



November 28, 2022

TO: Members of the *Ad Hoc* Working Group on Stakeholder Engagement
FROM: The General Assembly of Partners (GAP) represented by Eugenie L. Birch,
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RE: Stakeholder Engagement Mechanism (SEM)

Many thanks to you for inviting GAP to share its experiences with Habitat III (2013-2016) and its subsequent activities (2016-present). Given its recognition in the *New Urban Agenda*, GAP wishes to share features that could be adopted by you in the development of the UN-Habitat Stakeholder Engagement Policy. This statement has two parts, Part I Building on the Legacy with suggestions for the SEM and Part 2 Rationale: GAP from Inception to the Present, a history of GAP from 2013 to the present.

Introduction

As you likely know, Article 128 of the *New Urban Agenda* bids you to build on the legacy of the Habitat III experience, that in our opinion represents a “Golden Age” of exemplary intergovernmental deliberations noted for the early and deep collaboration and cooperation among Member States and a wide range of stakeholders.¹ In the Habitat III preparatory process stakeholders participated in a wide range of officially sanctioned activities detailed in Part 2 of this statement. The Habitat III secretariat contributed the written outcomes of the activities to the Member States as advisory documents for use in the composition of the *New Urban Agenda*.

Here is Article 128 of the *New Urban Agenda* with key sentences highlighted:

We will encourage UN-Habitat, other United Nations programmes and agencies, and other relevant stakeholders to generate evidence-based and practical guidance for the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and the urban dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals in close collaboration with the Member States, local authorities, major groups, and other relevant stakeholders as well as through the mobilization of experts. **We will build on the legacy of the Habitat III conference and the lessons learned from the preparatory process, including the regional and thematic meetings. We note, in this context, the valuable contributions of inter alia, the World Urban Campaign, the General Assembly of Partners for Habitat III, and the Global Land Tool Network.**

Part 1 Building on Legacy and Lessons Learned from Habitat III and Beyond

Here are three observations about features to include in the UN-Habitat Stakeholder Engagement Policy:

¹ Stakeholders participated through one of three mechanisms. They were either voluntary members of UN-Habitat advocacy groups having memorandums of understanding with UN-Habitat exemplified by the World Urban Campaign; as UN-Habitat-invited expert groups advising on specialized areas exemplified by the Global Land Tool Network; acting as representatives of separate major groups or as participants in self-organized independent multi-stakeholder platforms as exemplified by the General Assembly of Partners for Habitat III.

1. **Provide a broad, clear definition of stakeholders to reflect 21st century practice that recognizes the emergence, importance, and efficiency of multi-stakeholder platforms.** Beyond including individual major groups and Habitat Agenda Partners, recognize appointed advisory groups and self-organized multi-stakeholder platforms. The latter work together across interests and areas of knowledge to develop unified consensus driven contributions and therefore can work productively, collaboratively, and cooperatively with Member States as they create and implement policy and programs. They offer Member States an efficient means of dialogue with multiple groups who can present suggestions that encompass disparate interests in a comprehensive form.
2. **Give clear guidelines for timely stakeholder engagement.** Stakeholder contributions are timely if they are included early and throughout the various deliberative processes ranging from agenda setting to policymaking to decision-making. Stakeholders will be powerful allies with national governments in the implementation of programs and policies if they have a chance to explain their interests for Member State inclusion.
3. **Commit to meaningful stakeholder engagement.** Provide formal channels for stakeholder engagement at multiple stages of the deliberative processes as a way of doing business.

Part 2 Rationale: GAP from Inception to the Present

The narrative that follows illustrates the rationale for the three observations in Part 1. They demonstrate the efficacy of multi-stakeholder platforms, of early and timely engagement and of thoughtful forms of engagement. We offer the explanation of the process not for duplication of the actual activities but as examples of the type of work that embodies the true spirit of consultation among Member States and stakeholders.

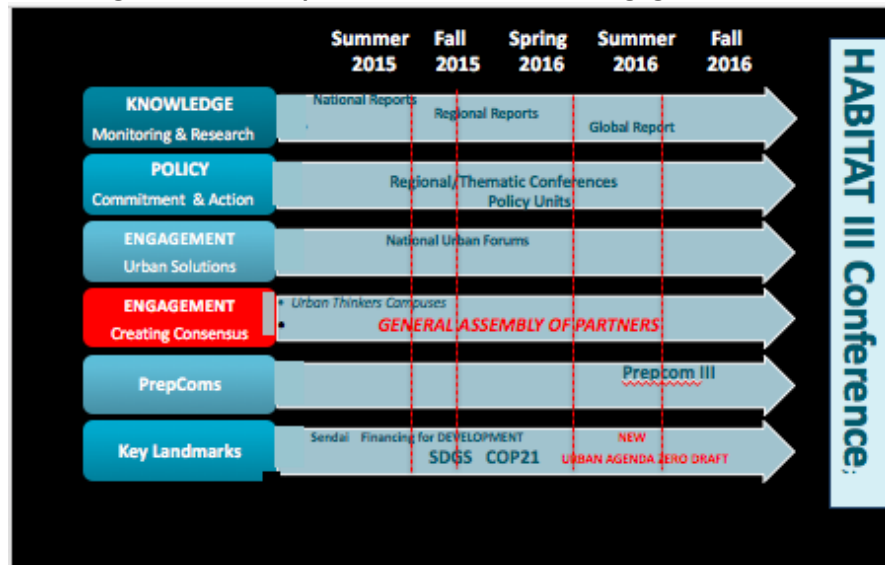
The Origins of the Conceptual Framework of Habitat III Stakeholder Engagement

In 2013, as the UN General Assembly approved the details for the Habitat III conference preparations, the Member States made an explicit request to Joan Clos, the Habitat III Secretary-General charged with overseeing the arrangements, along with a Bureau composed of representatives of ten Member States. They called for “improved participation of local authorities and other stakeholders in the preparatory process and the conference itself.”¹

Clos quickly transformed this request into an innovative 18-month multi-step, multi-party process that would involve thousands of participants in specific activities aimed at delivering a strong conference outcome. Not only did he respect the Member States’ mandate but also he knew, as a former mayor, that if the conference was to be impactful, he needed to develop a broadly accepted outcome document (named the *New Urban Agenda*) through intense and widespread involvement of many stakeholders.²

Thus, the preparatory process developed under his direction and embedded in ongoing courses of action had three types of components: knowledge sharing and reflection, policy recommendations, engagement activities.³ Each component had stakeholder involvement depending on the nature of the desired contribution to the preparations and the conference. The result was involvement of thousands of participants even before the conference which itself had some 50,000 attendees.⁴ Figure 1 illustrates the elements of the preparatory process.

Figure 1 The Components of Stakeholder Engagement



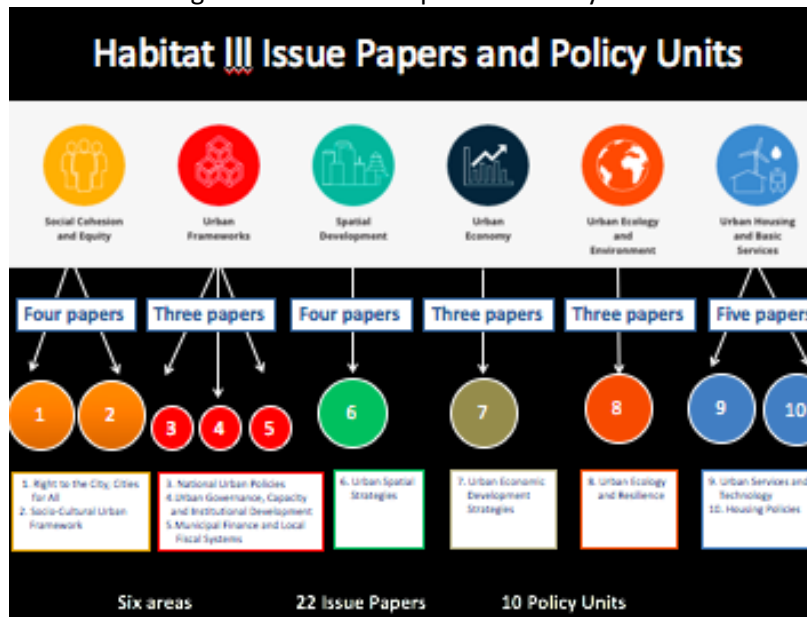
Knowledge-Sharing and Reflection: Stakeholders Contribute

The knowledge-sharing and reflection component involved national governments and regional commissions. It asked them to evaluate their work on housing and sustainable urban development since Habitat II, sharing this evaluation with stakeholders. The United States, for example, assembled a national committee of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders who reviewed a seven-chapter national report, largely written by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and opted to develop an annex to the US report which they completed in time for the conference. In addition, the US National Committee solicited US aspirations to be reflected at Habitat III by convening five regional conferences and sponsoring a discussion series on global agreements in Washington DC for national leaders.

Official Inputs to the New Urban Agenda: Stakeholders Involved

To collect policy recommendations for the *New Urban Agenda* the UN General Assembly accepted the Secretary General’s plan of soliciting two official input streams derived from the Habitat III Policy Units and the Habitat III Regional and Thematic Conferences. The Policy Unit concept was new to the UN. It brought in 200 experts nominated by the Member States and civil society organizations to synthesize material from 22 issue papers written by UN staff from agencies throughout the organization. The topics for both the papers and the policy units were organized under six large headings: social cohesion and equity, urban frameworks, spatial development, urban economy, urban ecology/environment and housing/basic services. Figure 2 illustrates this format.

Figure 2 The Issue Papers and Policy Units



The 11 Habitat III Regional and Thematic Conferences convened between Fall 2015 and Spring 2016 developed declarations that served as the second official input for the *New Urban Agenda*. Four regional conferences, sponsored by Member States, took place in Indonesia, Czech Republic, Nigeria, and Mexico. Seven thematic conferences, sponsored by local governments, took place in Pretoria (informal settlements), Barcelona (public space), Abu Dhabi (renewable energy), Tel Aviv (civic engagement), Montreal (metropolitan governance), intermediate cities (Cuenca), financing development (Mexico City). These meetings involved stakeholders locally, thus magnifying stakeholders' ability to participate in crafting the outcome document.

Engagement: Stakeholders Active in Formal Channels

To assure representation of key stakeholder groups, the Habitat III Secretariat encouraged the creation of an innovative engagement platform, the General Assembly of Partners (GAP). The idea for GAP originated in the workings of UN Habitat's World Urban Campaign (WUC) whose members quickly realized that WUC as a UN Habitat project formed to advocate of that agency's work would not be able to act as an independent entity.

To remedy this problem, they conceived of GAP at the first Urban Thinkers Campus held in Caserta, Italy in October 2015. They devised a constitution, consulted among the likely stakeholders, and proposed the organization at the second preparatory conference in April 2016. As its designers intended, GAP was to emulate the UN General Assembly in structure and purpose. It was a representative body originally composed of 14 Partner Constituent Groups (PCGs) based on the UN's nine major groups recognized in 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit), the Habitat Agenda Partners (formed after Habitat II) and other interested groups.

It aimed to contribute to Habitat III and the *New Urban Agenda* by providing an official channel for stakeholder engagement and collaboration, developing, and advocating for common positions, and elaborating and adopting position statements while respecting the individual differences among the PCGs. The GAP constitution called for each PCG to be headed by elected co-chairs, and Executive

Committee composed of the PCG co-chairs. The constitution called for GAP members to meet in plenary as a decision-making body. The UN General Assembly recognized GAP in its December 2015 resolution recognizing the modalities for Habitat III.⁵

During the months prior to Habitat III, the Executive Committee met six times and the GAP full membership met four times to develop its position. GAP issued two declarations – the *Nairobi Declaration* presented to the Bureau articulating its presence and commitment to develop collective contributions to the *New Urban Agenda* – the *New York Declaration* detailed GAP's intended legacy document. GAP issued its legacy document, *Partnerships for the New Urban Agenda* in March 2016 that identified areas of contributions from the partners in the implementation of the *New Urban Agenda* (knowledge, advocacy, piloting/innovation, and monitoring). This document became the basis for GAP interventions with Member States as they developed the *New Urban Agenda*.

GAP was extremely active in the deliberations for the *New Urban Agenda* in several ways beyond promoting its *Partnership* agreement. Its involvement increased with growing recognition of GAP by the Member States. GAP representatives were official members of the drafting committees for the Regional and Thematic Conferences. The GAP president was invited to address the opening and closing ceremonies of the Prague regional conference. GAP mounted side events at the conferences as well. GAP members were well-represented in the Policy Units.

In June 2016, GAP organized the Stakeholder Hearings mandated by the UN General Assembly modalities in which each PCG and more than 40 stakeholders commented on the zero draft of the *New Urban Agenda*. At this time and forward, GAP had multiple, lengthy meetings with the Bureau and the co-facilitators (UN ambassadors charged with assembling the final drafts of the *New Urban Agenda*), GAP PCG chairs were recognized to make statements at the informal meetings held in New York City in May and June and at third preparatory conference. Throughout this time, GAP increased the number of PCGs, adding one recognizing Older Persons and another recognizing Persons with Disabilities and its membership exploded rising from around a hundred at its formation in April 2015 to 1,200 +unique organizations and individual members in September 2016. Overall, its membership encompassed 58,000 networks and had an outreach in the millions.

For Habitat III, GAP was quite visible. It organized 16 roundtables and 4 assemblies, the president and vice-president's speeches were included in the opening and closing ceremonies. The UN Secretary General Ban ki Moon met privately with the PCG co-chairs. In an analysis of the *New Urban Agenda*, GAP identified twenty paragraphs where its interventions on behalf of knowledge, advocacy, innovation, and monitoring were present. Each PCG in similar analyses found many areas of support for their respective interests. Finally, the *New Urban Agenda* recognized GAP by name.

Transformation of GAP to a Permanent, Independent Organization

While GAP was originally intended to be a short-term project, self-extinguished with the end of the Habitat III conference as reflected in its constitution, its members voted to reconstitute the group as a permanent organization to support the *New Urban Agenda* and associated global agreements, especially SDG Goal 11. At its fifth plenary meeting, held at the Habitat III conference, the members decided to capitalize on the positive momentum generated in the preparatory process and at the conference, voted to extend the GAP's life into the *New Urban Agenda* implementation stage.

GAP leadership engaged in the process of formalizing the entity as the General Assembly of Partners (GAP). Its Executive Committee met in January 2017 in New York City to hammer out the revised

constitution and by-laws. The constitution outlines the purpose, organizational structure, responsibilities, and electoral procedures for the organization. The GAP membership ratified the constitution at the sixth GAP plenary meeting prior to UN Habitat's Governing Council meeting in Nairobi in May 2017. In the following year, GAP applied and received legal recognition as a charity under the State of New York law. For more information, please see our website <https://generalassemblyofpartners.com/>

GAP Activities 2017 to Present

As an independent, self-organized, consensus-driven multi-stakeholder platform now composed of 17 Partnership Constituent Groups, supportive of the implementation of the *New Urban Agenda* and associated global agreements, GAP has fulfilled its constitutionally mandated duties related to governance (meetings and elections) and advocacy responsibilities. Regarding the latter, GAP has attended UN-Habitat intergovernmental meetings including the newly formed UN-Habitat Assembly and Executive Board. Its members, speaking as accredited organizations with membership in GAP, have contributed statements representing GAP positions at these meetings. Here are some examples:

- GAP members, at the invitation of UN-Habitat, have participated in expert group meetings to contribute to the *New Urban Agenda's* quadrennial report.
- GAP has participated in and organized side and networking events at UN-Habitat's World Urban Forum.
- GAP has been a founding member of the Urban Cluster within the NGO major group. In this capacity, GAP has contributed to numerous side and networking events related to the annual meetings of the High-Level Political Forums and other official UN convenings in New York City. GAP has also contributed to NGO-Urban Cluster statements submitted to these meetings
- GAP has joined the Global Task Force for Local and Regional Governments, under whose aegis GAP has disseminated its current work on localizing support for the *New Urban Agenda* and associated global agreements.
- At the invitation of United Cities and Governments (UCLG) GAP has led two town halls, one on multistakeholder engagement and the other on trust in government at two World Assemblies of Local and Regional Government (Durban, 2020 and Daejeon, 2020) to disseminate the practices and lessons learned from Habitat III and advocate for the *New Urban Agenda*.
- Within GAP PCGs have formed partnerships to support focused activities – the partnership between the Persons with Disabilities and Older Persons PCGs to educate public and private decision-makers about universal design is an example.
- Individual PCGs with GAP endorsement have sponsored local advocacy and educational events in partnership with other stakeholder groups. A series of meetings and publications on affordable housing around the world organized by the Business PCG in partnership with the World Urban Campaign is an example as is GAP Civil Society PCG participation in the UN Disaster Risk Reduction stakeholder efforts.