

PRESS RELEASE

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New Global science initiative on Urban Health

The global science community launches a new interdisciplinary programme on science for urban decision making in relation to health and wellbeing

Rome, Italy – The General Assembly of the International Council for Science (ICSU) today endorsed plans for a new global initiative “ Health and Wellbeing in the Changing Urban Environment: A Systems Analysis Approach”.

Over half of the world's population lives in urban areas and this proportion is increasing rapidly, generating new challenges for maintaining and improving human health and wellbeing. Simple models for population health often have limited applicability in complex urban settings, where decision-making and policies have to simultaneously take account of many different issues. The ICSU Science Plan lays out a new conceptual framework for considering the multi-factorial nature of both the determinants and the manifestations of health and wellbeing in urban populations. The application of systems analysis – quantitative modelling of relationships among interrelated systems – provides a mechanism for exploring this complexity and providing solutions to real-world problems.

“A new approach to urban health and wellbeing is needed. The success of this initiative will depend on the extent to which scientists from different disciplines are able to work together to address urban problems in a way that is useful to decision-makers” says Dr Landis MacKellar, an economist from the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis (Vienna, Austria) who chaired the ICSU Planning Group. “It is an ambitious plan but the scale of urban health challenges is enormous and growing, so we have to be optimistic that the science and policy communities can come together around this to work out practical solutions.”

One region in which the new initiative is expected to have particular relevance is Asia and the Pacific, where more than 60% of the World's population lives and the annual urban population growth rate is over 2%. A group of experts from this region has already been convened by ICSU to consider how the global initiative can be implemented in Asia. Professor Indira Nath, a clinical scientist (New Delhi, India) and Chair of this regional group, presented its report to the ICSU Assembly. “All urban areas are different but they also have similarities and we can learn from each other” she said. “The global framework and systems approach is essential for this diverse region, as it would enable us to coordinate and collaborate across cities, countries and regions, for implementing projects with specific local needs. We need to think globally and act locally.”

The Scientific Unions of ICSU, which represent the various scientific disciplines, will play an important role in promoting the new initiative over the next few months. An international scientific advisory committee will be put in place to oversee its implementation and an international programme office will need to be established. In the meantime, scientists in Asia are already starting to work together under the new framework and the hope is that scientists in other regions will soon join in.

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About ICSU

Founded in 1931, ICSU is a non-governmental organization with a global membership of national scientific bodies (120 Members, representing 140 countries) and International Scientific Unions (30 Members). The Council's activities focus on three areas: planning and coordinating research; science for policy; and strengthening the Universality of Science. ICSU is frequently called upon to speak on behalf of the global scientific community and to act as an advisor in matters ranging from the environment to conduct in science.

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