

OCTOBER 19



Holy See Statement

At The Plenary Of United Nations Conference On Housing And Sustainable Urban Development  
(Habitat III)

By H. E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza

Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations

Holy See

Statement by H.E. Archbishop Bernardito Auza

Head of Delegation

United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III)

Quito, 19 October 2016

Mr. President,

I have the honour to convey to you and to all the distinguished participants at this Conference the best wishes and cordial greetings of His Holiness Pope Francis. I would like to reiterate his call to the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015, when he urged all government leaders to “do everything possible to ensure that all can have the minimum spiritual and material means needed to live in dignity and to create and support a family, which is the primary cell of any social development. In practical terms, this absolute minimum has three names: lodging, labour, and land; and one spiritual name: spiritual freedom, which includes religious freedom, the right to education and all other civil rights.”

We are gathered here in this beautiful city of Quito in order to seize the “historic opportunity to leverage the key role of cities and human settlements as drivers of sustainable development in an increasingly urbanized world,” as underlined in the New Urban Agenda (para 22). The urban sector can, and must, play a central role in the efforts to guarantee the aforementioned minimal spiritual and material means, as well as to overcome the crisis of our economic model. It is quite clear how this crisis is increasing rural and urban poverty in its multidimensional forms: economic, social, environmental and ethical, and is producing perverse systems of exclusion and inequality.

This historic opportunity has a significant challenge: the redefinition of the urban paradigm towards an urban renewal that is centred on the human person, founded on a long-term vision and grounded in the interconnected dimensions of integral human and sustainable development, as well as on what Pope Francis, in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, defines as “integral ecology.”

An urban paradigm shift requires change in economic and social structures. To avoid bureaucratization, corruption and failure, this shift should be accompanied by a sincere commitment from all stakeholders to put the intrinsic and inviolable dignity of the human person at the centre of any consideration regarding sustainable urban development and decent housing, which are issues linked to the respect for the integral promotion of the person and his/her fundamental human rights. This intrinsic and inviolable dignity should be recognized and protected from the conception until the natural death of each human person. This, however, is not so clear in paragraphs 34 and 55 of the New Urban Agenda.

Mr. President,

The rapid urbanization and move of people to urban centres has caused an increasing number of people living in urban slums and informal settlements, to experience considerable difficulties in having access to the minimal spiritual and material means needed to live in dignity. These men and women, boys and girls, risk losing the sense of self-worth and the respect of their own dignity; they find themselves trapped in a vicious circle of extreme poverty and marginalization. If economic profit has priority over individuals and humanity, we embed ourselves in a throwaway culture that considers human persons as goods to be consumed that can be used and then thrown away. This throwaway culture can generate social breakdown, increasing violence, new forms of social aggression, loss of identity. These signs are the symptoms of a real social decline leading us toward the “silent rupture of the bonds of integration and social cohesion” (*Laudato si'*, 46).

Hence, our first task is to put the economy, and even the urban economy, at the service of peoples.[1] In this perspective, the strategy of the new urban paradigm should give priority to the most vulnerable people and make all necessary efforts to guarantee their fundamental human rights, such as the right to adequate housing for all, which is a component of the right to an adequate standard of living. The family home is the place where the original cell of social life, the family, can grow and flourish. Family and housing go hand in hand.

Furthermore, for a house to be a home, a community dimension is required, and this is the neighbourhood: it is precisely here that the great family of humanity is built, starting from the most immediate instance, from living together with one’s neighbours. “There is a need to protect those common areas, visual landmarks and urban landscapes that increase our sense of belonging, of rootedness, of ‘feeling at home’ within a city which includes us and brings us together,” as Pope Francis wrote in *Laudato Si'* (151). In some places, where makeshift shantytowns have sprung up, this means developing those neighbourhoods rather than razing or displacing them. This will mean providing such places with basic social services, such as health, education, food security, drinking water, decent jobs, safety and a healthy environment in order to enable people to develop a normal life and to enable their human integral development. We should no longer think of our cities as being

many peripheries organized around one centre but rather as neighbourhoods, side by side to each other, that are organized in a polycentric way. These neighbourhoods, however, should provide citizens with access to the same standard of social, economic and cultural services, as well as to green areas and adequate employment opportunities, thereby reducing the need for the daily movement of people in the city with its consequent traffic congestion and pollution.

We have to reconsider the very meaning of the city, the very meaning of living and dwelling. It should be understood as the capability to welcome, to integrate and to facilitate the coexistence of different ethnic groups and cultures. This requires addressing the cultural and even religious issues of living together, since “urban planning has always to take into consideration the views of those who will live in these areas” (Laudato si’, 150), taking into account their cultural traditions and having special care for indigenous communities.

In the context of inclusive cities, there needs to be creativity in integrating rundown neighbourhoods into a welcoming city: “How beautiful [are] those cities,” Pope Francis has written, that “overcome paralyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development! How attractive are those cities which, even in their architectural design, are full of spaces that connect, relate and favour the recognition of others!” (Evangelii gaudium, 210). Therefore, to put the economy at the service of peoples means to promote an urban integration of slums and informal settlements. The challenge is to recognize and to evaluate the significant social, economic, and cultural contributions arising from the integration of both informal economy and migrants into urban life. They have to be seen not as a problem but as persons who can contribute to the development of the city in its various economic, social, cultural and environmental components. This means also promoting economic development that is truly inclusive through decent job opportunities, which can become an instrument of reconciliation, social cohesion and integration within the city, especially at this particular time characterized by the growing flows of population in urban areas. Slums and informal settlements are not only places that need to be helped or developed, but places that also teach us many different human values such as solidarity, fraternity, resilience, sharing and the living together of different religions and cultures; places that teach us a more human life.

Mr President,

We are at an important stage of human history where humanity has the technical capabilities to promote sustainable urban development: by improving the management of safe water supplies and sanitation as well as waste systems; by promoting the transition to the circular economy; by consolidating the urban-rural nexus; by strengthening the resilience of cities to implement disaster risk reduction strategies and to deal with the consequences of climate change; by leveraging the potential of renewable energies, energy efficiency, and infrastructures connected with the transport and mobility.

Technical solutions, although necessary, are not sufficient. What we need is a strong educational effort, based on promoting a new lifestyle, sustainable consumption and production patterns, and responsible awareness of our rights and duties; welcoming but also being welcomed; integrating but also being integrated; promoting the “home” value from a cultural point of view, and preventing the negative consequences of rapid urbanization that affect the social fabric and the dignity of living

conditions. People living in smaller localities in the countryside, or in villages, are used to a network of family and social relationships. In cities, however, people more often live next to each other rather than together, and this can even change the experience and the vision that the human person has of itself. Does cultural and religious pluralism contribute to harmonious urban coexistence or ghettoization? Therefore, to promote the former, it is fundamental to adopt an approach to urbanisation that is based on the awareness that the development of a truly human society is difficult without a common framework of values.

In this perspective, we need to enhance participation and education, and this comprises the spiritual freedom pointed out by Pope Francis at the UN General Assembly, which includes religious freedom, the right to education and all other civil rights, starting with the family, which is the primary cell of any social development. Cities absorb the young as resources and attract their skills, so it is necessary to establish educational places where the person can be formed in an integral manner. What is needed, therefore, is not just training, but also informal education services and meeting places where transmission of knowledge and development of skills are possible, without forgetting the religious dimension and cultural heritage. “How lovely are cities that, in their architectural design, are full of spaces that unite, connect and foster recognition of the other,” Pope Francis said to the participants in the 2014 World Meeting of Popular Movements. “So the line to follow is neither eradication nor marginalization but urban integration. Moreover, not only must the word ‘integration’ replace all talk of eradication; it must also supplant those projects that aim to varnish poor neighbourhoods, prettify the outskirts and daub make-up on social ailments instead of curing them by promoting genuine and respectful integration.”[2]

This could be an effective way to guarantee the aforementioned minimum spiritual and material means needed for every human being to live in dignity.

Muchísimas gracias, ¡Quito encantador!

Muchísimas gracias, ¡Ecuador hermano!

Muchísimas gracias, ¡Señor Presidente!

[Translation: Thank you very much, lovely Quito! Thank you very much, fraternal Ecuador! And thank you very much, Mr. President!"]

1. Cfr Pope Francis, Address to the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, 9 July 2015.

2. Cfr Pope Francis, Address to the participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements, Vatican, 28 October 2014.