Backgrounder

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A city-led strategy for sustainable development

A global programme of research, learning, training and advocacy to drive urban innovation

We might finally be at the tipping point regarding global recognition of the need to take urban issues far more seriously in the following four agendas:

- in development that includes universal provision of basic services and strong commitments to poverty reduction
- in understanding current disaster risks within each urban centre and acting to reduce them
- in climate change adaptation, which means extending disaster risk reduction to building resilience to future risks in all urban developments
- in contributions to climate change mitigation and to reducing ecological footprints, especially for the most successful and prosperous cities.

IIED proposes an ambitious global programme of research, learning, training, networking and advocacy about how cities and towns can fully address these agendas. This draws on all the work on urban issues by IIED and its many partners over the last four decades — but seeks to greatly expand the scale and scope of its influence.

Learning from local innovators. This will involve careful documentation of urban centres that have made progress on one or more of the four agendas, engaging with local government and civil society in the process. One of IIED's key comparative advantages is its long experience in working on urban issues with local governments and representative organisations of the urban poor as well as with national governments and international agencies. This work would

FACTS AND FIGURES

Around one billion people — one in seven of the world's population — live in informal settlements in urban areas.

These settlements are often on sites at high risk of flooding or landslides and lack basic services.

They concentrate most of the urban population most at risk from disasters and from climate change.

Almost all the growth in the world's population over the next few decades is expected to be in urban centres in what are currently low- and middle-income countries.

KEY TERMS

Disaster risk reduction: identifying current and potential risks from disasters and acting to reduce them and to build resilience to disasters.

Climate change adaptation in urban areas: adapting all aspects of urban areas and their surrounds (including buildings, infrastructure and services) to the direct and indirect impacts of climate change (and how these change).

Climate change mitigation in urban areas: identifying the main sources of greenhouse gas emissions (including households, businesses and transport and waste management systems), and implementing measures to reduce them.

Resilience: with regard to climate change, the term resilience is a useful complement to the more frequently used concept of adaptation, in that it suggests a capacity not only to withstand shocks or stresses but also to recover. Resilience might also include recovery in ways that increase capacity to withstand shocks and so 'building back better'.

include tracking progress over time in selected cities, working with their local governments.

Getting attention to all four agendas across four networks. These include networks of slum/shack dwellers and the NGOs that work with them (eg Slum/Shack Dwellers International and the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights); networks of urban authorities (including United Cities and Local Governments/UCLG, ICLEI and C-40 Cities); networks of urban donors and UN agencies (including Cities Alliance, UN ISDR and UN-Habitat); and networks of urban researchers including the IPCC urban network (centred on the authors of the chapter on urban adaptation in the IPCC's Fifth Assessment), the Asian Cities' Climate Change Resilience Network (ACCCRN), the Urban Climate Change Research Network (UCCRN), the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities programme and the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD).

Developing frameworks to help urban governments and civil society understand the linkages and overlaps between the four agendas and develop the most appropriate locally rooted responses.

Assessments of how and where multi-level governance is supporting the four agendas. This will include assessments of new legislation and financial systems established by national governments to support these and a particular interest in helping National Adaptation Plans give attention to the four agendas

Increasing the influence of the IPCC's Fifth Assessment. We will develop a series of briefs and handbooks for local governments and other local actors on key messages from the IPCC's Fifth Assessment to support local government attention to and action on climate change and its integration into other agendas. This will be led by the four IIED staff who were coordinating lead or lead authors in the IPCC's Fifth Assessment.

Building voice and influence for urban governments and civil society in the post 2015 agenda. Current discussions about the post-2015 sustainable development agenda may include urban issues but it is not clear that this will develop into the goals, targets and indicators that support the four urban agendas discussed here.

Engaging those most at risk. One of the most important issues is how what is proposed here would engage the hundreds of millions of urban dwellers who live in informal settlements and who are usually seen by local and national governments as illegal and as detrimental to local success. They also include most of those in the urban population who face the greatest risks to their health, homes and livelihoods from the lack of provision for services, for disaster risk reduction and for climate change adaptation. They need to be engaged not only because they are 'at risk' but also because they can bring knowledge, capacity and innovation to all four urban agendas. There is also a need to support the documentation of 'good practice' by grassroots organisations and federations in what they do and contribute — and perhaps most critically in the partnerships they form with local governments.

Looking ahead

Drawing attention to the four agendas outlined above needs a global network of researchers and research institutions with competence on urban issues who will work together and with other networks of the urban poor, local authorities and international agencies. Such a network would need to be inclusive, encouraging new individuals and institutions to join. It should also work in several languages and recognise where there is work already underway.

The experience of the CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) may be relevant here; it was set up to address the enormous knowledge gaps identified several decades ago on agricultural and rural development. Now there is a comparable need for far more attention to urban issues. But what we need is not so much a new formal network of international urban research centres but, rather, a process that encourages and supports relevant research in each nation (and city) that can be drawn on for needed syntheses and shared learning.

Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

"The post-2015 agenda must be relevant for urban dwellers. Cities are where the battle for sustainable development will be won or lost." *(The Report of the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post 2015 Development Agenda, United Nations)*

But this battle is currently being lost. In most urban centres in low- and middle-income countries, absolute poverty is not falling and very large deficits in provision for water, sanitation, health care and other services remain (and are often growing). Inequalities are increasing — in incomes, assets and access to services. Despite innovation in some cities, disaster risks are usually not being acted on and climate change adaptation and mitigation are not yet widely accepted as city or municipal government responsibilities.

How cities and towns develop over the next 30 years has very large implications for four agendas: poverty reduction, meeting needs and universal access to basic services; disaster risk reduction; climate change adaptation/ resilience; and contributions to climate change mitigation and reduced ecological footprints.

KEY SPACES

Local government. It will fall to urban governments to plan and manage action on the four agendas. Winning the battle for sustainable development needs locally driven, locally grounded responses that make best use of local resources and capacities. It also depends on local government's accountability to residents. This does not mean that local governments have to implement and fund all of this but they do have to provide the framework to encourage and support relevant investments and behaviour change among households, communities and enterprises.

Civil society. One of the most important yet difficult issues is how to engage with civil society — especially those groups that are formed by or represent low-income urban dwellers. This includes hundreds of millions of urban dwellers who live in informal settlements and/or work in the informal economy.

FIND OUT MORE

IIED's urban work is undertaken by our human settlements group and partners. This group works to reduce poverty and improve health and housing conditions in the urban centres of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It seeks to combine this with promoting good governance and more ecologically sustainable patterns of urban development and rural-urban linkages. For more information on our urban work see www.iied.org/urban