JPI Urban Europe in 2024?

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Given the ambitious and formidable work the JPI Urban Europe identifies in the coming years for European urban research and innovation, the solution oriented approach may require us to think and act more as a knowledge infrastructure. Particularly since the challenge entailed in our commission is not only to support urban sustainable development, but to help coordinate remedies to the implementation gap in a fragmented European funding and policy landscape.

Among post-its and visions

The chair, vice-chairs, and MB recently had a visioning workshop. During the workshop – replete with litres of coffee and multi-coloured post-it notes – we were asked to articulate important characteristics and achievements of the initiative as seen from around the year 2024. Ten years ahead, what have we achieved?

Since the initiative strives for transparency towards a wide community of interests and actors, this text will outline some of my views and visions. It is not the official story either, as the whole material is not yet 'processed', we plan to do the same exercise on a broader scale in the initiative, and this text is similar to a personalised blog-setting after all.

Connect and learn in 2024?

Broadly speaking, in 2024, the JPI Urban Europe is a (or perhaps the) main hub for urban research and innovation in Europe. It gathers many systems and networks in policy, business, and research, to enable their interface and for actors to (seamlessly) make use of them to achieve the broader objective of urban sustainable development.

In other words, the JPI Urban Europe runs what may be called a knowledge infrastructure that facilitates the exchange between the broad and heterogeneous range of actors necessary for urban sustainable development.[1] It is an infrastructure the initiative con-

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[1] A *knowledge infrastructure* may be defined in the following way: 'Instead of thinking about knowledge as pure facts, theories, and ideas – mental things carried around in people's heads, or written down in textbooks – an infrastructure perspective views knowledge as an enduring, widely shared sociotechnical system. Here is a definition: *Knowledge infrastructures comprise robust networks of people, artifacts, and institutions that generate, share, and maintain specific knowledge about the human and natural world.*' Edwards (2010), p. 17. See also Star and Ruhleder's (1996) argument that underline the distinction between understanding 'infrastructure' as a hidden support and, the authors' preferred version, as a relationship of systems, the 'in-between' required for any human to lead an everyday life, and infrastructure is thus dependent on from what perspective and when various systems and components come together.

stantly care for, develop, and improve upon its user-friendliness. This infrastructure enables the JPI Urban Europe to offer a stable, long-term support for urban development – hence to facilitate creative and 'risky' urban development research, innovation, and implementation projects otherwise not plausibly realised.

By this, the JPI Urban Europe is perceived to be the natural first instance to consult on urban development matters. That is, the initiative is helpful for the diverse and wide range of actors that are involved in urban development. The particular 'service' is the ability to help articulate their needs and requirements among actors, who many times see each other as important to ally but difficult to get the message through to.

At the core of this is of course that the JPI Urban Europe enables actors not only to connect but to learn from each other. In practice, this means that the initiative is a hub to the strategic capacity for urban sustainable development in Europe and serves as a global gateway for international arenas – and is thus able to impact policy on this level as well.

To challenge the current model of urbanisation

The vision is ambitious and perhaps a bit arrogant. But then again, this is part of all the JPIs' *raison d'être*: to align and coordinate with the active help of all actors concerned by the topic – in our case urban development. The vision, then, shows the need for such a loop, communication and – in effect – reference point for an epistemic community around urban development, research, and innovation.[2]

But why do we need to do this? And why think of it as an infrastructure?

Because urbanisation now more than ever requires a coordinated and concerted effort. During the last twenty years, urbanisation has been supportive to reduce poverty around the world. It has realised new income opportunities as well as made urban services more accessible and of a better quality. Urban areas now accounts for about 70 percent for world GDP. Around the world, and in in almost every country, cities and urban areas thus find themselves at the centre to define social, economic, and political relations. Hence, we are now in an urban age, where urbanisation is the overall global transformative force – 73 million new urbanites every year.

However, transformations can go hither and thither. How about harnessing it as an engine of sustainable development? Whereas urbanisation is now relatively well anchored as a platform for sustainable development in policy, it does not seem near enough to tackle e.g. climate change issues and, say, segregation issues in an effective manner. Particularly not as long as the 'unsustainable model of urbanisation' is kept. This current model is characterised by the UN-HABITAT as:

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[2] An *epistemic community* is a group that shares certain ideals, whether tacit or explicit, as to how knowledge is to be generated as well as an implicit ranking of types of knowledge claims and knowledge practices in terms of utility and robustness, particularly for outsiders of that particular epistemic community; cf. Haas (1992).

… [the] use of cheap fossil fuel, heavy dependence on private motor cars, endless urban peripheries that consume land, resources, and, in many cases, protected natural areas – largely steered by private, not public, interest; … forms of urban development that add to unequal wealth generation and spatial inequalities, creating divided cities, often characterized by the existence of gated communities and slum areas. Cities are finding it increasingly difficult to integrate refugees and migrants and to share the human, social, cultural and intellectual assets that cities offer, including their cultural heritage and built environment, resulting in a spatial fragmentation based on ethnicity, race, income or other social characteristics; … owing to widespread unemployment and underdevelopment and different forms of unstable and low-paid jobs and informal income-generating activities, which result in additional economic restrictions, unequal access to basic services and amenities and poor quality of life for many.[3]

Indeed, it is a long list of dysfunctional parts to the model. But these issues are made worse by an often deficient urban planning and management, and hence suboptimal design and functionality of institutions to support long-term and integrative urban sustainable management.[4]

Where to go in a fragmented landscape?

So, a further reason to tackle the challenge by building a long-term infrastructure is what Urban-Nexus participants called the 'the Super-wicked problem' and the resulting 'implementation gap'.[5] Simplified, the super-wicked problem is constituted by silo-effects in urban sustainable development policy and support. Somewhat surprisingly (for me at least, who recently toiled away in academic research) there is no real shortage of funds. Rather, the wicked problem is the fragmentation of these funds and support measures that counter-act each other. Thus the transition towards urban sustainable development is severely obstructed. The superlative is earned by the complication of relative change over time in the various challenges' make-up. Problems do not stay the same very long.

The JPI Urban Europe Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) shares and promotes the the general analysis and approach in warrant for an urban knowledge infrastructure: there is a need for a more continuous and robust backbone of dedicated urban development to connect research and innovation with practitioners (policy, business, civil society).[6] For this to work, European urban development require some kind of translator and hub to connect various systems and circuits already developing and sometimes in place. Comparable to the

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[3] UN (2014), p. 15

[4] Ibid., p. 16

[5] Urban-Nexus (2014)

[6] JPI Urban Europe Scientific Advisory Board (SAB), *Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda: Position Paper*, unpublished, Summer 2014.

basic principle of the European Research Area (ERA), but amended and integrated with innovation and practitioner organisations and actors. I might be wrong, but to my knowledge, we do not have such an infrastructure in Europe yet.

So, when it comes to implementing 'the urbanisation engine', it requires creative and innovative solutions, risk in explorative and co-creative experimental work in urban development which is not really foreseen or supported in the current EC funding framework Horizon 2020, since it almost does not talk of urban issues at all. In this, it is simply not enough to merely support research, we have to enable the connectivity of many kinds of actors all over Europe and even globally to maintain the engine.

And are we on the way?

The initiative already lines up two joint calls with 20 ongoing transnational project teams. It is about to launch an *ERA-NET Cofund on Smart Cities and Communities*. Furthermore, preparations on a fourth call is initiated to propose an *ERA-NET Cofund on Smart Urban Futures*. Furthermore, a fifth and sixth joint call with other themes and additional partners are currently discussed and prepared for. But although research and innovation funding is a great instrument to enable and help align both transnational project teams and national funding programmes – and thereby start to tackle the implementation gap – it is not enough to constitute an open dock or bay for the urban development capacity called for by the UN-HABITAT vision.

This is where the *Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda* (SRIA) is crucial. It will define and outline the backbone in terms of research and innovation needs, but also how to operationalize this programme. Hence, it supposed to work not only as a roadmap but also as a device to gather important actors to help the initiative to implement the vision above. Publication of the SRIA is planned for around September–October 2015, with a sneak pre-view around early 2015.

One kind of important actor to have on board is of course member states. The initiative is open for new members anytime! Since the initiative now gathers 14 countries and about 20 funding agencies in regular dialogue on issues such as joint calls, research programme management, and ways to communicate our findings with broader policy community – for instance, by events such as the high level event on Future Urban Challenges or the upcoming session at the OpenDays 2014.[7] But Europe is bigger and more diverse than the regional bias currently shown in the roster.

Another important kind of actor to ally are research and innovation organisations and institutes. To this end, the *Urban Europe Research Alliance* (UERA) is about to settle. A scientific share-your-interests and get-together workshop is planned for in October 2014. However, the alliance needs to grow to become one robust modality in the future infrastructure. If you feel enticed and called by it, join it, it is quite open!

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[7] See for High level event: < http://jpi-urbaneurope.eu/press-release-future-urban-challenges-call-for-renewed-and-integrated-policy-approaches/ >; and for OpenDays: < http://jpi-urbaneurope.eu/jpi-urban-europe-at-the-open-days/ >.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the JPI Urban Europe needs your engagement! Or at least your feedback. Yes, you, the person who reads this text. By reading it through to this point, you show you are in some way quite interested in urban development and research and innovation connected to it – and in the JPI Urban Europe. Hence you may find that interests converge to some degree. Only to some degree, that's all. Maybe not at all – and then we are all the more interested to hear why!

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