



Habitat III Pledges To ‘Leave No One Behind’

The phrase ‘no one left behind’ is a doctrine grounded in historic Technocracy from the 1930s. They reasoned that if society is to be properly ‘engineered’, that everyone had to be included. This is the same reason that ‘inclusion’ and ‘no one left behind’ is seen in virtually all United Nations documents. □ TN Editor

In cities across the world the dramatic increase in forced and market-driven evictions disproportionately affects the urban poor. While the issue of evictions remains a massive preoccupation for civil society, urban planning processes continually face an intricate balancing act between the entitlement rights of urban dwellers on the one hand, and the stimulation of urban prosperity on the other.

The UN Habitat III conference that has just taken place in Quito presented a unique opportunity to support a truly transformative New Urban Agenda, though the agreed draft is limited in terms of the extent to which evictions are explicitly articulated. Once again, this raises the question of whether academia can play an effective role in influencing the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.

What the researchers say

Alexandre Apsan Frediani of the Bartlett Development Planning Unit at University College London (DPU) explains how evictions regularly occur due to urban development processes that have been stimulated by governments: “there are often market forces that start permeating urban areas, due to governments not finding mechanisms to reconcile economic or market development with the protection of marginalised groups living in inner city areas”. Through research undertaken in Johannesburg and São Paulo, Alexandre finds that “in reality, when you see the trade-offs on the ground the economic development agenda starts being prioritised over the rights of the urban poor”.

The consequence is that vulnerable, marginalised groups are threatened. Government prioritisation of economic growth is manifested through various discourses that seek to legitimise evictions. An ongoing research project being conducted by Cassidy Johnson, for example, is exploring the way in which the ‘protection’ of residents through risk mitigation can facilitate relocation in order to make way for private development. Cassidy reveals how “evictions are occurring more and more as a result of doing disaster management. A way of thinking about how to respond to the risk of people being affected by disaster is to actually move people”.

In Nigeria, as Julian Walker has observed firsthand, the state is able to evict people with no protection or compensation. He explains, “this has a lot to do with symbolic battles of legitimacy and citizenship, so the way they are able to evict people is by saying ‘these people have no rights’. There is a lot of language around criminality, with environmental protection. So by presenting people that they want to evict as the locus of social problems they are able to do it”.

New Urban Agenda

The New Urban Agenda adopted at Habitat III is lacking in any explicit recommendations on how to manage these trade-offs. Alexandre, who feels that there is a lack of clarity, explains that “on the one hand they

say ‘we need to encourage market development’ and on the other hand ‘evictions should not take place’. So there is a whole issue around trade-offs and prioritisations. It’s not that it’s not there, it’s that everything else is also there too, it’s like a huge shopping list”.

Analysing the previous versions of the draft in the run-up to Quito, the DPU (with other colleagues at the Development Studies Association Urbanisation and Development Group workshop) raised a series of issues indicating that despite acknowledgment, no explicit reference was made to the protection of the urban poor against the loss of the particular entitlements generated by urban development processes. “We need much more visibility for the right to the city. In the latest draft the right to the city did feature a more prominent role, which is a welcome change, though, it is still not very clear how trade-offs will be made”, adds Alexandre.

Furthermore, how evictions are framed in the New Urban Agenda has been questioned. Julian Walker objects to the narrow definition that focuses on ‘arbitrary forced evictions’. “It’s clear from our research that this could be very problematic”, says Julian. “I think having the word ‘arbitrary’ in there is a disaster because involuntary resettlement doesn’t fall into that scope”. Questions around terminology are similarly at the heart of Cassidy Johnson’s research. The word ‘resettlement’ is frequently used to justify evictions, though as she explains “resettlement is a misnomer, in resettlement one should get the things that they lost when they are moved, whereas this is very difficult to achieve in practice when people are forcibly removed”.

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