

2nd World Social Science Fellows seminar on Sustainable Urbanization:
Transformations to Sustainability in Urban Contexts
Concept note

This century will be the century of the city. Virtually all of the world's population growth is projected to occur in cities. The total urban population is expected to rise to 5 billion by 2030, 80 per cent of which will concentrate in Asia, Africa and Latin America. A central feature of rapid growing cities is their physical expansion, a discontinuous, scattered, and low-density process that is fundamentally unsustainable. The results from a UN-HABITAT study on 120 cities (2013) show that urban land coverage grew on average at more than twice the pace of population, with however significant regional contrasts. Whereas more than 50% of all new building construction worldwide is taking place in Asia, and 300 million Chinese are projected to move into urban centres in the coming decades, new buildings make less than 1 % of the total stock in the UK, and it is estimated that at least 75% of homes that will exist in 2050 there are already built. As cities expand, so are the slums at their outskirts: 33% of the world's urban population now lives in slums, a proportion that reaches 62% in Sub-Saharan Africa, according to the last Millennium Development Goals Report, and which continues to grow globally, in absolute terms. Urban children are particularly affected by these developments, as demonstrated by the UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2012.

Urban areas are the scene of highly complex socio-environmental developments and critical sites of the necessary transformations to sustainability. They are the locus of economic expansion and employment opportunities; provider of resources and knowledge useful to improve social wellbeing and reduce poverty; prime mover of cultural and social changes. However and at the same time, they concentrate poverty, social inequality, and environmental degradation. The announced urban growth, hope of millions of people in low and middle income countries, may exacerbate suffering in a majority of new urbanities and aggravate pressures on social problems, biodiversity, ecosystem services, climate change and local environmental problems.

The high degree of interconnectedness between local, regional and global processes gives a further dimension of complexity that needs to be appreciated and grasped by research. Global and regional processes affect local wellbeing, and shape the construction, form, and function of cities. Given the long life span of the build environment (over 70 years), the quality of future urban growth depends largely on decisions taken now (with respect to the governance, planning, organization, structure, function, and inclusiveness of cities).

We have a solid but fragmented basis for understanding the drivers of social transformations to sustainability and the social-environmental interactions at stake in urban areas. In order to address these complex dynamics, we urgently need to rearticulate the various disciplinary contributions into interdisciplinary perspectives, spanning across the social, economic, political, cultural, physical and environmental dimensions of transformations in urban contexts. And we need to formulate the new, cross-cutting research agendas that should lead future research agenda on transformations to sustainability in urban contexts.

The 2nd World Social Science Fellows seminar on Sustainable Urbanization wishes to contribute to the development of innovative research agendas emphasizing multidimensional and interdisciplinary approaches. The seminar will partially take place in parallel to the Urbanization and Global Environmental Change project (UGEC) international conference on Urban Transitions and Transformations in Taipei, Taiwan. UGEC's conference seeks to synthesize current knowledge of the bidirectional interactions between urbanization and global environmental change and to identify transformative pathways in current and future urbanization. Some sessions of that conference will be part of the WSS Fellows seminar programme, providing the Fellows access to cutting-edge research on relevant dimensions of sustainable urbanization and to a diverse pool of international researchers.

The purpose of the seminar is to produce one or more articles on new paths for research on transformations to sustainability in urban contexts. The first two days of the seminar will initiate the discussion on the construction of multidimensional approaches for urban sustainability. For the next few days, the Fellows will continue their joint work and also attend a few selected sessions from the UGEC conference, which should serve as direct input to their joint reflection. The last day of the seminar will be dedicated to finalize the work on the article(s) and identify the next steps leading to publication.