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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

THE USE OF URBAN OBSERVATORIES AS A TOOL FOR LOCALIZING URBAN AND SOCIAL POLICY

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Note: The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of ESCWA.

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Introduction

National Urban Observatories (NUOs) are governmental agencies, research centres or educational institutions designed to develop monitoring tools and build relevant information for better urban policymaking at the national level. A Local Urban Observatory (LUO) for a city or town is designed to be the focal point for urban policy development and planning, where collaboration among policymakers, technical experts and representatives of partner groups is fostered. Networks of LUOs can be facilitated by NUOs. The Global Urban Observatory (GUO) Programme set up by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UN-HABITAT) focuses on how to build the capacity of both national and local urban observatories.[1]

Many types of urban observatories and indicator systems for guiding and better evaluating the effects of urban development are now in place.[2] There are a vast range of urban indicator initiatives in research and policy-led contexts – which have different origins and are often developed independently from each other – in the Arab region.[3] However, questions have been raised about their utility and use.[4] The main challenge of indicator-based approaches to urban development is to provide a clear understanding of the overall operational framework within which urban observatories can contribute to localizing processes of urban and social policies. This is possible through:

- An integrative model based upon functional links between the multiple components of urban observatories;

- The integration of social policy analysis into the key functions and activities of urban observatories;

- The effective integration of urban observatories into the urban development planning and policy processes.

Ultimately, there is a need to develop a methodological framework to effectively integrate urban and social policy in the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) region. This background paper will discuss the extent to which the use of the local urban observatory (as a tool), sustainable development (as a paradigm) and governance (as a mechanism) provide a useful integrative sustainable urbanization framework. This framework or model focuses on three main areas:

(a) How urban observatories can respond to the changing dynamics between the State and civil society, with regard to the provision of and demand for urban services, in a way that allows them to provide effective policy advice;

(b) Broad-based consultative processes that could assist Governments to implement (national and urban) structural and territorial reforms;

(c) The advisory role of urban observatories in policy formulation, against the background of processes of globalization and decentralization.

The main conceptual and modeling criteria to be discussed in this paper are based mostly upon the outcome of an ESCWA expert group meeting and the theoretical methodologies used in developing a social guide for urban observatories for the ESCWA region.[5]

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[1] More information is available at: http://ww2.unhabitat.org/programmes/guo.

[2] For a review of these urban observatory and indicator systems, see ESCWA. 2009. *Towards Equity in Urban Social Policies: Social Guide for Urban Observatories* (E/ESCWA/SDD/2009/1).

[3] In Lebanon, for example, these initiatives include Institut Français du Proche Orient (IFPO), Balamand University Urban Observatory (MAJAL), Tripoli Environment and Development Observatory (TEDO) and the urban observatory of Sin El-Fil.

[4] See Innes. *Knowledge and Public Policy: The Search for Meaningful Indicators.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers. He concluded from eight years of field research on the use of indicators in diverse policy contexts that: "decision use of data is rare".

[5] See ESCWA, 2009.

I. A NEW ROLE FOR URBAN OBSERVATORIES IN THE URBAN CENTURY

The twenty-first century is the urban century. Half of the world's population already lives in urban areas and by the middle of this century most regions of the developing world will be predominantly urban.[6] The Arab urban population currently accounts for over half of the total population and is likely to surpass 60 per cent by 2020.[7]

Cities are not only growing in number, they are also growing in influence.[8] There is a growing consensus among experts and decision makers that cities and metropolitan regions are becoming the focal points of economic and political power at the expense of nation States.[9] The role of nation States is being increasingly challenged and undermined from top by international organizations dealing with various issues that are relevant at the global level – like pollution, international security and trade – and from bottom by local decentralized authorities more suited and competent of answering local issues – like cultural specificities and citizen participation. Thus, cities are becoming the test bed for the adequacy of political institutions, for the performance of Government agencies, and for the effectiveness of urban governance.

This situation is paving the way to important opportunities for urban development.[10] Cities hold tremendous potential as engines of national growth and provide economic and social development, creating jobs and generating ideas through economies of scale and creative and innovative civic cultures. However, these opportunities are undermined by a number of such imposing challenges as growing inequality, urban violence and social exclusion.[11]

In the Arab region, urban growth and the accelerating drift to cities and towns is straining already-overstretched infrastructure and creating overcrowded, unhealthy and insecure living conditions in many cities.[12] The United Nations *Millennium Development Goals Report 2009* shows that, between 1990 and 2005, there was a fourfold increase in the number of people living in absolute poverty in Western Asia, and that the percentage of people in extreme poverty increased from 2 to 6 per cent during the same period. The report also stresses problems to meet other Millennium Development Goals (MDG) targets in Western Asia, including hunger, employment, health, and gender equality. This is where urban observatories could play a critical monitoring role in the ESCWA region, including in terms of its potential contribution to urban social policy. This is also a priority area in which ESCWA has been increasingly involved over the past decade.

In 1999, as part of the Global Urban Observatory Programme of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS), ESCWA established a partnership with UN-HABITAT and the Arab Towns Organization.[13] This partnership aimed at:

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[6] See United Nations Center for Human Settlements (UN-HABITAT). 2008. *State of the World's Cities 2008/2009 – Harmonious Cities*.

[7] See United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2009. *Arab Human Development Report 2009*.

[8] See World Bank. 2000. *Cities in transition: World Bank urban and local government strategy*.

[9] See Veltz. 1996; Le Galès, P. 1998. *Territorial Politics in Europe, A Zero-Sum Game? Urban Governance in Europe: How Does Globalization Matter?* European University Institute; Sassen, S. 2001. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton University Press; and Jouve, B. 2007. Urban societies and dominant political coalitions in the internationalization of cities. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*. 25(3): 374-390.

[10] See World Bank, 2000.

[11] See UNESCO. 2005. *International public debates: Urban Policies and the Right to the City*.

[12] See UNDP, 2009.

[13] See ESCWA. 2007a. *Enhancing Social Policy Analysis in Arab Urban Observatories*. Discussion Paper. Urban Indicators Expert Group Meeting.

(a) Promoting a larger diffusion of the LUO concept in the Arab region in order to support the formulation of sustainable urban strategies and to monitor the economic, social and environmental development of cities;

(b) Developing a tool at the local level that is able to monitor the achievement of the MDGs; and

(c) Enhancing the performance of municipal management.

During the Third World Urban Forum held in Vancouver, Canada, 19-23 June 2006, ESCWA organized and moderated a networking event on the role of ESCWA in Arab Urban Observatories, held in the presence of 60 international participants.[14] The event promoted the need to develop more – and more efficient – observatories in the region and the establishment of a network of Arab observatories. The immediate objectives were to address the gap between policymaking at city level and the relevance and usefulness of data collected through local and national urban observatories.[15] The ultimate goals of this initiative were: (a) to improve urban quality of life primarily by reducing unequal access to services and opportunities; (b) to develop appropriate urban development policies and strategies; and (c) to improve urban decision-making processes.

Building upon this past work, ESCWA has increasingly realized that the effectiveness of local urban observatories can be significantly enhanced through the effective integration of social policy analysis into urban observatory indicators, frameworks and research. In order to address this issue, the Social Development Division of ESCWA held an expert group meeting entitled Towards equity in urban social policies: the social policy guide for urban observatories, 20-21 November 2008. The main outcome of that meeting was the identification of complex (social and other) problems that need to be monitored by LUOs, with particular reference to the Arab region. The report of the meeting focused on the identification of clear methodologies for data gathering and analysis, as opposed to measures to operationalize and coordinate activities at the local level.[16]

It is now increasingly recognized that localizing social policy at the city level also requires: (a) the institutionalization of processes for local urban observatories; (b) the set-up of cooperation frameworks to harmonize the work of these local observatories in order to build significant databases at both urban and national levels; and (c) the monitoring of key social indicators. Ultimately, the effectiveness of urban observatories depends on their ability to make concrete contributions to urban policy formulation and implementation in a way that promotes sustainable urbanization.

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[14] Including two ministers from Bahrain and Tunisia and officials, mayors, representatives of national urban observatories from the Arab region, and the Global Urban Observatory of UN-HABITAT, in addition to representatives of international and Arab national and local organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector and the media.

[15] See ESCWA, 2007a.

[16] See ESCWA, 2009.

II. URBAN OBSERVATORIES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There are at least four key concepts related to the establishment and operation of urban observatories that should be further examined: (a) the role of Governments; (b) new urban challenges; (c) sustainable development; and (d) governance.

A. RETHINKING THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS

Nowadays, considering the role of Government in urban development clearly goes beyond the analysis of public policies of a nation State. The last decade has seen a proliferation of theoretical approaches which have sought to identify changing models of urban governance: the central-local relations of Government; the growing influence of urban regimes and urban coalitions; and metropolitan organization.

In essence, the concept of Government based upon the existence of society as a self-contained unity at the level of the nation State[17] is being increasingly challenged. The two main challenges are: (a) the rise of local community as a new territory for the administration of individual and collective existence; and (b) processes of globalization of economic relations. The twin corollaries of this rescaling process are, on the one hand, the resurgence of urban and metropolitan spaces of economic interaction and political governance, and, on the other hand, the enhanced significance of supranational and cross-border regulatory institutions.

In other words, the political power of the State-centred model of regulation and arbitration of social conflicts has been challenged in a number of areas. Among these are:[18]

- The lack of confidence in the capacity of the political realm to address both the problems of modern societies and the emergence of a civil society that claims greater say in the organization of power;[19]

- The fragmentation of policymaking systems caused by decentralizing reforms and federalist dynamic;[20]

- The emergence of such new issues as environmental protection, exclusion, integration and governance that can no longer be addressed by sector-based policies, but require integrated approaches and a quest for synergy between institutions with different logics of action, cultures and temporalities;[21]

- The consolidation of new areas of collective action, notably in urban regions where various forms of social movements have long challenged top down political integration.[22]

Arab States are undergoing a similar political evolution. The majority of these States failed to introduce democratic governance and institutions of representation that ensure inclusion, the equal distribution of wealth among various groups, and respect for cultural diversity. In such countries as Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan, several social or minority groups have been mobilized to press for either inclusion in or

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[17] See Foucault, M. 1991. Governmentality. In Burchell, G., Gordon, C. and Miller, P. (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead.

[18] See Jouve, 2008.

[19] See Keane, J. 1998. *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

[20] See Loughlin, J. (ed.) 2001. *Subnational Democracy in the European Union: Challenges and Opportunities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[21] See Duran, P. and Thoenig, J.C. 1996. L'Etat et la gestion publique territoriale. *Revue française de science politique*. 46 (4):580-623.

[22] See Hamel, P. Lustiger-Thaler, H. and Mayer, M. (eds.) 2000. *Urban Movements in a Globalizing World*. London, Routledge.

separation from nation states. This mobilization, associated to group struggles, has been destructive and destabilizing in most cases. However, according to UNDP,[23] these struggles that appear on the surface to stem from identity in fact often originate in skewed access to political access to political power or wealth, in a lack of channels for representative political participation, and in the suppression of cultural and linguistic diversity.

This situation implies: (a) a transformation of the relationships between public authorities and civil societies; (b) a transformation of the exercise of citizenship in political systems of contemporary Arab States in the post-colonial era; and (c) the emergence of metropolitan societies with growing claims for access to the political agenda. This is the broad context in which the use of urban observatories takes on its full meaning. In particular, there is an urgent need for a critical analysis of the new division of labour between State and urban regions; the identification of urban problems; the incorporation of the sustainable development paradigm into urban and social policies; and the examination of appropriate urban governance tools. This, in turn, leads to two critical related concepts: full citizenship and a rights-based approach.

The expression of citizenship can be categorized in the terms of the following categories of rights:[24]

(a) *Civic rights*: the capacity for the individuals composing civil society to organize themselves freely with regard to the authorities, notably the State;

(b) *Political rights*: the capacity for all the members of the same political community to attain the political realm, through full political representation, including access to the formulation and implementation of broad public policies;

(c) *Social rights*: the capacity for all the members of the same political community to have access to the formulation and implementation of public policies primarily aimed to promote human development and eradicate social and territorial inequalities.

The time has now come to shift gear from a needs-based approach to a rights-based approach. The United Nations Millennium Declaration stresses the importance of both development goals and human rights commitments in the global agenda for the current millennium.[25] Furthermore, cities nowadays are also places of learning, experimentation and struggle for the formal recognition of civic, political, social and cultural rights. Given the need to accelerate efforts to reduce poverty and exclusion, the commitment to translate these rights at the city level is thus critical.

As Western Asia, and the rest of the world, are becoming more and more urban,[26] poverty is also growing faster in urban areas, notably in growing slums. Effective action to tackle poverty in urban areas is, therefore, likely to have a considerable overall impact on the achievement of MDGs. Urbanization is taking place at an unprecedented magnitude and speed in the Arab region. In such contexts, urban problems – from housing shortages and the growth of slums to the urbanization of poverty and environmental degradation – are not to be considered only as an expression of scarcity or lack of financial resources, but also as an effect of economic growth, growing inequality and even a result of conflicting practices and power games within cities. This trend means that the scope of urban development is changing from a supposed needs or problem-solving approach to a broadly adaptive rights-based approach, which comes together with a profound change in the vision of sustainable urbanization.

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[23] See UNDP, 2009.

[24] See, for example, UNESCO, 2005.

[25] Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in resolution 55/2 of 8 September 2000.

[26] In 1970, 38 per cent of the Arab population was urban. By 2005, this figure had grown to 55 per cent, and is likely to surpass 60 per cent by 2020 (UNDP, 2009).

It is also evident from these new developments that effective mechanisms of supervision and monitoring of such urban issues and demands as urban observatories must be in place if social claims are to be met. In sum, urban observatories could serve two different purposes: (a) as political, social, economic and environmental reference in the formulation of policy options to ensure the proper distribution of the resources, services, goods and opportunities available in cities; and (b) as a database, not only for indicators, but of principles for rights to the city. However, two questions remain, namely: what kind of urban observatories are required to meet the needs of different types (or scales) of urban management; and how effective urban observatories can be in providing policy advice to local and national Governments.

B. RETHINKING THE CITY

In the ESCWA region and around the world, urban populations are spreading out beyond their old city limits, thereby rendering traditional municipal boundaries and, by extension, traditional governing structures and institutions, outdated. Conceptualizing the vast and often diffuse metropolitan territories and their spread across existing municipal boundaries is a difficult task. The absence of an internationally agreed-upon definition of urban or metropolitan areas tends to exacerbate these urban planning challenges.[27]

Governing metropolitan areas has therefore become much more complex than governing a lone municipality, since a decision taken in one city affects the whole region in which the city is located. There is thus an urgent need for balanced territorial development policies embedded in metropolitan planning and governance frameworks.[28] There are, however, at least two sets of challenges for the implementation of these policies, at both the institutional and social levels:

1. *Institutional level*

- The absence of institutional consensus about the delimitations of a clear urban territory for planning purposes, which tends to undermine the potential for joint action and interventions;

- Legal restrictions on the formulation and implementation of plans and programmes by municipalities, beyond their political and administrative jurisdictions.

2. *Social level*

- The challenges of equitable development among different groups in metropolitan areas point to the need for major improvements in the provision of such public services as health, decent shelter, education, water and sanitation;

- Urban poverty has been increasing, and in many cities of the ESCWA region, spreading outwards, making the peripheries of some metropolitan areas the poorest and most under-serviced settlements.

Many countries in the ESCWA region are engaged in State restructuring and dealing with such concepts as metropolitan governance and new scales of urban space administration.[29] New local Government units are proliferating at a rate that is little short of astonishing.[30] For example, despite weak institutional

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[27] See UN-HABITAT, 2008.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Metropolitanization, city-regionalism and urbanization are often used interchangeably. The point is not to distinguish between scales: the metropolitan or the municipal, the region or the local urbanization does not refer solely to very large cities. The scale of what we consider "urban" may vary from one place to the other (metropolitan or local).

[30] See Montgomery, M., Stren, R., Cohen, B. and Reed, H. (eds.) 2003. *Cities transformed: Demographic change and its implications in the developing world*. National Research Council.

boundaries, a new city-regional political space[31] is emerging in many parts of Lebanon in the form of union and federation of municipalities and regional councils, in a bottom-up process involving municipal coalition-building and promotion of strategies of economic development. This phenomenon is in part the result of growing agreement that effective urban management requires new formal structures of Government.

The forms in which Governments project themselves into these new urban spaces are rapidly changing. In the Arab region, local and regional institutions are taking on greater prominence, while national Governments are stepping back into indirect and regulatory roles. The process of decentralization is under way, whereby national Governments are devolving to lower-level Governments many political and administrative powers.

In all cases, a territorialized region is an important focus of mobilization. It is important to distinguish this analytical shift towards what Boudreau[32] calls political spaces. The concept of political space forces us to rethink the relationship between territory and politics.[33] For Magnusson,[34] the municipality is the most promising political space for resolving this tension because it intertwines State institutions with social movements. The ambiguous political power of the municipalities is that they do not see themselves as self-sufficient.

The decentralization of political space – or the unbundling of sovereignty, as formulated by Sassen[35] – emphasizes close relations among different political spaces and assigns agency powers to such political spaces without assuming that this agency is naturally derived from a well-bounded territory. New political spaces, in other words, are the result of power struggles for constituting coherence and common objectives. The effectiveness and power of this agency depends on how coherent this political space has become. Several authors seem to assume that the city-region now deserves consideration as a unit of analysis for governance and policy.[36]

The formulation of urban observatories should thus also consider political spaces, in addition to territorial sovereignty. This is not to say that nation States are obsolete and powerless. Governments provide the legal and regulatory structures within which social and economic interactions take place; they arrange for the delivery of public service; and they attempt to manage externalities and conflicts that inevitable accompany social interaction. Moreover, and surprisingly enough, the urbanization of political spaces leads to a stronger nation State; in many cases, metropolitan organization is used as a strategy to legitimize the actions of the nation States.

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[31] The term political space is commonly used to vaguely describe a well-bound territory in which politics unfold. It is sometimes further used to make claims in order to provide access to political participation for those who are not regarded as people with legitimate rights and claims on a political space of their own. (http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm ?SectionID=44&ItemID=4901).

[32] See Boudreau, J.A. 2007. Making new political spaces: mobilizing spatial imagineries, instrumentalizing spatial practices, and strategically using spatial tools. *Environment and Planning*. 39: 2593-2611.

[33] See Ferguson, Y. and Barry Jones, R.J. 2002. *Political Space: Frontiers of Change and Governance in a Globalizing World*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

[34] See Magnusson, W. 1996. *The Search for Political Space: Globalization, Social Movements and the Urban Political Experience*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

[35] See Sassen, S. 1996. *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization*. New York: Columbia University Press.

[36] See Montgomery et al, 2003.

Cities, as catalysts of socio-political mobilization, encompass both spaces of social claims and territorialized spaces.[37] They are social constructs[38] and arena for collective action and rights. LeGalès[39] considers five major elements in order to recognize collective action at the city level: (a) a collective decision-making system (State and non-State actors); (b) common interests – or those perceived as such; (c) integration mechanisms; (d) internal and external representation of the collective actor; and (f) a capacity for innovation.

This definition of the city, including the city-region, as a collective actor is used in the proposed urban observatory model to be developed in this paper. The proposed model takes into account that city-regional capacities vary according to different national contexts. In this institutional, territorial and political flux, the goal for public policy is to stabilize a place for exchanges between institutions at the city, regional and national levels. These new political spaces and new collective actors would induce the development of State institutional capacities, political legitimacy, political mobilization, and intense sociopolitical interaction.[40] In order to be effective, urban observatories should incorporate these new urban space dynamics.

C. RETHINKING SUSTAINABILITY

A significant literature has grown out of recent major world summit initiatives focusing on sustainability, urbanization and social development. This includes the following:

(a) World Summits on Sustainable Development:

- 1992: Rio Earth Summit, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro;

- 2002: Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development;

(b) World Summit for Social Development:

- 1995: The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action;

(c) UN-HABITAT (United Nations Human Settlements Programme):

- 1996: Habitat II (Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Istanbul);
- 2001: World Social Forum, Porto Alegre;

(d) Millennium Summits:

- 2000: The Millennium Declaration;
- 2005: The United Nations Millennium Project – Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals;

(e) World Urban Forum (recurrent):

- 2002: WUF I (Nairobi);
- 2004: WUF II (Barcelona);
- 2006: WUF III (Vancouver);
- 2008: WUF IV (Nanjing);

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[37] See Amin, A. 2004. Regions Unbound: Towards a New Politics of Place. *Geografiska Annaler*. 86(1): 33-44; and Massey, D. 2004. Geographies of Responsibility. *Geografiska Annaler*. 86: 5-18.

[38] Lefebvre, H. 1974. *La production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos Editions.

[39] See LeGalès, 2003.

[40] See Boudreau, 2007.

These global gatherings have propelled forward the notion that urbanization and globalization, as well as socio-economic development and environmental protection, are centrally relevant to the sustainable development agenda. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit marked a global turning point in the approach towards environment and development issues as interdependent and in realizing the global energies that could be mobilized to work towards sustainable development. The Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II), which was held in Istanbul, Turkey, from 3 to 14 June 1996, was the first among United Nations forums to encourage cities and localities, in addition to nation States, to seize and accept their rightful role in bringing together local concerns with those of the international community. During the World Summit for Social Development in 1995, a global consensus has emerged that social policy goes well beyond a limited set of safety nets and services to cover market failure. Well-designed and implemented social policy can powerfully shape countries, reduce poverty, foster employment and development, eradicate marginalization and overcome conflict.

Without events like these, it is difficult to imagine cities and local people being included in the broad development debate and plans for achieving urban sustainability. Those gatherings have placed sustainable development, along social policies, on the global development agenda.[41] Figure I attempts to conceptualize the interplay of United Nations agencies and objectives related to the proposed model of urban observatories, against the background of the above-mentioned sustainable urbanization and social development goals.

Figure I. The interplay of United Nations agencies goals related to urban observatories
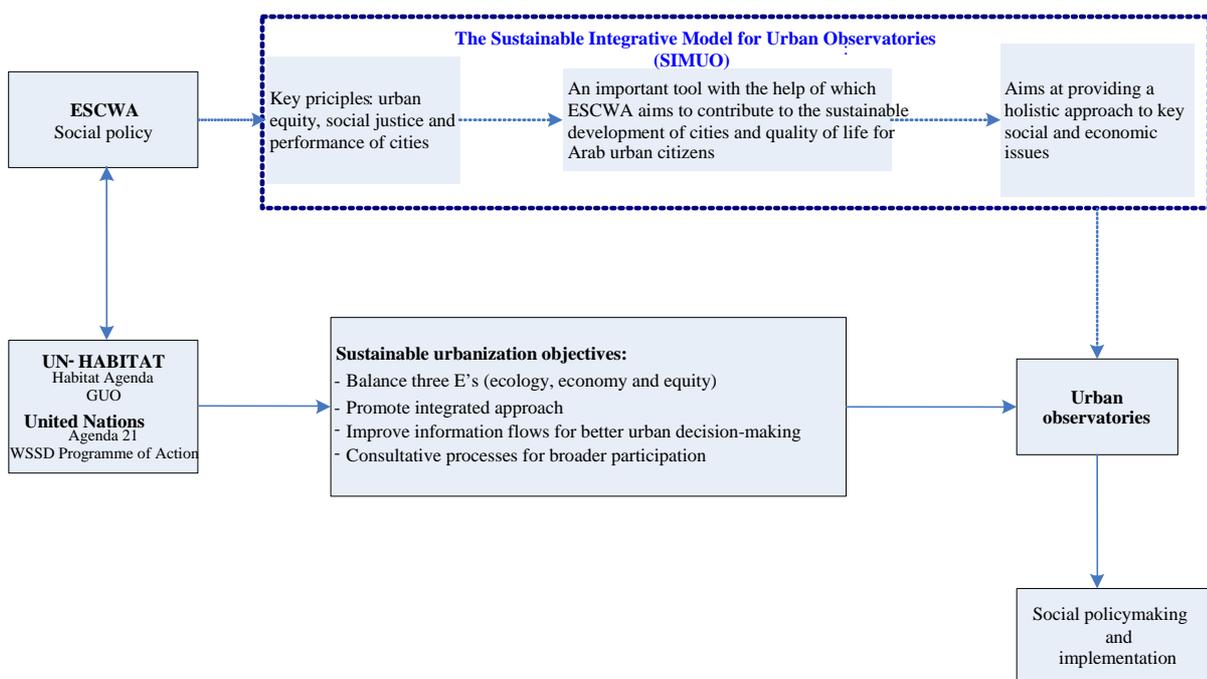
There are many challenges to achieve more sustainable and inclusive cities, but as far as State institutions are concerned, they can be summarized as a lack of clear social policies and leadership, a lack of a shared and negotiated consensus and a lack of coordinated social action and implementation; these points have been elaborated in the second Integrated Social Policy Report prepared by ESCWA.[42] In addition, many cities in both developing and ESCWA countries are suffering from an information crisis, undermining their capacity to have a sustained and systematic appraisal of physical and social urban problems. This information gap also undermines their understanding of the critical relationship between policy

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[41] See Holden, M. 2006. Urban Indicators and the Integrative Ideals of Cities. *Cities*. 23 (3): 170-183. Elsevier.

[42] See ESCWA. 2008b. *Integrated Social Policy Report II: From Concept to Practice.*

implementation and urban outcomes, and between the performance of individual sectors and broader socio-economic development results. The urban observatory framework is one of several tools that can address some of these questions and contribute to a shift towards a new development paradigm.

Important changes have occurred in the models of social policy over the past few decades, which reflect some of the changes that have occurred in macro-level economic approaches to development. A wide range of different development approaches emerged with different ideological background.[43] Some insisted on the empowerment of the individual, others still placed the accent on different social groups so they can be active stakeholders in the development of society overall. One of the central goals of social development policy is to overcome the different fragmentation processes that cut into the social fabric, leading to the exclusion of individuals and social groups from access to different common goods that are considered today as such elementary social rights as education, basic services, housing and employment.

But models of social policy trying to overcome this fragmentation can differ widely in terms of the role of the State, institutional structures, the sectors of interventions and the extent to which the policy is supply- or demand-driven. The methodological approach put forward in this paper is derived from ESCWA's first Integrated Social Policy Report, in that the principle of social equity and human rights forms processes of economic growth and drives the agenda for social change and development.[44]

These principles are seen as dynamic vectors that can lead progressively from the current growth-driven development paradigm, prevalent in the Arab region, to more sustainable kinds of development paradigms. If retained in any social development policy, these two principles will help empower previously excluded individuals, social groups and communities, and give them the possibility of full involvement in the economic, social and political processes. The resulting interaction will enrich and diversify productive and organizational schemes, making it more innovative and capable of adaptive behaviours.[45]

D. RETHINKING GOVERNANCE

Metropolitan areas in the Arab region are experiencing deep political, economical and social transformations due to two simultaneous processes: globalization and decentralization.[46] These transformations are closely associated with the governability of urban territories; the changing role of the State in the guidance of societies; and the increasing role of private and public actors in economic and social spheres. Urban governance is generally considered as a set of new regulation forms aiming at the governability of cities through the building of a collective actor. One of the central challenges for Arab Governments, namely to improve the social and economic conditions of their citizens and achieving social inclusiveness, is thus becoming a key urban challenge. Numerous legal and institutional reforms in many countries have given shape to institutional reform at the local level and have placed increased pressure on municipal authorities to contribute to local and national development.

Solutions to urban problems are increasingly being sought at the local level as central Governments cede responsibilities in basic service delivery, thereby making it possible for local authorities to take charge of services that affect the daily lives of their residents. However, there are several obstacles to ensure that decentralization works effectively. They can be summarized as follows:

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[43] See Roberts, T. and Hite, A. 2000. *From Modernization to Globalization: Perspectives on Development and Social Change*. Blackwell.

[44] See ESCWA. 2005. *Towards Integrated Social Policies in Arab Countries: Framework and Comparative Analysis*.

[45] Ascher, F. 1996. *Metapolis*. Paris: Odile Jacob Editions.

[46] These two key processes do not always move in the same direction and are affected by different forces. One interesting point to note is that national States often try to regulate (or take defensive action) to deal with globalization but are not always pro-active to speed up decentralization.

(a) Transferring responsibility for the provision of basic services to urban municipalities with growing urban populations is likely to face serious obstacles unless those municipalities are also given extra revenue mechanisms to fund those services;

(b) Although such innovative revenue mechanisms as the issuing of municipal bonds may help, central Government transfers continue to be needed, even though they may fluctuate due to a series of reasons, including national budgetary problems and political changes;

(c) Local authorities sometimes lack adequate managerial capacity to take on new functions;

(d) Decentralizing functions from national to local Government is not enough: mechanisms should also be put into place to give an effective role or voice to civil society organizations, labour unions, the private sector and others to contribute to urban planning processes;

(e) There is a need to deal effectively with competing subnational jurisdictions (metropolitan, urban, local and district).

It is within this context that new institutional forms of local governance are emerging in municipalities across the developing and Arab world. These new forms often involve larger roles for NGOs and community groups, greater transparency and accountability, and the devolution of more legal and financial responsibility for urban affairs to local levels.

III. THE OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK: THE SUSTAINABLE INTEGRATIVE MODEL FOR URBAN OBSERVATORIES (SIMUO)

A. THE LEARNING PARADIGM

One of the primary objectives of a city is to fulfil a social function and thus guarantee equal access to the potential urban benefits.[47] However, in order to ensure equity and social justice, social strategies alone are not sufficient at the national level; there is increasing pressure to enable municipal authorities to contribute to local and global sustainable development in an age when the responsibilities of cities are expanding rapidly through globalization.[48] Brazil has responded to this pressure by embedding the notion of the Right to the City in its Constitution, the so-called City Statute. At the international level, an initiative was launched by NGOs to draft a proposal for a World Charter on the Right to the City, proposing to construct a sustainable urban model.

There are systematic efforts to promote sustainable urbanization, reduce poverty and seek to obtain greater participation of traditionally disenfranchised and marginalized groups in urban planning and management within the United Nations urban development agenda. For example, in 2009, UN-HABITAT launched the Global Campaign for Sustainable Urbanization to promote a positive vision for sustainable urbanization developed through consultation with cities, Governments and UN-HABITAT partners. The components of this vision include access to housing and land, infrastructure as well as basic services and finance. These concern stronger citizen participation, local Government, private sector investment and national policies that support these processes for sustainable urbanization. The impact of the campaign will be partly assessed in terms of better policies implemented at all levels of Government and increased budgets for sustainable urban development programmes, which together should have a positive impact on improving the quality of urban life for the poor.

However, in any modeling initiatives, the main challenge is how to operationalize a concept. The main question here is how to give it the kind of forward, normative thrust it needs.[49] The proposed operational framework to be developed in this section adopts the following operational definition: if we can envision the search for sustainable living as community-based struggle to learn, and perpetuate a process of learning, then objective truth is a question of justifying goals and policies within a community of inquirers.[50] As Holden[51] stresses, the struggle to learn more, in a more contextualized fashion within the communities, valorizes the first principles of sustainability to include adaptability, negotiability and flexibility. The wager is that the outcome, in terms of a policy process with a balance of environmental, social and economic criteria, can be integrative for collective action, participation and decision-making.

B. THE SUSTAINABILITY DIMENSION

Sustainability was selected as a theoretical frame and inspiration in a context-dependant way. The Urban Observatory as conceived by the Sustainable Integrative Model for Urban Observatories (SIMUO) aims to assist cities and States in Western Asia to monitor and report on urban trends on a regular and

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[47] This social function, however, is not to be seen in isolation from other interacting sustainable development processes, such as economic sustainability, which is partly based on equal access to resources; ecological footprint, based upon the close relationship between the human and physical environments; technological choices (for example, transport, water supply, electricity generation, waste disposal, health, and so on); and organization of production.

[48] See UNESCO, 2005.

[49] See Norton, B. 1999. Pragmatism, Adaptive Management and Sustainability. *Environmental Values*. 8(4): 451- 466.

[50] Ibid.

[51] See Holden, 2006.

reliable basis. It also helps to adapt the global MDGs targets to the urban realm with urban sustainability goals.

As noted in the introduction, urban observatories can be considered as workshops where monitoring tools are developed and used for policymaking through consultative processes. Their three main functions are: (i) to involve local policymakers and organizations of civil society in dialogue; (ii) to generate information on local themes and problems; and (iii) to encourage policy responses to locally felt needs.[52]

To achieve these objectives and help implement the Habitat Agenda at the national and local levels, UN-HABITAT established a Global Urban Observatory Network (GUONet).[53] The purpose of GUONet is to support Governments, local authorities and civil society:

- To improve the collection, management, analysis and use of information in formulating more effective urban policies;

- To improve information flows between all levels for better urban decision-making;

- To stimulate broad-based consultative processes to help identify and integrate urban information needs;

- To provide information and analyses to all stakeholders for more effective participation in urban decision-making;

- To share information, knowledge and expertise using modern information and communications technology (ICT);

- To create a global network of local, national and regional platforms for sharing information about the implementation of the Habitat Agenda and Agenda 21.

In this context, strategic decisions in the design and construction of the SIMUO model are highly contingent on particular relationships the model is able to create between its components and stakeholders. These relationships rely simultaneously on common understanding of sustainability or indicators, and on a common understanding of the value of leaving open channels for communication, broadcasting results to a targeted audience, and spaces for negotiating key policy changes.

The need of membership in the model across the different scales needs to be creatively negotiated. This is a responsibility that falls on the city concerned. From a pragmatic perspective, different cities have different entry points into inclusiveness and solidarity with the emerging global urban context in seeking better local information, making plans and setting policy. For some cities, such as Cairo, combating slum formation may provide a common ground for higher aspirations; for others, such as Beirut, post-war reconstruction and reconciliation or provision of security, may be the most compelling framework.

C. PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENTS AND INDICATORS

Performance measurement and indicators of urban sustainability defined in terms of adaptive and social learning may seem somewhat contradictory. Notions of measurement are split between fact-finding and value-seeking. Frecker[54] identifies the debate over paradigms as a major area of concern about the general utility of the indicator approach to social analysis and the evaluation of public institutions. The entirely reductionist paradigm sits on one extreme, exemplified by the sectoral approach. A system approach

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[52] More information is available at: http://ww2.unhabitat.org/programmes/guo/.

[53] The Global Urban Observatory Network (GUONet) is a worldwide information and capacity-building network established by UN-HABITAT to help implement the Habitat Agenda at the national and local levels.

[54] See Frecker, K. 2005. Beyond GDP: enabling democracy with better measures of social well-being. *The Kiessling Papers*. Toronto: Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Toronto.

to sustainability indicators, at the other extreme of the debate, is based on an organic, complex and holistic paradigm.[55] The latter approach is characterized by a group of representative local stakeholders beginning a search for consensus-based indicators to uncover a list of key changes needed in human arrangements and activities if we are to move towards long-term viability and well-being.[56]

In negotiating a position within the indicator framework debate, it is useful to distinguish between descriptive and diagnostic indicators.[57] For example, descriptive indicators that tell us about income level assume expert-based knowledge for understanding cause and effect relationships and reliance on experts to assimilate the new information and devise solutions. The role of the public thus comes after the release of indicators and is limited to the task of moving sufficient political will to back the required action. In contrast, diagnostic indicators can only be devised on upfront work by the body politic to understand and suggest how a problem indicated by a reported trend could be solved.[58]

The framework for an indicator project can have a strong bearing on the validity it is perceived to have and the use to which it can be put.[59] For descriptive indicators, embedded in frameworks that tend to be rational and expert-derived, establishing validity is a fairly straightforward exercise using models and assumptions.[60] Validation of diagnostic indicators is more complex and requires negotiation of the most suitable utility of the indicators, based on different understandings, professional and other knowledge bases, judgment and intuition.[61] However, political motivation for choosing particular interpretations of an expert-derived fact, or diametrically opposed interpretations, is entirely possible in a politically charged context.[62] Instead, the most appropriate interpretation of an indicator, according to SIMUO is as a warning, or problem identification, for further investigation and action. As a warning, both quantitative and qualitative indicator types can serve equally well in different political and research contexts.[63]

Figure II illustrates the SIMUO concept, its setting, components and outcome. The operational components and the parts directly concerned by the social phenomenon are indicated in red letters; the problems are identified at the bottom, the policy determinants identified at the top; and the social policy indicators developed by the observatory are indicated on the left. The political urban entity at the junction between the observatory and the urban management is also in a dynamic relation with superior political entities. This figure not only crosses conceptually the different fields of political institutions, urban management, social policies and observatories, but also identifies their functioning framework. In addition, it outlines the logical links between the elements of the SIMUO without isolating them from the rest of the wider scheme, which gives them clear meaning in the process of achieving a sustainable urban development outcome.

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[55] See ESCWA, 2008a.

[56] See Gibson, R. 2001. Specification of sustainability-based environmental assessment decision criteria and implications for determining significance in environmental assessment. Available at: http://www.sustreport.org/downloads/SustainabilityEA.doc.

[57] See Holden, 2006.

[58] Please refer to the urban indicators framework developed by ESCWA (2009).

[59] See Holden, 2006.

[60] See Hoerning, H. and Seasons, M. 2005. Understanding indicators. *Community Indicators Measuring Systems.* 3-32. Ashgale, New York.

[61] Innes de Neufville, J. 1975. *Social Indicators and Public Policy: Interactive Processes of Design and Application.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

[62] Grindle, M. and Thomas, J. 1991. *Public Choices and Policy Change: The Political Economy of Reform in Developing countries.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

[63] The Arab Human Development Report assumes that no single composite index of human security would be valid, reliable or sufficiently sensitive to different circumstances in the region. Rather, it affirms the relevance of quantitative indicators and opinion surveys at the level of the region, its sub-regions and country groups. See UNDP. 2009.

The SIMUO proposes a multi-pronged approach to developing indicators of a sustainable city. The selection process for indicators to be tracked and reported by the urban observatory involves experts, citizens and public officials. It is the interplay of different knowledge types that the model seeks to support and optimize. While the work of experts is likely to be biased towards standards, the work of citizens is likely to have a richer context-dependency. While expert-based recommendations tend to be sectoral in nature, the indicators generated by stakeholders are intended to reflect trends across sectoral boundaries, and to be more related to local than non-local conditions.

The most common tool used to assess urban social policies in cities is the indicators framework. Indicators are instruments conveying information synthetically through such different representations as numbers, graphs and thematic maps. In their simplest form, indicators are parameters or combinations of measured parameters. They are a flexible method to study such complex phenomena as land use, transportation and environment interaction. They can integrate both quantitative and qualitative pieces of information and address the practical needs of decision makers. They are internationally recognized – notably in the MDG agenda – for their usefulness in terms of: (a) international comparisons; (b) their ability to serve as benchmarks to measure progress over time; and (c) their advocacy role in galvanizing support for political action and their assessment of urban sustainability.

However, the indicator approach presents several constraints. First of all, indicators cannot give a complete analysis. They always imply a simplification of the real world. Secondly, choosing the parameters or the combination of parameters to be used as indicators is always difficult. For example, national trends cannot explain what is happening in all cities and regions in the same country because the drivers of growth and the reasons for inequality vary in each location.[64] Thirdly, using universal indicators will undermine local particularities that could have great significance. Furthermore, excessive attention to particularities could lead to the loss of the overall picture and the ability to compare different situations. Comparability is necessary if scientific knowledge is to be acquired from the use of indicators.

There are a large variety of frameworks of indicators in the fast growing literature on indicators. These frameworks differ in their objectives and uses, and have both strengths and limitations.[65]

The increasingly popular index approach aggregates different selected indicators to describe the situation of a particular phenomenon into a single numeric index, such as the governance, poverty, environmental sustainability and performance indices.[66] These indices give a rapid global overlook to the state of a sector and are very useful to establish quick and global comparisons. While some of these indices, such as the human development index[67] and the city development index[68], are more holistic than others, they all are built around a small set of aggregated indicators, thus making it harder to expand analyses based only on these indices.

Analysis-oriented frameworks, such as the Capitals Framework,[69] endeavour to study development phenomena by using various quantification and accounting techniques of different elements and their monitoring over time. Even though such analysis-oriented frameworks present an interesting analytical approach to the socio-economic and environmental impacts of development, they face difficulties in

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[64] See UN-HABITAT, 2008, for detailed discussion on equity and inequality issues.

[65] For an elaborated typology of indicator frameworks, refer to UN/DESA. 2007. *Indicators of Sustainable Development: Guidelines and Methodologies*; and Asian Development Bank. 2001. *Urban Indicators for Managing Cities: Cities Data Book*.

[66] More information is available at: http://www.yale.edu/esi/.

[67] More information is available at: http://hdr.undp.org/.

[68] More information is available at: http://ww2.unhabitat.org/istanbul+5/116.pdf.

[69] For more details on the Capitals Framework, see Alfsen, K. and Moe, T. 2005. *An International Framework for constructing National Indicators for Policies to Enhance Sustainable Development*.

connecting the different capital accounts (such as the social capital account, physical capital account and cultural capital account) to operational policies.

Figure II. SIMUO links to sustainable urbanization
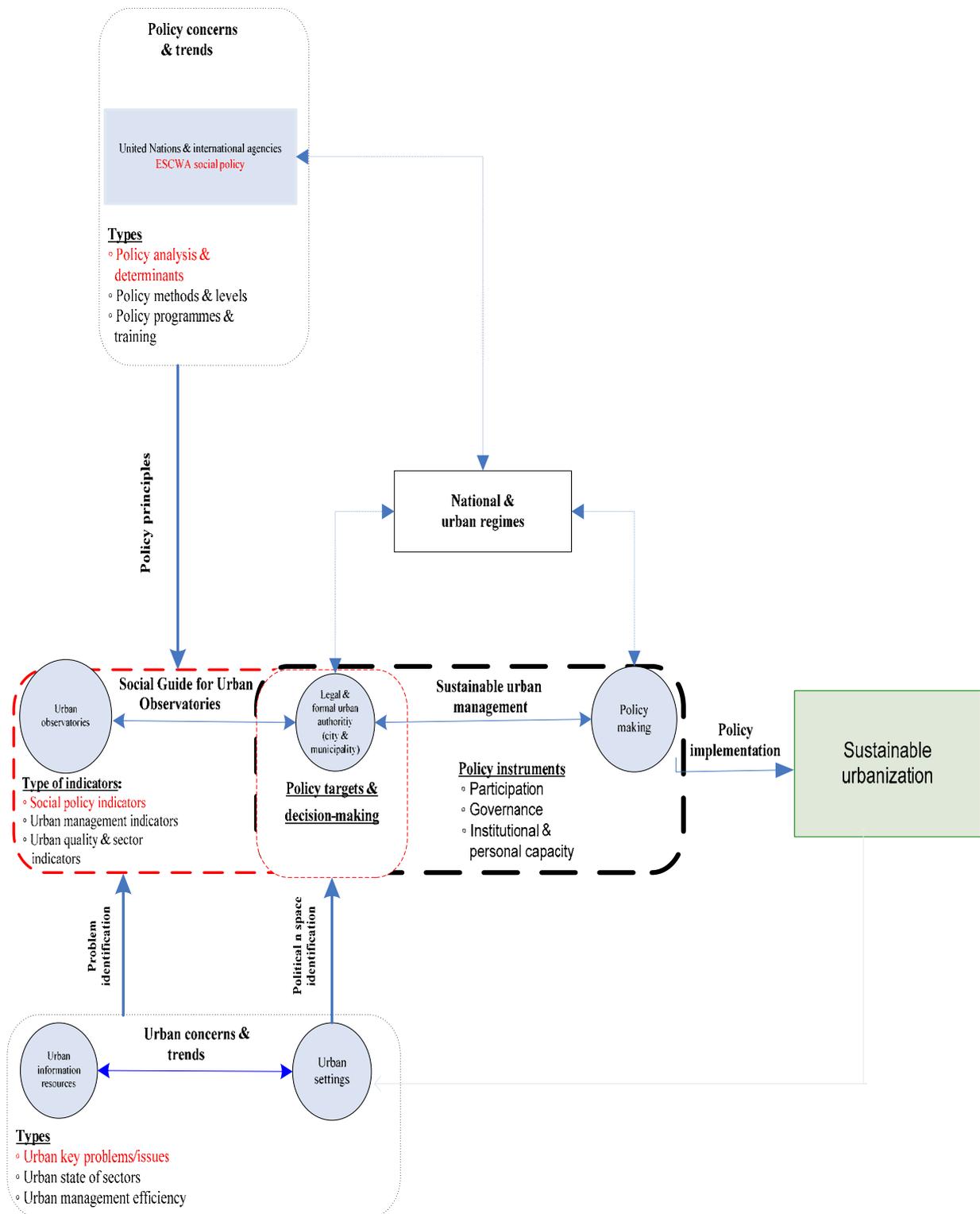
Policy-oriented frameworks classify indicators based on their relevance to such sectoral policies as education, health, housing and infrastructure. On the one hand, this approach has the credit of advancing clear significant information for sectoral decision makers, but on the other hand, they are unable to reflect such trans-sectoral phenomena as poverty or equity. One of the main challenges for urban observatories is to address such urban problems as poverty, unemployment, violence and access to services and infrastructures, that cut across sectoral areas.

The SIMUO framework introduces different parameters that are essential in the analysis of key dimensions of urban problems, and also help to link this assessment to the above-mentioned principles of sustainable urbanization.

The first parameter in this framework is the level. Every problem manifests itself on different social levels and poses at each level a set of different challenges to overcome. Urban poverty, for example, is a multi-level problem. It manifests itself at the individual, household, community and institutional levels, and poses, in each case, different challenges for different stakeholders.

Another major parameter is the determinant. Determinants are the economic and social variables that influence the condition of individuals, communities, and jurisdictions as a whole. They determine the extent to which a person possesses the physical, social and personal resources to identify and achieve personal aspirations, satisfy needs and cope with the environment. They also are about the quantity and quality of a variety of resources that a society makes available to its members.

A determinant is an essential parameter verifying the existence or the absence of a problem. Some social factors, known as social determinants, such as social mutual aid networks and existing social capital, have a strong influence on the development of urban problems. Other factors related to the presence of services and utilities provided by the political authority are also considered determinants, and are labeled in this framework as policy determinants. A particularly important emerging issue is whether any particular analysis of social determinants is de-politicized or not. A de-politicized approach is one that fails to take into account the fact that the quality of the social determinants to which citizens in a jurisdiction are exposed is shaped by public policy created by Governments. And Governments are controlled by political parties, or other means, who come to power with a set of ideological beliefs concerning the nature of society and the role of Governments.

A single approach towards social determinants is not enough; several approaches are required to address the problem holistically and design effective policies. For example, according to the literature on social determinants of health,[70] there are three main approaches:[71] (a) an analysis of case study contained in a webbing exercise which highlights the web of causation; (b) the use of such conventional data as health-related MDGs; and (c) community assessment or field work.

Social and policy determinants are key parameters in the SIMUO framework: on the one hand, they can produce information on the evolution of trends in society through indicators of social determinants; on the other hand, they can also produce information about the efficiency of urban management policies through indicators of policy determinants. Both kinds of determinants will be chosen to inform any progress that may have been made in applying principles leading to more such sustainable urban development paradigms as empowerment, urban governance, social equity and environmental protection.

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[70] The term social determinants grew out of research to identify the specific exposures by which members of different socio-economic groups come to experience varying degrees of health and illness. While it was well documented that individuals in various socio-economic groups experienced differing health outcomes, the specific factors and means by which these factors led to illness remained to be identified.

[71] Presentation by Narjis Rizvi at the Provincial Consultation on Expanding the MDG Agenda, Lahore, 31 August 2005.

Figure III illustrates the concept of the SIMUO framework. As can be seen from this figure, the framework links urban problems to levels, parameters and indicators, in accordance with sustainable urbanization principles.

Figure III. SIMUO indicators framework

	Levels	Determinants		Indicators
Urban problem	**Individual**	Urban governance (Empowerment) (Environmental justice)	*Social:*	
	Household			
	Community		*Policy:*	
	Institutional			

D. PARTICIPATION AND ADVOCACY

Community and sustainability indicator projects tend to be inclusive and participatory. Meaningful participation, consensus-building and people-centredness are key elements of most sustainability initiatives to date.[72] While consensus-building is a near-universal goal of local sustainability initiatives, the difficulties involved in building, maintaining and activating consensus are little understood and underestimated. The need for, and gains to be expected from, public participation in indicator projects are clear, but the means by which this participation can happen, how we can assess whether participation levels are accurate, and the validity of the information derived from a participatory process remain largely unaddressed in the literature.

Hoerning and Seasons[73] suggest four key themes for investigation of these aspects of participation and indicator projects:

(a)   What knowledge defines, monitors, analyses and reports indicators?

(b)   How to make knowledge understandable, accessible and relevant to stakeholders?

(c)   Who is involved in making decisions, who represents whom, to what degree should non-public employees be involved in public sector decision-making?

(d)   Empowerment as the link between knowledge and action; does greater participation bring greater responsibility?

Most answers to these questions would seem to lie in a two-way learning process in which sustainability professionals learn more about public values, everyday lives and experiences, just as citizens learn more about overarching frameworks and specific trends and issues within sustainable development. This suggests an informatization process that builds collective community knowledge encompassing hard and measurable trends and facts, and as soft and measurable values and perceptions.[74]

Urban observatories represent a continuous reminder that the SIMUO values the production of common understanding of action from many diverse perspectives on sustainability and progress that exist

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[72] See Carew-Reid, J., Prescott-Allen, R., Bass, S.M.J, and Dalal-Clayton, D.B. 1994. *Strategies for National Sustainable Development.* International Institute for Environment and Development. World Conservation Union. Earthscan: London.

[73] See Hoerning and Seasons, 2005.

[74] See Holden, 2006.

throughout the city. SIMUO has been designed to recognize the unique positioning of each component within a web network of relationships. These contexts are sure to generate different perspectives on how sustainability works or could work in the Arab region. The challenge for urban observatories in this regard is to articulate intersection points among these diverse perspectives in order to establish a regional sustainability indicators agenda.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper shows that Western Asia is urbanizing at a very rapid rate and that decision-making is being increasingly decentralized to cities and metropolitan areas. In addition, there is an increasing demand for the provision of such urban infrastructure and services as affordable housing, water supply and sanitation, electric power, solid waste disposal and health and education. This means that the implementation of socio-economic development policies will increasingly take place in urban areas. In order to be effective, urban observatories must be effectively used as a mechanism for localizing social and economic development initiatives. In order to increase their impact at the local level, all urban development initiatives, such as urban observatories, should thus strengthen links with civil society in order to enhance local ownership.

The paper has also discussed the challenge of combining the tools of urban indicators and performance measures with a local sustainability understanding as an integrative ideal of the city. Indicators, it has been argued, form part of a larger political and institutional strategy to revalue a continuous community-based struggle to learn. They incorporate the relative contributions of experts and citizens toward the definition of common challenges and goals, and also help Governments (both local and national) reset their policy objectives and priorities according to those new challenges and goals. The SIMUO model provides an integrative urban observatory framework for the selection of key urban sustainability and social policy indicators, based on both expert-based and citizen-based strategic indicators.

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