

HABITAT III: THE NEW URBAN AGENDA KEY MESSAGES

Background

The New Urban Agenda (NUA), the outcome document for Habitat III, the UN's Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, offers the opportunity to harness the potential of towns and cities to ensure they are economically dynamic, yet liveable and safe environments for the next generation of urban dwellers. At the centre of this is the need to recognise the 'urbanisation of emergencies' and ensure that following Habitat III, the changing landscape of humanitarian crises informs the implementation of the NUA. Habitat III presents a crucial moment to communicate why cities and towns must be prepared for and effectively respond to the impact of humanitarian crises, and how we can achieve the safety and resilience of all urban populations, with closer collaboration between humanitarian, development, national and local actors in the future.

Humanitarian actors have begun to recognise that they need to take a new approach to urban crises – working in support of and in collaboration with municipal authorities and ensuring municipal authorities have a much stronger role in crisis response. They are also giving greater focus to restoring or bolstering existing city systems, rather than creating parallel services or providing short-term, unsustainable solutions for housing, water or healthcare. To address the unique characteristics of urban crises, the **Global Alliance for Urban Crises** was launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016. The Alliance has more than 65 signatories to its Urban Crises Charter across humanitarian and development organisations, and networks of urban professionals and local governments.

Key Messages

1. The urbanisation agenda must recognise the growing intensity and frequency of urban crises. Achieving the urban SDG (no. 11) will be impossible if urban risks keep accumulating and towns and cities are not prepared to respond to humanitarian emergencies. Member States must commit to 'leave no city behind' and ensure that even the most at risk cities are able to develop pathways to sustainable development by ensuring that crisis preparedness and response are adopted as critical components when implementing the NUA.
2. Urbanisation, if well managed, has the potential to significantly increase people's resilience and reduce the impacts of crises. Urban areas offer economies of scale in the provision of services, including for displaced people and refugees, greater livelihood diversity and absorption capacity in terms of housing, health and employment.
3. Urban resilience should be considered a common framework to align human rights, humanitarian and development goals. Efforts to increase urban resilience in such a manner must incorporate capacity within and across UN architecture, and national and local governments to ensure preparedness, resilient response, recovery and reconstruction in crises.
4. Crisis response offers concrete opportunities to put towns and cities on a more resilient and sustainable urban growth trajectory, whilst meeting the immediate needs of impacted urban populations. To achieve this, much closer collaboration between municipal actors and humanitarian responders, as well as urban development specialists, planners, architects and engineers are needed. This requires well-planned and integrated responses which guide key early decisions during emergency responses and longer-term plans leveraging existing assets and response capacities, and supporting city systems and urban plans.
5. Responding to influxes of refugees and internally displaced persons in urban areas should be seen as a common humanitarian and development challenge. The displaced must be integrated into urban development strategies, and refugees and IDPs should be seen as potential contributors to local development.
6. There is much we don't yet know – investment in research on the best ways to assess vulnerability of urban populations, and to reach crisis-affected populations within towns and cities, is critical.

Urban Crises Highlights from the draft New Urban Agenda (Habitat III Outcome document)

The draft NUA was agreed in September 2016. Alliance members worked collectively and bilaterally to influence the text to ensure appropriate attention is given to the urban dimension of humanitarian crises. Language on urban displacement and urban crises remained largely unaltered since the draft outlined at the Third Preparatory Committee for HABITAT III meeting in Surabaya, in July. Inclusion of these references can in large part be credited to the sustained advocacy of Alliance members over the past six months.

Highlights from the Text

In its introductory paragraphs, amongst other challenges, the NUA references the increasing impact of humanitarian emergencies in cities (§2) and incorporates responsiveness to natural and man-made disasters into the overall vision for cities and human settlements (§13g). There are numerous references to climate change throughout the document, and calls for greater resilience and disaster risk reduction (e.g. §77, 78, 101).

The role for local government and other urban actors – both public and non-governmental – in supporting communities at risk of disasters, and prone to ‘recurrent and protracted humanitarian crises’ is highlighted in §29. This paragraph, one of the most critical for the Alliance, introduces the concept of vulnerability and the need for investment before a disaster happens. It further calls attention to ensuring that durable and dignified solutions are found for crisis-affected persons, and both they and their host communities are supported by aid flows, to prevent back-sliding in urban development. Reference to ‘crisis-affected populations’ was a demand made by the Alliance, as it can refer to displaced and conflict-affected populations. Previous iterations referred more narrowly to ‘disaster-affected’ populations.

Despite lobbying, the issue of refugees and others forcibly displaced into or within urban areas, is covered minimally. Refugees are mentioned in the text, but generally as one group within a list of vulnerable populations. Earlier drafts of the NUA tended to refer to ‘refugees and migrants’ together, causing problems for Member States who wish to differentiate more clearly between services and protection offered to the two groups. However, §28 calls attention to the contributions refugees and IDPs (as well as migrants) can make to social, economic and cultural life within towns and cities.

New references to conflict-affected populations were added at a fairly late stage in negotiations, and have remained. Of particular note, §30 refers to the critical issue of support for resilient urban services during armed conflict – a key issue for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Finally, the text refers in §77 to the ability to respond to and rapidly recover from shocks and stresses, not just within government institutions, but also within households, communities and services providers. This is followed in §78 by reference to ensuring ‘timely and effective local responses to address the immediate needs of inhabitants affected by natural and man-made disasters, and conflicts’, and by a call for increased capacity among local authorities to develop and implement disaster risk reduction and response plans (§101).

Next Steps

Beyond Habitat III, the NUA provides the basis from which the Alliance and its members can continue to advocate, in line with the Urban Crises Charter and the key messages above, for greater awareness amongst urban development specialists, policy makers at municipal, regional and national level, and humanitarian and development actors and for inclusion of relevant elements in further inter-governmental agreements.

Useful Resources

Global Alliance for Urban Crises: Urban Crises Charter (urbancrises.org)
Habitat III issues papers (habitat3.org)