



Declaration of the International Meeting for Equal Cities

A Common Commitment

Our organisations, movements and networks of residents, academics, and local governments committed to social territorial justice gathered in Buenos Aires in parallel with the official URBAN 20 meeting to discuss an alternative approach to neoliberal urban management, and to exchange ideas and experiences of the cities which we aspire to have in the international context of economic, social, environmental and political crisis.

We build on key contributions such as the Municipalist Declaration for the Right to Housing and the Right to the City, and on all international instruments which support the guaranteed right to decent housing and habitat as a basic human right. We understand the Right to the City to be the right of all current and future inhabitants, whether permanent or temporary, to live in, use, occupy, produce, transform, govern and enjoy fair, equal, safe, sustainable and democratic cities, villages and settlements. These are defined as common goods for a decent life, which should be shared and should belong to all the members of the community.

The defence of the Right to the City reaffirms, updates and defends human rights and the corresponding duties of states: the agreement that "no one will be left behind" of the 2030 Agenda, and that "no place is left behind" of the Declaration of the 9th Session of the World Urban Forum. Cities can be places for everyone.

We are the Creators of Cities

We are the workers who build and breathe life into cities, the casual workers who suffer very long journeys from home to work in degrading conditions. We are the unemployed, who are up against the markets in housing, business and casual jobs as we try to meet our families' basic needs. We are those evicted and made homeless by a property market which extracts capital gains from territories, by evicting and criminalising those who cannot pay. We are the poor, who find we are only able to settle in the most environmentally degraded places, without security of tenure, vulnerable to natural disasters, and where our rights to housing are ignored. We are the migrants and refugees from different cultures, driven out of other places, persecuted and repressed by governments. We are the disabled or the elderly, caught in urban traps which prevent us from using the spaces which others enjoy. We are the women who suffer from the undervaluing of care work, and the lack of infrastructure, adequate urban transport, or policies which could address the causes of the many abuses to which we are subjected. We are those who are persecuted, criminalised and stigmatised for our gender or sexual difference, who do not have access to the real opportunities of urban life. We are the girls who live in cities of enclosed spaces, and in less and less healthy environments. We are the young people criminalised for the way we live in the city. We are the street artists who do not receive the support we need and who are restricted from using the public space to show our work, which enriches urban culture. We are all those who suffer in some way from exclusion, violence and injustice in cities.

We are here together, we exist and we resist, and we are diverse, with a world of needs in common. We want to be part of the discussion on the Agenda for Cities, and to bring our everyday practices and experiences of resistance to the debate on the neoliberal city model.

We want to be able to make decisions on the most important issues of urban life.



Cities in Dispute

First and foremost, cities are home to millions of people trying to live in fair and decent conditions. Most local governments manage them as opportunities for investment and speculation however: as engines for unlimited economic development. The elitist management and commercial models imagine the urban environment from the point of view of experts and large urban developers, who privatise the common goods and exploit the countryside, forgetting those who have really built the city and disregarding the social production of habitat.

This model measures the success of cities on indicators such as the number of square metres of construction and the increase in property values, favouring quantity over quality. The New Urban Agenda states that urban development is unlimited and is driven by cities, whereas these indicators are evidence of the unsustainability of the neoliberal model.

Territory is concentrated in ever fewer hands. The surrender of common goods for property speculation is relentless. The (few) natural and public spaces which exist are completely expendable: they are considered "vacant", to be filled with businesses, naturalising the progress of privatising the public. Neighbourhoods lose their identities and their inhabitants have no decision-making powers on urban planning policies. Housing has been commercialised to the hilt, converting properties into *commodities*, no more than merchandise for speculation, converting citizens into customers. Ground is covered in hard landscaping, building and urbanisation continue without rhyme nor reason and encroach on absorbent surfaces in urban and suburban areas which are not planned with the common interest in mind, but rather for real estate, with State guarantees which often break laws. These speculative processes are the urban manifestation of accumulation by dispossession. The other side of this is the housing crisis, most notably the evictions, which affect the most vulnerable groups.

In this context, the democratic territory management model is the only one which is compatible with an approach which guarantees the rights of all the diverse identities who inhabit the city. We believe that this must be the framework for public policies which contribute to and strengthen democratic states governed by the rule of law: those which make commitments to the rights of all the various sectors of society, using tools and taking affirmative action in favour of those sectors whose rights are being violated.

We face a great challenge: to make cities a common good, through resistance and creativity; to work in partnership to implement new ways of guaranteeing human rights and participative democracy which respect diversity, and contribute to and ensure economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political empowerment for everyone.

Equal Cities

Action for the Environment

The causes of the social and environmental emergency hitting the planet are complex and multi-dimensional. Climate change is global. It increases the number of extreme climate events and makes them worse, but there are also local causes linked to the expansion of a (bad) development model which is incompatible with the cycles of nature. Fires, floods, droughts, hurricanes and other extreme events are part of a world-wide phenomenon, which government policies aggravate through



measures which favour agribusiness, megamining, fracking, expansion of oil exploration, large hydroelectric dams, huge real estate projects and so on.

We cannot therefore allow climate change to be used as an excuse. Its global nature does not diminish or mitigate the responsibility of leaders or politicians: quite the reverse - it augments it and puts it in the spotlight when deciding territorial public policies or managing control and prevention programmes against the impacts of these policies. The power of the dispossession model forces us to build bridges between those affected in the country and the city: between those who resist mining in remote places and fight against glyphosate and agribusiness, and those of us who live in ever more expensive, polluted, gated and repressive cities. It is all the same struggle, but links between people in the country and the city do not happen automatically: we must forge them.

(1) For most cities in the global South, adaptation to climate change is of paramount importance, because the survival of millions of people depends on it. Cities are considered major centres of wealth creation and innovation, but we are worried that the relationship between the city and territory is underestimated, especially the rural environment and more remote sources of natural wealth. Whilst cities produce 80% of GDP, economic power concentrated in administrative, legal and financial services appropriate it, degrading nature, crushing family farms and regional economies, displacing farmers and indigenous people, and wrongfully and irresponsibly exploiting Mother Earth through unlimited expansion of the urban sector, fracking, megamining, deforestation and monocultures. This wealth impoverishes the environment and threatens our future survival.

(2) Within the framework of major global consensus on the need for action against climate change, investment is made in large infrastructure projects in cities, which increase debt, do not solve the most urgent environmental challenges and often cause massive, unnecessary evictions. Faced with a global governance model, we reaffirm our belief in an environmental justice perspective for the truly sustainable development of our territories.

(3) We support the promotion of sustainable urban transport and the need to remove subsidies for fossil fuels. However, these initiatives must be accompanied by fiscal measures to discourage the purchase and use of private cars, within a framework of sustainable transport planning based on mass public transit and on non-motorised means.

(4) It is not just cities but also urban and rural residents who should play a part in development planning and promoting sustainability, with urban-rural links which benefit impoverished people in both rural and urban areas, guarantee food security, and protect biodiversity, natural habitats and the ecosystems around them. Implementation of planning and policies should be based on a democratic management model which involves communities in the design, implementation and evaluation processes.

(5) Information generation and monitoring is fundamental to decision-making processes. Research must bring civil society and the academic community together in order to guarantee the appropriate development of public policies.

(6) The risks from climate change are a combination of threats which require concerted efforts at a global level to reduce them and the social vulnerability they cause. Cities which aspire to improve their urban resilience should above all promote territorial regulation which contributes to reducing these vulnerabilities, which principally affect the poorest groups living in the most precarious places.



Decent Employment for the Future

We are aware of the technological advances which have led to the development of new businesses in what is called the *sharing economy*. We are also aware of the income-generating role of digital platforms in contexts of high unemployment and lack of opportunities for real work. We are concerned however by the privatisation of public services and the new economic models consisting of platforms which casualise work, do not meet social security standards and avoid paying taxes, thereby hollowing out the bases of the social State.

- (1)** The discussion on the future of work should not be based solely on scenarios predefined in accordance with digitalisation and automation forecasts, but should also include a wide discussion on the production model and the role of education and vocational training in different settings.
- (2)** For the benefits of the digital economy to be democratically distributed, it is essential to work tirelessly to reduce the digital divide and to commit to the progressive achievement of technological sovereignty.
- (3)** We support workers' and trade union struggles, and the strengthening of the popular economy. Local authorities must prioritise their commitments on the future of work, in order to guarantee quality employment and decent work in both public services and the private sector.
- (4)** We support self-management processes and the inclusion of cooperatives and SMEs in public contracts as ways of promoting decent employment.
- (5)** The development of business models tied to digital platforms cannot be separated from city planning or from its place within the framework of democratic management. We recall the experiences of local authorities in Barcelona, Paris, New York, London and Madrid who agreed to impose minimum social rights and taxation standards, in order to regulate large platform-based companies and limit their operations in their jurisdictions.
- (6)** In the context of increasing financialisation and commercialisation of life, the digital economy is becoming a new mechanism for casualising work, mainly for people suffering the effects of rising unemployment. The future of work must promote real economies, making the digital medium a means rather than an end in itself. Policies must be implemented to protect social security and the integrity of all types of workers' rights, in both the "old" and the "new" economies.
- (7)** We agree on the importance of promoting more compact, better connected cities, in order to maximise access to employment and to foster business to business relationships. These should guarantee accessibility for workers, both in terms of distance and cost, between places of work, home, and the urban facilities they need to build their lives. This should not mean urban planning exclusively for economic production, but rather that it should complement a city model designed for good living in all areas.
- (8)** We believe it is essential to develop diverse, inclusive economies which safeguard and protect access to safe ways of living and decent work for all inhabitants, progressively promoting decent working conditions for workers in the popular economy and all those employed in informal work.



Policies for Social Integration and Equality

Equality of every kind (social, political, economic, gender etc) as a concept has been losing ground on agendas and disappearing from public policy objectives. Inclusion is replacing it as the predominant objective, giving way to a new vision for urban policies. In our view, the priority focus for public action should continue to be on the goal of overcoming inequalities. The vision of the "entrepreneurial" State must not be developed. It is presented to citizens as a way of boosting individual careers which free up every citizen to be included in a city which has become naturally unequal. Governments should rather implement comprehensive policies and collective processes to bring social, political and economic equality to all citizens. These policies should de-commercialise rights, and produce quality spaces and public services which improve social interactions and political participation, promote sociocultural expression, embrace diversity and foster social cohesion.

Among the vulnerable groups, it is women who find themselves in the worst poverty, as well as being those who suffer most from urban barriers whilst bearing the burden of the caring roles historically assigned to them. Most women continue to bear the responsibility for domestic work, but this is undervalued and unrecognised, although it contributes hugely to development. Given the persistent division of labour by gender, and the double or triple responsibility which they bear, they need government support and gender-sensitive urban planning: local services and facilities, and safe, accessible transport which allows them to move around inhospitable and unequal territories.

(1) We support all policies directed at creating equal cities with universal access to education and health, which promote processes for building and improving the quality and coverage of public education institutions at all levels and of all specialist health services. Sub-national States must work towards growing their structures and gradually increasing their budgets in these sectors, paying particular attention to the most vulnerable areas in order to build urban equality processes.

(2) Planned infrastructures should not be designed to meet modernisation standards or city models regulated or constrained by international financial bodies on the assumption that they will attract new sources of sub-national funding. The use of existing public finance must be planned in a participative way, in line with the real needs of the residents. When determining policies and strategies, the main aspirations must be to overcome urban poverty and the housing shortage, and to ensure universal access to basic public services.

(3) It is urgent to include the feminist perspective in urban planning, especially the specific needs of those in caring roles. Cities modelled around people's real movements (and not just those connected with work) make a positive contribution to ending discrimination and dismantling existing urban barriers. Gender equality and respect for sexual diversity must be cross-cutting themes of all policies and not just goals for specific public programmes. Gender equality must be guaranteed, and all necessary measures adopted to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men, respect for sexual diversity, and resistance to all forms of discrimination and violence.

(4) Spatial justice is an essential concept when considering urban planning. It is no accident that it is poor people who find themselves living in the least safe areas, where there is the most pollution and where they suffer most from the consequences of climate change. It is necessary to design and implement strategies for the production and allocation of land and public housing in safe, central territories far from polluted areas of cities, so that vulnerable populations have access to the right to housing and the city.



(5) Whilst areas exist in the city which are either unaffordable, or completely casualised without access to basic urban services (public utilities, hospitals, public transport, quality schools), it is impossible to achieve the objective of urban integration. It is essential to regulate the cost of land and rent, and move completely away from the logic of different levels of wealth, which still dominate when determining the cost of living of each neighbourhood. Policies which guarantee access to housing for all the population are key drivers of true integration and equality in cities. There is no true development while there are whole families living on the streets. An integrated, human rights approach is required, where evictions are averted, land and housing are managed for strongly social purposes, and empty properties gradually disappear. The priorities must be investment in public housing policy-making, and expansion of support programmes for cooperatives, mutualism and self-management. Processes must also be created to regulate rents and the property market in general, to increase taxes on empty properties, and to implement policies to recuperate urban capital gains.

(6) Local governments must create suitable structures and instruments to eradicate violence, especially violence against women. For this to happen the priority must be access to a justice system which knows how to deal with reports of violence whilst avoiding stigmatisation and double victimisation. Public programmes for monitoring media content which reproduces historic abuse and discrimination should be promoted, and specialist observers should be developed who can monitor urban violence and generate new knowledge about it. Local authorities should be the first to root out violence as a mechanism for relating to their own citizens: to do so it is essential to implement strategies to stop repressive policing and to reduce militarisation of neighbourhoods.

(7) We support developing citizens' participation as an essential condition for achieving the Right to the City. The following are required: participative budgeting and planning; binding public hearings to take the major decisions on infrastructure and management of urban services; effective instruments for citizen audits of resources and the city's public debt; full knowledge for citizens about the land stock and public goods; and increased administrative decentralisation for local governments. These are some of the measures which aim to guarantee people's participation and therefore the democratisation of our cities.