



HABITAT INTERNATIONAL COALITION

Milestones in UN Habitat's Cooperation with Stakeholders: Forward and Backward

1976: Habitat Forum takes place parallel to the First UN Conference on Human Settlements (Vancouver BC), leading to formation of Habitat International Council (later, Habitat International Coalition). [Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements and The Vancouver Action Plan](#), with emphasis on “active participation of all governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations concerned in policy formulation and [national human settlements] strategy development...” [A.5(c)iii].

1978–92: Habitat International Coalition (HIC) is the sole global umbrella NGO support group of UN Habitat. UN Habitat keeps HIC outside decision making, reflecting general UN practice.

November 1992: UN Habitat holds first-ever consultative meeting between local governments and other stakeholders and national governments in preparation for the upcoming Habitat II Conference in The Hague, hosted by Government of The Netherlands.

April 1994: Second Meeting of the Preparatory Committee for Habitat II agrees on framework and rules on procedure and participation to make Habitat II first “UN Conference of Partners.”

1994–95: UN Habitat, as secretariat for Second UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), promotes establishment of inclusive government/local government/civil society National Habitat Committees to prepare for Habitat II.

June 1996: Habitat II becomes successful “Conference of Partners” and model for conferences to follow. Local governments, civil society and other stakeholders make commitments to implement outcome, as reflected in the Habitat II global plan of action: [Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements and The Habitat Agenda](#).

1996–97: UN Habitat establishes formal categories of Habitat Agenda Partners (HAPs) with tasks and guidelines for work to implement The Habitat Agenda. HAPs are based on the nine Major Groups and Other Stakeholders determined for the 1992 Environment and Development Conference at Rio de Janeiro ([Agenda 21](#)), including: women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, scientific and technological, community farmers.

1997: UN Commission on Human Settlements (CHS), then the governing body of UN Habitat, blocks proposal to restructure the Commission into a tripartite legislative body of national governments, local governments and civil society, inspired by ILO model.

1999: After two-year restructuring process, CHS, endorses establishment of UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA), the first-ever such advisory body.

Commission selects two themes out of The Habitat Agenda on the basis of which it launches two campaigns on Secure Tenure and Urban Governance. Each join efforts of both local and national governments, civil society and other stakeholders to advocate adequate shelter for all and participatory urban governance, respectively.

CHS also endorses work toward the World Charter of Local Self-government, the first-ever convention-like international agreement on the rights and responsibilities of local governments.

2000: UNACLA holds its first meeting at Venice.

With strong support from UN Secretariat and national governments, especially South Africa, civil society and other HAPs, [Millennium Declaration](#) commits to “significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers as proposed in the “Cities without Slums” initiative [para. 19] and as Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Target 7, also for achieving water and sanitation targets, with UN Habitat as the lead agency.

2001: CHS meeting fails to endorse the draft World Charter of Local Self-Government, the product of a two-year global consultative effort, principally because of opposition by USA, China, Iran and Egypt.

At Habitat II+5 Second Preparatory Committee (PrepCom), UN Habitat Executive Director (ED) deploys UN security in full riot gear to block any civil society or local government representative entering the PrepCom plenary chamber. HIC delivers [the only civil society statement](#) allowed before Special Plenary Session on NGO participation. Local government and civil society participation in UN Habitat policy and governance structures declines markedly thereafter. UN Habitat continues to work with individual cities on projects and programmes.

At Istanbul+5 special session, UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopts [A/RES/S-25/2](#), upgrades UN Habitat to a *programme* and the CHS to a Governing Council (GC), and calls for UN Habitat to operationalize a Habitat Task Management System (never implemented) and recognizes UN Habitat as the specialized agency serving as focal point for human settlement development in the UN system. UNGA also confirms UNACLA’s role and endorses World Urban Forum (WUF) as a “non-legislative technical meeting of experts” to convene government representatives, local governments, civil society and other stakeholders to discuss pressing global human-settlements challenges on an equal footing in the intervening years when the GC does not meet, the outcome of which to be reported by the ED.

2002: Outcome of 1st WUF leads to inclusion of housing and basic services in the outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio +10) at Johannesburg, South Africa.

2002 onward: UN Habitat strengthens ties with other UN specialized agencies, especially UNDP (Habitat Programme Managers initiative) and humanitarian sector, invited to join Geneva-based Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) for humanitarian-assistance coordination, developing ties with related Geneva-based international NGOs. UN-Habitat signs Memorandum of Understanding with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to commence cooperation under the auspices of a joint UN Housing Rights Programme, which a 2013 evaluation recommended be relegated to the UN Habitat Project Office.

2003: First GC meeting adopts rules of procedure, allowing local government and civil society representatives to participate in the all GC committees and sub-committees (without a vote), a novelty in the United Nations.

2004–10: Expansion of civil society and other stakeholder collaboration in governance and generally in programme formulation and implementation.

2004–06: UN Habitat establishes Advisory Group on Forced Evictions, but ceases work two years later, alienating many pro-poor housing civil society partners and advocates of the human right to adequate housing from UN Habitat.

2006 onward: Youth and Women Assemblies prior to WUF sessions and GC strengthen civil society voice in discussions and decision making.

2007: Utilizing the Human Settlements Foundation’s unique authority to mobilize funds on private financial markets, GC authorizes a pilot Experimental Reimbursable Seeding Operations (ERSO) to provide seed capital to small community-based lenders in developing countries, with UN Habitat as financial intermediary.

2008–09: Fourth WUF (2008) leads GC to endorse Youth Advisory Board (2009). Youth and Women’s Assemblies established.

2009: UN Habitat begins work on a partnership strategy to better organize and structure its rapidly expanding collaboration and cooperation with partners and groups of stakeholders at all levels, from governance to programme formulation and implementation.

Work on Partnership Strategy goes through several drafts, but not completed until end 2015. Endorsed by senior management but never implemented or disseminated.

2009: GC’s intersessional Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) begins discussions in Nairobi on improved governance options for UN Habitat, recommending to UNGA in December 2018.

2010: Fifth WUF consultations lead to GC resolution to establish Advisory Group on Gender Issues (2011).

2010: Defunct Secure Tenure and Urban Governance campaigns merged into World Urban Campaign at 5th WUF “to generate private-sector interest and collaboration.”

2012: New senior management restructures UN Habitat with a business model focusing on income from donor and recipient country–driven projects and programmes and away from normative work. Gender, youth, human rights and climate change become cross–cutting issues. Financial base of UN Habitat begins long decline.

As a consequence of restructuring, experimental ERSO activities suspended and Finance Division dissolved.

UN Habitat Geneva Office, established in 1978 to support work of humanitarian agencies and bodies and Geneva–based international NGOs (among other tasks) closes, and remaining staff move to Barcelona to engage in other activities

2012 onward: WUF ends the practice of endorsing a consensus report, focuses instead on networking, information exchange and host-country showcasing with little impact on UN Habitat or GC policy. Nonetheless, the **2013 GC** invites States and HAPs to “reform the regulatory and institutional frameworks for urban planning, to recognize the urban poor as stakeholders and to promote strategic partnerships with local governments in urban planning processes” progressively.

2014 onward: Organized policy dialogue with groups of partners declines as UN Habitat focuses on operational activities.

UN Habitat leadership overtly dismisses The Habitat Agenda, the habitat approach and its enshrined human rights obligations in favor of a *tabula rasa* instrument of only “urban” development.¹ The narrower scope effectively marginalizes non-urban stakeholders. However, the draft, despite the UN Habitat investment in The Habitat Agenda **amnesia**, ultimately evolves to define a more-integrated and more-practical “territorial” policy approach, catching up to its Habitat Agenda predecessor.

¹ HIC, “Restoring Human Rights and Habitat to the Habitat III Process and New Habitat Agenda: PrepCom3 Update on the Indispensable Process and Content of the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development,” (2016), at: <http://www.hic-gs.org/document.php?pid=6851>.

UN Habitat leadership instrumentalizes the World Urban Campaign to create the spin-off General Assembly of Partners (GAP), which collaborates with Habitat III Secretariat in supporting a GAP “executive” leadership that homogenizes Habitat III inputs consistent with UN Habitat leadership’s vision and takes no substantive position, even and especially on issues related to UN Habitat’s normative framework, the human right to adequate housing and/or its principal and most-persistent gross violation: **forced eviction**.

2014: Habitat III Conference preparations begin. Habitat III Secretariat is nominally “firewalled” from UN Habitat. Nonetheless, UN Habitat develops its own top-down, partner-selection-and-engagement strategy of UN-conference participation through GAP.

2016: National governments formally endorse Habitat III draft Plan of Action at New York, months prior to convening the 1st “UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development” at Quito, Ecuador, in October. Civil society and other stakeholders hold showcasing side events in the form of a WUF, as well as three major “alternative” forums. Without further negotiation, governments formally declare the New Urban Agenda (NUA) already agreed at New York in June–July.

2017: Assessment of UN Habitat called for in NUA brings only modest results, and this is reflected in the UNGA resolution on the subject in December of that year. In same resolution GA requests CPR to UN Habitat Nairobi to elaborate new governance options and a action framework for NUA implementation in close collaboration with governments, local authorities civil society and other stakeholders across the UN system. UNGA resolution **A/RES/72/226** encourages collaboration between UN Habitat and local authorities through UNACLA only.

December 2017: Just prior to leaving UN Habitat on 31 December 2017, ED makes WUC management changes, putting its future in doubt.

January 2018: Before arrival of new ED, senior UN Habitat management operationalizes A/RES/72/226, contacts selected civil society groups and other stakeholders to join “focus group” to comment on UN Habitat’s draft Stakeholder Engagement Policy (SEP). First meeting of Group set for WUF 9.

February 2018: UN Habitat convenes unproductive focus group meeting on SEP on the side of 9th WUF at Kuala Lumpur.

June 2018: CPR in Nairobi finalizes findings and recommendations on new UN Habitat governance structure, recommending a two-tiered configuration that consists of a UN Habitat Assembly with universal membership and a thirty-six member Executive Board (EB). CPR calls for active engagement of local authorities and other stakeholders in UNHA and subsidiary bodies, in accordance with SEP currently under discussion by Member States.

June–July 2018: UN Habitat completes draft of its 2020–25 Strategic Plan, the first after Habitat III, and submits it to CPR review. With no known participation of local authorities or stakeholders as per A/RES/72/226 guidance on the NUA action framework, the UN Habitat plan does not prioritize monitoring, review or evaluation of NUA implementation progress to the extent that UNGA requested.

July–November 2018: UN Habitat continues work on SEP with no visible inputs from local governments/authorities and/or civil society and other stakeholders, and without regard or response to input from partners (HAPs or GAP) and the local-government constituency.²

² “Integrating the engagement of local governments and stakeholders in UN HABITAT Statement of the General Assembly of Partners and Global Taskforce,” with American Association of Retired Persons, Habitat International Coalition, Habitat Norway, Huairou Commission and United Cities and Local Governments, 22 October 2018, at: http://www.hlrn.org/img/documents/20181022_GAP_and_GTF_STATEMENT_.pdf.

December 2018: UN Habitat Senior Management informs that SEP completed, but circulates no draft.

UNGA adopts [A/RES/73/239](#) on 20 December 2018, endorsing the new, three-tiered governance structure and requests CPR to draft rules of procedure to be adopted at the 1st UN Habitat Assembly (UNHA) session in late May 2019, making no mention of rules of procedure for the Executive Board, a subsidiary body of the new UNHA. Its operational paragraphs omit mention of local governments/authorities, civil society and other stakeholders.

After adoption of resolution, UN Habitat management requests senior staff to nominate (by 5 January 2019) civil society and other stakeholder organizations with whom they are currently working as candidates for membership in a UN Habitat Stakeholders Advisory Group of 22 members to be appointed by the ED.

February 2019: CPR begins work on UNHA rules of procedure, apparently with unclear input, if any, from stakeholders. UN Habitat Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG) appointments expected prior to May 2019, which is supposed to meet and endorse both rules of procedure and SEP.

March 2019: Draft rules of procedure for both UNHA and EB completed at the end of the month, in sum, reducing partner and other stakeholder participation level in UN Habitat policy and governance.

UN Habitat website features a [partnership strategy 2017–22](#) that is out of date and disconnected from earlier drafts.

March 2019: UN Habitat and its governance structure are on track to reverse many of the gains in local authorities, civil society and other stakeholder cooperation since 1996, and do not comply with the UNGA guidance in [A/RES/72/226](#). Local authorities, civil society and other stakeholders seek support of concerned governments to reverse the trend before and at the 1st UNHA session in May 2019.

UN Habitat announces a two-day “Global Stakeholder Forum,” just prior to the 1st UNHA without serious stakeholder consultation. It also announces a one-day private-sector partnership event.

April 2019: UN Habitat rejects HIC-proposed “Visions of People-centered Partnership” side event at 1st UNHA session. UN Habitat issues invitation letters to 18 individuals appointed to pan-stakeholder SAG.

May 2019: HIC issues open letter to UN Habitat ED and CPR Members, inquiring about the status and consultative process of the long-promised SEP. HIC and other stakeholders express concern for the UN Habitat’s opacity. HIC proposes an open process toward self-organized constituent mechanisms that draw on lessons learned and other successful models within the UN system.

May 2019: UN Habitat hosts “Global Stakeholder Forum” over two days before 1st UN Habitat Assembly. UN Habitat. ED scheduled to present SEP without consultation or vetting with stakeholders and partners concerned, and without convening SAG.

Abbreviations	
BC	British Columbia
CHS	Commission on Human Settlements
CPR	Conference of Permanent Representatives
EB	Executive Board
ED	Executive Director
ERSO	Experimental Reimbursable Seeding Operations
GAP	General Assembly of Partners
GC	Governing Council
HAP	Habitat Agenda Partners
HIC	Habitat International Coalition
HLRN	Housing and Land Rights Ne
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ILO	International Labour Organisation
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NUA	New Urban Agenda
PrepCom	Preparatory Committee
SAG	Stakeholder Advisory Group
SEP	Stakeholder Engagement Policy
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHA	United Nations Habitat Assembly
WUF	World Urban Forum