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

CPR Subcommittee Meeting, 5 March 2018

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, about to be completed with the upcoming Award Ceremony in Dubai (April-May 2018), marks 22 years of collaboration between Dubai Municipality and UN-Habitat in generating best practices through the Award system. Since 1995, more than 5,000 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 Practices[2]. 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

---

[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.

within the local context; gender equality and social inclusion; and transferability. In the current 11th round, criteria have also been aligned along the key themes of the New Urban Agenda.

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 EA (b) 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 initiatives[3]

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 is 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-Habitat[4] 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. 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. Despite its strategic importance, knowledge management is not yet systematically harvesting core knowledge and lessons learned, internally and externally[5].

---

[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 two short-term consultants, financed through the Dubai Award.

1.8   UN-Habitat's Best Practices Unit is responsible for qualitative information based on practices and policies that effectively illustrate ways to implement the New Urban Agenda. In this function, the Unit collects, consolidates, coordinates and shares best practices and enabling policies globally 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 Unit manages 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 advance the analysis potential of best practices, and the production of tailor-made packages of qualitative information to Member States and other stakeholder groups.

        Current collaboration includes that with the University of Southern Australia*,* where a prototype expert system search engine has been produced to enable analysis of best practices through the search lenses of the City Prosperity Index and the Sustainable Development Goals. The goal is to use advanced computer systems and specially designed applications to more effectively connect best practices to decision-making in global programmes implementing the New Urban Agenda. The prototype system was demonstrated— and generated large interest— during the 9th Session of the World Urban Forum (WUF 9). This includes potential work in Mexico to pilot the system along a specific set of thematic areas.

1.9   The Unit is responsible for the generation of qualitative information for key reports of the Agency in follow-up to Habitat III, including the World Cities Report and current production of the 1st Quadrennial Report for monitoring the implementation of the New Urban Agenda. In the 9th Session of the World Urban Forum (WUF 9) participants from different regions provided an array of creative and innovative best practices and policies that require systematization and inclusion in the preparation of these reports. Best practices will be integrated as a component of the Quito Implementation Platform, and feature as a key area of qualitative information to share among Member States. With UN-Habitat's mandate to encourage Member States to share best practices, the Units' role will need to expand to support such efforts.

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 April 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

---

[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.

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 and qualitative information 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 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 a 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.

2.3   The advent of the big data era where social media has created new ways of sharing knowledge will help in identification, harnessing, 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 mechanism[8]. 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 provided an excellent opportunity to advance the work of best practices and identify new partnerships.

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

---

[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.

3.1   The 11th cycle of the Dubai International Award came 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 of Dubai restructured 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 11th cycle of the Award succeeded to attract 524 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 2017). This can be attributed to the hard work of the staff and consultants and to the social media campaign that was introduced, attracting many 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 over 4,000 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   *Selection procedure for the Dubai Award*

        The Dubai Award consists of a two-step selection process, by a regionally, technically, and gender balanced Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and a Jury. The 10-member TAC met from 29 October-3 November 2017 in Dubai and reviewed all 524 submissions. They selected 110 best practices from 89 countries for final review. The 5-member Jury met from 15-17 January 2018 also in Dubai and selected the 10 winning initiatives.

        The short-listed submissions were diverse and covered all regions, although the number of submissions per regions varied. All winning initiatives were according to the Jury strong entries showing commendable impact and innovation.

3.5   *Winners of the 11th cycle of the Dubai Award*

        The ten winners of the Award represent different sectors— national and regional governments; local authorities and their associations; non-governmental organizations; community-

based organizations; research and academic institutions; public and private foundations; and individuals (Annex; Table 1.) The winners are outlined in Table 1 below.

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

The 11th round of the Dubai Award has, as demonstrated by the high number of submissions, demonstrated the continued interest in this Award, as well as the capacity of this Award system to harness and create incentives for documenting inspiring practices by different stakeholder groups. This is an important contribution to learning and sharing ways of implementing the New Urban Agenda.

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 attracted a slightly smaller number of submissions. The regional composition of the submissions is shown in Annex; Figure 3. Latin America and Asia-Pacific, are the main regions contributing to the submissions pool. Latin America 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, Russia and CIS, and North America, as well as enhance the language access (such as for Francophone Africa).

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 English[10].

A full diagnosis will be undertaken after the completion of the 11th Cycle Award Ceremony, to guide the work of a potential 12th cycle. This cycle will coincide with the Dubai Expo 2020, and 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 including that of the Shanghai Manual. 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.

---

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

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. There is also discussion underway on how to document lessons learned in any practice being documented.

4.4   Guidance 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 on implementing the New Urban Agenda and achieving Agenda 2030. This will contribute to the broader discussion by UN-Habitat moving forward, in terms of the coherence on Awards. To capitalize on the present round of the Dubai Award, efforts are already being made to go beyond the Award's traditional and most visible benefit in show-casing good work. This includes plans for urban lectures, policy briefs and other outreach materials, not only on the 10 winners but including other practices submitted in this round worth highlighting and sharing.

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 for 2018-19. The following areas of work are preliminarily being considered as priority (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, such as the Quadrennial Report.
- 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.

---

[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.

(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. This will be done along the themes of the Award as well as cross-cutting and emerging issues.
- Encourage more effective learning opportunities through the Award, such as Best Practice Seminars and Conferences, and the engagement of previous winning organizations.
- Establish closer linkages with communication platforms (such as the World Urban Forum, 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

Table 1: Winners for the 11th round of the Dubai Award

Country	Region	Category	Title
Morocco	Arab States	Best Practice Award for National Urban Policy	We are Medina Learning from Jnane Aztout
Switzerland	Europe	Best Practice Award for Participatory Slum Upgrading	Empower, an integrated development approach to informal settlement upgrading
Kenya	Africa	Best Practice Transfer Award in Local Implementation - Urban redevelopment, and redesign of urban spaces.	Courtyard System for Management of Public Spaces
Mexico	North America	Best Practice Transfer Award in Monitoring Mechanisms for the New Urban Agenda and the Urban SDGs	Monitoring urban prosperity and sustainability in 153 municipalities in Mexico
Kenya	Africa	Personal Award for Contribution to Urban Economy and Municipal Finance	Clean City by Green Economy
Chile	South America	Personal Award for Contribution to Urban Economy and Municipal Finance	Kappo - Cyclists Analytics for Smart Cities
Haiti	Caribbean	Private Sector Award for Contribution to Territorial Planning Urban Planning and Design	Three Public Spaces to Enhance Community Resilience
India	Asia Pacific	Private Sector Award for Contribution to Territorial Planning Urban Planning and Design	Using Safetipin to Build Safer and Inclusive Public spaces
Philippines	Asia Pacific	University Research Award on Legislation, Rules, Regulations & Governance Systems	Making land-use climate-sensitive: A project to increase resilience of cities against floods by integrating climate change into land-use planning
South Africa	Africa	University Research Award on Legislation, Rules, Regulations & Governance Systems	Reforming Urban Laws in Africa: a practical guide

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.
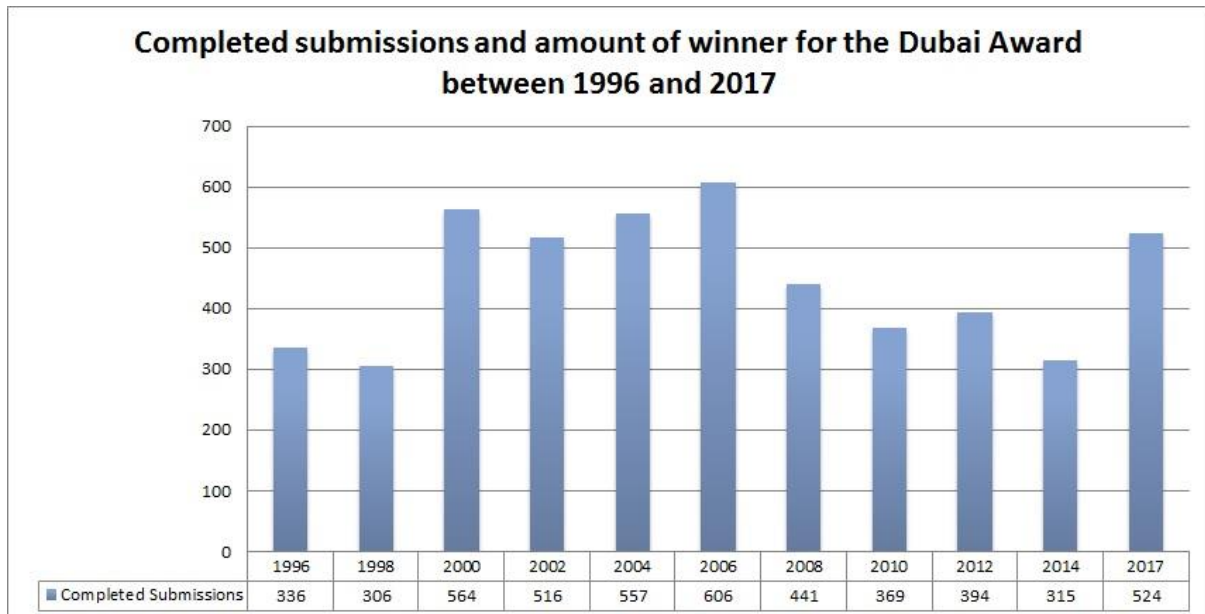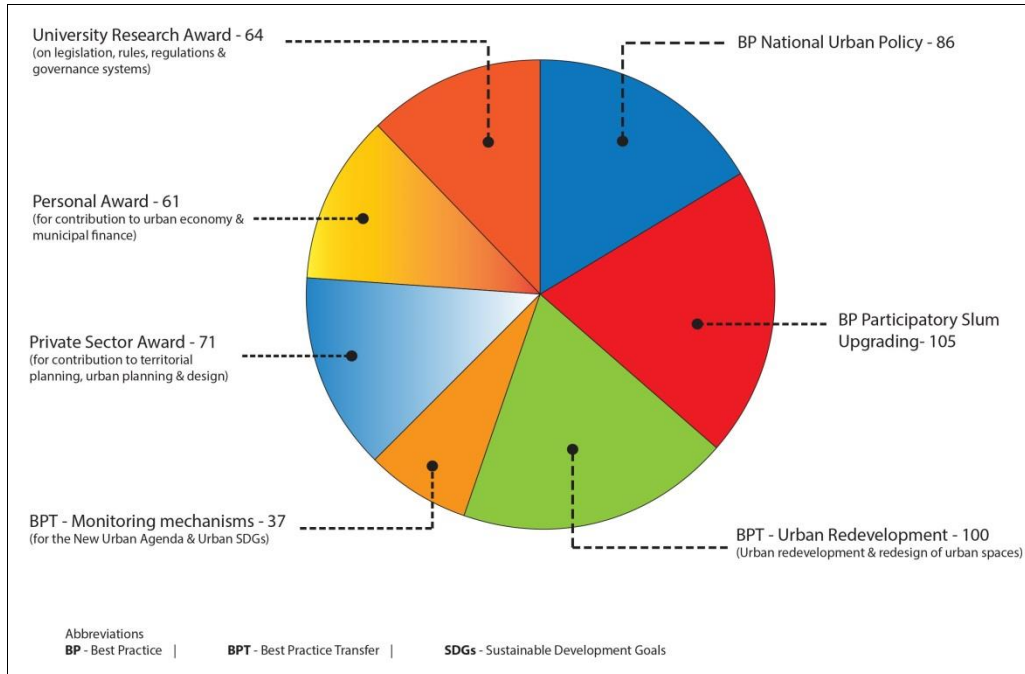

Completed submissions and amount of winner for the Dubai Award between 1996 and 2017

	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2017
Completed Submissions	336	306	564	516	557	606	441	369	394	315	524

Figure 2: Thematic distribution of submissions for the 11th round of the Dubai Award[12]

University Research Award - 64
(on legislation, rules, regulations & governance systems)

BP National Urban Policy - 86

Personal Award - 61
(for contribution to urban economy & municipal finance)

BP Participatory Slum Upgrading- 105

Private Sector Award - 71
(for contribution to territorial planning, urban planning & design)

BPT - Monitoring mechanisms - 37
(for the New Urban Agenda & Urban SDGs)

BPT - Urban Redevelopment - 100
(Urban redevelopment & redesign of urban spaces)

Abbreviations
BP - Best Practice | **BPT** - Best Practice Transfer | **SDGs** - Sustainable Development Goals

---

[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