



**Opening Plenary: Europe Regional Conference, Prague
Genie Birch, GAP President
March 16, 2015**

Good Day Excellencies, Delegates and Colleagues,

I am addressing you as president of the General Assembly of Partners or GAP, a special initiative of the World Urban Campaign, inaugurated at PrepCom II in Nairobi in April 2015 and recognized last December by the General Assembly's resolution on the modalities for Habitat III. GAP's aim is to support stakeholder engagement and contributions to the Habitat III Conference, in particular to the New Urban Agenda.

This being said, you probably have some questions – I would if I were you – so let me answer three of them – 1. How is GAP supporting stakeholder engagement? 2. Who is in GAP and what drives them? 4. What Does GAP do?

As I answer these questions, I hope you will reflect on how innovative and exciting GAP is. While Habitat I and Habitat II had civil society participation in varying degrees – NO Habitat Conference has had the kind of coordinated, lengthy, focused, inclusive program that the General Assembly of Partners represents.

1. How is GAP supporting stakeholder engagement?

We are assembling civil society and other stakeholders into 14 Partner Constituent Groups, The PCGs encompass the nine major groups, the Habitat Agenda Partners and others with an interest in housing and sustainable urban development. Each PCG is led by a chair and co-chair elected by that PCG. The chairs and co-chairs who constitute the GAP Executive Committee are drawn from all the UN regions – from the Asia Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe and others.

2. Who is in GAP and what drives them?

To date, nearly 1,000 individuals and organizations have joined GAP

- These members come from around the globe—nearly every member state is represented
- Collectively and individually, the PCGs have significant reach – for example,
 - Local and Subnational Authorities PCG – 250,000 local governments
 - Trade Unions and Workers – 655 million members
 - Grassroots – 500,000 direct members with potential to reach a billion
 - More than 300 Parliamentarians – from Argentina to the Czech Republic and Uganda
 - We are especially proud of the next generation, our future – Children and Youth with 184 members/organizations whose reach we are currently calculating – and of course, with social media, this reach is multiplied many times over.
 - I could go on with them all—the academics and researchers, women, media, foundations, civil society organizations, professionals, indigenous peoples, farmers and business and industry – with some major global company members having 27k, 47k, 200k+ employees respectively.

What drives them ...

First and foremost, our members are passionate about cities. They are volunteering their time in order to improve urban life.

GAP members firmly believe that the Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) offers the opportunity to develop a *New Urban Agenda* that profiles and highlights the strong commitments of leaders and stakeholders working in partnership to reap the benefits of urbanization while addressing its concomitant challenges.

GAP members hold the conviction that the solutions will lie in the member states' engagement of a wide range of stakeholders (including the members of GAPs 14 Partner Constituent Groups), each contributing according to its mission and capacity.

GAP expects the vision expressed in the *New Urban Agenda* to be translated by national governments and their partners into action programs tailored to their local contexts and needs.

GAP members are committed to the principles and agreements encompassed in predecessor accords, including the most recent – the formulation of the SDGs and the Paris agreement.

Further, GAP members can see from the well-planned work underlying the preparations for Habitat III, notably the reports of the 10 policy units and the 8 regional and thematic conferences held so far, offer a way forward. In fact, we are at the European Habitat Conference in full force to learn, participate and contribute to the Prague Declaration to the best of our abilities.

In our work, we are guided by two sets principles:

- First, we fully embrace the principles embodied in the output of the World Urban Campaign's 26 Urban Thinkers Campuses held around the world over the past year and expressed in the *City We Need 2.0*. These specify the nature of the cities to which we aspire .
- Second, in the GAP outcome document, tentatively titled *Partnerships for the New Urban Agenda*, we have articulated principles that address the challenges faced by a rapidly urbanizing world, but, at the same time enhance the opportunities to realize the NUA through collaborative efforts of a range of stakeholders.

We also believe that we have several responsibilities as stakeholders, among them are :

- sharing our collective knowledge, expertise and experience among ourselves, with our constituencies and with the general public
- working across disciplines and across jurisdictions and breaking down strictly compartmentalized approaches that create significant barriers to sustainable urban development
 - amplifying community voices, and working together towards convergence and prioritization of common values
 - considering the voices of all our members, speaking with one voice on areas of agreement and to working together to make tangible commitments supportive of the New Urban Agenda
 - committing to open GAP deliberations to all interested stakeholders in the spirit of sharing ownership and building trust

3. What Does GAP Do?

As broad platform working through an open process, we are developing common positions that encompass the challenges to be addressed, the priorities for policy development, and the drivers of change that we hope the New Urban Agenda will address. Further, we are highlighting areas in which our members can forge meaningful partnerships to assist in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. In so doing, we *recognize that each group brings to these concerns its members' particular values, interests and perspectives*. We will also call on the member states to provide the enabling environment to support sustainable urban development that fall into four categories: legal and policy frameworks; institutional capacities; fiscal interventions; and technology.

We will offer our suggestions in written form at the end of the month to the member states through the Secretary General of Habitat III to convey to the Bureau. We will discuss our ideas in many venues. In the next two days we will discuss them with

you here at the three GAP- sponsored side events labeled “The Straight Road to Habitat III and in the other partners’ side events. We will discuss them in the remaining regional and thematic conferences. We will discuss them at the Intergovernmental Informal meetings in New York in June. We will discuss them through our networks, in the media and with our respective member states.

In particular, we have identified four areas of competence around which we believe are ripe for forging the critical partnerships so necessary for the implementation of the NUA and an action agenda. They are our collective abilities to:

1. Encourage and promote evidence based policy making;
2. Develop, channel, and advocate shared priorities;
3. Advance and evaluate pilot programs organized by multiple partners; and
4. Monitor the local implementation of the SDGs as they apply to the New Urban Agenda and our own partnership performance.

We will be suggesting that the member states take the opportunity in the New Urban Agenda to call for a “Decade for Sustainable Urbanization,” as an important device to remind the world not only of the importance of the topic but also of the very short time in which to lay the foundations to achieve it.

The decade would provide a broad umbrella under which to develop the wide variety programs, commitments, partnerships that will assure that cities and human settlements are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. This would be the decade to show that the world’s cities and human settlements can be well-planned; that they can house all of their citizens well as well as provide access and mobility to transportation and public space, protect cultural and environmental heritage, to be free from disasters, while minimizing, their environmental impact, and are part of balanced territories or regions that maximize urban rural synergies and allow their residents to live healthy, productive lives.

Clearly, we cannot achieve these aspirations everywhere in this time, but we will offer our competencies to support them and suggest that the member states work with us to envision a global partners platform that encompasses the creation of four multi-stakeholder instruments that we describe but not detail, waiting to test the ideas with member states. And in fact, we will be meeting on Saturday in a full GAP Plenary to finalize our contributions document

So now that I have answered the three questions: 1. How is GAP supporting stakeholder engagement? 2. Who is in GAP and. what drives them ? 3. What Does GAP do? I hope you now share our excitement about our noble experiment in engagement. We are working closely with the Global Task Force of Local and Regional Governments to create inclusive, serious, integrated and well thought out platforms to help ensure the success of Habitat III and the 20 years of improvement that follow.

So if you share our excitement and are not already a GAP member, go to the Habitat III website, read more about the Habitat III preparations and about GAPs work. Find our registration page – and then, with a simple mouse click you can become a member, we will welcome you with open arms!! We want you to join the GAP in order to mind the GAP.