Feasibility Study on a Global Urban Research Umbrella (GURU)

Executive summary

This feasibility study responds to a call for expression of interest (EOI) from the UN-HABITAT Training and Capacity Building Branch in January, 2010. '*Under the SUD-Net umbrella and within the UN-HABITAT Partner University Initiative, UN-HABITAT proposes to support the building of an international urban research network bringing together Habitat Partner University members and other interested parties.*'[1] A major objective of this network is to significantly contribute to the generation of urban knowledge relevant for the future development of human settlements and to facilitate its accessibility to the key stakeholders. Its vision is to become a global key source of reference for urban innovation, a laboratory generating and exchanging new urban ideas within a vibrant learning environment. This general objective embraces, among others, the following specific goals:

1. To promote the exchange of ideas between research, practice and policy towards sustainable urban development, involving academics, experts, urban managers, municipalities and the affected communities.
2. To establish a transdisciplinary arena of urban practice an research for the 21st century and beyond.
3. To foster South-South-North co-operation and knowledge exchange, in particular fostering research capacities in economically weaker regions.
4. To focus attention to the specific challenges, opportunities and solutions in urban settings of the south.
5. To specifically support young researchers, women and other disadvantaged groups.
6. To mainstream core values and priority areas of the UN system in general and UN-Habitat in particular.
7. To assist UN-Habitat in providing a scientific basis to urban policies and in strengthening its institutional memory.

The proposed network will complement the already existing resource facilities by addressing research in the urban and human settlement fields provided by UN-HABITAT. Once introduced, it has the potential to develop into a key source of reference for urban research teams, practitioners, and experts from around the world. Institutions and networks from the South – currently underrepresented in the international academic landscape – will find special support, which has not been readily available to them so far and which will help them to become equally visible members in the international urban research community.

The global urban research network will obviously involve many members of the HPUI (Habitat Partner University Initiative) network. However, with a network profile covering a much wider spectrum of themes and professions, the HPUI members will remain a smaller but visible group among all members. Due to the complexity of urban development processes the composition of the network can only be interdisciplinary and will thus break away from most conventional university structures, which still tend to be highly fragmented and specialised.

The study has been arranged in the following way: Firstly potential network stakeholders are identified and their interests analysed. Secondly, the preferred research agenda is

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[1] Quotation from the original call for proposals from UN-HABITAT

discussed. Thirdly, different typologies and governance models are assessed by analysing best (and also not so good) practices of other networks, which leads, fourthly, to the proposal of a governance model for the new network. Fifthly, we elaborate a list of recommended network activities. Sixthly a sustainable the financial model is outlined and, seventhly, we draw up a preliminary road map towards implementation. Terms, lists and activities, the stakeholder databank, a log frame matrix, a tentative budget and additional background research are included in the annexes of the document.

Stakeholders and partners
A network will only survive if, apart from the founders themselves, all other members, partners and users perceive a benefit from participating. Of course, these stakeholders represent a diverse set of interests and can contribute to the venture in different ways. Here are the key potential stakeholders and partners:

- *Other urban research networks*: As the database of networks compiled as part of this study reveals, there are a large number of existing networks engaged in urban development and management issues. These networks would benefit from interlinking to avoid duplication of efforts and (especially smaller networks) allow for sharing of resources. The new UN-HABITAT network can fill this gap by acting as network of networks.
- *UN and other international agencies*: Due to their considerable influence on local and central governments worldwide, these are essential multipliers for promoting research results and incorporating them in national norms and legislation. At the same time, only in exceptional cases are these institutions in the position to carry out research on their own but instead need access to recent research from others on a global level.
- *Municipalities and urban policy makers* are the principal implementers of urban research findings. They have location specific research needs and need scientific evidence for guidance and justification of their decisions.
- *The academia* – especially professors and PhD students - are the main producers of research. They can use new research questions derived from practice, easy access to extisting literature and funding for their research. They are also interested in the wide circulation and visible impact of their research.
- Among the *private sector companies* some the big enterprises, like BASF for example, are highly interested in learning about boom regions as part of their diversification policy and are keen to explore future development trends and green technologies. As consortium partners, they have a sound funding basis. Smaller companies, especially in the consulting sector, may require fast research surveys but don't have the capacity to do this on their own.
- *Non Governmental Organizations* can engage in different roles: some of them are donor organizations, others organize housing and infrastructure construction, defend the rights of the urban poor, advise politicians, or even participate as partners in research projects.
- A special stakeholder is *UN-Habitat* itself. It already hosts at least 10 smaller and more or less specialized knowledge networks. But so far they do not reach the full spectrum of the research community. Also cross-fertilisation of the existing networks could become richer with specific support for linking up and sharing information. A systematic recording of accumulated UN-Habitat promoted research could help to build up or

improve institutional memory and avoid duplication of work. UN-Habitat also expects to gain a strong instrument to spotlight the current UN-Habitat focus areas.

- Institutions are made up of **individuals** who often push for specific initiatives or themes. These may stall if the individual leaves. Also, individuals may develop other, i.e. social, expectations of a network which may be irrelevant to their institution. They play a double role as representatives of their institutions and as individual stakeholders with interests that are not always congruent.

Research Agenda

In the 'stakeholder' analysis the focus was put on the complementary benefit that different interest groups may perceive in communicating and cooperation with each other. This aspect is what the proposed UN-Habitat network will offer as a plus-benefit over most other networks in which rather homogeneous groups unite. It goes without saying that every network needs a common denominator among the interests of its members that motivates them to engage in the venture. In a primarily *professional* network, as compared to the better known *social* networks, the common interest tends to be the access to information that people need for their studies or work. In the case of an UN-Habitat promoted network the shared interest – or common denominator - will be the theme of housing and urban development. However, the experience of existing discussion groups shows that such a wide and general theme runs the risk of only promoting the exchange of very superficial ideas and opinions, which do not satisfy the quality standards commonly expected in research needed to justify the formulation of policy guidance. Therefore further focus of the research agenda is being proposed on different levels:

The authors of the study sought to identify the most relevant and – from the point of view of the envisaged stakeholders – the preferred focus areas for the proposed research network. UN-Habitat has quite recently defined its 'Priority Substantive Areas'.[2] This work represents a useful systematisation of the broad 'housing and urban development' issue, but is less helpful for the formulation of a research focus – except maybe in implicitly excluding the rural areas. Interviews conducted during this feasibility study and internet polls through the UN-Habitat website in early 2011 do not support the formulation of a sector focus. Furthermore, when considering the large variety of stakeholders envisioned in this network, the resulting number of persons likely to be involved makes it technically impossible to narrow down the focus to one or very few single topics. If a selection of topics should be proposed, the mix becomes arbitrary and – referring to the need for an interdisciplinary approach – the number of possible combinations of topics (or disciplines) easily jumps into the thousands. Apart from that, the complexity of urban structures and systems is known to be immense, and is impossible to be understood and managed from a narrowly focused field of science. *Therefore, the proposed network thematic approach can only be comprehensive.* However, the expected large number of network members also permits the formation of **subgroups with specific thematic or regional interests**, and one person can belong to more than one of such subgroups.

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[2] Land – Legislation – Governance; Regional and Metropolitan Planning; Urban Economy, Urban Basic Services; Housing & Slum Upgrading; Risk Reduction and Rehabilitation; Research and Capacity Development. (http://www.unhabitat.org/downloads/docs/10629_1_594251.pdf, r27.03.2012)

In both, the academia and politics, leading agendas tend to change over time – or new ones are aggregated to the older ones. This permanent actualisation of research agendas will not stop – and the shifts of focus tend to go hand in hand with funding opportunities. Hence, the structure of the research network will have to be flexible enough to accommodate such shifts in the mainstream debate. But the research network can do more than just react to shifts in the debate. Using the network as a sensor, 'future themes' of highest priority can be identified and new concepts promoted in order to advance the mainstream debate.

Furthermore, an important mission of UN-Habitat, but also of urban research in general, is to provide orientation in the planning for the future of cities. Urban planning decisions have been shown to have impacts on the organization of cities that last over centuries. But our knowledge about the requirements of future cities is very incomplete. The challenge of urban research precisely lies in exploring future needs and will therefore open up new focus areas which we are unable to anticipate today. Therefore, Futures Research ought to be added either as another priority area or as a cross-cutting theme in the agenda.

Network typologies and network design

The proposed membership criteria and the governance structure of the new research network was derived from a survey and evaluation of more than 350 other networks which were gathered in a separate database 'CREATE'. A thorough analysis of eight representative networks suggests a distinction between three main governance principles: the cloud (spontaneous decentralised way), the pyramid (strictly hierarchical order), and the platform ('democratic' bottom-up order) – each with its characteristic advantages and limitations. Therefore we propose a multiplex governance structure for the new proposed network which can handle a large number of members, encourages innovation and permits the advancement of certain agendas, and the prevention of abuse.

In practical terms the study proposes a general management structure for the new network and the necessary legal documents required, without going into specifics since these would depend on other principal decisions to be taken before the establishment of a structure. Responsible for the management would be an *executive director* (or project manager), who is to be supported by a **secretariat** (or executive office). The executive director responds to a *governing board* or *council* which decides on the content and strategic development of the network. Semi-autonomous *regional chapters* will develop decentralised activities and facilitate face-to-face contacts between members in the framework of local events. *Thematic working groups* are foreseen similar to regional chapters, but organised horizontally through shared fields of interest instead of being vertically affiliated by geographic location. These will probably only meet occasionally such as at World Urban Forums and the like.

The role of UN-Habitat is central since without its initiative and support the network will not get started. UN-Habitat also has a rich portfolio of resources to offer in exchange for the benefits it can expect to obtain from it. It is suggested that UN-Habitat plays an important role in the network through its presence in the governing body, by housing the secretariat and through the provision of important infrastructure.

Membership structure

As pointed out before, one of the particular characteristics of the proposed network will be the interlinking between different stakeholder categories: namely producers, consumers, and brokers of research. In some cases, the categories overlap or are not appropriate. Therefore,

the membership should not be restricted to particular professions or status groups. As a principle, all information provided is public (apart from restricted user groups at a later stage, like participants from a network-sponsored training course). Administrative simplicity is the highest virtue of a network to its members. If entry thresholds seem necessary at a later stage, they can always be added. If particular membership characteristics are felt to be underrepresented (like, for example, young researchers from the global South), these should be encouraged to join through targeted promotion strategies.

Network activities

It is not the purpose of the network to conduct research on its own. It is, however, committed to initiating and supporting research done elsewhere in the areas of housing and urban settlement – including that addressing UN-Habitat priority issues and other forward-looking fields of interest. Among other ways, this should be done by the following means:

- *Promotion of specific research*
- *Commissioning research into a prioritised field of interest*
- *Linking internships with a piece of research*
- *Organization of research conferences on a global and regional level*
- *Creating awards for deserving newly published pieces of research*
- *Brokering between research demand and researchers*

Many of the network activities will be internet based, including, among others, the following assistance offered through its website:

- events calendar
- documents database
- researchers' directory
- marketplace for research themes and case studies
- marketplace for internships, jobs, competitions and scholarships
- chat room space for thematic and regional interest groups

Some of the sections may have to be restricted to registered members, but most of the information should be publicly available and free of charge.

Specific effort will be made to support young and/or developing country researchers through specific instruments, such as using the UN-Habitat label to third-source funded scholarships, the promotion of research training seminars of university staff and students in regions with limited university support for research activities; organizing participant-targeted conferences and colloquiums, etc.

1.1 Financial strategy

In order to assure the basic functions of the network, a certain *minimal budget* (see above) is essential at least for the first five years. The minimum initially necessary investment and operating cost of the network are estimated at US$ 311,000 for the first year. In subsequent years operating costs are estimated at US$ 255,000 per year (or, if the assistant to the managing director can be dropped, US$ 205,000). Additional features, providing extra value to the network, require third-source funding of up to US$ 358,888 per year. These features involve modular add-on components such as: training seminars, scholarships, research

projects, operation of peer-review mechanism. Funding for these activities needs to be arranged on a case-to-case basis. Membership fees for individual members would be counterproductive and rather expensive to collect and administer. Institutional membership could be charged, but it is not easy to draw the line between those who can easily pay and those who cannot. Therefore membership fees should not been incorporated – at least during the initial phase.

For the 'additional' services several sources of income have been considered and should be linked directly. For example:

- *Regional urban* **research conferences** are usually co-sponsored by local and regional sponsors.
- **Scholarships** *for young PhD scholars may often be covered by the student's home government – especially if the study program is awarded a UN-Habitat label.*
- **Awards** for excellent pieces of urban research are a recurrent expense and might come from a foundation with relative regular income.
- **Commissioning own research** by UN-Habitat for topics of particular interest to the agency may be integrated within a broader UN-Habitat programme or a third-party project.
- Research training seminars and similar activities can and should be run on a fee-charging basis at a cost comparable with local university fees or slightly above. UN-Habitat accredited universities may offer courses at a cost-covering basis or even run on surplus, contributing towards the running cost of the network (licensing fee)

The study concludes with an Action Plan intended as an orientation for the implementation of the network.