

Cities must be part of the UN's Urban Agenda

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Last week I was in Quito, Ecuador, attending Habitat III, the UN's global conference on urban development and housing, which is held every 20 years; the first one was held in Vancouver in 1976. The conference itself was a formal UN meeting, with national delegations in attendance. They agreed to a key global document, The New Urban Agenda (NUA), which provides an overall framework for how cities should develop in the next 20 years or more.

This important document comes in the wake of, and is shaped by, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Climate Accord, both approved by the UN's Member States in 2015. These formal international agreements have significant implications for cities and for health; SDG 11 refers specifically to cities ("Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable"), while SDG 3 refers to health, all within the context of ecologically sustainable development, especially the need to address climate change.

The NUA is based on three principles that are in fact fundamental to the health and wellbeing of urban residents: Leave no one behind, by ending poverty in all its forms and dimensions; create sustainable and inclusive urban economies, and ensure environmental sustainability. Indeed, the NUA recognizes that sustainable urban development is critical to the achievement of sustainable development globally.

Moreover, the Member States, including Canada, committed themselves to "promote a safe, healthy, inclusive, and secure environment in cities and human settlements for all to live, work, and participate in urban life". These are commitments we should ensure Canada lives up to in the years ahead, and we should hold our governments accountable for achieving this.

My role in Quito was to speak about health and cities at three side events organized by the International Council of Scientific Unions, Plan International and the UN University's International Institute for Global Health. Indeed, there was quite a strong health theme throughout the week, and the fact that health was on the agenda in Quito was itself significant.

This is a big change from 20 years ago at Habitat II in Istanbul, when health was not on the agenda. This time, backed in part by SDG number 3, which commits nations to "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all", the World Health Organisation (WHO) and many other health-related organisations were present.

The reason we were there is not hard to discern; as the WHO noted in the title of the key document it released in Quito, health is (or should be) the 'pulse' of the New Urban Agenda - "the health of the nearly four billion people who dwell in cities today must be a central concern".

The NUA includes a strong emphasis on improving municipal governance, with an entire section devoted to this issue. Indeed, this was a central focus of all three of my

presentations. After all, what business are we in, as cities, if it is not to improve the level of health, wellbeing and overall human development of our citizens – and to do so in a manner that is ecologically sustainable.

So it was ironic, to say the least, that the key decision makers - Mayors and the municipal governments and citizens they represent - were not part of the central decision-making process for the New Urban Agenda, which was restricted to national governments. Yet cities and towns are where more than half the world's population lives, so you would think their opinions and decisions would matter.

In fact, at a meeting in Bogota prior to the Habitat conference, 500 Mayors or their delegates from around the world issued a manifesto calling for a seat at the global table, noting that "The global governance system is no longer adequate to address the existing challenges the world is facing".

The Canadian delegation, to its credit, included municipal government representatives; provincial governments, however, were conspicuous by their absence (except for Ontario), which is troubling. Did they not see it as relevant?

In the closing meeting of the delegation, Jean-Yves Duclos, the federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, who was leading the delegation, suggested that Canadian municipalities hold public consultations on ways to implement the NUA. Are Victoria's civic leaders ready to take up the challenge?

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For more information about Habitat III and the New Urban Agenda see <https://habitat3.org/>