



*The New Urban Agenda: Need for Cohesive Vision and Platform for Transformative Change in the Development of Urban Sierra Leone*

*Braima Koroma, SLURC Co-Director*

*'By 2050 the world urban population is expected to nearly double, making urbanisation one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's most transformative trends'. (Quito Declaration on Sustainable Cities and Human Settlements for All, October 2016).*

The United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) held in Quito in October 2016 offer the opportunity to make transformative commitments in pursuit of a sustainable and just urban future more real than the Habitat Agendas of 1976 and 1996. The New Urban Agenda (NUA) is a 24-page document – a global 20-year vision for cities that are equal, accessible, and people centred. The NUA is a complementary framework that drills into what it will take to achieve a number of the UN Sustainable Development Goals but particularly Goal #11 that ensures that '*cities and human settlements are inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable*', as well as other targets across the SDGs, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030. Reinforcing Habitat III's position, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development also emphasizes that '*there is a critical need for a transformational change in development, so that no one is left behind*'.

Nevertheless the NUA provides an impressive, comprehensive shared vision for cities and human settlements for all, a vision where '*all inhabitants without discrimination of any kinds are able to inhabit and produce just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements*'. This vision includes equal rights and opportunities, fundamental freedoms, adequate housing, equal access for all to public goods, civic participation and engagement, gender equality, accessible urban mobility, disaster management and resilience, environmental sustainability, high productivity, competitiveness and innovation by promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all

In the NUA Member states collectively welcomed the ambitious 'transformative commitments' to work on the three core interlinked principles of:

- Sustainable and inclusive urban prosperity and opportunities for all (leave no one behind)
- Sustainable urban development for social inclusion and poverty eradication, and
- Environmentally sound and resilient urban development.

At the same time, in the efforts to 'get everything in', there is a lack of prioritization and so no implementation imperative nor a clear case for the interconnectedness of its major components, and the way of working makes it more like a wishlist than an innovative and transformative agenda for the future.

However, in order to achieve the desired urban transformations, the NUA pointed out three essential requirements. These include:

1. Local-national partnerships, in which national urban policies are backed by effective decentralisation to local authorities and civil society;
2. *'Strategic and integrated urban and territorial planning and management'* to *'promote mixed, connected, and compact cities and human settlements.'*
3. New ways of financing and implementing the desired changes in urban development.

The NUA was viewed as a platform for cities to build capacity to take on global challenges accompanying urbanisation, but also as a chance for participating countries to create a cohesive vision and platform for implementation. In this vein, Sierra Leone should make significant progress towards translating the NUA *'from paper to actions and concrete steps'*, create and maintain a sense of *'collective vision'* and to streamline efforts in different sectors. However, in ensuring the collective vision and political commitment towards transformative change for sustainable urban development, there is a need to take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development, and respect unique and emerging challenges specific to each context. Special attention should be paid to slum and informal settlement dwellers.

In exploring the possibilities of creating a cohesive vision and platform for transformative change in the implementation of the NUA, city authorities and their stakeholders in Sierra Leone need to:

- encourage the participation by and recognition of all actors – local governments in urban development and civil society, as well as the urban poor and their communities;
- address power imbalances and make every effort to reach equitable outcomes that leave no-one behind;
- include, and build capacity of, residents of informal settlements to lead data collection and monitoring processes in ways that improve the visibility of the living conditions and actual needs of the urban poor, while at the same time empowering groups in negotiating for their rights to secure adequate housing;
- build citizen-led processes, and to ensure that the 'new urban agenda 'leaves no-one behind'; and
- encourage inclusive leadership, monitoring and implementation of the NUA.

Turning the NUA into tangible changes in our cities in Sierra Leone will require a paradigm shift in how we approach in achieving sustainable cities. Too often, cities – and their individual agencies and departments – operate in their own siloes, developing sector-specific solutions, rather than integrated solutions which incorporate business, people and each other. Therefore creating the kind of transformative change requires more integrated strategic approaches as a foundation of sectoral solutions, coordination and collaboration than ever before, it is clear that the private sector will need to play a critical role. The private sector will help not only finance, construct and operate infrastructure, but also research and develop new technologies and innovation and unlock opportunities for private-public collaboration and partnership. If we as a nation want to implement *'transformative actions for sustainable urban development that will, at a minimum, change social relations in cities, and at best challenge urban inequality, then a more effective agenda focused on collective priorities through multi-stakeholder partnerships and participatory governance'* with the strongest leverage on local and national is required. Such transformational actions should *'leave no person and no space behind, achieve social cohesion, engage with informality, support healthy environment and lifestyles, and promote equitable economic growth'*. Also, transformative urban governance requires evidenced-based policies. The capacities of local government to collect, analyse and evaluate and use local data therefore need to be strengthened and embedded in open data and open government policies. Such evidence-based policy making should build on collaboration between local authorities and urban practioners and researchers. We need to move beyond participation to co-production.

But without a strong political commitment, leadership and buy-in at the national level, built through participative consultations with policy makers, practioners and activists, and the adaptation of the NUA to incorporate national realities and debates culminating to national urban policy and plans, the implementation of the new urban agenda may face significant challenge in the development of urban Sierra Leone.

In an effort to contribute to this process, SLURC took part in the UN Habitat III conference which launched the NUA. The delegation included Sam Gibson, Mayor of Freetown, and Sulaiman Parker, the Environment and Social Officer of Freetown City Council and the two co-directors of the SLURC, Dr Joseph Macarthy and Braima Koroma. The delegation participated to the World Mayors Assembly. Mayors of the world strongly asked to be recognised as the central actors in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda and asked for more powers, particularly in terms of direct access to finance mechanisms. The delegation had the opportunity to meet with IIHS, an Indian-based research institution which had similar purposes and learn from their history.



The Mayor of Freetown met with UN-Habitat to discuss the challenges of the city in terms of appropriate legal frameworks to implement city planning. These reflections were later presented at the special session on urban rules and regulations. The discussion also highlighted the need to clarify responsibilities between the city and central government and the need for the city to improve their own revenues. The delegation was also approached by the UN programme Capital Development Fund, which helps cities getting access to capital markets and bridging relationships with donors, in order to discuss municipal finance.





The following day the delegation met with the Secretary for Territory and Housing of the Quito Municipality and their civil society partners to learn from the experience of Quito. The delegation also met with Cities Alliance to discuss the possibility to expand their programme to Sierra Leone and focus on upgrading through an alliances of government, civil society and research institutions. Later, we met with the Government of Kenya to discuss slum upgrading approaches.



SLURC was launched internationally through a press conference to explain how it operates as an urban learning alliance introducing a new mode of urban knowledge production through partnerships with central and local government, universities, civil society organizations, and local communities.

Following this international launch, a networking invited brought together six urban alliances between universities and city actors, from four continents to share their insights and recommendations for SLURC and how urban learning alliances can play a key role in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.