New Urban Agenda is “*Quito Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All*”, the focus lies strongly on cities. More than half of the world's population now lives in cities; so it makes sense that the New Urban Agenda will shape future UN agendas. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to neglect rural areas. The crucial question is how to achieve holistic spatial development of all human settlements.

Altogether, the New Urban Agenda seems to take the well-organised cities from the Northern

Hemisphere as a model for the emerging metropolises of the South. There seems to be an inherent assumption about a universal model for a city. But this model is an invention of the Northern Hemisphere, developed via a protracted civilising process. It is by no means certain that this model fits the present-day needs of the rapidly growing urban regions in all those emerging economies in Africa and South Asia. This approach reminds one of the presumptuous (if not neo-colonial) claim of the Western World regarding democracy and the liberal market economy as the single pre-eminent model of government, although other approaches have proved more efficient in releasing masses of people from poverty. The New Urban Agenda does not ask the question of principle, whether cities in less developed countries of the South work differently and maybe should follow different paths.

19. Conclusions

The New Urban Agenda claims for ... *cities for all, inclusivity, just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements* (para. 11)

Put simply, the New Urban Agenda is a 22-page consensual document intending to “*guide the next twenty years of sustainable and transformative urban development worldwide*” and is based on a long and admirable participatory process.

As pointed out in the last section, the “new” of the New Urban Agenda is debatable since the answer depends on taking a vision and set of

principles from one national and local context to another. For example for many European cities this vision and set of principles would already be considered as accepted (see the adoption of the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities of 2007, the Lisbon Treaty of 2009 including the notion of territorial cohesion and the Europe2020 strategy). Rather than an innovative agenda of the future, it presents a reminder of values that cities have committed themselves to.

What is going to happen next with the New Urban Agenda? As this analysis has shown, the agenda presents a comprehensive guideline what goals to pursue, but a concrete roadmap how to actually achieve these goals is missing. Such a roadmap does not necessarily have to be part of the content of the agenda as it is a political document; however, it should be tackled in follow-up processes. Strong monitoring processes will be essential to maintain commitment and engagement over time for this agenda. However, a clear schedule for structured review processes is missing. Paragraphs 161 and 162 call for a periodic review of the implementation steps, but the next Habitat conference is not planned until 2036. In view of the nature and urgency of the challenges faced, a much shorter interval between conferences is necessary. One thing is clear, all countries and cities will need to step up their commitments if the aspirations outlined in Habitat III are to be achieved.

Download New Urban Agenda: www.habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda and from www.iibw.at