

# Defining a Global Urban Development Agenda

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**Summary.** — The United Nation's recent endorsement of a stand-alone urban Sustainable Development Goal and the immanent formulation of Habitat III marks a watershed in global development discourse on cities. The New Urban Agenda, currently under debate, is located in its historical context to reveal who the major actors and institutions were that defined global urban policy; what the shifting normative positions on cities are; and why the increasingly complex process of the global policy environment makes defining a universal agreement on urban development so hard. At stake in UN negotiations are fundamental issues about the centrality of urban pathways to sustainable development. A historical view of the Habitat process reveals that even at the global scale it is possible for those with strong convictions to change the normative base and mode of working on urban issues, but that the compromise politics of the international system also masks important compromises and contradictions. Looking back over the decades of international debate on development priorities shows not only that there is now greater acceptance of the importance of defining and agreeing to “an urban agenda” but that global policy on urban and regional issues has indeed evolved. There is no longer a question of whether cities are important for sustainable development, but rather why and how the urban condition affects our common future.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are to be affirmed by the September 2015 General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) in New York change the aspirations and practice of development in five substantive ways (United Nations, 2015). First the SDGs are now universal, in other words they set out a single normative base for all nations rather than focusing, as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) did, largely on conditions prevalent in the global south. Second the SDGs are philosophically premised on the developmental interdependence of social, economic, and environmental values, giving much greater weight than ever before to the absolute ecological limits of human existence and the dangers of climate change. Third, the SDG monitoring and reporting framework, enabled by innovations in geospatial science, complex modeling, and big data analysis, allows the integration of spatial and statistical analysis and the nesting of local, national, and global indicators. This technological revolution in data allows greater flexibility in indicator selection and reporting and so promises to refashion the metrics of global development. Fourth, the global development agenda is now being debated alongside issues of global finance. Although the conclusions of the July 2015 Addis Abba meeting were disappointingly unspecific, the principle that funding for development and development priorities should be joined up is acknowledged. Finally, the SDG endorsement of the new stand-alone urban goal *to make cities safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable* (henceforth SDG #11) is path breaking both within the UN system for the acknowledgment it brings of the developmental role of sub national governments and paradigmatically for global urban policy because it concedes that, in an urban world, cities can be pathways to sustainable development (Cityscope, 2014; SSDN, 2013).

Over the decades to come the game-changing shifts in global policy ushered into the UN system through the SDG deliberations will attract considerable academic reflection, with anal-

ysis of what institutional, ideological, and political forces underpin shifts from the pre to the post 2015 world development agendas. Not least of these is a city-centric shift in global policy. Reflections on the post 2015 urban-turn will likely focus both internally on workings of the multi-lateral system and the relative power of particular nations and groupings, such as the G77, in pushing their policy agendas and outward from the global governance machine, looking to reveal what new the post 2015 global policy redirection unleashed in actual urban development practices. A key question will be whether reforms originated from within member states, from the professional support staff of UN technocrats, or from external civil society forces who used the UN's participatory and lobbying structures to influence global development debates. A historical perspective is imperative for this kind of assessment, but while the history and evolution of the UN system as a whole is very well documented, the same is not true for all the sectoral developmental issues addressed by the global body. The place of the urban question in global policy making is an especially poorly understood vein of historical enquiry and the task of locating 2015, as the first formal UN statement about cities and their wider significance in the global quest for a more sustainable development path, cannot draw on a body secondary material.

This paper opens up the dialog on the emergence of a global policy focus on cities from the vantage point of the SDGs' approval and the shift from the MDGs to a post 2015 sustainable development agenda. Mindful of the significance of the spatial recalibration in development thinking and practice (UN Habitat, 2009), the first major section of the paper sets

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out the genesis of “a global urban agenda” within the UN system, tracking the evolution of embryonic urban-sector policies and aspirations through Habitat 1 and 11. In the following section I problematize what, given the SDGs’ already explicit urban commitments, Habitat 111 and the “New Urban Agenda” that it will present in 2016 might offer as an alternative city-centric perspective on sustainable development. Subsequent sections highlight the messy institutional process within which such a paradigmatically fresh urban perspective must be forged, noting not only the complexity of the UN’s deliberations but also the divergent views of the Habitat 111 stakeholders. Integrating both past and future accounts serves to highlight the evolution of the idea of “the urban” in global thinking and draws attention to the fact that establishing a sub-national spatial thrust to what is a global body of national interests has been and will be an ongoing struggle. As lead campaigner Aromar Revi points out, “*we do not fully comprehend the scale and gravity of the task ahead on implementing the #urbanSDGs*” (Revi, 2015, email).

## 2. THE GENESIS OF A GLOBAL URBAN AGENDA—A LONGER VIEW<sup>1</sup>

For the very first time SDG #11 establishes a single overall global urban policy position in a unified statement concerning the overall social, economic, and environmental functionality of cities and the urban system. This is in contrast to previous sectorial development commitments to what were largely, but not exclusively, urban issues. The MDG focus on slum eradication is the best example of an earlier iteration of global policy that impacted directly on how cities across the world and especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were approached by policy makers, but which could not be thought of as a comprehensive urban policy agenda. While the definition of exactly what is a city was eluded in both the MDGs and the post 2015 development agenda documentation,<sup>2</sup> SDG #11 unambiguously signals UN members’ acceptance of some form of devolution in governance, the imperative of an integrated vision of sustainable urban development that does not exclude social, economic, or ecological imperatives and (implicitly) a collective acknowledgment that the spatial concentration of resources and flows that cities represent can act as a driver of sustainable development. But, while SDG #11 provides a place for cities at the UN-hosted global development policy-makers table, it does not flesh out the substance of that agenda beyond the designation of targets and some indicators. The task of clarifying the new global urban agenda in greater normative and operational details officially falls to “Habitat 111”, which just happens to be the first of the UN’s cycle of conferences on the post 2015 development agenda (SSDN, 2013, parag. 3).

Even in its most minimal interpretation, the pro-urban SDG sentiment has huge implications for the debate on the “New Urban Agenda”, the title of the policy document to be signed off in 2016 in Quito Ecuador under the organizational mandate of Habitat 111. The substance of agreement reached in both of the UN-led processes will reconfigure debates within the multi-lateral system and will also frame the next decades of sustainable urban development thinking and practice around the world, making the precise formulation of the global urban agenda a matter of the gravest intellectual and policy concern (Moreno, 2014).<sup>3</sup> It is this latter matter, i.e., the gradual emergence of a shared utopian urban vision and its adoption as a developmental directive by the international community that is the focus of this paper, rather than the insti-

tutional politics of the UN system embracing the idea of an essentially urban future. Of course the two are difficult to uncouple and issues of devolution and the representation of sub-national government in multi-lateral negotiations will have to be taken more seriously given the importance ascribed to cities in the post 2015 agenda. But, for now, our focus is on how leading up to 2015 a global urban agenda came into being and how it might be further consolidated, this is achieved by using the narrative of the Habitat process to structure and periodize the urban story and put into context the challenges of Habitat 111.

To understand the significance and the potential of Habitat 111 the first task is to interrogate just how and why a supra-national or global urban agenda on sustainable development has emerged as part of the post 2015 agenda. Besides the importance of tracking the belated evolution of a formal position on cities within the multi-lateral community, the longer temporal reflection helps understand how different in content Habitat 111 is likely to be from precursor positions on urban affairs. This historical back-casting is also useful in highlighting that the role players within the movement for a new (global) urban agenda have held, and continue to hold, variant even conflicting positions. Points of contestation on how Habitat 111 can and should advance the urban agenda beyond that agreed in Habitat 1 and 11 mark out the frontlines of debates about: the role of cities in the global system; the specificity of urban settlements, and what the urban future implies for environmental change. The Habitat III negotiating process, like all UN resolutions, will reflect a global compromise as well as consensus. Implementation of global urban policy will necessarily be informed by national and local politics and the impacts of the changes in ideas remain uncertain.

It is important to recall that there has not always been a global consensus or an institutional mechanism for reaching international agreement on urban issues. This does not mean that the supra- or trans-national commitment to values of human development only became evident in the mid-late twentieth century with the creation of the UN. Some of the first development debates on cities took place before the approval of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 under the rubric of international discussions on the technical details of colonial policy. These debates on how modern science impacted colonial policy are now regarded as the antecedents of contemporary international development thinking (Cooper & Packard, 1997). Using a sophisticated system of international committees—colonial powers undertook an extensive process of research-based policy reflection with the express purpose of informing practice, to some extent foreshadowing the format and intent of the UN’s unfolding developmental agenda over the latter part of the twentieth century and now into the twenty-first (Tilley, 2011).

Ideologically, the ultimate objective of protecting imperial assets and investments is readily visible in the limited scope of the applied research topics taken up in the inter war period, but there is some evidence of efforts by scientists and policy makers to improve the settlement conditions of all people, including colonized subjects living in conditions of urban and rural poverty (Tilley, 2011). In the early twentieth century imperial powers tended to focus on rural areas and ignore or exclude cities from their development remit, depicting urban areas primarily as places of colonial settlement and control (Mamdani, 1996). Insofar as there was international attention to the urban question, the challenges of planning in rich and poor nations were never equated, reflecting a dualism in developmental expectations that persisted right into the MDG era that was challenged only by the post 2015 emphasis on a

universal set of goals and targets (but note that the indicators are still to be differentiated to reflect the widely divergent conditions across the world).

Cities in the colonial period and its aftermath were treated simply as sites of developmental action with the stress on sectoral issues (like water, housing, or health), rather than the spatial and functional integration of the urban settlement or settlement systems as a whole. The urban imperatives of colonial contexts that did draw the attention of global bodies were typically focused narrowly either on settler interests or on sharing lessons on cost-effective housing and basic service solutions for workers (Home, 2013). The only collective urban issue to receive ongoing international attention was that of cities' ability to provide basic public health, especially containing infectious disease (Demissie, 2013). In short the global urban agenda, insofar as it can be seen to exist as a cohesive whole, did little to advance the interests of the urban poor and it was in no way comprehensive or universal. Rather, the international communities' collected expression of urban policy served primarily to reinforce the interests of elite communities and colonial powers. It is little wonder therefore that global urban policy was not seen as a progressive instrument of development once the massive waves of urbanization took hold in the poorest parts of the world in the mid twentieth century—at about the same time as these nations attained political independence.

In the years leading up to and immediately following the Second World War there was muted debate about the introduction of urban welfare measures across Western-held colonial territories, but there was no systematic international debate on how to advance post colonial urban development in a meaningful way; a lacuna only partly explained by the fact that indigenous urban populations were small (Pieterse & Parnell, 2014). Relative to the issues of post-war urban reconstruction in Europe the emergent cities of Africa, Latin America, and Asia were not given high priority in international deliberations on the Marshal Plan or in the initial design of the Bretton Woods agreements. The wave of independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s reinforced an emphasis on nation building and so local government, planning, city management, and the questions that are now at the forefront of the new urban agenda slipped even further down global development priorities.

Notwithstanding the heyday of modernization theory, the 1960s and 1970s saw almost no international consensus on urban development for what we now think of as the “global south”. This policy vacuum left the deleterious social and material conditions of the burgeoning cities of Africa, Asia, and Latin America without much global reflection or intervention until the multi lateral lending agencies became interested in cities as potential borrowers, ushering in the developmental commitment to lending as a means to provide the bulk infrastructure that was necessary to meet the basic needs of city residents. The first real push for a global debate on urban policy, under the rubric of Habitat in 1976, thus took place in an environment shaped largely by the views of the World Bank whose institutional agenda substituted for any global expression or consensus from nation states on what the priority values and interventions in cities might include.

Mirroring the recent experiences of the campaign for an urban SDG, where a few powerful individuals were catalytic in unblocking the debate about cities in sustainable development, it was not UN member states that first challenged the global status quo on international attitudes toward the appropriate standards and form of human settlements. A few key individuals, who held ambitions to shift the global policy machine to confront sustainable development challenges,

unleashed the first major global policy shift on anything to do with cities within the UN system. The vehicle of change was the Habitat process (Cohen, 1996; Satterthwaite, 1997).<sup>4</sup> With its first meeting in Vancouver in 1976, Habitat (the conference and later UN Habitat the agency) became the mechanisms that defined and then institutionalized the evolving influence of progressive voices on sustainability and urban questions globally, albeit almost exclusively through an emphasis on social sustainability and the problem of the urban poor's exposure to environmental risk. In practice the lead sectors of global sustainability action were identified as housing and household service access, a focus sometimes more generally construed as human settlement though typically the term was used only for the urban poor and did not include all urban dwellings or non residential infrastructure.

(a) *Key individuals and institutions that shaped the Habitat Agenda*

Urban problems of the developing world had regained prominence in the international imaginary in the early 1970s, possibly in response to the first major oil crisis but arguably also as a result of the World Bank having shifted its geographical focus away from Europe to extend loan facilities that favored costly urban infrastructure for the poor in countries without access to their own financial resources (Finnemore, 1997). Paradoxically, despite critiques premised on the fact that the World Bank and others like the Inter American Development Bank (IDB) made money out of lending on urban infrastructure for the poor, it has been suggested that a global commitment to sustained interventions to reduce poverty only got rolled out at scale once the Bank, under Bob McNamara, took on the cause and gave poverty a global institutional home (Finnemore et al., 1997). Making the connection between poverty generally and urban poverty has, ever since then, been a painful journey within and beyond the Bank (Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2013; Wratten, 1995), not least as anti-urban sentiments and a tendency to underestimate urban poverty relative to that of rural poverty gained traction in development circles.

Under the leadership of the World Bank urban services were a major emphasis of the 1970s' roll out of anti poverty programs across many nations; the argument is always made that this was a largely a-spatial concern, that drew more from the imperative of high budget lending that infrastructure projects afforded than it did with any commitment to changing the urban structure, economy, or mode of city operation that might produce positive developmental outcomes. From the perspective of the present it is easy to recognize that this was a strategy that, although targeted at cities, was negotiated and implemented through the offices of national not local governments—creating a lending pattern mimicked by most of the donors who shied away from direct city-led development interventions. Whatever the critique of the Bank, and there were extensive arguments about the impact it and other Bretton Woods institutions had on global poverty, especially urban poverty because of the negative consequences of structural adjustment programs (Potts, 1995; Riddell, 1997; Simon, 1992), there is no question that the World Bank spearheaded global scale action in cities on issues of poverty (Pieterse, 2008; World Bank, 2001). It did not however initially promote urban development more generally, nor in the late twentieth century was the Bank especially interested in issues of urban environment or cities' resource use.

Garnered by its interest in the urban poor the Bank, along with other international donors, became an active and

influential participant in the Habitat deliberations, confirming both Habitat 1 and Habitat 11's focus on "development in cities" instead of the role of "cities in development". The fact that there was no wider UN attention to cities at this time meant that the global urban thought leaders were largely concerned with the realities of the urban poor in the global south. Drawing on the UN's human rights mandate, Habitat 1 was able to draw together divergent stakeholders and bring only those aspects of urban service provision or management that dealt most directly with poverty into the heart of the multilateral system through the remit of the global bodies' developmental concerns and commitments.

The evolution of the Habitat agenda cannot in any way be reduced to the influence of the Bank or to the voice of any single stakeholder, no matter how powerful, but when reflecting on the emergence of fresh policy deliberations about cities in there are some people who stand out. In 1976 the influence of academic activists like Schumacher, Illich, Turner, Mead, and others like Barbara Ward (many of whom were at the Vancouver meeting), was evident in the first Habitat Declaration that highlighted not only basic needs but also sustainable development (Satterthwaite interview). Ward, a Fabian not only enjoyed the confidence of McNamara and other global leaders, but was known for her outspoken commitment to ecological concerns and social justice (Satterthwaite, 2006); she played an especially important role in brokering the involvement of civil society in Habitat 1. In her capacity as President of the International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED) she brought a new generation of activists into the Habitat process, including David Satterthwaite, who was one of the organizers of the civil society gathering in Vancouver and who remains an influential actor in global urban debates, including in the urban SDG campaign.<sup>5</sup> What these influential individuals were able to do was to articulate a set of general concerns about urban poverty and sustainability, creating a global narrative, that was forged out of deep local knowledge of particular cities in low-income nations but which they were able to express in collective terms that resonated with international development imperatives focused on poverty reduction (Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 2014).

Perhaps surprisingly given the number of official delegates, the tone and content of the debates at Habitat in 1976 and 1996 reflects some of the most progressive ideas of the day. There is no doubt that the active culture of side events initiated at Habitat 1 and incorporated into Habitat 11 and other UN meetings since, invigorated and stimulated debate among voting members of the UN. Caroline Moser, who at the time was working at the World Bank was heavily involved in the 1996 Istanbul meeting. She recalls launching a book that was overtly critical of Structural Adjustment and focused instead on the lives and assets of poor urban households, an idea that would gain considerable traction among the donor community over the next decade (Moser interview and Moser, 1996). One hallmark of the urban policy process is the extensive influence of civil society seen in 1976, 1996, and in SDG campaign. One explanation for the dependence on outside instigators for urban issues is that UN members are national governments, who were unlikely to initiate or even support calls for greater sub-national development attention until the evidence of the essentially urban future became incontrovertible.

Habitat 1 and 11 failed to address all the complex issues relating to global urban policy, and there can be no certainty that Habitat 111 will rectify these omissions, or even advance previous deliberations. Michael Cohen, who set up a large urban division at the World Bank, speaks of an international preoccupation then and now with responding to the overall

growth of the poor urban population. Arguing that this "demographic paradigm" is problematic, he suggests that a radical departure is needed to shift the global urban agenda away from a largely unchanged concern with absorbing poor urbanites into well functioning cities. In his view and that of other leading voices such that of Aromar Revi, based at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, the fact that the world has reached the tipping point of a global urban majority has finally brought the issue of city management to the forefront of the sustainable development debate in the UN. However, acknowledging a majority urban population is not enough either to move the global urban agenda forward or to integrate cities into more sustainable pathways. Encouraged by the personal convictions of a few, Habitat 1 first asserted the link between social, economic, and ecological wellbeing that is now endorsed across the post 2015 agenda. But, to give heft to the "sustainable and resilient" aspirations of SDG #11, Habitat 111 will need to articulate much more precisely the sustainable development function of cities and city management in the global system.

#### (b) *Notable shifts between habitat agreements*

By Habitat II the global urban community was much larger and better organized to engage the UN system than it had been 20 years before in 1976. By now the system of Major Groups introduced by the UN following the Rio meeting of 1982 was in operation (see below) global civil society structures were more organized and individuals were less prominent, if not less influential. In addition to the formal representation of civil society there was an active involvement of private companies (IBM in particular). The donor community, notably the European donors who were supportive of urban development (especially if it had a strong gender, poverty, or environment emphasis), played a critical role in sponsoring side events at Istanbul. Taking their lead from a new generation of progressive development planning academics, debates about poverty, gender, and the livelihoods and capabilities of the urban poor prevailed. Unexpectedly, given initial American opposition, the Istanbul conference confirmed a universal commitment to the right to adequate housing and reaffirmed the global governance regimes' commitment to both participation and the increased role of local authorities in human settlements (UN Habitat, 1996). Despite these gains the global consensus on cities articulated by Habitat II was, however, still not only largely sectoral (and then primarily on shelter), it was also focused essentially on managing urbanization in the global south and on the urban poor. Already it is clear from the post 2015 agreements that this developmental logic has been abandoned and that a universal sustainable development imperative has been embraced with SDGs that include north and south, rich and poor. Just what the inclusion of the ecological lens on cities will unlock in Habitat 111 remains opaque, as does the developmental balance between poverty and inequality.

Obviously, the global agenda on cities is now more ambitious than that secured by earlier Habitat agreements. Not only was there significant criticism of the narrow sector-based developmental interventions that followed Istanbul, but ideas about cities have evolved radically over the last two decades. First there has been a shift from simply highlighting cities as sites for sustainable development action—the message of Local Agenda 21 that was confirmed by Habitat 1, to a call to see cities as the drivers of global environmental change. Led by the global science communities there are new positions on cities and sustainable development emerging: one view



focuses on the interconnected systems of cities that necessitate an orchestrated response of the global community in specific cities in order to protect the collective sustainable development trajectory and another that is associated with the planetary urbanism/urban anthropocene argument that cities, as the human nexus, can create or mediate tipping points of global ecological integrity (Elmqvist *et al.*, 2013; Revi & Satterthwaite, 2013).

The second major shift in the urban sector is that the battle to secure the universal right to housing that was achieved at Habitat 11 is likely to be overshadowed in 2016 as the far more ambitious claim to “the right to the city” becomes the clarion call of major southern nations led by Brazil and other Latin American nations, who are now much more prominent and powerful within the UN system than in its early years when northern powers dominated (Right to the City, 2015). Exactly how the regional blocks have operated across the UN system in deliberations on issues of housing and human settlement and urban policy and across the Habitat meetings more generally remains to be explored. It is not yet clear how the geographical regions will prioritize their views leading up to Habitat III, but some accommodation in reporting on the vastly different urban realities must be anticipated alongside the ideological battles about what a global endorsement of the right to the city implies. How the competing imperatives implied in SDG #11 will be addressed in Habitat III is taken up in the next section, but for now it is worth tracing shifts in the normative basis of the global urban policy process to date.

In looking to the future, as the Habitat III process does, it is often helpful to understand the legacies on which current policy assumptions about urban development rest. Reflection of the Habitat 1 and II Conference deliberations and agreements suggest for example that there has been a long-standing engagement with urban environmental issues, decentralization, and civil society participation, suggesting that the international community recognized, but was not able to fully action these issues and that implementation might usefully be given more attention in 2016 (Cohen, 1996). The longer view also helps reveal shifts and changes that are otherwise masked in the detail of policy niceties, especially those of the UN where there is a tendency to use inclusive and accommodating language to ensure as wide a buy in as possible. For Satterthwaite the most important problem here is the lack of focus on how nominal commitments to urban poverty eradication are to be accurately measured and achieved, for Cohen, now at the New School from where he engages actively with the SSDN on the SDGs and in civil society preparations for Habitat, the problem is the inattention to fiscal detail and the interface between urban finance, participation, and planning (Revi, Simon, Parnell, & Elmqvist, 2014). For organized local government the detail of decentralization will be the one core issue to tag in translating SDG #11 into a meaningful global urban policy.

Despite the surprisingly long history of Habitat’s engagement with ideas of multi-scale government, multi-actor governance, and multi-clear or integrated development, it is possible to discern clear progression in the global communities’ thinking on how to tackle urban development. Next Practice’s overview, that periodizes the evolution of the global urban agenda through successive UN meetings (Next Practice, 2014) (Table 1) was prepared for a Habitat III discussion in Bonn hosted by ICLEI and funded by GIZ. It provides an excellent starting point for understanding the macro shifts in UN policy on cities and sustainable development over time. In this interpretation we see a shift from seeing cities as being local problem points or sites in the 1980s to key strategic nodes

of intervention by 1996. For Habitat III by contrast, cities are being presented as an integrated part of a whole global environmental system; indeed the system is itself described as an urban system. Two other things Table 1 also usefully highlights are (1) the link between the changing conception of cities and the kinds of activities and inputs that emerged from the different policy positions and (2) the fact that the UN has acknowledged, in some form or another, decentralized or local action for over 30 years.

UN Habitat’s own comparative temporal assessment looks forward rather than backward, noting as have others that whereas Habitat II was an agenda for the global south, Habitat III aims to provide a universal agenda for both the developed and developing worlds. UN Habitat’s view of how Habitat III might move forward from the agreements of 20 years ago is frank about the highly political nature of shift away from cities as sites of developmental intervention to cities as vectors of change (Table 2—emphasis added). Noteworthy shifts implied in this depiction of the Habitat III agenda are the move away from the emphasis on shelter, a focus on inequality and not just poverty, and the clear signal of the imperative of stronger states and not just stronger civil society; these, unlike the suggestion that Habitat III take a less negative stance on migration, are unlikely to be contentious. More generally what the content of Morrales’ text reveals is the strong social awareness in UN Habitat. Significantly, the UN Habitat “proposal” as set out in Table 2 is silent on macro environmental issues such as cities and climate change or cities and biodiversity or economic issues of global finance and cities. Before returning to this and other potentially divisive or tricky issues in the final section we shift now to look at exactly how the substantive agenda of Habitat III is organized. As noted earlier this is important because much of the work in defining or populating the “New Urban Agenda” will be very far advanced by the 2016 meeting (Communitas Collaition, 2015; World Urban Campaign, 2015).

### 3. THE PROCESS OF SETTING A GLOBAL URBAN AGENDA

While the UN cannot define the parameters of a new global urban agenda alone, no other body is as powerful in setting out the normative base or systems of implementation for urban change. There are a number of examples of where, as intended, nations have drawn directly on the UN’s international policy positions in crafting national and local legislation and practice and the influential (if problematic) global system of reporting though the UN on progress in meeting the MDGs is scheduled to be extended to the SDGs. *De facto* the UN will define the ideal of the urban future for many policy makers across the world. In order to lobby nation states and to secure their endorsement of the “New Urban Agenda” at Habitat III, non-state actors (including academics) have to work very hard behind the scenes to define their message and package it for national states’ endorsement. Advancing key ideas entails traversing the extended committee structure of the UN, focusing on the nodal points of the Habitat summits to define and endorse urban policy shifts for the international agencies as a whole and lobbying to influence the global consensus and its subsequent roll out across nations and cities.

Before setting out the UN process through which the first global urban agenda will be forged, three disclaimers are necessary. First, the UN membership is through nation states and does not engage other levels of government—a structure that inevitable impacts on the form and content of what is agreed

Table 1. *The evolving urban agenda in international policy forums (Next Practice, 2014)*

Period	<u>EVOLVING CONCEPTIONS OF CITIES</u> <i>Factual assertions about urban regions &amp; trends</i>	<u>STRATEGIES FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT</u> <i>Theories about how to change factual realities in urban regions</i>	<u>NEW URBAN DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS, PRACTICES &amp; FRAMEWORKS (OUTCOMES)</u> <i>Ways to practically apply new theories about urban change in a concerted, scaled fashion</i>	<u>INPUTS TO ADVANCE THE TARGET OUTCOMES</u> <i>Ways to establish the target outcomes</i>
UNCED 1992 (recognition of “the local”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cities and urban growth as problems; sustainable urban and rural development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local authority and local stakeholder engagement and collaboration</li> <li>• More integrated local planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Agenda 21 (i.e., urban sustainability planning)</li> <li>• Integrated (Development) Planning</li> <li>• City Development Strategies, Cities Alliance</li> <li>• Cities Without Slums</li> <li>• Best Practices &amp; Benchmarking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Major Groups”</li> <li>• Coalition of national associations of local government/Curitiba Summit</li> <li>• Local Government Awards Program</li> <li>• UN Habitat Best Practices Program/Dubai Award</li> <li>• UN Habitat Global Urban Observatory</li> <li>• World Water Forum</li> </ul>
Habitat II 1996 (cities as strategic sites in a globalizing economy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cities as growth centers—as “half the world’s population”</li> <li>• Focus on “mega-cities”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive Cities</li> <li>• Good Urban Governance</li> <li>• Public–Private Partnerships/Privatization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urban Nexus</li> <li>• Smart Cities initiatives</li> <li>• Initiative for an Urban SDG</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Global Town Hall</li> <li>• Stakeholder Forum</li> </ul>
Rio +20/Current & Next (the world as an urban system)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cities as centers of economic, social, and ecological productivity in a global city system</li> <li>• “City as Opportunity”</li> <li>• Cities as “innovation spaces”</li> <li>• “Cities as Development Agents”</li> <li>• Cities as Leaders of Climate Action</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional (Rural–Urban) Integration</li> <li>• Green Urban Economy</li> <li>• Transition Theory/Regenerative Cities</li> <li>• Cities for Life (equity and social justice)</li> </ul>		

Table 2. *Shifts in the political implications habitat agendas over time (adapted from Moreno, 2014)*

Habitat II, 1996	Habitat III, 2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal on sustainable urban settlements</li> <li>• Inequality was not part of the agenda</li> <li>• Agenda focus on poverty</li> <li>• Promotes gender equality &amp; gender-sensitive institutional frameworks</li> <li>• Human rights and freedom</li> <li>• Poverty and HR</li> <li>• Connects rights to participation</li> <li>• Rights and land (evictions)</li> <li>• Promotes and enable environment that resulted in the deregulation of housing market</li> <li>• Migration was considered as a negative aspect of urbanization</li> <li>• Cities were considered as “platforms”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connects sustainable urban dev. to sustainable development</li> <li>• Inequality is being integrated into the development agenda</li> <li>• Agenda on poverty and inclusion</li> <li>• Programmatic mainstreaming of gender</li> <li>• Adoption of Human Rights-Based Approach</li> <li>• Promotes a regulatory mechanism and stronger presence of State and civil society</li> <li>• New Urban Agenda promotes policies to foster migration to enable the poor to move to more dynamic areas</li> <li>• Cities are considered as “vectors” of change</li> </ul>

and implemented, a point we will return to in the discussion of the wider participatory process and in the conclusion when the issue of decentralization is discussed. Second, even at the global scale the UN is not the only regulatory process to have direct developmental impact at the city scale. Other non-state-based global bodies, such as the World Trade Organisation, have significant sway in what happens in cities. Corporate regulation and international law have also emerged as powerful global forces for urban change—not always positively. These actors are both within and beyond the UN policy-making circles. One thing that sets Habitat III apart from earlier meetings is the enhanced participation of the private sector, which is interested in the construction of new cities but also in the business opportunities of urban consumption and smart city management. Global social movements such as labor bodies or religious organizations also shape cities through action at the supra national scale. The UN process, where these constituencies each has designated ways of engaging, offers a forum for all parties to debate a normative position on questions of global human settlement and urban development.

The third clarification is to note that talk in the UN of an emergent global urban agenda should not be conflated with the current scholarly discussion about global urbanism (Parnell & Oldfield, 2014; Roy & Robinson, 2015). This latter concept is fundamentally concerned with the way cities, especially cities in the south or beyond the powerful circuits of international power, are inappropriately depicted in dominant urban theories and practices and not, as we are here, with the formal policy consensus on cities at the global scale. There are obvious connections between the two concerns, especially given the current drive to ensure the UN’s traction in rich and poor contexts, a point affirmed by the SDGs’ universal reach. Implied in this is the imperative to design a single urban agenda to have legitimacy everywhere and in all cities. The Habitat III agenda has to embody a universal value base for cities and be signed off by all parties who agree to dedicating global resources of the UN to its implementation. Where the academic literature is useful is in highlighting the compromises (and sometimes contradictions) that underpin and are contained in this global consensus. Understanding how these differences of starting point, interpretation, and ideology among stakeholders might play out in the deliberations of Habitat III forums is made simpler not only with a better intellectual grasp of the urban issues, but also when the institutional arrangements of non-state engagement with the UN system are spelt out.

There are multiple formal conduits through which the campaign for a new urban agenda has been channeled thus far. The first is from within UN Habitat itself (UN Habitat,

2015), both as a global body working out of Nairobi and through its’ regional structures. The second is from within the UN-recognized Major Groups who are mandated to make representations to members on behalf of organized civil society and a third is from the SSDN, a newly created UN structure tasked with providing support to the Rio +20 process (SSDN, 2013). The intense engagement leading up to the adoption of a stand-alone urban SDG involved some confluence of stakeholder dialogs, with possible knock on implications for Habitat III preparations as parties engage across designated representative boundaries, often using social media as well as formal meetings to communicate their message (UN Habitat *et al.*, 2013).

UN Habitat is the host agency for Habitat III leading the internal international preparatory work for the “New Urban Agenda”. This entails extended international engagement—for example participating in the SDG process, liaising with urban stakeholders like UCLG, ICLEI or Cities Alliance, donors and other internal activities designed to build the general positioning or intellectual framing necessary for Habitat III.<sup>6</sup> In addition, there are extensive consultations with member states and Major Group representatives that are coordinated by UN Habitat’s regional offices. These continental or sub continental deliberations are dedicated to ensuring that all member states are included and briefed, that area-specific issues surface for inclusion in the new urban agenda, that there is feedback on substantive proposals, and that those tasked with implementation are fully involved in the details of the final deliberations. What makes things more complicated for Habitat III is the fact that some regions, like Africa, have recently adopted their own new urban agendas<sup>7</sup>—ideally to feed into, but possibly foreshadowing, the substance of Habitat III’s conclusions.

Although national votes remain the only conduit through which a global policy is endorsed, the limits of this state-centric formulation are clear and widely accepted, even by the UN. The principle that there should be wider consultation, beyond governments, was agreed to at Rio in 1992 as part of Agenda 21. Following that meeting and the milestone commitment there to enhancing participation in all governance arrangements to do with sustainable development, a system of Major Groups was approved. Major Groups are drawn from clusters of civil societies and organized to allow stakeholder access to the UN’s Open Working Group structure. The nine Major Groups include the Scientific and Technological Community, NGOs, Women, Children and Youth, Business and Industry, Indigenous Peoples, Local Authorities, Farmers, and Trade Unions and Workers (<http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/majorgroups.html>).

Notwithstanding the cumbersome machine that is still the UN, a number of individual and institutional stakeholders deemed advancing the global urban agenda a sufficiently important initiative to make time to engage in the Major Group deliberations. Designated groups of well-organized constituencies, often with full-time staff that liaise with the UN's Economic and Social Commission, make high-level representations in New York through the Open Working Group structure. However, the system is not without its critics.

The composition of the Major Groups has, somewhat controversially, remained static since their formation 30 years ago (there is for example no environmental caucus despite the massive expansion of this as a sectorial interest). Interestingly too, there is no differential weighting in time allocated to the Major Groups, thus on an issue like a stand-alone urban SDG, local government and the disabled had equal time to make their points. Also, within the Major Groups there is a process of self-selection (or elite capture depending on your view) based on who volunteers or is able to contribute to the UN discussions. For example in the SDG debates the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU), rather than the International Council of Social Science Unions (ISSC), became the *de facto* voice of the professions<sup>8</sup>—no doubt impacting on what were the tabled areas of concern in the UN member state statements on Sustainable Cities at the 7th session of the UN General Assembly Open Working Group on SDGs (UN, 2014, <http://urbansdg.org>).

The fact that the UN is in New York creates an obvious geographical bias in who from civil society is able to engage in the Open Working Group meetings. For constituencies as large and regionally diverse as organized local government, ensuring that there is an agreed-to position that is timeously and effectively brought into the UN system is a critical problem. Because the UN process is so complex the reality is that a small coterie of informed and expert insiders typically mediate non-nation state inputs into the Open Working Groups. One effort to overcome this problem of complexity was the creation of the SSDN.

To ensure that the SDG process was transparent and consultative the UN established the SSDN (SSDN, 2014). The SSDN is a new structure that has held periodic meetings, run social media, and generally lobbied for the urban agenda with support from various donors. If the civil society side event was the platform that infused Habitat I then the SSDN campaign for an urban goal has been the key intellectual energy behind the push for an urban SDG and the impetus that has drawn together participants from across the Major Groups in support of the urban agenda within the UN system. Whether this newly formed urban cohort will continue into the Habitat III process is not yet clear. It would be reasonable to expect that, having defeated the common enemy of anti-urbanism, fractures are likely to emerge as stakeholders push their particular interpretation of how important cities are for sustainable development and what aspect of urban change they want prioritized by Habitat III.

#### 4. COMPETING PRIORITIES IN THE NEW GLOBAL URBAN AGENDA

Because global policy positions, especially those endorsed by the United Nations, are formative in National Urban Strategies and City Development Strategies—what gets said and done under the auspices of the MDGs, SDGs, or UN Habitat-sponsored agreements is really important; some argue potential distorting of national and sectoral practices (Smith &

Taylor, 2013), though just how influential the final agreement is in global development agency practice is debated.<sup>9</sup> Given the potential impact of a consensus on urban policy there are surprising gaps in the most basic information about how the embryonic global urban agenda we have now was reached over the last decades, who was involved it is design, how effective it was—and how it might, learning from the past, be sharpened post 2015. In this limited effort to help begin to fill that historical gap the picture that emerges of the Habitat process is both complex and drawn out; this is not unexpected. By definition the UN draws in almost 200 national governments and interest groups of many kinds predictably surround these formal representatives both in New York and in their home countries. Policy formation takes place in several languages, over multiple years and all continents. Opening UN deliberations up to participation from non-member states has added further layers of complexity to what has always been an opaque policy process. Indeed, the inherently inclusive wording of UN policy positions that depend on consensus is the reason that the fixed (inflexible) targets and indicators are seen as the most influential (and potentially dangerous) element of the global process as here, with largely quantitative data, there is less room for interpretation and more room for unintended impacts (Smith & Taylor, 2013).

It is true that it is not until policy implementation, with the associated allocation of budget and operationalization of real projects, that nuances hidden beneath the embracing policy discourse are revealed. The architects of Habitat III, mindful of the imperative to move swiftly to action, will be keen to avoid both overly vague and internally contradictory expectations. This means finding clarity and consensus on the substance of the new global urban agenda soon. If the consolidation of a global urban agenda was a convoluted and disparate process 20 and 40 years ago we can only expect that, with the heightened importance of cities and with much stronger and wider participation by stakeholders in the UN process, that reaching consensus on the New Urban Agenda at Habitat III will be harder than ever.

Common sense suggests variance in the urban interests and expectations of newly active Habitat constituencies like business, who have only recently discovered cities and are unself-consciously promoting a smart urban agenda to expand markets (Pieterse & Parnell, 2014),<sup>10</sup> and long-time constituencies of the Major Group process like local government, that has an obvious interest in promoting decentralization as an essential reform to improve urban development. The complexity of the urban agenda demands that Habitat III accommodates a range of urban development principles and actions and there are hard choices that will have to be made. For example, the views of indigenous peoples on cities in general or Goal 11 in particular have not yet been presented with any clarity. However, the unfettered management of the tribal land that is increasingly found in urban areas by traditional authorities unaccountable to outside bodies will be contested, not only by women's groups but also by local government and business. Other points of conflict are not hard to imagine.

Cleavages within the Major Groups should in theory be resolved before the Habitat engagements, but the contradictory nature of the urban agenda is likely to surface ongoing tensions for some. For organized local government in particular this moment of policy realignment, with its dedicated focus on cities not just nations, represents a watershed which will not only make the sub-national scale of government more important and visible, but will bring into focus the efficacy of their actions in the wider struggle to achieve sustainable development priorities: an undoubted opportunity but



Table 3. *Axes of dissent that might inform Habitat III*

	DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT		
	Social	Economic	Ecological
ANTI URBAN OR SPATIALLY NEUTRAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT	The focus of the MDGs Anti urban positions across the social, economic and ecological arguments remain in evidence from some nations (e.g., the UK or Australia in the SDG discussions) and many African representatives in regional Habitat preparations		
CITIES AS NEW AND DISTINCT SITES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT	The minimum gain achieved by the approval of SDG 11. Prompted by the demographic evidence of a global majority		
CITIES AS THE HUBS OR EPI-CENTER OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT	Apparent support from across the Major Groups Will be seen in the detail and implementation of SDG 11 and possibly urban scale reporting on other SDGs, with the balance in social, economic, and ecological indicators tbc		
	Civil society—interested in increased participation in and influence on city scale power	Most business—interested in urban markets Unions—urban work conditions are dominant	Climate and biodiversity adaptation lobbies (but environment NGOs are not represented in the Major Groups)
CITIES AS THE DRIVERS OR PATHWAYS OF GLOBAL CHANGE AND THEREFORE THE PRIMARY OBJECT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT	Local government—sustainable development is not possible without effective city control of power and money to make social, economic, and ecological interventions		
	Some academics— inclusive cities Some in local government see cities as increasingly dominant hubs of global power	Some academics—smart cities	Some academics—resilient cities
		Some business—interested in promoting new agglomeration to sustain global GDP growth and expand markets	

potentially also an additional burden for those who will be tasked with implementation. The issue of how decentralization or sub national devolution is cast lies, with the issue of unfunded mandates, at the heart of the New Urban Development Agenda, but it will not be the only complex theme that must be tackled.

Other known points of potential cleavage include:

- o Participation—who are in the Major groups and are they the correct/indefinite representatives on the urban question?
- o Urban complexity—have the right triggers/tipping points/drivers of urban change been identified and appropriately targeted in the SDG, both Goal 11 and others?
- o What is the most effective agency for the implementation of the global urban agenda, UN Habitat or Habitat plus other agencies? What changes will be necessary in these and other organizations in order to secure the vision of the New Urban Agenda?
- o Should the right to the city be the core value of the new urban agenda?

What else, beyond anticipated conflict issues and a general sense of dissonance based on the anticipated self interests, can we expect the hard negotiations of Habitat III to have to contend with? Two primary axes of dissent are likely to infuse the Habitat III deliberations (Table 3). The first line of contestation that Habitat III will confront is not new, though it has particular urban resonance, it relates to the proportional focus given to the three pillars of sustainable development, social, economic, and environment (the *y* axis of Table 3). What will make Habitat III negotiations difficult is that not all who want to position cities as the fundamental drivers or linchpins of the post 2015 agenda will want to do so for the same reason. The fact that distinct and arguably contradictory bodies of academic literature and policy instruments and frameworks exist to promote inclusive cities, smart cities, and resilient cities highlights the range of normative positions that underpin the champions of urban drivers of change.

The second general area that will divide stakeholders is the relative importance ascribed to cities in global change (the *x* axis). Having won a dedicated urban goal the issue post Goal 11 is that not all parties will want to ascribe the same political or fiscal importance to urban development. As pointed out earlier, if the paradigm is one that the SDGs are there to respond to population growth and its spatial concentration in cities then all that is needed is to acknowledge cities as sites of sustainable development. In a different reading, some constituencies (local government and even business) might agree that because what happens within cities impacts nations economically, socially, and ecologically, Habitat III has to position cities as the focus of all development (including shifting national development finance to cities). This “cities as driver of development” position is already evident in the African New Urban Agenda and is widely promoted by Cities Alliance, but it is unlikely to be taken up by many of the NGOs and will be resisted by those national governments who continue to promote a rural or spatially neutral sustainable development vision.

In addition to getting the Major Groups to speak with one voice about cities and sustainable development, inherent problems of getting all the country representatives of the UN to agree to proposals in the designated time frames for Habitat III mitigate against clear and decisive action and generally make the adoption of a new well-targeted policy direction difficult. The question of how cities are represented in the UN's

own processes and developmental aspirations has become a higher profile issue over time. It is not just that UN policy has become more sensitive to the urban imperative, or even that anti urban sentiments are abating, but that the UN is acknowledging what scholars and urban representatives have long argued, which is that cities are now catalysts of almost every aspect of the global system. Ambiguous wording from the World Urban Forum in Medellin in 2014 manages to elide the issue of urban-led sustainable development *versus* sustainable urban development and simply presents the Habitat III agenda as “*harnessing urbanization as a positive force for present and future generations, and advancing the quest for equity and shared prosperity*” (UN Habitat, 2013a, 2013b, no page number). The detail of the New Urban Agenda may need to be more specific to be effective.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Noting the massive material and ideological changes that have taken place in and through cities because of urbanization and globalization over the last century, my aim was to distill and periodize the evolution the existing “global urban agenda” using the device of a review of the Habitat process that started from the pre Habitat 1 meeting in Vancouver in 1976 and moved to the proposed Habitat III meeting in 2016.<sup>11</sup> The parts of the historical argument are simple—there was not always a global development agenda; consensus that nations should push for minimum targets on poverty, development, and environmental sustainability did not initially speak comprehensively to urban issues and then, when an urban agenda was first mooted it was unevenly absorbed into global development praxis and the sustainable development agenda did not have anything like the emphasis on the urban nexus that it does now.

Looking forward, the formulation of the “New Urban Agenda” will reflect both the maturation of a global urban position and include aspirational statements about where the international community would like to be in 20 years’ time. The endorsement of Goal 11 underscores, at minimum, that UN members now acknowledge cities as legitimate concerns in sustainable development action. Habitat III must now give weight to either the social, economic, or environmental determinants of cities in and from global change. In precise ways, that are still to be decided, Habitat III will seek to shift the global urban agenda into new terrain and introduce universal ideas and practices not advocated in the earlier Habitat generated positions. The importance of the Habitat III moment for how we think and act collectively in, on, and through cities should not therefore be underestimated for development thinkers and practitioners.

The UN, through Habitat III, is obliged to lay out what the global community believes are the critical steps and instruments for shifting urban development trajectories over the next two decades. What Habitat III could do in 2016 is assert that cities are not just simply another site of development, instead spelling out the centrality of urban hubs in the implementation of all of the SDGs. Habitat III partners could also go further, to set out how and why urban pathways will determine the world’s future.

I have suggested that some stakeholders will be happy that with Goal 11 cities are more visible than before and they will use Habitat III simply to debate the relative importance of social, economic, or environmental priorities within the new global urban agenda. For others, the key issue for a new global urban agenda is more fundamental than calibrating

the tripartite goals. The imperative of articulating a new (global) urban agenda that does more than speak narrowly to Goal 11 flows from the more radical view that cities are key pathways in every aspect of sustainable development and not merely vehicles for the promotion of social, economic,

or environmental objectives.<sup>12</sup> For this group the Habitat III agenda's central problem, working from the premise that city's future is integral to achieving global sustainable development, is to define appropriate post 2015 actions that will lead the world into the urban anthropocene.

## NOTES

1. This section draws on unstructured interviews with Michael Cohen, Caroline Moser, and David Satterthwaite who were both active in earlier Habitat-related meetings and who have both written extensively on related global urban development issues. Any errors of content or interpretation are my own.

2. The enduring issue of how to define a city (by population, function, density, or physical size) is typically sidestepped in the UN system by following national conventions in the delineation of urban and rural.

3. Eduardo L. Moreno, Director, Research and Capacity Development for UN Habitat, speaking at the UN in New York in Sept 2014 set out the following objectives for Habitat III: To undertake a critical review of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda; To identify constraints to the implementation of the goals and objectives; To develop a shared perspective on human settlements and sustainable urban development; To tackle new challenges and opportunities that have emerged since Habitat II; To outline a new development agenda, to achieve inclusive, people-centered and sustainable urban development; To engender a collective agreement on the role that sustainable urbanization can play to support sustainable development.

4. I am in no way suggesting that individuals single handedly and without regard to their own or other organizational structures created a global movement or urban agenda. Rather that they occupied (along with others not detailed here such as Jeb Brugman from ICLEI or Michael Cohen who started the first major Urban Unit in the World Bank) pivotal seats in rooms where the articulation of a global urban development was debated. Nor am I suggesting that these individuals always concurred with the outcomes or expressions of the Habitat agenda.

5. Satterthwaite was Coordinating Lead Author with Aro Revi of the IPCC Working Group 2 on Urban areas, he is a shadow author of numerous policy overviews and prolific author on urban poverty and the global development agenda.

6. World Urban Campaign created to spearhead this work see [www.worldurbancampaign.org/about/](http://www.worldurbancampaign.org/about/).

7. For example: Meeting of UN Habitat, "New African Urban Agenda", December, 2013 in Nairobi.

8. The current organizing partners for the Science and Technology Major Group are the International Council for Science (ICSU), the World Federation of Engineering Organisations (WFEO), and the International Social Science Council (ISSC).

9. Both Cohen and Satterthwaite make the point that no actual increases in fiscal flows to urban poverty can be linked to agreements forged at Habitat 2.

10. Most prominent in this regard are the large consultancy firms like Monitor whose reports on cities and the importance of expanding markets of the new urban middle classes have attracted much attention. But Siemens, IBM and others push the whole smart city big data agenda.

11. For a chart that tracks events along this journey see [http://mirror.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/Habitat\\_3\\_Timeline.pdf](http://mirror.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/Habitat_3_Timeline.pdf).

12. Skype interview with Michael Cohen, New School, October 2014; Revi *et al.* (2014), Revi and Rosenzweig (2013).

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