
PLUS NETWORK BIENNIAL CONFERENCE
SURVEY RESULTS SUMMARY



Survey Results

An extensive survey was answered by 20 international delegates who attended the PLUS Network Biennial Conference in Durban, South Africa, in September 2008. The survey aimed to learn more about a) how members of the PLUS Network (urban planners) learn about urban sustainability; and b) what has been the impact of their membership in the PLUS Network.

The Need for Urban Sustainability

90% of the respondents answered that their city was undertaking an integrated long-term approach to sustainability planning, and the majority (80%) were using a set framework (such as Earth CAT, LA 21, Governments of Canada Strategic Reference Model- (GSRM), Transition Towns, or a hybrid of these). 65% of the respondents indicated that their city has adopted a set of sustainability indicators to monitor their progress towards sustainability. The need to address urban sustainability has come about from a dire need to design for a better future, demand from the community and citizen action, and from progressive political aspirations of leaders. Another key driver for changing the approach to urban planning has been the ability to learn from other cities about how they are addressing urban sustainability challenges, which includes being exposed to both their successes and their failures.

In order to implement their plans, 45% of the respondents answered that their city was using Fast Action for Sustainability Transition (FAST) community demonstration projects to propel the long-term planning process and demonstrate results on the ground. These project include actions such as implementation of visioning processes, the development of multi-stakeholder groups to consult on a specific theme (such as the Dar es Salaam Tourism Advisory Committee), forming credit cooperatives to service youth, women and disabled groups, special mapping exercises, seed funding local initiatives (such as cleaning up public spaces), conducting an analysis on pedestrian/bicycling activities in the city, building “rain gardens”, and raising public awareness, particularly with youth.

How Cities Learn

The results from the survey indicate that when faced with a challenge regarding planning for urban sustainability, an overwhelming majority of people turn to colleagues, firstly in their own city, and secondly (80%) turn to colleagues in another city. Over 80% of respondents were very likely or likely to have a mentor, to whom they turn for advice. 66.7% replied that they would very likely turn to an association or network for assistance, but notably, only 18% used professional associations, as opposed to peer networks, non-governmental associations (such as ICLEI, PLUS Network or City Net). Other sources of information and guidance included government departments, consultants, academic institutions, journals and consultants however these were not the primary sources of support. Searching on the internet was a likely step for exploring approaches, and common sites include: ICLEI, Wetkit, Planetizen, key word search, Wikipedia or other directly searching on another city's website. (how to account for learning from friends – as did not distinguish between friends and colleagues)

Over 80% of respondents said that learning about urban sustainability could still be enhanced and suggested that time for informal, open discussions as well as establishing a network of people that provide advice and support were key. Increasing the number of people involved in informal learning settings, such as peer learning exchanges of the PLUS Network would mean that more people (such as city councilors, private sector representatives and the construction industry) were aware of the interrelated aspects of the challenges being faced and the opportunities to address these complex problems and in turn, this would propel more learning and innovation.

The Role of the PLUS Network

The PLUS Network was established in 2004 and has grown from a core membership of X to 38 cities, of which half are from low-income countries and the other half are from high-income countries (primarily Canada). Of the respondents, 33% were original members (joined in 2004), and the other respondents had primarily been involved for at least 2 years (since 2006). 65% of the respondents considered themselves to be active participants of the Network, attending peer exchanges and web dialogues. The other respondents play a more passive role, due to lack of leadership, time or resources. Respondents stated that the major strengths of the PLUS Network were the peer learning and sharing forums, providing a point of reference for taking action, providing common focus and direction for questions, and the opportunity to participate in an adaptive learning setting. The PLUS Network has run over 20 peer exchanges. The majority of the respondents had attended between 1 and 4 of these forums, of which they found their participation very useful. Peer exchanges have been inspirational, provide checks and balances for individual cities and their initiatives and provide opportunities for cities to see urban sustainability in action around the world. Respondents noted that there are some weaknesses in the framework, such as insufficient financial support, not enough staff can participate (and those that do attend aren't always the "right" people), the need to expand membership to include European cities and an overt emphasis on environmental issues, as opposed to "sustainability". Of the cities that have undertaken integrated long-term planning; 26% of the respondents indicated that the PLUS Network has been helpful with their initiatives and 26% said it had not; 21% of respondents indicated that the PLUS Network has been helpful with their demonstration projects and 15% said it had not; 31% of the respondents indicated that the PLUS Network had been helpful with their implementation of sustainability indicators, 10% said it had not. In all these cases (demonstration projects, indicators and long-term planning) the remaining respondents either did not know or it was not relevant to their city.

PLUS Network On-line Services

The PLUS Network also runs on-line dialogues focused on specific themes. Ten dialogues have been run, however few respondents had participated in many of them. The dialogue with the highest participation of respondents (25% participation for the dialogue on youth engagement found the dialogue either above average or excellent. Only 36% of respondents had used the Sustainable Cities website (www.sustainablecities.net), and ratings ranged from below average (21%) to excellent (5%). ICSC is currently upgrading the website in order to better suit the needs of the members and outside audiences.

Interns

(not included because low participation of respondents)

Membership and Governance

Finally, respondents were asked several questions about the membership and governance of the PLUS Network. The majority of respondents (41%) indicated that they thought that members of the Steering Committee should be elected, but that members should also be able to volunteer for this position.

Most members (70%) did not have an opinion about whether the PLUS Network should expand its governance and membership structures. However, when asked about specific types of groups, most respondents (58%) said that NGO's should be able to become PLUS Network members (assuming they agree with the mission of the organization) and 41% said private consultants should not be able to join as members (indicating fears of changing the role of the Network towards selling services as opposed to supporting cities). 58% of the respondents said that they would like to have a more active role in the governance of the PLUS Network (able to give advice, provide information on specific themes and advise on governance issues).