**Comments of the government of the Netherlands on the Habitat III Issue Papers   
(non-edited version 2.0, New York, 31 May 2015)**

In reference to the preparations for the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) to be held in Quito, Ecuador from 17 to 20 October 2016 and taking into account the invitation to all member states to submit written comments on the issue papers whose final versions were published on the conference website on 31 May 2015, the Netherlands has the honour to present its general and specific comments for your consideration.

**General comments**

Firstly, many urban areas have developed nearby rivers and the sea, often at river-coastal interfaces. Their strategic geographic location, offering a wide range of trade and economic opportunities, makes deltas attractive places at which to build cities. But delta areas are also the places hit hardest by climate extremes as well as gradual stress. The World Economic Forum (WEF) global risks report lists water as the number-one risk. Thirteen of the world’s most populated delta areas which play a vital role in global supply chains are also highly vulnerable to flooding and water-related disasters.

**The Netherlands therefore underlines the importance of sharpening focus on urban deltas in order to boost the impact of our joint efforts.**

Secondly, although the need for a holistic approach to urban development is acknowledged in many places, the separate issue papers remain highly sector-oriented in their focus. For example, the papers on local economic development do not highlight social inclusion or job creation as key aspects in fostering inclusion. Similarly, the papers do not recognise the important role urban planning plays in facilitating social equality and conflict mitigation. And issues such as decoupling natural resource use from economic growth through a circular economy/urban mining and better resource efficiency are not reflected in the economic issue papers. Furthermore, demographic trends like migration to (and from) cities from rural areas or other countries can have a considerable impact on long-term urban development strategies and policies and should therefore be taken in account.

**The Netherlands therefore underlines the importance of developing clear conceptual criteria based on an integrated holistic approach to urban development, offering the policy units clear guidelines before they start their work.**

Thirdly, important governance dimensions are given too little attention. These include issues like citizen participation and local democracy, the role of subsidiarity and self-government, and the role of local government associations as a vehicle for sharing experiences. For example, urban planning (paper 8) is approached from a technical point of view; the political process in which citizens, the private sector and local government together discuss and decide on a vision for a city’s sustainable future is not sufficiently developed.

**The Netherlands therefore underlines the importance of a stronger and more integrated focus on the governance dimension in all issue papers, taking into account the key role played by all stakeholders, including citizens, the private sector and local government.**

Finally, the Netherlands emphasises that spatial and urban planning strategies and policies, including those related to industrial planning, contribute to economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability and resilience. Different sectors influence the spatial layout of the physical environment, and spatial planning strategies help tackle these challenges in a cross-sectoral way. They also help address underlying disaster risks, making cities more resilient. The Netherlands stresses the need for an integrated approach to spatial planning. It helps us take on the most complex of challenges, devise tailor-made solutions and work towards greater sustainability in the future. Key elements in spatial planning are long-term integrated planning, participatory approaches and building alliances with stakeholders, risk assessments, using spatial design as a policy tool, building on the basis of scenarios, working in multidisciplinary teams and multi-level governance. The end user and society must be given a central role in all spatial planning efforts.

**The Netherlands therefore underlines the importance of spatial and urban planning strategies for sustainable and resilient urban development.**

**Specific comments**

*Issue Paper 9 on Urban Land*

* Responsibility for land registration and management varies from country to country and is generally shared between different levels of government. In some countries it is centralised at national government level.
* A key recommendation should therefore be for government bodies to work together at local and national level on the financing and implementation of land registration and management.

*Issue Paper 15 on Urban Resilience*

The World Economic Forum global risks report 2015 lists water as the number-one risk in terms of its potential impact. It also mentions failure of urban planning as a major risk. So it is all the more important to invest in resilience to these risks in urban areas, which have the highest population density and the highest level of economic activity. Urban deltas are especially vulnerable to water-related shocks due to their location at a river-sea interfaces.

The Netherlands fully supports the notion that integrated holistic planning is needed. Based on our experience, we would like to propose the following building blocks as part of the key drivers for action:

* Policies should be based on scenario planning and forecasting rather than on a reactive approach to events as they occur. It pays off to invest in prevention, both economically and socially, because it protects livelihoods.
* We need integrated policies that promote urban resilience while taking the natural environment, the economy and spatial quality into account.
* Essential short-term measures need to be taken as soon as possible to make cities resilient. These should be combined with long-term flexibility to avoid path dependence and enable us to respond to future challenges (adaptive management).
* A multi-stakeholder approach is needed to raise awareness of the costs and risks and to actively involve all levels of government, business, academia, the local population and local institutions in implementing the measures while taking the local spatial context into account.

*Issue Paper 16 on Urban Ecosystems and Resource Management*

* The Netherlands fully recognises the importance of ecosystems but would also like to underline the importance of operationalising the different concepts. It is essential for sustainable urban development to consider the relations between vulnerable coastal ecosystems, wetlands, urban development, degradation and increased vulnerability to disasters and the effects of climate change.
* Although this issue paper also deals with resource management, it does not provide an in-depth assessment and analysis of all the different aspects of sustainable resource management. Issues like resource efficiency, decoupling, circular economy/urban mining and the transition to renewable energy are not addressed. This is a serious omission and a missed opportunity and should be included in the policy unit’s work.

*Issue Paper 17 on Cities and Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management*

* This paper should be explicitly linked to the Sendai Action Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction approved in March this year. Equally important is a link to the SDGs and the UNFCCC to facilitate coordination and boost efficiency.
* The Netherlands would like to draw attention to the importance of adaptive and preventive planning. On a local scale the effects of climate change are highly uncertain. This makes adaptive urban planning extremely useful and necessary. Furthermore, since the risks are so uncertain, prevention is key in reducing the impact of climate shocks and stress: risk = chance x consequence. The consequences of a disaster can be significantly reduced by taking preventive measures.
* In the case of extreme climate-related events, the continuity of critical services (roads, hospitals, communications, etc.) is critical in reducing disaster risks and creating a city that is resilient to the effects of climate change.

*Issue Paper 18 on Urban Infrastructure and Basic Services, including energy*

* The debate on managing infrastructure and basic services is a very rich and complex one. For that reason the issue paper is the ideal medium for providing an extensive overview of the present discussions on different models of local service delivery. It is important to look at the stakeholders responsible for delivering basic services and infrastructure (e.g. water, sanitation, transport, waste management, etc.) in the different countries and to elaborate more on financing the maintenance thereof.
* There is no clear identification of the current challenges: in less developed countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, where urban growth is set to be concentrated (94%) in the decades ahead, there is a need for urgent support to build national and local policies for infrastructure and basic services.
* Also, many developed countries are facing massive investments gaps for renewing infrastructure, adapting to structural demographic and economic changes, investing in new and alternative infrastructure for renewable energy and promoting climate adaptation and mitigation.

*Issue Paper 21 on Smart Cities*

* The Netherlands supports the focus on smart cities in the Habitat III process and considers integrated planning, smart governance, ICT infrastructure, mobility, urban resilience and sustainability as key elements of smart city developments.
* A smart city approach relies not only on technology and innovation but also on an integrated vision that incorporates various infrastructures and systems: water, mobility, energy, health, creative industry, food distribution, manufacturing, IT, etc.
* When it comes to smart city developments we should bear in mind that there is no such thing as a ‘one size fits all’ solution and demand a bottom-up approach.
* The issue paper is written from a more top-down point of view with barely any mention of stakeholder participation or the role of cities themselves. It is particularly important that governments are able to facilitate initiatives from society and establish the right framework and preconditions.