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Habitat III: Let's urbanise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)!

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The New Urban Agenda to be adopted next October by the UN ought to be more than an urban aggiornamento: it is the opportunity to convert the try and set an action agenda to implement the SDGs in, for and with the world's cities.

The Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (**Habitat III**) will be held in Quito in October 2016. It will gather the Member States of the General Assembly to secure a New Urban Agenda (**NUA**) for the next 20 years. Habitat III being the first international conference following the adoption of the

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is a unique opportunity to convert the try of the global 2015 agreements.

The urban and sustainable development agendas

Even though the implementation of the urban agenda has fallen short, the 1976 and 1996 conferences on human settlements were occasions to promote innovative policy directions and messages on urban stakes. The preparatory process for Habitat III has built on this legacy, taken stock of current challenges and opportunities and proposed high-level recommendations to manage urbanisation.

In parallel, 2015 has been a turning point: the conferences on Disaster Risk Reduction and Financing for Development, [the adoption of the SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement have changed the logics](#). By proposing a universal, socially, economically and environmentally integrated framework and an implementation process, the 2030 Agenda is ground-breaking for sustainable development. This shift in mindsets and approaches is now the foundation for policies at international, national and local levels.

However, the articulation of these agendas is not self-imposing and the way cities will contribute to its implementation remains uncertain. Indeed, contributions to the NUA follow the path of Habitat I and II but do not resort to the SDGs framework as the new backbone, whereas the current international priority is the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

As the role of cities is increasingly acknowledged by the international community, Habitat III is a unique opportunity. To miss it could both jeopardize the 2030 Agenda action-oriented ambition, and limit the Habitat III outcome to an independent, sectorial and technical meeting.

The needed paradigm shift

The demographic shift to an urban world entails a political one: *de facto*, [the SDGs have been adopted and will be implemented in an urban world](#). Habitat is not about the 'urban' anymore but about a planetary condition. The NUA should not involve the urban community only, but the world's leaders and citizens. The little media coverage Habitat III is receiving until now shows that political messages and public awareness remain to be raised. The way Habitat III debates are framed will be key to foster mobilisation.

A radical shift from a relatively confidential urban expertise to global concerns is thus needed. Considering the outreach of the SDGs, their analysis through an urban lens may garner much attention. By inscribing itself in the 2015 sequence, Habitat III can convert negotiating States to the 'urban cause'. In that perspective, the NUA ought to clarify objectives and means for implementing the SDGs in cities: it is about adapting a global political agenda to an urban world. Technical guidelines will be useful to accompany authorities in their domestic action later on. But for now, the challenge is to convey political discourses on the way the NUA will contribute to sustainable development.

Urbanising the SDGs

Beyond the dedicated SDG 11 for cities, all SDGs have an urban dimension. The NUA can capitalise on this by [applying an urban lens to the SDGs](#): urban poverty, urban water and sanitation, urban economic growth, etc., represent viable objectives for the NUA. The 2030 Agenda provides the NUA with aims and principles already endorsed by States, private and civil stakeholders. Context specificities identified in the Habitat III preparatory regional conferences can help prioritize. But globally, this urban translation of the SDGs constitutes a clear normative framework; it also takes advantage of the consensus previously achieved.

From an operational perspective, SDG 17 sets financing, technology, capacity building and trade as key means to strengthen. [Since cities will be decisive for implementation, the local appropriation of instruments will as well](#). Local financing, technologies for smart cities, municipal capacity building and local economic development require adapted solutions. To do so, Habitat III preparatory policy papers and thematic meetings offer indeed solid technical options, but the toolbox remains to be articulated with SDG 17.

Overall, the SDGs offer a consensual, universal and integrated normative framework, operational instruments and a reporting process to follow-up on commitments. Drafting the NUA on that basis would show the international community that Habitat III is founded on the 2030 Agenda, and engage negotiators to pursue further the work initiated in 2015. The point is to both urbanise the aims and localise the means to implement the SDGs. Drawing lessons from successful local Agendas 21, the NUA could draw a localised 2030 Agenda based on the SDGs targets and means relevant for cities. This would set the tone for future city visions coherent with global sustainable development priorities.

Political and people-oriented discourses

Beyond norms and instruments, the NUA can make the political case for sustainable urban development. Habitat III is the occasion to steer States' awareness and endorsement for articulating cities and SDGs. That would appeal to international, national and local actors, as well as urban, development and political communities. SDG 17 "systemic issues" translated to cities' case further helps identifying decisive options:

- **Policy and institutional coherence:** for cities to implement the SDGs requires multi-level governance. Devolution to local authorities will not suffice. Cities can be drivers for change, but they also need State's support; reciprocally the latter need to rely on local counterparts to enforce national strategies. The principle of subsidiarity and practices of State-local arrangements constitute the basics.
- Cities concentrate actors, and thus opportunities for **multi-stakeholder partnerships**. Local authorities are to be drivers of the private sector's involvement to deliver services and civil society's ability to participate in decision-making. To instill cities in the role of facilitators for these coalitions supposes local transparency and accountability as well as ability to gather interests and resources around common strategies.
- As to **data, monitoring and accountability**, the case for sub-national disaggregation is emerging. To handle 304 indicators may be complex for municipalities. But to identify the relevant indicators for cities—not only for SDG 11—and build a simplified template would serve both cities and States. It would permit to analyse how cities are involved and able to contribute to the global efforts for sustainable development.

Last but not least, Habitat III needs broad constituency. Messages have not percolated yet in media, general public and policy debates. The urban community shall generate understanding and conviction not within itself but towards politics, leaders and citizens. The collective urban narrative ought to resonate with last year individual and international concerns for sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda calls for "transforming our world", the NUA

could come on top of it by “transforming our cities”. To build that momentum requires translating technical debates into accessible discourses. Therefore, let's start an open discussion on the urban dimension of the SDGs. Shall the NUA be legitimate, it needs attention. The 2030 Agenda is people-centred and people-oriented, discourses should too.

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