

## The URBIS Partnership

### Introduction:

Throughout the world, the unsustainable use of resources and demographic changes result in extensive pressures on existing environmental and social resources. Urban regions, which now house over half of the world's population<sup>1</sup>, may be the places where the consequences of such pressures are the most visible. However, these are also places where new innovations and solutions can be devised. Including the ecological, cultural, and social services and values urban areas provide society will change the view of cities as unsustainable<sup>2</sup>. Integrated planning efforts focusing on improving the health of urban ecosystems,<sup>3</sup> addressing the connections between rural and urban systems, and providing ecological and social services will help create sustainable conditions in these diverse, complex, and changing areas. The challenges urban regions will inevitably face, such as climate change, need to be addressed at a variety of different scales including outside municipal administrative boundaries<sup>4</sup>. Fostering systems education, communication, and ongoing discussions among scientists, urban planners, policy makers, and educators can help cities implement strategies that build social and environmental resilience. This effort will help countries meet internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

### Seeking Solutions through the URBIS Partnership:

As a global network of scientists, planners, governments, educators, and policy makers who discuss and share ideas, approaches, and suggestions, the URBIS Partnership strives to create more resilient and equitable urban regions. The URBIS Partnership is currently developing an international platform for cross-sectoral discussion and generation of public goods, which provides tools for urban planning at a variety of scales. Local governments participating in this network share their sustainable management experiences and document the process of linking science, education, and policy while using an ecosystem approach in urban planning<sup>5,6</sup>.

The URBIS Partnership is also proposing a designation process to recognize urban areas' efforts to engage in participatory and comprehensive social and ecological approaches in urban planning for sustainability. Through this process, sustainable management practices will be developed and then cataloged for sharing and dissemination as part of a global knowledge network.

Started in 2003, the development of the URBIS proposed designation is a work in progress<sup>7</sup>. The URBIS Partnership is currently inviting experts in fields including but not limited to urban ecology, environmental education, and participatory planning to develop the process. This will culminate in the establishment of a working group for the URBIS Partnership proposed designation with the Global Partnership of Cities and Biodiversity at the City Biodiversity Summit at Nagoya, Japan; the 10th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

<sup>1</sup> UN United Nations Population Fund 2009 report <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2009/en/ch6.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> UN University Institute of Advanced Studies, "Defining an Ecosystem Approach to Urban Management and Policy Development" available at: [http://www.ias.unu.edu/binaries/UNUIAS\\_UrbanReport1.pdf](http://www.ias.unu.edu/binaries/UNUIAS_UrbanReport1.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Definition of ecosystem: Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Article 2, available at: <http://www.cbd.int/convention/articles.shtml?a=cbd-02>

<sup>4</sup> "Solving the Puzzle: the Ecosystem Approach and Biosphere Reserves" adopted by the Conference of the Parties of the CBD, available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001197/119790eb.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The Introductory Notes from the Norway/UN Conference on the Ecosystem Approach for Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity

<sup>6</sup> Man and the Biosphere (MAB) and Seville Strategy, available at: <http://sovereignty.net/p/land/mab-sev.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Urban Biosphere and Society Partnership of Cities, editors: Christine Alfsen, Benjamin Lane, Melody Corry. Available at: <http://www.nyas.org/Publications/Annals/Detail.aspx?cid=98a460be-79fc-4310-95bd-55b83691b101>

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**Vision:** URBIS Partnership envisions:

Urban regions as sustainable social, cultural, and ecological systems contributing to equitable production, distribution, and consumption of resources.

**Mission:** URBIS Partnership seeks to contribute to an increased urban understanding, valuing, recognition, and reconnection of people and ecosystem in the urban landscape to:

1. Recognize the efforts of urban regions to engage in participatory, inclusive, and comprehensive social and ecological approaches in urban planning for sustainability.
2. Increase the resilience of urban social, cultural, and ecological systems in the face of future changes, uncertainties, and challenges
3. Improve equitable terms of access and management to resources
4. Promote adaptive governance at the appropriate scale while incorporating a diverse cohort of stakeholders

**Approach:** URBIS Partnership is proposing to accomplish this mission through collaborating on a designation process that cities can achieve through:

1. Platforms for local and international networks and communication among and between scientific, educational, planning, and governmental communities
2. A framework for designation to recognize cities who meet international standards
3. Knowledge sharing of sustainable practices and scenario building to assist cities to deliberately plan for resilience

**Value Proposition:** An investment in the URBIS partnership offers all stakeholders a unique high value proposition as this designation process would build a distinguished community of urban centers engaged in highly visible urban sustainability planning. URBIS Partnerships also provides an effective networking platform allowing access to tools, materials, and information sharing. Benefits from investing in the URBIS partnership would include:

1. Global recognition and international visibility for sustainable urban planning
2. Increased quality of life for residents and improved performance on environmental indicators
3. Enhanced global competitiveness and leadership in the green economy.
4. Comprehensive tools for adaptation to environmental changes.

### **Overview of the URBIS Partnership Proposed Designation Process:**

The URBIS Partnership proposes that cities work through a voluntary, participatory, site-driven and tiered designation approach. This process would help cities make common-sense, cost-effective, and science-based decisions to help guide equitable and sustainable urban social-ecological development.

Using a tiered approach will be beneficial for urban regions at all stages of the comprehensive planning process. This includes urban regions just starting a comprehensive planning process as well as those in the middle of an ongoing, stalled, or abandoned comprehensive planning process. Following this approach, would also be useful for urban regions that have completed a

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similar process on their own and would like guidance to refurbish, assess, and gain recognition for their plan.

Each tier would include a set of guidance documents tailor-made to each urban region which provide agreed upon tasks for insuring accomplishment of each tier and graduation to the next.

- Tier 1:** Inventory current activities, future plans and potential social, cultural and environmental concerns through a process like a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) Analysis.
- Tier 2:** Document current sustainable social and ecological urban practices and assess and prioritize areas of concern including practices and problem areas. Set overall vision and goals.
- Tier 3:** Develop comprehensive plans to address concerns and areas identified in Tiers 1 and 2 tailored to the urban regions goals. Identify financial, educational, and technical requirements and potential partners.
- Tier 4:** Implement plans utilizing available financial, educational and technical assistance.
- Tier 5:** Evaluate progress against the URBIS Partnership vision mission, values, as well as local goals and objectives. Start the iterative process of creating comprehensive urban plans. (Completion of Tier 5 implies launching multiple iterations of the cycle back to Tier 1)

### Proposed Steps towards Designation by an Urban Region:

- Step 1:** Decides to participate in the URBIS Partnership and work towards achieving URBIS designation (decision may be about designation, and can also be seen as a mode of inquiry)
- Step 2:** Obtains from URBIS tools and guidance (Tier 1- Tier 5 documentation and worksheets) in the correct language(s).
- Step 3:** Convenes participatory stakeholder meetings to complete Tier 1 (all sectors adequately represented).
- Step 4:** Upon completion of Tier 1, an urban area receives the designation “*URBIS Partnership Participating City*,” and becomes part of a growing network of URBIS Partnership Participating Cities involved in a peer to peer (city to city) review process.
- Step 5:** Makes decisions through participatory processes on how to proceed through Tier 2, makes use of the peer to peer review process as appropriate, and chooses a suite of available Tier 2 worksheets and other guidance documents to complete.
- Step 6:** Proceeds through Tiers 3 and 4, and when implementing a participatory, inclusive, and comprehensive social and ecological urban plan which has gone through final peer to peer review achieves the designation “*URBIS Partnership City of Distinction*.” As this point, the city is in Tier 5, has a leadership and reinvestment responsibility, and begins the iterative process.

### Main Concepts of the Proposed Designation:

- **Demand-driven by local and global challenges:** Cities choose whether or not to participate and are central in the process.
- **Uses a scale appropriate, ecosystem, and adaptive management approach:** The URBIS process is carried out within the context of a holistic ecosystem planning effort.
- **Customized by each urban system:** Social and ecological conditions unique to each city are considered throughout the URBIS process.

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- **Collaborative management and multi-disciplinary approach:** URBIS coordinates technical assistance, collaboration, and knowledge networking assistance from international, federal and local government programs, as well as the private sector.
- **Cost-effective:** URBIS targets program and technical resources to cities with the greatest potential for increasing sustainability.
- **Locally-led and implemented:** Through collaboration and networks, URBIS encourages stake-holder based, participatory processes and equitable engagement and decision making among all sectors.
- **Peer-reviewed, scientific, and local knowledge-based:** The URBIS planning process is based on well-established community based environmental planning efforts. Environmental protection measures are based on scientific principles and research from global partners. Opportunities to collaboratively develop new, innovative approaches are available.
- **Encourages innovation and experimentation:** This process allows cities to create innovative site based planning approaches.

*Please note:* The URBIS Partnership designation is a proposal and therefore is not yet an official program. It is currently under development with governmental and institutional partners. More information will be available soon.

This concept paper is the product of a collaborative effort involving concept team members, intuitions including Cornell University and the Stockholm Reliance Center, as well as other agencies and governments.

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