

Scotland influences European urban research priorities



SNIFFER is a great acronym (almost as good as SURF). In this article, Dr Sandra Marks, explains what it is and how it's helping to inform European regeneration research priorities.



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URBAN-NET is a five-year European Research Area Network initiative launched in August 2006 and financed and promoted by the European Commission. It aims to structure and coordinate research on urban sustainability within the European Research Area, with a focus on addressing shared requirements for research and the opening of joint research programmes. The network comprises 15 research-funding or facilitating organisations in 12 European countries and UN-Habitat.

Research priorities for Scotland - engaging with stakeholders

Since late 2007, a national stakeholder consultation has been underway across Europe to prioritise areas for future urban sustainability research within the URBAN-NET initiative. This process is being coordinated in the UK by SNIFFER (Scotland & Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research) and in Scotland by the Scottish Government. An important framework for discussion is the URBAN-NET discussion paper, Future Research Areas in the Field of Urban Sustainability, which summarises 15 research themes. Briefly, these are:

- * Integrated urban management through multi-sector/actor governance
- * Demographic change - opportunities and consequences for cities
- * Competitive urban futures and adaptation to globalisation
- * Shrinking cities
- * Social stability and deprived neighbourhoods
- * Migration and diversity as a challenge and an opportunity
- * Health, quality of life and public spaces
- * Proximity, access, transport and mobility
- * Urban sprawl or compact city – integrated re-use of land
- * Environmental management and social behaviour
- * Housing and urban design in highly differentiated cities
- * Climate change and ecological risk management
- * Energy efficiency and infrastructure management
- * Developing commercial locations and centralised supply areas
- * Heritage, identity, culture, tourism and branding

In February 2008, SNIFFER and the Scottish Government co-facilitated a workshop to identify future research priorities for urban sustainability research in Scotland. Around 40 stakeholders from the research, policy, practitioner and private communities contributed to a day of stimulating discussion, views and comments, focusing on the themes in the document. Participants were invited to consider how cooperation between stakeholders could be improved, how research findings could be better implemented, and what the focus of future research should be. Finally, they were asked to vote for what they considered to be the most relevant and important of the 15 areas for Scotland, to feed into the next stage of developing a Europe-wide consensus on urban research priorities.

The top four research priorities as voted for Scotland were:

- Health, quality of life and public spaces,
- Integrated urban management through multi-sector/multi-actor governance,
- Climate change and ecological risk management, and;
- Social stability and deprived neighbourhoods.

These were seen as the most cross-cutting of the 15 areas, and therefore useful for encouraging interdisciplinary networking and collaboration as well as capturing the main issues most pertinent to Scotland, and will be taken forward in an URBAN-NET transnational stakeholder workshop in June 2008. The final part of the process will result in a document that will elaborate a European Strategic Urban Research Framework for use at national and regional levels to encourage collaborative research between European research funding organisations.

Cooperation between urban stakeholder groups

It was seen as particularly important to invest in and promote knowledge exchange between academia, policy makers and practitioners.

Suggestions of ways this could be achieved included:

- development of government/academic/industrial advisory groups
- improved secondment opportunities
- more 'on the ground' experience for researchers
- better use of regional and web-based networks and forums
- multi-sectoral steering groups and assessment panels

From a European perspective, common solutions are needed for common problems. In Scotland, there may be much to learn from other countries, particularly with regard to climate change, including greener infrastructures and improved housing design and delivery. Whilst what works in other countries may not necessarily work for Scotland, there may be value in comparative studies in relation to some of these areas.

Implementation of urban research

Critical reviews of relevant existing research (as already undertaken at European level by the URBAN-NET initiative) were seen as useful for identifying evidence and knowledge gaps. However, research into barriers to implementation were seen as equally important. In Scotland, improved exchange of knowledge, skills and experience between sectors was seen as key to promoting more effective implementation.

Research findings need to be translated into evidence and clear qualitative indicators if they are to influence and drive practical delivery. In Scotland, despite extensive research into health and social deprivation, it was felt there has been little improvement over the past 15 years. Conflicting evidence makes it difficult to separate cause and effect, and this remains a key area where practical solutions are needed. To help address this, research could be linked to pilot implementation projects so that researchers are involved in demonstrating their conclusions.

Focus of future research

Future research needs to include horizon-scanning as well as problem-solving, and ways need to be found to measure environmental, economic and social sustainability and balance it with competing priorities such as economic growth. Regarding climate change, scientific facts and engineering solutions are not enough on their own; we need to understand more about triggers and drivers of institutional change and how individuals and organisations behave in response to policy instruments and measures.

For more information:

Visit the project website at www.urban-net.org

Contact the project at [info\(at\)urban-net.org](mailto:info(at)urban-net.org) to receive the bi-monthly bulletin

Visit SNIFFER's website at www.sniffer.org.uk

Visit the Scottish Government's research at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Research>