

Subject: Open Letter to UN Habitat Executive Director concerning the role of partners and other stakeholders

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UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director
UN Habitat
Nairobi, Kenya

Nairobi, 14 May 2019

Dear Madame Executive Director:

Habitat International Coalition (HIC) takes this opportunity to congratulate you for the support you have shown to global civil society, for the progress you have made over the past year to re-invigorate UN Habitat and for your commitment to strengthening the partnership of civil society and other stakeholders in implementing the New Urban Agenda (NUA). Since the first UN Conference on Housing and Human Settlements in 1976, HIC has remained dedicated to upholding and advancing the principles of the Habitat Agenda and NUA, and to the progressive evolution of multi-stakeholders partnerships toward their monitoring and implementation.

With these shared values in mind, HIC would like to enquire as to the status of the new Stakeholder Engagement Policy, which we understand has been the subject of internal discussions at UN Habitat and among the members of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) to UN Habitat at Nairobi. It is our understanding that this process was to be completed in December 2018, and we are sure that you can appreciate that we, and indeed all civil society and other Habitat stakeholders, have a great interest to apprise ourselves of its contents, especially in light of the very recently appointed upcoming inaugural meeting of the UN Habitat Assembly at Nairobi in May 2019.

As you surely are aware, UN Habitat has a long, rich and pioneering history as an innovator in the inclusion of a wide range of civil society and local government partners and stakeholders in both its governance and programme formulation and execution spanning several decades. In that course also, other models of progressive engagement with specialized implementation and policy bodies have emerged within the UN system. Together, these examples should inform the development of meaningful stakeholder engagement in implementing the NUA aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

UN Habitat's shining example emerged in the preparations for the 1996 Habitat II Conference, which was rolled out as a "conference of partners" and the first-ever global UN conference to provide for broad inclusion of local governments, civil society and other stakeholders in both the preparatory process and the deliberations of the conference itself. That close cooperation was reflected in the outcome Istanbul Declaration and Programme of Action: the Habitat Agenda. Throughout the text, the Habitat Agenda explicitly called for partnership among national governments, local governments, civil society and other stakeholders to address the challenges of urban development, good local governance and ensuring adequate shelter for all.

This was followed by the establishment of categorized Habitat Agenda Partner groups tasked with specific responsibilities in implementing the Habitat Agenda. Partner participation in the implementation of the Agenda was strengthened further by the inclusion of local governments, civil society and other stakeholders in the governance of UN Habitat by the new Governing Council's rules of procedure. These measures were innovative for the UN at the time, and the 2001 General Assembly further endorsed the establishment of the World Urban Forum as a partner engagement platform.

Facilitated by these enabling measures, UN Habitat's work with partners grew significantly throughout the following decade, which greatly increased the agency's reach and impact, and produced many successful programmes and activities to advance sustainable urbanization worldwide. That gave UN Habitat a global profile it did not previously have, within or outside the United Nations system. Given that rapid growth, from 2009 onward, UN Habitat attempted to structure and organize these growing networks in order to maximize their potential. UN Habitat now can boast more than 6,000 local, national and international partners with which it engages in various ways.

This process took the form of a partnership strategy, which went through several drafts. However, that never was implemented, due to the interregnum created after 2012, as the leadership of the agency became more and more focused on the preparations for the Habitat III Conference. We sincerely hope that the new Stakeholder Engagement Policy (SEP) will pursue—and expand—the partnership strategy development, building on all the positive stakeholder engagement and collaboration that UN Habitat achieved in the past by UN Habitat, innovative ways to strengthen it in light of the new governance structures and NUA implementation through the UN Habitat 2020–25 Strategic Plan and beyond.

In this regard, we also understand that, as of December 2018, UN Habitat has been undergoing the process of establishing the Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG), which we assume is linked to the SEP. Given UN Habitat's wide engagement with partners, the formulation of such a Group should follow an open process that casts a wide net, so as to maximize the effectiveness and global scope of the Advisory Group and capture the experience that reflects the pooling of assets and expertise across the system, as the longer-term positioning of the UN Development System promises.

Any stakeholder mechanism also should reflect the lessons of UN Habitat's past, as well as the successful models developed across the UN system. In matters so urgent and important as those called for in the NUA, SDGs and other global policy instruments, the SAG—like any multi-stakeholder platform—cannot supplant the purpose, inputs or engagement of a civil society mechanism that reflects public and plural interests. Nor does any appointed body carry the legitimacy of self-determined structure based on principles of critical thinking, free expression and democratic processes.

In our experience, a more-transparent and inclusive process of engaging partners and stakeholders that builds and expands upon the achievements and such lessons of the past is indispensable to be fit for purpose and keep pace with the ever-demanding future. Such a process could be informed by the successful experience of UNEP, FAO, the Committee on World Food Security and the treaty system with their more partner-driven and open stakeholder engagement mechanisms, with which the members of the CPR already should be familiar.

The first meeting of the UN Habitat Assembly will be critical, where it will adopt its rules of procedures and define the role of partners and other stakeholders. We look forward to an Assembly that is open and welcoming to partners and other stakeholders, expanding their participation both in the Assembly and the Executive Board beyond what was the norm in the previous Governing Council. We look forward also to stakeholders' and other partners' inclusion in the decision-making processes for implementation of the NUA through the UN Habitat work programme. Such crucial roles and functions should not be relegated to a small hand-picked group, or a hierarchical and executive-driven structure, but through a self-organized mechanism through which constituent groups can express their substantive contributions to NUA implementation and, thereby also, achieving the SDGs.

It is with this vision that HIC and partners have proposed a side event to channel the essential lessons of thinkers and actors with four decades of institutional memory and inter-agency stakeholder engagement experience in the context of the 1st UN Habitat Assembly. Unfortunately, this side event was not accepted.

Therefore, we look forward to your kind response to the queries and concerns expressed in this letter. In particular, we look forward to your SEP proposal in advance of the first Habitat Assembly, so we and other stakeholders may be able to contribute to the preparations and debates of the Assembly and ensure successful outcomes, including an inclusive, democratic and durable partnership mechanism moving forward.

Please be assured, Mme. Executive Director, of our highest consideration.

Yours sincerely,



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Habitat International Coalition (HIC) (<http://www.hic-gs.org/>) is the global network for the rights related to habitat. HIC struggles for social justice, gender equality, and environmental sustainability, and works in the defence, promotion and realization of human rights related to housing and land in both rural and urban areas.

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