



# Mistra Urban Futures Impact Analysis Report (Preliminary Findings)

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## Impact Analysis – Preliminary Findings

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# 1 Introduction

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Mistra Urban Futures is an organisation dedicated to making cities around the world equitable and sustainable in recognition that more and more people are moving to urban areas. The organisation's approach to greening cities is rooted in co-production methods and working holistically with local stakeholders and citizens. This impact analysis focuses on identifying the

"[Mistra Urban Futures was] quite predictive of what we are discovering now across the world"  
**Interview 01**

nature and pathways to impact from the Centre as perceived by stakeholders in international organisations, local, regional and national governments, primarily related to SDGs.

This report presents findings from qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with selected interview participants, representing international organisations, local, regional and national governments with an interest in urban sustainable development.

Questions for these interviews were designed to gain insight into the experiences of these stakeholders and the pathways to impact and benefits developed from Mistra Urban Futures' work. This includes foreseen future impact, as well as missed opportunities, as perceived by these stakeholders.

## 2 Methods

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Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with seven representatives from international organisations, local, regional and national governments with an interest in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and urban sustainable development more generally. Data collection with these sector stakeholders external to the Mistra Urban Futures organisation took place in 2019.

### 2.1 Interview Participants

The list of external stakeholder organisations represented in the interviews is presented below.

No.	Organisation	Gender
01	UN-Habitat	Male
02	WWF One Planet Challenge	Female
03	University of Pennsylvania	Female
04	New School	Male
05	UN-Habitat	Male
06	University of Bristol	Female
07	Cities Alliance	Male

### 2.2 Analysis

Interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed by staff of the Institute for Methods Innovation (IMI). The transcripts were analysed to identify relevant excerpts that could shed light on the nature and pathways of impact developed or under-developed by the Mistra Urban Futures research centre and wider organisation. Based on this analysis, theory of change diagrams were created, highlighting the process to impact, as outlined by interview participants (see Section 4).

“[Mistra Urban Futures’] approach to co-production with institutions and developing countries is a very useful thing”  
**Interview 04**

## 3 Results

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In this chapter, results are presented, with supporting quotations directly extracted from the qualitative interviews with sustainable development sector stakeholders working outside the Mistra Urban Futures organisation.

### **Motivations for engagement with the Mistra Urban Futures project**

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Interview participants felt that Mistra Urban Futures offered a pathway to scaling up work in urban sustainable development.

*“[W]e looked at the Mistra Urban Futures as a good, potentially very good engine for propagating and expanding the work on sustainable urban development, particularly in developing countries.”*

**Interview 05**

Gaining collaborative support and validation was also an important factor driving interest amongst external stakeholders in engaging with Mistra Urban Futures.

*“I think in the end it turned into an incredibly important and valuable collaboration and I would say it was [...] very significant for us for a number of different reasons. [...] It validated what we were already doing and we felt we were able to scale, and it reflected some of the ideas of co-production and the partnerships. So these were things that we were already doing.”*

**Interview 06**

The extract above exemplifies a view of Mistra Urban Futures as comprising a large, well-connected effort that could reinforce existing like-minded approaches to sustainable development, especially approaches rooted in co-production practices.

### **How has the Mistra Urban Futures developed impact with external sustainable development stakeholder organisations?**

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The external stakeholder interviews indicate that Mistra Urban Futures' non-academic impacts were predominantly indirect in nature. However, one of the most direct types of impact identified by external stakeholders was learning about the issues pertaining to SDGs from the research outputs associated with Mistra Urban Futures.

*“[Mistra Urban Futures] has contributed to my understanding of the opportunities and challenges of implementing the development agenda [in] particular the SDGs.”*

**Interview 03**

Mistra Urban Futures affected the work of academics and organisations through direct engagement or publication of material, specifically contributing to the sector by clarifying the common barriers, opportunities and challenges of sustainable development in urban contexts.

*“[W]e had representatives invited and had a discussion reflecting on what can be learned from barriers and opportunities for Sustainable Urban Development”*

**Interview 02**

One of the key indirect ways that Mistra Urban Futures has had an impact was by joining with others working on similar issues to influence policy agendas, as well as enhancing the visibility urban dimensions of sustainable development.

*“[I]n part with Mistra [Urban Futures]’s help in getting this urban goal we now have a mandate which is much more visible on the kind of global development stage [...] So, I would say, the work we’ve done with Mistra [Urban Futures] and others has really ramped up the visibility of our agenda.”*

**Interview 01**

The project “helped to add voice to a broad coalition of players” at a global level and mobilised resources locally (e.g. Cape Town and Kisumu).

*“So, at the global level, [Mistra Urban Futures] has helped to add voice to a broad coalition of players, and at the local level, at least on the cities that I’ve seen: Cape Town, Kisumu and so on, it had made an impact with the resource that was mobilised.”*

**Interview 05**

The emphasis on co-production within Mistra Urban Futures was also highlighted as a positive in terms of facilitating the organisation’s impact.

*“[...] I definitely like the idea of co-production they are using when they are talking about their programmes. [...] that’s a significant contribution.”*

**Interview 04**

However, for some relevant stakeholders, the direct impact on their work is limited.

*“I don’t want to exaggerate that they have all kinds of wonderful consequences for what we are doing, because I don’t think that’s the case, so far.”*

**Interview 04**

This final quotation in this section highlights the lingering potential to develop greater impact from Mistra Urban Futures’ work.

## What do external stakeholder organisations see as beneficial outcomes from Mistra Urban Futures?

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Mistra Urban Futures supports sustainable development organisations and capacity building in the sector through “fresh ideas, innovation[,] how to do planning and design, how to research [and] how to ensure inclusion”.

*“[A]t the local level, institution building, supporting organisations to move in a more progressive direction and giving them fresh ideas, [for] innovation[,] how to do planning and design, how to research [and] how to ensure inclusion in their work. I would say that was the impact.”*

**Interview 05**

Through Mistra Urban Futures-supported workshops and meetings, stakeholders gained important insights and focus necessary to be more effective in their SDG-related work.

*“[T]here were a couple of meetings that were supported by Mistra [Urban] Futures which really determined in helping that advocacy group focused on what it needed to do in terms of the content of the SDG and ultimately did succeed in getting it.”*

**Interview 03**

Mistra Urban Futures’ work to develop and test SDG indicators was highlighted as offering a valuable contribution to other sector stakeholders’ work.

*“[T]he work on testing indicators that Mistra [Urban Futures] has done, testing the urban SDG indicators in [...] cities around the world. [...] This early feedback did actually help us in the campaign to retool some of what we were asking for.”*

**Interview 01**

The participants emphasised the usefulness of Mistra Urban Futures’ research, indicating that it provided early insights about “complications and challenges [...] we are discovering now across the world”. These upstream insights about shared challenges helped sustainable development organisations to be attentive to likely issues as they developed their work.

*“[C]o-production between academia, and policy makers and statisticians feed back into the advocacy that we were doing [...] in time to make some key changes. [T]he Mistra [Urban Futures] report showed a lot of these complications or challenges showed up very early in the studies and they were quite predictive of what we are discovering now across the world.”*

**Interview 01**

Indeed, this category of impact could be developed further in the future by facilitating sector organisations' analysis of how their planned interventions could be designed to mitigate these challenges from the outset.

Mistra Urban Futures further contributed to addressing the gap between national governments and cities by developing a robust evidence base about relevant issues and challenges.

*On whether Mistra [Urban Futures] managed to bridge the gap between national governments and cities: "Absolutely! Because you make your arguments based on evidence and the evidence has been produced by Mistra Urban Futures in these 8 cities and it is invaluable in sustaining that argument."*

**Interview 03**

The ongoing exchange of information across cities about common challenges and ways of addressing them was highlighted as very important.

Mistra Urban Futures' role in facilitating the use of co-creation and mutual learning approaches more generally was highlighted as valuable, not only for "researchers and instructors" but also "the public and private decision makers".

*"[T]he exchange of information that occurs between the cities is very important [...] to learn from each other, so it's not just people like me, who are researchers and instructors, it is the public and private decision makers[.]"*

**Interview 03**

Similarly, participants noted the added value that Mistra Urban Futures brought to global partnerships.

*"Mistra [Urban Futures], for me, enriched some of the global partnerships [...] this is really useful for other people [...]."*

**Interview 06**

A key contribution linked to Mistra Urban Futures was the strong emphasis on sustainable urban development through co-production.

*"I think that [Mistra Urban Futures'] approach to co-production with institutions and developing countries is a very useful thing. It's a significant contribution. And they're one of the few organisations that really talks about co-production."*

**Interview 04**

This suggests that co-production was recognised as a distinctive feature of Mistra Urban Futures' approach by some sector stakeholders.

## What type of people or organisations have benefited from Mistra Urban Futures and how?

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It was clear that the primary beneficiaries of Mistra Urban Futures have been academics, policymakers and professionals working in universities, government or municipalities on sustainable development topics. Participants noted that research results from Mistra Urban Futures have been disseminated through academic publications and research networks.

*“[A]s an academic I do research and publish so I integrated the information that has emerged from the activities that Mistra Urban Futures has done in the cities and of course absorbed my own thinking”*

**Interview 03**

However, Mistra Urban Futures was also valued for bridging the gap between academia and practical implementation through its co-production approach.

*“[A] lot of the work [Mistra Urban Futures is] doing in this co-production is really bridging a critical gap between traditional academia which often does some research for its own sake, which could not be easy to apply, and policymakers and implementers in the field[.]”*

**Interview 01**

The usefulness of the co-production model touted by the organisation was recognised by professionals working on sustainable development in the cities that were the focus for Mistra Urban Futures.

*“[Sustainable development-related professionals working in select cities] discovered that it would be very useful to follow the model that has been established by Urban Futures and [...] what's happening here is the incremental building up of knowledge about how to go about these things and I think that's really the value that we're seeing here.”*

**Interview 03**

The benefits of gaining knowledge about how to go about implementing a co-production approach was emphasised by participants.

Another benefit identified by external stakeholders was Mistra Urban Futures' success in bringing municipalities to a “bigger, [...] wider international frame” to realise their place on the “bigger global stage”.

*“I think the municipalities had benefited, because they've been brought to a bigger, a wider international frame than what they usually do. [S]ome of the direct benefits already get the local institutions realising they are in a bigger*

*global stage.”*

**Interview 04**

These benefits are attributed to Mistra Urban Futures' consistent focus on a selected set of cities and institutions, keeping up a constant relationship with local stakeholders.

*”[I]n Cape Town and Kisumu, I know that the universities, in different ways, have benefited a lot in their own, but because of the consistent focus on a few cities, universities, and constant relationship, I think that has been an inspiration and an enormous benefit for these.”*

**Interview 05**

This reference to a 'constant relationship' points to the value of long-term engagement to develop lasting impacts.

### **What factors have been most important in determining the kind of impact Mistra Urban Futures has had on the work of external sustainable development organisations?**

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In determining the kind of impact Mistra Urban Futures has developed, the organisation's 'bridging' function was highlighted. Specifically, Mistra Urban Futures was identified as (1) *bridging* knowledge and action, (2) the tensions between universality and contextuality and (3) and the gaps that often exist between sustainable development-related sectors and disciplines.

*“I'm going to say it's three types of bridging that I think are the most significant factors [in Mistra Urban Futures' impact...]. One it's bridging knowledge and action, two is sort of exploring the tensions [...] between universality and contextuality. [...]. And the third [...] is looking at ways to link sectors and disciplines. So, bringing together planners, designers, policy makers, academics, NGOs with the kind of typical sectorial ministries and departments in cities.”*

**Interview 01**

Impacts however are not always immediately visible and can hardly be attributed to single actions, as they are often “much more subtle”. Few participants therefore were able to provide direct answers about the impacts of Mistra Urban Futures' work in these retrospective interviews.

*“You can't just put your finger on it and say ‘because Mistra [Urban Futures] did this we can see that’. The impacts are not going to be [...] a perfect causal relationship, it is much more subtle.”*

**Interview 03**

This finding may stem in part from the integrated nature of Mistra Urban Futures' work, but may also indicate that more direct impact development activities should be developed to ensure that its work is getting to those who can use it to make a difference.

## **What kind of future impact, if any, do external stakeholders foresee from the project?**

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The work done by Mistra Urban Futures could be used locally for years to come, according to external stakeholders.

*"I really hope that we can have greater impact in places where urban expansion is most likely to occur the next 10, 15, 20 years and I hope the early Mistra [Urban Futures] work has given us some leverage to do that."*

### **Interview 01**

Multiplying the impact developed would require additional resources and mediators, specific for each region to directly facilitate uptake of Mistra Urban Futures' work.

*"I would say there would need to [be] some kind of duplication or multiplication of the impact [...] You would need people that are able to translate and, or mediate, between those international discussions and the discussions on the national level[.]"*

### **Interview 02**

Stakeholders identified potential for the work done on SDGs and indicators to translate into policy making, allowing cities to be more effective in delivering on SDG targets and minimising reporting burdens.

*"I hope that the work on Sustainable Development Goals and the exploration on the potential [...] indicators could [...] translate into policies that make it easier for cities to target that delivery on these goals and without bothering with extra reporting."*

### **Interview 02**

Part of the process of influencing policy involves changing perspectives within different organisations working on sustainable development. It was noted that Mistra Urban Futures is in a prime position to alter stereotypical notions held by developed world sustainable development organisations.

*"And it's not just changing policy makers in national and local governments in Africa, it's also development partners, and I would say that is a category that Mistra Urban Futures would be supremely well positioned to be changing that"*

*narrative.”*

**Interview 07**

However, Mistra Urban Futures is only one of many initiatives contributing to future urban development. It does not seem to have risen to the surface as a major player in the urban sustainable development landscape, according to the interview participants.

*“I don’t think Mistra [Urban Futures] is Big. Mistra [Urban Futures] is modest. It’s one in many universities and programmes that are trying to do things. Good things, but I wouldn’t exaggerate the impact.”*

**Interview 05**

It is still unclear if Mistra Urban Futures’ efforts will develop the intended sustainable impact on urban development, given the complex web of activities underway to address this global challenge.

*“[Mistra Urban Futures] is contributing, it is putting a block in a big wall, right? Putting a brick in a big wall. And a lot of people are putting bricks in. And hopefully the bricks wall stays together, and they don’t fall apart. But, who knows?”*

**Interview 04**

## **What missed opportunities for impact can external organisations identify?**

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External stakeholders indicated that Mistra Urban Futures could have collaborated more with other sustainable development organisations operating in the same geographical areas, for example, by reaching out for local support in some regions where other international organisations are working on similar topics.

*“Mistra Urban Futures had this research in habitat as well in countries where we [WWF] also exist. [...] I think we could have probably provided it more support locally in those regions where we both organizations have representatives[.]”*

**Interview 02**

Through a more assertive approach to develop sector engagement and communication, Mistra Urban Futures could have leveraged greater attention and impact, according to external stakeholders.

*“[Mistra Urban Futures is] going to have to be more active and a bit more aggressive with their communications and trying to define issues in a more controversial way. [...] They are talking already about green, talking about inclusive. I think these are all good things, but I think they have to talk about*

*them in a way it gets people's attention."*

**Interview 04**

This would have helped Mistra Urban Futures to better establish a long-term legacy with a "more significant [...] and a more lasting role" in urban sustainable development.

*"Can Mistra Urban Futures not do more? Can they, with the resources that were invested and with the expertise that was mobilised, could they have had a bigger role, a more significant role, and a more lasting role?"*

**Interview 06**

As impact takes a long time to fully develop, it is a challenge to keep going after the project ended and "keeping people engaged [...], supported and moving along the trajectory".

*"I think [the challenge] is the need to keep going. I think it is to build the capacity and keeping people engaged in this, supported and moving along the trajectory in which they're going. [...] It takes a long time to see change."*

**Interview 03**

The work done and impact developed could be replicated beyond the regions covered by Mistra Urban Futures. However, there would need to be specific plans and scaffolding to ensure that the resources and research methods developed by Mistra Urban Futures are visible to those who could use them to develop impact in different parts of the world.

*"I see publications circling around these cities, and you see them and it's very detailed and it's very intensive, with many researchers and so on, but you see: how is that relevant if their findings are irrelevant? How will that effort be replicated, that research methodology be replicated. [T]hat's what I've not seen[.]"*

**Interview 05**

Finally, there was a concern raised about the selection of cities as a focus in Mistra Urban Futures. Specifically, the focus on Cape Town was seen as questionable, because it may not be representative of the challenges many other African regions and urban areas are facing.

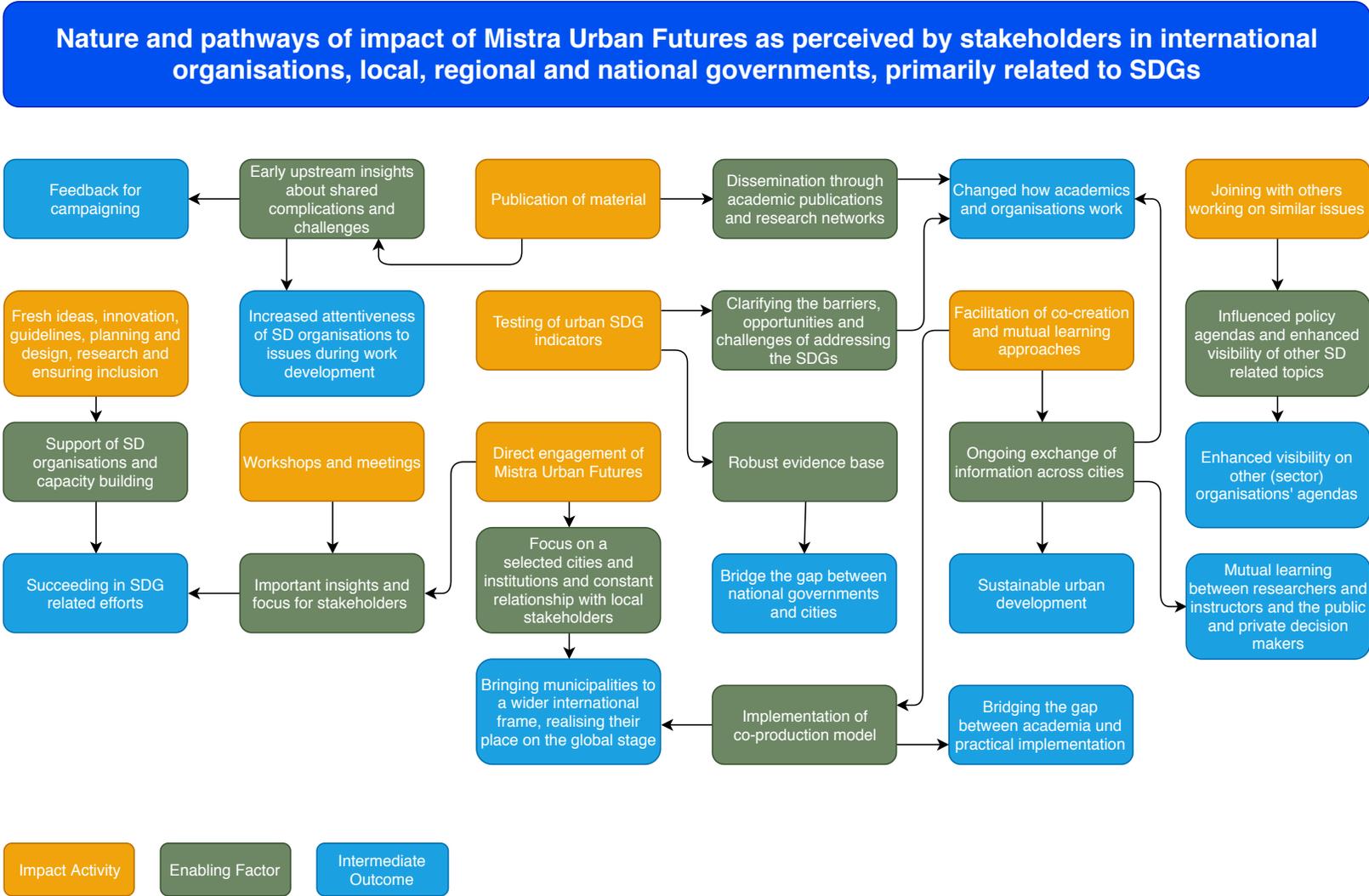
*"That's [Cape Town] not where the challenge is, and I think [...] too many Northern institutions are able to tick the co-creation box by going to a very, very narrow and elite market tip of South Africa as opposed to engaging in Adis or in the west of Africa or somewhere else."*

**Interview 07**

## 4 Theory of Change diagrams showing pathways to impact

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Figure 1: Theory of change diagram showing the pathway of activities towards developing outcomes/impacts



Note 1: 'SD' refers to 'sustainable development'. 'SDGs' are sustainable development goals.

## Potential future impact, missed opportunities and challenges

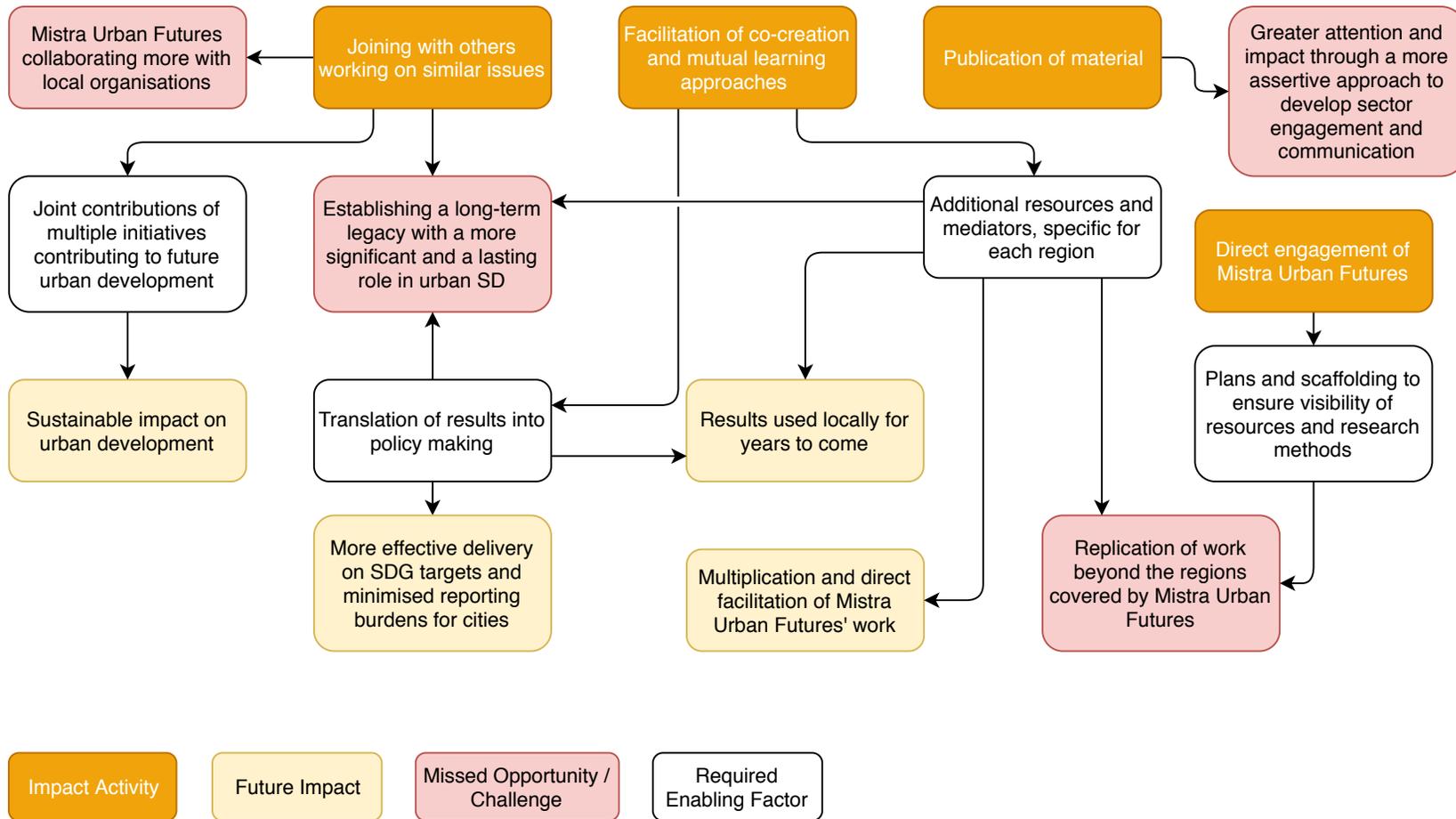


Figure 2: Theory of change diagram showing the potential future impacts resulting from impact activities. Missed opportunities and challenges are shown as potential impacts, which were not fully developed based on the perspectives of the interviewed external stakeholders. The required enabling factors show the steps that may be needed to develop potential future impacts or the factors that would be required to address missed opportunities.

## 5 Conclusion

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This impact analysis was designed to identify pathways to impact for the Mistra Urban Futures organisation that have been developed and under-developed. The findings indicate that the organisation has succeeded in gaining some traction with networking and building relationships with different sector stakeholders. It has helped develop a “collective voice” about how to go about achieving SDGs. However, particularly due to the retrospective nature of this impact analysis, it is difficult to separate positive outcomes directly attributed to Mistra Urban Futures’ work. Clearly, the organisation is working in an increasingly crowded space, with key positive outcomes stemming from combined efforts by a range of sustainable development-oriented organisations that share the same goals.

“What’s happening here is the incremental building up of knowledge [...] that’s really the value that we’re seeing here”  
**Interview 03**

From external stakeholders’ perspectives, Mistra Urban Futures has made a key contribution at the level of research production. It has developed knowledge that highlighted important challenges to urban sustainable development for other organisations working in the sector. However, external stakeholders raised questions about the reach and impact of these important research outputs, indicating that they had not become widely known in the sector. This indicates the need for an effort to develop impact from the existing research that Mistra Urban Futures has generated.

Mistra Urban Futures also highlighted ways of working that other sector organisations found inspiring, especially in the form of co-production and joint working connecting policy, academic research and professionals working on relevant issues in cities. Mistra Urban Futures helped to join up efforts by national and regional government with work at the city level, as well as linking those working within one city level context with others elsewhere around the world. External stakeholders noted the value of having academic research connected with policymakers and professionals working “in the field” from this project. Building bridges is especially crucial given the different levels that Mistra Urban Futures was linking up normally tend to stay in their separate domain, thus missing out on important opportunities to share knowledge. Mistra Urban Futures’ efforts to bring civil society, academia and government (at different levels) together was identified as a key strength of the organisation’s work.

“I really hope that we can have greater impact in places where urban expansion is most likely to occur the next 10,15, 20 years”  
**Interview 01**

In sum, a concerted effort to enable impact from the work that Mistra Urban Futures has already completed is still needed, from the perspective of external stakeholders. Understanding specific improvements related to policy and the overall wellbeing of citizens inside the cities

Mistra Urban Futures has worked with will require deeper analysis and may not be feasible to accurately assess retrospectively.