

# Opportunities for Action

Policy Priorities for Implementing the New Urban Agenda  
September 2017



A GLOBAL ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN  
OF HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

## I. Advancing the New Urban Agenda

Twice in 13 months, more than 150 countries came together laying a critical foundation for improving living conditions around the world. This historic time in housing policy saw the adoption of two global agreements – the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) and the [New Urban Agenda](#). Together, they are a collective blueprint for policy makers, donors and advocates alike and outline the broad contours for sustainable urban development for decades to come.<sup>1</sup>

Adopted in September 2015, the SDGs include a goal to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” and a target to ensure access to adequate, safe and affordable housing for all by 2030. The New Urban Agenda, which was agreed to at the Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador in October 2016, expands on this vision and includes more detailed commitments by national governments around housing and sustainable urban development.

Housing, both in the informal and formal sectors, fosters strength, stability and self-reliance and is often at the center of key development challenges. However, the absolute number of people living in slums continues to grow and approximately 1.6 billion people around the world lack this basic need. While progress has been made, the world’s ability to meet the housing demand of the global urban population is currently outpaced by the rate of urbanization.

With a goal ensuring housing needs are met even as cities expand and slum populations rise, Habitat for Humanity engaged extensively in the lead up to Habitat III and successfully advocated for key provisions around housing, land and community-led development to be included in the New Urban Agenda. One effort was co-chairing a housing policy unit which brought together high-level expertise to develop a [housing policy paper](#) with recommendations to feed into the New Urban Agenda as it was being created.

Housing is featured throughout the New Urban Agenda, but importantly governments agreed to “foster the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing” (para 31) and to implement “sustainable urban development programs with housing and people’s needs at the center of the strategy.” (para 112) They will seek to develop “appropriate and affordable housing finance products...to invest in affordable and incremental housing in all its forms.” (para 140)

Regarding land, governments pledge to promote “increased security of tenure for all, recognizing the plurality of tenure types...with particular attention to security of land tenure for women as a key to their empowerment, including through effective administrative systems.” (para 35) Also critical is the reference to “strong, inclusive management frameworks and accountable institutions that deal with land registration and governance” (para 104) as well as the connection to resilience (para 51 and 71).

On community-led development, governments commit to “promote participatory age and gender-responsive approaches at all stages of the urban and territorial policy and planning process, from conceptualization to design, budgeting, implementation, evaluation and review.” (para 92)

While these commitments and others included in the New Urban Agenda should be applauded, they are also voluntary and their implementation is not guaranteed. The New Urban Agenda is highly ambitious. It will take

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda, there have been other essential global agreements and discussions such as the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, Paris Climate Agreement and the World Humanitarian Summit, which should also be considered when addressing sustainable urban development.

partnership and mutual accountability, political will, resources, innovative approaches and a sense of urgency.

**Therefore, we call on all stakeholders to advance implementation of the New Urban Agenda. Stakeholders at all levels should work together to help create an enabling environment and establish urban plans and policies that prioritize adequate and affordable housing, secure land tenure, and community-led development, fostering sustainable cities where everyone has a decent place to live.**

## II. Recommendations for National Governments and the United Nations

**We believe national governments and the United Nations have a unique leadership role to play in creating frameworks to enable stakeholders to implement the New Urban Agenda.**

**To implement the New Urban Agenda, national governments should:**

### 1. Establish Country-Led Commissions

National governments should establish commissions or other bodies dedicated to advancing plans, funding and initiatives related to the New Urban Agenda. Commissions should be tasked with tackling many of the priorities outlined below including surveying and strengthening urban laws and regulations, developing financial plans, prioritizing aspects of the New Urban Agenda based on individual contexts and thinking critically about how those priorities might be carried out and resourced given a country's capacity. Commissions should be comprised of diverse stakeholders such as national and subnational policy makers, donors, civil society, technical experts and local leaders and communities.

National governments should also support the creations of subnational commissions or local working groups. National governments set priorities and create overarching frameworks such as national urban, housing and land policies, but implementation is ultimately carried out at the local level where capacity is often a constraint.

### 2. Strengthen and Enact Urban Laws and Regulations

National governments should strengthen and enact urban laws and regulations, especially around housing and land, and support subnational and local level reviews which take into consideration the principle of subsidiarity. The New Urban Agenda focuses on outcomes, but to reach them national and local leaders must assess the status quo and determine what gaps need to be filled. Initial assessments should inform changes to laws and regulations which should then be re-evaluated after implementation, creating a feedback loop and further accountability.

Many countries have already begun this process. The [World Bank](#) has helped Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Bangladesh, India, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and others conduct urban reviews which can serve as a baseline. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recently hosted its second annual conference on national urban policies and has [compiled information on national urban policies](#) for all OECD countries. Individual countries such as Mexico are preparing guidance and action plans to help cities implement the New Urban Agenda, and Australia recently [convened a national conference](#) to discuss urban laws and policies.

Urban policies should take into account changes in demographic trends, availability and use of urban land and supply of adequate and affordable housing. Policies should also clearly define roles and responsibilities of various institutions and actors, create an integrated framework for sectoral plans and establish minimum standards for service delivery. Finally, plans must acknowledge the continuum between urban, peri-urban and rural communities, understanding there are economic connections, sociocultural links and environmental synergies

between the geographies. Both the SDGs (Target 11.a) and the New Urban Agenda (para 49) recognize this interdependence and addressing the themes of sustainable cities and human settlements and rural development in a complementary and mutually reinforcing manner will be essential in the implementation the New Urban Agenda.

Beyond assessing and establishing broad urban policies, national governments will need to enact or revise specific laws and regulations, particularly around improving access to housing and strengthening land rights. Countries such as Zambia, where 85 percent of land tenure is customary, have taken an important step in this direction and enacted [legislation](#) to help plan for rapid urbanization, provide clarity around land rights and ensure a participatory and inclusive process for citizens and stakeholders to engage.

### 3. Develop Financial Plans

Implementing the New Urban Agenda requires national governments to develop a financial plan. A financial plan serves as an overarching framework and contributes to the overall understanding of governance structures and fiscal conditions. Plans can include varying levels of detail but should highlight the binding constraints to economic growth and establish principles for developing more in-depth budgets. Plans should focus on revenue generation and partnership opportunities to catalyze market development, outline mechanisms for increasing housing supply and improving affordability and promote tools to increase access to land and basic services. National governments should also provide support to cities as they develop their own complementary plans.<sup>2</sup>

While assistance from developed nations and philanthropy play an important role and should align with the New Urban Agenda and SDGs, government aid only accounts for [15 percent](#) of donor countries' economic engagement with the developing world. Private financial flows represent the remaining 85 percent. To finance the commitments made in the New Urban Agenda, especially around housing and land, national governments will need to assist cities in mobilizing domestic resources such as taxes, levies and fees. Implementing the New Urban Agenda must also be rooted in public-private partnerships. These mechanisms are highly contextualized but must be conducted in a transparent and accountable way that promotes inclusiveness and increases residents' ownership over development. An overview of many of these tools can be found in UN-Habitat's 2016 "[Financing for City Leaders Handbook](#)."

Housing microfinance and rental assistance subsidies can also play an important role. Traditional financing methods such as mortgages, do not meet the needs of low income populations who often have informal and inconsistent incomes and lack the required collateral for a loan. With housing microfinance, families upgrade their homes as many do around the world: incrementally and as needed.

Finally, the concept of subsidiarity must be considered in developing financial plans, i.e. government decisions should be made locally, unless there are specific efficiencies to be gained otherwise. In an increasingly urbanized world, cities are required to provide housing, land and services to growing populations while operating with limited budgets and control of financial resources. National governments should help facilitate access to capital markets, coordinate alternative forms of financing and public-private partnerships and reduce risk for projects and investments. Transfers from national governments, particularly in unitary states, do not necessarily increase proportionately to the rapid population growth in cities in the developing world. Thus, decentralization of these decisions to local actors and helping cities finding creative ways to raise municipal revenues is key.

### 4. Enable Stakeholder Participation

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<sup>2</sup> See Addis Ababa Action Agenda paragraph 34: <http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/ffd3/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/07/Addis-Ababa-Action-Agenda-Draft-Outcome-Document-7-July-2015.pdf>.

Communities know their unique needs and should play a critical role in defining their future. Local coalitions, networks and partnerships play an essential role. Global platforms such as the [General Assembly of Partners](#), which is organized around 16 “Partner Constituent Groups,” and the World Urban Campaign’s [“Urban Thinkers Campuses”](#) provide broader platforms for stakeholder engagement. [Cities Alliance](#), a global partnership for urban poverty reduction, the [Global Land Tool Network](#), a global alliance focused on land reform, also play an important role, and the [Right to the City](#), a global movement focused on housing and urban justice for all.

But beyond these groups, implementation of the New Urban Agenda must be inclusive and involve citizens’ and grassroots groups’ direct input and participation in decision making processes at national, subnational and local level. This inclusive process should involve a variety of voices, balancing men and women and those from different income levels. This inclusive process involves a shift in mindset on behalf of government and citizens alike and, as the New Urban Agenda notes, will be “rooted in new forms of direct partnership of government at all levels and civil society.” (para 92) Properly enabling stakeholder participation also involves building capacity, skills, resources and leadership among civil society to equally engage in open dialogue with government.

As noted above, private sector financial flows vastly outweigh direct government spending or aid. Thus, the private sector, which enhances market systems and can enable financial inclusion, must play an active role in all aspects of the New Urban Agenda. Finally, robust stakeholder participation should be part and parcel of the other priorities noted here, including establishing commissions, assessments of urban policies and laws, formation of financial plans, collection and vetting of data, and follow up and review of the New Urban Agenda.

## 5. Collect and Promote Open, Accessible and Disaggregated Data

Governments face enormous challenges as populations grow and they often lack capacity, resources and administrative systems to collect rigorous and reliable data. This is particularly true with disaggregating data by gender and assessing indicators at a neighborhood or household level. Without open, accessible and disaggregated data, governments, businesses and other stakeholders are unable to weigh investments, prioritize limited budgets and assess progress.

Many global groups are working on this issue including the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, which has developed a [toolkit](#) designed to help countries assess their own statistical needs and develop recommendations to improve. Others are exploring the role technology can play such as [how geo-spatial mapping can contribute to tenure security](#).

While the New Urban Agenda lacks specific indicators and measurements, governments can look to the SDGs as a starting point. Because housing serves as a platform connecting and improving urban quality of life while relying on a broader enabling environment, many of the [indicators in the SDGs](#) directly contribute to its successful development. Habitat for Humanity will work with partners to track several of them including women’s ownership and control over land and other forms of property. There are two critical housing indicators in the SDGs though which contribute to the realization of the New Urban Agenda:

- Indicator 1.4.2 - Proportion of total adult population with secure tenure rights to land, with legally recognized documentation and who perceive their rights to land as secure, by sex and by type of tenure.
- Indicator 11.1.1 - Proportion of urban population living in slums, informal settlements, or inadequate housing.

Indicator 11.1.1 has been prioritized by governments and a detailed explanation of the indicator’s metadata [has been outlined](#), but indicator 1.4.2 [is a lower priority](#). A [plan](#) for indicator 1.4.2 has been established, but significant work is required to improve the collection, transparency and accountability of the indicator. Given the foundational nature of land rights, without clear data and tracking, broader investments in urban development are at risk.

## To implement the New Urban Agenda, the United Nations should:

### 1. Centralize Follow Up and Review

While governments and citizens alike have a stake in the success of the New Urban Agenda, there must be a centralized and coordinated mechanism at the United Nations that formally owns its implementation and elevates its profile. Currently, the New Urban Agenda is overshadowed by the SDGs and Paris Climate Agreement, despite the complimentary and overlapping nature of the three global agreements.

UN-Habitat has recently developed an [Action Framework for Implementation of the New Urban Agenda](#) which identifies concrete steps governments can take. This framework should inform the work of a centralized inter-agency committee at the United Nations. While UN-Habitat should coordinate the committee, the New Urban Agenda will require expertise and participation from agencies across the institution.

### 2. Strengthen UN-Habitat and implementation platforms

UN-Habitat leads the United Nations' work related to housing and urban development and therefore should be as efficient and effective as possible if it is to help implement the New Urban Agenda. The New Urban Agenda calls for an assessment of the agency by an eight-member [independent panel](#). The panel's report is due in July and will inform a two-day meeting of housing and development ministers in New York City in early September.

A [2017 institutional review](#) of UN-Habitat identified a number of the organizations strengths, but also some areas for improvement including:

- Stabilizing its core funding (which has declined in recent years), including linking a partnership strategy to additional resource mobilization.
- Strengthening reporting at the outcome level by applying a more systematic approach to establishing targets and data collection.
- Developing a comprehensive results analysis tool and knowledge management structure.
- Better incorporating learning from evaluations.
- Focusing on sustainability of interventions and on identifying and managing risks.

Beyond UN-Habitat, national governments say they will encourage “other United Nations programs and agencies, and other relevant stakeholders to generate evidence-based and practical guidance for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.” (para 128) The World Urban Campaign, General Assembly of Partners and the Global Land Tool Network are explicitly recognized for their contributions to the creation of the New Urban Agenda and must be supported moving forward along with other implementation platforms.

### 3. Increase Funding, Research and Capacity for Cities

The United Nations and its member states must increase funding, research and capacity for cities to ensure urban growth in the next 20 years is inclusive and sustainable. While UN-Habitat should be strengthened and continues to bring an essential spatial and territorial approach to development, agencies across the UN system such as the UN Environmental Program and the UN Development Program, must prioritize cities. As much as [65 percent](#) of the SDG agenda is contingent on the involvement of urban actors and the New Urban Agenda cuts across numerous sectors. The world's urban population is expected to nearly double by 2050, and over 90 percent of urban expansion is taking place in emerging economies, particularly in Asia and Africa. Local leadership is paramount, but the UN can help cities capitalize on the efficiencies and economic opportunities that urbanization can bring.

[Commitments around research and capacity building](#) are included throughout the New Urban Agenda and governments agree to urge UN-Habitat to “continue its work to develop its normative knowledge and provide capacity development and tools to national, subnational and local governments in designing, planning and managing sustainable urban development.” (para 129)

The UN can also support governments in their effort to “foster the creation, promotion and enhancement of open, user-friendly and participatory data platforms using technological and social tools available to transfer and share knowledge among national, subnational and local governments.” (para 160)

#### 4. Promote cross-sectoral collaboration

In order to achieve the ambitious goals called for in the New Urban Agenda, it will be necessary for various sectors and disciplines to work together and align their complementary strengths and capabilities. When the experience and resources of practitioners, the private sector, the innovation of academic community, funders, multi-lateral institutions, civil society and most importantly communities themselves come together, the possibility for achieving truly transformational progress increases dramatically. The United Nations, particularly UN-Habitat, can play a central role in helping to facilitate the formation and operation of these coalitions.

### III. Conclusion

In sum, by implementing these priorities we can ensure the potential of this historic collaboration is fully realized. Cities will continue to grow as people search for jobs, stability and the promise of a better life. However, urbanization has reached a tipping point and sustainable cities will happen by design, not by default. The New Urban Agenda and SDGs provide a blueprint, but putting the plan into action will require hard work, political will and mutual accountability.

## Habitat for Humanity's Commitment to the New Urban Agenda

Cities are dynamic hubs of activity that are interconnected and continuously evolving. Housing can serve as a platform that connects and improves urban quality of life as an integral and integrating element of sound urban development and urban policies. But housing also relies on a broader enabling environment to fully foster strength, stability and self-reliance. Thus, in addition to boosting access to adequate and affordable housing, Habitat for Humanity commits to promoting sustainable cities, increasing security of tenure and catalyzing market development to implement the New Urban Agenda through the following:

### A New Urban Approach

By 2030, nearly two-thirds of the world's population will be living in urban areas, and the number of people living in slums continues to grow. To address this, Habitat for Humanity introduced a [new urban approach](#) to promote in 2016 sustainable cities and is looking for partners to support the implementation of this new strategy globally. The new urban approach is a comprehensive guide to the way we implement programs in urban areas in a more integrated and targeted manner. This approach is based on the premise that there are eight non-negotiable principles that are universal and essential for good urban and housing development, which can be implemented through various contextually adapted practices.

### The Solid Ground campaign

Housing accounts for more than 70 percent of land use in most cities, yet 1 billion people in cities around the world lack secure land rights. As a result, households are forced to operate in complex informal arrangements, making them vulnerable to displacement and loss of livelihoods and unable to reap the social and economic benefits associated with security of tenure. In 2016, Habitat for Humanity created a global advocacy campaign called [Solid Ground](#) to improve policies and systems to increase access to land for shelter for 10 million people.

### The Terwilliger Center for Innovation in Shelter

A thriving private sector that fosters innovation and entrepreneurship to reach low-income households with housing solutions is also critical. Innovative new products, services, and financing that help households upgrade their homes incrementally are critical for helping households in markets where traditional bank financing and developer-built models have failed to serve lower income families at scale. To accelerate private sector solutions, Habitat for Humanity launched the [Terwilliger Center for Innovation in Shelter](#) in 2016 to take a market systems approach to mobilize investment capital to the affordable housing sector, facilitate and advise housing market actors, and advance knowledge with the aim of helping markets better reach the housing needs of low-income families.

### Increased access to housing for 40 million people

Inequality is rising, and currently over 300 million households are financially stretched by housing costs. To address this, Habitat for Humanity will implement a wide array of community development strategies, advocacy initiatives and market development approaches by 2020, increasing housing access and affordability to housing for nearly 40 million people. Over the course of the New Urban Agenda, Habitat plans to help over 200 million people gain access to decent shelter by 2036.

### About Habitat for Humanity

Driven by the vision that everyone needs a decent place to live, Habitat for Humanity began in 1976 as a grassroots effort. The Christian housing organization has since grown to become a leading global nonprofit working in nearly 70 countries. Families and individuals in need of a hand up partner with Habitat for Humanity to build or improve a place they can call home. Through financial support, volunteering or adding a voice to support affordable housing, everyone can help families achieve the strength, stability and self-reliance they need to build better lives for themselves. Through shelter, we empower. To learn more, visit [habitat.org](http://habitat.org).





This report was prepared in conjunction with Solid Ground, a global advocacy campaign of Habitat for Humanity. Solid Ground's mission is to change land policy and systems to ensure that more people around the globe have a decent home.