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Habitat III and the New Urban Agenda: debriefing the debriefs

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The Habitat III conference and the adoption of the New Urban Agenda (NUA) at the end of October 2016 in Quito (Ecuador) attracted little political or media attention. Beyond the initial excitement around the event, which was intended to define the lines of action for sustainable urban development throughout the world over the next 20 years, the urban community came back with a feeling of confusion. What lessons can be learned from the official enthusiasm and social resistance encountered?

The relative disappointments and mixed feedback from Habitat III have started debates that are as critical and polarized as those before the conference. Negotiated by the 193 states of the United Nations, the NUA aims to

encompass all the issues and demands. However, a lack of operational priorities has disappointed the actors involved. Several “debriefing” meetings have been conducted in different arenas. The sometimes contradictory interpretations of the NUA illustrate the absence of guidelines and consequently the significant manoeuvre room that remains for proponents of different visions and modalities for managing the city.

1. Scientific contributions

The [Quito papers \[1\]](#), purportedly the theoretical foundations of the NUA, were presented at Habitat III. They aim to replace the Charter of Athens that was written in 1933 by Le Corbusier, which fuelled a modernist and functionalist vision of the city, and authoritative master planning. They advocate an open city, where complexity must be approached in a positive rather than a simplifying way. Three principles underlie this vision: public spaces (porosity) must be developed by and for the public as common goods, so that interactions and opportunities proliferate (synchronicity); therefore planning should not aim to deliver a perfect city, but to lay the foundations for progressive development (incompleteness). While this reflection has inspired the NUA, its construction behind the scenes and the ex-post publication of the document, which is still confidential, limits its appropriation.

The scope of scientific discourse on the NUA remains limited. The European N-Aerus network has contributed a [policy paper](#) with Cities Alliance and a workshop with African and Latin American networks. They advocated the fact that research should not be limited to providing data, and their recommendations aim to challenge decision-makers and practitioners. They promote the inclusion of informality, local adaptation of planning and flexible governance frameworks. However, it is difficult to find these attributes in the NUA, which remains focused on classic urbanism without questioning the causes of its relative failure in recent decades.

2. Social movements

Three alternative forums to Habitat III have brought together researchers and social movements. They have mainly defended the “[right to the city](#)” [2]. Although accepting that the concept of a diffuse and collective right remains - legally - inapplicable, they use it as a mobilizing slogan to unite against “urban commodification” and for cities that belong to their inhabitants. The mention of this in the NUA is nevertheless perceived as a partial victory because of the vagueness of its definition and of the presence of other contradictory notions such as urban competitiveness and the progressivity of rights.

In parallel with the Habitat III process, some French researchers, local authorities and social movements, organized around the Centre Sud and AITEC networks, defend the approach of “progressive” cities. A coalition emerged to defend the inclusion of poorer districts and to fight against the financialisation of land and property in the North as well as the South. These militants were frustrated because ultimately the NUA did not go beyond the 1976 Habitat I proposals, and even diluted them in a speech on cities as engines of growth. They also emphasized the unintelligibility of an overloaded diplomatic text that was full of contradictions, and which requires clarification in order to serve as a reference framework.

3. Institutional perspective

The lack of political enthusiasm around the NUA is undeniable. In addition to the diplomatic fatigue associated with the 2015 negotiations, the crystallization of debates around the future of UN-Habitat - the UN agency in charge of urban issues - has limited interest in discussions. The lack of linkage between the NUA and the agreements on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate and development financing, has also isolated Habitat III from other international agendas, and thus the mobilization of other communities. [Negotiators](#)

expected Habitat III to address the local implementation of Agenda 2030 for sustainable development; urban experts have focused on specialized technical issues that did not command the attention of politicians or explicitly feed the International Agenda.

In addition, local authorities have established themselves as key interlocutors and partners, who are proactive and responsible and at the forefront of implementing sustainable development. The place and role of these actors remains a sensitive political issue; and despite their powerful advocacy, the issue has not been directly addressed. On the one hand, states resist making an explicit commitment in favour of decentralization; and on the other the UN system itself does not offer a place to local authorities as partners in the decision-making process. This remains a decisive political-institutional challenge at all levels, which the NUA is unable to address at the present time.

4. What implementation...?

Taking an optimistic view, the urban community considers that Habitat III was not an end, but a starting point. The text seems general, or vague, enough, so that everyone can find a fault, a promise or a path to follow to promote his or her vision of the city. Since the NUA text does not provide an operational perspective, it is now up to the stakeholders to put forward their views and priorities. The work is still in progress and the repositioning of the urban community remains to be done. Future urban forums [3] will find a new function through detailed studies of the more specific thematic issues.

While international conferences can consolidate an epistemic community, provide conceptual frameworks and create alliances, it is too early to know which structuring ideas will emerge from Habitat III. The displacement of the urban debate to the local level, by, for, in and with cities, however, appears to be a structuring issue. This cross-cutting challenge mobilizes a myriad of actors with their own visions and divergent interpretations. Each actor can and will probably advocate the role of local authorities with their own means of action: identification of champions, promotion of good practices, production of territorialized data, financing experiments, creation of coalitions, etc. The paradigm shift – that is still to be built – of the NUA, and more broadly of Agenda 2030, seems to be that of affirming cities as partners that are able to contribute to sustainable development and are legitimate in international governance.

[1] Informally developed by J. Clos (UN-Habitat), R. Burdett (LSE), S. Sassen (Columbia University) and R. Sennett (NYU), they have been/will be presented in Quito, Paris, London, Beijing and New York, but have not yet been published. [2] “The right of all inhabitants, present and future, permanent and temporary, to use, occupy and produce fair, inclusive and sustainable cities, defined as an essential common good for a full and decent life.” [3] The World Urban Forums, organized by UN-Habitat since 2001, bring together every two years the international urban community and the general public on international urban issues.