

## Will Habitat III defend the human right to the city?

Written by The Conversation USA

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Luar Batang, one of Jakarta's oldest waterfront squatter areas, is being flattened. Residents and their homes [will be removed](#) to free up flood-prone land and access to the city for tourists. Thousands of people will be evicted, disrupting if not destroying livelihoods, jobs, homes and long-established social networks.

Like the illegal settlements in [Kalijodo](#) district, Luar Batang has received global attention for the heavy-handedness of the state-led intervention. Yet the decision to demolish a community built on a unique combination of circumstance, place and people is unlikely to be reversed.

The Luar Batang story is not exclusive to [Jakarta](#). In many cities in the Asia-Pacific and developing countries, [informal or unplanned settlements](#) continue to grow and are seen as a blight on city development.

These "parasites" of the city are on land that the formal planning system deemed unsuitable for development. Yet state and private developers now see them as a relatively easy land gain to reap higher financial returns.

Rather than engage in [strategies to upgrade settlements](#), some policymakers want them "out of sight, out of mind". The settlements' structure, people and image do not conform to middle-class and private developer views.

### Informal settlement isn't the exception

Globally, informal settlements in urban areas are growing at an unprecedented rate. In 2016, [UN-Habitat](#) estimated that [around one billion people live in slums](#) (an extreme type of informal settlement). That's about [one-quarter of the world's urban population](#).

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A United Nations report, [The State of Asian and Pacific Cities 2015](#), noted that the Asia-Pacific region has gained a reputation as home to the world's biggest and most populated slums and informal settlements. While the urban middle class has grown and good gains have been made in reducing urban disparities, including poverty, basic [human rights](#) remain elusive for people in such settlements.

In October 2016, the [UN Habitat III Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development](#) takes place in Quito, Ecuador. This global event happens only every 20 years.

Habitat III offers policymakers the chance to adopt a better-managed, more humane approach to the complexities of [urbanisation](#). [Regional meetings and other laudable initiatives](#) have been taking place for the last 18 months. Government, civil society and other stakeholders have been working towards a [New Urban Agenda](#) to be debated and adopted at Habitat III.

With more than [54% of the world's population now urban](#), informal settlements are burgeoning. The challenges are daunting. So where will informal settlements and the people who live in them be placed at Habitat III?

## Seismic shift in attitudes is needed

The emerging agenda is strongly centred on the Habitat III policy theme of the ["Right to the City and Cities for All"](#)

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[Henri Lefebvre](#)

proposed the "Right to the City" in 1968.

[David Harvey](#)

developed the concept in the new millennium as a means to reshape urbanisation by enhancing or extending access to human rights.

The Right to the City agenda requires a monumental shift in society attitudes. It requires us to reduce [socio-spatial injustices, achieve socio-spatial inclusion, increase equity](#), improve multi-level governance and, importantly, respect the sociocultural diversity that increasingly

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defines cities.

Therein lies a major hurdle. The [rights of the people in informal settlements](#) are being taken away or withheld at many levels, such as access to safe water, sanitation and educational opportunities. As well, their non-compliance with the norms and values of prevailing formal planning – such as land tenure and where and how they build houses, construct spaces and undertake social activities – means they have reduced rights to a city.

The Right to the City idea challenges us first and foremost as individuals to decide what basic human rights – such as land, housing, water and sanitation – are “non-negotiable” and “must haves” in city development. Changing how informal settlements and the city are viewed requires a multi-scale and multi-institutional policy underpinned by a major coalition of support.

For teachers in the privileged position of educating university students who will one day be urban planners and designers in a multicultural world, for example, this requires major realignment of planning education. We need to integrate civic responsibility and the broader Right to the City into current approaches.

[Initiatives by Australian universities](#) to work with tertiary institutions in [developing countries](#) and interested stakeholders are small but important steps. These opportunities to share ideas, work together in the field and experience everyday life in informal settlements let graduates see first-hand what the Right to the City means. This opens eyes to future international development opportunities.

As noted in a recent assessment of the [Pulosari kampung](#) (“village”) in Bandung, Indonesia, we need to “  
[step outside our comfort zone on how we view and understand the city](#)”  
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The “Right to the City” debate at Habitat III is important for Australia in how it positions itself working with developing countries and with the greater issue of human rights for the next 20 years as mainstreamed into the urban realm.

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For example, recognising the role that informal settlements play in providing affordable housing – rather than seeing them as an aesthetic problem – is part of changing society’s blinkered view of an increasingly complex urban world.

With Habitat III looming as a landmark global event, will informal settlements be taken seriously as people seek a reasonable life in the city? What impact will this have on the urban divide?

*Paul Jones does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

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