

**Background Note:
Best practices including an Update on the Dubai International Awards**

CPR Subcommittee Meeting, 25 October 2017

1. UN-Habitat's Mandate on Best Practices

History and operating environment

1.1 Best practices have been a long standing modality of knowledge generation and sharing by UN-Habitat, and grew in focus during Habitat II in 1996, and the establishment of the Dubai International Award the year before in 1995.¹ The 11th round of the Dubai Award this year marks the 21th anniversary of collaboration between Dubai Municipality and UN-Habitat in generating best practices through the Award system. Since 1995, more than 4,300 initiatives, which document various ways of solving economic, social and environmental issues, from more than 150 countries, have been compiled and disseminated through the best practices database hosted by UN-Habitat.

1.2 Several other partners have also contributed to UN-Habitat's work on best practices, such as the Government of China, the Spanish Ministry of Public Works, and the Iberoamerican and Caribbean Forum on Best Practices². The Latin America and Caribbean region, with support of the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (ROLAC) in particular has been a strong promotor of best practices, including the Dubai Award, with important regional and country experiences to draw from.

1.3 The United Nations General Assembly in 1995 defined Best Practices as *"initiatives which have made outstanding contributions to improving quality of life in cities and communities."* More specifically, the General Assembly defined Best Practices as successful initiatives which:

- Have a demonstrable and tangible impact on improving people's quality of life;
- Are the result of effective partnerships between the public, private and civic sectors of society; and
- Are socially, culturally, economically and environmentally sustainable.

These three basic criteria have since been expanded to include additional considerations in light of emerging issues and trends. These include: leadership and community empowerment; innovation within the local context; gender equality and social inclusion; and transferability.

¹ The Dubai International Award for Best Practices (DIABP) was established in 1995 under the directive of the late Sheikh Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, to recognize initiatives which have resulted in positive impact on improving the living environment.

² The UN-Habitat Best Practices Unit has over the years also notably collaborated with Brazilian Institute for Municipal Administration; City of Vienna, Best Practices Hub; El Agora; Environmental Development Action in the Third World (ENDA Tiers Monde); Fundación HÁBITAT Colombia; Institute for International Urban Development; Huairou Commission; Practical Action, The Schumacher Centre for Technology & Development; International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI); International Art and Architecture Research Association (IAARA), Tehran; Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities (JCI); Global Urban Development, University of Naples "Federico II", CAIXA Federal, Brazil; Spanish Habitat Committee, among others.

1.4 The Best Practices Unit is one of the units of the Research and Capacity Development Division (Sub-Programme 7). This Unit is critical for reaching one out of the three Excepted Accomplishments of this Sub-Programme, namely EAb, with the related outputs listed in Box 1 below. The Governing Council resolution HSP/GC/26/CPR.10 Paragraph 7 highlights this mandate and “*Encourages Member States, at the twenty-seventh session of the Governing Council, to share best practices regarding the early implementation of the New Urban Agenda.*”

Box 1: Best Practices-related EAs and outputs (Sub-Programme 7)

EA (b): Improved knowledge of sustainable urbanization issues at the local, national and global levels for evidence-based formulation

Outputs:

- Best practices case studies for Global, Country and City Reports
- Database on best practices, awards and systematization in support of knowledge management
- Best practices as options presented after CPI analysis (support to Technical Cooperation)
- Best practices and lessons learned in the implementation of the NUA
- Technical capacity development on best practices initiatives³

1.5 To date, the work of the Unit on best practices has focused more on EA (b) of *improving knowledge* as outlined above. This can be seen as an easier accomplishment for best practices to directly contribute to than EA (c) on improving *capacity*. The Unit considers EA (c): *Improved capacity of national and local authorities and partners to implement plans or strategies for sustainable urbanization* as part of a longer-term strategy, and modalities are currently being developed to ensure that the lessons drawn from best practices have a measurable impact on actual work modalities through training and capacity building activities. With the cross-cutting nature of best practices, it is recognized that these accomplishments and outputs are also advanced by other parts of the Agency.

1.6 With the elevation of the need to strengthen the normative side of UN-Habitat’s work in the report of the High Level Independent Panel to Assess and Enhance the Effectiveness of UN-Habitat⁴ knowledge management in general—including best practices— comes into the forefront. Similar observations have been made by the Mid-Term Evaluation of the Strategic Plan. In order to be optimally geared to deliver its mandate and make a difference in the sustainable development agenda, UN-Habitat needs to more effectively use knowledge as an asset, with best practices forming an important part of this knowledge set.

In 2016, UN-Habitat developed and approved a Knowledge Management Strategy in view of transforming the Agency into a learning and knowledge-based organization. Since then, the Agency has made measurable improvements in various organizational and management areas that are related to knowledge. Mainstreaming and institutionalizing this knowledge is nonetheless not fully capitalized upon, and numerous areas are still to be developed and/or refined. It is clear that despite its strategic importance, knowledge management is not yet systematically harvesting core knowledge and lessons learned, internally and externally⁵.

³ Linked most directly to EAc as per para. 1.5

⁴ Advance Unedited Version 01 August 2017 A/71/1006

⁵ UN-Habitat Knowledge Management Strategy (2016)

Current staffing and portfolio

1.7 Several Offices and Branches across the Agency collect and utilise best practices in their work. The Best Practices Unit, where the overall coordination lies, was not staffed from 2013 to mid-2017.⁶ On 31 May 2017, the P4 RB post was filled. The Unit currently has an additional four short-term consultants, financed through the Dubai Award.

1.8 UN-Habitat's Best Practices Unit collects, consolidates, coordinates and shares best practices and enabling policies on urban development. It supports UN-Habitat in being a global actor in the field of sustainable urban development by acquiring, creating, refining, storing, transferring, sharing and encouraging the use of knowledge generated from these practices.⁷ The key focus of the Unit is currently the implementation of the Dubai International Award for Best Practices (see Point 2. below) and the updating and relaunching of the Best Practices database. In addition, the Unit is advancing on a number of strategic partnerships, to be rolled out further during 2018. This includes a Cooperation Agreement with the University of Southern Australia to establish an expert system search engine to enable analysis of best practices database and external sources of information. Work will be undertaken with advanced computer systems and specially designed applications to more effectively connect best practices to decision-making in global programmes such as the City Prosperity Initiative, and from a New Urban Agenda and SDG perspective. This work has already produced a prototype that is expected to be presented during the 9th Session of the World Urban Forum (WUF 9).

1.9 With UN-Habitat's mandate to encourage Member States to share best practices, the Units' role will need to expand to support such efforts. This will be done primarily through the existing architecture, such as that for Habitat III follow-up and the World Urban Forum. The Unit will support the preparation of the Quadrennial Report for monitoring the implementation of the New Urban Agenda, the World Cities Report that is the flagship publication of UN-Habitat, and the regional reports. This support will take the form of collection and analysis of best practices to illustrate what works and how. Best practices will also be integrated in the Quito Implementation Platform, and feature as a key area of qualitative information to share among Member States.

1.10 In addition to one RB P4 staff, the Best Practices Unit currently has one source of funding through the ear-marked financial support through the grant for the 2017 Dubai Award (up to February 2018). Therefore a priority for the Unit is to fundraise to enable implementation of the expected outputs, including the support to knowledge management activities.

2. Strengths and opportunities in advancing the work of best practices

2.1 The strengths and opportunities for enhancing the Agency's work on best practices are multiple, starting with the solid foundation of best practices in the Agency's mandate, evidence-based nature of the best practices, and the extensive history of work in this area across the Agency. The renewed recognition of knowledge management and best practices, continuous reference to best practice activities in the 2030 Development Agenda strategies for implementation and monitoring, and demonstrated demand for best practices on a daily basis from Member States as well as UN and other partner agencies all create opportunities to respond. This demand includes the production of local urban knowledge and information on best practices and lessons learned in terms

⁶ Consultant were assigned to implement the 2014 Dubai International Award and the start of the 2017 Award; but were not assigned to develop the wider mandate of the Unit.

⁷ Building on the concepts of UN-Habitat's Knowledge Management Strategy (2016), citing King William (2009) *Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning*, Katz Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh, USA.

of policies, programmes, and institutional arrangements that are fit for purpose for different urban contexts.

2.2 The momentum and focus built by the SDGs, and the Habitat III Conference and its outcome document follow-up and monitoring creates an new opportunity for UN-Habitat and Member States to revisit the significance of best practices and to identify the best ways to operationalize them in the Action Framework for the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda (AFINUA). As noted in Resolution HSP/GC/26/CPR.10, best practices can serve as a key tool for countries to gain and share guidance, practical experience and inspiration on the implementation of these global commitments. The preparation of a draft proposal for the Quadrennial Report on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda provides renewed impetus to the use of best practices, as does the promotion of best practices on the Quito Implementation Platform.

2.3 The advent of the big data era where social media has created new ways of sharing knowledge will help in identification, collection and sharing of best practices over the next decade, largely expanding the pool of available knowledge on new ways of doing things, particularly those directly related to implementing of the New Urban Agenda and SDGs, and potentially the relation between them.

2.4 More systemic work is nonetheless needed to use information, knowledge and learning in the Agency's efforts to achieve sustainable urban development. This includes strengthening the institutional and operational structure of knowledge management; reinforcing the use of information and knowledge within the organization; fostering partnerships for broader knowledge-sharing and learning; promoting a culture of learning and exchange; and creating a monitoring mechanism⁸. Best practices are a fundamental part of refining these institutional processes. In addition to their transformative potential outside the Agency, this includes the role of external best practices to also more systematically inform the development of new project proposals.⁹

2.5 The Best Practices database is a key knowledge asset for the Agency; and once updated and aligned to the New Urban Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals, and the City Prosperity Initiative, will provide a powerful set of knowledge to guide policy-making. Introducing the technological innovations that can support best practices analysis will likely attract new partners and sources of funding. Through being placed on the Quito Implementation Platform, it will have a wider outreach and use.

2.6 As a learning and knowledge organization, UN-Habitat needs to create conditions to systematically and collectively learn from the experience of its partners. The Best Practices Unit has over the years generated long-standing partnerships, which will be revitalised and establish new areas of cooperation. The 9th Session of the World Urban Forum (WUF 9) in Kuala Lumpur provides an excellent opportunity to advance the work of best practices in general, as well as the Dubai Award. Several activities are being proposed, including an Exhibition on Best Practices, networking and side-events.

3. Update on the 11th Round of the Dubai International Award

3.1 The 11th cycle of the Dubai International Award comes at an opportune time when most countries have re-affirmed their commitments through the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. To incorporate these emerging global agendas, UN-Habitat and the Municipality

⁸ UN-Habitat Knowledge Management Strategy, 2016.

⁹ Discussion is underway in how to establish such feedback loops between the Best Practices Unit and the Project Advisory Committee.

of Dubai agreed to restructure the Award in 2016 to align to the key items of the New Urban Agenda along seven categories:

1. National Urban Policies (government)
2. Participatory Slum Upgrading
3. Local Implementation-urban redevelopment, redesign of urban spaces
4. Monitoring Mechanisms for the New Urban Agenda and the Urban SDGs
5. Territorial planning, urban planning and design (for private sector)
6. Urban economy and finance (for an individual)
7. Legislation, Rules, Regulations & Governance Systems (for a university)

3.2 The submissions stage of the 11th cycle closed on 31 August 2017. The Award has succeeded to attract over 500 submissions across the 7 categories. As indicated in Figure 1 (Annex) below, this represents a higher number of submissions compared to the last four rounds of the Award (2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014). This has been achieved despite the introduction of a set of new categories along the New Urban Agenda themes, and the short time span to announce the Award (with the Unit staffed on 31 May this year). This can be attributed to the hard work of the staff and consultants and to the social media campaign that was introduced, attracting a large number of visitors. Dubai Municipality should also be commended for modernizing the application portal.

3.3 *Dubai advocacy and communication strategy analytics*

The goal of the strategy was three-fold, namely (1) reach out to UN-Habitat's internal and external partners and other UN Agencies networks; (2) encourage submissions from people in all sectors; and (3) enhance publicity and international recognition of the Award. The Best Practices Unit, serving as the Award Secretariat, established focal points in Branches and Regional offices to reach out to the Agency's partners and networks encouraging them to apply. Communication was also shared to all the 26 UN Agencies within Nairobi which has 4000+ people through United Nations Information and Communications Office. Various social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Youtube were also used to enhance visibility. The strategy succeeded to attract 20,853 visits to the on-line portal during July-August 2017.

3.4 *Preliminary analysis of the 11th Round of the Dubai International Award*

The submission analysis shows that a high number of people downloaded the submission guidelines (3,277 downloads), while substantively fewer went on to register on the Dubai Award application webpage (1,798 registered users). The actual number of submitted applications dropped further, and the eventual completed submissions down to 524. This reduced engagement after visiting the webpage, indicates that there is a room to improve and ensure that a larger number of visitors and registered users complete the full application process. Factors that may have caused the drop (from registration to actual completions) may include: the relatively more targeted focus of the sub-categories of the Award; high expectations on submissions (such as demonstrated impact); lengthy submission guidelines; and the award requirement for applications to be made only in English¹⁰.

The composition of the submissions pool shows that the advocacy efforts penetrated all different groups and sectors (Annex; Figure 2.) Some of the Award categories such as *Monitoring mechanisms for the New Urban Agenda and Urban SDGs* are more technical in nature and therefore

¹⁰ Efforts of outreach and translation where required were nonetheless made in Arabic, French, Russian and Spanish.

attracting a comparatively smaller number of submissions. The regional composition of the submissions are shown in Annex; Figure 3. Latin America and Asia-Pacific, are the main regions contributing to the submissions pool. Latin America in particular serves as a useful model of engaging regional and national institutions to advocate and collect best practices, including for the Dubai Award. There are still opportunities to engage more with the Caribbean, Western Europe and North America, as well as enhance the language access (such as for Francophone Africa).

3.5 The next stage of the Dubai Award is the evaluation of submissions by a 10-member Technical Advisory Committee, scheduled to be held in Dubai from 29 October-3 November 2017. The Jury, which will make the final selection of winners, will be held from 15-16 January 2018 also in Dubai. The dates for the Award Ceremony are still to be confirmed.

3.6 A full diagnosis will be undertaken after the completion of the 11th Cycle of the Award to help guide the work of a potential 12th cycle, to be awarded in 2020. This cycle will coincide with the 10th World Urban Forum to be held in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, with opportune possibilities for collaboration.

4. Challenges and areas to address

4.1 The Agency's explicit work on best practices through the Best Practices Unit has to date relied on only one main source of generating best practices, through the Dubai Award. This has led to the Unit being associated only with this one area of deliverables and funding. It is important to broaden the incentives that attract submissions of best practices to the Agency; and to make the comparative advantage of UN-Habitat as a hub for urban best practices more visible. Integration of best practices on the Quito Implementation Platform will here be important, as well as wider discussion on connections with other global platforms. Further reflection is necessary to enhance the use of best practises being generated both internally and externally, and ultimately how to track and demonstrate impact.

4.2 The potentials of best practices in guiding and supporting both the normative and operational work of the Agency need to be recognized at a more extensive level. Inadequate funding and staffing to match the expected deliverables of the Work Programme remain a key challenge and weakness to actively undertake the work on best practices. This, along with UN-Habitat's overall Knowledge Management Strategy, is a collective organizational endeavour that demands well-defined, coordinated efforts.

4.3 Conceptually, discussions have previously been held, and currently revisited, regarding the importance to look at both urban practices and *policies*.¹¹ Furthermore, the value of distinction between "best", "good" and "promising" practices (or the use of other terms) is being reassessed, along with the degree to which demonstrated impact, as opposed to a commendable ongoing process, should be a requirement to be considered, for example, as a Dubai Award winner.

4.4 Lessons will be drawn from the 11th round of the Dubai International Award for the above discourse, as well as to identify the most suitable set of categories and criteria to use to effectively generate relevant practices for the implementing of the New Urban Agenda and achieving Agenda 2030. This will contribute to a broader discussion by UN-Habitat moving forward, in terms of the coherence on Awards. For the current round of the Dubai Award, efforts are already made to go

¹¹ See for example *Good policies and enabling legislation for attaining MDGs: a methodology for participatory review and assessment* (UN-Habitat, 2005), where the previous Best Practices and Local Leadership Programme implemented a pilot project to document some outstanding urban policies and laws.

beyond the Award's traditional and most visible benefit in show-casing good work. This includes the proposal to present at WUF 9, the 50 or most relevant practices in terms of the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal implementation rather than to await only the winners or "best" submissions. New forms of peer-to-peer learning on practices generated, such as between Mayors, are also being considered.

5. Proposed priority areas of work on best practices

5.1 The Best Practices Unit is preparing a Strategy Paper to advance the detailed set of forthcoming activities; to be ready by December 2017. The following areas of work are preliminarily being considered as priority for 2018-19 (Box 2).

Box 2: UN-Habitat priority areas of work on best practices

(i) On the overall management of best practices:

- Consolidate and systematize the overall management of best practices in the Agency—covering knowledge creation, storage, sharing and use of best practices, including through the Quito Implementation Platform.
- Broaden mechanisms to generate best practices (Awards and others) along existing architecture for Habitat III, NUA, and World Urban Forum implementation.
- Strengthen the Best Practices database to be aligned with key themes and indicators of the NUA and the SDGs, connecting in a more organic manner data to knowledge and decision-making, including migration to the Quito Implementation Platform.
- Identify new mechanisms and forums for best practices information sharing between Member States.
- Activate the best practices partnership, including the reinforcement of regional networks.
- Enhance the qualitative contribution of best practices to the NUA and SDGs reports, and UN-Habitat global and flagship reports.
- Develop integrated capacity development strategies to apply best practices and policies.
- Strengthened regional and national strategies, and collaboration with networks on best practices.
- Publication of booklets and policy briefs on best practices and lessons learned on the implementation of the New Urban Agenda.
- Establish feed-back loop systems for best practice inputs in the Agency's project formulation.

(ii) In direct follow-up of the Dubai Award system:

- Implement dissemination/engagement strategy for the winning, as well as a wider selection of practices, from the 11th round of the Dubai International Award, including inter alia, policy briefs, urban lectures; and features in flag-ship reports and other publications.
- Establish closer linkages with communication platforms (such as World Urban Campaign, City Scope, Urban Gateway, Archidaily, City Lab) as well as through social media channels.
- Consider verification and monitoring aspects of best practices generated through the Award.
- Guide the next round of the Award according to its key objectives, based on a diagnosis of the category and selection criteria for the 11th round, along with other learnings.
- Expand best practices to regional areas that have participated less in the Award.

Annex: Dubai International Award for the Living Environment

Figure 1: Number of submissions to the Dubai Award 1996-2014

Over the 20 year life of the Award (since 1996), a total of 112 winners from different countries have been awarded with cash prizes and trophies for their efforts to improve the living environment.

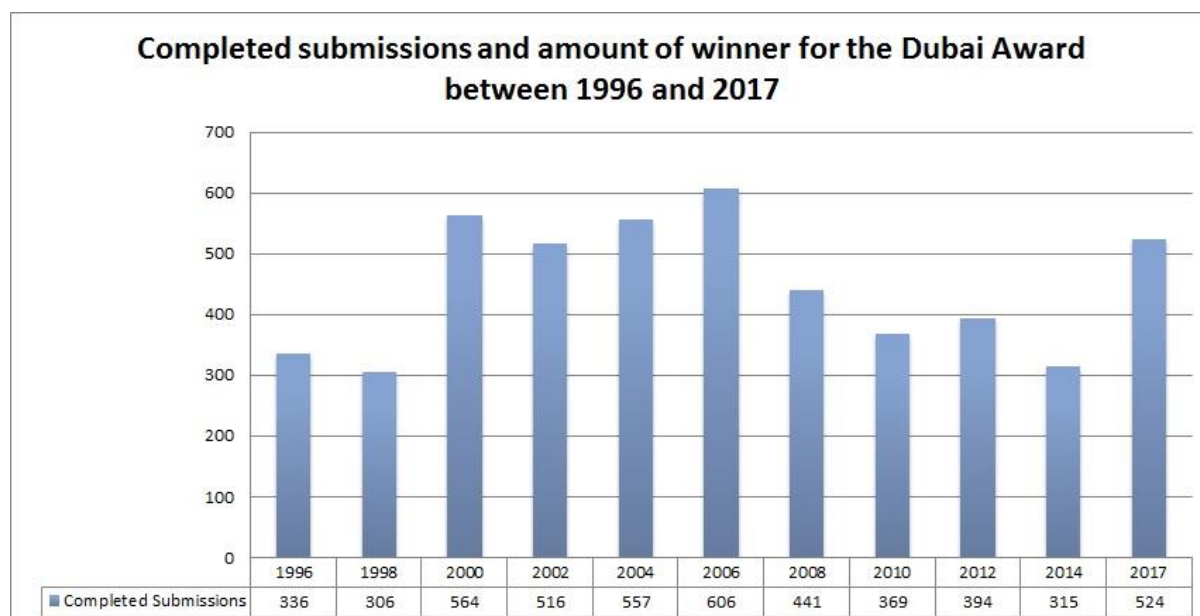
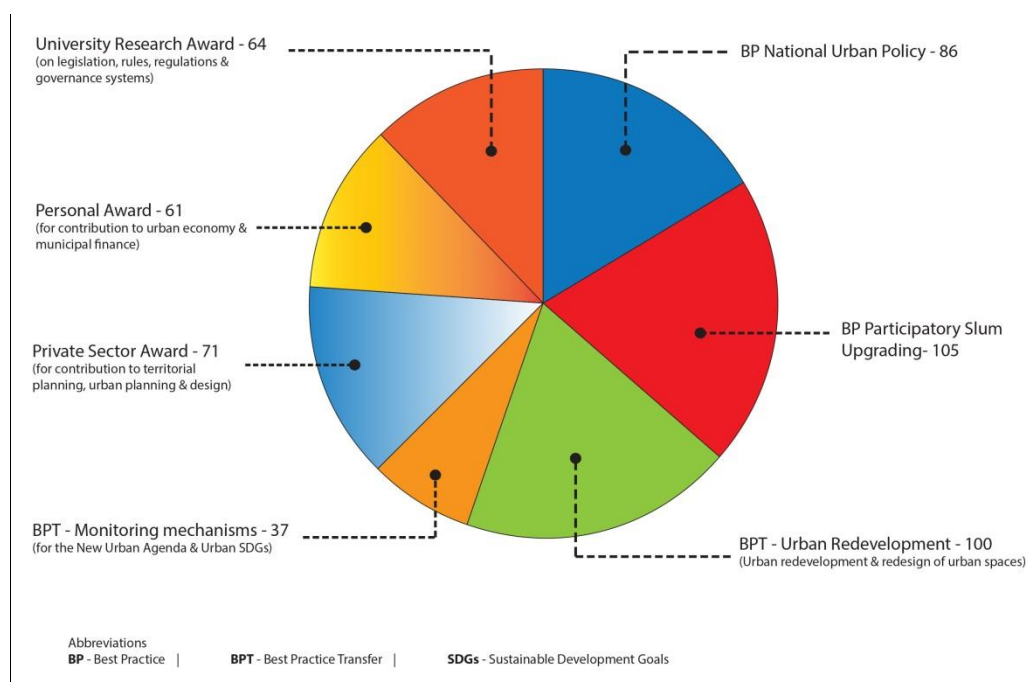


Figure 2: Thematic distribution of submissions for the 11th round of the Dubai Award¹²



¹² The numbers will be further updated after the final submission to the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)

Figure 3: Geographical distribution of submissions for the 11th round of the Dubai Award

