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Dear reader,

The goal of the Sustainable Development of Urban Regions (SURE) funding priority of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) is to strengthen countries partnerships in the fight against climate change and in climate adaptation. On 26 and 27 September 2023 the SURE funded projects came together during the Status Seminar 2023 in Bangkok, Thailand. Around 100 participants from Germany, Southeast Asia and other parts of the world had the opportunity to network and exchange experiences and ideas for further development of sustainable urban regions. The event focus was mainly on the achievements of the ten collaborative projects within the last three years of research.

On day one, the programme started with a welcome of Prof Dr. Jörg Noennig, coordinator of the facilitation and synthesis research project and the event's first day moderator, and Dr. Verena Hebbecker, Deputy Head of Division 723 „Global Change, Climate Research" of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Dr. Hebbecker emphasized the importance of exchanges between participants and encouraged them to talk to and learn from each other.

The first inspiring keynote of the event was given by Assistant Prof. Niramon Serisakul from Chulalongkorn University, director of the Urban Design and Development Center. She presented several examples of cases in Thailand and the challenges and opportunities they brought in building sustainable urban regions. Afterwards, it was time for the ten SURE projects and their Asian-German delegations to give insights into their topics of research and current achievements. The event programme included round tables and a world café. During the round tables, participants were able to discuss comparative urban transformation approaches, social significance sustainability, and urban planning and decision-making towards sustainability. Several world café tables invited the participants to discuss the topic of reflection and exchange their practical experiences, challenges faced, as well as methods and strategies for overcoming them. Lively discussions characterized the first conference day.

The second day was moderated by Prof. Frank Schwartze, project partner of the facilitation and synthesis research project. It started with the keynotes by Frank D´hondt of UN Habitat Vietnam and Joachim Bergerhoff of GFA Consulting Group about the importance of alliances for sustainable urban development. The keynotes offered a perfect bridge to the panel discussion featuring "Alliances across borders", which included the keynote speakers of both days and Riccardo Maroso of UN Habitat. The discussions focused on the benefits of alliances and how to start these effectively. Organized as a market square, project members exhibited their research results to the audience using posters and short pitches for delving into the project contexts and connecting results.

In this newsletter you can find out more about reflections carried out by the SURE funded projects in their research about ways of implementing sustainability in urban areas. At the end, we also invite you for scientific events in which the F&SR Teams takes part.

We hope that you enjoy the reading!

The SURE Facilitation and Synthesis Research Project

Engaging with the projects – barriers and drivers on the way to solution-finding

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Within the SURE Funding Priority, researchers, practitioners, people from Europe, Asia and the world are learning from each other. During the SURE Status Seminar 2023, participating projects came together in a World Café and carried out thematic reflections about several topics.

Culture shapes research outcomes

Genuine element of the SURE research projects are cultural frames in which cooperation and the exchange of knowledge take place. In this context, intercultural understanding and coordination are crucial. There are several ways of (further) developing these skills and positive results were made of interactive workshops for trust-building, cooperation management, and discussion and definition of goals. Additionally, internal and external communication is of great importance for this kind of projects, and experiences and abilities of intercultural cooperation and representation are strongly needed.

Additional consideration points to capacity building, as the complexity of the outcomes might make it necessary for the local partners of the different Southeast Asian countries to be able to implement the solutions generated by the projects. Creative approaches are necessary in order to get access to local groups, as several communities present a hierarchical and inflexible structure. Sometimes, these are as easy as getting into informal conversations to people in the neighborhoods whose needs should be considered and who are directly affected by implementations. Other times, approaches can be more complex, such as entering in local communities by offering help for domestic activities to be able to chat unbiased with the people. To support this process, interviews with experts or selected groups enable the validation of local results and give insights into the causality of the measured phenomena.

Furthermore, there are technical challenges, e.g. personal data protection, need for expensive hardware and software equipment like sensors, that need to be dealt with. In these cases, technologies using remote sensing and drones offer new data collection opportunities. Combined with local knowledge, specialized knowledge can be created and shared.

Cooperation of research and practitioners in the implementation process
For researchers, effects are classically measured by number and impact of publications, theses, patents, number of PhD students, and cooperations resulting of a study. In this case dedicated networks support the knowledge creation and transfer process. For practitioners, the efficiency of used approaches, tools, and methods are used to measure impact. Merging the interests of researchers and practitioners is necessary and can be achieved by using a common language between stakeholders. Joint goal setting for co-production of knowledge in the application orientation is a key process for finding solutions that contribute to both interests, leading to a new form of stakeholders: pracademics – a person whose career spans the boundaries of academia and practice [1].

In application-orientation, market-driven or technical biases can affect created solutions. Other barriers in the implementation process might involve legal issues especially because legal framework is missing in several regions and cases. Successful pilot projects have included social, legal, and technical matters in their processes. This allowed for broader possibilities to transfer their visible and tangible products to other municipal settings with similar problem profiles.

Ways of reflection in interdisciplinary research projects
Project members can reflect in different ways, and this is a continuous and iterative task during the whole project duration, helping to improve the quality of the work and its impacts.

The discussions from the world café revealed that reflection often takes place informally, but there may be a need to formalize it and anchor the findings in the project. For this purpose, the SURE Toolbox is currently being developed. It will provide different tools that can be used in different situations, being flexible in terms of time, format, and number of people reflecting. Furthermore, it is essential in the SURE context that the reflection tools cater to multi-national teams with diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds. In light of this, the SURE F&SR team is presently engaging with all projects to gain insights from their experience and adjust the toolbox accordingly. The final SURE Toolbox will be released shortly.

[1] Posner, Paul (2009): The Pracademic: An Agenda for Re-Engaging Practitioners and Academics. Public Budgeting & Finance, Volume 29, Issue 1 pp. 12-26

Sustainability aspirations challenging the status quo

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In round table discussions, the question "how sustainability in urban planning, the society and politics change the settings and challenge established physical and mental infrastructures" was discussed by participants.

Urban Transformation Approaches

Every region deals differently with challenges to achieve sustainable and resilient cities depending on the local and cultural context and the availability of knowledge about possible solutions. For the knowledge transfer of urban sustainability transformation approaches, it is important to understand and respect local approaches and contexts, adapting approaches instead of trying to force them. A continuous exchange process is needed for a mutual understanding, cooperation and co-creation.

A successful example of resilient urban transformation approach involves sufficient supply of green infrastructures in Southeast Asia, like Huế in central Vietnam presented by the team of the Green City Lab Huế. Historically embedded in the old Imperial city, it has a rich extent of green spaces and canals, which contribute to thermal comfort and the reduction of air pollution. In the SURE framework, German project partners empirically investigate the eco-system services for the preservation of these qualities and amplification with nature-based solutions.

Urban planning and decision-making towards sustainability

From a top-down perspective, the political claim for urban planning is being well-informed based on scientific evidence and executed by experts. The planning process is in a constant conflict between formal standards and informal adaptations. On the one hand, well-prepared plans supporting political decision-making emerge consequently. On the other hand, planning is a temporary determination and needs flexibility for iterative planning modifications considering political conflicts, systems, and risk management. These poles demand an extensive decision-making process, which should prevent gaps in the implementation process. These gaps are usually due to poor evaluation of risks and uncertainties despite availability of data.

From a bottom-up perspective, empowering local actors is crucial for the transformation of local policies. Urban planning can enable or restrict development at the same time. The participation of local communities in decision-making is necessary for the acceptance of plans and their implementation. Equally important is the political will for good governance, including the preparation of guidelines, independent and compliant staff, the availability of financial resources, as well as the establishment of cadastral policies and land property rights for the realization of projects.

Social Significance of the Topic of Sustainability

There is a consensus within the SURE projects that transformation processes only work well if local knowledge and cooperations with local stakeholders are well integrated. Most projects make use of this social capital for co-learning and co-creation processes. Furthermore, participatory methods are used for motivating and empowering people to adapt their behavior and live more sustainable. It is important to value existing structures and efforts to gain experience on dealing with local stakeholders to achieve goals in local communities. Local groups can be the starting point for associations in a coalition of the willing.

In general, the event indicated that the assessment of social aspects needs to be comprehensively considered for a sustainable lifestyle and to increase life quality. Local cultures need to be taken into account and awareness of traditions must be created in research for sustainability projects to have an impact.

Up Coming Events:

19th International Forum on Knowledge Asset Dynamics (IFKAD), 12-14 June 2024 in Madrid

The Facilitation and Synthesis Research Team of HCU Hamburg invites researcher linked to the built environment and engaged in sustainable development within cross-cultural contexts to apply for their track at 19th International Forum on Knowledge Asset Dynamics (IFKAD) 2024, 12-14 June 2024 in Madrid, Spain. In Track 22 "Knowledge-Based Development Digital Approaches and Tools for Global Urban Development and Innovation" the following topics are dealt with:

•Innovation in Sustainable Development: Bridging Research and Practice
•Knowledge Transfer and Innovation in Urban Planning: Lessons from Digital City Science
•Agent-Based Models as Innovation Tools: Enhancing Urban Systems Analysis
•The Impact of Smart Building Data on Urban Innovation Dynamics
•Global Urbanization and Open Source Innovation
•Collaborative Innovation in Sustainable City Planning
•Artificial intelligence and Machine learning in urban mobility
•Citizen participation and co-creation
•Integrating Urban Resilience measures into digital, spatial platforms.
•Modelling Social Systems and Dynamics in cities

For further details check out the track flyer. Deadline for handing in abstracts is 15 January 2024.