

# New trends in Urban Facts' research

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Big cities are increasingly seen as producers and processors of information. Thus the extension and efficient exploitation of information and knowledge banks is a key factor for the success of major cities. In the case of Helsinki, this is even truer for the reason that the population and the employees of the City of Helsinki represent a very large knowledge reserve in Finnish conditions. In this sense, the City of Helsinki is already a rich organisation and is excellently placed for R&D, research and development. But the public sector, too, needs funds for product development – a certain proportion of the budget that would be earmarked for systematic development work.

The Helsinki Metropolitan Area has increasing opportunities to use international impulses to develop its innovation potential. Recent years have provided valuable experience of extensive exchange of experiences and of benchmarking within the European Union. Strengthening research collaboration between the universities and municipalities in the region is further enhancing these opportunities.

## **The accumulating nature of knowledge and expertise**

Over the years, an extensive research practice has developed to support a deeper understanding and development of the urban region. Helsinki City Urban Facts plays an important role here. Traditionally, the

basis of this information has concerned population, housing and living conditions, as well as economy and environment. The various offices and departments of the city are constantly involved in the public service provided for the inhabitants and concerned with its demand, quality and organisation. How do, for example, the city's population and industrial structures develop and how do these affect the demand for services and products? What should be taken into account when targeting resources?

The research conducted by the City of Helsinki has, to a great extent, been shaped by various information needs for long-term planning of a general nature such as master plans and economic plans. Since the late 1960s, information has been stored in electronic data registers, and applications drawing on these have been used for, e.g. population and employment forecasts and traffic planning. Administrative and planning practices increasingly involve regional and development projects that proceed on the basis of comparisons. Consequently, there has been a constant growth in the demand for evaluations and comparisons. Analyses of urban structure from the angles of service centres, traffic and, lately, sustainable development have also come along.

The city's first research steps were characterised by measurable, statistics-based analyses. Data on living conditions and various dimensioning figures – on housing and workplace space, job sufficiency and

rate of employment, for example – have been available for a long time. Combined with population and job forecasts and economic plans, these have worked as a means to link the planning of the city and its districts with general social development. Quantitative development figures in Helsinki are dependent on economic fluctuations and the demand for and the mobility of labour which, in turn, are linked with the demand for housing.

Since the 1970s, Helsinki's information service has developed into a versatile electronic data based system that has gradually become an important support for the city's planning and policy-making. City offices and departments have participated in the development of the system. In the 1990s, information needs relating to urban policy were born, particularly to Helsinki's position in global economic competition and to the concern for social cohesion. Who are the survivors, and who are threatened by social exclusion? What is the city's readiness and responsibility to act in such matters? Urban development from the point of view of the citizens and the business community also became a topic in a new way – and an important one involving the themes of participation and access.

Contacts between various city authorities, state authorities and government offices have played an important role in the accumulation of urban knowledge and in the development of the City of Helsinki's information systems. Experiences have been exchanged on such topics as interpretations of the state grant system and the principles for housing subsidy allocation, about difficult city planning issues and traffic arrangements and many questions relating to the provision of public welfare services. The special features of the major city as described by Heikki Helin in his article in the present Helsinki Quarterly are an important topic in these discussions.

## Challenges for our research today

According to recent assessments, the Helsinki Region has managed to be successful in global economic competition while maintaining public welfare services and living conditions at a high level (e.g. Castells & Himanen 2000, OECD 2002). "Digital divide" has been avoided: new digital technology has not significantly divided the population socio-economically. Yet, long-term unemployment is a serious problem in the Helsinki Region, and therefore our research is paying special attention to signs of looming social differentiation and social and ethnic segregation. It seems clear that social differentiation in Helsinki today is linked to the location of public benefit housing.

An OECD country report on Finland and the Helsinki Region claims that the challenge for the Helsinki Region is its organising capacity and international competitiveness. Although the region has the means to be successful by applying a model of voluntary and direct cooperation, it would be useful to intensify cooperation and coordination in the region. Attention is also paid to the cooperation between municipalities and the state and to the local economy which would need other strong clusters, too, than just ICT.

Using a multi-disciplinary and comparative approach to our research, we at Helsinki City Urban Facts try to assess challenges and problems in urban development. We view Helsinki from many different angles, and research projects may concern, for example, issues such as equality between citizens, means of participation and social justice. The integration and collaboration between various administrative sectors often come to the fore, as do matters relating to the internal differentiation of the region and the consequences of its growth. At present, the city's economy and Helsinki's role in the Finnish economy are a hot topic. Other topics often on the agenda have included urban policy for major cities and international challenges such as developments in the Baltic

Rim, EU enlargement, the challenges of the ICT cluster, and the global economy.

The most recent of these topics relates, in one way or the other, to the innovation potential of the region and the budding innovation system. Supporting development that relies on skills, innovations and partnership is important in urban research, too. The increasing number of people doing research and development, the problems of centres of competence and urban problems and the cities' investment in local universities and polytechnics are examples of this kind of activity. In the Helsinki Region, 3.9% of employees work in R&D, which is the highest figure among city regions in the European Union, the European average being 1.4% (Eurostat 2003). At the regional level, there is growing technology transfer from local universities to industrial firms. A key element in this respect may be the Finnish way of life with short social distances between people that make for easy cooperation.

### **Regional partnership to improve local innovation; the case of Culminatum Ltd**

Culminatum Ltd was established to combine the resources of the local authorities, universities, and the business sector to improve the innovation environment in the Helsinki Region. The shareholders of Culminatum are local universities and polytechnics, the chambers of commerce of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, local science park organisations, the cities of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa and Uusimaa Regional Council.

The vision is to develop Helsinki as an "Ideopolis", a world-class innovation centre based on creativity in arts and science. The strategy of Culminatum has two pillars: (1) To implement regional cluster programmes (centre of expertise programmes) together with science parks and (2) to strengthen the knowledge potential and the local innovation environment (Hols-

tila 2003). Helsinki City Urban Facts supports Culminatum by providing varied information and knowledge on the Helsinki Region as an environment for living and business.

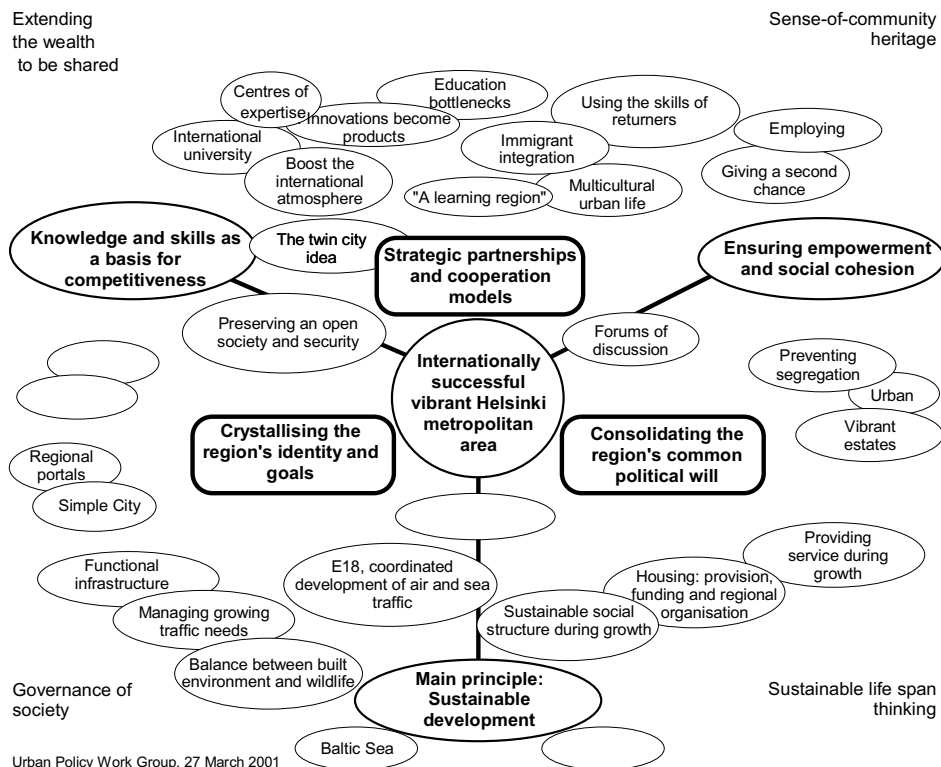
### **The Urban Programme of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area**

In autumn 2000, the mayors of the cities of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area decided to launch a common Policy Programme, after finding it necessary to start developing an urban policy of their own initiative from grass root level. The themes chosen were to strengthen expertise and improve innovation and to consolidate empowerment and social cohesion. The idea is that the programme should respond to challenges of the day by creating innovative action models in co-operation with various partners. The programme aims at better cooperation in the region, a deeper understanding of the challenges of major cities among the state authorities, and thereby the acquisition of additional resources for the region (figure). Both the choice of themes and projects and their planning rely on research findings. This work has proceeded successfully. Some government ministries and central offices participate in financing the projects.

### **Strengthening urban research together with the local universities**

Today, we already have five years' experience of the model of six professorships on urban research that came about as a result of negotiations between the City, the University of Helsinki and the Ministry of Education. These professorships are in social policy (especially urban research); sociology (especially demography), population and social changes in urban communities; urban geography; urban ecology; urban history and urban economics. The posts are

## Map of the urban policy strategy



funded equally by the City of Helsinki, the University of Helsinki, and the Ministry of Education.

At present, we are extending this model to comprise nine professorships. The expenses will be paid for by two universities, the four cities in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and the Ministry of Education. The new posts are temporary, for a five-year period each, but the old posts will become permanent. In addition to their university responsibilities, these professors are expected to act as scientific leaders of research projects of the cities in the Helsinki Metropolitan Region. They will also perform other expert functions pertaining to their fields.

This model and research network combines resources that equal, at least, a medium-sized teaching and research institute. Thus the conglomerate is likely to result in clear advantages of size in research

activities. The goal is also to develop the basic and graduate education given by relevant university departments, mediate expert services, and organise conferences and seminars. Organising new university education from the urban research perspective within each discipline is also considered important. In the urban research network, basic research, applied research and externally ordered and funded research will become closely connected.

### A new research programme underway

A new research programme that is underway and coordinated by Helsinki City Urban Facts seeks to make the above intentions a reality. This time, a special challenge is to activate, coordinate and concretise re-

search cooperation with the local universities on new forums, whose conceptual core is formed by the nine professorships of urban research and the four cities in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The idea is that the programme – and its web version, especially ([www.hel.fi/tietokeskus](http://www.hel.fi/tietokeskus)) – will work as an efficient link between the supply and demand for research findings.

At the millennium, the Helsinki Region was one of Europe's fastest growing urban regions. Today we are seeing slower growth, particularly so in Helsinki proper. The ICT sector is no longer as powerful an engine of growth as it was just two years ago. Another factor slowing growth seems to be related to the new situation on the money market and easy access to low-interest mortgages. Many young families have thus been able to buy a spacious first home of their own. Yet in Helsinki, the number of flats or houses suitable for young families is clearly smaller than in the adjacent municipalities, where prices are more affordable.

Growth has implied work and income to many, but also a housing shortage, difficulties for the public sector to provide basic welfare services in due time, traffic problems and rising costs. And although Helsinki has avoided many of the economic, social and environmental problems that the core cities of numerous other European major city regions have, many of the typical negative phenomena of major cities are visible here, too. The challenge of the authorities is to contribute to economic prosperity, to predict

structural change, to be as prepared as possible for economic fluctuations and to level the effects of these. Strong growth deteriorates competitiveness, while recessions threaten to seclude some of the inhabitants. The duty of researchers is to bring forth critical common sense and foresee risks. An ability to combine resources in a creative way is an important basis for Helsinki's vitality and success. Likewise, in research, too, partnership-based cooperation is needed.

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