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Secretary-General, Habitat III  
Habitat III Secretariat  
UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development

Paris, 30 January 2016

**Comments on behalf of ICSU and Future Earth on the Habitat III Policy Paper Frameworks**

Dear Secretary-General,

As a representative and coordinating body of the scientific and technological community in other UN processes, and as an NGO accredited to ECOSOC, the International Council for Science (ICSU) welcomes the opportunity to submit comments for consideration as an official contribution to the policy-level process toward Habitat III. The development challenge urban environments represent needs to bring together different scientific knowledge communities. Definitely, this is a welcomed challenge for the research community.

This contribution presents the major comments our community has on the overall set of Policy Paper Frameworks, and then in a second part more detailed comments on specific Policy Paper Frameworks.

The 10 Policy Paper Frameworks, outlining the length and breadth of topics that will make up the New Urban Agenda, prepared by the policy units are comprehensive and action-oriented.

We welcome the realisation that Habitat III agenda must be inclusive and provide key contributions to other policy processes and post-2015 agendas. We need to ensure that the outcome document of Habitat III encourages a holistic approach to agenda making and the seeking of solutions. These issue papers are sectoral, and little perspective from whole of systems approach and the ecosystem that lies between these sectors.

The New Urban Agenda must seek to position itself towards a people-centric view of development, transitioning from a focus on land or other economic-centered developments to a focus on other aspects such as welfare and other human interests – supported by good, fair, and equitable governance.

In particular, Policy Paper Framework 8 would be stronger if a discussion on sustainability was included alongside resilience. Sustainability framed together with

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resilience of the urban system are two concepts that should be seen as complementary and urban resilience may perhaps only make sense in the light of a sustainability discourse in society.

These policy frameworks are lacking a narrative on urban health. Urban settings as social determinants of health cut across most of the key areas outlined in the policy papers. Many factors influencing urban health will need a detailed framing and inclusion in the final agenda, one that moves away from the traditional definition of health as simple provision of services.

Finally, we appreciate the opportunity for the scientific community to make fruitful contributions to the sustainability agenda around urban human settlements.

On behalf of ICSU and Future Earth, with contributions from:

Xuemei Bai, Future Earth

Thomas Elmqvist, Stockholm Resilience Centre

Alyson Surveyer, Future Earth

Anne-Hélène Prieur-Richard, Future Earth

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Ruben Zondervan, Earth System Governance Project

Yours sincerely,



Heide Hackmann

Executive Director

## **Future Earth comments on Habitat III Policy Paper Frameworks**

This section presents specific comments from Future Earth, a scientific international programme on sustainable development ([www.futureearth.org](http://www.futureearth.org)). Authors include Xuemei Bai, Thomas Elmqvist, Alyson Surveyer, and Anne-Hélène Prieur-Richard.

### **Overall set of Policy Paper Frameworks**

The 10 Policy Paper Frameworks are comprehensive and action-oriented.

Although, Policy Paper Framework 1 is broad in scope, the Policy Unit Frameworks are structured in a sectorial approach which might create undesired silos and a fragmented understanding and view of urban components. A more holistic and systems approach is recommended to understand and tackle complex interactions, trade-offs and synergies between these sectors. Future Earth is drafting a white paper specifically on this issue, titled “Systems Approach and Evidence-Based Policy Making in Cities”. It will be submitted in March 2016 as a policy paper input for the Third Meeting of the Habitat III Preparatory Committee (July 2016).

### **Policy Paper Framework 1 – The Right to the city**

- 1) The Policy Paper Framework 1 is comprehensive and covers the essential issue of transitioning from a focus on land or other economic-centered developments to a focus on other aspects such as welfare and other human interests. This people-centered urbanization is attempted in China's National New-type Urbanization Plan (released in March 2014) shifting from the current economic focus of land development to welfare and well-being whilst aiming to address issues of rapid urbanization (Bai et al, 2014). This Chinese Urbanization Plan might serve as a useful case study and scenario planning for the new “The right to the City” paradigm.
- 2) This paper needs to address and elaborate on rights to environmental protection, specifically regarding energy consumption and air pollution issues (in light of the increasing pollutant concentration and smog in world city-regions, and in particular in China, India and other developing country cities where the health toll is expected to grow rapidly). Proposed actions may not consider specificities of cities in developing countries as they may not be aggressive enough to (rapidly) reduce pollutant concentrations to acceptable levels and/or may not be appropriate mechanisms for cities in developing countries (i.e. incentives).
- 3) An additional dimension to address while considering urban economy and social aspects (e.g. welfare and well-being, safer cities and identity and culture), would be international migration and refugees in relation to aforementioned aspects especially in view of the current migrant crisis. Addressing such questions as: How can cities accommodate such fluxes of refugees whilst providing secure

livelihoods to all? How can cities accommodate new diversity of cultures and identities?

### **Policy Paper Framework 8 – Urban Ecology and Resilience**

We find the current version of Policy Paper Framework 8 (31 December 2015) very comprehensive and action oriented. However, the paper would significantly be strengthened if a) clear definitions of urban resilience and sustainability are given, and b) a discussion on how the two concepts relate to each other is included.

The policy paper is very much in line with current discourse on urban sustainability and resilience which recently has been pointed out to be plagued with confusions and misconceptions (Redman 2014, Meerow et al. 2016). For example, Meerow et al (2016) concluded in their literature review on the meaning and definitions of urban resilience that "...existing definitions are inconsistent and underdeveloped ..."

The need to have clear definitions and simultaneously address both the concept of urban resilience and sustainability is made obvious in the formulation of the SDG 11 "*Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, **resilient and sustainable***". The two concepts are not the same and by only addressing one of them, e.g. urban resilience, in a policy document, there is a danger of resilience becoming vague and ambiguous and tending to replace sustainability, and this is the perception readers have with the present policy document.

The classic definition of sustainability is clearly normative and focuses on managing resources and ecosystems in a way that guarantees welfare and promotes environmental justice for current urban as well as rural human populations, and for future generations. Urban sustainability in such a definition can only be achieved within planetary boundaries (Steffen et al., 2015). Urban resilience on the other hand is non-normative and a characteristic of a complex system, representing the capacity of an isolated urban system to maintain essential functions in face of disturbances while continuing to develop. However, resilience is often ambiguous and contested with respect to resilience to what, for what, and for whom.

In this policy paper, resilience is unfortunately largely viewed as normative. The paper would be stronger if a discussion on sustainability is also included, viewed as the normative goal of society, while resilience represents a more non-normative characteristic of the urban system and may be desired or non-desired in a particular context. The two concepts should be seen as complementary and urban resilience may perhaps only make sense in the light of a sustainability discourse in society (Elmqvist, 2014).

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## **Earth Systems Governance comments on Habitat III Policy Papers**

This section presents specific comments from the Earth System Governance Project ([www.earthsystemgovernance.org](http://www.earthsystemgovernance.org)).

### **General comments**

The policy briefs are comprehensive and provide almost a complete overview of all relevant aspects. Several points are listed here below which could improve the quality of the policy briefs.

- The policy briefs are not coherent. Only some of the policy briefs list relevant SDGs and provide clear summaries (see for example policy brief 6). A coherent and more structured approach could improve the readability of the policy briefs. Furthermore an overview of the relevant SDGs and targets per policy brief could improve the transparency of the documents.
- The word 'sustainability' is used in several of the policy briefs. However as Young et al (2015) state in order to achieve sustainability there is a need for redefining 'what many individuals and societies believe is the good life'. 'Research on new perspective on the management of human- environment relations is also urgently needed' (Young, Et al). For more information see Earth System Challenges and a Multi-layered Approach for the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>0</sup>.
- Several tradeoffs are made in the policy briefs, one could however wonder if this is desired. Amongst others, scholars as Halsnaes & Shukla (2007) point out in their article, that these trades-offs are 'assumptions and are an incomplete description of the way in which humans really make decisions'<sup>0</sup>.

### **Comments on individual policy papers**

#### **Policy Paper Framework 1**

- The following formulation is too limited (see the red part).  
*'Some of the worst effects of the hegemonic urbanization pattern are the gentrification of traditional and popular neighbourhoods, the privatization of public spaces and basic services, spatial segregation of the urban poor and the use of governmental funds to promote major infrastructure projects which do not answer to people's needs, but to economic interests'.*

A formulation in the style of: 'focus mostly only on economic interest' would be a better fit.

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<sup>0</sup> Young Et al. Policy brief 1 link: [http://www.post2015.jp/dl/result/seika\\_140520\\_1.pdf](http://www.post2015.jp/dl/result/seika_140520_1.pdf)

<sup>0</sup> Framing Issues. Halsnaes & Shukla (2007) link: <http://bit.ly/1SLYU7P>

- The following sentence needs clarification: '*For the effects of the New Urban Agenda, all the persons who inhabit a city, whether permanently or transitionally must be considered its citizens*'. The statement could be relevant to the situation in China but could create problematic situations in e.g. Palestine.
- Point 3.2 of the policy paper needs to be reformulated: '*3.2 Growth versus wellbeing*'. This is incorrect; growth is not per definition contradictory to wellbeing.

### Policy Paper Framework 2

- The policy brief states: '*Enable good governance for assuring acceptable balances between different social and population groups*' (Page 12). There are however three aspects of governance: good governance, effective governance and equitable governance. The term 'equitable governance' needs to be incorporated in the policy brief, to provide a holistic definition of governance. 'Equitable governance relates both to the equitable application of the rule of law and to the distribution of wealth and opportunity within society' (Biermann, et al.). For more information please see Policy brief 3: Integrating Governance into the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>0</sup>.

### Policy Paper Framework 3

- The policy brief provide a large variety of relevant SDGs. However SDG 14 is not listed. SDG 14 refers to the 'Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resource's<sup>0</sup>. However, target 14.1 and 14.b refer also to relevant aspects.
  - **14.1:** By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution.
  - **14.b:** Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets.
- Therefore SDG 14 and the above listed targets should be incorporated into the policy brief.

### Policy Paper Framework 4

- Page 10 states: '*Good urban governance within an effective legal and institutional framework shall promote and ensure....*' (As mentioned earlier), there are however three aspects of governance: good governance, effective governance and equitable governance. Equitable governance needs to be incorporated in the

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<sup>0</sup> Biermann, et al. Policy brief 3 link: <http://bit.ly/1yDwnXJ>

<sup>0</sup> UN 2016, link <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/oceans/>

policy brief. ‘Equitable governance relates both to the equitable application of the rule of law and to the distribution of wealth and opportunity within society’ (Biermann, et al.). For more information please see policy brief 3: Integrating Governance into the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>0</sup>.

### **Policy Paper Framework 7**

- ‘*Economic growth is key to job and wealth creation*’ (Page 9). This statement needs to be explained.

### **Policy Paper Framework 9**

- ‘*A revised model of socio-economic governance is required*’. (Page 17). This statement needs to be explained.

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<sup>0</sup> Biermann, et al. Policy brief 3 link: <http://bit.ly/1yDwnXJ>