The New Urban Agenda.
What is its relevance for local and regional governments?

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Habitat III saw representatives from almost 200 UN member states come together in Quito, Ecuador from 17-20 October 2016 to formally adopt a 20-year global framework on urbanization titled the "New Urban Agenda" (NUA).

The NUA, which is the most visible outcome of Habitat III, comprises a non-binding global framework which looks to connect the dots between sustainable development and urbanization. Its publication coincided with the closure of a series of landmark UN agreements, in particular the Paris Climate Agreement and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. With these agreements now in place, sustainable development advocates – particularly those focused on cities and regions – looked to Habitat III and the NUA as an opportune pivot to transition from big ideas into on-the-ground action by outlining a clear implementation agenda based on enabling national framework conditions. Judged against this standard, the NUA falls short of expectations. Nonetheless, depending on the outcome of the yet to be negotiated monitoring and evaluation framework and the significance of commitments submitted to support implementation, the NUA can still prove highly relevant to local and regional governments.

From Habitat I to Habitat III: 40 years in the making

The United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development series, more commonly referred to as "Habitat", is a series of bi-decennial conferences that began with Habitat I in 1976 (Vancouver, Canada) and continued with Habitat II in 1996 (Istanbul, Turkey). The impetus for the inaugural Habitat conference came from growing recognition of the need for a strategy to mitigate the negative effects of unplanned and rapid growth in urban areas all over the world.

Habitat I and Habitat II both directly engaged with challenges in-and-around poverty and inequality. The "Vancouver Declaration on Human Settlements" that emerged out of Habitat I made perceptive insights into the dangers to land access posed by commercial real estate speculation, while Habitat II resulted in the creation of a formal Habitat Agenda through the "Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements". To the extent that the conferences explicitly engaged with inequality and championed social justice, Habitat I and II were necessary forerunners to both the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Unfortunately, neither Habitat I nor Habitat II established clear targets or action plans for confronting the challenges of urbanization, and the majority of the UN Member States that sent delegations did not follow the many recommendations which emerged out of the conferences. Consequently, Habitat I and II are widely regarded as unsuccessful.

Fast forward to 2016: the international sustainability community has never been more acutely aware of the challenges which cities are simultaneously facing and exacerbating. Cities are responsible for 70% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and 75% of natural

resources consumption. The global urban population has steadily increased, rising from 37.9% at Habitat I in 1976, to 45.1% in 1996, and estimated to be around 54.5% in 2016. Accordingly, the various actors within cities – with local and regional governments at the forefront – are increasingly understood as being pivotal to successful sustainable development.

Habitat III followed an unprecedented two years of cooperation towards holistic efforts for global sustainability. The momentum generated through several landmark agreements (see Box 1) created an atmosphere of hope and expectation around Habitat III.

Box 1: Landmark Agreements in Global Sustainable Development 2015

- In March 2015, UN member states agreed upon the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, which includes strong references to the empowerment and capacity building of local authorities to secure resilient cities.

- This was followed by the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (AAAA) in July 2015, which acknowledges that investments in sustainable development need to be made at the subnational level and promises to strengthen capacities of municipalities and other local authorities.

- In September 2015, national governments adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development including 17 universally applicable, integrated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that will guide the development agendas and national policies of UN member states over the next 15 years.

- Following this, 195 nations adopted the Paris Agreement at COP21, the UNFCCC Climate Conference in Paris in December. The Agreement opens a new era of a universal, inclusive and ambitious climate regime. Through the Agreement, nations will strive to limit global warming to well below 2° Celsius, with the intent to pursue a 1.5° scenario.

What comprises the NUA?

The NUA consists of two parts: the *Quito Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for all* (22 paragraphs) and the *Quito Implementation Plan* (153 paragraphs).

The Quito Declaration includes principles and commitments which present a vision for an inclusive, participatory, and environmentally friendly city of the future. The Declaration also includes a "Call for Action" addressed to any-and-all relevant stakeholders, calling on them to implement the NUA and help

realize this shared vision. In this regard, the Quito Declaration is similar to the Vancouver Declaration and Istanbul Declaration: a manifesto that champions long-term, visionary planning.

The Quito Implementation Plan consists of three sections: Section 'A' looks at "Transformative Commitments for Sustainable Urban Development". In the spirit of inclusivity, the Quito Implementation Plan offers a web portal where countries, cities, organizations, and citizens can make their commitments. As of 1 November 2016, three national governments or associations of national governments have submitted inputs to the portal (the European Commission, Ecuador, and Turkey). The lack of a presence on the portal does not necessarily indicate absence of commitment; despite the fact that contributions to the portal are voluntary, additional submissions are expected as governments conclude stakeholder engagement processes. The Federal Government of Canada, for example, will continue to solicit inputs and opinions from interested Canadians until 25 November 2016, at which point they will shift focus to formulating commitments and action items.

Section 'B' is focused on "Effective Implementation" and is rich in inclusive language; paragraph 81 acknowledges the need for "an enabling policy framework at the national, sub-national, and local levels, integrated by participatory planning and management of urban spatial development".

Section 'C' prioritizes "Follow-up and Review" and details a two-year process, ending in September 2018, which mandates the UN Secretary General and the General Assembly to conduct consultations, dialogues, and analysis eventually leading to an agreement on an institutional framework for follow-up and review of the NUA. This means that we will only be able to assess the preliminary impacts of the NUA in two years when Member States have reached consensus on how they will monitor and evaluate progress.

What can local and regional governments "take" from the NUA?

The NUA embraces a significant amount of the language and concepts advanced by local and subnational governments in their sustainable development efforts over the last 20 years. It reflects the significance and necessity of action at the local and regional government level.

Furthermore, the text is necessarily inclusive – not only in regard to extant inequalities within urban areas – but among cities themselves. Exposure and awareness of local and regional government actors around the Paris Agreement tended to cluster around the emissions reduction potential of megacities. The

NUA, while still essential for megacities, places equal emphasis on the growth that is yet to come and in ensuring the vitality of cities that are seeing their population decrease.

What it does not contain, however, is details into how the vision it posits should be adapted, implemented, advanced, and monitored at either the national or local level. An effective NUA needs all actors to engage and commit to making its vision a reality. This requires going beyond acknowledging local and regional authorities in text. What is needed is a tangible roadmap for action which answers the fundamental questions: what must be done, how can it be accomplished, and what governance and fiscal frameworks can support the work?

A considerable amount of the frustration with the NUA stems from the fact that it did not need to answer "what must be done?". The targets detailed in the Paris Agreement and the SDGs are already in place. But if cities are considered to be the levers of global sustainable development, Habitat III was the perfect opportunity to answer those fundamental questions which now remain. And while it is promising that the SDGs are mentioned 11 times in the final NUA text, any connection to "localization" remains superficial in the absence of an action plan.

In two years' time, the NUA may emerge as an essential resource for local and regional governments. However, the existential imperatives posed by climate change and the dangers of insufficiently planned urban growth, have brought us to a juncture where immediate action is required.

What developments would indicate that the NUA is gaining in relevance?

In an ideal world, national governments would advance the policy and governance recommendations laid out in the NUA by co-creating (along with local and regional governments, civil society, the research community, and the private sector) and resourcing action plans for achieving the targets laid out in the SDGs and Paris Agreement. In reality, progress will be incremental and will likely reflect aspects of the following concepts and recommendations.

Multi-level and multi-stakeholder governance

Sustainable development in urban areas is more likely to be achieved if the relationship between national and subnational governments expands beyond consultation to consider agenda setting, planning, implementation and review. To this end, local and regional governments need national governments to support the clear message of partnership and inclusion made in paragraph 90 of the NUA. Such commitments indicate willingness on the part of national governments to commit to the multi-stakeholder dialogue and collaboration which is pre-requisite for making any other mechanism or framework successful, and can help facilitate access to finance for cities and regions.

A strong multi-stakeholder framework can also strengthen cooperation and promote integrated planning within regions. Many local governments around the world were designed to service a distinct urban core, yet the growth of urban areas has made it so that such municipalities are now part of larger metropolitan regions with multiple municipal administrations. A framework for urbanization which emphasizes integrated horizontal cooperation within and between regions is just as significant as increased support from national governments.

National urban policy frameworks

Urbanization is contextually specific, and national urban policies take this context into account. A national urban policy implements institutional, legal, and financial framework guidelines from which to ensure sustainable and inclusive urbanization. A proactive national urban policy encourages vertical cooperation across levels of government and horizontal cooperation across departments, decentralizing authority and resources where appropriate, and provides support against the negative environmental disparities which emerge from urban congestion.

Although not legally binding, the Quito Implementation Plan commitment portal offers the opportunity to anchor a "pledge and review" framework, similar to the intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) made in global climate negotiations and anchored in the Paris Agreement. And as demonstrated by climate negotiations, international agreements which allow for Member States to control their inputs both relieve pressure on the negotiation process and strengthen implementation efforts.

A clear mandate for facilitation, coordination, and engagement

Local and regional authorities need to be empowered to engage with other city-level actors in order to coordinate on-the-ground action. Autonomy in this regard will promote efficient use of political and institutional capacities.

Empowering local and regional governments as facilitators also addresses the fact that top-down international processes have routinely struggled to increase their participation base. Cities consist of dynamic and diverse stakeholders who not only contribute to the mobilization of capital and the provision of basic services, but who also make indispensable social and cultural contributions to the quality of city life. Local and regional governments are best positioned to take advantage of this dynamism by creating partnerships which involve these various urban stakeholders and engage them in the civic process.

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Integration into multilateral diplomacy

Despite the prominence of cities at international climate and sustainable development processes over the past two years, local and regional governments remain disjointed from multilateral diplomatic processes. The following two years should see innovative modalities which allow local and regional governments to emerge from the parallel track and directly engage within UN processes, therein increasing their effectiveness as drivers of change.

If the targets outlined within the SDGs or the Paris Agenda are to be successful, local and regional governments – from town to megacity – must be able to see a direct entry point for contribution and feel that their actions and impacts make a difference within the UN framework.

What if the NUA fails to evolve?

Irrespective of the further development of the NUA, the options for local and regional governments are manifold. Moving forward, the most effective steps are threefold: establish local commitments in support of sustainable development, seek sustainable and innovative financing mechanisms, and raise awareness and advocate for support.

Establish local commitments

Since 2010, over 600 cities have been reporting to the carbon*n*® Climate Registry (cCR), the world's leading voluntary reporting platform for cities and regions making contributions and commitments to support climate change mitigation. Moving forward, with an eye towards sustainable development, we recommend that local and regional authorities determine where their own strategies and activities are already aligned with the SDGs. This allows for a municipal administration to identify gaps which provide the impetus for additional policies and action. Aligning and examining existing municipal strategies with the SDGs is precisely what cities such as Seoul (Republic of Korea), New York City (USA) and Freiburg (Germany) have done.

Seek sustainable and innovative financing mechanisms

The slow process of determining how global sustainable urban development will be financed has established a need to not only enhance the abilities of cities to self-finance initiatives, but to develop new templates which make finance work for cities. To this end, local government associations are initiat-ing policy dialogues with development aid providers and advocating for greater autonomy for local and regional governments by highlighting the successes of local action.

This need for scaling-up the financial capacities of local governments is the reason why we are working to develop new mediums for financing local sustainability projects such as the Transformative Actions Program (TAP). The TAP provides a platform for local and subnational governments to submit ambitious, cross-cutting and inclusive projects. ICLEI, as coordinator of the TAP, then looks to transit these proposals into funding pipelines. The TAP, as well as initiatives such as the Cities Climate Finance Leadership Alliance (CCFLA) – a coalition of over 40 diverse organizations working together to catalyze and accelerate investment into low-carbon and climate-resilient infrastructure in cities and urban areas – are all part of a movement to create a model which leverages financing for local investment and makes local financing transparent, accountable, and sustainable.

Raise awareness and advocate for support

Sustainable development can only be achieved through an integrated and inclusive approach. To this end, local and regional governments can support the Paris Agreement and the SDGs by providing a narrative which can help their citizens see how incremental actions influence the success of the global goals. It is vital that citizens know that achieving global development goals does not supplant satisfying basic needs and services; if planned correctly, the processes are complementary.

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