

Linking urban research and policy towards sustainability

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Prologue

The proportion of the population that is urban is expected to rise to 61 percent by 2030 and further more what is alarming is that almost all the growth of the world's total population between 2000 and 2030 is expected to be absorbed by the urban areas of the less developed countries. Almost half (45 percent approximately) of the total world urban population growth has been in and will continue to be in small urban settlements of the less developed regions. This is followed by cities of 1 million to 5 million persons in the less developed regions, whose share of the overall annual urban increment was 20 percent in 1975-2000 and is expected to rise to 25 per cent in 2000-2015. Lastly, the mega¹ cities of the less developed regions account for the third largest share, amounting to 11 per cent in 1975-2000 and 9 per cent during 2000-2015. These projections indicate that for the world as a whole, it is both small towns and cities (with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants) and cities with populations of 1 million to 5 million persons from the less developed regions that are likely to account for most of the future growth in the urban population of the world amounting to over two-thirds of the total during 2000-2015. **Urban sustainability** thus emerges as the front runner for research and precise policy formulation especially in context of the developing world.

Thus the role of urban research in developing and shaping policies for sustainable development of urban settlements in the south is fundamental and it could well be argued that without it there could only be unsystematic and erratic observations, intuitive, adhoc and piecemeal policy formulations that can only have a limited or no impact on ground. It is now commonplace to assert that actions toward sustainable urban development require a mix of scientific, economic, social and political knowledge, and judgments. Urban Research should therefore be undertaken to inform policy and it can also be affirmed that without a close link between the two, both will suffer a diminution in their effectiveness as the two groups need to inform each other and so progress together towards achieving the objective of sustainable urban development.

The key question remains that what could be done to encourage research institutions and networks to conduct urban research oriented towards policy formulations. In this context some of the key research questions to underpin urban research and policy linkages emerge as follows;

¹ Urban Agglomerations with 10 million inhabitants or more as specified in World Urbanization Prospects, 2003.

1. **What could be the catalysts?:** These could include changes in public policy and the availability of government funding. The actual initiation of networks, however, largely also depends on individual academics being willing to respond positively because they can see their own research goals and deliverables within sight.
2. **What happens when a research-policy nexus develops?** There is also evidence that where urban research networks have been developed, they have opened up new and unexpected opportunities for research-policy engagements which might not have been created otherwise. This also suggests a level of untapped demand for greater engagement which is currently constrained either by limits on academic/network involvement, or by the problems of quantifying the benefits to urban policy makers. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, including the lack of incentives to sustain individual/organizational engagement and the difficulties regarding stretching academic roles.
3. **What could be the network drivers?** There are also common drivers for many of the networks in terms of the enterprising role of academics, the desire to develop new forms of knowledge production, and the incentives towards undertaking research to inform policy. At the same time there could also be countervailing pressures due to the lack of individual or organizational capabilities.
4. **What are the impediments?** Conventional impediments such as the deep rooted divide between academia and policy formulating institutions that hinder any inter-relations to develop need to be identified and addressed.
5. **What has been the outcome of previous action?** It will become pertinent to review the theories and strategies that have emerged in the attempt to improve the linkages between research-based knowledge and action in the context of sustainability across four broad categories i.e, participation, integration, learning, and negotiation. The relationships between research-based knowledge and action can be better understood as arenas of shared responsibility, embedded within larger systems of power and knowledge that evolve over time. The distinctive contribution of research-based knowledge needs also to be understood in relation to actual or potential contributions from other forms of knowledge to the subject of sustainable urban development.