



Response of the scientific committee to the 2019 review of the ISC-UHWB programme (Urban Health and Wellbeing Programme)

Xiamen, 2019, Dec. 2

General response

We of the UHWB scientific committee welcome this opportunity to provide a response to the very helpful International Science Council (ISC) external review of this exciting new program. While the review began 2018, with a site visit of the International Programme Office (IPO) in Xiamen in April 2018, the opportunity to provide this public response at this time allows us to provide a current picture of our work as of the end of November, 2019.

As discussed with ISC leadership and the review Committee, the Committee was asked to review our Science Plan 2011 a “Report of the ICSU Planning Group on Health and Wellbeing in the Changing Urban Environment: a Systems Analysis Approach” (the Report) that set out a vision and goals for a 10 year programme that would ideally fill what had been identified as “the knowledge gap” in the field. As everyone who has begun new programmes in new scientific areas knows, the programme must be able to secure appropriate funding and staffing to carry out its agenda. Any interim review must assess achievements against available resources.

Though the review Committee was charged to measure the programme against the 10 year Science Plan 2011, we agree with the authors of the review who confirmed that the science plan 2011 was not an appropriate document to evaluate programme performance as they recommended that the “The leadership of the IPO should work....to render goals and objectives relevant, feasible and attainable.” We have been actively addressing this recommendation since the review was submitted. The work of the UHWB Scientific Committee has been guided by a programme plan aligned with the overall vision of the programme as initially articulated in “the Report” but also aligned with available resources of funding and staff.

Thus, we have been measuring progress against a clear set of goals and planned activities, and these activities had been meticulously defined and documented in minutes after each scientific committee (SC) meeting and the programme advanced along those steps which were reviewed and redefined twice a year in accordance with available funding. These materials have been shared with ICSU and programme sponsors, but and the comments in the review would, in our opinion, have been even more helpful had the detailed records of our work been considered in the review.

Specific response to recommendations and review criteria

1. Response to recommendations

- 1.1. The International Programme Office (IPO) leadership is working in partnership with CAS and the science committee to revise the Science Plan in order to assure that goals and objectives relevant, feasible and attainable and aligned with ISC's science strategy. We were pleased to have Mathieu Denis, ISC Science Director, join us for an extended and fruitful discussion at the recent ICUH 2019 meeting in Xiamen (see below).
- 1.2. As requested in the review, the IPO will prepare a logic model in the first quarter of 2020 in order to prioritise day-to-day operations and as a framework for future evaluation

2. Response to review criteria

(Note: Sentences in bold and *italic* are a direct reference to issues mentioned in the review report)

2.1. Review criteria 1: Strategic planning and implementation

Prioritization of activities. In each of its meetings the SC defines and prioritizes action points against changes in the external scientific and policy environment shaping global efforts in urban health and the most strategic role for the programme within available resources.

Targeted approach to engagement and building relations with researchers, policy makers and civil society. We agree that these two elements must be at the core of any programme that seeks to create networks and promote knowledge development and exchange. The work of the UHWB programme in this area is a real success story. Relations have been established in form of MoUs with UN organisations and events of UN organisations, such as the Habitat III in Quito, the 1st UN Habitat Assembly, the UN Environment Assembly and the High-Level Political Forum in New York. A network of mayors from Latin American and Caribbean countries had been address and communicated with in the context of the SALUD URBANA en AMERICA LATINA ([SALURBAL](#)) programme and the Urban Health Model workshop in San Salvador. Partners at Beirut Arab University work with local decision makers on systems approaches to reduce traffic noise. Civil society is engaged, in specific research projects carried out by SC members or by programme partners in the context of specific activities. The programme organized an Ecological Civilization workshop in Xiamen, China to which mayors of small cities came and reported about their rural vitalization activities.

Developing methodologies. At the core of ICSU's (now ISC's) original goal for this programme has been bringing systems science approaches to the complex problems on urban health and wellbeing. Again, this has been a priority of the programme and the SC. A network of system science researchers has been created. Key researchers came together in the foundation of the Systems Science Working Group formally affiliated with the International Society for Urban Health (ISUH). Systems science methodologies range widely from mathematical modeling to participatory modeling.

The methodologies have been mapped and published. Workshops and seminars have been carried out at the United Nations University's International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH) and Beirut Arab University, but also at the SALURBAL project.

Coordinating research. In earlier discussions, considerable time was devoted to the most effective role a relatively small programme like the UHWB could play in advancing research in systems thinking. The decision was made that the program would not be able to fund research directly but would serve as an enabling, coordinating body, linking the systems research framework for urban health and wellbeing with implementation researchers through international and national partners and raising the visibility of research and action in this area. Large urban health research network programmes, like SALURBAL, and the network of researchers who contributed to the proposal of the New Zealand Centre for Urban Research Excellence (CURE) have been strongly supported in their launch phases and in ongoing support by the UHWB programme.

Original research is produced by SC members and by researchers of the network and documented on the programme webpage. Promotion of relevant research activities of others is being done via the webpage. The programme closely collaborates with the ISUH (International Society for Urban Health) and its members have published in the journal of the society and others. 2019 the programme organized the society's annual conference, the International Conference for Urban Health (ICUH) (www.isuhconference.org) in Xiamen, making the programme visible to more than 300 participants from 55 countries.

Creating a formal network of systems scientists. As noted above, an informal global network has been created for specific systems methods applied in the urban health context. The value and feasibility of formalizing such a network within China, the region, or globally needs to be determined and will be a part of the agenda in the next phase or our work.

2.2. Review criteria 2: Governance

IPO staff. Since the review, the hosting institute (Institute of Urban Environment) which has facilitated making international connections, has hired a science and communications officer.

Competing priorities of the programme vis-à-vis its location in China. There are general operational restrictions for the programme due to its location in China. Overall the programme office support by the host organization is however regarded as enabling and supportive. By confirming its intention to renew support for the UHWB programme for the next 5 years, the Chinese government has both reinforced its interest in urban health in general and the value of the UHWB programme in this effort.

Restrictions of the amount of time allocated for research of the executive director (20%). The programme director uses those 20% of time mainly for supervising a PhD student and publishing. Increasing the time allotted for research would not make the contribution to advancing the research in the field that the core activities of the programme as global catalyst for research is playing.

Developing a domestic research programme. The host Institute of Urban Environment (IUE), is in the process of organizing a Winter School for Urban Systems Science with Arizona State University. Researchers at IUE offer courses on urban systems science topics. A critical mass of systems scientists for urban environments is yet to be built in China, but such a goal very much depends on research priorities set by the Chinese host and funding organisations.

Role of the scientific committee (SC). The SC reviews UHWB programme progress and advises leadership on key strategic decisions on action points at every meeting of the SC, which is twice per year. Members of the SC also make commitments using their own expertise and networks to support different elements of the programme. In every meeting of the SC goals and actions are re-examined and re-aligned. In future this will be done according to the logic framework that will be developed in early 2020.

Building an urban research programme based on systems approach including SDGs. As noted above, early on, the scientific committee determined that it would be unrealistic to raise external support for its own or a network of researchers it might create. Rather, within the capacity of members of the SC we have explored opportunities to apply for external funding from national and/or international funding bodies (e.g. from the Wellcome Trust) and to join other networks in seeking funding to set up a research programme that would provide comparative case studies on systems science approaches to urban health and wellbeing. For example, a Centre for Urban Research Excellence (CURE), which is partnering with the Institute of Urban Research in Xiamen, is being submitted through the NZ Royal Society to the Tertiary Education Commission for NZ\$40 million to fund empirical work in NZ and the Pacific Islands. An outline was shared with the Committee and if it is successful, it could provide a platform for UHWB to expand its research collaborations.

2.3. Review criteria 3: Secretariat, funding and operations

Staffing. MSc level communications and science officers have been hired after the site visit of the programme review, in September 2018.

Trial of co-director model. This model was tried linking the UHWB programme more closely to its host, the Institute of Urban Environment (IUE). The co-director, however, moved to a different university. We agree that closer research collaboration with IUE researchers and the programme would strengthen the programme and collaboration on the Winter School for Urban Systems is an effort to further strengthen our scientific relationship.

2.4. Review criteria 4: Stakeholders and partners

Strategic long-term partnerships to be formalized. As noted above, the programme is partnering with numerous relevant networks and organisations. With some, such as with UN Habitat and Beirut Arab University formal agreements have been signed by the host organization, IUE. Under those formal partnerships outputs and activities have been agreed to. Other relevant partners are ISC programmes such as CODATA, IRDR and Future Earth, apart from numerous universities. The executive director participates in many of their meetings and there is an active and inspiring exchange. Under the new ISC action plan, it is planned to bring those programme partners together and produce common outputs.

Role of sponsors. The ISUH is currently the strongest sponsor of the programme. IAP is represented through the same representative. Because IAP has been going through its own strategic restructuring over the past 2-3 years, IAP's direct support has been limited, but a plan to enhance it for the future will be developed.

Role of ISC. The new action plan of the ISC has been communicated with the UHWB programme and there are now opportunities to contribute and engage. Relations to ISC regional offices have been built, however, the regional offices are now undergoing a structural transformation in accordance to the new governance of ISC. The regional office for LAC had been particularly strong in developing the Urban Health Model in the LAC region. The ISC science director joined the UHWB programme's SC meeting Nov 2019, which was particularly useful to clarify complementarities and contributions of the programme to ISC's new science action plan 2019-2021.

International organisations. As noted above, working relations and initiatives have been defined with UN Habitat, WHO, UN Environment at both international and regional levels.

2.5. Review criteria 5: Communication, visibility and influence

Visibility globally. Communication, visibility and influence are mainly achieved through a broad spectrum of publications, events, cases and other information listed on two webpages. The International Conference on Urban Health 2019 in Xiamen, hosted by the UHWB programme, boosted the visibility of the programme directly to a global audience. The programme is well known among relevant stakeholders at international organisations.

Visibility in China. Webpage design and management in China is constrained, however, the webpage under a Chinese domain, aims at mirroring the international webpage. Publications appear in English. If financial resources become available, translating the publications into Chinese would improve visibility.

The visibility and influence of the programme will further improve through research, training and education activities planned in the coming 2 years: a MOOC led by University of Lausanne and a training course led by UC Berkeley and research applications linked to the scientific committee.