

FUTURE EARTH AUSTRALIA



EARLY CAREER URBAN RESEARCH WORKING GROUP

ADDENDUM TO SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND REGIONS: 10 YEAR STRATEGY TO ENABLE URBAN SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

On 26 May 2023, RMIT Urban Futures Enabling Impact Platform hosted a workshop for the Future Earth Australia Early Career Urban Research Working Group to review and update *Sustainable Cities and Regions: 10 Year Strategy to Enable Urban Systems Transformation* (the decadal strategy or strategy).

The decadal strategy was launched in December 2019 at the State of Australian (now Australasian) Cities Conference (SOAC). Since then, Australian cities and regions have experienced multiple major disasters in the form of bushfires, flooding, and storms. These events highlight our continued interconnectedness with the natural world and the growing fragility of the ecological systems we depend on.

The overlap of these climate and environmental related disasters with the COVID-19 pandemic emphasises that the risks we face must not be considered in isolation. The challenges and threats to our cities and regions intersect with existing vulnerabilities, including the rising cost of living and housing emergency, and the worsening living standards of the most disadvantaged in our society.

This 2023 workshop brought together 13 PhD candidates and early career researchers to act as a working group and offer new perspectives on the decadal strategy. We identified the following recommendations to update the strategy:

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| <p>1. REASSESS THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY IN AUSTRALIAN CITIES AND REGIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • emerging challenges and opportunities | <p>2. REALIGN THE DECADAL STRATEGY TO CONTEMPORARY VALUES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indigenous connection to Country • nature-based solutions for biodiversity • just transitions | <p>3. REDEFINE URBAN KNOWLEDGE AND APPROACHES TO DISSEMINATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transformative research • innovation and knowledge platforms • knowledge beyond academia | <p>4. CONNECT POLICY TO ACTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National urban policy • Action, implementation and feedback loops |
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1. REASSESS THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY IN AUSTRALIA

We identified several challenges that have arisen since the release of the decadal strategy in 2019 (Table 1). Recent changes in government also offer opportunities to put forward a more ambitious strategy. These important drivers should be recognised in updating the strategy to reflect the current state of play in our country.

Table 1: Identified challenges and opportunities not addressed by the current decadal strategy

Emerging challenges and opportunities in Australia
Socioeconomic disparities driven by built form and lack of social and green infrastructures
Car-centred urban form and its impacts on social equality
Forced technologically based engagement of citizens towards digital platforms
Poor interface and design of digital engagement technologies focused on scaling up engagement processes rather than improving creative and collaborative expression (across national and local levels).
Inequitable engagement with certain communities (particularly those without access to forms of technology or the internet, or the financial means to update/upgrade technologies as required to accommodate changes in digital platform requirements)
New timeframes set by the <i>Climate Change Act 2022</i>

Image: National Arboretum Canberra, Forest Drive, Molonglo Valley ACT. Photo by Unsplash.



2. REALIGN THE DECADAL STRATEGY TO CONTEMPORARY VALUES

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Identify and discuss opportunities to recognise and represent First Nations people in urban areas and strengthen partnerships between people of Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds
- Respond to the biodiversity emergency by explicitly recognising and integrating opportunities for nature-based solutions to foster biodiversity within urban areas
- Apply a 'just transitions' lens, identifying ways to respond to power imbalances of different actors, and engage in distributive justice

Connection to Country

A significant missed opportunity of the current decadal strategy is connection to Country. Grounding the decadal strategy on 'Country' invites us to define what connection to Country means and looks like for Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. It will also bring in opportunities to incorporate First Nations' perspectives in shaping sustainable cities and regions. A decadal strategy that starts with Country is particularly relevant for the 'vision for action' and 'connecting knowledge' components.

The political and cultural reckoning Australia is experiencing is a call to action to recognise and engage with First Nations people in ways not yet reflected in the decadal strategy. The working group recognises collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is critical to achieving sustainability. This review revealed that the settler-colonial perspective is the only clear narrative presented throughout the decadal strategy. The terms *First Nations*, *First Peoples*, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* do not appear within the publication; *Indigenous* appears twice. While the latter incorporates elements

of acknowledgement, Indigenous knowledges must be protected and respected as intellectual property rather than exploited to serve settler-colonial interests. We recommend that the strategy identifies and discusses opportunities to prioritise justice and strengthen partnerships between First Nations Peoples and non-Indigenous people that call Australia their home.

Nature-based solutions for biodiversity

Another missed opportunity of the decadal strategy is acknowledging biodiversity, natural cycles and other natural features as non-human stakeholders of urban spaces. Biodiversity plays an integral role in sustainable development and the resilience of our cities, yet the strategy fails to acknowledge the integration of nature and biodiversity as a needed characteristic of sustainable and resilient cities. The term 'biodiversity' only appears once within the document when it acknowledges that urban areas occur within Australia's biodiversity hotspots.

The biodiversity crisis was highlighted in the [2019 IPBES report](#) and the 2022 [Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework](#). Australia is one of

the global leaders in biodiversity loss. Younger generations are looking for opportunities to step away from this history of extraction and to find ways to celebrate Australia's unique biodiversity. In failing to integrate biodiversity as part of our living spaces, the decadal strategy unwittingly perpetuates a system where Australia will continue to lead biodiversity-loss records rather than protecting and fostering biodiversity. Simultaneously, biodiversity loss will continue to make our cities vulnerable to natural disasters, pandemics, and other urban challenges.

Integrating nature and biodiversity within the urban fabric critically impacts people's mental and physical health. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of access to nature; people found refuge and social interactions in natural environments in previously ignored ways. To take the lessons learned over the past few years, the decadal strategy must raise the profile of nature, nature-based solutions and biodiversity within the document and advocate for everyday nature interactions for every citizen within the urban realm. We recommend that the report emphasises biodiverse urban areas as a key outcome to pursue. Explicitly recognising biodiversity's role in liveable cities and identifying opportunities for nature-based solutions to foster biodiversity within urban areas are critical steps to achieving this outcome.

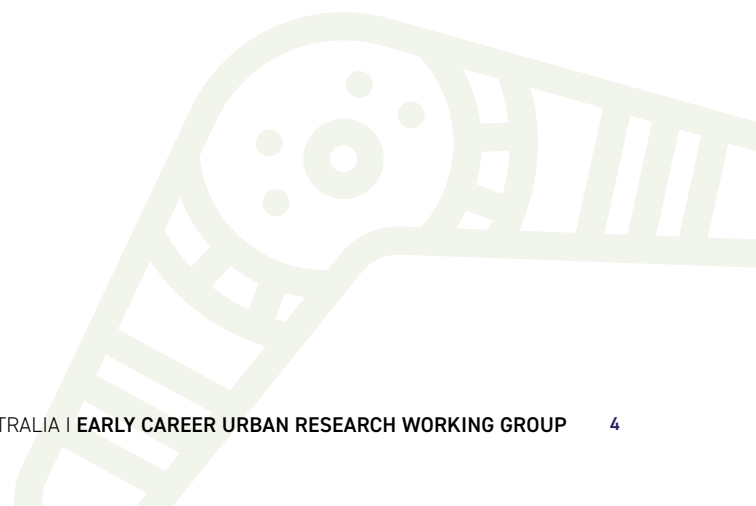
Just transitions

Justice is deeply intertwined with sustainability and is a foundational component of social equity. Despite its importance, this element is chronically overlooked throughout urban development management and governance processes. Justice-based development, deliverables and evaluative tools must be built into Australia's sustainable city planning and governance to respect and honour

commitments to citizens, cultural and social groups, and the broader international community. We strongly suggest the decadal strategy prioritises engagement with rights holders and stakeholders, adopting a community-centred approach. Through this, existing community groups, leaders and organisations can direct the discussion around place-based solutions for sustainable cities. This can be achieved through actions that serve three key justice types:

1. recognitional justice providing appropriate acknowledgement
2. procedural justice ensuring participation throughout decision-making processes
3. distributive justice realising positive impacts.

Sustainable development relies on the longevity of positive partnerships and united collaboration. We believe it is important to make public participation in planning across all government levels more interesting, approachable and tangible to foster better participatory and deliberative democratic practices. Processes and tools must be used to achieve management plans explicitly incorporating justice elements. We recommend that the decadal strategy applies a justice lens to determine strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with the national shift toward sustainability. Furthermore, First Peoples must be recognised as rights holders rather than stakeholders. Transparency is essential to understand the efforts and impacts of the Decadal Strategy and should be explicitly incorporated within justice targets.



3. REDEFINE URBAN KNOWLEDGE AND APPROACHES TO DISSEMINATION

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consider advances in urban transformation research and practice
 - Expand urban knowledge contribution beyond academia and encourage alternative and non-traditional research and knowledge outputs
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Urban transformation research and practice

Urban transformation research

Since the release of the decadal strategy, significant research has been undertaken on the complexity of compounding and cascading climate change risks. As such, discussion of the risks that can arise from both the impacts of climate change and responses to climate change is limited in the document. Recognising that urban responses to climate change can produce additional risk is critical for more informed decision-making. The document could acknowledge such risks through a case study exploring maladaptation.

Existing and emerging activities

Innovation hubs, a core recommendation of the decadal strategy, can create alternative spaces for planning and policy experimentation that actively work to bring together new actors and activities for urban transformation. These hubs are critical to progress toward sustainability across cities and regions. However, innovation hubs implemented from the top down are consistently institutionalised entities that can embed bias and structural barriers common in the academic and urban policy spheres. Hubs that contribute to an urban transformation need a complete review of their definition (i.e. technological and/or social innovation), their scope (i.e. knowledge

production/co-creation and/or knowledge dissemination) and their operations (e.g. that require long-term commitments at national, state, local and community levels).

There is a need to explore these hubs as sources of inclusive workforce development, collective social learning, and urban governance experimentation through the participation and inclusion of diverse stakeholders and actors. This engenders the need for the hubs to integrate facilities for research and development, technical colleges for skills formation, innovation hubs and local Fab Labs accessible to members of the public.

Knowledge platforms

As the decadal strategy suggests, our aim should not be to reinvent the wheel. Existing innovation hubs and knowledge platforms are prevalent and diverse in their ambitions, leadership, abilities and shortcomings. The strategy can gain momentum towards an urban transformation by tapping into the existing networks of actors and activities that are already contributing to siloed transformations within their respective fields. These essential networks of resource and knowledge sharing and new practice formation within industry, community and government should be seen as

the foundation for the strategy's roadmap (i.e. first mapping the current state of play) and inform its work to connect rather than reconfigure emerging transformative pathways to create a collective and cohesive national urban landscape.

This also works to improve the decadal strategy's application within the diverse urban contexts across Australia, working with existing institutions and grassroots groups to add to their knowledge and capabilities and not start from scratch or from a distance. Bridging the gap so commonly left between national policy and its on-the-ground implementation is vital to the strategy's success and creating an urban transformation that is contributed to by many and adopted across all levels.

Expand knowledge contribution and dissemination beyond academia and traditional outputs

We challenge the report's existing definitions of knowledge creation and sharing within academic institutions. We recognise that academia is

poor in connecting and leading cooperation due to institutional silos. We suggest reframing assumptions about urban transformation, such as knowledge definition, creation and sharing beyond the higher degree by research (HDR) context, to incorporate skill and capacity building for those not from an academic background.

Building on a 'just transitions' lens, embracing participatory knowledge creation and alternative, non-traditional research outputs would allow for broader interdisciplinary participation across urban systems transformations. Considering a variety of other avenues for communication beyond traditional academic dissemination outputs, that are relevant and engaging, expands the accessibility of knowledge sharing to a wide range of community and industry stakeholders. This would assist the decadal strategy in defining clear objectives and guidelines towards improving community engagement and connecting "diverse knowledge across sectors, disciplines and professions" (p.9).



Image: Butterfly in Urban Area. Photo by Unsplash.

4. CONNECT POLICY TO ACTION

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Advocate for the adoption of a national urban policy
 - Integrate clear guidance for the implementation of the decadal strategy
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National urban policy

With recent changes in the Australian Government, we now have an opportunity for the decadal strategy to support the adoption of a national urban policy (NUP) for a productive, sustainable and liveable future. Through the work of the Urban Policy Forum, the NUP needs to prioritise planning for our cities with the core values described in the section 'Realign the decadal strategy to contemporary values'.

We see opportunities for the NUP to direct the coordination of urban policy reform and provide a clear framework for a national cities and regions database and coordinate monitoring initiatives.

The themes that arose from the workshop were:

1. Develop the NUP and ensure Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are sufficiently embedded and operationalised in terms of actions and monitoring;
2. Ensure accessibility to data which enables monitoring progress towards national targets;
3. Identify key data gaps; and
4. Identify actors and innovations at state and local levels.

Action plan, implementation, and feedback loops

The decadal strategy offers high-level strategic directions for Australian cities to transition into sustainable and liveable cities. The strategy lacks clear guidance on how citizens, organisations and local governments can implement the plan. A gap exists between strategic documents and implementation plans, where organisations with the capacity and capability to follow the strategy require further support for interpretation and execution. Specifically, implementation actions are absent and require explicit incorporation.

We recommend the decadal strategy be supported by the development and publication of complementary documentation, providing clear guidance on implementing actions suggested within the strategy. This should include action plans with specific goals and potential deliverables. Such plans must be developed alongside local community actors to elaborate on national suggestions for urban transformation and redefine the accessibility of HDR knowledge for diverse groups and communities to use and expand on the research.

Additionally, regarding the capacity building follow-up and feedback in the decadal strategy,

greater clarity is needed on how feedback will be collected, and by whom. This will require acknowledging the prevalence of power dynamics between different actors and providing the means for equal opportunities through the grounded lenses of justice and equity. We must reimagine 'co-design' and 'co-management' and critically consider whose voice is prioritised.

The decadal strategy suggests that to create a long-term sustainable cities agenda, we must

improve collaboration between systems, sectors as well as community and industry partners by "harness[ing] innovation and disruption more effectively" (p.21). However, we urge that the decadal strategy clarifies the definitions of 'innovation' and 'disruption' to challenge the current participatory channels and methods, rather than finding new tools to conduct the same feedback loops, which only reinforces existing structures and unequal power dynamics.

Image: Australian National Botanic Gardens, Clunies Ross Street, Acton ACT. Photo by Unsplash.



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Image: Ready To Take Flight. Photo by Unsplash.





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