As the urban community gears up for the Habitat III Conference in October 2016, there are high hopes that the New Urban Agenda will harness this once-in-a-generation opportunity to make a paradigm shift that puts local governments and territories at the center of development. In many ways, there has been great progress in the international debate over the 20 years since Habitat II; concepts such as the Right to the City can no longer be ignored, and the importance of previously marginalized issues such as gender equality, cultural diversity, and multilevel governance as both a means and an end of sustainable development are being recognized as never before.

The lead up to Habitat III has been remarkable in its inclusiveness for a UN process, with countless thematic preparatory conferences and processes involving all stakeholders. In the case of local and regional governments, our global networks have contributed through the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments, which co-led the Policy Unit on Urban Governance, Capacity and Institutional Development, and provided inputs to all of the major thematic and regional meetings leading up to the conference. We were also invited to make recommendations at specific Informal Hearings for Local Authorities in May 2016, where we were recognized as a distinct constituency.
My organization, UCLG, has put special enthusiasm into facilitating the participation of local and regional governments in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Habitat III processes. We are convinced that, by doing so, we are not only benefiting our broad membership, but also the global development agenda itself. The paradigm shift we need will require the recognition of a different role for local governments; we need local thinking and global implementation and the full involvement of local and sub-national dynamics in international processes.

We recognize the apparent contradiction that the New Urban Agenda will ultimately be defined and adopted by UN Member States, rather than by the cities and territories that must actually put it in place. But we accept it with the expectation that the outcomes of Habitat III will create an inclusive framework. We also accept this contradiction in the hope that Member States will take this opportunity to ensure that it will be the last time that an agenda for territories is shaped without the direct involvement of local leaders at the negotiation table. Only in this way will they be able to lay out a truly transformative vision capable of meeting the challenges of the coming decades.

But, whatever happens at Habitat III, it is locally elected leaders who have the direct responsibility for dealing with the challenges and opportunities of the urban future. It is they who must ensure housing, clean water and sanitation for their citizens, empower women and girls, face the impact of natural disasters, welcome and integrate refugees, protect and share local cultural heritage, and tackle increasing inequalities.

That's why, on the eve of Habitat III, local and regional governments will gather at the World Summit of Local and Regional Leaders and UCLG Congress in Bogotá, Colombia, to set out our vision from the frontline, of the transformations needed in great metropolises, intermediary cities, rural areas and small municipalities across the world. For us, the New Urban Agenda must share a new world vision by all stakeholders in their diverse local cultures and environments, with a common purpose to rebalance society by guaranteeing the Right to the City, change the production and consumption patterns of urban society, and develop a new governance model that allows local governments and local communities to countervail the uncontrolled power of the global markets and politics, allowing a better balance between the state, the commons and the market.

The UCLG Congress in Bogotá will also reaffirm the commitments of local and regional governments to improve the lives of their communities by protecting common goods, guaranteeing basic services for all and bridging inequalities through the promotion of renewed governance with the Right to the City at its center. It will set out ways to make local governments more capable but also more accountable. It will integrate culture as a driver of urban transformation. It will strive for the participation of women and girls in economic, cultural and political life, particularly in local elected office. It will lay out a vision of territorial economic development that allows local communities to both contribute to achieving sustainable consumption and production patterns and developing resilient communities promoting planetary environmental sustainability. Perhaps most importantly, it will reimage the relationship between the citizen and the local state, moving to a dynamic process of co-creating society from the bottom up.

Local and regional governments are not waiting for their national counterparts and the international community to take notice of the urgency of the urban challenge. Just as local governments have been one step ahead of their national counterparts in taking concrete climate action, they are now one step ahead in recognizing the Right to the City. While the ambitious, complex nature of the concept and the commitments it implies still divide national governments, local and regional governments have been brave enough to take on the concept, advocate for its inclusion in the New Urban Agenda and, most importantly, start the hard work of making it a reality in their cities.

Local and regional governments are also seeking to lead the way by developing innovative and brave solutions at the local level and sharing them with one another through global, decentralized learning partnerships. The entire international municipal movement, with its dozens of global local and regional government networks, is creating exchange platforms that will allow global learning from local practice on how to localize the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda.

Local leaders cannot achieve sustainable urbanization on their own. Our sustainable future must be co-created by all stakeholders, with strong public institutions protecting the public interest and the wellbeing of all. There will be no
better way to ensure this than by capable, well-resourced and inclusive local institutions acting as the conveners of a new type of governance.

UCLG and the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments are fully committed to ensuring direct dialogue between the international community and the constituency of local elected leaders, organized through the World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments as an important trigger for change. It is up to the national governments to make the next move in Quito.

Source: IISD Reporting Services

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