

UNICA Seminar on Research Policies & Urban Challenges

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CONCLUSIONS

by Prof. Serge Jaumain, former Vice-Rector International, Université libre de Bruxelles, former member of the UNICA Steering Committee

At the end of this exciting day, I was asked to say a few concluding words and to outline some ideas to ensure that the discussion will not be put in the cupboard of useless accessories.

UNICA Secretary-General, Kris Dejonckheere, has therefore asked me to listen to you and, based on your suggestions, to make some very concrete proposals for action that could be taken by UNICA.

I would like to start by mentioning that **you have all demonstrated that urban challenges are becoming more and more numerous and complex**. You stressed that **finding solutions to these challenges is an essential democratic exercise for our societies, and that our universities can play an important role in this process**.

I would also like to mention the work of a Brussels intellectual who was often quoted today, namely my colleague and friend **Eric Corijn** with whom I founded seven years ago the Brussels Studies Institute, of which you have also been informed.

Last March, Eric gave a speech in Antwerp which resulted in a small publication that I warmly invite you to read, even if for the moment it is only available in Dutch. Its title is enigmatic: "*Een stad is geen land...*" ("A city is not a country"). You need to wait for the last sentence on the last page to find the full sentence: "*Een stad is geen land... het is een hele wereld*". **A city is not a country... It's a whole world**. The subtitle of the book clearly states the author's objective. "*Pleidooi voor een stedelijke revolutie*" ("plea for an urban revolution"). However, it is more than a plea: it is a declaration of love for the city.

After recalling that more than half of the human population lives in an urban environment, Eric shows that the world of tomorrow is being built in the heart of the cities. Therefore, solving "urban challenges" is an emergency. Eric shows that cities have in a way succeeded the Nation-States and that, unlike them, they constitute unique places of integration. Brussels is an excellent example of this.

The world of tomorrow belongs to cities and - as **Kurt Vandenberghe** mentioned this morning - **cities are today the living labs for systemic transformation**. Their leaders have already understood this new dimension: it is no coincidence that a "Parliament of Mayors" has been created.

Our universities have also understood the importance of this evolution. Think about for example the tremendous development of urban studies centers, or of the increasing number of Masters in urban studies, which are a great success. In this regard, let me recall you that **UNICA played an important role in this process by supporting the creation of the famous trans-European master's degree "4 cities"**.

The enthusiasm for urban studies has also led our universities to move beyond their walls and to develop dialog with urban actors, because **knowledge is no longer the monopoly of academic experts**.

We heard today good examples of initiatives undertaken in Amsterdam, Brussels, Madrid, Warsaw and Edinburgh. For Brussels, we highlighted the role of the **Brussels Studies Institute**, a transversal, interdisciplinary and inter-institutional model of knowledge production. We have also heard about the role played in this process by prestigious cultural institutions such as BOZAR, which is hosting us today.

In the "knowledge society" we are entering, **knowledge is more than ever necessary to solve complex problems such as urban problems**. **Caroline Pauwels** (VUB) therefore logically pleaded for more collaboration within academia and with societal knowledge, which implies changes in our institutions but also in the management of local governments to better use the knowledge produced by universities. This is a formidable "virtuous circle", but unfortunately it's not used enough.

After these observations, a simple question arises at the end of the day: **"What next?"**.

The question is really important because we need to remind that **UNICA is primarily an association of universities in capitals**. In principle this clearly differentiates us from other university networks, but is this really the case? **Do we use this specificity (and richness) enough in the daily work of our network?**

As **Antonio Rendas** (NOVA) recalled this morning: "We are capital cities universities. This means the challenges are not the same as in universities established in other cities".

At a time when the urban revolution is underway, **being urban universities is a huge asset that we should probably make better use of**. But how?

At the end of this excellent seminar let me come up with **7 propositions based on what I heard today**.

1. The most important outcome of the discussions we had today is really simple: **UNICA must reinforce its relations with all the urban actors** (political, cultural, economic, social actors, etc.). In the afternoon session, some participants mentioned the necessity for our universities to have "knowledge diplomats" to break the ice. It's a good idea to reinforce the links between our colleagues and the local powers. However, there is a need to go a step further at the "institutional" level of UNICA: cities have created associations (such as Eurocities), universities too (e.g. UNICA), and the time has come to bring these two types of organizations together and to think about the development of new contacts and new collaborations between them.
2. UNICA has a good experience in the field of education (the creation of the master's degree "4 cities" is an example of this expertise). Now we should extend our action to research. As Caroline Pauwels suggested, we could **stimulate the development of research on urban issues within the network**. What about a kind of network of urban study centres at UNICA universities? We could take advantage of the new space that will bring together the urban research centres of two of our members (ULB and VUB) on the Usquare site in Brussels. This space could serve as a starting point for a network of urban studies centers coordinated by UNICA.

3. We could launch a call to all UNICA members to know who would be interested in conducting **comparative research on how university research policies are addressing urban challenges**. If a few UNICA members are interested in financing such a research, its results might be a starting point for new ideas to share within our network. We might also propose a research related to urban studies projects in Cordis (the repository of all project information held by the European Commission such as project factsheets, participants, reports, deliverables and links to open-access publications).
4. As Caroline Pauwels proposed, we could check willingness to develop an academic interuniversity, an **interdisciplinary platform of "urban" knowledge production**. It would be more than a simple platform for discussion and exchange of good practices. This new kind of UNICA working group would bring together urban actors (and in particular political leaders) and representatives of the academic world to discuss about some new proposals we mentioned today (for instance the implementation of "Chief science officers" like in Amsterdam). The research mentioned above could feed into this group.
5. This morning the existence in the United States of a Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities and a Coalition of urban serving universities was mentioned. Although they don't have the same activities as UNICA their *raison d'être* is to bring together "city-based universities". In my view a **network of "capital-based universities" like UNICA has a lot to share with those organizations**. What about a study on how they work and a dialogue with them regarding the way they address urban challenges?
6. We might **reinforce (and formalize?) UNICA's collaboration with European institutions** such as the dynamic Joint Research Center and the Unit Inclusive Growth, Urban and Territorial Development presented this morning. We have a lot to share with them regarding urban universities. Moreover, our members are not well aware of their activities, and it would be good to reinforce the communication with them and about them.
7. Finally, I mentioned at the beginning the Parliament of Mayors. What about the **creation of a Parliament of Mayors and Rectors of European capitals?** Is this just a dream? I'm not so sure. We have just to think about the mediatic impact of such an institution. If this proposal is too ambitious, we have to offer at least a real space for discussion and exchanges between urban and academic authorities. As the *raison d'être* of our network is to bring together capital cities based universities, this specificity must be at the core of our strategic policy. We must use the power of our network to raise among political leaders of capital cities the awareness of the importance of working together.

I will conclude with these items that I suggest for a discussion at the UNICA Steering Committee.

I hope this conference was a first step towards a new dimension for UNICA's general policy. The discussions of today were too good to forget them. We must propose to our members a rapid and very concrete follow-up.