

International Union for the Scientific Study of Population

Family Planning, Fertility and Urban Development

Influencing the urban policy agenda: A survey of expert opinion

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List of abbreviations

BMGF	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
COP	Conference of the Parties
CUSSH	Complex Urban Systems for Sustainability and Health
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
ICLEI	Local Governments for Sustainability
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IUSSP	International Union for the Scientific Study of Population
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDI	Slum/Shack Dwellers International
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UN	United Nations
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WFP	World Food Programme
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

10 key points

1. The case for paying greater attention to cities, made on the basis of the demographic argument of a pending shift to a majority urban world, was pivotal in shifting global, regional and national policy debates.
2. Family planning and reproductive health are still seen as important issues across the urban experts, but they are perceived as difficult issues to bring into sharper focus in contemporary debates about cities in both the Global North and South because of the shadow of neo-Malthusian connotations or wariness of accusations of privileged Northern didacticism.
3. Having key messages about why family planning and reproductive health are central to (and should be given greater profile in) urban scholarly and policy debates is a necessary but not sufficient route to delivering the message to implementers and to changing the analytical and service delivery priorities of cities.
4. Without extensive reform of data to allow the production of city-scale demographic evidence to allow comparative spatial, statistical and qualitative analysis, it is not possible to amplify the importance of urban family planning and reproductive health.
5. To overcome political sensitivities and to find air in an oversubscribed environment, a conscious strategy is needed to land broad demographic messages with urban influencers. Embedding the narrower and more contested issues of family planning and reproductive health in the overarching urban concerns such as infrastructure planning or service delivery that emerge from shifts in the size and composition of households, ageing and youth bulges and migration may be strategic.
6. The terrain of urban policy and practice is both diffuse, cutting across constituencies (local and national governments, sector specialists, banks) and scales. It is a crowded space where big issues of biodiversity, climate change, inequality, competitiveness and digitisation compete for traction. This complexity makes locating family planning and reproductive health as a central urban issue more difficult. Finding opportunities to co-locate demographic arguments with other major issues may therefore be productive.
7. Ideas about how to change urban policy, even when well-funded and strategically driven, can take decades to bear fruit and need individual as well as institutional champions – this takes long-term commitments to funding and organisational planning. At the same time, crises like COVID-19 and the climate emergency show us that rapid change is possible and imperative. Using the opportunities of wider policy restructuring requires vigilance and adaptability on the part of organizations seeking to influence fluid intellectual and policy debates.

8. Nearly all successful urban change interventions have been well funded, located in institutions that have profile at the local (often municipal but also civil society) scale while drawing upon a wider network or global capacity.
9. There is not currently sufficient capacity to mobilize a global urban family planning and reproductive health campaign beyond that of small projects or cases. As all lines of effective urban transformation action draw from, contribute to and are embedded in work with scholars and educators, the capacity gap is an obvious area to scale up to prepare for a more sustained impact campaign. Given shortcomings in capacity in the field of urban family planning and even urban demography more generally, creating and leveraging partnerships with other organizations (scientific, civil society, donors, etc.) and with cities themselves is a strategic imperative.
10. Locating demographers, skilled in the data analysis and the importance of family planning and reproductive health, within key urban organisations such as key innovative municipalities, the OECD, UN-Habitat or ICLEI could provide a fruitful entry-point to catalyse action to promote debates about family planning and reproductive health in cities and the global urban system.

1. Introduction

In 2018, the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) initiated a project focusing on Family Planning, Fertility and Urban Development with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). Aiming to produce policy-relevant evidence on the effects of family planning and fertility change on urban welfare, the project has funded fellowships for early-to-mid career researchers to conduct research on these dynamics in urban settings of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The ultimate aim of the project is to raise awareness of the contributions of family planning to sustainable cities among urban policymakers and practitioners, and to put family planning on the urban policy agenda where to date it has been largely absent.

In meetings held in November and December 2020, members of the project's Scientific Panel reflected that, to date, the project to date has struggled to directly influence the global urban policy agenda to extent originally intended. The Panel Chairs approached the authors and requested the production of a research report to explore how this project aim might be achieved in the remaining project period. The specific objectives for this study were:

- To contribute to improving the IUSSP project's effectiveness in reaching the urban sector;
- To learn more about the urban sector's receptivity to different messages emerging from our project; and

- To better understand the current state of knowledge of, and commitment to, demographic and reproductive health issues in cities.

In researching and writing this report, our approach was to consider and examine what it is that makes cities change. Drivers of change include crises (climatic, health or otherwise), major political transitions, or the influence of new (or reformed) ideas. The broader IUSSP project principally sought to influence the urban policy agenda via the insertion of ideas regarding family planning and fertility as drivers of positive change in urban areas of the Global South. However, as a form of urban practice, family planning generates changes over multiple timeframes, some of which are not always immediately perceptible. Family planning is not associated with sudden crises or ruptures capable of driving transformation. Moreover, historically family planning has been a politically contested issue due to its links with eugenicist and racist thought and coercive programmes of population control in Global South countries. Family planning may also be contested on religious or cultural grounds due to its association with abortion or its perceived opposition to pro-natalist norms. In attempting to claim greater prominence in broader development debates, family planning therefore faces particular kinds of challenges that are different to those, say, of biodiversity, climate change, economic development or health.

The central questions that underpinned data collection and analysis were as follows: *How do we insert new ideas into urban change? How would we do this for family planning? What advice can we give to the IUSSP (and BMGF) for the best ways to proceed for work in this area?* The first question is of a different kind to those concerning the history of policy ideas or the specific empirical relationships between family planning, demographic change and urban development. It is a question that concerns the specific factors that are needed to instigate processes of positive urban transformation. Methodologically, our approach has been to interview approximately 20 key urban experts who have been, or are, mobilizing to transform urban debates and practices in different ways and at various scales. We primarily approached urban sector professionals who have been involved in cross-city networks or high-level processes of reform, while also being intimately familiar with issues and dynamics unfolding at the city level. Our interviewees included experts involved in multilateral governance processes, networks of local governments, international development agencies, research and advocacy organizations, academics involved in policy or reform processes, among others. Ethical clearance (dated 30 March 2021) was secured from the Ethics in Research Committee of the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, University of Cape Town.

We wish to emphasize that this report in itself is not a blueprint for further urban family planning research or an agenda for future programmatic work. We are not in a position to provide firm and fast recommendations concerning specific messages or strategic modes of action. We identify a range of factors that might inhibit or enable change in urban thought and practice. As further opportunities emerge to scale up the work on urban family planning, the wider field of factors should be considered and distilled by IUSSP and BMGF to develop specific strategies and actions, perhaps in consultation with experts (like those interviewed for this study) who are experienced in driving transformations of intellectual and policy discussions.

Key findings from the interviews can be summarized as follows:

- Urban reform and related debates exist within a complicated space: IUSSP is not the first group that has attempted and struggled to land a message within the urban policy agenda and, in moving forward with its aims, it will have to act deliberately but also with caution.
- Interviewees agreed that family planning and fertility are important with respect to urban issues, but also that it is a contested and sometimes controversial domain with which to engage.
- Urban sector experts come from a range of intellectual, professional and institutional backgrounds, and interviewees did not agree on how to go about inserting ideas around family planning and fertility into the urban agenda.
- Data was the only common element discussed by all interviewees as a strategic point of engagement with the urban sector. This is a domain in which IUSSP members have experience and expertise. However, data reforms are not sufficient on their own grounds, and it is likely that we will need something more than quantitative knowledge to drive political and policy reform. Case studies of specific examples of positive urban transformation are required in order for actors and institutions to capture the political imperatives and implications of ensuring a closer relationship between family planning and urban development.

The report is arranged in two sections. Section 1 discusses the study's findings concerning how urban sector experts think about the linkages between family planning, fertility and urban development. Section 2 then explores various ways, identified and described by interviewees, for how IUSSP and other institutions might to go about influencing processes of urban reform, policymaking and transformation.

2. Connecting sectors

What do urban sector experts think about the links between family planning, fertility and urban development?

Interviewees did not necessarily think anything specific about family planning and its connections with urban development and change; however, when probed they were generally able to identify relevant links. No one denied that connections do exist. Most saw demographic and fertility change as relating implicitly and positively to all five of the IUSSP thematic 'arcs' (see figure 1). Others focused on and discussed the links that specifically relate to their immediate area of training, expertise and practice – such as economic development, health, informal work or security.

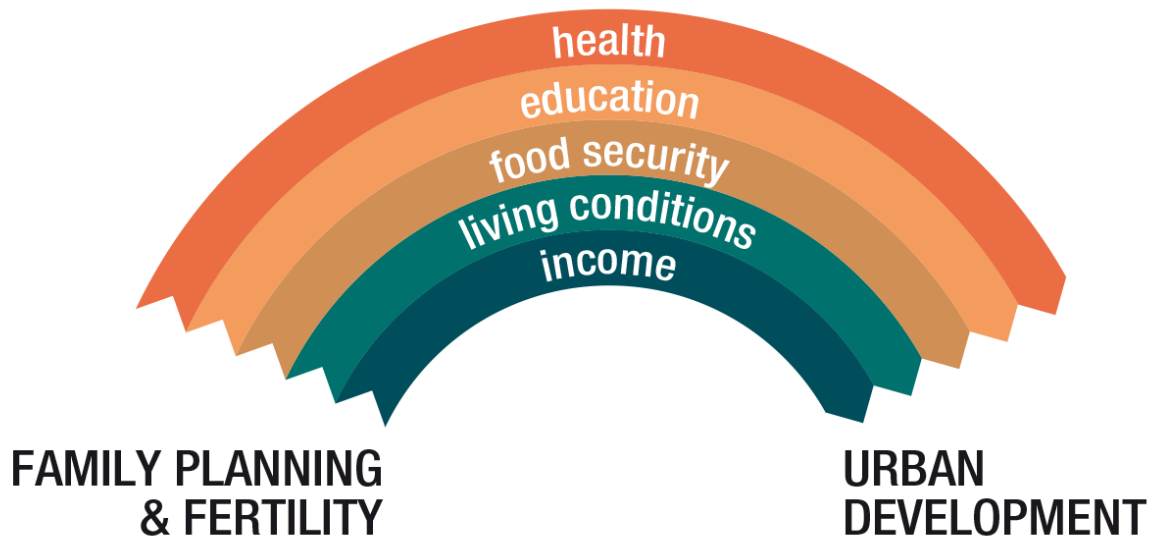


Figure 1: The five ‘arcs’ of the IUSSP Family Planning, Fertility and Urban Development project

Respondents involved in the shaping of the global urban agenda, yet drawn from or based in the Global North, tended to take a broader view of demographic change as it relates to cities and urbanization. While they acknowledged the broader ‘picture’ of population growth in Africa and Asia contributing to rapid urbanization at the global scale, they were also prone to discussing the aspects of demographic change that affected their immediate contexts most acutely. Two leading urban thinkers and practitioners from Sweden and Japan, for example, considered the implications of ageing city populations in those and other countries.¹ Another, based in Montreal and involved in cross-city cooperation programmes in Francophone countries, discussed the implications of youthful migration into cities for the risks of political radicalization and security.²

While all interviewees saw links between family planning, fertility and urban development, we do not believe that any one of the interviewees would become a ‘champion’ for that link. The implication is that the IUSSP will need to create its own champions. However, another insight gained from the interviews is that successful processes of championing a reform agenda may take years to decades. It is unlikely that there will be a quick high-level route enabling an impact in the short term. We suggest that working according to a slower, more incremental process of reform will require interventions and activities related to data, funding and the development of an appropriate knowledge base. Those interventions and activities should include helping to define a future research agenda, facilitating the production of appropriate case studies, funding places in the Global South to undertake research, ensuring that key individuals are strategically embedded in important organizations, and producing and disseminating key messages that are not politically contested – messages that are embedded in a wider perspective emphasizing a broader range of factors and processes in addition to family planning. However, the general

¹ Interviews 6 and 11.

² Interview 4.

importance of taking a long-term and macro-level approach to influencing the urban agenda does not preclude the option of working to connect institutional partners at the meso-level (e.g. regional or national), or devising localized interventions to demonstrate lessons through case studies in the shorter term (see section 4).

Key principles emerging from the interviews include the following.

- *Context is important when thinking about influencing agendas*

An urban policy expert and academic from India noted the particular history of urban networks and change in that country, influenced by colonial legacies of extraction and (from the late eighteenth century) broad patterns of deindustrialization and deurbanization. Networks of transportation (the railways) and economic extraction increasingly concentrated on large trading cities such as Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Madras. Those legacies have resulted in the entire South Asian region being service-sector led in terms of economic output, both historically and currently. Demographic change in India also has specific drivers influenced by high rates of marriage, cultural mores surrounding son preference (lagging behind expectations of infant mortality), major increases in life expectancy and gendered patterns of migration. India, and Indian politics, are dominated by societies that are still ‘agrarian, rural and deeply patriarchal in their sociology and imagination’.³

Those factors form a unique confluence of forces that drive and shape the specific nature of urbanization and urban politics in India (see Box 1 below). Indeed, the ‘narrative’ around urban and demographic change in India, in most cases, is historically and largely anti-urban in emphasis even if the current national government has built upon a traditionally urban support base (Kumar, 2020). Despite the complexity of the drivers of demographic and urban change in India – including high urban fertility rates – the narrative is preoccupied with the migration of poor people into cities and the desire to keep poor agrarian populations in rural areas. The urban and demographic narrative is preoccupied with India’s large metropolitan cities, with the political focus accordingly placed on rural investment and development.

Moreover, family planning in India has a controversial political history associated with coercive programmes of male sterilization, which is well known (Williams, 2014). Those experiences provided: ‘a lesson the political class would never forget, and that is that population control is an impossible question to deal with’. The implication is that ‘anybody who wants to play that game again, is going to be a basket case’.⁴ While it is clear that ‘population control’ is no longer the overarching objective of family planning programming, such statements indicate that there may be reluctance to even raise the issue for fear of reopening the ‘political wound’ associated with by past experiences.

³ Interview 12.

⁴ Interview 12.

One implication is that projecting messages with a narrow focus on family planning and fertility, at least in a context such as India, is likely to be politically untenable. A second implication is that in order to influence the Indian urban narrative, or to advance a new urban agenda, one first has to understand the larger socio-cultural context, as well as the existing political narrative and how it relates to the question of cities. One may have to initially confront and negate the specific narrative that already predominates, demonstrating where it no longer holds, before attempting to insert new messages and ideas. Overall, these points highlight the primacy of *context* when thinking about engaging in intellectual or policy advocacy – an understanding that precludes universal approaches or solutions to ensuring a closer link between the urban and family planning fields.

The reason I'm giving you this context is that the relationship between the village and the city, its imagination and migrations between them are very central and very important to understand. Because if you don't get that you don't get the narrative. So, the big policy narrative and debate between the 1930s and almost the 1980s was the debate that took place between Nehru, who was a modernizer, who was trying to promote urbanism – you know, Chandigarh and stuff like that – and Gandhi who firmly believed that India would live and develop in its villages. And even now that is the dominant political narrative and discourse. And Ambedkar, who basically wrote the Constitution, basically told the lower caste – especially the untouchable caste – to leave the village, because the village was the den of the caste system in some senses, and come to the city, because the city was a melting pot. So, a lot of the dynamics in the narrative in this region comes from that archetypical conversation.

Also, there's the fact that the politics of India is only possible because of the way that there were basically three constitutional amendments (in 1909, 1919 and 1935), so the only domain for politics or political leaders before 1935 was in municipalities. That drove a lot of the innovation and a lot of the political movements. So, the narrative developed from that. There was the 1935 Government of India Act, and though they had very little time – and they did a pretty good job of doing it – they did not integrate the urban into the Constitution. Our cities are governed essentially, by our states. They have no autonomy. So, it still is a very colonial two-level constitutional frame in some senses, speaking to that dichotomous tension between Gandhi and Nehru on where India is, and the fact that Indian politics has historically been driven by caste, and is driven by a rural constituency.

So, the narrative from 1880, when the first piece of work was done on the economy by Indian economists, has basically been that large metropolitan centres are the sites of colonial exploitation, and that's the reason why you should stay away from them. The entire cultural narrative, at least in the formative years (1950s, 1960s, etc.) – you see it in film and cinema and literature etc. – poses that these were horrible places, which not only had the mills and all the other things that you saw in Manchester, but these are the places that basically stripped and destroyed India. And these are the places that that people *governed from*. So, cities were associated with that.

Box 1: The nature and historical influences of the 'urban narrative' in India (source: interview 12)

- *There is no one-size-fits-all*

The urban sector is fragmented, comprised of a multitude of different actors and institutions, many working on specific portfolios of issues from particular intellectual backgrounds. Anyone tasked with inserting new ideas into urban debates almost invariably faces the challenge of the absence of an institutional home for the urban agenda. At the global level, there is no

‘Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for cities’, and some have questioned the capacity of an organization like UN-Habitat to effectively curate and implement the New Urban Agenda. Likewise, at a national level, urban concerns are often distributed across a range of sectoral departments. At the level of individuals, urban experts emerge from certain disciplinary and professional backgrounds and will inevitably have particular interests in a topic such as family planning and fertility change. The implication is that modes of engagement, and messages delivered through those engagements, may have to be nuanced and tailored to particular constituencies.

The lesson about understanding the political moment and the point of departure of the audience also relates more closely to how programmes or interventions are devised in partnership with city governments. The interview quotes presented in Box 2 below indicate the importance of taking a flexible approach that is attentive and responsive to local or national institutional and political contexts. On one hand, it is imperative to remain open in terms of with whom one partners, and how one seeks to integrate a family planning agenda into urban policymaking or wider urban healthcare systems. On the other hand, it is advisable to refrain from being prescriptive when working with different cities – rather recognizing the diversity of city experiences and concerns that will influence how they view the benefits of an urban family planning agenda, and how they approach the adoption of such an agenda. Those points highlight the necessity of building upon existing and emerging *demand*, as discussed below.

First of all, be context specific. Having one simple solution for the whole world, or all of Africa, isn't going to work. In some cases, the reproductive health people might be in a good position to make the case and to drive things forward. In some cases, it will be the urban decisionmakers. Where possible one needs to forge collaborations between them. But as I say, because I come from a broader primary care background, I wouldn't be advocating so much for vertical programs. What I'd be saying is, well, what systems have you got in your country? How can we integrate family planning most effectively into those systems? And increasingly, I think we need to be supporting affordable, accessible, good quality primary care systems, which will include community health workers, for example. How do we actually have a robust primary care system, which is integrated into a broader and more effective healthcare system, including hospitals and so on, and going up to tertiary care where appropriate?

Low-carbon development, resilient development, nature-based development, circular development – those are all pathways or entry points or windows through which a city can engage with a sustainability agenda. And that's an important lesson we learned early on: not every city is going to use the same window through which to enter the sustainability space. You don't want everybody to use all pathways. We do not prescribe; we have programmes, projects, tools, platforms – a variety of different ways of working with cities, because we've realized that no two cities are alike, and no two cities are going to respond to the same thing. There's no one-size-fits-all. We have to create a very broad partnership base with other organizations, and a very broad base through which cities can enter and flourish in this space. And that is really the aim, because all the SDGs are interlinked, so it really doesn't matter if a city enters this space through a focus on waste, or through nature, or through climate adaptation or whatever, because the one activity leads to another activity, and leads them and educates them and takes them along in a non-prescriptive way. We do not say a city has to 'achieve this by then, otherwise you are or you're not sustainable', or whatever. We do not judge; we just support and help and build. We listen to cities, and based on that listening, we have heard them saying things about science, and we then embarked on building bridges, just like we are building bridges in the finance space for them at the moment.

Box 2: The importance of tailoring advocacy, intervention and partnerships (source: interviews 3 and 14)

- *Build on existing demand*

We have noted that simply creating new guidelines or mechanisms and trying to uniformly impose these on cities is unlikely to be an effective strategy to drive change. Rather, effective and sustainable reform will probably result from identifying and building upon the existing concerns facing cities (see Box 3 below). In the process of engaging around those concerns, cities will be able to understand better what their key issues are, what their priorities should be, and what they need in order to better know about and address those issues and priorities. One example of this, given by a representative of UN-Habitat, concerned the City Prosperity Index⁵ implemented by that organization in partnership with city authorities: 'in many cases,

⁵ UN-Habitat's City Prosperity Initiative (CPI) is a global initiative that enables city authorities and other stakeholders to identify opportunities and potential areas of intervention for their cities to become more prosperous. It consists of a composite index of six dimensions that serves to define targets and goals that can support the formulation of evidence-based and measurable policies. See <https://unhabitat.org/programme/city-prosperity-initiative>

working with cities to develop a city prosperity report helped them to understand that they need to invest, for example, in generating quality data at the city level'.⁶

I think one of the issues is trying to understand what the current preoccupations of the urban decisionmakers are, and trying to get their agenda integrated into that, rather than coming at it from a very singular focus and saying, well, this is what we want to change. You first of all have to listen to what the current preoccupations are. Now, we've had a very interesting example of that in Kenya in Kisumu for example, so with the Complex Urban Systems for Sustainability and Health (CUSSH) project, which went in initially with the idea of working on decarbonization – how do you get a city like Kisumu to develop on a low-carbon trajectory – but then it became very apparent that this wasn't on the local government's radar at all, really. It wasn't an issue that interested them, or it was just something that had not occurred to them. So, then you have to start from what their problems are, and in their case it was waste. Waste was a big point of public concern – a lot of incineration of waste, which causes health implications. And so, we had to reorient things and start from where their priorities were. And I think the same issue applies in a situation like family planning.

Q: You mentioned food as an example of where you've specifically tried to insert a kind of new sort of emphasis into thinking around cities. So how did that come about? And what was the kind of strategy that you use to get that message out there?

A: Well, sometimes it comes from demand. One step back – it stemmed from the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, where the crises started in cities, toppled governments, and proliferated. So, we start looking into this and we realize that many of the issues of food shortage (just as issues of fertility change and control) are compounded in cities. Then there was the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, which tried to get cities to come up with strategies on how to – not just focus on infrastructure and other things – but think of the quality, the livelihoods and struggles surrounding food. We started engaging with these processes. And they asked us as UN-Habitat, what can we do to ensure that city planning, budgets, policies and so on support these initiatives? There are many movements that focus on food for cities. So, this demand coming from local government, national government, often driven by this social unrest, pushed us to start thinking about what we could do. Then UN agencies started reaching out to us – WFP, FAO, IFAD. They had realized that food is not only about agricultural production, but rather an entire system. There are major issues of waste, quality, diet and so on that are concentrated in cities. So, there was a lot of demand from different quarters, and we were looking at helping countries to systematize urban food issues into their policies and strategies, rather than just implementing small actions on the ground.

I think one of the key issues has always been the availability of urban data not just at the national level but at the city level, at much lower scales of decision-making. I don't think there have been a lot of efforts to put in the resources to ensure that the data are available. UN-Habitat has developed some mechanisms, for example the urban observatory model, to support countries or cities to setup a mechanism for generating data at the local level. But again, once you provide those mechanisms and tools and approaches, there is also the need for the importance of having data at that level to be recognized. If there is not much push or willingness from the local authorities to do that, then there is nothing there is not much that can be obtained from those mechanisms.

Box 3: The importance of identifying and responding to city demand (source: interviews 1 and 2)

⁶ Interview 2.

- *Clear messaging is important*

If engaging with a diverse range of urban-related actors and institutions is necessary, it follows that developing appropriate messages to address those audiences will inevitably be a challenge. While some interviewees questioned whether the crafting and dissemination of high-level messages was the most effective means for an organization like IUSSP to engage in urban reform processes, it was nonetheless clear that if one wishes to go this route, working with a clear and compelling message is critical (see Box 4 below). This message has to be tied to some kind of programmatic action, while being clear about who is going to drive that action. It should focus on an issue, or set of issues, around which there is wide agreement and which serve(s) the same objectives as those working on issues not immediately related to health or demography. The example given in section 3a below is that of girls' education.

I think it's about having unified public messaging. If you're going to advocate, the most important thing with all these political processes is trying to have a consensus around three, four, five headline messages. In the SDG process, within the health community it was universal health coverage and access. Within the urban community, it was first about the urban SDG, and then it became about public services, transport, and so on. I think it's going to be very hard to get health actors to deprioritize their arguments in favour of economic ones, or more instrumental arguments about means of implementation. But in the current climate, I think working with coalitions to streamline some quite simple messaging that is quite instrumental is probably the most useful thing that could be done first. But you need everyone at the table, right? You can't just cherry pick a couple of key demographic organizations to work with. So, they're going to have to work with the health community and education community and so on. You need to work with as many people as possible. It's just about trying to get consensus on what's going to fly politically right now.

Box 4: The importance of clear messaging in international policy advocacy (source: interview 7)

- *Emphasize urban and rural connections*

Engaging with policymakers and practitioners in Africa and Asia around an urban family planning agenda will likely entail interfacing with governments and institutions that may not always be receptive to an urban-focused agenda. Despite high-level commitments to SDG 11 and the New Urban Agenda among governments in these regions, the realpolitik of national governments still is often highly influenced by rural constituencies and elites (Duminy and Parnell, 2020; also see Box 1 above for the case of India). Consequently, it may be necessary to emphasize both the *urban and rural* benefits resulting from improved family planning supply and access. The experiences of organizations such as UN-Habitat in attempting to craft The New Urban agenda (indicated in Box 5 below) suggest that it may still be necessary, even in an era of a global urban-centred agenda for sustainable development, to emphasize the rural connections to and implications of improved fertility regulation in cities.

One way to convince governments to embrace urbanization is by using the argument of agricultural productivity. I think something that many governments don't necessarily see is that by investing in rural development, especially in agricultural development, you are encouraging and accelerating the process of urban development, because rural development leading to increased efficiency, bringing more sophisticated tools into rural development will mean less demand for labourers, and will mean there is a need for more urban centres that are able to distribute goods and services to support this agricultural productivity. So, you have a positive relationship and a spiral that moves towards stronger urbanization and less rural population, which is probably contrary to the original objective of making the lives of rural dwellers better. This is a strong argument that we have used, and I think successfully, in some cases. But it's a hard struggle, because if you have a parliament where two thirds of its members have a rural constituency, it's very hard to convince people that you need to drastically change the allocation of resources towards urban development.

Box 5: The importance of avoiding accusations of urban bias (source: interview 15)

- *Emphasize the global nature of demographic change*

Relating to the above, interviewees noted the importance of nesting messages surrounding urban family planning and fertility within a wider, more global understanding of demographic change (rather than one strictly limited to population growth in African and Asian contexts). That would entail seeing urban problems of population growth in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia alongside those of population decrease and ageing in some urban regions of the Global North. It would also mean linking our understanding of changing fertility, mortality and age structure in the Global North and South to global processes of migration and their implications – such as increased youthful migration to northern cities and the resulting potential for socio-political insecurity. Focusing exclusively on population growth may fail to secure the interest of urban reform actors based in international institutions, many of whom will be reluctant to attract accusations of Malthusianism, racism and historical amnesia regarding past population control initiatives, or accusations of privileged Northern didacticism. A more global and interconnected perspective, that is increasingly espoused from the South where the urban dividend is being embraced, draw attention to the implications, everywhere, of not attending to issues of demographic change that include rapid urban population growth in the South. How to balance a global understanding of such changes with the imperative of clear and sharp political messaging will likely be a challenge.

The issue here is not so much that urban experts think that family planning programmes still form part of Malthusian projects of population control. We found no direct evidence that they do think so. It is more that they are reluctant to engage with family planning and even related demographic issues in any significant detail for fear of *being accused of making that association*. This may indicate that urban experts are not receiving appropriate messages regarding the current 'unmet need', service access, empowerment and resilience agenda surrounding family planning. That would not be surprising, given that this is a starting point of this IUSSP project. Urban experts are certainly aware of government commitment to the notion of the 'demographic dividend', as indicated by interviewed representatives⁷ and written outputs of UN-Habitat (2020a, 2014) and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA,

⁷ Interview 1.

2017). However, some may believe that factors such as education, access to basic services and cost of living, more so than access to family planning, are the principal drivers of urban fertility decline and demographic dividends.⁸ Whatever the reason, it does not change the fact that urban changemakers from the Global North appear to be reluctant to ‘touch’ the issue, at least when the focus is exclusively placed on high fertility in the cities of the Global South.

We found less reluctance to discuss the issue of high urban fertility rates among interviewees based in the Global South, and certainly there was an awareness of the potential of the demographic dividend in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa and the importance of family planning for that dividend as well as issues of gender equity. As noted, however, the history of coercive population control in India ensures that it retains a status as a political ‘hot potato’, which discourages a narrow focus on family planning as the key demographic solution in that context. That is less the case among African urban professionals, as far as we could tell and as borne out by engagements of the IUSSP fellows with urban policymakers and practitioners in various parts of the continent.⁹

I think it depends what you mean by demographic questions. There is more than one question. There’s the ageing population, and there’s a fertility issue. Now, with fertility, I’m a bit cautious, because people living in the privileged North have got to be careful about lecturing people in the South about fertility and population. I don’t think it’s very productive. But I think what we need is an authentic African voice making those arguments and, of course, there are people from Africa who are doing that. So, I always address it when people ask me about it. But I don’t regard it as a wise thing for someone like me to be taking a leadership role on that. Because I think people might well turn around and say, well, you come from a privileged position from a country that’s exploiting vast amounts of resources; why don’t you get your own house in order? And I would agree with that. So, I think the thing to do is to build the capacity of colleagues in Africa to make these arguments because it’s in their own near-term and long-term interests.

Box 6: Taking a global view of demographic change (source: interview 14)

3. Means of engagement

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with successful (or unsuccessful) cases in which new ideas or agendas have been inserted into urban debates and policy processes. They were also asked to consider how the IUSSP could go about raising the profile of family planning and fertility in the urban sector. Interviewees discussed a wide range of approaches and examples. It was clear that some strategies would be more suitable for different scales of action and for different objectives. Below we identify and discuss five different approaches relating to the themes of politics, institutions, knowledge, strategic partnerships and data.

a. Political approach

⁸ Interviews 1 and 15.

⁹ A list of quotations and summaries of these engagements, compiled by Lauren Law, was provided to the authors by Judith Helzner on 27 July 2021.

Processes aiming to influence urban development agendas through political means include those targeting international forums and processes, such as those linked to the United Nations (UN) system. One interviewee had played a key role in the multi-party negotiations leading to the adoption of the urban Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 11), and described the process as involving protracted and intensive lobbying with national ambassadors and negotiators.¹⁰ Key here was the development of a ‘community of practice’ that included influential academics – many of whom were based in or around New York – who were able to interact closely with actors and processes in the UN system.

Within the process to develop and adopt SDG 11, political messaging only connected with demographic issues in a broad sense – the notion that some regions of the world are undergoing very rapid urbanization, which presents an opportunity to act to promote global transitions towards sustainable development. Fertility or fertility change did not feature at all in the debate, probably due to its status as a political ‘hot potato’. Indeed, this interviewee was the clearest about the risks of advocating an agenda using the specific terminology of family planning or sexual and reproductive health, and suggested that doing so would probably require undertaking a political mapping of the acceptance of that agenda among various parties and organizations. Rather, they suggested nesting family planning issues within a broader economic argument:

The other thing I’d stress is going and done the economic argument, which everyone says, but taking the line that we need better measurements of demographic change in order to look at how different city environments are going to change in their economic positioning and opportunities and access to trade and all that kind of stuff. Essentially, to do effective economic models, we need to have more accurate demographic data and more of a focus on demographics. And, I think, particularly in this climate, and with the economic insecurity that’s associated with COVID, and all the rest, that’s probably the most politically palatable argument.¹¹

At the same time, they suggested steering the messaging and argument away from the health sector as the latter was potentially too ‘crowded’ and complicated, not least due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

I would suggest steering away from the health case, right now. The health space is so crowded; there are so many other concerns. The COVID monitoring stuff is always going to be dominant at the moment, on top of non-communicable and infectious diseases and all those kinds of things. And I think if you go in with the kind of argument that this is about managing demographic growth and helping to improve women’s sexual reproductive rights and fertility, I just think it’s all – sadly, as much as I love it – it’s old hat and it’s political. And so, I wouldn’t go that way myself.¹²

¹⁰ Interview 7.

¹¹ Interview 7.

¹² Interview 7.

A number of relevant global platforms exist through which to attempt to raise the political profile of the links between family planning and urban development. One option would be to engage with the Conference of the Parties (COP)¹³ process, which now includes a specific urban chapter with a dedicated stream of work on cities. Here there is a specific opportunity given the increasing attention afforded to urban issues within climate dialogues. At the same time, representations at COP dialogues can be very demanding for organizations that are not particularly large and resourced. A second option would be to engage with dialogues specifically related to biodiversity, as there is growing interest in the links between about population (in terms of numbers, movement and consumption) and biodiversity (Crist et al., 2017). And third, the UN General Assembly will remain an important platform, particularly in the build-up to 2030/2025; being ‘ahead of the curve’ and preparing to influence the post-SDG process will be important. That could happen by taking advantage of IUSSP’s ECOSOC status. That said, our interviewee also suggested that it may be more strategic to target the introduction of new ideas and reforms by focusing on issues related to data and information systems rather than through high-level political messaging and engagement. A data-based approach to driving reform is discussed below.

A second interviewee, a former director of an international partnership dedicated to urban development and poverty alleviation, emphasized the importance of clear messaging to build a broad base of political support.¹⁴ They reflected on the need to ‘narrow down’ the agenda to ‘the correct proxies’, using the specific example of improving girls’ education as an issue around which there is wide agreement and which serves a broad range of objectives (including gender empowerment, greater uptake and use of family planning, fertility decline, economic development and improved biodiversity/climatic outcomes). An advantage of this approach is that it would avoid the debate surrounding whether economic factors (such as education and economic development) or family planning supply/access are more significant drivers of fertility decline. Those on both sides of this debate would support the notion that improved supply of and access to family planning contribute to better educational outcomes for girls, and that this in turn will have positive outcomes for fertility decline, the realization of demographic dividends and sustainable economic development. The importance of improving girls’ education and lowering fertility rates for urban and national development has also been recognized by regional organizations including the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2017).

Political approaches to driving reform can also happen at the level of individual countries, which often calls for enlisting the support of top government officials (see Box 7 below).

¹³ COP is the decision-making body responsible for monitoring and reviewing the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). COP21, held in Paris in 2015, produced the first international climate agreement, known as the Paris Agreement. See <https://youth.wmo.int/en/content/what-conference-parties-united-nations-framework-convention-climate-change>

¹⁴ Interview 13.

Since around 2012, UN-Habitat has put the transformative power of urbanization at the centre of what we do. And it's not an easy argument to make, especially in countries that are not yet urbanized that, say, more than 40 or 50%, because they look at their electorate and other large populations concentrated in rural areas. So, it is an argument that is not so easy to make. And you need a lot of evidence and conviction from the top leadership, not just from a couple of mayors and ministers or heads of department. You need really top leadership backing, because it requires a total shift of priorities in the in the whole set of government agencies. It has to come from the top. I think it's something that must come from the top because it implies allocation of resources in a very big way, and changing and shifting the allocation of resources. You can only do that if the people who are in charge of urban policy, or more broadly development policy, are convinced that this will generate more development benefits or reduce negative externalities in a significant way without creating political upheaval and unrest, which is sometimes associated with urbanization. That's what I think is the most difficult part. Because you want to address the countries that still have the longest trajectory of urbanization to go.

Some of the countries where you could say there has been a clear change over the last 10 years are Rwanda and Ethiopia. These are two countries where there has been a fundamental change towards a positive belief that urbanization will be a force for good in sustainable development. It has been embraced by the top leadership. These are two extremely different countries. The argument has been based on the concept of promoting consolidation of villages into small towns as a process of urbanization, and all the benefits that are to accrue to that: economic benefits in terms of food production, in terms of proximity to services, like health services. It's an economic efficiency. Mainly, that's the argument that you make; that instead of building 200 hospitals, you can build 20 hospitals, of better quality, as long as you have that proximity and density. That is applicable for both Rwanda and Ethiopia; for Ethiopian in a much different way, with a federalized structure – it's much more difficult to convince each of the regions that this is the way to go. There are more layers of government that need to be convinced, but at least there's a strong federal push.

Box 7: Targeting political leadership to raise an urban development agenda (Source: interview 15)

b. Institutional approach

An institutional approach to driving reform involves the building of new institutional networks, or the use of existing networks, to sit behind and grant legitimacy to a reform agenda. There is a significant scholarly literature that relates the importance of city networks as agents of transformation (Acuto and Leffel, 2021; Davidson et al., 2019). The growing number of these networks internationally signals the rising importance of partnerships – both informal and organized – between urban local governments and city leaders in driving both local and broader regulatory or policy reform. In some cases, these networks are already established and might be engaged as they are. Such include the climate leadership network C40,¹⁵ Cities Alliance,¹⁶ Metropolis,¹⁷ and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).¹⁸ In other cases, new networks may have to be created around particular objects of concern. One example is given in Box 8 below. This example, moreover, highlights the importance of identifying and working with key individuals within city organizations in structuring and institutionalizing such a thematically focused network.

¹⁵ <https://www.c40.org>

¹⁶ <https://www.citiesalliance.org>

¹⁷ <https://www.metropolis.org>

¹⁸ <https://www.uclg.org>

I coordinate a network of cities on the topic of what we call 'living together', which is actually social cohesion, coexistence, on a global perspective. Not from what happens on the ground in our cities, but from a global perspective – so cities can share experiences, initiatives, and how to improve links together through urban policies. When I arrived, my mandate was to put that in place. It was a general idea. It started because the Mayor at that time said, well, there is a global issue – at that time it was about extremism attacks that were targeting cities. So, in 2014 or 2015, several cities around the world, in different regions, were attacked by extremist attacks. At that point, the Mayor said, well, cities are always the target, so cities should be in solidarity with one another. They are on the frontline of such challenges, but they're also on the frontline in bringing solutions. That was the starting point, to create an initiative to bring change. And the city of Montreal decided to bring together mayors from different cities around the world to discuss these challenges and to share experiences. So, there was a special international event, but then the mandate was to build a permanent forum to make this initiative permanent, and bring all the other cities into discussion. That was the general idea of the initiative. We were bringing different people into a discussion – different stakeholders from different sectors. But actually, I had to start from the beginning to build this up. I had to structure the initiative. And that meant dealing with some very particular people, even within cities, because city administrations are huge organizations with many people with different very different roles. So, it's very important to identify the right person, the right actors within cities to do that. You never know who the right person is, but you try to have an idea.

Box 8: The importance of networks for driving new urban policy agendas (source: interview 4)

c. Knowledge-based approach

A knowledge-based approach to driving urban transformation takes a somewhat different form to the political and institutional strategies discussed above. This approach would focus more on ensuring that policymakers and practitioners better understand the local urban context, that this understanding draws on expertise from a range of disciplines, and that they have and employ both robust data and case study methods – mixing and matching data and methods in a way that is opportunistic but also methodologically robust.

For their part, interviewees involved with editing academic journals reflected on their efforts to influence the global urban knowledge agenda. They noted that shifting this agenda is both a geographical as well as an intellectual project; it involves influencing not only the kinds of knowledge that are produced, but also from where and on what contexts people publish.¹⁹ It may also entail the tactic of using publications to try to establish a 'community of practice' of scholars and practitioners that self-consciously identify themselves as a network.²⁰ This is an active process, involving ongoing workshops and engagements, and it is one that runs against the grain of a global system of research funding, knowledge production and publication that privileges ideas, debate and contexts of the Global North. Consequently, securing funding support is often an essential precondition.

Shifting the urban agenda through a knowledge-based approach might entail searching for and seizing opportunities to influence this knowledge by working through systems of research

¹⁹ Interview 8.

²⁰ Interview 5.

funding while employing cutting-edge approaches like evidence-based policymaking, complex systems analysis, big data analytics and coproduction – all with a focus on cities of the Global South. In this strategy, IUSSP and BMGF could do at least three things. First, they could help define a research programme by establishing a research funding call that exemplifies and pushes the interest in the interface between family planning, fertility and urban development. Second, they could help to establish a placement programme to strengthen partnerships between institutions via the embedding of demographic or family planning experts within key organizations (in this case, these might include WIEGO, UNdata, ICLEI or OECD). Third, they could help to build a repertoire of knowledge of transformative interventions by facilitating the researching and writing-up of case studies addressing programmatic implementation in a range of contexts (see Box 9 below).

In staking out a knowledge agenda to influence urban transformation, monitoring the impact of programmatic interventions across sectors in a more systemic way is a critical imperative. Recent programmes such as the Urban Reproductive Health Initiative have included major project components concerned with monitoring the impacts of project interventions over time, principally with respect to variables such as family planning use and unmet need. Yet attempting to monitor, say, the impacts of family planning programmes on a broader set of urban dimensions such as shelter, education, health, poverty, environmental quality and work remains a significant methodological challenge. That is, in part, due to the ways that cities are structured institutionally, according to vertical sectors or ‘silos’. Finding examples of the monitoring of cross-sectoral transformation is difficult, but it is the kind of evidence needed to demonstrate the wider impacts of family planning interventions in cities (see Box 9 below). The difficulty in finding these kinds of case studies is also related to issues of funding – researchers often are not funded to do evaluation-type work. It is related, also, to the lack of appropriate and interoperable datasets at the city scale.

Despite these challenges, there are methodological approaches that can be taken to capture a more systemic view of programme impacts, while in the process ensuring closer cooperation and ongoing exchange between researchers, policymaker and practitioners. One example is the ‘whole system’ approach, which in this case would seek to embrace the complexity of interacting components within an urban/health/demographic system, while involving a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives and stakeholders within a dynamic process of constant feedback and learning (Bagnall et al., 2019; Rütten et al., 2019). Consequently, it arguably has ‘the potential to engage decisionmakers and ensure that they are impacted on by the decisions in a much more active way than traditional research’.²¹

²¹ Interview 14.

I don't think anyone's been very successful at bringing various aspects of the health agenda to interface more directly with the city and climate change agenda. Really, if you look at the magnitude of the change required, certainly in terms of the climate, nobody is moving at that kind of speed. And some of the work we're doing at the moment with this new [Pathfinder initiative](#) focusing on the implementation of zero carbon policies, strategies and technologies in different contexts, makes it abundantly clear that there's an enormous amount of rhetoric around the need for change, and there's quite a lot of modelling about what the potential benefits of change will be. But when you actually ask for case studies of implementing change, there aren't very many of them. Most of the case studies we're getting are of 'bottle changes'. So, they're saying, 'well if we did this, then these are the benefits that would accrue'. But there has been relatively little documented in terms of actual change on the ground.

We have found some case studies, but what we find is that often the people that implement change are not very good at evaluating it. Because that's not their priority. And so, we do need a much better coalition between implementers and researchers to evaluate the impacts of these complex changes.

I think that just passively presenting research evidence has very little impact on policy. I think there has to be is much greater integration between research effort and the policy dimensions and environment. But of course, there's also a gap between policy and practice. So just because something gets into policy doesn't mean to say it gets implemented. So, you've got this double jump, you know, from research into policy and from policy into practice. And the policy to practice interface, of course, is a very valid interface for research, but very few resources have been devoted to understanding the implementation process. It's very much the kind of poor relation in the research community.

Box 9: The value of case studies of implementation, and implications for a research agenda (source: interview 14)

d. Strategic partnership approach

Ensuring that one partners with, and thereby influences, key organizations was surfaced as an important means of influencing urban-sector reforms. These partnerships could coalesce around a range of issues. One approach, as taken by the international advocacy group Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) was to specifically use data as a strategic entry point to forge and maintain partnerships. By engaging around the specific issue of data, WIEGO was able to influence the statistical definitions of (informal) work employed by institutions such as the International Labour Organization. This required recruiting staff with high-level statistical expertise. WIEGO activists (representing informal workers' unions) also consciously cultivate relationships with academics based in reputable universities as a way of bringing credibility to their statistical work and findings.

It is important to note that this kind of partnership-based approach could be implemented and targeted at different scales. The WIEGO case provides an excellent example of engagement at the international scale. Yet, lessons from the work of organizations like Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and ICLEI also show that involving communities in gathering data at the neighbourhood or city scale can promote the local ownership and sustainability of interventions (Patel et al., 2012).²² Those data captured 'on the ground' can then be used to partner with scientific institutions for the purposes of analysis and monitoring. The flow of information (from

²² Interview 3.

community to scientist) is therefore the reverse of that which is traditionally pursued in scientific and policy-facing research (i.e. from scientist to community).

e. Data-based approach

The one common factor emerging across all interviews concerned the importance of data in fostering appropriate partnerships and raising the profile of particular issues within urban dialogues and debates. Several principles emerged. First, it is critical to make the most of new and emerging data opportunities enabled by technological developments and the growing political and programmatic interest in securing accurate data and crafting appropriate information systems for evidence-based policy (see Box 10 below). Many funders, development agencies and governments now recognize the importance of baseline population statistics for effective planning and programme monitoring, and there is a concerted push to invest in securing that information.²³ Second, if one can get the question of data and metrics ‘right’, one will open up the spatial and temporal links between family planning, fertility and urban change. Third, reforming data systems will involve downscaling and interscaling those systems, on one hand, while ensuring the interoperability or ‘interdigitization’ of data systems, on the other.²⁴ That means ensuring data is collected and is sufficiently fine-grained at the city scale, and that health and demographic data systems are able to interface effectively with those concerned with urban waste, transport, water and so on.

Precisely what kinds of demographic/health and urban data need to be made available and interoperable will be for statistical and sectoral experts to decide in collaboration. A representative of UN-Habitat argued that the data collected by the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) could serve as a base – in other words covering issues of fertility, access to health and family planning services, and so on. But in order to secure the buy-in from other sectoral organizations those data would need to be related to issues such as inadequate housing, transport, waste management, air quality and public space. At present a comprehensive survey instrument that assesses those relationships at the city level does not exist.²⁵ However, the downscaling of data is an area in which IUSSP members probably have the requisite skills to play an active, even formative role.

²³ Interview 7.

²⁴ Interview 14.

²⁵ Interview 2.

If you were going into an equivalent dialogue [to the SDGs] now, I think things have changed. We're quite different from where we were seven or eight years ago, in terms of the international dialogue. I think there's much more of a focus on data and information systems and this argument around the necessity to have the appropriate data and evidence at your fingertips in order to inform policy – that's become a lot more accepted. Even looking at the stature of the Stats Commission and UN Statistics Division that has skyrocketed since 2013 – no one even knew who they were in 2012 or 2013. So, my point being that I think there's a real opportunity to come at this from the data side, and talk about the importance of demographic monitoring, the census. I mean, everyone's always agreed with that, but the focus on household surveys, accurate population counts, the imperative to use geospatial data in order to do better estimates in countries without accurate censuses... I think the importance of baseline population statistics for everything we're trying to do is very widely accepted. And now there's a real push to invest in it. And, we've seen, for example, the GRID3 project, which has had loads of funding from Gates and various others, which is basically all about overlaying census and geospatial information, and is being heralded everywhere as some sort of darling project. And there's lots of opportunity to basically make the argument from that perspective: this is about the baseline information that we need in order to achieve anything, essentially, and modernizing those tools and methods... The case has already been made, all of those stakeholders very much agree that we need accurate demographic information. And I think we can go a long way engaging with negotiators and ambassadors by saying our number one priority is making sure that we have an accurate baseline for everything we're trying to do. And the heart of that is population data. So, I think that case is almost already won, it just needs to be amplified. And that would be an easy way to engage.

Box 10: Emerging opportunities for data as a basis for engagement between urban and demographic sectors (source: interview 7)

While downscaling data to the urban scale and ensuring the interoperability of data systems would be a strategic point of engagement for IUSSP, interviewees also recognized that statistical data were necessary but not sufficient to capture the knowledge required to drive political, policy and programmatic transformation. Other forms of knowledge are also needed in the form of case studies (as mentioned in section 3c above). The latter should examine more than the relationship between demographic and urban change. They should also capture the contextual factors that are necessary to shift the terms of debate and modes of practice in particular contexts. These would include the specific roles of (different kinds of) strategic leaders, academics and data in driving and informing processes of reform.

4. Who, when and how to engage?

The issue of with whom IUSSP should engage in order to influence the urban sector really depends on the scale at which it wishes to work, and its specific objectives in doing so. If IUSSP wishes to influence policy discussions at an international level through the UN system, for example, this would require engaging with country ambassadors and negotiators in addition to using its status within ECOSOC to submit representations. If the objective is to influence the sector via the production and distribution of new knowledge, then working with funders to define a research agenda and broaden the geographical and intellectual basis for this research will be critical.

a. Local governments as key actors

It was clear from most interviewees that engaging with organized local government has been and will be crucial in staking out the parameters of the urban development agenda, and therefore organizations like UCLG are likely to be strategic partners. While it may be possible to influence urban policy and practice without working directly with local or national governments, it was noted that achieving desirable reforms would probably be far easier if one did.

b. Taking a diagnostic approach to engagement

However, working effectively with urban local governments requires being flexible and responsive to context. In part, this is a matter of understanding the local institutional and governance context for something like family planning. One interviewee, for example, outlined a 'diagnostic approach' to working with governments at the urban scale:

I'd be inclined to lay out some broad principles of, of action, which can be tailored to the context. And I would say, well, in those contexts where you've got a strong city government, which controls and manages the healthcare system, then what you've got to do is to ensure that family planning is integrated properly into that healthcare system. In those situations where the city government doesn't have any influence or has limited influence over the healthcare system, then you have to look at the mechanisms for interaction between the city government and whoever does control or manage the healthcare system, which might be the national or the provincial state government. So, it's a question of having a kind of diagnostic approach, if you like: how do you go about diagnosing the most or deciding on the most profitable entry point? And I think it depends very much on how the system is set up locally; how the city governments interrelate with the healthcare system, and probably the education system as well. And I would go to them with case studies of different kinds of contexts and where people have been working successfully, or perhaps less successfully, to try and integrate these agendas. So, my inclination would be to get to lay out some clear principles and guidelines which are context specific, and to illustrate those with different case studies of how the city governments have tried to tackle some of these issues.²⁶

c. Maintaining flexibility and adaptability

However, arguably the need for adaptability goes beyond the institutional system for healthcare provision, and relates to the character of the partnering/advocacy organization itself. A representative of ICLEI, for example, spoke of the need to be 'quick on one's feet' if one is to respond to emerging city demands and maintain relevance.²⁷ Part of the success and sustainability of an organization like ICLEI is that it has been unafraid 'to go out there and

²⁶ Interview 14.

²⁷ Interview 3.

experiment and form unusual partnerships'. It has purposefully selected to work with cities where the probability of success was highest (i.e. places not beset by conflict and extreme stressors), and it has actively listened and responses to what cities themselves say. It has a decentralized organizational model, which allows for this rapid adaptability and responsiveness. As a self-funded organization it has to actively try to work with and influence donors (see Box 11 below).

We need to take into account that we are project based; one of our biggest issues is funding ourselves. Unlike some other organizations, we don't have angel investors. Everything that we build up, has to first be funded through a project. In order to land that project, we have to write proposals. And we have to get into the space; we've got to build relationships with donors, under the right partners, form the right consortiums, etc. So, it's very difficult to start very small and then go big. You've got to take baby steps and just be patient, and build your reputation along the way. So, it's not easy for us. We can't always do what we want, and what we know cities need. We still believe that there's a big gap between what donors put out as potential projects to be funded and what cities really need. We are trying to be in that space and take our donors closer to reality; some are more open to it than others.

Box 11: The challenges of self-funding (source: interview 3)

d. Responding to emerging discourses

In taking such a flexible and adaptable approach, it will be important to recognize and build upon emerging currents of urban policy thinking (see Box 12 below for one example). For at least the past five years, for example, there has been evidence of an appetite to promote closer linkages between urban policy and health concerns in Africa and elsewhere (Oyuela and Carbajal, 2018; UN-Habitat and WHO, 2020; UNAS, 2018). The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has also worked to centre health imperatives within urban policy discussions (Smit, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2021, 2020a, 2020b). Yet COVID-19 has also had the tendency to 'crowd out' issues (such as reproductive health) that are not directly related to infectious disease. Indeed, direct references to family planning and reproductive health do not feature prominently in these ongoing discussions around urban health, perhaps with the exception of those specifically concerned with issues facing women in cities (Azcona et al., 2020). Building upon emerging currents of thought and practice in the area of urban health implies the need to maintain vigilance concerning global discourses and their relative influence, in this case surrounding policymaking for cities.

I think you need to build on things that are already happening. So, I noticed in Stockholm, after the Rio Conference in 1992, there was an increasing interest in nature in cities, and it was sort of growing slowly. But I think that was a trend in many, many cities around the world. So, just building on that and providing clear evidence for some of the arguments or some of the ideas that were floating around, either refuting or supporting, was very helpful for people. I think academia was embraced at that moment. A lot of people said, well, great, you're on board, you will help give us good arguments. And sometimes we did, sometimes we didn't, depending on the evidence...

It wasn't just me. I mean, there were lots and lots of people. There was a wider trend among ecologists to maybe shift the view from this very purist vision of ecology, that is almost devoid of humans, to an opposing view that really wanted to understand human-dominated landscapes. A lot of people saw that that is the future of the planet – we will have human domination everywhere; we need to understand that interaction and how we can manage it in a positive way. That shift going on in ecology helped to attract new people, particularly young people, to this type of research. And also, whatever you do in urban areas, you have to work in interdisciplinary ways, and you have to work with policy and practice. So, it was an arena that was ripe for doing all these interactions with other groups of people.

Box 12: Building on emerging currents of urban thought: the example of ecology (source: interview 11)

e. Working according to different scales and timeframes

Many of the lessons relayed by our interviewees showed that changing the urban development agenda can take a long time – years if not decades. At the same time, the crisis of COVID-19 shows us that 'behavioural change' need not 'take forever'.²⁸ It has also revealed that sometimes we cannot afford to wait to have all the data or solutions in hand before acting. That realization indicates that it may be productive to think about strategies for driving change at different scales and over different timeframes. Those might include:

- The longer-term pressure built through forming partnerships, better data practices and sustained lobbying at the macro or global scale – here the use of IUSSP's ECOSOC status to influence thinking in the UN system is an obvious opportunity;
- Finding connections or leverage points in the meso-level of institutions, development agencies, governments, donors and so on at a more regional or national scale; or
- More localized experimental or 'bottom-up' interventions in the short term – what one interviewee referred to as 'acupuncture' interventions – that generate case studies of implementation from which to demonstrate positive outcomes and disseminate key lessons.²⁹

IUSSP itself may not be the ideal type of organization to implement programmes of reform directly. However, it is well placed to act as a convening 'platform' or 'animator' – what one interviewee termed a 'provider of methodologies' – that enables the creation of connections between disparate actors and institutions.³⁰

²⁸ Interview 3.

²⁹ Interview 9.

³⁰ Interview 9.

f. Seizing the post-SDG opportunity

Overall, there are no neat guidelines for whom to engage. One interviewee noted the need to ‘work with everyone’.³¹ Likewise, no particular events or forums stand out as strategic platforms for engagement and influence. Decisions regarding with whom and where to engage, however, should be taken with respect to timing. As we attempt to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and move towards 2030 (the culmination of the SDG period), preparing to position ourselves in the post-SDG transition will be critical – and this calls for the early preparation of a body of knowledge, key messages and champions who will be able to interface with the UN system as negotiations are planned and set in motion.

³¹ Interview 7.

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