

A CALL TO ACTION: KNOWLEDGE FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The overarching goal of this call is to create a knowledge/policy/practice interface that will help create the conditions under which knowledge can guide sustainable urban development.

Join us and help shape knowledge/policy/practice interface for sustainable urban and territorial development

Global urban knowledge in all its forms, from all its sources — academia, policy, civil society and grassroots organizations — is crucial to realizing sustainable development at urban and territorial scales. However, the growing body of research and knowledge around urbanization and urban issues is disparate, incomplete and ill-prepared to inform policy. As a community, we will need to self-organize to define relevant questions; to make sense of existing knowledge and identify knowledge gaps, and; to share and integrate the growing body of urban knowledge at multiple levels and scales (local, national, regional, global).

This *Call to Action* outlines how all stakeholders can play a role in building a global community that works towards the shared goal of *creating the enabling conditions under which knowledge can effectively inform decision-making for more sustainable urban and territorial development.*

Context

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) provides a holistic and progressive approach to sustainable urban development. It acknowledges several separate paradigm-shifting global agreements (the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction*, the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda*, the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the *Paris Agreement*) and commits to aligning with these in working with national, regional, and local governments and stakeholders to promote sustainable urbanization. Crucially, the NUA recognizes the need for, and encourages the production of, evidence-based and practical guidance for the implementation of the NUA and the urban and territorial dimensions of the SDGs. However, it does not identify any specific avenues or mechanisms for the provision, assessment and utilization of independent scientific and other forms of knowledge that could support the implementation, periodic review and revision of these landmark global agreements.

A coalition of scientists, researchers and practitioners propose a way forward to remedy this gap: **establish a multi-stakeholder knowledge/policy/practice interface to support the implementation and monitoring of the relevant urban and territorial dimensions of the NUA, SDGs and other global frameworks.** This recommendation, which results from an informal, collaborative and *pro bono* effort lasting several months, has a single overarching goal: *to help create the conditions under which knowledge can better guide*

Why does the global community need a knowledge/policy/practice interface for sustainable urban and territorial development?

Decisions about sustainable urban strategies are based on evidence that decision makers have access to, which is interpreted in light of a range of imperatives - economic, social, environmental, political and demographic, amongst others. Such evidence is rarely comprehensive, timely, or fit for purpose; meaning that the individuals and institutions shaping cities through their actions rely on knowledge and data that is anecdotal, fragmentary or out-of-date. The use of such incomplete information is a source of inefficiency, ineffectiveness and unintended consequences – all of which are too often observed in decisions made in the name of sustainable urban development.

There is substantial potential and goodwill amongst a wide range of stakeholders for the generation and use of better evidence, which is evaluated more rigorously and communicated more effectively, to improve the quality of urban decision-making for the benefit of all. A robust knowledge/policy/practice interface would connect those who produce and assess evidence with decision-makers at all levels, and should be a critical component of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the implementation and follow-up of the NUA. This is crucial in an era of increasingly interlinked challenges to prosperity, equality, health and wellbeing, social cohesion and environmental limits.

However, such an interface is unlikely to arise spontaneously in the face of countervailing forces, such as the tendency to specialize and create silos in order to simplify complex systems. Further, where knowledge/policy/practice interfaces do arise, they seldom include all relevant actors with a multi-stakeholder approach, and rarely achieve the optimal scale. As a result, there is an urgent need to *create the enabling conditions under which knowledge can effectively inform decision-making for more sustainable urban development.*

What can a knowledge/policy/practice interface on sustainable urban and territorial development do?

Whatever form taken, a knowledge/policy/practice interface for sustainable urban and territorial development would have three closely circumscribed, yet overlapping, functions:

1. To synthesize and translate current knowledge on sustainable urbanization and its implications for policy. Drawing on sources that range from basic research to local experience, and from broadly-generalizable large-scale studies to contextualized city-to-city learning and good practice, the interface would help refine, update and redefine pre-conceived notions about urban challenges. Importantly, it would illuminate the intersections between global challenges, and their urban and territorial equivalents, and explore their human-induced drivers and the means by which to address them. Though not envisioned as a source for original research, this interface would help identify gaps in knowledge for researchers to pursue.

2. To communicate and build awareness by providing a platform for practitioners, knowledge-producers and stakeholder groups to exchange insights on relevant topics; as well as undertaking regular, broad communication efforts to publicize both the costs and benefits of pursuing sustainable urban development to policy makers, and the risks of failing to do so.

3. To inform policy at global, national, and local scales, serving the many constituencies concerned with sustainable urban and territorial development. The beneficiaries of an improved interface encompass: UN member states involved in establishing and monitoring global agreements; UN-system entities aiming to connect this urban work with their mandates; subnational government leaders charged with implementation of the NUA and the other global agreements; civil society and grassroots organizations seeking to voice their concerns and integrate with other decision-makers in this context; philanthropies, and; the private sector in its daily interactions with all these other constituencies. It could further serve as a testing ground for evaluating current policies and as a platform to help build capacity for policy implementation.

The likely focal areas for the interface would be the imperatives outlined in the NUA and the associated SDGs: urban governance and legal frameworks, planning and management of urban and territorial spatial development, and mobilization of financial resources. These broad topics incorporate a number of sub-areas

relevant to urban places including: housing, water, sanitation, waste, energy, air pollution, health, food security, transport, participatory urban and territorial planning, balanced territorial development, climate change, resilience, heritage, employment and education.

Our timeline: What are the critical international milestones around which we will continue working?

Now is the time to forge a knowledge/policy/practice interface as a backbone for the implementation and monitoring of the NUA and the other key global agreements that have shined a spotlight on cities and human settlements. A knowledge/policy/practice interface for sustainable urban development would operate continuously, but would disseminate results internationally, through regularly scheduled global meetings (e.g. the World Urban Forum, the UN High Level Political Forum), and more locally, through a number of means including the media and organizational networks. Beyond the several meetings at Habitat III (see bottom list) several critical meetings in 2017-8 could provide important opportunities at which to discuss ideas and ongoing work regarding the interface:

January 2017: 1st UN World Data Forum

April 2017: UN Habitat Governing Council

July 2017: 4th High Level Political Forum

September 2017: Newly elected Secretary General reports to UN General Assembly on existing and future mandates for UN Habitat

March 2018: 9th World Urban Forum (Kuala Lumpur)

July 2018: 5th High Level Political Forum scheduled to review SDG Goals 6 (water and sanitation), 7 (energy), 11 (cities and human settlements), 12 (sustainable consumption) and 15 (forests and biodiversity)

We invite the broader community of knowledge producers and users, in the wake of Habitat III, to set out on this journey. Whether a UN member state, a subnational government, a civil society group, a grassroots movement, a researcher, an academic, a philanthropy or a private sector actor – you are ALL invited to provide feedback and get involved in this discussion. Do not hesitate to visit this [web page](#) and to sign up if you are interested in this discussion. Attend several Habitat III events to further discuss this initiative:

- [Research and Academic Stakeholder Roundtable](#) (October 18, 8-10 AM, R21)
- Follow-up Discussion [Habitat X Change](#) Pavilion (October 18 10-12 Booth B 77)
- Ongoing Informal Discussions GAP Lounge is reserved (October 19 12:30-1:30; October 20, 8-10 AM National Theater)

