GUIDEBOOK

A GUIDE TO SETTING UP AN URBAN OBSERVATORY

POPULAR VERSION

UN-HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

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1. Overview

In many parts of the world, lack of good quality, relevant, accessible and timely data on cities is a key element impeding progress in monitoring and reporting on global agendas such as the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development and its related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda (NUA). The lack of sound urban data also affects the formulation of evidence-based policies and designing of programs that respond to urban dynamics and related challenges. Indeed, many countries are still in need of tools and capacities to improve their data collection, validation, and reporting practices, as well as the necessary connection to policies. As a result, many urban planners and decision-makers are operating in an environment of uncertainty, allocating resources to immediate and pressing issues (reactive processes) rather than investing in progressive change over the long term.

Recognizing the urban data challenges across the world, UN-Habitat developed the urban observatory model to assist cities and countries in strengthening their data capacities, and to guide them in collation, analysis and translation the data into simple to understand information which would support decision making processes. Urban observatories aim to leverage local technology, innovation and analytical capabilities while supporting capacity-building, urban data literacy and awareness. They also seek to manage local partnerships and coordination of data originating from government departments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, the media, academia and communities at large; which in turn promotes good practices and principles in data sharing, open data and data rights.

This guide introduces the urban observatory model and provides a summary of the key requirements and steps in setting up an urban observatory. More details for the requirements and aspects presented in this summary version are available in the full version of the guidebook titled **"A Guide to Setting up an Urban Observatory"**.

A Guide to Setting up an Urban Observatory, Full version

2. What is an Urban Observatory?

An urban observatory is a local network of stakeholders responsible for producing, analyzing and disseminating data on a meaningful set of indicators that reflect collectively prioritized issues on sustainable development in a given area or country. Data and information resources produced by the local network are used to support decision-making and the formulation of evidence-informed policies. An urban observatory also constitutes a platform through which data and information is disseminated, public opinions sought and through which citizens can track progress and hold their governance structures accountable.

Urban observatories are designed to a) promote the generation of value-based urban data and distributing information by coordinating various sectors and partners within the city or country, b) facilitate the participation of communities and public and private stakeholders in the development process of their neighborhoods by producing urban data at the appropriate scale, and c) support decision-making processes and enhancing governance within the urban sector by producing local knowledge-based information.

The specific objectives of urban observatories include to:

- ***Develop, collect and analyze data*** *on a set of localized indicators to monitor a range of local or national priority issues – e.g. social development, economic performance, service delivery, etc.*
- ***Establish long-term mechanisms for monitoring SDGs*** *and Urban indicators*
- ***Promote the use of urban data in planning and policymaking*** *at local and national level*
- ***Disseminate information*** *to strengthen accountability and transparency*
- ***Promote local ownership of urban indicators systems*** *and a culture of monitoring and assessment.*

Urban observatories are driven by the need for improved coordination in the measurement and monitoring of urban indicators in key areas, such as demography, socio-economic development, urban development and environmental issues, among others. They are also driven by the desire to develop a knowledge-based information system that can ultimately be used to support evidence-informed urban programmes and policies. The beneficiaries of an urban observatory are policymakers at all levels and all stakeholders involved in local sustainable urban development.

In addition, urban observatories typically work with partner groups to develop and use appropriate indicators, indices and evaluation mechanisms; maintain information systems and undertake evaluations and impact analyses at the request of local authorities and partner groups and build capacity for the generation, management, analysis and dissemination of urban data. They also produce various knowledge products – including general and thematic reports, empirical studies, policy briefs, factsheets, indicators databases, data visualization platforms, newsletters – that

stimulate dialogue among stakeholders around priority issues. Ultimately, urban observatories strengthen the community-wide base of urban knowledge which is key for planning processes as well as promoting accountability from the governance systems.

A section of Dar es salaam city, Tanzania 2019 © UN-Habitat / Julius Mwelu.

3. Types of Urban Observatories

There are typically two types of urban observatories - **Local Urban Observatory (LUO)** and **National Urban Observatory (NUO)**.

a) Local Urban Observatories (LUO)

These are city/ urban level observatories which are typically housed in an existing city department, non-governmental organization, or a university. Their objective is to produce, manage and analyze data on the performance of a city on key urban indicators and other thematic issues, as well as to promote use of data in local decision-making processes. The main activities of a LUO include the following:

- Work with partner groups to develop and apply appropriate indicators, indices and evaluation mechanisms for the urban area and its communities
- Maintain information management systems and undertake evaluations and impact analyses at the request of local authorities and partners groups
- Build capacity for the regular and consistent generation, management, analysis, dissemination and use of urban information for decision-making
- Identify conditions, trends and priority issues through research and consultative processes involving local authorities and civil society organizations
- Propose options for harmonizing sectoral policies and strategies in the context of the local plan of action
- Cooperate with other LUOs in sharing lessons, resources, exchanging substantive and methodological knowledge and disseminating information at national, regional and global levels
- Maintain an online data and information platform and a news/trends avenue for sharing data and information on the city and for reporting on activities of the LUO and its partner groups
- Produce a State of the City report, including analysis of progress towards sustainable development, local targets of SDGs/NUA, policy scenarios and best practices in terms of investments and actions (recommended to be produced biennially).

b) National Urban Observatories (NUO)

National Urban Observatories (NUOs) coordinate and consolidate urban data collection at the national level using the results for evidence-based policymaking. They can either coordinate the activities of local urban observatories in the country or produce their own data and information resources at the national, regional or local level. The main activities of a NUO include the following:

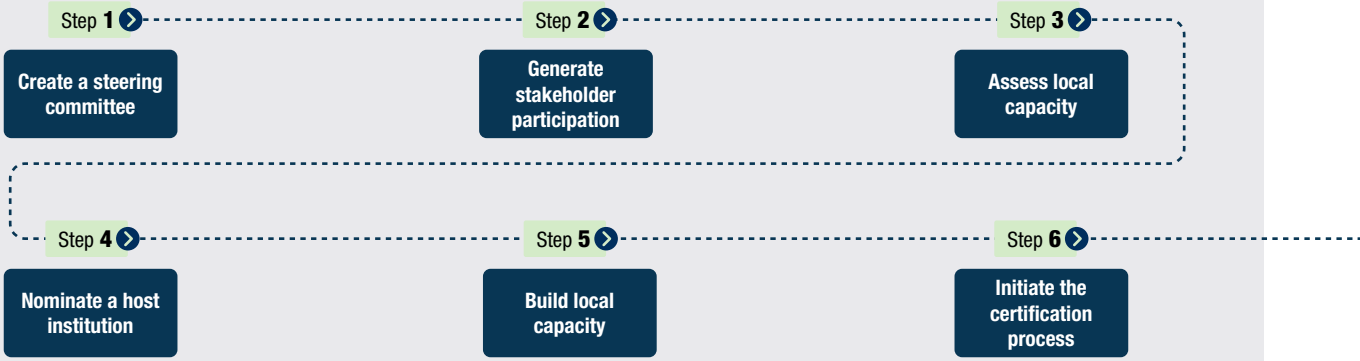
- Provide a coordinating framework for the collection, analysis and application of urban indicators at the national and local levels
- Organize, in conjunction with other partners, networks for training and peer-to-peer learning among agencies, local authorities and civil society organizations engaged in improving living conditions, as well as national competitions and exhibitions on best practices
- Organize capacity building programmes on the generation and use of data and empirical evidence, for policy makers and technical officers at the national and local levels
- Conduct broad-based consultations to review or formulate the National Plan of Action (NPA) considering the commitments and recommendations of the New Urban Agenda and priorities expressed through consultative processes
- Propose a national urban policy framework to guide the implementation of the NPA and the formulation and implementation of Local Plans of Action (LPAs)
- Propose options for harmonizing sectoral objectives, based on urban indicators and best practices analysis
- Maintain an indicators programme to monitor implementation of the NPA
- Coordinate the assessment and provision of capacity-building resources for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of NPA and LPAs
- Maintain an online data and information platform and a newsletter for sharing data and information on the city and for reporting on activities of the NUO and its partner groups
- Produce a biennial State of the Nation's Cities report, including analysis of progress towards sustainable development, national targets of SDGs/NUA, policy scenarios and best practices in terms of investments and actions.

4. How to set up an Urban Observatory

A set of key actions are required to successfully set up an urban observatory, whether at the local or the national levels. These range from putting in place the administrative and institutional setup to ensuring long term sustainability of the observatory through funding and securing political buy-in. Figure 1 summarizes the process of setting up an urban observatory, which is divided into two broad phases: a) inception and feasibility assessment and b) organizational development.

Phase 1: Inception and feasibility assessment

This Phase involves identifying the role of the observatory, the data and information needs (indicators), assessment of potential data sources, defining roles of partners, identifying sources of funding and other resources for the observatory. A feasibility report should be produced at the end of the phase.



Phase 2: Structural and organizational development

This phase involves actual operationalization of the observatory through such things as defining the observatory objectives and scope, developing an action plan, engaging stakeholder network, staffing the observatory, and securing financing for sustainability and getting institutional and political support.

UN-Habitat provides technical support in the entire process and certifies urban observatories that follow specific guidelines for indicator development, monitoring and reporting.

For urban observatories to succeed, they must be carefully designed and managed. Some of the must avoid issues when setting up an urban observatory include:

1. Lack of a clear mission, vision or objectives
2. Lack of political support and clear linkage between urban observatory and decision-making structures
3. Lack of financial sustainability and institutional support
4. Not linking indicators to local development needs, priorities and challenges
5. Defining too many urban indicators for monitoring
6. Lack of clear outcomes and a sound communication strategy
7. Lack of coordination system among actors
8. Lack of investment in continuous training

Peacekeeping - UNAMI Erbil, KRG, IRAQ © UN-Habitat

5. Tools and methodologies for Urban Observatories

UN-Habitat has developed several tools and methodologies to help cities and countries to harmonize their urban monitoring and identify key policy and investment aspects. Some of the tools which have been working hand in hand with the urban observatory model to promote urban monitoring and sustainable urbanization include the City Prosperity Index, the City Performance Monitoring Framework (CPMF), the Spatial Data Integration Model (SDIM) and the National Sample of Cities (NSC).

Design Charrette in Johannesburg © UN-Habitat

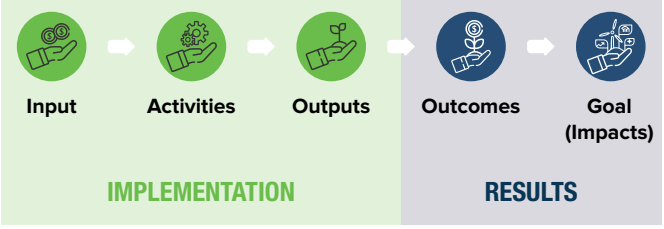
The City Prosperity Index

This is a flexible framework developed for the formulation, implementation and monitoring of policies and practices on sustainable development to increase prosperity and sustainability of cities. The CPI integrates indicators for urban SGs and NUA to address, in a single framework, the environmental, social and economic components of city prosperity and sustainability. The CPI relies on six dimensions that are context specific and globally comparable: productivity, infrastructure development, quality of life, equity and social inclusion, environmental sustainability, governance and legislation. Each dimension has a set of indicators which are produced at the city level, and the level of prosperity of a city is measured through the extent to it has achieved all six dimensions of prosperity. The CPI provides urban observatories with a basic and extended set of indicators, which can be a good starting point. It also provides a clear approach for identifying where immediate interventions are needed as well as guidance on preparation of State of Cities Report – one of the key outcomes of an urban observatory.

CITY PROSPERITY INITIATIVE

The City Performance Monitoring Framework

This is a monitoring framework to track routine inputs and outputs connected to the implementation of the national development plans within cities. As a tailor-made system of tracking city performance, CPMF allows for periodic monitoring of the implementation of the urban development plans and programmes in cities using a core set of 100 indicators, and requires the engagement of various stakeholders and levels of governance. The CPMF relies on a network of city leaders and managers and a strong ICT background to ensure near to real-time progress monitoring with efficiency. It promotes higher accountability, better performance assessment and strong coordination of the central/local government with the regional or local/ subnational government entities. Urban observatories can adapt the CPMF to enable cities or regions in which they operate to make appropriate decisions on the best actions to adopt and track changes, whilst systematically documenting their performance at the input/output levels and connect these directly to the outcome and impact levels.



CPMF process of monitoring city performance

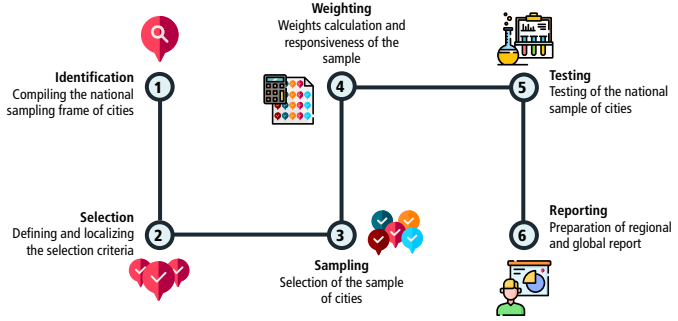
Spatial Data Integration Models

Earth Observation and Geospatial Information technologies are no longer an optional consideration but a must in every data management strategy at all levels. UN-Habitat considers such technologies as a central component of all efforts to track urbanization and inform data-driven decisions and in turn promotes their integration into the core architecture of the urban observatory data management system. For urban observatories, these technologies have opened a new era of open source data – ranging from satellite imagery to huge repository of volunteered geospatial data, which can be quickly and easily analyzed at the city level at minimal cost. Equally, the ability of these technologies to convert multi-indicator data into visual products allows policy makers not only to understand trends without having to dive into long reports and complex numbers but also helps them identify deprivations and needs-distribution, and in turn to focus action when developing urban policies. Detailed guidelines and executable tools are continuously being developed by UN-Habitat and partners, and trainings are regularly undertaken to introduce the emerging tools to data producers and generators at the city and national levels.

Using GIS to obtain useful data for planners and decision makers

The National Sample of Cities

This is a carefully constructed approach which helps countries with a large number of cities to define a sample of nationally representative cities for which data can be continuously produced and aggregated in a systematic and scientific manner. The sample of cities is drawn using sound statistical and scientific methodologies based on a number of relevant city-specific criteria/characteristics that capture the specific contexts of countries, ensuring that the sample is consistent, and representative of a given country's territory, geography, size, history, etc. The NSC may be used by countries to select cities or urban areas in which to set up of urban observatories over time as part of the monitoring and reporting process.



How to construct a National Sample of Cities

Railway, Bangladesh © Peter Walters / UN-Habitat.

6. How we can help

UN-Habitat provides systematic guidance on setting up of urban observatories to many countries, which today constitutes the Global Urban Observatory Network (GUO-Net) – a network of local, national and regional urban observatories. Among other things, GUO-Net offers a platform for best practice sharing, peer to peer learning and collaboration, and a framework for continuous capacity development and direct support on diverse aspects of urban monitoring from UN-Habitat. The critical mass of urban observatories under GUO-Net equally constitutes a very important asset for local data production and data driven decision making, while also supporting the monitoring and reporting of the international agendas such as the NUA and the SDGs.

UN-Habitat provides technical assistance in the development of new observatories at the national or local level. Such support starts in the early planning stages and includes capacity building, sharing of best practices and key knowledge management tools and technical assistance for the inception and organizational development phases of the observatory, as well as indicator framework development, capacity building for data collection, management and analysis.

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