

URBAN LABS:

A TOOL FOR INTEGRATED AND PARTICIPATIVE URBAN PLANNING

Barcelona, 2-3 February 2016





GLOBAL EXPERTS GROUP MEETING

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1. BACKGROUND

As a result of the global trend of rapid urbanization, contemporary cities are facing many increasingly complex issues, such as sprawled peripheries and the destruction of natural resources, urban decay and gentrification, informal settlements and difficult access to basic services, deserted city centres and segregated gated communities. These challenges are further increased by the growing problem of climate change and the need to integrate climate change adaptation and mitigation into city planning and development. Moreover, urban planning and development do not only influence the physical dimension of urban and natural areas, but also the socio-economic wellbeing of citizens, as unsustainable patterns of urbanization increase both spatial and social inequality, segregation, ghettoization and poverty, both in developed and developing countries.

Embedding a vast number of problems, challenges and affected groups, city leaders and local governments bear the heavy responsibility to provide conditions for sustainable urban development and a high standard of living, while responding to the specific needs of different groups of stakeholders, namely – the citizens and community groups, including vulnerable groups, the private sector, the governmental and international agencies etc.

Balancing a wide array of needs and desires of different stakeholders is what makes urban planning a political process and the local governments the facilitators of this process. In order to ensure the smooth and efficient implementation of urban development projects, local governments need to facilitate integrated work across sectors and departments, and a collaborative relationship with the private sector, the non-government sector and the communities. At the same time they need to device tools for the financing of urban development projects and for their legal and technical implementation.

Where spatial planning and design provide the vision, articulating planning with regulatory and financial frameworks provides the means to reach that vision. For this reason, an effective approach to planning must integrate legal and financial components. In many countries, the private sector, including individual households and firms, leads the majority of urban development. Typically more than 40% of the land developed and more than 80% of the investment will occur through private

parties. Effective regulatory frameworks will be necessary to guide this development in concurrence with plans.

Financial frameworks and public investments also influence private development and whether it complies with what is planned. Planning cannot be separated from publicly led investments in basic infrastructure and services. In order to ensure that these planned investments do not remain only on paper, capital investment planning and adequate financial resources are necessary.

And so, on one side, there are the local administrations that are struggling with finding the resources for planning and development. On the other side, there is the private sector that is often not given the right conditions for development, or whose potential to contribute to the public infrastructure is not fully used. Finally there are the citizens, communities and different interests group that are affected by urban planning and are often left outside of the loop, resulting with poor public satisfaction, conflict or protest.

The successful exchange of knowledge and collaboration between these different groups of stakeholders increases the chances for a successful and sustainable urban development significantly. Urban Planning and Design LABs are tools that have the role to facilitate and ease this process.

Urban Planning and Design LABs are vehicles that guide the urban planning and development in a multi-stakeholder institutional setting, facilitating political and participatory processes through design. LABs are integrative platforms whose aim is to work across sectors and departments, engaging different stakeholders through advanced participatory processes and tools. The LABs promote an integrated approach that combines spatial, legal, financial, social and environmental strategies to deliver holistic plans through an iterative and participatory process.

Urban Planning and Design LABs are tools that can be used for a wide array of context-specific needs, agendas and strategies, ranging from city-wide planning strategies, to urban regeneration and infill, planned city extensions, planning tools, policies and guidelines or smaller scale pilot-projects. Furthermore, they can be of great use when dealing with specific pressing issues, such as climate change, gender equality or land conflict resolution.

The Urban Planning and Design LAB of UN-Habitat, formed in 2014, has already worked on a number

of successful case-studies showcasing the potential of planning labs. The Urban Planning and Design LAB (the LAB) is an initiative from UN-Habitat to promptly respond to the request of national and local governments to support sustainable urban development. The LAB acts as the integrative facility of the Agency in which spatial planning is used as the tool coordinating economic, legal, social and environmental aspects of urban development, translating them into concrete and implementable projects that materialize the normative work of UN-Habitat.

Using a ‘research by design’ working methodology and a learning-by-doing approach to urban planning, the LAB has often served not only as a tool for integrated planning, but also a process of capacity building for local and national governments. The UPD-LAB is formed by a multidisciplinary team of urban planners, legal and financial experts providing a holistic proactive approach. Due to this, the UPD-LAB has become the team building facility inside the Agency where different areas of expertise come together to deliver concrete and integrated solutions. The LAB is currently working in concrete projects joining international and local expertise in more than 20 countries and 40 cities in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and Asia, working on urban renewal, planned city extensions, city-wide strategies and planning guidelines. The UPD-LAB is also the cornerstone of the Global Network of Planning and Design LAB’s, an initiative supported by member states during the 25th Governing Council of UN-Habitat. The Network promotes the collaboration of international experts working together in different countries with local partners to propose implementable plans.

The UN-Habitat Urban Planning and Design LAB is one of a growing number of other public, academic or private planning and design LABs globally, successfully developing and upgrading the

potential to actively contribute in future projects and collaborations.

This Expert Group Meeting aims at creating the conditions for this progress of the Urban Planning and Design LABs as a globally implementable tool for integrated, sustainable urban development. The EGM will seek to discuss the working methods and tools of different planning and design labs, aiming to exchange different knowledge, experiences and approaches and reach collaborative conclusions for the potential future progress of planning and design labs. The EGM will aim at understanding the strengths and the opportunities, as well as the weaknesses and threats of the Planning Labs, in order to maximize their effectiveness for the implementation of the principles of the New Urban Agenda.

2. ALIGNMENT WITH INTERNATIONAL AGENDAS

2.1 HABITAT III, THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

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