World Social Science Fellows report on the 2016 Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador

Back row (L-R): Serge Allou (Cities Alliance), Andre Ortega (Philippines), Sohail Ahmad (India)
Front row (L-R): Tracy-Ann Hyman (Jamaica), Natalie Rosales (Mexico), Rodrigo Mora Vega (Chile)
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Approximately 54% of the world’s population now live in urban areas, and global population is expected to rise from 7 billion to 9.5 billion by 2050. Consequently, the number of people living in urban areas will rise to 66%, with this increase taking place primarily in African and Asian cities. The increasing concentration of people in cities pose challenges to sustainable development, such as increasing inequalities, social and economic exclusion, as well as environmental degradation. Yet urbanization also offers opportunities for economic growth, social and cultural development, and environmental protection.

The United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), which took place in Quito, Ecuador from 17 – 20 October, 2016, aimed to address these challenges and opportunities for the long term, through the adoption of the New Urban Agenda. Five World Social Science Fellows (WSSF) attended Habitat III, serving as rapporteurs on the Cities Alliance Delegation. The Fellows, who hail from different countries, were: Sohail Ahmad (India); Tracy-Ann Hyman (Jamaica); Rodrigo Mora Vega (Chile), Andre Ortega (Philippines) and Natalie Rosales (Mexico). All Fellows attended sessions organized or co-organized by Cities Alliance, and reported on their engagement with other stakeholder groups throughout the entire conference.

Cities Alliance is a global partnership for poverty reduction which promotes sustainable development for cities worldwide. They made preparations for Habitat III prior to the conference in October 2016, and from 2014 created a Joint Work Programme which focused solely on the conference. The Joint Work Programme on Habitat III comprised members from cities all across the world, who looked at advocacy, as well as formulating common key messages, determining how best to disseminate this information in the run-up to Quito in 2016. Cities Alliance has supported numerous events, especially in Latin America, which have provided a platform for knowledge and exchange to help the region mobilize for Habitat III. They also provided input into the drafts of the New Urban Agenda, commissioning several studies.
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The New Urban Agenda ([http://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/](http://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/)) sets global standards for sustainable urban development for the next twenty years. It aims to rethink the way we build, manage and live in cities through cooperation with partners and relevant stakeholder groups, at all levels of government and civil society. Here are some of the thoughts of the WSSF on the New Urban Agenda and Habitat III, along with their personal reflections:

**Sohail Ahmad (India)**

The experience of Quito was interesting to me from two aspects: a) exposure to the rich culture and landscape of Latin America and b) witnessing first-hand the New Urban Agenda coming into existence or being enacted, with expectations to impact all, particularly disadvantaged communities and other vulnerable groups.

The Conference allowed for comparisons across nations, specifically related to Municipal Urban Finance and National Urban Policy. In the case of Municipal Urban Finance, land was seen as a means for financing urban development across the urban world, with the exception of China, who viewed land as having limitations for sustainable urban finance. National Urban Policy, on the other hand, was seen as a means to an end, rather than an outcome, by several leading thinkers at the conference.

I enjoyed talks on the practical aspects of gender mainstreaming, and its inclusion in development agendas across the world, and also the importance of data in policy making, with regards to urban policy and programmes. In the process of urban development, I believe that gender mainstreaming can be achieved by understanding each country's context, challenges and unique situation, in order to achieve the vision of the New Urban Agenda. To ensure the success of gender mainstreaming, it is best to consider gender streaming at each stage of the project, from planning level to implementation. The importance of evidence-based interventions was also emphasized.

Personally, I greatly appreciated the existence of an informal market not only within the city, but in close proximity to the Habitat III venue. I have experienced informality in Indian cities but not in such an integrated way as in Quito. This was a good lesson in terms of integrating the informal market within cities or venues, rather than making it opaque by trying to hide it.
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A Panel discussion on Gender Mainstreaming jointly organized by SKL International and Cities alliance, with the participation of Slum Dwellers International.
Tracy-Ann Hyman (Jamaica)

The Habitat III and New Urban Agenda emphasized the importance of creating linkages between communities and local government councils – namely citizen participation in local governance. The UN Habitat ‘Participatory cities’ sign really drove home the importance of this for me, and my country Jamaica. I particularly enjoyed the session organised by Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and their ‘Know Your City Campaign.’ I learnt that SDI acts in the capacity of a mediator between local governments and slums and has successfully collected census data on people living in these areas - engaging local councils in the provision of basic services such as sanitation and water, among others, to these areas.

I also learnt that there is a deficit in skills and training for urban planning globally, especially in universities and government municipalities. Some statistics on accredited planners showed that there are:
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- 38 accredited planners per 100,000 people in the United Kingdom;
- 1.44 accredited planners per 100,000 people in Nigeria.

This was very surprising to me, and will definitely need to be addressed if the New Urban Agenda is to be achieved within the next 20 years.

What was however lacking from the conference for me, was more discussion on Small Island States and the role they play in the New Urban Agenda. There seemed to be a lot of focus on Latin America and other developing countries, with little or no reference to the Caribbean region. There was also an overemphasis on cities, and less focus on rural communities, rural development and the provision of services for persons in these areas. If some of the rural areas were developed and serviced with necessary amenities, then some of the challenges in cities, such as overcrowding and environmental degradation, could be dramatically reduced.

The long lines to enter the venue were a major challenge and will need to be revisited for future United Nation events. Aside from that hiccup, I enjoyed the hospitality of the Ecuadorian people, especially the staff at our accommodation, Kinde House. Eduardo was very kind and helpful to us.
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The long lines to enter the UN Habitat Venue, Quito

From Left to Right: Sohail, Andre, Tracy, Rodrigo (World Social Science Fellows) and Eduardo at Kinde House
Rodrigo Mora Vega (Chile)

Aside from Quito being the venue for the adoption of the New Urban Agenda (2016 – 2036), I found it to be quite remarkable as an urban renewal project. I visited the city many years ago as a tourist, backpacking in the country during my college years, so the experience of walking around a colonial city totally transformed was very pleasant. The city has changed for the better, with magnificent architecture, monuments and squares renewed in a very subtle and sophisticated manner, allowing visitors to experience the richness of the original urban layout.

This is not necessarily unique to Latin American cities, but what was surprising about Quito was that urban renewal seems to have occurred without evidence of gentrification. In fact, most shops are traditional shops packed with locals, with restaurants selling local food at local prices with almost no tourist-oriented store in the entire historic district. I found this amazing, having observed many times renewals of historical districts that are transformed into somewhat ‘themed’ areas designed for tourists, rather than locals – where local traditions and people are displaced, only to be replaced by international stores.

Quito was not like that as it preserves local stores, people and culture, creating an atmosphere that is somewhat rare. Quito sends a powerful message to urban planners – i.e. urban renewal is possible without making cities look like open museums, grand and beautiful but nonetheless without soul.

Professionally, my time spent in Quito afforded me the opportunity to expand my field of expertise. It also permitted me to establish some academic networks with people from Peru, with whom I started a comparative research project on the use of public space in deprived areas. At our hotel, in the evenings after the conference, I also engaged in lively discussions with the other World Social Science Fellows on urban challenges facing our respective countries and regions. The opportunity to share ideas with academics from different continents and backgrounds was very enriching.
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The scenery in Quito at night
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Andre Ortega (Philippines)

Amidst huge UN Habitat billboards proclaiming cities of inclusivity and participation, the event itself was a highly militarized enclave as participants were screened, checked and inspected, translating into the urban discourse perpetuated throughout the conference.

Habitat III felt like a huge marketplace selling cities ‘place-marketing’ and promoting buzz words such as sustainability, inclusivity, resilience and informality for financialization. In my opinion, there were no informed debates or discussions that interrogated the very foundation of the New Urban Agenda, nor questioned the seemingly reflexive inclusion of financialization in the name of resilience and sustainability. What most people fail to uncover is the dark underbelly of the NUA and all its attendant propositions, namely the privatization of cities, inequality, accumulation by dispossession and gentrification.

Habitat III was a space where states, private sector and civil society groups warmly embraced sustainability and growth as key modes of addressing poverty and ecological
imbalance. What seemed to be absent were discussions on how urban renewal projects, mortgage programmes and other efforts that benefit the so-called ‘urban economy’ have led to millions of displaced urban residents, homelessness, marginalization and socio-economic inequality. Public-private partnership projects in the Global South have led not just to ‘sustainable’ and ‘green’ new urban projects but have also enabled slum eviction, dislocation and displacement of the poor and indigenous peoples in rural frontier lands.

This is the case in Manila and other parts of the Philippines, whereby the state (both national and local governments), in alliance with private developers and multinational organizations (World Bank, Asian Development Bank, etc.), have used ‘sustainable’ and ‘green’ urban projects as a means of privatizing urban space to produce new ‘globally competitive’ and profitable urban development at the expense of marginalized populations, primarily informal settlers who are displaced and relocated to far-flung regions. These discussions were absent in Habitat III, much to my chagrin!

The UN Habitat was also a logistical nightmare with participants having to line up for several hours on Day 1 just to enter the venue. Security is important; however it turned into a nightmare, with our group of fellows taking over 3 hours to get in. There was inadequate information provided on how to enter, and later on we found out that there was only one main entrance for over 40,000 people.

Several blocks away from Habitat III’s main venue was the alternative to the Habitat III conference held at the Central University of Ecuador. The event, organized by various social-justice-oriented organizations (urban poor groups, indigenous peoples’ coalitions, etc.) was a stark contrast to Habitat III. It was much smaller and involved participants including indigenous peoples, members of the urban poor, academics, activists and other members of grassroots organizations. The event was very promising because of themes centring on urban social justice, inequality and privatization; topics that were not explicitly tackled during the main Habitat III Conference.

Despite the mishaps during the main Habitat III conference, my engagement with the other World Social Science Fellows was enriching as we learnt from each other’s experiences as early career urban scholars. Outside of Habitat III, I was mesmerized by Quito itself, its landscape, terrain, food and culture.
Natalie Rosales (Mexico)

UN Habitat III and the New Urban Agenda: A political and social process
As a social scientist dedicated to the study of - and dialogue around - the construction of cities, I have witnessed how urban issues have gained importance over the last few years. Being part of Habitat III, gave me the opportunity to verify the power that ‘the urban’ has in mobilizing a great number of national and local authorities, representatives of international organizations, social movements, students and academics, from all over the world. Attending this conference afforded me a great opportunity, to be part of the debate on the New Urban Agenda from a different perspective, that of a political and social one.

The Habitat III Conference involved reinvigorating global commitments to sustainable urbanization and the implementation of a New Urban Agenda (NUA), through dialogue, exhibitions, urban talks, side meetings, parallel and special sessions, training events, plenary meetings and high-level roundtable talks. I had the opportunity to take part in some side and networking events, as well as dialogue with stakeholders, other World Social Science Fellows and the broader urbanization community.

One such side event (which I attended), convened policymakers, government representatives and experts to discuss the NUA policies. During this session I learnt about monitoring and evaluating the progress of the NUA. I also participated in dialogues on the topic of sustainable cities, built on social cohesion and equity. This involved discussion on how to capitalize on the advances and challenges for the management rights to the city. For these discussions the local government’s speakers shared participatory democracy practices, such as bottom-up approaches to governance based on a community’s needs.
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An urban ecology and resilience panel exploring different ways of thinking about how bottom-up approaches to governance can be implemented in the New Urban Agenda, and the particular role that national governments have in supporting this process.
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Between the time spent at the main Habitat III Venue (La Casa de la Cultura), I had the chance to explore parts of Quito, where grassroots sustainability demonstration projects were displayed.

The arrangements at the Habitat III conference, particularly the United Nations protocols and excessive security, coloured the dynamic of the conference as an essentially government space. This was reinforced with a walled enclosure, instead of building a common space to mix government and non-government actors. This was disappointing for some conference participants, who came from around the world to participate in the NUA dialogue, but who felt that the conference was too ‘closed,’ ‘undemocratic’ and ‘away from social realities.’ This was one of the reasons which gave rise to the emergence of an alternative movement to Habitat III.
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Far from Habitat III, academics, activists and social change agents held events to complement, and even counteract, the New Urban Agenda. I had the opportunity to join these groups who converged mainly in the Quito headquarters of the Latin American Social Sciences Faculty.

For some, urban fora and the Habitat conferences held every 20 years have become a repetitive popular fair, where governments and institutions benchmark their activities, instead of having real spaces for debates, resolutions and the monitoring of commitments.