

Habitat II Agenda to Include Calls for LVT

The United Nations will hold its final conference of the century, Habitat II, this June in Istanbul, Turkey. Since it deals with land and housing, it is especially important for Georgists. Habitat II is a unique UN gathering in several ways. Its global action plan will incorporate

summits — on environment, human rights, population, social development, and women — in language of deeds, not just promises. Also, the NGO community, which includes businesses, bankers and many other groups interested in housing and infrastructure, has played a more active role in the Habitat II agenda than in previous conferences.

More than a billion people are badly housed or homeless. Some are the rural poor; some are among the millions who leave rural areas hoping for work in cities; others are refugees of war or political upheavals. Soon, more than half the world's population will live in cities — most of them in poverty.

Shelter is a basic human right (although the US opposes including a universal right to shelter in the Habitat II document) and NGOs regard Habitat II as more than a discussion of urban and rural renewal. Many, looking for the roots of urban chaos and poverty, see the economic growth patterns brought about by transnational corporations driving wedges into their already poor communities. In many cases the "higher" wages in new manufacturing jobs end up buying less because of inflation stimulated by the new investments themselves. Despite financiers' claims to heed grass roots needs, the "structural adjustment programs" of the World Bank and other global lenders damage or destroy traditional ways of farming and doing business by insisting on large-scale, cash-oriented enterprises.

NGOs see citizens and economies becoming more dependent than ever. More and more civic groups advocate decentralization, enabling local governments to get a fair return from business to help pay for physical and social infrastructure. The services needed are very basic indeed: better water, sewage and utility systems, public transit, health care and education. These depend on economic changes that create jobs, at equitable pay — and provide for sensible public funding.

Editor's note: At the end of the Feb. 9th program, Pat Aller was called to the fore by her NGO colleague, Alanna Hartzok, who presented Pat with a surprise gift in appreciation for Pat's tireless work on behalf of the International Union. She and Alanna have been working to ensure that the document adapted at Habitat II will incorporate potent affirmations of the need for public collection of land rents. Pat is also a member of the NGO Committee on Shelter and Community. Her efforts have been integral to the inclusion of references to public collection of land rent that appear in the draft document.

Sections in the Draft Habitat II Document Referring to Land Rights

49. (d) apply public policies, including fiscal policies and planning policies, to stimulate sustainable shelter markets and land development;
52. (d) review and adjust, when necessary, the legal, fiscal and regulatory framework to respond to the special needs of the poor and low-income population;
(e) periodically review shelter finance policies and systems, taking into consideration their impacts on the environment, on economic development and on social welfare; and
(f) promote and adopt policies which coordinate and encourage the adequate supply of key inputs required for the construction of housing and infrastructure, such as land, finance, building materials, etc.
54. (e) apply appropriate fiscal measures, including taxation, to promote the supply of housing and land;
56. (d) apply transparent, comprehensive, easily accessible and progressive taxation and incentive mechanisms to stimulate efficient, environmentally sound and equitable use of land; exploit the full potential of land-based and other forms of taxation in mobilizing financial resources for service provision by local authorities;
(e) consider fiscal and other measures, as appropriate, to prevent hoarding of vacant land for speculative purposes, and thus increase the supply of land for shelter development;
(f) develop land information systems and practices for land-value assessment;
(h) take advantage of innovative instruments which capture land value gains and recover public investments;
80. (c) develop fiscal incentives and land use control measures, including land-use planning solutions for a more rational and sustainable use of limited land resources;
112. (a) formulate and implement fiscal policies that support sustainable development and stimulate urban employment.