



**Global Platform for the Right to the City**  
Plataforma Global por el Derecho a la Ciudad  
Plataforma Global pelo Direito à Cidade

# **HABITAT III**

## **Policy Papers Frameworks**

## **Review and Comments**

February 2016

## **9.- URBAN SERVICES AND TECHNOLOGY**

## **General comments**

1. This paper does not include a **Human Rights approach** in delivering public services: their objective is to “satisfy needs” rather than fulfil rights and, therefore, costs’ recovery becomes a main issue when planning services. A Human Rights mainstreaming –which should be applied here- would transform “users” into “citizens” and would entitle them to accessible and affordable services of quality, rather than depend on the concomitant economic situation or on an economic costs-benefits calculus. Ultimately, conceiving urban services as a right which citizens are entitled to would mean letting them autonomously manage some of these services.
2. It is very important to remember that the **Habitat II Agenda** included the full and progressive realization of the Human Right to adequate housing, and the corresponding obligations of states and governments. In this sense, it is important to note that basic urban services, infrastructure and transportation are inherent components of this Human Right. Unfortunately this is not mentioned in this PPF.
3. Although the **Right to the City** is not explicitly mentioned in this paper, in a way the principles set up in the introduction that assert that “Everyone should have access to basic affordable services” and that access to services concerns all the “users” of the city is one of the key messages of the right to the city. Hence, it would be interesting that the paper mention the Right to the City and make the link with the policy paper 1 on “Right to the city and inclusive cities for all”.
4. The paper does not develop **all urban services** that are described in the introduction. In particular, the social welfare is not dealt in the paper whereas the services related to childcare or the elderly but also culture and leisure are part of urban public services. It would be interesting that the paper not only focuses on basic services but also extend the idea of progressive achievement of “public services” able to respond to the need of the people.
5. In general, the PPF lists already existing problems and challenges related with urban infrastructure, public services, transport and mobility, but is not proposing remedies or alternatives to the **root causes** of these problems. When it does propose some alternatives they seem unattainable for many, especially for the urban poor and those living in rural areas, whose needs are not considered in this PPF.
6. In addition to this, the paper should develop the **principle of poly-centrism**, which means cities where people in every part of the city can access to services, resources and rights in the same condition as if there were in the center/downtown.

7. Cities' communities are composed of different groups with diverse needs; a "differentiated approach within the framework of universal access to services" in public action would enable the most **vulnerable collectives** to get their specificities recognised and treated by public servants to improve their access to rights. This should include reach-out policies, for the most vulnerable and inaccessible groups to be reached by services' workers.

8. Starting from some experiments of "Commonalization" or "municipalisation" of water (Paris) or energy (German Municipalities), it would be interesting to focus on the potential of **common goods** to create resources for the general interest and to create public energy companies, able to assume costs derived from decarbonisation and, at the same time, to ensure universal energy provision to all citizens. Additionally, consider to pass laws that prohibit energy or water cuts (see the Catalan law).

9. Finally, this paper does not address the issue of services' externalization and **public-private partnerships** (PPP), which have been broadly used for the last decades. The framework of PPP should respect general interest and that private profit does not damage universal accessibility and quality of services. This can be done through independent accountability mechanisms set up with the participation of civil society's organizations and to a greater empowerment of local governments in this kind of partnerships. Also, this paper should include recommendations regarding "**public-popular**" partnerships –services managed by civil society's organizations, which don't look to get profit from it.

## **Challenges**

10. Control of funds, procurement and delivery process should include independent accountability mechanisms with the participation of users.

11. It misses an important issue that is affecting quality of services worldwide: efficiency can't be a reason to justify externalisation of services if it is confronted with their quality or with citizens' rights.

12. The challenges should address the issue of urban fragmentation, tackling the differences of access to public services in the poorest districts and areas.

13. Integrated planning and coordination processes regarding energy should include organizations of civil society –especially those that have studied or worked with alternative, greener production, delivery and consumption models.

14. The priority of efficiency over affordability regarding public transport policies still prevents the access for all urban users in particular for low-income citizens –which, precisely do not have any alternative to public transportation.

15. Infrastructure projects are becoming incredible expensive and unable to cope with the needs of urban dwellers. These systems require massive investments and involve a high maintenance cost which is an issue in poor countries. At the same time, it exacerbates the inequalities between rural and urban areas, with the later consuming most of the existing resources. Only a balanced development (and balanced investment) for both urban and rural areas, as pledged in Habitat II, would solve this dilemma being also an alternative to the urban future that Habitat III is predicting.

16. Regarding the urban-rural continuum, only the section about transport and mobility mentions the need of planned inter-city and rural-urban transportation models, going beyond the administrative boundaries of cities (2.b). This principle is further developed in the conclusion, pointing that the interdependence of urban and rural areas which "constitute an imperative for a sustainable urban development and its inter-urban and urban-rural ties" but fails to ensure also the above mentioned balanced rural development.

### **Policy priorities**

17. As urban services are prerequisite for any improvements in personal, social and economic opportunities for citizens, they should be accessible and affordable for them, prioritising their accessibility over cost recovery (p. 7).

18. This paper needs to be clearer on the idea that technological progress is instrumental to social progress and that the use of available knowledge, data and smart technologies are resources to implement more effective and accessible services (p. 7).

19. Urban services, including water and sanitation, have a crucial role regarding social cohesion and citizens' well-being. Therefore, they should be affordable and accessible for all citizens –and when this is faced against cost recovery, the former should prevail over the latter (p. 8).

20. Education should also include all-life-long learning and popular education.

21. Regarding safety and security, some other issues need to be mentioned beyond the clear need of mixed and inclusive neighbourhoods: security services and police should focus on prevention tasks and not only on reactive/repressive actions. Also, independent and public accountability mechanisms are needed to framework the police action, in order to report and condemn the actions that may entail arbitrary, racist or excessively violent elements (p. 8 & 14).

22. Apart from all the benefits of a good mobility system mentioned in this section, it should be added the territorial cohesion: at a metropolitan level, mobility system and quality public transport increases the social cohesion and shares opportunities all along the urban-rural continuum. Territorial cohesion, however, needs to be ensured at city level

too: in order not to create peripheral ghettos within the city (not only poor ones, also rich ghettos), public transport system need to be connected –and not only centre-periphery (p. 10). As mentioned above, the question is also to strengthen poly-centric cities where all the goods, resources and services are not concentrated in the center/downtown.

## **Implementation**

23. The multi-level governance and service planning process aims to improve the effectiveness, capacity and efficiency of services. As citizens are the users of these services, their knowledges, experiences and autonomous practices should be included in the infrastructures and services' planning, transforming the top-down approach in policy-making in a more horizontal way of decision-making and city planning (p. 12).

24. Apart from seeking solutions and sharing best practices, we should note that some basic services, such as transport, waste disposal and recycling, are managed largely by the informal sectors in many countries. The PPF positively recommends that any improvement of these services should be planned with those who make a living from these activities.

25. Education: although education is a cornerstone for social progress, it has to be frameworked within a wider strategy against poverty and social inequalities, in close alliance with other social actors. Therefore, education services' planning should be accompanied by further measures than ensure its function as social ladder –meaning, make this laddering more dependent on the educative level and less on family incomes (p. 13).

26. For waste, water and sanitation and energy management, the policy paper should encourage the commonalization or municipalization of them, in the framework of adequate competencies and resources, with the participation of the users.

27. Regarding public safety and security, the recommendations should refer to policy paper N°1. The mention of “strengthening social control” for security should be better explained in order to avoid confusion, giving place to self-justice mechanisms and unequal application of law between territories. Security should be a state monopoly for general interest and in the framework of rule of law and human rights under social control (p.14).

28. The PPF briefly denounces the privatization of public spaces, but does not mention the privatization trends of public services (transportation, education, health, water supply and water treatment and even security) which in many cases exacerbate inequality.

29. The use of private transport methods can not only be identified with social status or self interest. In developing countries, many have to commute from one place to another in an endless run to make a living. Thus, there are many other factors that can foster the use of alternative systems and reduce urban mobility problems such as (good) Urban planning,

proper distribution of urban services (i.e. educational and health facilities) and decent and well located jobs.

30. The PPF9 adequately recommends that local governments have access to funding and corresponding political and administrative capacities. There are also some comments about smart solutions; despite the obvious advantages of any solutions aiming at improving the living conditions of many, these solutions can increase the existent technological gap on those who cannot afford them. For this reason, it is highly important that any "smart" solution is adapted to different built environments and they should not become another north to south technology transfer.

## **Conclusion**

31. The conclusion of this PPF is particularly interesting; it is important to highlight all the vectors included, in particular vector no. 2 "To develop local economies that sustain processes of social production of habitat and community development" and no. 4 "To move towards a new model of sustainable habitat". It's a pity that the document neither explains nor explores this new model any further.

32. The human rights approach is missing -again- when vector no1. quotes "(...) give legitimacy to the right to land, housing, access to urban services and opportunities, without compromising environmental values". These rights are basic Human Rights and there's no need to give them legitimacy but to uphold and implement them.

33. The conclusion should include a reference to the essential role of urban public services in the fight against inequalities and the great damages that budget cuts and austerity policies are causing to this aim. It is needed, then, to ensure sufficient public funds for urban services in order to contribute to social cohesion (p.18).

## **Additional commentary on the "smart city" concept**

The PPF9 promotes the new concept of the “smart city” and its accompanying technology. It should be noted that this [contemporary concept](#) refers to an urban region that features highly advanced interconnected infrastructure, transportation and built environment, in general, and information and communications technology (ICT), in particular. Many technological platforms are involved, including but not limited to automated sensor networks and data centers.

“Smart city” is primarily a marketing term, promoting the production, exchange and consumption of such technology. The concept originated during the world economic crisis of 2008, when the IBM Corporation began work on a “smarter cities” concept as part of its [Smarter Planet](#) initiative. By the beginning of 2009, the concept had captured the imagination of many private- and public-sector innovators across the globe, becoming one of the many lucrative businesses forming the so-called “[green economy](#).”

The [positive aspects](#) of the smart city include a promised public benefit from enhanced quality, performance, efficiency and interactivity of urban functions and services, reduced costs and resource consumption, more convenient access to information and improved contact between citizens and government. Certain smart city technologies also seek to enhance public security through digital monitoring, data exchange, surveillance and reporting applications.

Some negative aspects of a “smart city” are the high cost in financial resources and time, especially for taxpayers and consumers who would have to pay the bill for projects over the projected 20–30 years required to build a “smart city.” Many cities seeking to become “smart” may require special investment regions or special economic zones with modified labor standards and tax incentives to attract investment, where much of the funding for these projects would have to come from private developers and from abroad, in addition to the maintenance and operation costs that tend to form a major part of public-private procurement and service contracts.

Some [critics warn](#) that the dominance of the fashion to acquire cool, new, innovative technology forms a giant distraction from the most-important issues and survival priorities of the impoverished majority in cities and other human settlements, while accelerating processes that lead to the transfer of power away from ordinary people. For instance, a city in which insurance companies, banks and corporations are eager to incorporate “smart city” technologies in their operations and decision making, their proprietary over data and systems raises questions related to the larger issues of the democratization of data.

Noteworthy among the challenges and hazards is harmonization of “smart city” features across wide spatial areas. Only certain parts of cities can implement these technologies at any given time, thus creating clusters of buildings, zones or neighborhoods featuring smart solutions, but disconnected from the surrounding areas.

The “smart city” concept also poses a human rights and governance dilemma, as every “freedom” digital technology offers is accompanied by the corresponding threat of surveillance and social engineering. Other concerns emerge from uneven coverage resulting in increased hegemony of the city over the countryside and supplanting the greater urgency of building a human rights habitat.

Moreover, building or converting to a “smart city” can deepen the existent technological gap, leaving behind those who cannot afford such solutions. For this reason, it is highly important that these solutions are adapted to various built environments, including poorer neighborhoods, and they should not form another north-to-south technology transfer pattern, replacing local and indigenous innovation with costly, external solutions.

The technological advances of a “smart city” do not obviate the need for human settlements to operate as “learning cities” or “learning villages,” by ensuring appropriate, high-quality education for all, as well as participatory evaluation of the performance of functions, tasks and services toward future improvement of habitat conditions. Among the examples of such “learning” habitats are those that have evaluated the implementation of Habitat Agenda commitments over the period since Habitat II (1996) and have committed to applying consequent lessons in the performance period of Habitat III (2017–36).