

Human settlements on the world stage

A report from the Habitat I conference in Vancouver

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The colourful Habitat Forum and the iconic logo.

“The world’s poor increasingly know that their condition is not an Act of God, but the choice of man.”

Barbara Ward

“Of course we are able to build a Western city for the lowest income groups of the Third World. But when we put them into it we can be sure that they will die of starvation.”

John FC Turner

“Development is the movement of the whole cultural system in transferring more and more power to the people so that they can overcome backwardness and oppression”.

Paul Lin

“We’ve got to politicise this thing. That’s what it’s all about”.

Canadian Premier Trudeau

“The living conditions in the world are unacceptable.”

Enrique Penalosa, Conference General Secretary

“A chicken has a home. It’s home is called a coup.
The rabbit has a home. It’s home is called a burrow.
A bird has a home. It’s home is called a nest.
Everybody has a home.
Home is where one can feel happy and free.
The Palestinian has no home.”

From the beginning of a PLO film for Habitat 1 called ‘The Key’

“...This conference is part of the great theme of our times. The division of the world into a bloc of abundance and an enormous archipelago of poverty....We must insist on a fundamental fact: the urban problem, like so many others, will never be solved if we think of it as something autonomous, as a specific and isolated problem... How can it be dealt with as something separate from unemployment, ignorance, unsanitary conditions, the population explosion and the inadequate diet or outright hunger of the great majority of the world’s population? ...There can be no positive solution unless the problem is dealt with as a whole.”

Luis Echeverria Alvarez, President of Mexico

“Three quarters of our people live in cities. Half of them say they would rather not.”

USA official film for Habitat

A major achievement of the \$20 million United Nations Habitat bonanza in Vancouver was to establish that the problem of human settlements requires fundamental political and social solutions rather than technical ones.

One third or more of the entire urban population of the developing world lives in slums or squatter settlements. A large percentage of the people of the less developed countries have no water within a hundred metres of their homes and more than half of all people in developing countries have no electricity in their homes. These statistics affect more than one billion people now and are likely to affect even more in the future as the world's population is expected to double in the next twenty-five years. Yet the technical ability and the resources already exist to enable everybody in the world to have adequate housing, water, energy and food. The problem is organising these resources so that it actually happens. It is therefore a problem of politics. Furthermore, the Conference has firmly established that material development in itself is of little value if it does not allow for the holistic development of people as meaningful human beings. Development must include ecological balance from oppression, human dignity and so on.

The barrier to real development then is not lack of expertise, but rather oppressive power structures at international, national and local levels. Solutions therefore require fundamental shifts in the balance of power. As Enrique Penalosa, the Secretary General of the Conference said in a speech, "we must make it clear to the world that the social, political and economic systems of the past – both national and international, have failed to satisfy the needs of the present, and are totally inadequate for the needs of the future".

The significance of the Habitat Conference in Vancouver was that it was itself an expression of changing power relationships in the world and the dominant theme was a worldwide demand for more public participation in the creation and management of human settlements.

Habitat consisted of two major events; the official government's conference, which took place in various hotels and theatres in downtown Vancouver, and the non-governmental forum, which was held a couple of miles away in an old navy base.

The official conference was attended by delegations from 131 countries, including all the major nations apart from China, and of course, those excluded from the United Nations, like South Africa. There were also delegations from six liberation movements and from various international organisations, like the World Bank. Each delegation made a fifteen-minute presentation on the subject of human settlement to the plenary session, and also presented one or more specially made films, which were shown separately throughout the fortnight. Little of great importance came out of the presentations, but many of the films are very good. Although one or two are more like advertisements for sunshine holidays and some are limited because they were made by the governments of the day who try and show themselves in good light, the films provide a fascinating series of documentaries about the state of human settlements in the world. Hopefully, they will be available for public showing in the future.

The main work of the official Conference was done in 3 committees held simultaneously with the plenary session which aimed to produce 3 major documents: recommendations

for national action, a programme for international cooperation, and a declaration of principals. The drafting of these documents was done by the Habitat secretariat over the past 2 years. The committees modified them and then presented them to the full plenary session for ratification.

The recommendations for national action approved by the Conference could if implemented go a long way towards improving the quality of life for people all over the world. Many of the recommendations are fairly radical, particularly those urging the public control of land use, the legalisation of squatter settlements and the encouragement of public participation and control. It is very easy to be cynical about the effectiveness of such United Nations recommendations as there is no way of ensuring that national governments take any notice of them. They do however provide an important tool for all those seeking progressive change and should be widely circulated so that people can constantly remind their governments of their existence.

The only significant outcome of the programme for international co-operation is the decision to create a new intergovernmental body for human settlements. It is unclear exactly what this body will consist of or what it will do. It may merely result in a reorganisation of already existing United Nations departments and it is too early to judge whether this will materially affect the lives of anybody other than UN staff. One interesting point is that this new body is urged to co-operate with 'universities, research and scientific institutes, non-governmental organisations, voluntary groups, etc.' If this actually happens it might help to break down the present insularity and elitism of the UN.

It was the 'declaration of principles' which inevitably exposed the main conflicts underlying the whole conference. The 'Group of 77' underdeveloped nations prepared the final draft of the declaration, which was then rejected by several of the Western and developed nations. The most publicised objection related to a paragraph which equated Zionism with racism. However, the more fundamental objection related to references to 'involuntary migration', 'occupied territories', levels of aid to developing countries, and the creation of a New Economic Order. Basically, the poorer nations were demanding an end to imperialism of all kinds, and a redistribution of resources on a world scale. The rich countries felt unable to give anything away. The declaration was in fact passed by 85 votes to 15, with 10 abstentions, but it will have little effect as the 15 against were the most powerful (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, West Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, United Kingdom and United States).

Apart from the official declaration and recommendations, many delegations came to Habitat for something specific. The Mexicans, for instance, fielded the largest delegation headed by their President in an attempt to get the new intergovernmental organisations located in Mexico. And a member from the United Kingdom delegation claimed that their main objective was to secure overseas contacts for both British government agencies and private firms. For this purpose, lavish receptions were held by many delegations where, surrounded by alcohol and caviar, contacts were established and agreements negotiated. The success of these extravaganzas can only be estimated by noting that some delegations were prepared to spend well over \$10,000 on them.

Other delegations used the Conference in a more overtly political manner to obtain publicity for their particular problems. The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was particularly effective. Their conflict with Israel is undeniably about human settlements, as many thousands of Palestinians are living in appalling conditions in refugee camps. It could hardly be dismissed as an 'extraneous political issue', as the United States would have liked. As a publicity stunt, all the Arab delegates staged a walk out of the plenary session when the Israeli spokesman started to make his presentation. The media, many of who were finding it difficult to find anything else newsworthy, latched on immediately, and there followed a series of press conferences and counter press conferences. As the Minister of the Interior for Israel commented: 'It's just a continuation of the war'.

Habitat Forum

Whereas the official conference was only open to official delegates, Habitat Forum was open to any individual or organisation that could afford to get themselves to Vancouver. It was a spectacular event. During the 12 days of Habitat, scheduled events were held comprising plenary sessions on major theoretical issues, case study presentations, film shows and seminars. There were also exhibitions, musicals and theatrical events and a whole hillside of domes, wigwams and self-built houses.

In terms of affecting the outcome of the official conference, the Forum was fairly ineffective. Few of the participants knew how to lobby their official delegates, and in any case, conference arrangements did not encourage contact between the two events. Also, the Habitat secretariat had incorporated many ideas of non-governmental agencies into the documents of the official conference, and many national delegations even contained people from outside government (one-third of the British delegation were from non-governmental organisations). As a result, the statements produced by the Forum differed little from those of the official conference, the major exceptions being only the complete condemnation of nuclear power and an emphasis on immediate action.

The most serious defect of the Forum was the lack of participation from people in the Third World. Although Latin America was well represented, there were few people from Asia or Africa and the whole event was orientated towards the intellectuals of the developed Western world. Quite simply, not enough money was made to transport people to the Forum, so that only the rich could afford to get there. Ironically, Vancouver is further from the Third World than almost anywhere else on the globe.

The same problem, incidentally, was evident in the media coverage of the whole of Habitat. The vast majority of media representatives were from developed Western countries, while many undeveloped countries had no representatives present at all. Unfortunately, many millions of people living in the world's worst human settlements will never even have heard about Habitat.

Despite these shortcomings, the Forum was an extremely valuable event. It provided a public platform for minority groups who would not normally be heard, and it provided a meeting place for people from different parts of the world to get together, share experiences and learn from each other. Although few concrete actions came out of the

Forum, (self-help housing was an exception), it was an important educational event. Whether it was worthwhile will depend on what the participants do when they return to their own countries.

There are only two forms of power: money and people. Habitat has done nothing to alter the distribution of money in the world. There has been no commitment to transfer resources on the scale that would make any significant impact. The only hope is that Habitat may have altered enough people. The two-year build up, and the two-week Conference itself, have been a remarkable educational exercise. Politicians have learned to speak technical language. Technicians have learned that issues they are dealing with are political. And laymen have had their eyes opened to the whole complex area of human settlements. The question now is whether these people will organise themselves and act in such a way as to change the existing political and social structures so that the problems that we are now too familiar with can be solved.

* A handwritten version of this article was discovered in a file of conference papers in 2016. It is reproduced as written at the time.