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Thirty years of Habitat I: no more neoliberal model of cities!

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It is possible to build new cities thanks to a new urban social pact centered on the citizens. The failure of the neoliberal model of cities.

Thirty years after the first Habitat I world summit held in Vancouver, we, citizens of the world, have witnessed the manifest deterioration of our living conditions and unalienable rights.

After all these years, not one of the objectives or goals has been even partially achieved: 15% of the world population is subjected to forced eviction caused by foreign investments in indebted countries or in countries undergoing the transition towards a market economy (Karachi, Bombay, New Delhi, Istanbul), to the privatization and liberalization of the real estate market (throughout Europe including Russia, and the United States), due to ethnic cleansing (from the ex Yugoslavia to the United Kingdom), due to occupations and wars (Palestine and others), and finally, due to speculation in the aftermath of natural disasters such as the Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina.

This also underlines the fact that Objective 11 of the United Nations' Millenium Goals on the basis of which living conditions of 100 million people were supposed to have been improved by the year 2020, when it is more realistic to foresee that there will be 700 million more residents of shanty towns.

The main cause of this was the failure of the strategies of simplification and support which conferred the main responsibility for housing development to the market, which supposedly would have then been self-managed and thus the existing inequity would have been corrected. Instead of improving living conditions in most cities, neoliberal globalization caused new problems stemming from the mercantilization of the land and basic services, as well as from wasting limited resources such as water.

This phenomenon is causing a rapid loss of identity of the communities and their territories, rising segregation and marginalization of individuals and concepts such as housing and participation, the indiscriminate rise in the cost of land, mass evictions and the elimination of counterbalances and elementary norms, which crumble under the pressure of large sums of capital.

Furthermore, the neoliberal policies and structural reform programs have favoured the privatisation of public services all over the world and the transfer of elementary responsibilities to the local communities, both through the local authorities and through the organized community, while the State provides only insufficient subvention, concentrating only on welfare policies for the poor, whose numbers have risen everywhere during the last decade.

Today inequality goes much deeper, so much so, that the issue of manageability of the cities is being questioned, because of the development of two different but strongly interconnected worlds, the formal and the informal, each of which develops its own rules and regulations.

In this context, the idea of basing public policy on the formalization of the informal policies by simplifying administrative norms and progressively eliminating all references to "housing rights" in the texts of UN-habitat is incredibly superficial and naïve.

The reign of capital in third-world cities can only lead to the realization of the chilling predictions made by George Orwell in his famous book "1984": cities where police control millions of poor individuals who survive with great difficulty in the vicinity of the official city. Only those who do not know the shortages suffered by the majority of the urban population in developing countries in cities like Lima, Sao Paulo, Mexico D.F., Buenos Aires, Abuja, Nairobi, Harare, could find this to be an exaggerated statement.

As for the cities of the "first world" or those in transition toward a market economy, any outside observer can

see the accelerated process of "third world-isation" that they experience year after year. This process is not only due to increasing migration but also to the deterioration of living conditions and to the creation of ghettos that have given rise to the recent revolts of young people in the poor Parisian suburbs and to the opposition of the inhabitants of Beijing to the demolitions associated with the Olympic Games. Not to mention those historical cities, such as Venice, Rennes or Aachen, which evict their inhabitants and thus squander the dynamism of community life, and are thus drained of their significance as well as their substance.

Call for a New Urban Social Pact

The harmonious development of cities, the respect for fundamental civil rights and the improvement of living conditions of their populations, demands more than ever the implementation of a **new urban social pact** that concerns everyone (habitant associations and urban social movements, local and governmental authorities, militant researchers and other operators) with common principles (rights to housing and to the city, public intervention, durability, equality and non-discrimination). In this pact, the autonomy and the differences of the actors should be considered as a part of the solution to the problems and not as problems to be solved by the rules of the market or police intervention.

However, this new urban social pact involves agreeing on the material and symbolic significance of the city for its habitants, for the region, for the country and for the world and on shared principles that make it possible to live a civilized life in the heart of the city, such as gender and economic equity, peace, harmony and the wisdom to manage conflicts as well as resources. Among others:

- Respect of individual and collective rights of the city and in the city
- No racial, social, economic, or gender discrimination
- Collective character of public property
- Fundamental role of the public sector and of participation in controlling the market
- Land use restrictions in agreement with the needs and interests of the whole, especially in matters of rare resources such as water
- Shared development planning
- Local democracy and active subvention

As for housing and urban development, it must be taken into account that urban and habitat problems have specific characteristics according to each concrete reality and that, as a consequence, the envisaged solutions must be flexible, adapted to the circumstances, with a local approach and needs for improvement proper to each territory, and they must be worked out with the active participation of the habitants and of their organizations and not behind their backs or in their names.

Uniform housing policies promoted by the multilateral agencies, and that can not be modified by the "beneficiary" country, should be put aside.

But for that to happen the countries, especially those in the South, must be able to count on the necessary resources so that programs adapted to the real needs of the people can become reality.

According to this perspective, social movements propose practical measures such as taxes on speculative real estate transactions and the creation of public trusts for the improvement of housing that draw, for example, on foreign debt.

From these bases, we call on the UN Habitat to become closer to people, to renew its vocation to service and its social sensitivity, to put aside privatist philosophies and its immeasurable faith in a market that has caused so much damage to the poor. For this thirtieth anniversary of Habitat I, we propose a new form of dialogue so that the voice of the habitants, the true builders of the city will be heard once and for all.

Creating a Shared Space for Urban Social Movements: Toward a World Assembly of Habitants

This call will be all the stronger at every level if, the habitants know how to conquer the spaces and to claim the legitimacy that was refused to them.

Thus, we reaffirm the proposal, first made at the World Social Forum, to build a unified sphere for associations and urban social movements, which includes more than 200 organizations from more than 30 countries: exchange of experiences, refinement of shared strategies, a global solidarity campaign like the Campaign for Zero Expulsions.

Therefore we hereby call everyone, organizations and networks throughout the world, to organize World Zero Eviction Days for housing rights (October 2006) on the occasion of UN Habitat's World Habitat Day.

These events will represent a further step toward reaffirming the voice of the habitants as opposed to the voice of the counterparts, a fundamental step in the creation of the World Assembly of Habitants, which should be based on the pace of the neighbourhoods, at the local/national/continental levels, so as to give life to a new Urban Way.

Vancouver, 19-23 June 2006

Click here for the invitation to participate in the "Reinforce Housing rights now!" protest march at the FUM (Vancouver 19/6/06)

Click here to see the official site of the World Urban Forum

Click here to read the program of the UN-AGFE seminar on evictions

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