

Co-producing knowledge on urban sustainability through local government-university interactions: A case study of Mistra Urban Futures in Cape Town

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Background

The City of Cape Town and the African Centre for Cities (ACC) at the University of Cape Town have established a formal partnership to collaboratively improve knowledge and enhance well-being in the city. The two institutions are participating in the international research programme Mistra Urban Futures (MUF) which seeks to conduct in-depth local research on urban sustainability governance and policy and compare findings across five different cities.

Cape Town has both a growing economy and a diverse but highly unequal society, and its urban form continues to contribute to inequality and unsustainability. Cape Town's carbon footprint is relatively high, and – along with the rest of South Africa – it suffers from energy insecurity. Ensuring universal access to basic services remains a challenge. This combination of factors provides the opportunity for the city to adapt to change, while also subjecting it to vulnerabilities. The City of Cape Town has introduced a number of policies which seek to create a more socially, ecologically and economically sustainable and resilient city, and the ACC has engaged with the City through various projects to encourage debate and share knowledge on this and other topics.

Goals and challenges

The goal of MUF is to develop an improved understanding of the process of sustainable urban governance by practitioners, policy-makers and researchers alike through learning from experience and interaction. The MUF in Cape Town builds on lessons learned from previous interactions and is aimed at expanding and deepening engagement between City officials, political leaders and UCT researchers. City officials recognise the complexity of sustainability challenges, but are often caught up in the day to day of service delivery in a context of significant back-logs and informality, and are often unable to take the time to consider and incorporate relevant academic knowledge in their work. Similarly, academics and researchers have recognised the need to ensure that their work is relevant and responsive to the local context and can fill key knowledge gaps in local government.

Both the City and the ACC recognize the need to work together to help officials to develop more substantiated policy and frameworks for decision-making as well as to help researchers engage in more useful, locally-relevant and applicable knowledge production. One of the key challenges is how knowledge can be produced that bridges the gap between policy and practice, but importantly, it is not just the research that must be co-produced. To make this programme truly integrated, decision-making, administration, funding arrangements, governance structures, etc. are conducted through an equal partnership between the City and the ACC.

Specific Projects

In each of the five cities, two aspects of the MUF programme are being implemented: the International Pilot Project (IPP), and the Local Interaction Platform (LIP).

The IPP seeks to gain insights into the ways in which different local governments and universities around the world deal with the challenges of urban sustainability. Baseline information is currently being collected in Cape Town, as well as in each of the other 4 cities participating in the programme (Gothenburg in Sweden, Manchester in the UK, Kisumu in Kenya and Shanghai in China), to understand the current context. This includes the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data on issues relating to energy, climate, spatial form and

economic value, as a basis for generating insights into the processes of knowledge generation and policy formation.

Each city is simultaneously undertaking a local project in which the issues of knowledge co-production and urban sustainability will be addressed at the local level. In Cape Town, this interaction is called the MUF Knowledge Transfer Project. As a key part of this project, four researchers from the ACC have been embedded in the City of Cape Town to undertake research to support and develop policy, while simultaneously working towards their PhDs. Each of the researchers is collaborating with a City official working in the relevant policy area. The following areas of policy development and research are currently being undertaken:

- **Climate Change Policy:** Working to understand how climate change challenges authorities and policymakers to think about and do urban development differently and assessing the need and opportunities for fiscal and legislative reform in light of climate change.
- **Green Economy:** Development of a green economy concept for the City, and an increased understanding of green economy concepts such as risk, cost-benefit, green growth and socio-ecological innovation as these apply to the City and a broad range of local stakeholder.
- **Space Economy:** Development of a knowledge platform of the City's space economy as currently articulated through its Economic Areas Management Plan project. The knowledge platform will assist in the future development of key policies and strategies for densification and spatial development.
- **Energy Governance:** Development of energy governance policy with the objective of embedding principles of fairness and equality of access within the City's energy policy whilst promoting a sustainable, secure and clean energy supply for the City.

Additionally, at a later stage in the programme, City officials will be given the opportunity to work with various UCT academics to write up their policy work as academic papers for publication. This component is aimed at capturing the embodied knowledge of the City of Cape Town and translating it into the academic environment.

Conclusion

The key outcome at this stage is an improved understanding of the processes of institutional change, policy formulation, and knowledge co-production in the context of urban development and sustainability. Embedding researchers in local government and enabling officials to spend time in a research and learning institution can make a significant contribution to generating more useful knowledge outcomes and providing better public services. The knowledge co-production process remains an experiment, and important questions remain in terms of balancing interests, politics, and values. While there are lessons to be learned across contexts, there is no single model which will fit every case.

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