

# HIC comments on Habitat III Policy Paper Frameworks

This document is an official contribution to the policy level process toward Habitat III.



## Habitat International Coalition and the Habitat III Process

### Introduction

Since the very early stages of the Habitat III preparations, Habitat International Coalition (HIC) has called for the integrity of the Habitat II (1996) commitments and modalities; this demand has three related aspects:

- Processes must uphold the Habitat II-established principle to be as inclusive as possible;
- Maintain the Habitat Agenda, not pose a narrower and more-divisive "urban agenda";
- The human rights and good-governance approaches must continue to anchor and guide global human settlement policy and corresponding commitments.

The various Habitat III preparations, reporting and deliberation processes and contents must be grounded in (1) a faithful evaluation of commitments made at Habitat II; (2) a review of housing-rights and good-governance practices consistent with those essential aspects of the Habitat II promise, while taking into consideration the lessons learned and greater conceptual clarity of the issues since Habitat II; and (3) realistic preparation for the emerging human settlement-development challenges that light the way toward improving "balanced rural and urban development," as pledged since Habitat I (1976).

This message has been delivered to the Habitat III Secretariat, States and other Stakeholders in different occasions. Regretfully, we observe how these fundamental principles are omitted—again—in the Policy Paper Frameworks (PPFs). These documents generally point out challenges, priorities and ways of implementation to resolve problems. They succeed, in part, but they fail, in general, to address the fundamental causes of these problems.

The official narrative production on Habitat III, despite the number of documents and stakeholders involved, has left important questions unanswered: these Frameworks are not an exception. Habitat International Coalition expected that these PPFs would fill the gaps already identified in the Issue Papers and in several other documents and discussions, gaps that should have been filled by now with the discourse and intended consensus that will take the form of Habitat III principles and commitments on a similarly broad range of issues.

This review points to some outstanding considerations, in particular, civil society issues that have yet

to find a home in any of the existing forums and mechanisms; unfortunately they are essential and too numerous. The authors of this document have been fundamental to the Habitat I and Habitat II processes, defining related normative frameworks, informing public policies at all levels, as well as analyzing, training, multi-actor awareness raising and mobilizing around habitat-related human rights and the right to the city.

All PPFs would benefit from a regimen of both maintaining integrity with, and challenging Habitat II issues and commitments made in 1996. HIC has insisted that that is rather the heart of the exercise, otherwise the conversation falsely presumes to start from zero and come from nowhere, especially for any newcomer to the process. Rather, the exercise forms part of a continuum of forty years of policy discourse and commitments, currently enshrined in Habitat II (expiring and coming up for renewal this year).

It is clear that the PPFs can stimulate discussion and they point at many fundamental issues but, at the same time, they reflect a deliberate purpose of ostensibly dismissing or forgetting what has gone before. This consistent omission of Habitat II commitments from the discussion has not been addressed yet, and we fear never will be.

The PPFs did not achieve such a goal, leaving the question of Habitat III's purpose, relevance and coherence unresolved, particularly if Habitat II issues and commitments are now rendered to oblivion. Such treatment does not augur much relevance, coherence, impact or hopes for implementation of a Habitat III. Besides the broken promises of Habitat II implementation and missing links between Habitat II and Habitat III, the discontinuity puts into critical focus the tremendous resource demands now on all Habitat III stakeholders to participate effectively, especially to salvage the Habitat II values that risk being lost. If the supposed guardians of Habitat II and its commitments (UN-Habitat, ECOSOC, the UN Secretariat and UN member states) cannot show continuity and integrity of that Habitat process since 1996, then the current and future one must be doubted.

The apparent structural amnesia of what went before is closely related to the other gap wanting to be filled: As mentioned above, the PPFs succeed in presenting problems and posing solutions; however, they need a greater emphasis on root causes and the normative aspect of remedial responses, including the applicable international norms—not least including Habitat II commitments—that already address, prohibit, seek to prevent and/or avoid many of the problems identified.

The PPFs' general silence on the existing normative framework and the needed attention to causative factors for habitat problems it's alarming, especially at this stage of the HIII process.

The assumption that urbanization is inevitable prevails and remains immune to any prospect of mitigating it, except for only its direct consequences. The PPFs conclude with apparent contentment at technical adjustments to ensure some measure of comfort for those who can afford them. The apocalyptic Habitat III Secretariat's vision of a mechanized countryside, of depopulated rural areas without peasants and devoted to the prosperity of cities, of megacities "nurturing and embracing" all newcomers, is reflected to some extent in the PPFs.

This approach is highly ideological in nature and disposition, having the ostensible purpose of lulling dominant stakeholders into a sense of gratification with whatever they are presently doing, and encouraging an agenda for simply doing more of the same (i.e., inviting a rather cynical interpretation of "sustainability"). The preventive and remedial behaviour changes required, as well as the behavioural changes already long-ago committed (in Habitat II), are not prominent.

Issues that should define the Habitat III debate are missing, such as the reparations framework, a significant UN General Assembly clarification (A/RES/60/147) since Habitat II, the discourse on human security in its human settlement context or the essential human rights standards that specifically apply in the context of human settlements are a binding purpose and constant pillar of action in the UN Charter.

Despite the UN Charter's contractual guidance and the abundance of normative references developed to date, especially since 1996, the PPFs mostly do not take a human rights approach, and do not incorporate human rights principles, especially the indivisibility of human rights, nor the over-riding treaty-implementation requirements of gender equality, and non-discrimination. Certain PPFs claim to take a rights-based approach, but do not follow through with that assertion. Most of them are weak on gender and women's rights, but they should be a methodological standard of such products from any UN Charter-based specialized organization or Secretariat body dealing with habitat issues.

Therefore, Habitat International Coalition misses the references to the relevant norms and human rights standards, including those from the UN—as well as trends in practice—that have evolved since 1996. The wholesale omission of these aspects suggests a bias toward avoidance of the law when it is inconvenient to embedded interests. The absence of international law and related norms, in general, and Habitat II commitments, in particular, suggests something deliberately hidden, rather than something merely overlooked as unimportant. Each PPF needs a legal review to ensure universal reference to the applicable international norms and to correct some errors and misunderstandings, in some cases, and to provide appropriate emphasis in others.

The body of PPFs reveals also the need for additional Papers on (1) population trends (growth, ageing, youth bulge) and related global and state policies (or lack thereof) and on (2) global financialization of real estate as a challenge, providing recommendations toward adequate social and political regulation of the related markets and actors and on alternatives to "free" housing, land, mortgage markets and to private property. That would complete the picture and address some of the causes and consequences behind the looming assumption that current trends are, perforce, immutable.

The needed debate over curative responses eventually will propel the importance of the Habitat III processes. This phase of Habitat III discourse should have reached that stage by now, through the rigorous deliberation that should follow and fill any gaps.

Macroeconomic policies are not mentioned at all, despite the repeated Habitat II commitment to take that factor into consideration in all related fields of policy, housing affordability, finance, land tenure, et al. This forms one more example where the abandonment of the Habitat II commitments has weakened the PPFs and the Habitat III discourse, in general.

As a whole, the PPFs do not justify narrowing the subject of habitat to only an "urban" agenda, despite several comments about urban-rural linkages. The concepts and ideas listed in the PPFs make a strong conceptual case for restoring the "Habitat" Agenda and dropping the divisive, inadequate and lopsided messaging of a development agenda only for spaces considered as "urban" (although that term has no uniform definition). The evidence does not support the presumptive conclusion that we all are facing the need for an "urban agenda," at the ideological expense of other values, communities, contexts, human practice and planning-and-governance wisdom.

It would be useful also to include a contextualizing introduction that stresses the Habitat II commitments and assesses their implementation, laying out a path for strengthening, actually implementing, developing and updating—instead of omitting/ignoring/diluting—them, something that Habitat International Coalition, hand in hand with its Members, Friends and allies, have been hammering since the early Habitat III preparations.

*This compilation has been drafted thanks to the inputs of HIC's members and staff.*

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