

U.N. Urban Summit Gives Rise to a Mixture of Optimism and Criticism

Posted by Joan Russow

Wednesday, 19 October 2016 08:16 - Last Updated Thursday, 27 October 2016 20:40

By Emilio Godoy



Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa (left) and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon during a meeting with journalists at the inauguration of the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), on Monday, Oct. 17 in Quito. Credit: Presidency of Ecuador

QUITO, Oct 18 2016 (IPS) - Experts and activists greeted with a mixture of hope and skepticism the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III), which opened Monday Oct. 17 in the capital of Ecuador, and which seeks to produce a new urban agenda for cities and their inhabitants.

These voices are confident that the summit, which runs through Thursday Oct. 20, will contribute new elements to address the growing problems facing cities, such as inequality, violent crime, the effects of climate change and the lack of basic services such as access to clean water and electric power.

But on the other hand they fear that the participating countries will only pay lip service to commitments that will quickly be forgotten, as occurred after the first Habitat conference, held in 1976 in Montreal, and the second, which took place in Istanbul in 1996.

During the inauguration of the summit, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon pointed to the dark

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side of urbanisation.

"Urban areas are expanding rapidly, especially in developing countries, and that expansion is frequently unplanned," he said. "Approximately a quarter of urban dwellers live in slums or informal settlements. Increasing numbers of poor and vulnerable people live in precarious conditions. They lack access to basic services and adequate living space."

Meanwhile, host President Rafael Correa of Ecuador criticised land speculation and profiteering that have favoured only a select few.

"This is common in Latin America, as are the poverty and exclusion fuelled by the free market system; the poor do not exist for the market," said Correa, who was elected Monday morning as president of [Habitat III](#) .

Advocates of the "right to the city", a set of rights for urban dwellers, share that view.

"Huge problems in cities are exclusion, segregation and marginalisation. We have undesirable, unacceptable cities, which are a reflection of a failed system. Habitat III has the niches to address these problems," Salvadoran activist Claudia Blanco told IPS.

Blanco, executive director of the Salvadoran Foundation for Development and Low-Income Housing ([FUNDASAL](#)), was taking part in [Towards an Alternative Habitat 3](#) , a parallel forum that brought together academics and activists at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences ([FLACSO](#)).

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~~...the summit was a success, but it was also a disappointment. The summit was a success because it brought together leaders from around the world to discuss the challenges of urbanization. It was a disappointment because the summit did not address the most pressing issues of urbanization, such as housing and transportation. The summit was a success because it was the first time that the United Nations has held a summit on urbanization. It was a disappointment because the summit was too short and did not have enough time to discuss all the important issues. The summit was a success because it was a landmark event in the history of the United Nations. It was a disappointment because it was not followed up by any concrete action. The summit was a success because it was a step towards a more sustainable and inclusive world. It was a disappointment because it was not a step towards a more just and equitable world.~~