

Housing Perspectives on Habitat III: Canada

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Abstract

Canada was one of more than 170 countries to participate in Habitat III and embrace the principles of the New Urban Agenda. Implementing the New Urban Agenda will mean addressing the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of our cities, with housing a key priority. This article describes Canada's approach to developing its National Housing Strategy, sets out the key priorities and themes, and describes the synergy between the Strategy and the principles of the New Urban Agenda.

Intensity and excitement marked the buildup to and participation in the United Nations (UN) Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador. Now governments, nongovernmental organizations, communities, public servants, academics, and citizens must get down to the hard work of translating the good intentions of the *New Urban Agenda* into concrete actions and meaningful change for people and the planet.

The government of Canada embraced the guiding principles set for the Habitat III summit, which align well with Canada's interest in improving access to housing and building healthier communities across the country. Those principles will guide work as our government embarks on the development of important national strategies and solutions related to housing, poverty reduction, childcare, infrastructure, climate change, and other challenges in both the urban and rural contexts.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said recently at the UN General Assembly, "Diversity is a source of strength, not weakness. Our country is strong not in spite of our differences, but because of them" (Trudeau, 2016). Working together is something that Canada does well and will be vital as we undertake the important work of implementing the *New Urban Agenda*. Safe, adequate, and affordable housing is an essential component of inclusive, sustainable urban centers and requires continued partnerships with provinces, municipalities, academia, civil society, youth, indigenous peoples, and others. Going forward, we will engage with our partners to share what we learned from Habitat III and discuss how we can implement the *New Urban Agenda*.

Throughout the negotiation process on the *New Urban Agenda*, Canada fought hard to ensure an inclusive approach—to have groups like youth, children, immigrants, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, women, and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex officially recognized in the *New Urban Agenda*. Canada strives to be an inclusive society, but it faces challenges. Although its housing system is fundamentally sound, Canada can and must do better. High levels of homelessness continue to plague many Canadian communities, and new approaches to community building are needed to ensure all people have equal opportunities to thrive in society and contribute to the economy. A lack of affordable housing is a significant contributing factor to social challenges such as poverty and homelessness, unemployment and poor health, and poor educational outcomes.

At the same time Canada was preparing for Habitat III in Quito, the government was also in the midst of consulting widely with Canadians on the vision, priorities, and outcomes of a National Housing Strategy (NHS). Thousands of Canadians took part by filling in an online survey, submitting ideas in writing, and joining the conversation on social media. Many also participated in formal consultations, such as a series of expert and stakeholder roundtables and focus groups to get the views and input of Canadians facing some of the most difficult housing challenges, including people who have been homeless, indigenous peoples, people living in the north, newcomers to Canada, and persons with disabilities.

In November 2016, Canada released *What We Heard*, which summarizes the themes and priorities identified by Canadians throughout the consultation process (Conference Board of Canada, 2016). For example, the government heard consistently that the NHS should consider the entire housing system and spectrum of housing needs while prioritizing the most vulnerable. The government heard of a need for better integration of housing and support services and access to capital to facilitate more affordable housing options. It heard a strong partiality for policies that enable local communities to drive local solutions to housing problems.

A number of themes also emerged from the consultations covering topics Canadians felt needed to be addressed in the NHS.

- Every effort should be made to reduce or eliminate homelessness in Canada.
- The strategy needs to prioritize the housing needs of low-income and vulnerable Canadians.
- Special attention needs to be given to addressing the unique challenges facing indigenous peoples, wherever they may live.
- The strategy should respond to the growing housing affordability challenges faced by low- and middle-income Canadians, especially in large cities.
- Housing should shape communities that are both inclusive and sustainable.
- A strong social housing sector needs to be a pillar of the NHS.

For the most part, Canadians across the country ranked outcomes related to affordability, sustainability, and inclusivity as the top three priority outcomes of the NHS, which are very much in line with those outlined in the *New Urban Agenda*. In particular, achieving greater social inclusion of

those who are often not able to fully participate in the prosperity of the country is a key outcome for which to strive. Canada looks forward to creating meaningful change in the social and economic outcomes for its most vulnerable citizens (notably for seniors, indigenous peoples, veterans, victims of domestic violence, and those with mental health issues).

The government is committed to release a comprehensive NHS in 2017 that aims to—

- Mobilize partnerships across the housing system.
- Achieve better housing outcomes for Canadians with indicators and targets to track progress and a strong performance measurement framework.
- Optimize government investments and assets (for example, lands and buildings) in order to ensure a fiscally sustainable approach to achieving outcomes.
- Improve housing affordability for those who need support and provide pathways toward greater self-reliance and prosperity.
- Identify gaps and provide a continuum of flexible policy and program responses built on best evidence of what will produce the desired outcomes.
- Promote innovation and new approaches, including financing approaches and private sector partnerships.
- Situate housing as part of a holistic approach to achieve broader socioeconomic and environmental outcomes.

The 2017 federal budget, released on March 22, proposed \$11.2 billion over 11 years for new federal programs and initiatives that will address important housing needs and shape Canada's long-term vision and priorities for a NHS. A proposed National Housing Fund (NHF) includes allocations for the renewal of the social housing sector, innovative approaches to the development of affordable housing, a coinvestment fund to promote partnerships where housing can support complementary social objectives, and direct lending, which will increase the impact of these investment dollars. Funding will also go toward renewing the federal-provincial-territorial partnership in housing and supporting shared affordable housing priorities.

The proposed NHF also includes targeted funding to—

- Reduce chronic and episodic homelessness.
- Support efforts to improve housing conditions in the north.
- Make surplus federal lands and buildings available to housing providers at low or no cost for the development of affordable housing.
- Support expanded housing research and improve data collection and analytics, including developing and implementing a new Housing Statistics Framework.
- Address critical repair and affordability needs, and encourage development of new housing, for indigenous people living off reserve.

In addition to substantial new investments in housing, approximately \$1.7 billion in annual housing funding, which was scheduled to decline as long-term operating agreements end, has been preserved. Options for reinvesting these funds in support of sustainable social housing are being considered. The 2017 budget also proposed new investments for indigenous peoples, including \$4 billion for infrastructure in indigenous communities, a significant portion of which will go to housing, where it is most needed. In 2017, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada will work with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis groups to codevelop distinct initiatives to improve outcomes and move toward greater autonomy and responsibility for their housing on the part of indigenous peoples.

The *New Urban Agenda* challenges governments to make bold changes to the way they plan and invest in infrastructure, social services, and economic development in urban centers. Canada recognizes the importance of housing as the foundation for social and economic opportunities, which lead to better lives for Canadians. The 2017 budget demonstrates this commitment to housing through significant proposed investments, which would build on existing programs and the \$4.3 billion for new and existing housing initiatives included in the 2016 budget. Details of Canada's NHS will be released later this year.

Habitat III brought government leaders and civil society from around the world together to agree on a vision for socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable cities that put people and adequate housing at the center. The NHS will be one part of Canada's integrated approach to creating healthier and more sustainable communities and a significant step toward realizing the vision and goals of the *New Urban Agenda*. Achieving the desired outcomes of the NHS and of the *New Urban Agenda* will depend on us—individuals at all levels of government and civil society—to take the vision to heart, to promote it on a daily basis in our work, and to take actions that make a difference.

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