

# URBAN OBSERVATORIES IN THE MIDST OF COVID-19: CHALLENGES & RESPONSES

WORKING PAPER

WORKSHOP REPORT  
SEPTEMBER 2020

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This working paper has been developed by the Connected Cities Lab, a laboratory within the University of Melbourne, based within the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning.

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

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

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This Working Paper has been developed by the Connected Cities Laboratory at the University of Melbourne in collaboration with the Urban Policy and Innovation Lab at University College London and UN-Habitat, the United Nations Human Settlements Agency. The project was managed and delivered at the University of Melbourne and University College London, involving interviews with third parties not affiliated with these institutions. All interviews were conducted in online workshops on the 3rd and 6th of August 2020 and transcribed by the Connected Cities Lab. This document is intended to inform research, policy and public discussions on boundary institutions between research and decision-making. The authors have sought to ensure the accuracy of the material in this document, but they, the Lab, the University of Melbourne and University College London will not be liable for any loss or damage incurred through the use of this report.

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This Working Paper builds on a Report for the wider "Urban Observatories" program by the Lab, UCL and UN-Habitat, which is available on request from the Lab.

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## INTRODUCTION

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In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, urban observatories have demonstrated their value, but also highlighted the challenges for boundary institutions between knowledge generation and decision-making in a variety of different ways. We aim here to capture some of their voices in a time of crisis.

The Connected Cities Lab, in collaboration with University College London and UN-Habitat, and in dialogue with a variety of urban research institutions around the planet, has been working since 2018 to develop a review of the challenges and values of and challenges for 'urban observatories'. That project aims to present evidence on the **boundary-spanning roles of these institutions**, capturing the ways in which they bridge information in and about their cities and the potential value they offer to urban governance.

As the COVID-19 crisis took hold across cities and continents in early 2020, it became apparent that this study could not prescind from a closer look at how these observatories had both been coping with, but also responding to, the pandemic. This resulted in a series of additional interviews, document reviews and a two-part virtual workshop in August 2020 with observatories, and urban research institutions performing observatory functions, to give further voice to these experiences.

As a background to this 'deep' dive into the reality of COVID-19 for observatories, the overall study underpinning this working paper has relied on, first, desktop research on publicly available information to identify thirty-two cases of either explicitly-named 'urban observatories' or else urban research institutions performing 'observatory-like' functions. This research was then coupled with a series of interviews with experts and senior staff from these observatories to ground truth initial considerations as well as to capture how the processes of boundary-spanning worked beyond the publicly available persona of each observatory. We then referred back to these thirty-two cases and selected a sample of fourteen for specific analysis in relation to COVID-specific interventions, with six of them involved directly into two virtual workshops to capture directly their experience in the context of the pandemic crisis. Capturing initial findings from these engagements (which will ultimately form an integral part of the project's final report), this working paper offers a preliminary snapshot of some of these lessons drawn from the study.

Essential for us has been the chance, amidst the complications of COVID-19 lockdowns and travel bans, to better **capture the voice of observatories** the world over and their **tangible experiences with spanning urban research-practice boundaries in a turbulent historical moment**. Whilst the final report for the project will likely include more extensively analysed cases emerging from the current crisis, we have sought to present here much of the raw reflections emerging from our engagement with colleagues in observatories (and 'observatory-like' institutions) to both offer useful reflections to other contexts around the world as well as to offer insights on the unique situation urban knowledge institutions find themselves in a reality where cities and urban life has been fundamentally recast by the pandemic.

The working paper is organised in a way that follows our broader study's key themes looking at the structure and activities of observatories, putting our broader findings into dialogue with the voices of observatories during the COVID-19 crisis.

Section 1 describes the proposed visions and functions performed by observatories and puts it into dialogue with the COVID-19 crisis. Positionality of urban observatories is also discussed in this section.

Section 2 explores outputs produced by, and themes investigated in, observatories and how they have been shaped by and for the crisis. In Sections 1 and 2 we endeavoured to capture vignettes from the participating observatories through the experiences of a set of six more specific interlocutor institutions engaged in the project: the Gauteng City Region Observatory (GCRO) in Johannesburg, the Karachi Urban Lab (KUL) in Karachi, the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) in Bangalore, the Metropolis Observatory in Barcelona, and the World Resources Institute Ross Centre in Washington DC.

Section 3 concludes with a commentary on the ongoing challenges and opportunities faced by urban observatories in the wake of COVID-19, without underestimating how the crisis might be far from over.

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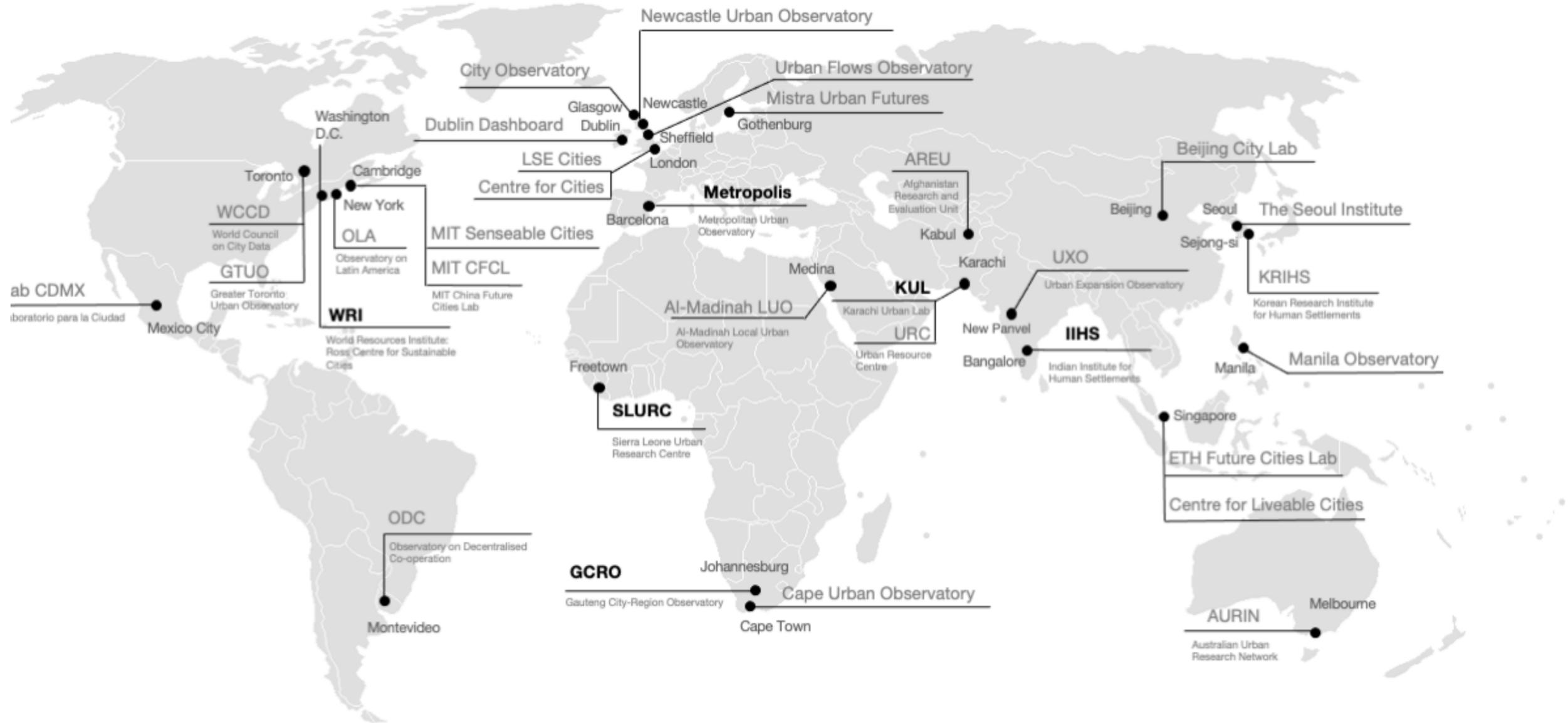


Figure 1. Map of case study "urban observatories" analysed, cases discussed in the COVID context are in bold

## 01 THE PURPOSE OF AN OBSERVATORY IN A DISRUPTED CONTEXT

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What is the purpose of an urban observatory, and how does the position(ality) of these institutions change in times of crisis?

Our broader investigation starts from a question of purpose, vision and core ‘functions’ observatories perform. This is of course cast into a very peculiar light as the pandemic crisis, not least for its heavy information demands, has impacted the ways urban researchers and practitioners work. To capture how this has been having tangible impacts onto the work of observatories, we first review here our wider findings on the strategic visions of urban observatories to understand their intentions. Against the backdrop of the crisis, we present a series of insight cases, which demonstrate how these visions are actioned. From there, we explored more specifically the issue of positionality of these institutions and how it has been playing out in the reality of the pandemic.

### IMPLEMENTING VISIONS IN A TIME OF CRISIS

Our broad comparative study identified four non-exclusive theme-setting visions of urban observatories around the world. The four themes are as follows.

- Collect and produce urban knowledge
- Mobilise urban knowledge to shape urban governance, decision-making, and development
- Network urban knowledge and drive knowledge exchange
- Offer a platform for dialogue about urban challenges between stakeholders



Figure 2: This figure shows the distribution of the non-exclusive visions stated by the analysed observatories.

Indeed, the non-exclusive nature of these activities in fact yields a productive mix in the context of crisis where urgent information is needed. Yet few, if in fact any, of our broader set of thirty-two cases had been devised explicitly with visions that take into account the role of urban knowledge circulation in a time of sudden and global crisis like that ushered in by COVID-19. The workshops and interviews therefore raised a few important lessons.

### Insight case

#### GCRO: between scientific advisor and governance mediator



Figure 3: Based in Johannesburg, the Gauteng City-Region Observatory is located on the campus of the University of Witwatersrand. [Image source: Carla Washbourne]

The Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) is a South Africa-based observatory focused on the Gauteng city-region, the economic heart of the country within which Johannesburg and Pretoria (Tshwane) are located. Set up explicitly as an observatory and having an advisory role built into its founding vision, GCRO was perhaps more destined than other knowledge institutions to take a central place in the city and region’s decision-making processes around the COVID-19 crisis.

The crisis brought GCRO into a distinct crisis advisory role. At the time of this project's workshop, more than half of GCRO's staff of 19 had been involved in the response work. Throughout the pandemic, GCRO has provided a continuing flow of support and advice to multiple levels of government, mostly through its data visualisation and analytics capacity. In March, when COVID-19 was first declared a pandemic, GCRO was swiftly able to draw on its extensive research into quality of life to develop spatially-specific vulnerability indexes that identified communities most at risk to the virus. This assisted government in planning mitigation measures in those areas. Thereafter, the GCRO became closely involved in analysing data to identify transmission hot-spots and understand how the pandemic was unfolding differently in varying contexts and communities. The GCRO was called on to advise government structures at all levels, and was a member of the Premier's COVID Advisory Committee. In these roles, the GCRO found itself fulfilling a discreet intermediary role between functional areas of government. Although GCRO typically works with the provincial government, the pandemic prompted deepening relationships with other levels of government, including municipal and national. It also further cemented GCRO's role as a source of general public-oriented information (e.g. via its 'Map of the Month' project) seeking to put the crisis affecting Gauteng into a more tangible explanatory and spatially-referenced context.

The combination of strong data generation capacity and the expertise of its analysts make GCRO particularly capable of mobilising to respond to a crisis. Strategically, this has resulted in an "ongoing presence in meetings and briefings" held by different layers of government, strengthening the advisory role of the observatory. Yet it also surfaced an interesting additional capacity: as national and provincial governments have become "keener to understand how governance may have shifted during this time" The Office of the Premier tasked the GCRO with convening a number of dialogues on the future of governance in the city-region, drawing among other things on insights derived from the pandemic. and to write up a case study about this. The observatory has thus not only acquired a stronger place in scientific advice, but is experimenting with a (still evidence-based) role in governance reform.

At the same time, the case of GCRO presents a snapshot in the shifting dynamics of urban knowledge mobilisation that the crisis might have initiated. The quality of GCRO's longitudinal, baseline data enables them to provide key insights to decision-makers – both proactively and in response to specific needs and queries. Complementary to its high-quality data is GCRO's skilled staff, who are not only adept at data analytics and curation of information to elicit quick responses from decision-makers but also in navigating interpersonal relationships with government partners. As such, staff were suddenly thrust into the "micropolitics of data" and rapidly learned to negotiate a "very delicate and sensitive political landscape" – resulting in the development of what might be considered the new "social technologies" of science policy

advice.

#### Key Learnings

Strong baseline data and skilled staff equipped GCRO to quickly pivot and play a critical advisory role for government in developing their response to the pandemic. The crisis also revealed a shift in governance across the region and revealed a need for evidence-based reform.

#### Insight case

##### IIHS: embedding observation with a broader 'action research'



Figure 4. IIHS works closely with man levels of government, including that of the state of Tamil Nadu, where the Institute has engaged in a 5-year project on urban sanitation. [Image courtesy of IIHS]

The Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) is a research, teaching and advisory institution based in Bangalore, working primarily in and on Indian cities but also with a vast variety of international engagements in urban research, practice and education. As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, IIHS researchers found themselves "in the 'eye of the storm' in terms of lockdowns, contagions and deep impact of crisis" across the subcontinent which, at time of publication, is amidst the worst hit globally. The work of IIHS not just in data gathering and mobilisation, but also its vision to be 'on the ground' experimenting and working with communities and governments across all levels (national, state, and city) across urban India, set the Institute to face complex challenges from the start of the crisis. At the outset of the pandemic, over six million people were left stranded without access to India's state-provided food support system in Delhi, one of India's megacities where IIHS has been active for many of its twelve years of operation. In response, IIHS staff mobilised their staff skilled in GIS and data analytics to rapidly establish emergency food provision throughout the city where it was most needed, clearly upholding its explicit social inclusion mission and diverting several efforts toward these types of pandemic responses. After an initial emergency response stage (arguably still ongoing), IIHS also began working with state agencies to set up a longer-term system to address questions of food security.

The Institute has also worked extensively with state and city governments throughout the crisis, for example in the state of Tamil Nadu. Building on IIHS' 5-year long engagement with the state government on urban sanitation, IIHS secured personal protective equipment (PPE kits) for at-risk sanitation workers, provided food rations, and created enterprise-based livelihood support programmes for the urban poor. IIHS attributes its ability to address the crisis and ushering in of new social protections to its advantage as an observatory-like institution capable of providing “a sense of continuity” in a context where state data and knowledge capacity is weak. As a result of its research, education, and capacity building activities over more than a decade, IIHS sees itself as serving as a sort of “collective memory” in providing space for reflection and analysis of “where things were, where they might be going, and how new imaginaries can be contested”. This role as a locus for reflection also enabled IIHS to author a high-level report for the Finance Commission of India on the potential of urbanisation to accelerate post-COVID economic recovery, signalling its commitment to strategic advisory support across levels of government. This role, however, is very clearly seen not at odds, but rather complementary, to a more engaged action research capacity that the Institute is now well known for – perhaps characterising the value of observatory-like functions as embedded also within broader urban knowledge institutions, not just as bespoke boundary-spanning mediums like in the case of GCRO.

IIHS was able to step up to respond to an emerging crisis and to support the state in particular areas where it needed to supplement its capacity. This appears to demonstrate the ability of the observatory functions to quickly identify and offer an evidence base not just for advice but also more applied forms of urban action response to crises. This is the result of IIHS's staff skill base in data analytics, qualitative and ethnographic methods and GIS, and its existing knowledge of the areas in which it works, but also of the co-existence of these research activities next to a deep engagement with governments across levels through its extensive practice, research and training engagements, as well as its advocacy and community engagement role. Yet it also surfaces important questions as to the capacity to gather and process data that emerge from the ground up in a moment of severe disruption. As also illustrated poignantly by colleagues based at the Karachi Urban Lab, a question lingers in this and other urban observatory contexts especially (but exclusively) in the Global South: “What are ‘research methods’ at a time of COVID?” ask Karachi-based colleagues, in agreement with IIHS colleagues. “The ‘field’ has been suspended since March” and researchers are more often than not relying on “cell-phone connectivity, using common interlocutors to share stories (and take pictures) and share information whilst those are the very same [interlocutors that are] battling to put a meal on table” whilst they themselves confront deep inequalities. Needless to say, this observation brings about critical questions of positionality for all urban observatories.

#### Key Learnings

As a result of their ongoing activities, IIHS acts as a collective memory of sorts, providing continuity and a strong evidence base to supplement state capacity. In response to the crisis, the Institute was able to act on pre-existing knowledge of the localities in which it works to immediately identify and intervene with social protection measures for the most vulnerable. The pandemic also raised concerns around the ethics of research in a time of crisis.

## THE POSITIONING OF URBAN OBSERVATORIES

Reflections on the vision and mission of observatories and institutions that house observatory functions bring about quite naturally, as the cases of GCRO and IIHS outline, a question of positionality. As a result of their boundary-spanning role, but also the interpretation of this in varied ways around the world, locating common traits in the positionality of urban observatories can be complex.

The broad categories we have identified include institutions hosted at universities, both public and private; at governments, from the local to national level; and independently-hosted, thereby holding not-for-profit, NGO, or private sector status. A typology-based assessment, as attempted in the broader study behind this working paper, should not be understood as strict divisions but rather guides towards understanding traits that these institutions have and the roles that they play in urban governance.

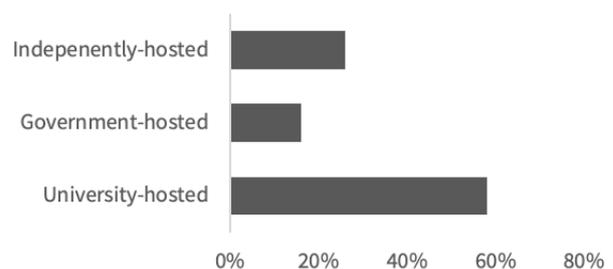


Figure 5: The types of hosting institutions varies between observatories. University-hosted is the most common arrangement, as shown in the chart above.

The positionality of the cases analysed are summarised in the chart above. Equally, the question of positionality brings about considerations on the scale of operation and the frame of reference embedded in the mission of observatories. Our broader research also identified the scale observatories targeted in their activities, hinting at a varied geography when it comes to their “placement” across scales of urban governance.

The largest number (10 observatories) of our thirty-two cases works predominantly at the national scale, or else at the international scale (9), with a smaller group (5) focused at a local scale or (3) with a metropolitan orientation. Much less common, at least in the sample of cases from our broader study, is working at the world-regional scale (e.g. on Southeast Asia or Europe), but also at the sub-national regional scale and at an explicitly where not exclusively community-based scale<sup>1</sup>.

### Insight case

#### SLURC: tackling vulnerability



Figure 6. Previous engagement with communities enabled SLURC to leverage existing platforms to respond quickly to the pandemic. [Image courtesy of SLURC]

Based in Freetown, the Sierra Leone Urban Research Centre (SLURC) provides an example of a community-based observatory. In response to COVID-19, SLURC quickly produced a publicly available policy brief, which drew lessons from the 2014 Ebola epidemic and applied them to COVID-19. This underscored from early days of the pandemic the centrality of “historical” and “institutional memory” when it comes to urban challenges, and the pivotal role an observatory can play on this front. It also underscored, as early writing from much of the development planning community sought to advocate, that much pivotal knowledge about this crisis is valuably held by the many that, in the Global South, bore the brunt of a previously similar situation like Ebola. South-to-South exchange on this front, as well as ideally South-to-North engagements too, stood out clearly as fundamental to draw lessons about COVID-19 response and management from the (very fresh) memory of Ebola.

From this perspective SLURC’s brief highlighted health inequalities as pivotal (with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa), foregrounding the conditions in informal settlements that cause residents to face disproportionately higher rates of infection. SLURC also

<sup>1</sup> Although observatories have been categorised in our wider study based on their primary activities, this division does not preclude observatory work at other scales – rather we aim here to illustrate the most common primary space of operation of these observatories.

worked closely with city authorities in their preparation of a COVID-19 action plan, putting the community realities of informal settlements at the fore of city-level decisions and challenging the “one size fits all” solutions cities typically prioritise. In doing so, SLURC advocated for recognition that COVID-19 is not simply a health issue but rather a complex, intersectional reality, particularly with regards to vulnerability.

SLURC’s work in community mobilisation and capacity building was especially important during the crisis. Prior to the pandemic, SLURC was engaged with multiple levels of government and diverse urban actors through various initiatives such as the City Learning Platform, which was originally designed to be a space for diverse urban actors to come together to develop proposals for upgrading informal settlements. SLURC was then able to leverage these existing platforms to support communities in COVID-19 response. SLURC also immediately acted to sensitise residents of informal settlements to preventative actions while awaiting the government’s official response. As a result of the participatory, action-based research SLURC conducts with a focus on co-researching with communities, the communities were already equipped with the capacity to work with SLURC remotely. This is an important element of the picture painted here and one that stresses the potential for boundary-spanning dynamics not just based on the information itself, but on the ways information is gathered and mobilised.

#### Key Learnings

SLURC plays an important advocacy role for residents in informal settlements, highlighting their vulnerabilities to COVID-19 as the product of a complex, intersectional reality and pushing for an alternative to address these realities at the city decision-making level in contrast to the usual “one size fits all” approach taken by authorities. SLURC’s prior work in community mobilisation and capacity building enabled it to work with communities to rapidly respond to the pandemic.

## 02 MOBILIZING INFORMATION

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Central amidst the functions and rationale for observatories, the role of information dissemination stands out in our broader study as pivotal to understanding how to effectively mobilise urban knowledge. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, the rapid dissemination of relevant information through channels such as social media and shorter written outputs (like blogs) has been a commonplace action taken by observatories, well beyond the case studies presented here. For instance, the Dublin Dashboard, tweeted about a new COVID-19 Health Surveillance Monitor developed at its hosting institution Maynooth University in conjunction with government and a private sector mapping agency. The dashboard shows various graphs and spatial representations of the virus's distribution around Ireland. LSE Cities in London, IHS, Metropolis, and the Urban Resource Centre in Karachi have used Twitter and Facebook to share COVID-relevant videos and articles, while the Seoul Institute in South Korea released a special issue of policy reports, research reports, and trends from other world cities focused on infectious disease.

This is not just a matter of outputs though: observatories in the crisis have often sought to create conversation platforms about the evolving situation and its impacts on the shape of urban development worldwide. For example, the Centre for Liveable Cities in Singapore has tapped into its repository of not just local but also internationally affiliated urban expertise to host a number of COVID-19-related webinars. This repository has resulted from their knowledge exchange and networking activities during normal times, which connected the observatory with skilled individuals and specialised organisations.

As the pandemic took hold, the Centre was able to draw from its network of experts to share insights into how cities are reacting to the pandemic and what cities can do to continue pursuing liveability and sustainability despite the disruption caused by COVID-19. The webinars have since become a regular series called "Cities Adapting to a Disrupted World" in which topics discussed include how cities can thrive in the context of new technologies, social shifts, and the climate crisis. Overall, as our workshop participants point out, much is to be said about the capacity of observatories to animate debates and become platforms for urban conversations, repositories of actionable information but also advocates for different urban stories to be included in the mainstream reporting, which perhaps better attends to the needs of marginalised urban communities.

### LEVERAGING INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

#### Insight case

#### WRI Ross Center: balancing local and global drivers of urban knowledge.



Figure 7. In Kampala, WRI assisted with a non-motorised transport project that began before the pandemic but took on new urgency with the travel restrictions imposed by COVID-19. [Image source: Kikomeko Jackson]

The World Resources Institute (WRI), an international think tank focused on macro-themes across city contexts, presents an interesting case of balancing both the local and international scale of many observatories. Like IHS, WRI sets observatory-like functions within a wider frame of activities. Within the organisation, WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities is perhaps the closest comparator to our other observatory case studies and was taken within the broader study as an example of observatory functions embedded into a wider mandate organisation. While based in Washington D.C., WRI has physical locations in many cities across multiple countries, including Mexico, Brazil, India, and Turkey – this cross-country role stood out clearly as a feature of the Center in its COVID-19 activities.

In response to COVID-19, WRI Ross Center hosted a number of webinars and tapped into its repository of expertise to provide commentary on the situation at hand on topics such as COVID-19's effects on public transportation. Interestingly, and perhaps even more clearly than other case studies presented here, WRI Ross Center's engagement with pandemic responses has been closely focused on "having to highlight the impact [of the crisis] on social systems" like those of health but also how these are tightly interconnected with economic systems (e.g. the job market) and infrastructure (e.g. public transport) – practically orienting its work around a 'systems of systems' conversation on the urban impact of the pandemic.

A complementary focus of WRI Ross Center’s work has been that of national recovery investments and whether or not these attend to needs of urban dwellers (especially the poor) at the city-scale, particularly with regards to “building back better”. WRI Ross Center also hosted a series of COVID-19-related blog posts, providing both local snapshots and international comparative work. This dimension, as with the case of the Metropolis Observatory (discussed in the following section), points at a poignant lesson summarised to us by the WRI Ross Center staff: “we need layers of [urban] knowledge” they reminded us because “local government wants local information but also comparability”. Balancing localised learning with internationalised benchmarking, or at the very least referencing, remains a key challenge for observatories and not just within a crisis. This echoes clearly WRI Ross Center’s unique positioning, as both an international network but also a collection of national offices, and has enabled it to work closely with the cities in which it is located while also “engaging in global conversations about cities so that city policy discussions are shaped by what’s happening on the ground,” and thereby connecting local and global networks of information

Perhaps the context of COVID-19, with limited capacity to dig deeper into local challenges from an analytical standpoint, but also to create solid international assessments in a fast-changing situation, surfaces a valuable question for urban researchers and practitioners as to the local-global balance in urban knowledge mobilisation. As the WRI Ross Center team put it: “the key question is how do we make this seamless? [It is] very easy to be distracted” – and that is even more so when confronting the ‘infodemic’ of knowledge emerging about the COVID-19 situation. This, as we stress below with another explicitly ‘international’ case like that of Metropolis, surfaces a critical tension in the work of observatories and observatory-like institutions. As Metropolis colleagues put it: “How do you manage to keep the global-local tension stable?” Global “attempts at comparisons might often be very inaccurate” but at the same time co-exist with a broad “need and demand for exchange and shared conversations”.

#### Key Learnings

Uniquely positioned at both the international and local scales, WRI Ross Center is primed to connect networks of information between them and demonstrates how these networks can be tapped into as a knowledge resource in a time of crisis. In response to the pandemic, WRI Ross Center foregrounded the impact of the crisis on social systems and the negative knock-on effects in other systems when social systems are strained.

## Insight case

### Metropolis: encouraging policy mobility



Figure 8. Screenshot of a Live Learning Experience organized with United Cities and Local Government as part of the Cities for Global Health initiative. [Image source: United Cities and Local Government World Secretariat]

The Metropolis Observatory is a project of the World Association of the Major Metropolises, also known as Metropolis, whose Secretariat General is based in Barcelona. Like

WRI in the US, and perhaps even more clearly than these cases, Metropolis activated its network of members (local and regional governments of major cities and metropolitan areas worldwide) to mobilise knowledge in response to COVID-19. Amidst other initiatives, Metropolis created, in collaboration with United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) and the Euro-Latin-American Alliance of Cooperation among Cities (AL-LAs) the Cities for Global Health platform, which was complemented with the Emergency Governance Initiative for Cities and Regions. Cities for Global Health is a repository where members of Metropolis’s network, as well as non-members, can submit and share COVID-19 responses with one another. The Emergency Governance Initiative for Cities and Regions, developed in partnership with LSE Cities and UCLG, also seeks to build “vertical and horizontal urban governance capacity” in response to COVID-19. Using data from the Cities for Global Health repository, the Initiative has been providing an ‘Emergency Transitions Monitor’ of ways in which cities and regions are transitioning in and out of emergency modes – focusing again on research-driven brokering of policy mobility between local governments. Both of these are clear examples aimed at “encourag[ing] information sharing and policy mobility” typical of city networks, and perhaps offering an important snapshot as to the valuable boundary spanning role observatories can play not just locally but across jurisdictions and continents. By creating these resources, Metropolis animated its network to produce a resource for different localities figuring out how to appropriately respond to the pandemic. This stressed the value of observatories linking to observatories, like in the case of Metropolis’s connections to GCRO through the Gauteng Provincial Government (one of its 141 members).

As noted, in the work of Metropolis, “there are [about] 15 local observatories (like GCRO) supporting and feeding into some of this [platform] work” – further amplifying the value of boundary-spanning urban knowledge mobilisation beyond the ‘local’. Yet this also resulted in a vast variety of knowledge gathered fast on a platform but also not necessarily having strict analytical plans in place from the outset. Interestingly, as Metropolis colleagues noted, the willingness of organisations to contribute to the projects perhaps also hinted at a “shared anxiety” about what to do with all the data gathered by these data institutions. The virus thus presented a problem that aligns with the function of a city network-based observatory because it created cause for “extending and engaging across boundaries for a challenge that does not care about boundaries”.

Yet this also raises important questions as to the mechanics of evidence-driven policy mobility and knowledge circulation in international city networks. From this perspective it is interesting to note that, as the pandemic brought large city-based exchanges to a relative halt in terms of travel and mobility, Metropolis colleagues highlighted how this reality might contribute to a “shifting of work toward less resource intensive exchanges from the congresses and large events” that characterized pre-pandemic operations by entities like city networks. In turn, however, this has also underscored in at least some cases how networks (not just of cities but also of urban research as for GCRO, IHS or KUL) prompted people to further value, as Metropolis colleagues put it, “the international connections made and the importance and usefulness of them in everyday urban policy” especially in a moment of crisis.

#### Key Learnings

As a network of local and regional governments, Metropolis animated its members to establish multiple information-sharing initiatives in response to the crisis. In doing so, Metropolis encourages policy mobility and cross-boundary engagement. The crisis also highlighted a shift towards decentralising information-sharing from large, in-person exchanges and events to sharing platforms accessible anywhere.

## MIXING OUTPUTS AND ADVOCACY

The diversity of outputs produced by observatories range from written work to education, training, and advisory services, as shown in the chart below. Typically, observatories produce multiple output types, with 88% doing so.

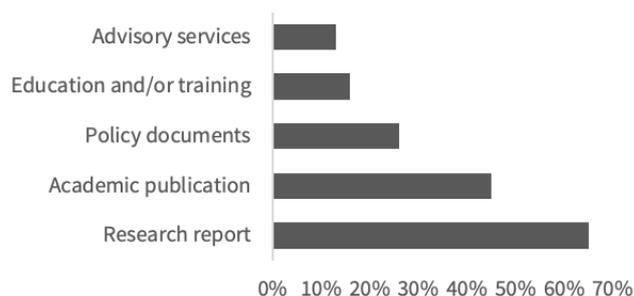


Figure 9: The various output types produced by observatories is captured above, with research reports being the most common.

### Insight case

#### Karachi Urban Lab: dealing with complexity



Figure 10. KUL is an urban research centre nested within a public university in Karachi. Starr are pictured here at work. [Image courtesy of KUL]

The Karachi Urban Lab (KUL)’s mission, focused on “nurturing ideas” that “enable explorations and connections” between “research, teaching, public policy dialogue and advocacy”, is certainly closely attuned to a boundary-spanning role. Similar to GCRO, KUL has been able to draw on a wide suite of urban analytics capacities, ranging from “GIS mapping to qualitative/quantitative surveys to archival history”. Differently from GCRO, the Lab is “nested” within a local academic department in a public university in Karachi but entirely funded by international grants – a feature that in turn has been shaping KUL’s positionality both in reach for engagement as well as an active player within local communities.

Akin to SLURC and IIHS, KUL's pre-pandemic work had already sown the seeds of an active role in bridging between research, crisis response and community engagement. Accompanying its land displacement project, the issue of "providing support between communities" has become central to the activity of the Lab during the time of COVID-19. From this perspective it has become apparent to KUL colleagues that, different from the other insight cases presented the "the space of the government engagement is harder" within Pakistan's urban landscape, presenting a governance structure inherently "fragmented, fractured, and yet centralised" with limited degrees of direct policy advice provided to central government. From this perspective, a remark from Bangalore-based IIHS colleagues is equally helpful: as they argue, "the systems within which global South observatories operate are systems where governments by and large still have cracks and opinions for alternative possibilities;" there are, the IIHS (and possibly also the KUL) experience flag, a "whole range of emergent possibilities and potentially a whole range of new opportunities surfacing from the South if we pay attention to them."

This bridging and advocacy role, fast expanded from a specific focus on land and food to wider demands on the Lab's capacity to support communities, goes hand in hand with an additional avenue of work emerging from the crisis and showing a continued value for localisation and local advocacy – even at a national scale. In addition to the reports and papers KUL has written in response to COVID-19, its relationship with the media has proven to be a key mode of information dissemination. Whereas most academics in Pakistan primarily produce English outputs, KUL explicitly has begun engaging with the Urdu media as a means to connect directly to communities, particularly those with which it works. By engaging with the media, KUL has been able to clearly articulate its agenda and findings throughout the crisis. And through its engagement with the Urdu media as well as the English media, the lab has used language as a basis for reaching a wider audience when disseminating information. KUL has also played a role in challenging state-sanctioned narratives about Pakistan throughout the crisis. An article published in the Wall Street Journal describes Pakistan as a "bright spot" amidst the crisis, reporting that the country has successfully controlled the virus – a remarkable feat when compared to neighbouring India and to Brazil, which has a similar population size.

The reality on the ground captured by KUL, however, tells a less uplifting story of state disorganisation, with residents of informal settlements unable to access food rations, health centres, or welfare checks, and "deliberate and very strategic" state-led obfuscation of data in order to "give it the leverage to do whatever it wishes and wants". In this context, the Lab plays an important role in challenging the prevailing narratives and gathering and analysing much-needed data in a state where urban knowledge deficits are sizeable, often being equated by KUL colleagues as "working 'in the dark.'" Researchers and activities, as they note, are dealing with "ground realities that are deeply unclear and murky" further compound by a "particularly complex" realm of governance where it is often hard to "understand how local government and local governance dynamics can function".

In a reality like COVID-19, ripe not just for fast-changing situations but also misinformation, it becomes essential for observatories like KUL to play a grounded role whilst "trying to stay abreast of these dynamics particularly hard amidst confusion." Yet in turn, this question of activity goes back to the issues of vision and positionality we started the workshop report with. As KUL colleagues humbly put it, and certainly as echoed by others in the likes of GCRO and IIHS, "COVID-19 [has been] a very steep learning curve for KUL and a space for experimentation as to the role of a research centre" – a lesson essential for all observatories looking introspectively in a time like this pandemic crisis.

#### Key Learnings

Like SLURC, KUL played an important advocacy role throughout the pandemic. Using its existing community relationships, KUL was able to produce evidence-based challenges to prevailing state narratives about Karachi's progress in dealing with the virus, instead calling attention to the harsher realities on the ground. The crisis exposed substantial data deficits, some of which were state-sanctioned – a trend KUL is actively working against.

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## 03 BEYOND THE PANDEMIC?

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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore a number of existing strengths and opportunities for improvement for urban observatories. Having a repository of baseline data and networks of information that can quickly be acted upon in a time of crisis, for example, has proven to be invaluable for observatories as boundary institutions driven by the production of advice and evidence-based input into decision-making. This baselining approach can ensure some resilience of the data systems to the next crisis, whether that be another pandemic, a natural disaster, or another unexpected fault. And, in fact, this approach has perhaps revealed the weakness of state data capacities that was larger than previously known. In the case of KUL, for example, the intentional gaps left in state data, which prior to the pandemic enabled a high degree of state control, left the state unable to properly address the crisis at hand. WRI and Metropolis both provide illustrative accounts of the impact that leveraging existing networks can have, connecting the local and global scales in addressing complex challenges like the pandemic. GCRO and IIHS speak volumes to the capacity of long-established observatories, or urban knowledge institutions with some observatory functions, to mobilise solid skills, datasets and techniques to an even greater role in their respective urban research and practice missions.

Observatories were not only called upon for their access to data and networks, but also for their access to research knowledge. Specialists from GCRO and IIHS, for example, have been deeply engaged at multiple levels of government to provide a variety of inputs on, for instance, spatial analytical skills or evidence mobilisation processes that the state lacked. In the case of GCRO, this resulted in over half of the GCRO staff transitioning to COVID response roles working closely with the state. These cases lay bare the capacity-filling role that observatories have come to play and the crisis itself revealed the states' reliance on these boundary-spanning institutions.

In addition to the value of adapting existing strengths and products, observatories also perform significant work in mobilising communities, and 'standing in' to form effective bridges between these and decision-makers. SLURC's previous work with residents of informal settlements and across multiple levels of government in Freetown allowed the observatory to use its existing platforms to advocate for a city-level response to conditions in informal settlements, advocate for recognition that the pandemic is not simply a health crisis, and galvanise resident responses to the virus where the state had yet to do so. Likewise, KUL provided an essential service in bringing to light the very different realities on the ground as compared to those purported by the state.

At the same time the crisis has influenced what the observatories in question here have been working on, possibly becoming (as KUL colleagues put it) a laboratory for experimentation and introspection critical to these institutions' evolution. For instance we have noted how WRI's work has shifted, because of COVID-19, towards a greater focus on the microeconomies and social economies of cities, for example examining what jobs have been lost, who those are who have lost their jobs, and what has to be done to get the jobs back "not just to the cities, but back to those people".

Observatories faced challenges deploying new research methods in the face of the pandemic, particularly with regards to working remotely. Heavier reliance on mobile phones and video conferencing has become the new reality, however limitations, such as the infrastructure to support these technologies, still need to be addressed. New voices are also emerging from the crisis through their work with observatories through the pandemic, such as the unions of informal workers in India working with IIHS. Using these technologies, however, comes with a whole additional suite of ethical dilemmas. Commonly cited reflections from the observatories who participated in the workshop revolved around data privacy concerns and the intrusiveness of remote data collection in a time of crisis. It also underscored the necessity to think carefully of the 'subjects' of research and the providers of data, be they urban dwellers in vulnerable communities doubling as research informants, or indeed local governments battling the crisis from around the world feeding valuable case studies of policy action from across the span of international networks.

At the heart of the situation, the pandemic revealed a tension between what is perhaps an overload of data and information emerging from the crisis and the need for reliable and credible information in decision-making when tackling what is a multifaceted crisis, not just a health hazard, in urban areas. Looking forward, reflections from the observatories highlight a role that may be well-suited for these boundary institutions: that of the broker mediating between the speed of demand and the need for establishing solid longitudinal data. As our cases have shown, there is a pressing need for institutions which can support evidence-based decision-making at the city level, made all the clearer by the pandemic. In light of this demonstrated need, initial calls from participants but indeed also from our wider study as to the need for various layers of government to pay attention to (or even establish) urban observatories in their own localities are clear. Similarly, demands for an ongoing conversation, grounded in valuable South-to-South and South-to-North exchanges of the likes that we attempted here stand out as critical. These discussions can heed a better appreciation of the value and

possibilities of observatories in a moment of deep disruptions and strengthen both a sense of community in their everyday activities with colleagues from far away realities embedded in similar challenges. Critically, these exchanges may engender greater capacity building for urban researchers to bridge urban knowledge and action.’

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