

The importance of being networked

Cities are a breeding place for innovation in an increasingly urbanized world. Networks of local urban organizations specialized in generating and sharing knowledge are playing an important role in addressing urban development and poverty.

The world has become urbanized and is gradually transforming into a network society. Two contradictory trends characterize urban development today. On the one hand, cities are increasingly becoming part of globalized economies and have to respond to global environmental concerns, and, on the other hand, they are increasingly being managed by decentralized systems of governance. In addition, the urban world is going through a rapid pace of change. In many countries, this has challenged urban poverty and sustainability strategies. Fortunately, cities are often a breeding place for innovative solutions and entrepreneurship, and have an enormous potential to adapt to ever-changing circumstances.

It is widely agreed that there is a need to invest more extensively in the generation and dissemination of urban knowledge if this potential is to be realized. But there is also a concern that conventional methods, such as academic research or classroom training, may not be appropriate. In this context, the concept of Local Urban Knowledge Arenas (LUKAs) is being explored as a form of knowledge management that provides a flexible way of generating, accessing, sharing and applying demand-based knowledge for local development.

The Swedish International Development Agency introduced the term Local Urban Knowledge Arena during the World Urban Forum in 2007. It is closely related to concepts introduced by influential scholars, like Charles

By **Banashree Banerjee, Leon van den Dool, Maartje van Eerd** and **Saskia Ruijsink**. Banerjee is an urban management consultant based in New Delhi, India. Van Eerd and Ruijsink work at the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Van den Dool works at PricewaterhouseCoopers and Tilburg University.

summary

- In 2007, the Swedish International Development Agency introduced the term Local Urban Knowledge Arena (LUKA) during the World Urban Forum.
- LUKAs contribute to urban development by involving a variety of actors in their activities, from non-governmental organizations, academia and the media, to trade union representatives and important local citizens.
- Though LUKAs cannot solve the problems of the urban poor on their own, they can provide these communities with information and empower them with knowledge.
- Setting up a global network of LUKAs is the way forward, but building up a reliable knowledge base will take considerable time, money and effort.

Landry, founder of Comedia publishing house, and Tim Campbell, chairman of the Urban Change Institute, such as the 'creative city' and the 'learning city'. They argue that cities can deal with many challenges and changes – but only if they have the capacity to be innovative, to be creative and to learn. LUKAs can play an important role in achieving this.

What LUKAs look like

LUKAs are often largely informal networks of organizations and individuals whose activities are meant to benefit the urban poor and contribute to urban development. Research and practice typically converge in the activities of LUKAs. Some LUKAs focus on creating awareness, organizing neighbourhood activities and conducting workshops and campaigns. They do advocacy work and try to influence policy makers. Other LUKAs are primarily knowledge networks that focus on collecting and generating applied knowledge that addresses urban problems. Social relevance is



By connecting the lines between the academic world, NGOs and policy makers would promote adequate urban development

a key aspect of their research, unlike much academic research, which primarily focuses on excellence, reputation and ranking.

LUKAs are found in different parts of the world, in different forms and with different concerns, but all within the broad field of knowledge management for urban development. Examples are Slum Dwellers International (with branches in many cities), the South African Cities Network, the Foro Ciudades para la Vida from Peru, the Urban Resource Centre (URC) in Karachi, Pakistan and the Center for the Built Environment (CBE) in Kolkata, India.

One strength of LUKAs is that they focus on generating and sharing knowledge for citywide development issues, including, though not exclusively, poverty reduction. This also explains why there is increased interest from other actors in cities, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local governments, businesses, universities and community groups to cooperate with LUKAs. The flexible and informal structure of most LUKAs allows them to do so on an ad hoc basis, depending on the relevance of the issue.

The majority of LUKAs are membership organizations whose members pay a contribution to join. Some LUKAs are supported by donations and grants from individuals, organizations, local or national governments, or multilateral or bilateral donors. Other networks completely depend on the contribution of their members, such as the URC.

Empowering the poor in Pakistan

The URC was initiated as an urban study group in Karachi consisting of people from the department of architecture and

planning at the Dawood College of Engineering and the Orangi Pilot Project, an NGO involved in upgrading the slum in Katchi Abadis in Orangi Town in the north-western part of Karachi. They set up the Urban Resource Centre in 1989.

Twenty years later, the URC still plays an important role in informing urban residents about the government's plans for the city. The issues the URC currently deals with are transport and infrastructure, water and sanitation, solid waste management, evictions and street vendors. The URC organizes discussion forums where experts from universities, independent city experts and government officials are invited to discuss a particular issue with community members.

The URC alone cannot solve the problems of poor communities. But it can provide the poor with information and empower these communities with knowledge. The URC publishes newsletters, articles, booklets and pamphlets. Knowledge dissemination, which is an important tool for mobilizing communities, plays a key role in the URC's work.

One of the URC's success stories is its involvement in the Karachi Mass Transit project. The local government had plans to build six corridors of light transit railways, the first of which would cost US\$668 million. The URC objected that the elevated transit would be an environmental disaster in the inner city and adversely affect its built heritage. Moreover, to cover the costs of the project railway fares would be unaffordable for lower- and lower-middle income families. The URC suggested that an abandoned circular railway be renovated instead, which would cost a fraction of the price of the elevated railway's first corridor and serve a far larger area to boot.



The URC presented its case through articles and letters in the press and in meetings with government agencies. It formed a committee comprising planners, economists and activists to evaluate the mass transit project and identify possible alternatives. The URC met with communities and shopkeepers along the corridor to explain the mass transit project and its environmental repercussions. The URC then held a major forum inviting World Bank consultants involved in the project, mass transit officials, academia, the media, trade union representatives, shopkeepers' organizations and important citizens.

The forum was reported extensively in the media, and it sparked a major debate in and outside the media. This resulted in major changes to the Karachi Mass Transit Project and the development of proposals for the revitalization and extension of the abandoned circular railway. The most important accomplishment of this process was the creation of an extensive, informal network consisting of NGOs, community organizations, the media, concerned citizens, professionals, academic institutions and central government departments. This network still exists and becomes operative when the need arises.

Today, the URC is still working locally in Karachi. Apart from receiving some financial support, it does not have ties with international organizations and networks.

The URC is not the only LUKA operating in Pakistan. There is another research centre based in Lahore, the Punjab Resource Centre, and new resource centres in Rawalpindi and Multan. The URC provides technical support to these new resource centres, but the latter operate independently. Similar resource centres that are inspired by the URC's work are also being set up outside Pakistan, for example in Sri Lanka, South Africa, Mongolia and Kazakhstan.

Two types of LUKAs

The URC is a typical example of a LUKA that focuses on knowledge dissemination and advocacy. It shares the following characteristics with other such LUKAs:

- Mainly informal rules and loosely organized structures
- Committed and (often highly trained) volunteers
- A history as a local initiative
- A single-city focus
- Closely related to important issues in the city
- Good access to local media, local politicians and local community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations
- Some have sister organizations in other cities

Another type of LUKA is one that focuses on generating knowledge. It has the following characteristics:

- Highly qualified and full-time professional staff
- A formal organizational structure that has informal relations with other groups
- Partners with research skills and experience who work on joint projects
- Professional secretariat staff who are experienced in tendering procedures, competing for research funds and using changing partnerships beyond a single city

The Centre for the Built Environment (CBE) is an example of a LUKA that focuses on generating knowledge. The CBE was established in 1991 as a voluntary professional organization in Kolkata, the third largest city in India. The members are architects, city planners and environmental engineers. The founders felt that the city lacked a forum for innovative thinking on current issues related to the built environment. In the past 15 years, the CBE has established networks and partnerships in India and worldwide with universities, NGOs, professional organizations of architects, engineers and environmentalists, global and regional forums for sustainable development, and donors and private businesses.

This has helped to bring together knowledge and experience from all over the world for building local capacity in Kolkata. Students of architecture and planning, who get the opportunity at the CBE to receive the professional exposure and experience that goes beyond their conventional university education, also benefit from this.

The direct beneficiaries of the CBE network are professionals working in the field of the built environment, mainly architects, planners, environmental engineers, NGOs, social scientists, and students and researchers who transfer their knowledge to their own workplaces. Thus, local urban institutions, community groups and the citizens of Kolkata are indirect beneficiaries of the CBE's activities.

An example of the CBE's engagement with participatory urban governance is its public awareness campaign for riverfront development through the media, NGO forums and international seminars. The CBE also organized public lectures by the chairman of the London Rivers Association, an NGO that has been instrumental in keeping the Thames clean and that had developed a programme for the renewal of part of Kolkata's waterfront.

The result was a mass movement which pressured civic authorities to develop the Millennium Park on the riverfront instead of the earlier planned multi-storeyed luxury apartments and shopping mall. Another activity was to organize an international workshop on urban agriculture and aquaculture. The dual purpose was to share Kolkata's experience of managing its wetlands and bring international examples to the city. This stimulated Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority to use treated waste water for fisheries and agriculture in the city's periphery.

Global networks for local needs

It would be wrong to think that LUKAs only operate within single cities. Indeed, they often exchange knowledge and are linked with networks in other cities, and some cooperate at a national, or even international level. In fact, the CBE's access to global networks and international institutions has given it an edge over other knowledge institutions in the city. Most LUKA members clearly value the usefulness of better access to knowledge and knowledge networks. One strategy to achieve this is by creating global urban knowledge networks (GUKN).

A GUKN is an international system for networking and managing urban knowledge. It has a supportive role and acts as a knowledge resource for urban development, mainly in



Generating knowledge for urban development requires making use of networks

developing countries. GUKNs have some potential core components: databases, a website for access to data and information, a series of state-of-the-art reports, a series of workshops and conferences. Examples of existing GUKNs are the European Urban Knowledge Network for European Union members, UN-HABITAT's Global Land Tenure Network and Local Governments for Sustainability.

In order to be effective and useful, these networks require sufficient resources for management and support, most often provided by donors. This is a tricky issue because LUKA members are wary about the possible compromises and loss of autonomy that such donor relationships imply.

Looking for a good fit

LUKAs that originated from local initiatives focus in particular on issues that the organization's partners consider especially important for the city. The founders of a LUKA are generally highly committed individuals, who inevitably influence its agenda. But these LUKAs are also vulnerable as organizations since they depend on a small number of inspirational people and often lack paid, professional staff. Donor funds can help redress this situation, but they also introduce new dilemmas.

LUKAs need organizational structures that are a good fit with the challenging context of the cities in which they operate. The Centre for the Built Environment in Kolkata and the Urban Resource Centre in Karachi both value their independence and are apprehensive that donor support might influence their agendas and flexibility. The perception is that donor funding may require a LUKA to bind itself to a project document or issue of the donor's liking, which may not be so relevant for the city or for LUKA members over time. In other words, commitments to donors may result in a lack of flexibility to respond to changing local priorities. Another perception is that acquiring funds from donors is a lengthy process of applying, reporting and monitoring, which is especially problematic for small organizations.

Both the CBE and the URC, however, have identified some types of support that will not compromise their autonomy. Examples include financial support for basic institutional infrastructure, such as spaces for a library and meetings, facilities for storing knowledge and publishing and distributing newsletters and other publications, website maintenance and web links to different knowledge networks.

Polis, the Social Policies Studies, Training and Advisory Institute in Brazil, is a good example of a LUKA that has developed the capacity to be linked to important international networks without compromising the autonomy of its own local network. In other words, it has avoided becoming 'an enclave'. The institute works on the principle that anyone operating at the local level must take advantage of the accumulated experience at the national and international levels.

At the same time, the institute believes that local experience provides insights that enable the search for and emergence of responsive concepts. Polis aligns itself with international organizations that share its concerns for human rights, social justice and inclusive development. These organizations are responsible for 70% of the funds channelled to Polis, which are primarily used for publications and institutional development. The donors in this case have a more comprehensive relationship with Polis than just providing funds and have therefore clearly strengthened local dialogue.

The nature of global networks

There is a great potential for GUKNs and LUKAs to benefit from each other. GUKNs can provide much needed knowledge support to LUKAs and they, in turn, can improve the quality and extent of their knowledge products by tapping into the local experiences of LUKAs and making them available for peer learning.

However, GUKNs are likely to be more successful if their activities and services reflect the demands and concerns of LUKAs rather than those of funding agencies. At present, the agenda of GUKNs is driven by funding agencies. This could weaken the sustainability of the network in the long run. LUKAs should therefore become specific clients or even members that have a say in how and what knowledge is managed by GUKNs.

Setting-up a global network would require long-term investments. It would take considerable time to build up a reliable and dynamic knowledge base and manage it in a way that is accessible, due to copyright difficulties, for example. The input will be higher than the output during the first years in terms of funds, time and network building, but worth the trouble considering the potential benefits to LUKAs. ■

-
- Van den Dool, L., Van Eerd, M. and Ruijsink, S. (2011) *Supporting Local Urban Knowledge Arenas: How Can Knowledge Networks Contribute to Urban Development?* Lambert Academic Publishing.
 - Nyström, M. and Lindgren, E.S. (2005) *A Research Agenda for Africa: Sustainable Urban Development and Environment*. SIDA, Stockholm, Sweden.