

The only sustainable city is one co-created by all of us

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III, it's up to national leaders and the international community to take the next step: to share powers, means and responsibilities with local and regional authorities.

As the inheritor of the global movement of subnational governments dating back to 1913, UCLG has been calling on the United Nations and its agencies to include cities and regions in decision-making that affects them.

In this, UCLG's members found a strong framework for action in the outcome of the [Habitat II conference](#), which took place in 1996 in Istanbul. Twenty years on, and with the next Habitat conference just around the corner, the heart of our work still consists of the participation of local governments in defining the [New Urban Agenda](#), the global urbanization strategy that will come out of [Habitat III](#).

In fact, [Habitat III](#) — which takes place in October in Quito, Ecuador — will mark the culmination of four particularly intensive years of global advocacy for UCLG and our partners in the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments.

Since 2012, the United Nations has launched a plethora of global agendas that require action at the local level for their achievement. These include four major agreements last year alone: the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), the [Paris Agreement](#) on climate change, the [Financing for Development](#) agenda, and the [Sendai Disaster Risk Reduction Framework](#).

As a constituency, our challenge is to bring the perceptions and priorities of our members to these debates, and to work to communicate the relevance of these agendas to local and regional governments on the ground. As the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne wrote, the challenge is now to adapt universal agendas to local realities.

[[See: Localizing the Habitat III agenda](#)]

The international agendas of the United Nations and its member states can risk seeming far removed from the daily concerns of local administrations and their communities. Indeed, one of the major shortfalls of the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs) — the global development framework that was replaced this year with the SDGs — was their lack of ownership at the local level.

With so many global goals and targets being set over a short period, it's more important than ever to ensure coherence among agendas and avoid policy gaps and contradictions between them. Most importantly, these will have

to be achieved with the needs of the communities in mind, from the local level up.

[[See: Cities must be part of defining the New Urban Agenda](#)]

That's why organizations of local governments are advocating through the Global Taskforce for links to be forged between the New Urban Agenda and those frameworks that have come before it. We need to ensure that the multiple global agendas that the United Nations is defining, with the best of intentions and limited resources, make sense for cities and their citizens — that they answer their needs and help shape the kind of society in which we would like future generations to grow.

Spirit of Istanbul

When we say we want a universal agenda, we don't just mean an agenda that applies to both the Global North and South. We also refer to an agenda that is broad and flexible enough to be relevant from the smallest municipality to the largest capital city, an agenda that addresses inequalities.

Too often, the great diversity of human settlements is made invisible by the blanket term "cities", which is taken to refer to major global metropolises. Yes, the New Urban Agenda must speak to our largest cities. But it also must be relevant to the peripheral cities at their edges, to the intermediary cities where most of the world's urban population live, and to small municipalities, rural areas and regions.

[[See: Regional strategies make small places bigger, Habitat III forum notes](#)]

“The global influences the local, sometimes dramatically and uncontrollably. That's why local people, communities and institutions want to participate in the co-creation of the New Urban Agenda.” UCLG's forthcoming Global Report on Local

Democracy and Decentralization, which will be published to coincide with Habitat III, looks at these issues from the perspective of each of these constituencies. It will highlight the unique challenges and opportunities faced by local leaders in different types of human settlements. Such an approach is essential in order to create sustainable systems of cities and to ensure a positive economic, environmental, social and cultural continuum between urban and rural areas.

If any global agenda depends on local and regional governments for its success (and yes, they all do!), it is the urban agenda. Therefore, one of the top priorities for local and regional governments at Habitat III is to ensure that the New Urban Agenda builds on the progress made at the Habitat II conference in Istanbul, particularly in terms of the acknowledgement of the positive role that decentralization plays in development.

In 1996, U. N. member states agreed that sustainable human settlements could be achieved through “the effective decentralization of responsibilities, policy management, decision-making authority, and sufficient resources ... to local authorities, closest to, and most representative of, their constituencies.” The [Istanbul Declaration](#) also recognized local authorities as “the closest partner” of UN-Habitat in the implementation of the [Habitat Agenda](#) , the framework that came out of the Istanbul negotiations.

[[See: U. N. General Assembly approves Habitat III rules, ending 8 months of limbo](#)]

Two decades later, failure to reaffirm and strengthen these commitments and to recognize the urbanization trend and its potential would represent a step backwards. It would also jeopardize the capacity of local and regional governments to reach our full potential as development partners.

Co-creation cornerstone

UCLG is calling for the right to the city — that is, the collective right to transform ourselves by changing the city — to be at the heart of the New Urban Agenda. Beyond the discussion on the right-based approach, our constituency sees the right to the city as the answer to the call by communities and inhabitants to shape their own future.

[[See: A needed cornerstone for Habitat III: The Right to the City](#)]

“There are many formats that could ensure local authorities a seat at the global table. For instance, a liaison unit of elected local representatives or a committee of local and regional governments could be linked to ECOSOC. Or a strong U. N. agency could deal solely with local development and urban issues, bringing on board non-member states as partners.”

This approach encompasses an understanding of the city as part of the commons, implying that its resources and opportunities must be accessible to all. The value of this approach is that it acknowledges cities as more than bundles of infrastructure, engines of economic growth or local institutions. Cities are living, social and cultural phenomena, under a constant process of co-creation and reinvention by everyone who inhabits them.

This co-creation of the city is taking place simultaneously in hundreds of thousands of cities across the world. Millions of citizens, activists, businesses and elected representatives are working to find ways to improve their lives and those of their communities in areas as diverse as local democracy, financing, planning, disaster risk management, culture and the relationship of the city with its rural surrounds.

It is the role of local governments to act as facilitators in this democratic process of co-creation and, as part of the state, to protect and guarantee human rights in the city, from the rights to water and housing to the rights to security and culture.

[[See: Human rights and the New Urban Agenda](#)]

Local leaders, as the elected representatives closest to the people, are ideally placed to experiment with participatory forms of decision-making. They also are best positioned to bring together different members of their communities, including those most at risk of exclusion, around a collective vision of the city they want.

Seat at the global table

But the co-creation of the city should not be limited to the local level. People in cities across the world realize that their local decisions are influenced by events, policies and decisions made at the national and international levels. The global influences the local, sometimes dramatically and uncontrollably. That’s why local people, communities and institutions want to participate in the co-creation of the New Urban Agenda, enriching the international debate with our diverse experiences, cultures and histories.

[[See: Habitat III process entering political phase](#)]

Unfortunately, the recommendations of a key official report on the role of civil society within the United Nations — known as the [Cardoso Report, from 2004](#) — have not been acted upon. Local and regional governments are still not recognized as a sphere of government in the international processes.

This is why our constituency particularly welcomes the specific [Informal Hearings for Local Authorities](#) , which will be held in the Habitat process for the very first time and will take place in mid-May. Our contributions to the New Urban

Agenda through the political mechanism set up by and for our constituency — the [Second World Assembly of Local and Regional Governments](#) — will also represent an important milestone of what we hope will be the start of a new form structure of global governance.

[[See: Potentially historic gathering of mayors to meet three times this year](#)]

Yet the changing paradigm of an urbanizing world calls for further steps to enhance the partnership between local governments and the international community, based on inclusive participation and decision-making.

There are many formats that could ensure local authorities a seat at the global table. For instance, a liaison unit of elected local representatives or a committee of local and regional governments could be linked to ECOSOC, the U. N. agency that coordinates discussion on sustainable development. Or a strong U. N. agency could deal solely with local development and urban issues, bringing on board non-member states as partners.

The format is not the issue. Rather, what is important is the political will that could take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to fully deploy the potential of all actors — potential that can be catalyzed from the local level up.

[[See: Proposed mechanisms would coordinate post-Habitat III action on urbanization](#)]

For over a century, local and regional governments have been building an international municipal movement to represent tens of thousands of local and regional leaders and their communities across the world. Since 2012 we have brought together all international networks of local and regional governments in a Global Taskforce to coordinate our advocacy around the SDGs and Habitat III processes.

We are an organized constituency — ready, willing and able to play our part in the New Urban Agenda. It's now up to national leaders and the international community to make the next move — to share powers, means and responsibilities. The task at hand is too great for any single actor alone.

Source: Josep Roig at [citiscopes.org](#)

Enlaces

[1] <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/explainer/2015/06/whats-history-habitat-process>

[2] <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/explainer/2015/06/what-new-urban-agenda>

[3] <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/explainer/2015/06/what-habitat-iii>

[4] <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/explainer/2015/03/what-are-sustainable-development-goals>

[5] <http://citiscopes.org/topics/cop-21>

[6] <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/explainer/2015/03/what-financing-development>

[7] <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/news/2015/03/new-disaster-risk-framework-seen-first-step-toward-sustainability>

[8] <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/commentary/2015/04/localizing-habitat-iii-agenda>

[9] <http://citiscopes.org/story/2014/comparing-mdgs-and-sdgs>

[10] <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/commentary/2015/08/cities-must-be-part-defining-new-urban-agenda>

[11] <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/news/2015/11/regional-strategies-make-small-places-bigger-habitat-iii-forum-notes>

[12] <http://www.un.org/ga/Istanbul+5/declaration.htm>

[13]

<http://unhabitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/The-Habitat-Agenda-Goals-and-Principles-Commitments-and-the-Global-Plan-of-Action-2003.pdf>

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<http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/news/2015/12/update-un-general-assembly-approves-habitat-iii-rules-ending-8-months-li-mbo>

[15] <http://citiscopes.org/habitatIII/commentary/2016/02/needed-cornerstone-habitat-iii-right-city>

- [16] <http://citiscope.org/habitatIII/commentary/2015/07/human-rights-and-new-urban-agenda>
- [17] <http://citiscope.org/habitatIII/news/2016/04/habitat-iii-process-entering-political-phase>
- [18] <https://www.globalpolicy.org/images/pdfs/0611report.pdf>
- [19] <http://citiscope.org/habitatIII/explainer/2015/06/calendar-toward-habitat-iii>
- [20] <http://citiscope.org/habitatIII/news/2016/03/potentially-historic-gathering-mayors-meet-three-times-year>
- [21] <http://citiscope.org/habitatIII/news/2016/03/proposed-mechanisms-would-coordinate-post-habitat-iii-action-urbanization>
- [22] <http://citiscope.org/habitatIII/commentary/2016/05/only-sustainable-city-one-co-created-all-us>