



MEDIA RELEASE

Leading global institutions launch alliance to advance human-centric urban research

(Vienna, Austria) Wednesday, 2 July 2025 – Five globally respected academic institutions have come together to launch the **Global Alliance on Sustainable Urban Societies** – a pioneering initiative that places people at the heart of urban research and policymaking. The partnership was announced today at the **Singapore Management University (SMU) City Dialogues held in Vienna**, taking place as part of the Mayors Forum of the World Cities Summit 2025.

The founding members of the alliance are:

- The Urban Institute, **Singapore Management University**
- The Initiative on Cities, **Boston University**
- The Department of Geography and Environment, **The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)**
- Melbourne Centre for Cities, **University of Melbourne**
- The School of Cities, **University of Toronto**

Representatives from the five founding institutions signed an agreement at a networking reception of the SMU City Dialogues Vienna.

Formed around a shared vision of interdisciplinary and human-centred urban research, the Alliance aims to deepen understanding of how city dwellers sense, navigate and shape the urban environments they inhabit. This includes examination of the social and cultural norms, social networks and economic linkages – the “soft infrastructures” – that underpin resilient and sustainable cities.

In an era of accelerating digital transformation, the Alliance embraces the fusion of critical social science with data science to offer fresh, actionable insights into urban life. By recognising people as *sensors*, *enablers* and *actuators*, the collaboration acknowledges the vital, multi-faceted role of residents in shaping sustainable urban societies.

The Alliance will collaborate through:

- Joint research initiatives and academic publications
- Co-hosted workshops and global conferences
- Faculty and student exchanges
- Responsible data-sharing protocols that uphold privacy and confidentiality

The founding institutions extend an open invitation to like-minded academic institutions to join the Alliance in advancing a collective understanding of sustainable, people-first cities.

Speaking at the SMU City Dialogues Vienna, the founding institutions underscored their commitment to fostering a diverse, inclusive and global network of urban researchers.

Professor Orlando Woods, the Director of the Urban Institute at SMU, said, “The joint vision is to pursue interdisciplinary research that views cities through a human-centred lens to shape sustainable urban societies and promote urban resilience. This exciting collaboration will deepen knowledge in an important field across the founding institutions, and it encompasses joint research projects, academic publications and workshops and conferences. It is also empowered by student and faculty exchanges, and data sharing initiatives that safeguard the confidentiality, privacy and security of individuals’ data. We welcome like-minded academic institutions to join this alliance.”

Professor Loretta Lees, the Director of the Initiative on Cities at Boston University, said, “The Initiative on Cities at Boston University is an interdisciplinary research, learning and practice centre focused on resilient and liveable cities. To be resilient and liveable, cities must be socially sustainable, and we need to understand how individuals and communities perceive, interact with, and are affected by urbanisation and the urban environment. Ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities in cities is important because this affects well-being and quality of life. Investigating urban community building and socio-cultural interactions and connections is strategic in terms of building human resilience to shocks, environmental, economic, or other. Working with like-minded urbanists globally is critical towards these goals, and we are very excited to be a part of launching this global urban alliance.”

Professor Hyun Bang Shin, the Head of the Department of Geography and Environment at the London School of Economics and Political Science, said, “The Department of Geography and Environment at LSE embodies international excellence through its diverse community of globally engaged academics, researchers, and students. Our work addresses some of the world’s most pressing urban challenges, combining rigorous academic inquiry with applied, policy-relevant solutions. Committed to fostering sustainable, equitable, and inclusive urban futures, we produce research that informs global debates, shapes practice, and empowers communities—from informal settlements to global cities—towards more just and resilient urban worlds. We are excited to be part of this global alliance on sustainable urban societies and look forward to working together with like-minded urban scholars across the world.”

Associate Professor Cathy Oke, Director of the Melbourne Centre for Cities, said, “At the Melbourne Centre for Cities we believe strongly in the importance of international collaboration between and amongst cities and universities, to further urban scholarship policy and decisions informed by lived experiences, shared goals, challenges and opportunities faced by urban settlements around the world. We’re delighted to be part of this global alliance, and look forward to finding new opportunities to help leaders and citizens as they shape just, thriving cities.”

Professor Karen Chapple, Director of the School of Cities, and Professor, Department of Geography & Planning, at the University of Toronto, said, “The School of Cities is delighted to be a founding member of the Global Alliance on Sustainable Urban Societies. This partnership reflects our deep commitment to advancing inclusive, interdisciplinary urban research that

centres the lived experiences of residents and city-builders. By working collaboratively across continents and disciplines, we can better understand the complex social fabrics that make cities resilient, and co-create solutions that are both innovative and grounded in the realities of urban life.”

- End -

Enclosures:

- Annex 1 – Photos of the signing ceremony
 - Annex 2 – About [SMU City Dialogues 2025](#)
-

About SMU Urban Institute

Set up on 17 January 2024, the SMU Urban Institute plans to forge an interdisciplinary research agenda that bridges theoretical and applied research, data science and the critical social sciences, industry and academia, and Singapore and Southeast Asia. It seeks to synthesise and cultivate thought leadership and innovative solutions, inform policy decisions, and drive sustainable urban development practices for the development of more inclusive, resilient, and vibrant cities. Organised into three pillars – Urban Life, Urban Growth and Urban Infrastructure – it aims to address the evolving urban challenges that confront Singapore and key Asian cities. <https://urban.smu.edu.sg/>

About Boston University Initiative on Cities

The Boston University Initiative on Cities is a global urban research and policy center, founded in 2014, that serves as a bridge between academic research and real-world urban challenges. By leveraging the interdisciplinary expertise of Boston University’s faculty and connecting it to practitioners, policymakers, and communities, the IOC seeks to advance more livable, resilient, and just cities. Learn more at www.bu.edu/ioc.

About the London School of Economics and Political Science

The [Department of Geography and Environment](#) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) is a centre of international academic excellence in economic and urban geography, planning, environmental social science, and climate change. Accommodating the largest concentration of urban scholars at the LSE, the Department’s research expertise is grounded in social sciences and policy relevance, excelling in six key areas that encompass city economies; housing, land and property; regional economic development; sustainability and environmental economics; global urban worlds; and environmental politics and justice.

About the Melbourne Centre for Cities

The [Melbourne Centre for Cities](#) is a cross-faculty, multidisciplinary initiative at the University of Melbourne, hosted by the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning. It leverages evidence-based research and bridges the gap between urban scholarship and policy-making, driving deeper academic understanding and transformative policy centred on key themes of urban sustainability, connectivity, leadership, and equity.

About the School of Cities, University of Toronto

The [School of Cities](#) is a unique multidisciplinary hub for urban research, education, and engagement creating new and just ways for cities and their residents to thrive. Based at the

University of Toronto and in a fast-growing, culturally diverse, and economically dynamic urban region, the School of Cities supports leading scholars, practitioners, and community members spanning disciplines and lived experiences to co-create new understandings, policies, and practices.

The School of Cities is playing a critical role in addressing climate change and justice, migration and belonging, inequality and democracy, and the world's collective ability to address urgent urban challenges.

Media Contacts

Singapore Management University

Joh Ting Koh

Senior Manager, SMU Office of Corporate Communications and Marketing

jtkoh@smu.edu.sg

Boston University

Stacy Fox

Executive Director, Boston University Initiative on Cities

sfox@bu.edu

The London School of Economics and Political Science

Charlotte Kelloway

Media Relations Manager, Communications Division

c.kelloway@lse.ac.uk

University of Melbourne

Scott Limbrick

Communications Officer, The Melbourne Centre for Cities

scott.limbrick@unimelb.edu.au

University of Toronto

Felicity Heyworth, Senior Communications Officer

School of Cities

communication.sofc@utoronto.ca

Annex 1: Photos of signing ceremony

Photo 1



Photo 2



Right to left:

- Prof Orlando Woods, Director, Urban Institute, Singapore Management University
- Prof Karen Chapple, Director, The School of Cities, University of Toronto
- Prof Cathy Oke, Director, Melbourne Centre for Cities
- Prof Loretta Lees, Director, The Initiative on Cities, Boston University
- Prof Hyun Bang Shin, Head of Department, Department of Geography and Environment, The London School of Economics and Political Science

Photo credit: Singapore Management University

Annex 2: SMU City Dialogues

[City Dialogues Vienna](#) marks the 4th edition of the signature series, and is the 2nd edition held overseas. This year, in partnership with [Urban Innovation Vienna](#) (UIV), the Dialogue, being held this year on 2 July in Vienna, serves as a platform for candid and solution-driven discussions among city leaders, industry experts, and scholars. The event also aims to generate practical and actionable recommendations that can serve as a stimulus and catalyst for positive change in urban development.

Notably, City Dialogues Vienna is a partner event of the [Mayors Forum of the World Cities Summit \(WCS\) 2025](#), hosted by the City of Vienna and co-organised by the Centre for Liveable Cities, Urban Redevelopment Authority, Singapore, and UIV. SMU's senior leadership will participate in Mayors Forum as speakers and moderators, further enhancing the University's contribution to the discourse. SMU was a Patron Sponsor of WCS Singapore in 2022 and 2024.

Theme: What is the Value of Urban Resilience?

The risks associated with urban development in a climate-disrupted and a dynamic digital world are well known, and solutions that can reduce these risks abound. However, the actions that enable – or impede – these solutions vary from region to region and city to city. Hence timely discussion to deploy these actions by governments, corporates and communities is crucial.

In this City Dialogues, we explore the multifaceted value of resilience through various lenses, including: economic benefits, social equality, environment sustainability, public-private partnerships, innovation & technology, and more. Effective resilience strategies necessitate the integration of both 'hardware' – investment in robust, state-of-the-art infrastructure – and 'software' or 'orgware' – the capacity to adapt to new challenges, foster innovation and establish new partnerships.

This dialogue aims to illuminate how these elements interplay to enhance urban resilience amidst rapid, and often disruptive, change.

Track 1 Economic Benefits & Public-Private Partnerships

- 1. How might investing in resilience reduce long-term costs and attract private investment?
- 2. How can collaboration between governments, businesses, and communities build more resilient infrastructure and services?
- 3. What are the different temporalities of resilience?
- 4. What are the spatial variabilities of resilience within and between cities/countries?
- 5. What roles do stakeholders from the public, private, and people sectors play?

Track 2

Social Equity & Environmental Sustainability

- 1. How can we ensure that resilience protects vulnerable populations and prioritises inclusive development?
- 2. How can resilient cities contribute to climate adaptation, the reduction of carbon footprints, and the preservation of natural resources?
- 3. What are the different temporalities of resilience?
- 4. What are the spatial variabilities of resilience within and between cities/countries?
- 5. What roles do stakeholders from the public, private, and people sectors play?

Track 3

Innovation & Technology

- 1. How can utilising data, AI, and smart systems maximise urban resilience and ensure future-ready cities and communities?
- 2. What are the different temporalities of resilience?
- 3. What are the spatial variabilities of resilience within and between cities/countries?
- 4. What roles do stakeholders from the public, private, and people sectors play?