

Who Speaks for the Urban?

Addressing the Urban Science-Policy Interface

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What does urban research contribute to urban policy—not only as evidence, but also in shaping how “urban problems” are defined?

Urban knowledge already shapes policy—through indicators, guidance, and “best practice”—but it also shapes the categories through which urban problems are defined.

Unlike climate change, biodiversity, or food security, the urban has no permanent, intergovernmentally authorised body that produces regular, authoritative assessments of the field.

Even so, an urban science–policy interface exists in practice, dispersed across UN-Habitat’s normative work, the World Urban Forum, city networks, foundation-funded research, and academic publishing. With Agenda 2030 approaching its horizon, this session takes stock of this fragmented landscape and asks what should come next.

Three Questions

1. Current state of the urban science–policy interface

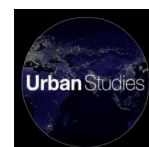
If there is no “IPCC for cities”, what mechanisms exist today—and where are the gaps?

2. Lessons from other domains

IPCC and IPBES are obvious reference points, but HLPE-FSN and others offer alternative designs. What transfers to the urban context—and what does not?

3. Political economy and trade-offs

Existing mechanisms balance authority, plurality, and feasibility differently. What configuration is buildable—and who bears the costs?



The Current Landscape and its Comparators

Mechanism	Type	Scope	Authorising body	Form of output
UN-Habitat	Intergovernmental agency	Global urban development	UN General Assembly (via UN-Habitat Assembly)	Reports, normative guidance; limited assessment capacity
New Urban Agenda	Policy framework (non-binding)	Global (Habitat III)	UN General Assembly endorsement	Outcome document; no permanent scientific body
UCCRN	Research network	Urban climate (IPCC-modelled)	Self-organised academic consortium	ARC3 assessment reports
ICLEI	City network	Local sustainability	Member-led	Tools, peer learning, advocacy
C40 Cities	City network	Climate (~97 cities)	Mayoral steering committee	Standards, research, peer learning
Ad hoc UN expert groups	Thematic, time-limited	Variable	Convening UN entity	Reports, position papers
Comparators from other domains				
IPCC	Intergovernmental scientific panel	Climate change	WMO + UNEP (UNGA-endorsed); commissioned by UNFCCC/COP	Assessment reports (~6-year cycle); Special Reports on COP request
IPBES	Intergovernmental science-policy platform	Biodiversity & ecosystem services	Plenary of member states	Thematic and global assessments
HLPE-FSN	Expert panel within an intergovernmental committee	Food security & nutrition	Committee on World Food Security	Targeted reports; deliberative and integrated with policy negotiation

The table highlights a crowded institutional landscape, but no permanent body that produces authoritative, periodic assessments of urban knowledge.

The comparators point to a design choice: should an urban interface prioritise **scale and consensus** (IPCC/IPBES) or **smaller, deliberative integration with policy negotiation** (HLPE-FSN)?