

Scientists call for greater say on global plan for future cities

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Tianjin, China. Credit: Jakob Montrasio, Flickr

An urban environment expert at The Australian National University (ANU) is among leading scientists calling for a greater say on a new international plan for cities of the future, ahead of a major United Nations conference next week.

Professor Xuemei Bai from ANU is one of the scientific leaders of

Urban Knowledge Action Network to be launched at the UN Habitat III conference in Ecuador.

Delegates at the conference will adopt a new global framework that will guide sustainable urban development for the next 20 years - the New Urban Agenda (NUA).

"Unfortunately science didn't play a major role in the drafting of the NUA," said Professor Bai from the ANU Fenner School of Environment and Society.

Professor Bai said more urban areas would be built in the next 30 years than ever before.

"Cities already account for about 75 per cent of global energy use and contribute an equivalent share of carbon dioxide emissions," she said.

"If cities expand business as usual, the projected urbanisation alone will breach the warming limit set by the 2015 Paris climate agreement."

Professor Bai and colleagues from the United States, South Africa, United Kingdom, Sweden and India wrote a comment article that appeared in *Nature* this week arguing that urban scientists needed to be better organised and to have a greater role in shaping future cities.

The article states: "The Habitat III agenda requires a global community of urban biophysical and social scientists to assess developments and help direct progress. To achieve the SDGs and the NUA, the global urban research community must come together to develop institutions, funding mechanisms and research agendas."

The Urban Knowledge Action Network would be a global research and engagement platform that would seek to achieve sustainable urban

development across the world, bringing together researchers, policymakers and urban practitioners, Professor Bai said.

Urbanisation globally - particularly in China, India and Africa, but also countries such as Australia - is one of the biggest social transformations in human history.

"This poses major challenges such as land use, resource demand, and air and water pollution for [city](#) planners and policymakers," Professor Bai said.

"Australia is already highly urbanised, but it is one of the few developed countries that are still experiencing rapid urban expansion."

Professor Bai said cities were also the centres of technological, social and cultural innovations.

"Increasingly, we realise cities are complex systems governed by multiple processes and interactions, and we need to achieve a better understanding of the synergies and trade-offs among these processes," she said.

Habitat III is the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development to be held in Quito, Ecuador, from 17 to 20 October 2016.

The UN General Assembly decided to convene the Habitat III conference to affirm global commitment to sustainable urbanisation, focusing on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda that builds on the Habitat Agenda of Istanbul in 1996.

Future Earth, a 10-year research program on global environmental change, will officially launch the Urban Knowledge Action Network at

the UN Habitat III Conference on Tuesday 18 October, when Professor Bai will present the rationale and vision of the initiative.

More information: Timon McPhearson et al. Scientists must have a say in the future of cities, *Nature* (2016). [DOI: 10.1038/538165a](https://doi.org/10.1038/538165a)

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