URBAN OBSERVATORIES:
A COMPARATIVE REVIEW

RESEARCH REPORT

JANUARY 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Connected Cities Lab is a centre of excellence designed to address the challenges that city leadership faces, and the information it needs, in an interconnected and increasingly urbanised planet.

The University of Melbourne's School of Design (MSD) is the graduate school of the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning. The Faculty actively seeks to extend linkages between education, research and practice in the built environment, and aims to inspire learning through interdisciplinary reflection, and its integration of research teaching and practice around the implications of all forms of urbanisation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Cities are increasingly recognised as critical to global challenges. They have been identified time and time again as key sites for addressing interconnected environmental, health social issues affecting our increasingly urbanised planet. Numerous global agreements and frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) and the New Urban Agenda (2016), call for recognition of this relationship between urban settlements and global processes. Many of them, like with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or the Paris Agreement on climate change, also call upon developing a better understanding of how these challenges pan out in cities, and vice-versa of how cities are mobilising to tackle them. Data, and the information arising from it, has certainly arisen as an increasingly critical component of the way we think of, experience and ultimately manage, cities. We generate more urban data than ever before, through a variety of formal and informal knowledge mobilization channels, but this is not always accessible or collated into formats that make it possible to use. Urban governance, from this point of view, is steeped deeply in, and many argue increasingly dependent on, flows of data, information and the knowledge derived from them. From this point of view, understanding how the development, production and mobilisation of these urban insights shapes urban governance is a pressing agenda for those seeking to manage cities the world over.

'Urban observatories' have thus emerged as organisations capable of supporting knowledge translation between research and decision-making. In a microcosm, they represent an important experiment in informed urban governance. Yet they also present us with a vast varieties of ways, institutional set ups and logics upon which this bridge can be built. This report presents a comparative study of 32 of these urban observatories, including a series of institutions with what we call 'observatory-like' functions not just explicitly named 'observatories', drawing examples from both the Global North and South. The report's goal is to represent how these institutions operate, and prompt learnings from these comparisons that are explicitly international. Mixing document reviews with interviews and collaborative workshopping, observatories were examined for characteristics such as level of operation, type of host institution or funders, or the types of outputs emerging from these observatories.

DEFINING THE URBAN OBSERVATORY

Based on a scholarly and practice literature review and building on the definition set by the Data and Analytics Unit of the United Nations Human Settlement Program (UN-Habitat), as well as our experience analysing these institutions, we define urban observatories as boundary spanning institutions with an explicit monitoring role focused on one or more urban settlements. Observatories are expected to perform five key functions:

- data and information gathering;
- research and knowledge production;
- policy development;
- capacity development;
- and facilitate dialogue. and collectively advocate for urban priorities across a range of global agendas.

INTERNATIONAL EVIDENCE: GOVERNANCE

Visions

Upon reviewing the observatories' officially stated visions, four non-exclusive types of commonplace aspirations emerged:

- to collect and produce urban knowledge about a defined area;
- to mobilize urban knowledge to shape urban governance, decision-making and development;
- to network urban knowledge and drive knowledge exchange; and
- to offer a platform for dialogue about urban challenges between different stakeholders.
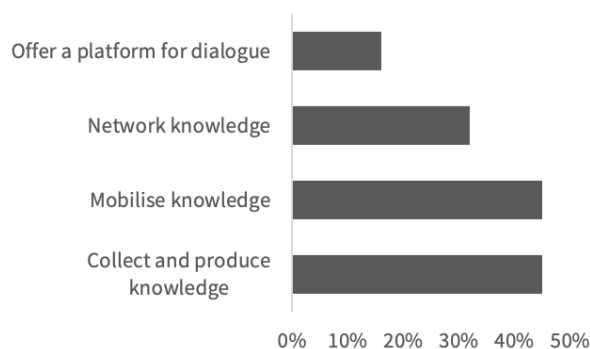
Scale: at what level are observatories placed?

The observatories analysed target several levels of operation observatories, hinting at a varied geography when it comes to their 'placement' across scales of urban governance.

Scale of observatory operation (N=32)

Governance structures

The governance structures of the observatories were determined by systematising the comparison of governance in relation to the hosting institution housing the operations of the observatory; the formalised institutional partners that operate in relation to the observatories; and the original funding source that led to the observatories' establishment.

Hosting Arrangements (N=32)

Funding the operations

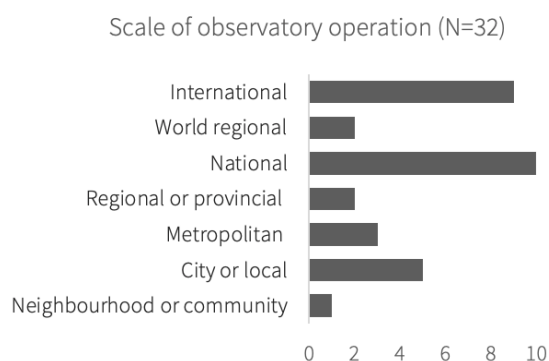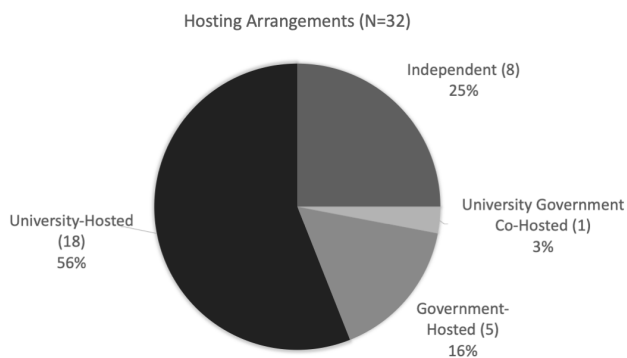The diverse funding structures behind the observatories yield variant operations. Observatories are typically funded by one or a combination of funding institution types, including government, university, philanthropy, and private institutions.

The funding itself ranges from flexible to inflexible and depends on the funding body. Whereas flexible funding has minimal conditions, allowing the observatories mostly to decide how to allocate it, inflexible funding carries specific conditions for how the funding can be spent and is typically project-based.

INTERNATIONAL EVIDENCE: OUTPUTS

Output types and targets

Like their governance structures, observatories vary in the outputs they produce. Typically, they generate multiple output types, with 84% of the case studies doing so. A majority of observatories cite researchers and practitioners as intended targets and thus produce research reports to inform future research and practice, with 65% of the cases studied producing reports that are publicly available on their websites. Research reports are the most commonly produced output. Of the observatories examined, 16% serve in some educational role, offering either or both Masters and PhD programs. Observatories with this function all produce academic publications and actively seek to network urban knowledge and drive knowledge exchange. An additional 13% of the observatories offer advisory and consulting services. Open access to observatory outputs emerged as another key trend across observatories, with 84% of them making their outputs publicly available. This demonstrates a commitment to observatories' function of distributing the information they gathered. At least 35% also produce outputs in multiple languages, thus further easing accessibility.

Thematic content

Numerous, non-exclusive themes manifested when analysing the content of the observatories' research. Most observatories addressed multiple themes.

Output Themes
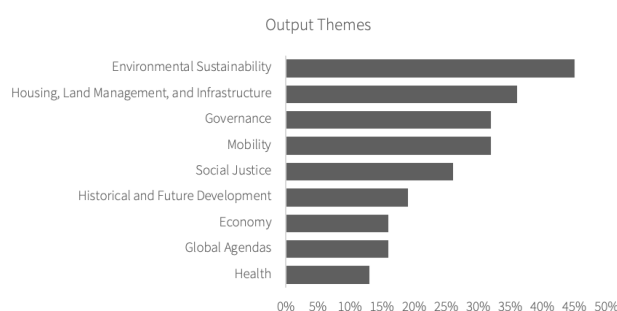
URBAN OBSERVATORIES AND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

In order to better understand how the various observatory features, functions, and outputs manifested in real-time, we contextualise our findings from the third stage of research against the COVID-19 crisis. COVID-19 has brought to the fore the strengths of observatories in a time of crisis, including their ready access to pre-existing data and analytical expertise; capacity-filling and strategic support roles for governments; and quick dissemination of information and outputs relevant to the crisis. Their positioning also enabled them to produce specific responses attuned to the needs of the localities in which they operate by, for example, connecting local and global networks of information; leveraging pre-existing relationships and

capacity-building activities to support communities in responding to COVID-19; and playing an advocacy role, bringing the voices of typically marginalised groups to the fore of city-level decision-making.

Observatories also faced challenges during the pandemic, including those related to deploying new research methods, particularly with regards to working remotely. Using new technologies and existing technologies in new ways enabled new methods, tools, and forms of engagement, but also introduced ethical dilemmas around the intrusiveness of sourcing data while communities dealt with the many COVID-related stresses as well as with the creeping expansion of digital surveillance at a time when the pandemic has given governments essentially free license to control populations and rapidly acclimate them to a "new normal."

CONCLUSIONS

With our comparative review, we seek to offer an intimate snapshot of 'urban observatories,' which have been developed to mobilise the various kinds of knowledge that exist in and about cities. The report demonstrates how observatories serve as intermediaries – between research and decision-making, but also between communities and decision-makers. Our study highlights the need to account for observatories' role in urban governance, particularly with regards to their advocacy and capacity building functions. We also underline the significance of observatories' trust-based relationships with stakeholders, including decision-makers, individuals and communities. Through these relationships and the knowledge produced by them, observatories bring complex urban realities into the evidence base used by decision-makers. Another report finding is the role observatories play in providing strong and continuous data that supplement state data , or in some cases, are the only sources of data in places where state capacity is weak. And finally, we discuss the increasing centrality of knowledge networking in urban governance, both within and between cities, to encourage shared learning and to make knowledge

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