

# Interrogating the New Urban Agenda from the perspective of pressing urban realities in sub-Saharan Africa

Marie Huchzermeyer, Centre for Urbanism and the Built Environment (CUBES), School of Architecture and Planning, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg  
[marie.huchzermeyer@wits.ac.za](mailto:marie.huchzermeyer@wits.ac.za)

Urban Talks, Habitat Unit and Urban Management, Institute for Architecture, Technical University of Berlin, 17 July.

## **Abstract:**

The New Urban Agenda adopted in Quito in October 2016 was the culmination of extensive negotiations among member countries of the UN and lobbying by the non-governmental sector. The result is a commitment by member states to some important advances such as the fore-fronting of individual and collective rights in the governing of cities. However, there is also an adherence to liberal economic assumptions and approaches, softened by the pervasive term 'sustainability'. This speaks past much of the urban reality on the African continent. The public lecture will interrogate the New Urban Agenda from this perspective, using examples primarily from South Africa and Kenya. It raises (for discussion) difficult challenges for the urban practitioners of the next decade.

## Introduction

The New Urban Agenda is the culmination of intensive international consensus-seeking on the future of urban life. It also represents recognition of the role of urban policy within a series of global agreements – the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, the Paris Agreement on greenhouse gas emissions in 2016, global agreements on development finance and on disaster risk reduction, and Habitat III also in 2016. In relation to these agreements, cities are now not only recognised as part of the problem, be it the concentrated production of greenhouse gasses, but as Barnett and Parnell (2016:93) put it, cities are also seen as 'potential surfaces of intervention for the transformation of global processes of environmental change'.

Our multi-year collaboration with TU Berlin aims to support this by working on cities on the sub-Saharan African continent as surfaces of intervention, as a key aspect for the implementation of this new agenda. The project intends to contribute through nurturing of relevant skills. As an aside, we witness a wastage of relevant skills at German higher education institutions in which mid- to high level academics in our field experience closed doors in a hierarchy in which job security is reserved (though with some exceptions) only for full professors, and so we add our voice to calls for reform.

But back to the task at hand, in this presentation I step back to interrogate the New Urban Agenda (NUA) in relation to diverse urban realities on the sub-Saharan African continent. I will speak to the shift from Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda, debates running up to the adoption of the New Urban Agenda, which will take me to a discussion of three relevant themes in the text of the New Urban Agenda.

I draw here on my own involvement in some of the preparatory initiatives towards Habitat III in South Africa, initiatives within the African Urban Research Initiative, debates within the Global

Platform for the Right to the City, and on published literature that either anticipated or has begun to reflect on the 'Habitat III moment', as Parnell (2015:538) calls it.

## From MDGs to SDGs and NUA

The 15 years since adoption of the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs up to their target date in 2015 saw much reflection and discussion on the usefulness of this form of global commitment. Most of the MDG targets applied across rural and urban settings. But for the urban sector or more widely urban society, the biggest shortcoming of the MDGs was the absence of any explicit engagement with the changing urban reality, its potentials and challenges. While the Habitat II Agenda of 1996 with its complex and nuanced statements on housing and urban policy remained operational, the MDGs took its place in determining mandates at country level but also for UN-Habitat as an organisation. Many gains of Habitat II faded into the background.

The only 'urban' MDG Target was 7D to improve the lives of ten percent of the global 'slum' population by 2020. This catapulted the term 'slum' and the condition it represents into global attention, but without the necessary embeddedness in wider normative positions on urban inequalities and their spatial manifestation. Contrary to its initial intentions to improve slum dwellers' lives, MDG target 7D, the only MDG target that remains operational for a further three years up to 2020, changed into a drive to reduce slum populations. With its official slogan 'Cities Without Slums', it legitimised some of the largest 'slum' demolition drives of the past decade and a half: On the African continent Operation Murambatsvina in 2005, mass demolitions and displacements in Nigeria's capital Abuja between 2000 and 2007, and South Africa's slum elimination or eradication drive from 2005 to 2009 to name a few (Huchzermeyer, 2011).

One may argue that for purposes of monitoring, the knowledge industry surrounding this target produced necessary definitional work on the term 'slum'. This included careful work on the relationship between 'slums' and informal settlements, the latter being one of the slum conditions MDG target 7D was to apply to. However, the New Urban Agenda has rendered this work defunct by turning definitions on their head. In NUA, 'slums' are not a wider condition determined by a range of inadequacies that may include informality. While the NUA text mostly refers to 'slums and informal settlements', it understands 'slums' as a sub-sector of informal settlements, referring in Section 77 to 'informal settlements, including slums' (Habitat III, 2016a: S.77). Whether informal settlements are distinct from 'slums' or include a condition referred to as 'slums', this is a change from the definition adopted globally under the MDGs, in which informal settlements are one of several housing situations that can be referred to as 'slums'. New knowledge gymnastics will be called for in reporting against Section 110 of the New Urban Agenda. This section supports 'efforts to define and reinforce inclusive and transparent monitoring systems for reducing the proportion of people living in slums and informal settlements'.

But a direct comparison between the MDGs of 2001 and the New Urban Agenda of 2016 leaves out the adoption of the SDGs in 2015. SDG11 to 'make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable' has several targets. The first deals with housing, basic services and 'slum' upgrading, and can be understood as a refinement and extension of MDG target 7D. The other targets under SDG11 address transport, urbanisation, heritage, risk of disasters, environmental externalities of urban development, needs of differently abled people, rural-urban linkages, urban policy and planning, and sustainable building (Satterthwaite, 2016).

Parnell (2015:529) recognises five important advances in the SDGs:

1. The SDGs present 'a single normative base for all nations', which means that they are universal (applying across the globe), and not addressed only to the developing world or 'global south'.
2. The SDGs treat the ecological limits of the planet, and climate change, with urgency.
3. They can be monitored more effectively as this industry has rapidly revolutionised through technological advancements that bring together spatial and statistical data.
4. The SDGs take funding of development seriously, though perhaps still not seriously enough.
5. They give sub-national governments a developmental role, thus recognising that 'cities can be pathways to sustainable development' (ibid.).

The first point acknowledges on the one hand that challenges such as inequality and informality exist (and increasingly so) in most regions of the globe, including the 'global north', and on the other hand that decisions in countries referred to as the 'global north' contribute to or exacerbate deep rooted problems such as inequality in countries of the 'global south'.

However, we have to ask whether a 'single normative base' is sufficiently nuanced to diverse realities. Is a 'single normative base' able to generate meaningful statements about diverse and complex conditions of extreme inequality, and the various forms of property relations and informality that shape cities on the African continent?

In discussions within the African Urban Research Initiative that engaged with Parnell's five points, concerns emerged as to whether an explicitly pro-poor focus would be lost in the universalisation inherent in the SDGs (AURI, 2015). A further discussion on resilience questioned whether a normative base can adequately anticipate the unknown, in a context of rapid change that may not necessarily be predicted. Here a normative approach aligns more with equilibrium thinking on resilience (the ability to bounce back) rather than evolutionary thinking in which resilience is understood as the ability to adjust to unpredictable change (Weakely, 2015). On the question of capabilities for prediction, AURI (2015) also raises concern with the unevenness of the technological advances in spatial and statistical monitoring.

I return later to the normative base of SDG 11 and the expression it has found in the New Urban Agenda, in particular its liberal leaning which determines the thinking on development funding as well as assumptions about devolution of powers to sub-national levels. Before that, I will say a few words about the debates running up to the New Urban Agenda.

## Debates running up to the New Urban Agenda

In the early run-up to the Habitat III negotiations, several areas of contestation emerged. Already in 2015, Parnell (2015:538) listed these as follows:

- What agency would be appropriate to support the implementation of the New Urban Agenda?
- Should a right to the city be incorporated into the New Urban Agenda?
- Where should the line be drawn on participation; in other words, who are the legitimate participants?
- Given growing complexity in and across urban environments, what exactly are the triggers of change?

The third of these concerns or dilemmas, the one about participation, played itself out in the Habitat III preparations, which sought to be fully inclusive. Thus in South Africa, the national Department of Human Settlement organised, at considerable cost, extensive consultations with various sectors

within and beyond government. After intense studying of New Urban Agenda drafts, and detailed collection of inputs and deliberation on the advantages of proposing changes to wording, we were informed that the South African government, while promising to take our inputs forward, would in fact not have a voice itself in the New Urban Agenda negotiations, but instead would try to inform the African position, as the countries of the continent had decided to represent the continent's voice as a block.

Understandably, none of the detailed inputs found their way into any official proposals, and instead the African block deliberated on its position on the above contestations. The first two emerged as the most important and controversial. African governments as a block lobbied, along with the US and in opposition to European and Latin American countries, against inclusion of a right to the city (GPR2C discussions). Seemingly this was in fear of having to compromise on the measures underway in cities to attract foreign direct investment. Indeed, in discussions within the African Urban Research Initiative, the overwhelming conservatism of African governments (and aversion to devolution) was raised as a concern (AURI, 2015). A cross-African normative base swept aside the call (perhaps weakly made by AURI) for recognition of Africa's pluralism and warning against reductionism of a widely diverse reality. I will return to the compromised way in which the right to the city was ultimately incorporated into the New Urban Agenda.

However, African governments also lobbied, in opposition to European counterparts, for the continuation of UN-Habitat in its function to support country governments in the implementation of global agreements. The west, including donor countries, largely found UN-Habitat to be inefficient and wasteful. Headquartered in Nairobi, the continent perhaps indirectly benefits from some of the lavish spending through this agency. But more importantly, the position that sought to do away with UN-Habitat overlooked this agency's vital role (if not always successful) as a counterbalance to, or in moderation of, the neoliberal consulting industry that aggressively sells unsustainable visions of high modernity to national and city governments across the African continent. From this perspective, it is welcomed that the final version of the New Urban Agenda ultimately does support the continuation of UN-Habitat, though subjecting it to review.

The important questions on whether and how to commit to a move from token to meaningful participation and through which participants, and on triggers of change, seem to have been overshadowed by these two tightly contested debates.

## Engaging with the text of the New Urban Agenda

I turn now to some aspects of the 'normative base' that is set out in the New Urban Agenda. I have selected three main aspects which tie back to the earlier discussion in this presentation and which are particularly relevant for cities on the African continent: Firstly, the New Urban Agenda's approach to right to the city; secondly its position and assumptions on the economy, and thirdly its approach to informality and in particular informal settlements.

The Global Platform for the Right to the City celebrates the inclusion of a right to the city in the opening statement of the 'Shared Vision' of the New Urban Agenda. This is to a large part a result of intense lobbying on its part, and also the work of a Policy Unit under Habitat III. The Policy Unit deliberated on the meaning of a right to the city and its articulation with existing human rights. It recommended that the right to the city be adopted as a central paradigm or 'heart' of the New Urban Agenda (Habitat III, 2016b).

As mentioned, the New Urban Agenda in its final version does indeed mention the right to the city in the opening statement of its 'shared vision'. However, it places the catch-phrase 'cities for all' in the foreground, and refers to 'right to the city' only indirectly as a phrase to which the same principles apply. The main principle is inclusivity and goes hand-in-hand with the laudable undertaking in NUA and the Sustainable Development Goals to end 'poverty in all its forms and dimensions' and to 'leave no one behind' (NUA, Section 14).

Inclusivity within the New Urban Agenda hinges on the right of current and future generations to 'inhabit' and be involved in the production of cities that are 'just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient and sustainable' in a way that fosters 'prosperity and quality of life for all' (Habitat III, 2016a: S.11). The New Urban Agenda clearly states its dependence on rights and freedoms in international law and human rights. Sections 13 (a) and (b) of the New Urban Agenda underline not only individual rights (to housing and services) but also collective rights (to public goods), and give prominence to participation, engagement and belonging. In the context of overwhelmingly conservative governments on the African continent, often advised by bluntly neoliberal urban consultants, these are important commitments.

However, the achievement of 'cities for all' hinges on a second, and somewhat contradicting principle, which on closer inspection might more readily be considered the 'heart' or central paradigm of the New Urban Agenda. This principle is economic growth. This growth is to be sustained into the future. It is to be inclusive and based on processes that can be deemed sustainable. It is also to facilitate a 'sustainable transition' of the informal economy into the formal.

For many cities, South African cities being a case in point, economic growth is not a given even in optimistic and pro-market predictions. In the context of interlinked but uneven patterns of economic growth and recession across the globe, it is an omission that the New Urban Agenda fails to make any recommendations for urban policy in contexts of economic stagnation and decline. More importantly, the New Urban Agenda could have encouraged research into and experimentation with alternative economic systems that are not reliant on growth, and, if the African context is to be taken seriously, which interface with and learn from the informal.

The means that the New Urban Agenda puts forward to achieve 'sustainable and inclusive urban economies' include 'competitiveness' (the ability to attract foreign direct investment), coupled with 'high productivity' and 'innovation' and in the same breath assumes that 'full and productive employment' is achievable. This ignores evidence-based critiques from around the globe of urban strategies that prioritise the demands and interests of investors, particularly in relation to the land market. It ignores evidence that such strategies, without exception, result in market-based exclusion and spatial displacement or peripheralisation of economically weak households. If competitiveness is to be understood in a developmental sense as a necessary evil to generate the resources that are needed to extend basic services to the poor, then the New Urban Agenda needed to include workable approaches in contexts where the majority of the urban population derives its livelihood informally and whose ties to urban land is precarious. Without this, 'Cities for all' remains a hollow promise.

In assuming that the informal economy can and should be fully absorbed into the 'formal economy', the New Urban Agenda wishes away a dimension of the existing urban reality which has proven difficult to change and on which livelihoods depend. There seems to be a refusal to acknowledge the informal economy and its role within stagnant, declining or unevenly growing economies. This also applies to informal occupation of land for habitation. The New Urban Agenda assumes that cities and their authorities have the methods and means to formalise the informal at scale and in a way that is inclusive and adheres to universal rights. Within the African Urban Research Initiative, we

asked how, for instance, one would untangle the vulnerable livelihoods of waste pickers, which are built on unsustainable systems of urban production and consumption. In such contexts, is it not more important to find sensitive ways to govern the formal-informal continuum (ARUI, 2015)?

The New Urban Agenda (Habitat III, 2016a: S.51) gives relevance to spatial planning in governing urban form towards more compact and integrated constellations. However, this does not acknowledge an existing formal-informal continuum in urban form. The New Urban Agenda gives no guidance on how planning is to take into account already existing unplanned occupation or informal settlements. Its underlying message is that problems of access to adequate housing can be solved through 'planned urban extensions' and 'economies of scale'.

Only in Section 77, does the New Urban Agenda mention 'rehabilitation and upgrading' of informal settlements. This is with the objective to reduce risk, and is placed under the larger aim to achieve environmental sustainability and urban resilience. Rather than highlighting the strong articulation of informal settlement upgrading with human rights and inclusion, it places informal settlements on the (mostly conservative) environmental agenda, as was the case in the MGDs. In Section 103 of the New Urban Agenda, informal settlements reappear on the urban security agenda.

Under 'effective implementation', the New Urban Agenda gives little guidance on what informal settlement upgrading entails (Habitat III, 2016a: S.97). This allows for an interpretation of 'upgrading' that is prominent on the African continent, namely demolition, decanting and complete redevelopment, always with substantial displacement of the existing population and imposition of new and often unsustainable costs of living. The mistaken assumption (see Habitat III, 2016: S.99) is that 'affordable housing options' can be produced through this approach. In Section 109, the New Urban Agenda describes informal settlement upgrading through the conditions that this approach is to achieve: affordable housing, basic services, public spaces, security of tenure and conflict management. No mention is made of the processes through which to make these achievements. This discards UN-Habitat's advocacy over decades for informal settlement upgrading approaches that are incremental, participatory (if not self-managed) and with minimal disruption to the inhabitants' lives.

## Conclusion

Changes in national politics since the adoption of the New Urban Agenda in October 2016 illustrate the delicate balance through which the New Urban Agenda came into being. Trump's triumph in the United States implies a regression of many of the inclusionary ideals of the New Urban Agenda. In Brazil, the current government has contradicted its commitments to implement the New Urban Agenda by cutting its expenditure on 'social investments', by changing laws to privilege large corporations, elevating urban land as a commodity rather than a right, undermining previous gains to secure land for economically weak households and centralising and bureaucratising decision making on budgetary spending (GPR2C, 2017). In essence, Brazil has lost its status as the most advanced country to have given a concrete legal and policy meaning to the right to the city.

The African continent has not been spared this scandal-filled turn to a conservative politics, intertwined with the interests of large corporations. These politics play themselves out in seemingly irreversible urban land deals, legitimised under competitiveness and mega projects, urban expansions and economies of scale. This requires us to recognise the New Urban Agenda for what it is, to work with its contradictions, but wherever possible to emphasise as its normative base not its liberal pro-growth pronouncements but its other face, namely 'cities for all', and its basis in rights rather than commodities. For the African continent this requires of us to tirelessly foreground the

formal-informal continuum and to search for approaches that secure basic rights within this continuum.

## References

AURI, 2015. Promoting durable urban knowledge institutions in Africa by activating the African Urban Research Initiative. In-country workshop of key local and national stakeholders, 11, 12, 14 May. Workshop Report. Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies (CUBES), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, for the African Urban Research Initiative, AURI, Cape Town.

Barnett, C. and Parnell, S., 2016. Ideas, implementation and indicators: epistemologies of the post-2015 urban agenda. *Environment and Urbanization*, 28(1), 87-98.

GPR2C, 2017. Statement against Setbacks in Brazilian Urban Policy. Global Platform for the Right to the City, Sao Paulo.

Habitat III (2016a) New Urban Agenda. Draft Outcome Document for Adoption in Quito, October 2016. 10 September. Habitat III United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development.

<https://www2.habitat3.org/bitcache/97ced11dcecef85d41f74043195e5472836f6291?vid=588897&disposition=inline&op=view>. Accessed 30 September 2016.

Habitat III (2016b) Policy Paper Unit 1: Right to the City and Cities for All. Habitat III United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development.

<http://www.csb.gov.tr/db/habitat/editordosya/file/POLICY%20PAPER-SON/PU1-right%20to%20the%20city%20and%20cities%20for%20all.pdf>. Accessed 20 October 2016.

Huchzermeyer, M., 2011. *Cities With 'Slums': From Informal Settlements Eradication to a Right to the City on the African Continent*. University of Cape Town Press, Cape Town.

Parnell, S., 2015. Defining a global urban development agenda. *World Development*, 78, 529-540.

Satterthwaite, D., 2016. Successful, safe and sustainable cities: towards a New Urban Agenda. *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, 19 (5446) December, 3-18.

Weakely, D. 2015. Resilience Thinking. Presentation at the African Urban Research Initiative workshop 'Promoting durable urban knowledge institutions in Africa by activating the African Urban Research Initiative'. In-country workshop of key local and national stakeholders, 12 May. Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies (CUBES), University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

### Also see the following for debates on the New Urban Agenda:

Kaika, M., 2017. 'Don't call me resilient again!': the New Urban Agenda as immunology ... or ... what happens when communities refuse to be vaccinated with 'smart cities' and indicators. *Environment and Urbanization*, 29(1), 89-102.

McGrannahan, G., Schensul, D. and Singh, G., 2016. Inclusive urbanization: can the 2030 agenda be delivered without it? *Environment and Urbanization*, 28(1), 13-34.

Soederberg, S., 2016. Universal access to affordable housing? Interrogating an elusive development goal. *Globalizations*. (available online but still to be placed in an issue?)

Watson, V., 2016. Locating planning in the New Urban Agenda of the urban sustainable development goal. *Planning Theory*, 15(4), 435-448.