

Annette M. Kim's Comments
for the UN Habitat policy dialogue on Affordable Housing
organized by the InterAmerican Development Bank and Habitat for Humanity International
October 29, 2016:

Twenty years ago I attended Habitat 2 in Istanbul when I was a student. At the time, it was exciting to see the gathering of tens of thousands of people from around the world. But, the events were top-down presentations and NGOs were all located in a separate, alternative site. So, it's amazing to see the difference with this Habitat 3. In particular GAP, the General Assembly of Partners from civil society, helped to edit the New Urban Agenda statement, were given seats in the general assembly plenary and allowed to make statements entered into the official records, and had a meeting with Ban Ki Moon and Joan Clos who conveyed that the inclusion of GAP was one of the big successes of this Habitat.

Just to give you a sense of how remarkable this is, it would be a miracle to get a bunch of professors from one university to agree on anything let alone professors from around the world communicating through email, plus 14 other constituencies and counting! But, in 18 months, GAP was able to organize a disparate group of constituents around the globe to come together and agree on some common overarching goals such as being included in the process as well as the goal of building a more inclusive city. We have to applaud the UN Habitat Secretariat's office and the member states who welcomed us.

So, in this session as we talk about housing policy, we do so within this context of a global shift towards INCLUSION.

I was asked to reflect on what was said and not said by our esteemed speakers and the policy paper. As we talk about urban housing policy, I would say central to who we must include in our discussions about urban housing but whom we hardly ever explicitly name anymore are migrants/immigrants. And we really need to name migrants and immigrants given the current anti-immigrant/migrant sentiment that is sweeping all over the globe in this crazy US election, Brexit in Europe, and in the Global South towards fellow citizens born in rural areas. There is a mounting fear and demonization of our fellow urban residents that we need to counter. And we need to counter it because grassroots civil society is also agitating for it. And as we all know, migration is why our cities have grown so rapidly. 1/7 of the people in the world are migrants. Migration is urbanization.

Given this state of affairs and larger context, as we talk about housing we are talking about much more than the building. As has been raised in the many sessions here and in the New Urban Agenda, we are really talking about dimensions such as housing's affordability, security, location, rights and entitlements, etc. In other words, within the larger context of a global move towards inclusion, what we are more essentially talking about is spatial inclusion, a spatial justice.

Spatial inclusion requires us changing two fundamental things:

1) Urban narrative: of who is legitimate to be in the city, and how the city is supposed to look like and be experienced.

2) Property rights: rights to urban land and space are the fundamental key to unlocking our urban situation problems, including housing.

1) URBAN NARRATIVE:

As I mentioned earlier, legitimating migrants as integral members of our cities is one of the major narratives that needs to be established. It's fundamentally a political project. One of the narratives we need to counter is that migrants are scary, threatening, and criminals. This othering is done by de-humanizing migrants as not fully human people. We can't make inclusive housing policy if that is our society's narrative. Laws and plans won't be changed to make space for them, and when amazing laws are changed such as we've seen in Brazil and India, they will not be implemented or normalized into society without new legitimating narratives.

So, what we need to do and what I see this Habitat meeting is about is building a counter-narrative. In addition to the smart, efficient, green city, cities are filled with lots of diverse people, many of whom have arrived in 1 or 2 generations. We should call these people by name, hear their voices, and make space for them.

UN Habitat can help to build this counter-narrative. The position of a global body will be one voice, a much needed voice, that will then have to fight with other narratives at the local level. But, I think we can be more explicit about who has a right to the city, the main people that have made our cities grow: migrants.

2) PROPERTY RIGHTS

Legitimizing narratives are needed to underpin a reform of our property rights

The talk about "rights to the city" don't mean anything if there isn't a place to practice that right, a place to live inside the city. A right to where exactly? In other words, real rights to the city means real property rights

My comment are that it's about more than about private property rights or legal land tenure. I applaud the policy trend towards viewing land tenure regularization as a continuum rather than a binary, and the experiments to be more relevant and creative about how we disseminate title papers.

But, property rights are more than about legalizing land tenure. The piece of paper only has power if we as a society give it power, respect it, are willing to trade with it. But, that piece of paper also has not only entitlements but obligations and liabilities. In other words, we as a society define the terms and conditions of these and that is why property rights are the great focus and potential for solving our spatial inclusion problem.

Globally, we are in the midst of re-writing property rights.

To make practical space out of the right for spatial inclusion means a broader host of strategies such as:

- a) change our legal codes to include the legitimacy of people who are outside the formal documentation system.
- b) change our land use plans in order to share urban space

c) change our regulations, building codes, design guidelines in order to allow for smaller, more affordable spaces

d) change taxation for land value capture in order to help finance the urban evolution

We can be much more creative about creating new kinds of spaces and property rights. Civil society is already agitating for these changes. The only way to make adequate space is for government along with civil society and business to create new paradigm of property rights.

In sum, all of us here at this conference are part of an international division of labor. We work inside government at the international, national, and local levels, we work outside of government as communities of activists, artists, academics. It will take all of us to create a world of more spatially inclusive cities.