

What's new about the New Urban Agenda?

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A view of Busan, South Korea's second largest city. The New Urban Agenda aims to be the international community's foremost guide for sustainable urban development over the next 20 years. Photo by: [Kibae Park / U.N.](#)

A final draft of the New Urban Agenda has now been agreed upon and made public. But is it a detailed enough blueprint to achieve some of the key urbanization targets that world leaders endorsed in the Sustainable Development Goals this time last year? The development community has the next month to debate and discuss before, ultimately, translating the agenda's broad framework into concrete strategies for action.

The [New Urban Agenda](#) aims to be the international community's foremost guide for sustainable urban development over the next 20 years. By agreeing to a final draft version, United Nations delegates cleared a major hurdle ahead of next month's Habitat III summit.

The final draft is a 24-page, 175 paragraph document that lays out a sweeping set of visions, pledges and commitments of how urbanization and city governance can be drivers of sustainable development. Negotiators agreed to the final draft late Saturday evening September 10 in New York during a last minute round of meetings after four months of previous negotiations failed to produce a final document. The draft text was made eventually made public last week.

An agreed upon draft of the New Urban Agenda now paves the way for a more productive set of meetings at the Habitat III summit, the U.N.'s seminal forum on housing and urban development that occurs only once every 20 years. The next gathering will take place from Oct. 17-20 in Quito, Ecuador. Rather than diverting time to continue defining the issues and promoting their interests, negotiators have a ready-made agreement that can allow discussions to focus on implementation strategies for putting visions into action.

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— Ani Dasgupta, director of the Ross Center for Sustainable Cities at the World Resources Institute

National governments will be expected to formally adopt the New Urban Agenda at Habitat III. An estimated 30,000 participants will converge on the Ecuadorean capital next month, ranging from official delegates to leaders of business, private industry and civil society. By signing on to the New Urban Agenda, the development community will be committing to a framework that, while directly addressing issues of sustainable urbanization, also lays much of the groundwork for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030.

The Global Goals officially recognize the imperative for sustainable urban areas under SDG11 — on sustainable cities and communities. But as cities increasingly become home to the world's population — 66 percent by 2050 according to U.N. forecasts — the ways in which they sustainably develop will ultimately underpin global development at-large.

“Cities are not just another SDG, they're the fabric on which these outcomes will be possible,” said Ani Dasgupta, director of the Ross Center for Sustainable Cities at the World Resources Institute, a Washington, DC-based think tank.

Like any U.N. agreement, the New Urban Agenda is broad-ranging, comprehensive and ambitious. The final draft endorses an “urban paradigm shift” that “readdresses the way governments plan, finance, develop, govern and manage cities.”

It is guided by commitments to “ending poverty in all its forms and dimensions,” “promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all,” and “promoting clean energy, sustainable use of land and resources in urban development.” Gender and human rights interests are represented through commitments to “address multiple forms of discrimination faced by women and girls and persons with disabilities.” So too are refugee rights. “We commit to ensure the full respect for human rights and humane treatment of refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants,” the document reads.

“U.N. documents can tend to have more good ideas than prioritization,” Dasgupta said, referring to the sweeping nature of the New Urban Agenda. “But that's by definition what these documents are.”

However, within the kitchen sink of visions and commitments, development experts credit the New Urban Agenda for standing out in several key ways.

First, it establishes an integrated approach to urbanization by setting a clear vision of how urban economies, standards of living and climate sustainability are interconnected. In that regard, the draft document breaks from the “old” urban agenda that came out of the last U.N. Habitat summit in Istanbul in 1996. “Habitat II simply focused on poverty, poor people in slums and never connected the other side which is the economy of cities,” Dasgupta noted.

The New Urban Agenda also promotes a strong sense of inclusiveness, both in the diversity of actors who helped forge the agenda and in the participatory roles it sets for national and local governments to create policies that support sustainable urbanization. Because U.N. Habitat outcome documents are agreements among national governments, development experts say they tend to diminish the role of local governments.

“However, a core success of the New Urban Agenda is [the endorsement of] national and local governments working together,” said Yunus Arian, head of global policy and advocacy for ICLEI, a global network of cities and towns that promotes urban sustainability. “There is a strong emphasis to bring all levels of society together to have a role in the design of the New Urban Agenda.

The need for innovative financing and funding strategies also stands out.

“This is the first time that municipal finance comes as a major requisite for policies,” Marco Kamiya, head of the urban economy and finance branch of U.N. Habitat, told Devex. “Almost in each page finance and local fiscal frameworks are mentioned,” he noted in an email to Devex. Specific calls for action that the New Urban Agenda promotes include various forms of pooled finance, local infrastructure funds and financial vehicles related to housing

finance and land value sharing.

Such a document is of course not immune from criticism.

A major shortcoming, Arikan said, is that the New Urban Agenda did not go far enough to own SDG11. “It doesn’t say that the New Urban Agenda will be the home of SDG11,” he commented. “There are a couple of introductory remarks [about SDG11], but otherwise you can’t feel it that much.”

ICLEI and other civil society groups want to tie the non-binding set of principles expressed in the New Urban Agenda into a global mandate such as the SDGs.

“The document to be approved in Quito will be proposed to ministers of urban planning and works, but the SDGs were presented to heads of state as a core document for the next few decades of development,” Arikan noted. “Which one will have more influence? Definitely the SDGs.”

Habitat III can still produce debate over the text as more stakeholders and a broader range of participants join the meetings. But with negotiations officially concluded, the main task in Quito will be to hammer down specific implementation strategies and formally adopt the New Urban Agenda.

Specific areas to be discussed, Kamiya notes, are intergovernmental transfers of revenues and services between city and central governments; the governance and local infrastructure funds; and the promotion and design of enabling environments for private sector participation.

“From a business perspective, our greatest expectation is that Quito will focus on implementation,” Irge Aujouannet, director of global policy affairs for the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, told Devex. “We would like to use this opportunity to create a platform, an open dialogue between different stakeholders. How can we put the right mechanisms in place that ensure that the right partnerships exist to implement the agenda and deliver good results?”

The private sector is especially well poised to partner on climate issues, she noted, which are expected to be hot-button topics in Quito. Specific areas for collaboration between public bodies and private industry include investments to help governments meet emission reduction targets, boost energy efficiency, roll out sustainable transportation solutions and strengthen disaster preparedness.

We’ll be on-the-ground at Habitat III so stay tuned for more coverage leading up to the event. You can find relevant stories [here](#).