

»» Cities as key actors of the Agenda 2030: more than just a buzzword



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The *New Urban Agenda* (NUA) will be adopted at the Habitat III conference in Quito on 17-20 October 2016. Since the last Habitat conference 20 years ago, the share of urban citizens in the global population increased from around 45% to 54% - and is rapidly growing further. Cities are centres of development and prosperity; at the same time, they are facing enormous ecological and socio-economic challenges. However, for the cities to assume their role as key local actors in the implementation of the global sustainable development goals (SDG), basic preconditions will first have to be established.

The path to Quito

In the Final Declaration of the Habitat II conference in 1996, it was already advised that cities should be granted an active role in the implementation of recommended measures. Since then, decentralisation processes have been pressed forward in many countries. Representatives of cities and city networks have already been taking part in preparatory conferences in the run-up to the Habitat III conference. Civil society has also had a strong voice. All of this shows that cities, despite the continuing leadership role of national governments in UN conferences, are increasingly recognised as important actors.

Global sustainability and climate goals ask for active cities

In formulating the NUA, participants largely agree on the relevant fields of action: we need active urban planning and its effective implementation. This is to improve inclusive economic development and proactively reduce social tension.

Controversy about the degree of decentralisation and subsidiarity

It is more difficult to reach an agreement on the preconditions that must be met for cities to be able to live up to their rights and responsibilities as actors. What is an "adequate" level of decentralisation, for in-

stance - not only of tasks (deconcentration) but also of finances- and, especially, according to which logic (e.g. subsidiarity principle) are responsibilities to be divided between the cities and the central state - these are hot topics that are the subject of controversial debate. The positions reflect different political opinions but also different capacities and abilities of states and cities. This becomes particularly clear when looking at the question of whether the so-called Right to the City approach should explicitly be included in the NUA. This includes, for example, the statutory right of citizens to democratic, participative urban development - a requirement that is not fully in line with the individual development strategies of all governments.

Access to financing for cities as a precondition for their actions

According to many experts, continued fiscal decentralisation is needed for cities to better meet the needs of their residents. Funds provided by national governments are often neither reliable nor always reflecting urban priorities. Moreover, there is often a lack of legal preconditions that would allow cities to generate their own income (e.g. with local taxes) or raise credit. Legal conditions and available funds fail to keep up with the pace of urbanisation.

Municipalities to become better qualified and transparent

Cities will only be able to tackle these challenges if they have adequate human resources (in both quantitative and qualitative terms). Many smaller and medium-sized cities in particular still have considerable deficiencies in this area. Along with growing responsibilities and an increasing financial autonomy, systems providing urban transparency and accountability of a city to its citizens will also have to be strengthened in order to ensure need-based, efficient actions.

The New Urban Agenda as a central frame of action

The NUA defines responsibilities and goals of cities to implement the sustainability agenda; it is therefore important to adopt the NUA as a central frame of action at the Habitat III conference. In addition, the conference in October offers the opportunity to

- further strengthen urban institutional capacities as well as
- press forward the debate on subsidiarity and decentralisation including residents' participation.

Given the factual development alone, regarding the city as an "actor" is more than just a buzzword: independently of the conference's outcome, it becomes increasingly evident that due to the rapid demographic development as well as ecological and social challenges, global sustainability goals can no longer be reached without an active role of the cities. It is now a question of finding country-specific answers to the individual challenges faced by states and cities. ■

Literature:

Draft New Urban Agenda:
<https://www.habitat3.org/bitcache/b581c7d6129c25b03b0102e2a7e5e175e9019535?vid=586129&disp osition=inline&op=view>