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Editorial

The agreement of member states on the text of the New Urban Agenda, accepted at Habitat III (*United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development*), in October 2016 was a major achievement. This is part of a wider recognition in international development agendas of the role of cities and human settlements in meeting the major 21st century challenges – tackling climate change, achieving social justice, or ending poverty – notably through inclusion of Goal 11 in the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs), agreed by the United Nations in October 2015. Yet although local government is at the forefront of changes that will transform the lives of citizens, the New Urban Agenda sees local governments as implementers rather than innovators, and local government will remain on the margins until a stronger mechanism for its inclusion in United Nations debates is found.

In the lead paper in this issue, David Satterthwaite highlights how the new focus on cities reflects recognition of their importance in promoting economic development, healthy living, and reductions in greenhouse gas emissions as a key to achieving sustainable development. The inclusion of an ‘urban goal’ in the SDGs, championed by the Global Taskforce of Local and Regional Governments and Sustainable Solutions Network, and the Paris Agreement on climate change were landmarks. However, he finds in Habitat III’s *New Urban Agenda* a lack of innovation with little that is ‘new’ and not much ‘agenda’, with no mention of the role of grassroots organisations, mayors, or shack and slum dwellers in driving social and environmental equity. He argues instead for an urban agenda that “*speaks to local governments and local civil society in which their needs and priorities are evident, with local and global goals to which local governments can commit*”.

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The following papers present a fascinating portfolio of governance innovations from round the world. From Australia, despite local government's lack of recognition in the Constitution, governance debates remain vibrant. Su Fei Tan, Alan Morris and Bligh Grant, from the Centre for Local Government, UTS Sydney, which hosts and supports this journal, explore how notwithstanding New Public Management reforms in the state of Victoria, councillors have difficulty in moving away from a focus on day-to-day issues to embrace their new strategic role. Tooran Alizadeh and Heather Shearer discuss how the national broadband roll-out supported enabling programmes at local government level and provided an impetus for collaborative initiatives between local authorities.

Debate in southern Africa is also active as the following three papers show. Hoolo Nyane explores how in Lesotho a weak constitutional definition of local government and lack of fiscal control have inhibited the roll out of decentralisation, so that many local authority functions are still carried out by the central state. Mkhululi Ncube and Jabulile Monnakgotla examine the implications of rural council amalgamation in South Africa, designed to reduce central-local transfers and promote movement to a self-sufficient revenue base, arguing these are unlikely to achieve the intended financial viability. Thina Nzo examines how political patronage influenced council decision-making in the Northern Cape, through the saga of a proposed statue to Nelson Mandela.

In the first of two papers from south Asia, Mohammad Chowdhury and Mohammad Aktaruzzaman examine the effectiveness of citizen participation in Kanaighat municipality, with its population of 27,000, finding its effectiveness limited because elected representatives were unconvinced about participation, and the community did not believe they could have an impact. From India, Sonali Srivastava and Madhavi Rajadhyaksha examine the impact of an innovative 'organisation and development framework' on the effectiveness of local change management in forward-looking Kerala.

In our two Policy and Practice papers, first Chris Taylor and Jed Donoghue, also from Australia, examine how community development was crucial in the revival of Sydney's Greenway social housing estate, while Tofail Ahmed discusses the challenges facing the local ward *sabha* in Bangladesh. In the first of two book reviews, Gordon Morris finds *Reclaiming Local Democracy: A Progressive Future for Local Government* a thought-provoking and informative book arguing that, if local democracy is to be reclaimed from market-dominated politics, power inequalities must be addressed. Finally, A.C. Mosha reviews *Cities and Agriculture*, which provides a useful overview for planners, policymakers, producers and consumers, on urban and peri-urban agriculture in the context of urban food systems.