

INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF INHABITANTS

c/o Unione Inquilini, via Bettella, 2/ter - 35133 - Padova - Italy
ph. + 39 049691771 - fax + 39 02700415592 e-mail : info@habitants.org - www.habitants.org

Towards an ALBA-Backed Right to Housing in Latin America and the Caribbean*

Most of our continent's states have signed conventions and treaties committing not only to meet the housing and infrastructure needs of their countries' inhabitants, but also to uphold and ensure the fulfillment of the Right to Housing, considered a fundamental human right for all of the world's inhabitants. Such commitments have been aired during many summit meetings and events, including the World Urban Forum in 2006, marking the thirtieth anniversary of the first World Habitat Summit, Habitat I, held in Vancouver, as well as the tenth anniversary of Habitat II, in Istanbul. They have been reiterated in the Millennium Development Goals, which include the goal of providing secure housing for some 100 million slum dwellers; but studies have shown that rather than achieving this goal we are facing instead the possibility that that figure will grow of 700 million by 2020.

This means that, despite all these international agreements, a lot of water has flowed under the right-to-housing bridge. The reality is that these objectives have not been achieved: states have abandoned social housing policies to favour financial and real estate interests; evictions continue in a number of countries, carried out either directly by government authorities or in conjunction with the property sector, as we have seen repeatedly in countries such as the Dominican Republic; housing insecurity has increased; housing costs are intolerable and the quality of life in our cities is declining.

The International Alliance of Inhabitants (IAI), a global network of urban social movements and inhabitants' associations, offers its reading of the reasons why the population of our countries are facing this degree of insecurity:

- most Latin American governments have adopted policies in line with the misguided thinking of international organisations and agreements associated with the World Bank, the IDB, the IMF and Free Trade Agreements and prioritising payment of the foreign debt, accounting for, on average, 25 per cent of the national budget in our countries, diverting expenditure from development;
- speculative investments in the urban sector, large infrastructural projects such as the Puebla-Panama Plan, the destruction of nature through tourism-driven real estate development following the sand, beach and cruises model of tourism, financed mainly through foreign investment;
- domestic and international migration caused by breakdown of the social fabric, leading to a loss of identity for the indigenous communities that are also affected, in some cases, by monoculture or industrial fishing;
- government abandonment of social welfare goals in favour of the privatisation and deregulation of the property, land and basic services sectors;
- specific geopolitical factors such as civil wars (mainly in Colombia and Mexico), the economic blockade of Cuba and the influence of narco-politics, among others.

The housing policies of our continent's governments have basically been shaped by the neoliberal model, involving privatisation of the land and housing markets. The effects of these policies on our cities reveal the conflict between these neoliberal models and the realities of social, economic, racial and gender-based exclusion. Official housing programmes have been heavily influenced by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), whose credits have been directed primarily towards middle-class and affluent socio-economic groups via the commercial banks, excluding the poorer sectors of the urban population.

The low-income population has been forced to solve its housing problems by their own efforts, with self-help housing as the key to construction of the built environment. These efforts have generally been ignored by the region's governments, which have generally failed to support these efforts financially.

If governments focus their attention on their own populations rather than continuing to build up further social debt, they should demand that international organisations revise the policies that have been foisted on Latin America and the Caribbean.

They need to give a voice to the voiceless: to inhabitants and to their organisations and networks, which are calling everywhere for the promises made in inter-government agreements and at international

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summits to be honoured – in particular Millennium Development Goal 7, Target 11, provides for legislation guaranteeing the right to secure land and housing tenure so that people can live in peace and with dignity.

Faced with the alarming neoliberal reality of poverty and social exclusion, the continent's urban social movements propose an alternative, built on the altermondialist principles of the World Social Forum and the sharing of experiences, working towards integrated strategies to create a united front and achieve real solidarity in the struggle for the right to housing without borders.

IAI promotes in fact Latin American and Caribbean integration within this framework, via the Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas (ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas) promoted by Venezuela and Cuba.

What can ALBA mean if social rights, especially the right to housing, are not respected?

For these reasons, IAI proposes a Human Focus on the Right to Housing and Habitat:

- strengthening political, social, economic integration at regional and sub-regional levels, such as the South American Community of Nations, MERCOSUR, the Andean Community and CARICOM. This implies a refusal to subscribe to the Free Trade Agreements promoted by the United States government, given their harmful consequences for the life of our communities;
- developing and implementing new social housing and environmental policies addressing the urgent need for access to decent housing and leaving behind the neoliberal emphasis on privatisation in housing policies;
- calling on local, regional and state governments to play a key role in promoting social justice for our people. We need to overcome the obstacles created by political centralisation and social control, encouraging real social participation and ensuring that funds are available to allow governments to represent their citizens effectively at the local level, particularly by promoting participatory budgeting with social accountability.

In view of the strategic importance of ALBA's mission, IAI proposes the establishment of new forums for sharing, measuring and tracking initiatives undertaken by popular sector actors in addressing and overcoming urban and housing problems at local, national and regional levels and in social, political, economic, legal and institutional fields.

Based on this, we propose the following Platform to address the issues of housing and the urban environment:

1. **to recognise unequivocally the human right to housing**, established in article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, in accordance with general comments numbers 4 and 7 and article 34 of the Charter of the Organization of American States ratified by all of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. This right must be justiciable and based on urban and housing policies.
2. **to make land a common, non-market and egalitarian good** (like public service agencies and natural water resources, among others); stopping deregulation of the real estate sector and allowing public control of prices in the sector (for example: rent and mortgage payments to be limited to 10 per cent of income, the seizure of properties left vacant as a result of speculation, for example, by taxation, confiscation or expropriation).
3. **to support a World Charter on the Right to the City** to promote the basic rights of citizens, the real city builders, including the right to speak out, share experiences and work in partnership.
4. **to declare a continental moratorium on evictions** through:
 - the creation of 'Zero Eviction' zones;
 - a ban on national and foreign investments in speculative infrastructure and real estate investments leading to eviction without satisfactory arrangements for rehousing;
 - international support for peace and justice processes in war zones.
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5. **to design plans and programmes for sustainable local, municipal and metropolitan development**, to be inclusive and participatory and to guarantee access to urban land and housing to all citizens.

6. **to set up Committees to coordinate land and housing actions at the local, national and regional level to support:**

- the regularisation of land tenure and property titling without speculation;
- the development of social and cooperative shelter policies based on the human right to housing;
- the promotion of social housing as a public service
- the establishment of Popular Funds for Land and Housing funded by the cancellation of foreign debt and by public funds contributing to the Banco del Sur (Bank of the South), to increase access to land and housing and security of tenure via collective ownership, mutual aid, cooperatives and other joint efforts;
- the promotion of resettlement by consensus, with dignity and compensation for displaced communities, including those affected by disasters.

This is IAI's contribution to the fight against imperialism, neoliberalism and Free Trade Agreements in Latin America and the Caribbean.

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