

Revised- Dated 3<sup>rd</sup>. October 2016

## LET'S COMMIT LAND FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Single most important outcome of the Habitat III would be if all participating nations equivocally agree to commit land in their cities exclusively for construction of affordable housing (this does not come through in the draft 'New Urban Agenda'). Thereafter, various governments would have to undertake direct responsibility of building affordable housing and not rely on markets for their supply.

Exclusion of more and more people from the benefits of development, particularly their access to formal and dignified housing is squarely a failure of the current patterns of urbanization that is steadfastly undermining the very idea of cities. Expanding cities are by no means indicators of desirable and sustainable urbanization. Achievement of higher human development standards along with equity and justice for all are instead true indicators of successful urbanization and city making effort. Tragically cities are being rapidly divided into disparate fragments of exclusive communities and marginalized populations. It is in this context that the Housing Question has to be understood and evaluated. Our failure in ensuring such basic human rights to vast majority of city population exposes our failure while putting our collective capacity and capability to challenge.

Central issue in the housing question is land. Unfortunately, this statement has to be reiterated. Question that stares on our faces is how do we achieve equity in land use and interweave the disparate fragments of our fast growing cities into unified landscape? We hope these questions are dealt with bluntly and squarely leading to tangible outcome at the habitat conference.

We hope, the final declarations will overcome the over-arching generalizations in the draft documents and outline more specifically much needed interventions for equitable distribution of land and increased role of governments in building affordable housing and amenities for all. However, the daunting task will be to incorporate and reflect the multitude of local needs and demands into a classified set of common principles and action plans for the achievement of these objectives. While respective governments may put local plans together, an agreement to collectively review and assess intermittently individual city and nations action plans for successful implementation of the global objectives is executed.

### **Equity in land use:**

We have to bring land back to the center stage of our discussion. All these years, since countries have committed to neo-liberal globalization, question of land has been pushed to the back stage. Over the years, substantial public land has been gifted away by governments and or captured and colonized by private

developers who have been mandated to carry out development works, including public housing. Therefore, questions relating to just utilization of land are not raised, as it would hurt the freedom of free market forces. Such model of development has not worked in favor of public interest nor contributed to public good.

In many instances, without pledging land, governments have been beating around the bush negotiating deals with private landowners and developers seeking concessions by way of a percentage of the built-up area in their high-cost projects towards affordable housing. Such begging-bowl approach is only scratching the surface of this gigantic crisis that is crippling our cities and causing serious social unrest. We also hope the outcome at Quito conference formally calls off our increased dependency on markets for promotion of affordable housing.

But in many cities, large tracts of land is colonized and or occupied with very little vacant land. Fact is that people- poor and lower middle class, have managed to find roofs over their heads by living in slums and other informal settlements. Slums have proliferated due to non-availability of affordable housing. Can the present land occupation pattern that are consistent with demand, illegal as it is termed, be accepted and formalized by incorporating them into the development plan of cities? Reserving slum land in the development plans of cities would be one way of gaining land for affordable housing.

### **Focus on affordable housing:**

Habitat declaration merely specifies the need for governments to allocate land for housing. This is too general, rather weak as a proposition given the current situation of land in cities. We know that land earmarked for housing has been taken over and exploited almost entirely for exclusive upper class housing, high-cost amenities and commercial development. Therefore, land has to be more specifically reserved for affordable housing. It is time that we collectively resolve under the UN Habitat- III banner that 'Housing' be re-addressed or rephrased as 'Affordable Housing' in all our discussions and documents. Our collective focus has to shift to affordable housing alone given the gravity of housing condition in most cities. Let the rich and those who can afford to buy or rent from the open market continue to rely on private builders and developers to fulfill their desires. We need not invest our collective time and resources to facilitate them.

Therefore, we hope the UN Habitat-III conference resolves that governments of all participating nations agree to commit adequate land and undertake upon themselves the development of affordable housing and amenities, for the achievement of just, equal and sustainable cities.