World Urban Forum III Networking Meeting, Vancouver, June 21, 2006

Report from the Preparatory Workshop on the Role of Urban Indicators for Sustainable Development, Vancouver, June 17-18, 2006

Prof David Wilmoth, Rapporteur

This remarkable two-day meeting brought together participants from around the world through three sponsors

- The Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory or RVu, our local host and the first local urban observatory to be established as part of the growing Global Urban Observatory network in Canada,
- Metropolis, an association of 90 cities of over a million inhabitants from around the world, whose Commission 5 on monitoring city performance has promoted some transferable ideas for indicators in action, and
- UN-HABITAT, leaders in the process of localising the Millennium Development Goals and who, with UNDP, promotes the development of relevant urban indicators, monitoring and communication.

We had some outstanding participants and live case studies to draw upon. We addressed ourselves to the means of putting ideas into action for urban indicators. This is what we want to say:

1. Make sure the task of localising the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) considers all eight Goals even though (a) given resource shortages priorities among goals have to be set and (b) we recognise the vital importance of UN-HABITAT's leadership towards implementation of Goal 7, Target 11, to 'achieve a significant

improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020'.

2. Just as local indicators when done well can extend local stories of success within the city, so can success developing urban monitoring systems themselves be extended among cities and internationally. This is now possible through a growing network of around 200 local urban observatories and through resources such as the UN-HABITAT Global Urban Observatory toolkits. Communities of practice can be built among monitoring agencies and among cities as capacity grows. There is much to celebrate but so much more to do.

3. Criteria for measuring performance towards the Targets are well defined, but the task of localising them would be assisted by clearer definitions of the responsibilities of different levels of government for implementation action and if necessary their rationalisation. Clearly this will vary from country to country. At present in most countries there are significant gaps between national and local implementation. To encourage local support for monitoring systems – important since most data collected have local coordinates – it is most useful to include local representatives in the design of national monitoring systems and to make clear assignments of responsibilities for monitoring particular areas to particular experts or agencies.

4. At the universal level, like that of the MDGs, we can and should expect targets to be broadly similar in most cities. However, we should recognise that they will be approached and prioritized differently based on the history and development context of local places. Recognition of this variability – whether at provincial, regional, urban / municipal or district levels – should be a key part of the process of communicating MDGs and progress towards them. Detailed supplementary local indicators can guide area priorities for implementation including especially towards Target 11. MDGs cannot be implemented without clear local area priorities for engagement and intervention.

5. Notwithstanding the need for spatial detail, the task of communicating and popularising the MDGs at the local levels can be made easier through the creation of simple 'dashboard' indicators and their widespread dissemination.

6. In the diminishing but still unsatisfactory number of areas where there is reluctance to commit to the adoption of MDGs or their localisation – noting that some countries such as Tunisia, Morocco and Sri Lanka have been outstanding in their pursuit of cities without slums – identifying 'champions' for promoting urban indicators can help acceptance. Efforts to have the 'custodians' of relevant monitoring systems meet with policy-makers to increase mutual understanding of the benefits that well-developed local monitoring of MDGs can bring are worthwhile as too few key decisions affecting local development are based on local indicators. In some cases the best 'champions' might be local political leaders, such as in Bogotá's successful 'How Are We Doing?' project, and in Medina's .annual whole-of-government meeting to examine indicators and set development priorities.

7. The needs of people in slums and informal settlements tend to be poorly recognised through under-enumerated censuses and surveys, and this results in weakened evidence for providing local services and infrastructure to slums. A significant effort is needed to improve the veracity and timeliness of indicators of wellbeing in those areas, even if full inclusion might show politically unpopular indicators. Monitoring agencies should be prepared to use appropriate informal means to engage with people in poor areas and to make an effort to dispel any misplaced fears of intrusion.

8. The localisation of MDGs is helped – indeed, cannot work without – the participation of people and local organisations in the choice of indicators that contribute to or supplement official indicators, in the collection of data for indicators and, most importantly, their use. This is especially important for recording and monitoring criteria for the living conditions of slum dwellers, and the Workshop suggests the

dissemination of good practice such as the detailed local mapping and community based information system for measuring living conditions at the New Sanjay Amar Colony of New Delhi. Community involvement in urban monitoring also helps bring transparency to the results. Our Vancouver and Calgary colleagues stressed that local urban indicators are not only for decision-makers but for raising community understanding. The recently-signed Canadian 'New Deal' for cities mandates annual reporting by cities to citizens, with at least an attempt at reporting on indicators of urban sustainability .

9. The business sector is at present not widely involved in monitoring the local implementation of the MDGs and opportunities for deeper engagement should be sought, from tiny businesses in slums financed from local savings through to global corporations who might sponsor or otherwise support local observatory infrastructure.

10. There is no intrinsic optimum length of time for monitoring. The Workshop suggests the timing of the electoral cycle be considered in multiparty political systems and that data be held securely for a long time so as to identify long-term trends (cities change slowly on some dimensions) and to protect against serial installation of new systems that replace old systems. However the idea of using short term feedback is also well exemplified by daily monitoring of citizen and service user telephone calls to a municipal hotline in Teheran.

11. Secure tenure relies in part on clear urban land information and urban monitoring systems should include, or at least interface with, land title, land tenure and land use rights information.

12. Though not a new idea, the success of localising MDGs depends critically on sufficient human and physical resources to do the job professionally and in consultation with affected people; thus recruitment, training, professional development, acquisition of data bases and support for building communities of practice with other jurisdictions or observatories are vital. The Workshop heard a number of cases of diminishing support for this important work.

13. While by far the greater effort towards the improvement of life in slums around the world has to be in developing countries, on many urban sustainability criteria (e.g. waste, energy consumption, per capita ecological footprints) developed countries need a concerted monitoring effort as well as on these dimensions their status is worse. It was plain to the Workshop that many of the most 'liveable' cities are the least sustainable cities. The exchange of learning that occurred at the Workshop by confronting the experience of urban indicators in developed countries with that in less developed countries, and the establishment of common ground in urban performance monitoring, suggest opportunities for continuing exchange of experience internationally. A greater effort on the part of developed countries in localising the MDGs is needed not only through further development support as is occurring now (e.g. UK DFID's projects) but through more widespread direct understanding and application of the MDG localisation process in developed countries.