

Habitat II at Istanbul Produces Significant Recommendations

by Eric Carlson

The Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) was held in Istanbul, Turkey, from June 3-14, 1996, with 171 countries represented. It was an unusual event for its openness to participation and partnerships among a wide variety of groupings, all of whom were invited to present their statements and viewpoints to the Conference itself, as well as to their own meetings, workshops and dialogue sessions.

The Conference produced the Habitat Agenda, a global plan of action, which provides guidelines to governments and all concerned to address the goals of adequate shelter for all and sustainable human settlements development. The Habitat Agenda is a document of 120 pages with lofty goals and objectives that will not in many cases be easy to implement but that do reflect a leap forward in achieving a better understanding about the realities of urbanization, and the problems and attitudes that must be addressed in meeting the needs for housing, shelter and community infrastructure. Significantly, the Habitat Agenda also produced recommendations on housing finance. This is the first time the subject has been dealt with in any substantial way since the Stockholm UN 1972 Conference on the

Human Environment. The first UN Conference on Habitat, held in Vancouver in June 1976, ignored the subject entirely, as did the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio in 1992.

The International Union for Housing Finance is a duly registered non-government organization (NGO) in Category II with the UN Economic and Social Council. It has long taken a supportive interest in UN activities and proposals concerned with housing finance.¹ The Habitat Agenda now offers an open door and new starting point for public and private sector work to accelerate housing finance development internationally.

In addition to a large contingent of Turkish NGOs and journalists, there were about 10,000 participants at the Habitat Conference and its many related parallel events. There were 1,200 NGO representatives who for the first time found that they were able to assist delegations by their amendments and suggestions for the Habitat Agenda and to collaborate when requested with the various working groups.

In addition to the elevation of recognition for the NGOs, there was also established a ground-breaking participation of mayors and local authorities who were accorded the privilege of speaking at the Conference sessions. A World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities met at Istanbul for two days before the Conference itself, and it is clear that this

will be a permanent new and growing constituency for participation in future UN Conferences and meetings.

SUBJECT DIALOGUES

There were also one-day dialogues on specific subjects. One of these was on finance, organized by The World Bank and promoted by the Habitat Centre and nominally co-sponsored by the US Agency for International Development and eight other organizations. It was titled: Habitat II Dialogue, Finance and Cities in the Twenty-First Century. The Dialogue, attended by 200 participants, was mainly concerned with the mobilization of financial services and resources for the poor and the financing of basic infrastructure services in slums and marginal settlements. A two-page summary report of the Dialogue, "Selected Urban Finance Priorities," was presented to Committee II of the official conference.

The Habitat Forum, organized by the Habitat International Coalition, featured a variety of presentations, discussions, seminars and workshops on most aspects of the Habitat Agenda. Prominent among the topics were the role of women in shelter and housing construction and community facilities, infrastructure and services, and their rights to land ownership; housing as a human right, an originally highly contentious issue which was largely resolved in the newly adopted Habitat Agenda; cooperatives and other forms of organization for habitat development and management;

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micro-financing for shelter and entrepreneurship—a fast-growing sector; ecotechnology and design issues; good governance principles and examples; decentralization of responsibilities for housing finance, management and programs; and urban research.

“BEST PRACTICES”

A major permanent contribution of Habitat II was represented by the “Best Practices” Exhibition, showcasing examples of human settlements development from around the world. Organized by the Habitat Secretariat, the Best Practices Initiative forms part of an unprecedented global effort to identify solutions that work from a wealth of concrete experience in dealing with pressing issues. Originally, there were 500 submissions, reduced to 100 by a Technical Advisory Committee. Forty-three were short-listed and forwarded to an International Jury which selected 12 for showing at the Conference Exhibition. The exhibits were both large and small, with most featuring cooperation with local governments and with local community groupings and self-help organizations.

The Best Practices Initiative is now an interactive, computerized tool developed with the Together Foundation. Users can access information on the 500 case studies and other global data bank features which are available in various forms, including the Internet, CD-ROM, diskette and printed form.

Urban and housing indicators were also a major feature of the preparatory activities for the Conference. There were five regional forums and one global meeting to discuss the effective use of the indicators. The Indicators project, co-sponsored by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) and the World Bank, has evolved from the collection of information from 180 cities in over 100 countries. The indicators were developed as a tool for monitoring national and global trends of urbanization and urban

problems. Increasingly they will be used in evaluation of national and regional and local strategies, and decisions for housing and urban improvement.

DOCUMENTS AVAILABLE

Habitat II produced an impressive volume of documents, including: the national reports of all member participants; reports from the national committees for Habitat II; organizational achievement reports from NGOs, community-based organizations, and private sector foundations and development firms, as well as municipalities. Readers of *Housing Finance International* may wish to secure copies from the List of Selected References at the conclusion of this report.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the overall fund for provision of technical support and advisory services, took the occasion of the Conference to announce the expansion into its third phase of the Urban Management Programme, operated in conjunction with the World Bank and UNCHS. The UNDP has also been helpful in promoting local government initiatives and inter-action. The LIFE program (Local Initiatives Fund for the Environment) is being continued and expanded, and the UNDP country offices will work more closely with local level managers and executives, and to help implement bottom-up initiatives.

The World Bank was an active participant in many of the meetings at the Conference. The Vice President for Sustainable Development, Ismael Serageldin, stated that the bank has available \$15 billion for investment in sustainable development projects over the next five-year period.

AN UNCLEAR FUTURE

As to what happens next, the future is far from clear. In the first place, the UN itself faces major financial problems and restructuring,

much of which will be dealt with by the UN Economic and Social Council in 1997. Whether the Habitat Center and its guiding Commission remain intact and in control of follow-up to the Conference is still to be determined. The relationship between the Center and the United Nations Environment Programme, also with headquarters in Nairobi, has never been effectively resolved. The future focus of both of these organizations is also unclear. At the Habitat II Conference there was little discussion of basic environment and ecological issues, especially as related to the rapid increase in global urbanization.

The report of the Conference and its Habitat Agenda will be considered by the Second Committee of the UN General Assembly at its 51st session, which begins in New York, September 1996. The report also will be reviewed by the fifth session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in 1997 and the special session of the UN General Assembly in April. The UN Commission on Human Settlements is scheduled to meet for its next session in April/May 1997. Underlying actions on the Habitat II Agenda will be dependent on the overall UN restructuring process which is currently in progress.

Meanwhile, the many partners represented at Habitat II can advance their own programs, for example through the business and foundation groupings. Local governments, within their Agenda 21 programs and budgets, have much to do without waiting for further international guidance. The same can be said for the project development and investment groups. Habitat II will be remembered for its role in gearing up the world conscience and institutional capabilities for financing, building and implementing a drive for rebuilding communities large and small, and to improve the quality of life they offer in Millennium III.

NOTES

¹ For example, see the June 1995 issue of *Housing Finance International*.

SELECTED LIST OF REFERENCES

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