

Urban Transformations

Scoping Report on Research Priorities

1. Purpose.....	1
2. Wider context.....	2
Sources of transformation.....	2
A changing global context	3
3. Thematic topics.....	4
Social Innovation and Digital Technology	4
Environment, Resilience, and Urban Vulnerability.....	5
Urban Economies.....	6
4. Cross cutting issues	7
Inequalities, Diversities and Difference.....	7
Politics, Contestation and Governance.....	8
Annex I.....	10
Expert Group Membership.....	10

1. Purpose

The ESRC has identified urban transformations as a potential topic for strategic future investment to ensure the social sciences contribute to emerging research, policy and practice needs. The themes of cities and urbanisation already feature in ESRC’s investment portfolio and our aim with this work has been to seek opportunities to augment our existing portfolio by: identifying research gaps; needs and opportunities for data resources and capacity building; and the appropriate mechanisms for the translation of research into policy and practice.

To develop that commitment we appointed an Expert Group (see Annex I) to identify key urban research themes and issues as well as opportunities for collaboration in the UK and overseas. The group produced initial position papers on the following themes: urban society, urban informatics and big data, environment and sustainability, urban resilience, economics and finance, civil society, inequality and exclusion, and governance and government. From our discussions of those papers we have identified for further exploration three broad themes or topics for urban social science, intersected by two areas of cross cutting issues.

The three themes are:

- Social Innovation and Digital Technology
- Environment, Resilience and Urban Vulnerability
- Urban Economies

The two cross-cutting areas are:

- Inequalities, Diversities and Difference
- Politics, Contestation and Governance

In addition to the key themes and cross cutting issue areas, the work of the Expert Group has highlighted the salience of three perspectives that are threaded across the research themes and should be reflected in ESRC's overall portfolio of work. First, the recognition that a portfolio on cities and urban transformations should be founded on comparative urban research while also recognising that global trends and challenges play out in a range of urban contexts including neighbourhoods, town and cities. Second, the availability of big data has the potential to improve planning, management and governance across a range of urban sectors. Third, the portfolio will encourage the development and use of innovative research methods in comparative urban settings.

We have tested our thinking with a wide group of stakeholders, including academics, policy makers and practitioners at a Town Hall Meeting who confirmed the relevance of the research priorities identified by the Expert Group. This paper sets out the themes and issues, as informed by their feedback, in more detail. Its purpose is to inform ESRC's thinking about the development of its urban research portfolio and inputs the ESRC makes in wider exchanges about social science, interdisciplinary work and collaborative opportunities with other research councils. The themes and cross-cutting issues are intended as an organising framework for thinking about the relevant research questions for addressing the challenges urban societies face.

2. Wider context

Sources of transformation

Major changes are taking place in cities across the globe, both in developed countries and in the developing world where the pace of change is accelerating. The majority of people now live in urban areas and the urban population in developing countries will reach 50 per cent by 2030. Much of the increase is taking place in smaller towns and cities that are undergoing rapid growth and transformation. Cities play a fundamental role in shaping patterns of growth, innovation and resilience which impact in complex ways on the wellbeing of urban citizens and have effects on wider regional economies. While generating a host of fresh policy challenges, urban transformations are also the source of potential solutions for harnessing economic and environmental change for societal progress.

The private sector is responding to the growth potential of urban areas with fresh flows of investment, resulting in the spatial concentration of capital, skills and resources, and creating new sources of prosperity and inequality. New technologies are creating more integrated networks through which citizens can access big data and hold public authorities to account, and generating innovative business opportunities which create new sources of employment and income. Cities are also vulnerable to the risks of environmental change which impact forcibly on the most socially excluded urban populations, creating novel patterns of resilience and policy response.

A social science perspective is vital for understanding the impact and significance of these transformations for the welfare and wellbeing of urban citizens across the globe. These transformations are producing or reframing existing problems and generating complex opportunities and challenges for policy makers, practitioners and local communities. The increasing resurgence of policy interest in cities offers a major opportunity for social science research to generate fresh evidence, shape debates and to devise solutions for major urban policy challenges in the UK and internationally. The results of such research should also have relevance for practice and offer findings that are relevant for business, civil society and local community groups.

A changing global context

The ESRC undertook an important research programme on cities a decade ago. But we believe it is important to return to those issues again because we have seen substantial changes since then. The economic and policy context in the UK at that time was very different. It was set in a period of national and global economic boom and urban investment – not in austerity and disinvestment. Government policy was expansive and interventionist rather than minimalist. Instead of stability there is now uncertainty in many British cities about the future of employment, housing, energy, security, community relations, social cohesion, the financial viability of cities, and the impact of devolution. But this is not a parochial phenomenon. We recognise these concerns are global even though the experience of them is diverse. Urban conditions in developing countries are extremely varied with extensive differences in governmental institutions, and in their capacity and remit. Some cities are experiencing rapid population expansion in high growth environments, while others are growing but not generating economic opportunities. Others are expanding but experience conflict and violence. Many cities lack effective governance and genuine citizen engagement.

Across the globe there is a varied pattern of economic recession, fiscal austerity, and state restructuring as well as challenges to those developments by social movements. Urban areas are engines of mobility and circulation – of people, money, ideas, disease etc. - and new forms of communication and connection. They are also the sites of the regulation of populations and movements and forms of immobility and restriction. This is taking place as the speed and scale of technological change globally is having a major impact on how we live, work, play and communicate in our cities and in our urban systems, conferring benefits and costs on different people and places in unpredictable ways.

These developments have changed views about the nature and scale of urban government, its relationship with the private sector and responsibility for delivering services. It has also raised issues about governance, transparency, accountability and democracy. Concerns about social class, power, poverty, and social, ethnic and territorial inequality are much further up the current agenda. So any new portfolio of work must try to explain what has been happening to different communities and people in different cities, countries and continents during the past few decades, and explore the future implications for policy makers and researchers.

Strengthening city government will be crucial both for growth and prosperity, to address critical environmental policy issues and strengthen political legitimacy. City leaders play a vital role in urban governance and are driving policy innovation and promoting new forms of civic participation. How citizens engage with formal and informal institutions in urban

settings shapes their ability to secure services, benefit from new technologies, and access economic opportunities and ultimately conditions the legitimacy and effectiveness of political institutions in city environments. We believe we need comparative research on such issues. This raises two key questions: What kinds of institutions meet public expectations of legitimate and responsive government and encourage public engagement in different urban contexts? And which institutions best meet demands for public goods and address complex, multiple problems at a city level when resources are scarce?

3. Thematic topics

Based on discussions with our Expert Group and following wider stakeholder engagement we have identified the following themes, issues and questions as important areas to be reflected in ESRC's investment portfolio.

Social Innovation and Digital Technology

Individuals and groups in a range of urban settings are using a variety of means including digital technology to inform and improve their own life chances and the lives of those around them through creating: new spaces for civic participation and collective action; new forms of employment; and social innovations at a variety of scales generating new patterns of care and responsibility. Social science plays a significant role in developing new insights into the ways in which urban living is experienced and shaped by urban inhabitants. There is a need to better understand the conditions in which social innovation can thrive, what approaches work in what contexts in terms of achieving social goals, and whether successful interventions can be transferred or scaled up to other contexts. There's also an opportunity to apply new methodologies to understanding the creation and changing nature of social networks and flows of information.

Current dominant narratives around 'smart' or 'intelligent' cities and the 'internet of things' highlight the significance of digital technology, as well as the data traces it can generate, in influencing how people live or could live in urban areas. These agendas state the huge potential for: improving how urban areas are understood and managed and creating new forms of citizen participation at the institutional level. There's a need for social science to investigate these claims; to understand the real and imagined consequences of these interventions for urban development as well as the urban commons; to ensure social innovation is recognised as a key element of contemporary urban change and 'smart' societies and spaces; as well as to reveal what is not 'seen' in how smart cities are being conceptualised by some groups.

Also, access to digital technology is unequal and uneven, and how this impacts on urban social and spatial patterns is inadequately understood. While some social groups might reasonably be expected to benefit from trends toward distribution of services and opportunities through digital media, others may not have access to, or the ability or appetite to make use of such media. Digitally disconnected groups in urban areas might be expected to include more generally disadvantaged groups, such as ageing populations, the poor, and ethnic minorities, although it is important for research to question such assumptions to better understand diversity in forms of community and connection, and the causes and impacts of both social and digital disconnection.

Research questions might include:

- How are individuals and groups using technology at different scales, as well as other means, to participate in the urban process but also to create opportunities for social innovation and change?
- What are the potentials, barriers, and opportunities for new ways of engaging communities, public services, the private and voluntary sectors through enhanced digital access?
- How digital divides in access to online services in, for example, housing, public services, and retailing affect different groups – the elderly, the poor, ethnic minorities?
- How issues of privacy, confidentiality, and security which are being transformed by digital data, impact on the spatial forms, accessibility and polarisation in cities?

Environment, Resilience, and Urban Vulnerability

Urban societies face challenges of resource use, green space, species conservation, biodiversity, pollution, security, public service provision, population growth and adapting to climate change. A diverse range of terms are used to describe these particular challenges and the ways in which they might be addressed, alongside the now long-standing concern with urban sustainability. Challenges associated with the urban environment have come to be described and determined through a set of languages concerning vulnerability, security, risk, resilience, adaptation, low carbon, and smart cities. Social science can provide valuable insights into how, why, by and for whom the urban environment, and ‘the environment’ more generally, has come to be understood in these terms, and the consequences for urban socialities and the politics and economics of urban development.

While research has provided useful insights into the characteristics and social contexts which may lead individuals to be more or less at risk or more or less resilient, there is less understanding of how risk and resilience are produced through the socio-technical and socio-ecological systems that go to make up urban areas. Shifting perspective from individuals to urban networks, infrastructures and systems may have profound consequences for how we conceive of resilience and sustainability, as well as for how we adapt and intervene to address these challenges in the urban environment. It may also require engagement with a range of diverse theoretical perspectives which have yet to be brought to bear on these issues, and methodological approaches which enable researchers to look beyond specific urban locations to consider the wider economic, social and political systems through which vulnerability, security, risk, resilience, and sustainability are both produced and undermined.

A multitude of responses to the changing urban environments, largely in terms of vulnerability to environmental hazard, have taken place over the past two decades, from large scale planning endeavours, to smaller scale neighbourhood and community interventions. Some of these responses have been led by public authorities, and still more are being undertaken by private corporations, not-for-profit organisations and community-based groups. Some such responses have been explicit, while other responses depend on professionals, workers, and citizens working in their ordinary capacities. There is a critical need to understand how and why such responses have and have not been effective.

Research questions might include:

- What forms of knowledge and which organisations are involved in the production of these visions, their circulation and articulation?
- How can new forms of spatial data assist in understanding these issues?
- How have successful initiatives been accomplished at the local level and what are the barriers to success?
- What innovations in governance systems and structures are likely to enable governments to respond effectively to predicted increases in the depth and scale of vulnerabilities to environmental hazards?

Urban Economies

We need to improve our understanding of how urban economies – both formal and informal - function in different global contexts. In a number of developing country contexts rapid urbanisation presents governments with huge policy challenges around recognition and regulation of economic activity. High levels of the informal economic activity characterise cities in the global South including among countries that already have high levels of urbanisation. By contrast, in the developed world long term urbanisation rates are broadly stable. But within many, there has been recent urban resurgence after a long period of relative decline - if often unevenly experienced across the urban system. In addition the availability of better micro-data on individuals and firms and better administrative data on policies is driving empirical investigation of urban economies. The emergence of Big Data will also play an increasing role.

This is a huge field with many possible lines of inquiry. However we have identified three areas that warrant exploration.

Spatial concentration and urban economic performance – costs and benefits. Increasing our understanding of the effects of spatial concentration and deconcentration is crucial to improving our understanding of urban economies. We also need to understand how spatial concentration within the city affects urban economies and the role of the private sector.

- What are the effects of agglomeration economies and diseconomies for a wider set of outcomes – entrepreneurship and innovation, services, and sectors??
- How do government policies, planning regimes, property markets, , land-use restrictions and infrastructure affect economies and diseconomies?
- What determines the location choices of households and firms?
- How and why do these relationships differ across countries?

Variation in economic performance - We also need to understand the diversity in economic performance of different urban areas at a variety of scales and the implications of this for changing spatial patterns. For example, the economic performance of different urban areas across the UK varied significantly both during the long boom and the recent recession, but the question is why and at what cost?

- What are the dynamics of performance at local level and how do local governance factors interact with wider global and national forces and policies?

- In what ways do economic and spatial informality relate to each other, for example through informal economic activity in urban informal settlements with high levels of density?
- What role is played by non-governmental organisations and local community initiatives?
- What are the critical success factors? Leadership, scale, fundamental assets, location, and/or other factors?

The role of urban policy in economic performance - As important as questions of the roles of governance and institutions, are questions about what urban policy can and should do. Such questions may be broad or narrow, for example:

- What are the appropriate policy responses to structural transformation and city decline?
- What methodological improvements would allow more robust evaluation of the impact of specific policies?
- How will current national strategies for cities and their governance affect urban economic performance?

4. Cross cutting issues

Inequalities, Diversities and Difference

Urban transformations are increasingly both the causes and potential solutions of broader economic and environmental change, which both confirm existing and create new patterns of vulnerability, exclusion, inequality and interconnection. Inequalities of 'race' and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality are still strongly marked in urban societies and markets, alongside the urbanisation of inequalities of health and education, as well as intergenerational inequalities. These inequalities are subject to changing spatial expressions, for example - from poor access to work and infrastructure for stigmatised low-income neighbourhoods to enclaves in gated communities of mobile elites in urban areas across the globe. Change and continuity in social differentiation and exclusion remain critical issues, both across and between urban areas. Policies to address exclusion and vulnerability are longstanding in many contexts, but both their past effectiveness and their ability to respond to new challenges require new understanding.

In a number of urban areas, we need first to understand the scale and nature of urban poverty, exclusion and inequality. In many developing countries terms of absolute deprivation conditions remain pressing. Without a better understanding of the scale, extent and impact of urban poverty, the problems associated with low incomes and other forms of disadvantage will not be addressed. Across the world global recession and austerity has given rise to urban stresses, and in a number of cases has led to protest, conflict and violence, both spontaneous and through organised social movements.

Urban demographic changes will continue to have profound implications for the dynamics within and between urban centres. This includes aging as well as youthful urban populations, the implications of changing family dynamics including gender relations, as well as changing patterns of migration, both intra-national and international. The diversity and difference

characteristic of large cities, added to media concentration, continually produces novel connections and cultural change, seen across the urban system, that may give rise to new conceptions of equality, of citizenship and of democracy. Questions of social mix and segregation are at the heart of academic and policy debates over multiculturalism and community cohesion and integration.

But despite these challenges there are many positive opportunities to be realised. This is an era in which urban mobilities and interconnections are intensifying and diversifying, giving rise to new cultural forms and connections, hybrid identities, and changing social practices. As individuals and within family and neighbourhood groups urban citizens create new livelihood opportunities, improve their human capital and positively engage the state. People's energy, optimism and aspiration are critical resources to address human challenges across the globe. Investment in urban networks at different scales may offer new approaches and improved policies, programmes and practices to address social exclusion and deprivation. Our research should recognise and explore these assets.

Research questions might include:

- What are the relationships between different urban vulnerabilities and their changing spatial expressions?
- What are the scale and nature of the social costs that are likely to be incurred if urban inequalities are not addressed?
- What are the broader consequences of income inequality, particularly in respect of its impact on democracy, and associations with insecurity and violence?
- What circumstances promote, and which inhibit, social, political, cultural and economic benefits resulting from urban demographic change?
- What policy and programmatic responses reduce exclusion, improve well-being and maximise the potential offered by urban centres and their populations?
- What lessons can be learned from new social mobilisations and alliances and emerging claims for identity and recognition?
- What are the challenges for public policy in the context of changing urban mobilities and interconnections?

Politics, Contestation and Governance

Governance describes the wider set of institutions and relationships which play a role in shaping economic and social processes than the formal bodies and processes associated with government. It operates within the political and social domains and is not limited to administrative and institutional concerns. Governance emphasises the role of the private and local community actors as well as public and government sectors.

Urban settings are extremely varied and have a fundamental bearing on governance. In some developing country contexts, many centres are experiencing rapid expansion in population in high growth environments, while others are growing but not creating fresh economic opportunities or stimulating economic growth. A third category of cities are expanding but experience conflict and violence. Evidence to support the strengthening of institutions for effective city government is essential for growth and prosperity, mobilising resources, and for strengthening political legitimacy. Many urban centres lack effective governance structures, limiting opportunities for citizen engagement through traditional democratic

processes. While new forms of engagement are emerging in some cases, in others political and other factors limit engagement by any means.

Community participation and legitimacy is a crucial feature of governance. However, in the context of austerity and changes in government policies, in the UK (eg localism vs austerity) but also elsewhere, there's a need to understand whether and how the ability of communities and/or the organised voluntary sector to play a role in governance and influence the direction, shape or outcome of change has improved and/or adversely affected.

Research questions might include:

- How much does governance actually matter to the economic or social performance of cities, how and why and what are the implications?
- What evidence is there from different urban settings and at different scales about the relationship of governance to sustainability, security, social integration?
- What role does the private sector play in different cities, where does it invest, how does it decide, and what difference does it make?
- Do we have institutional and political infrastructures which allow communities to have a big enough voice in city governance? What is the evidence from different cities across the UK and internationally?
- What are the potentials and challenges of different types of relationship between city governments and national governments?

Annex I

Expert Group Membership

- Chair: Dr Mark Robinson, Department for International Development, ESRC Research Committee
- Professor David de Roure, University of Oxford, ESRC Methods and Infrastructure Committee
- Dr Sally Stares, London School of Economics and Political Science, ESRC Training and Skills Committee
- Professor Michael Batty, University College London
- Professor Gary Bridge, University of Bristol
- Professor Harriet Bulkeley, University of Durham
- Professor Jon Coaffee, University of Warwick
- Professor Diana Mitlin, University of Manchester
- Professor Henry Overman, London School of Economics and Political Science
- Professor Michael Parkinson, University of Liverpool