

Shaping a better urban world

IHS Strategy 2025-2029

Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies
of Erasmus University Rotterdam



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Preface

More than ever before, the lives of humans and the health of the planet are shaped in towns and cities. The way that urban areas are planned and governed has significant implications for prosperity, wellbeing, and sustainability. That is why the core purpose of the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS)—inspiring and empowering urban professionals and citizens to make cities work for all—remains so relevant, and why we have developed this new strategy to guide how we achieve this goal in the coming years.

The strategy was produced during a time of political uncertainty in the Netherlands and globally, and when reminders of the extent of global and urban crises of inequality, unsustainability and climate change were all around. However, the work of the Institute continues to highlight ways in which working closely with multiple stakeholders to implement approaches to governance, planning, and sustainability can make a positive impact in cities around the world.

Not least because of this uncertainty, the strategy is framed around four new directions. We will use these to guide our decisions in a more focused way in the coming five years while remaining flexible in the face of a changing context:

- We will focus on societal impact – ensuring that our work makes a positive difference in the world.
- We will do this by increasingly working in transdisciplinary ways—the interconnected challenges in cities and urban systems can only be addressed from multiple perspectives, disciplines, and expertise.
- We will engage in new partnerships and will reflect critically on how we work with others in institutions around the world.
- We will strengthen our internal processes to foster entrepreneurship and make IHS an even better place to work – recognising that our staff are our greatest resource in achieving our goals.

While we want this strategy to engage with observed trends and the priorities of other actors working in cities, we also want to remain inquisitive and flexible to identify and respond to emerging themes.

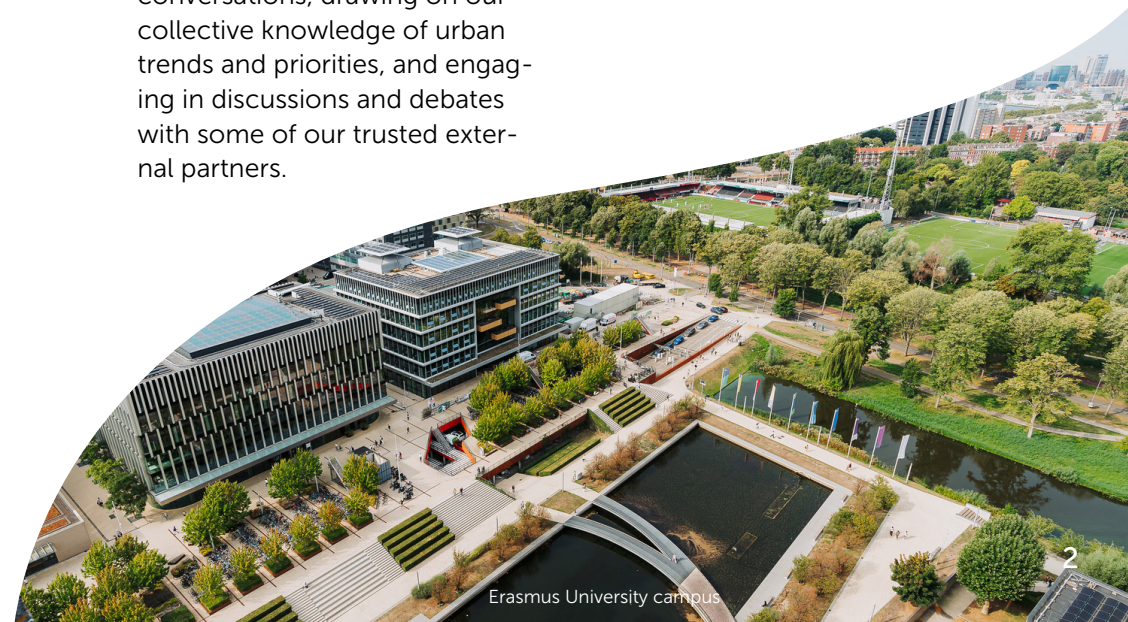
But some important things will remain constant. We are embedded in Erasmus University as our physical and intellectual home, a university that prioritises positive societal impact. We will draw linkages between cities around the world and our own urban context in Zuid-Holland and Rotterdam. And we will remain connected to our global network of partners and alumni, who ensure that IHS exists beyond any physical walls.

We created this strategy through a series of detailed internal conversations, drawing on our collective knowledge of urban trends and priorities, and engaging in discussions and debates with some of our trusted external partners.

We worked in teams to elaborate on how the directions above will shape our operational decisions across our core activities and functions.

The creation of a new strategy is an important moment in the life of an organisation. It is a time to look back on achievements – of which there have been many in the past 65 years of IHS's existence. It is a time to look forward, recommit to being fit for purpose, and identify changes that need to be made to achieve this. We hope you will join us as we seek to be a catalyst for innovation, equity and meaningful collaboration in cities around the world.

David Dodman
General Director, IHS



Introduction

As a globally recognised leader in urban development, IHS has spent decades generating, analysing, sharing and applying knowledge on how to make cities around the world more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient. Amid increasingly complex urban challenges, growing inequality, and pressing climate concerns, we can build on our past strengths, adopt new approaches, and make a genuine contribution to our field for the coming years and decades. With a renewed emphasis on societal impact, transdisciplinarity and inclusivity, this strategy outlines our commitment to advancing our mission and values from 2025 to 2029.

Recognising the diverse contexts in which we operate, we will seek impactful outcomes across our three pillars of education, research, and advisory work, grounded in three core values of people-centredness, commitment, and professional excellence. To achieve meaningful change, we will generate synergies across our pillars and expertise of our staff. We will focus on the pressing urban issues of climate resilience, access to adequate housing, social inclusion, and digital transformation. We will explore new financing opportunities that align with our increasingly transdisciplinary approach. By strengthening existing partnerships and building new ones, expanding strategic alliances, and deepening our engagement in global urban debates, we aim to amplify our impact and solidify our position as a catalyst of transformative and sustainable change in urban development for people and cities.

We also recognise the significant changes in the political dynamics and funding streams in the Netherlands and beyond, as well as the ongoing challenge of working in increasingly equitable relationships with partners from around the world. These evolving dynamics demand that we change to remain relevant and ensure that our programmes are accessible to urban professionals. As we approach 2030, we stay committed to contributing to global frameworks, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the words of SDG11, making cities “inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” is more important than ever, and remains at the core of our strategy.

We envision cities that are liveable and just, as well as socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

Our mission is to inspire and empower urban professionals and citizens to make cities work for all.



Core values



Our core values

Our core values underpin and guide everything that we do. We are **people-centred** and **committed**, and we deliver **professional excellence** across our three pillars of work: education, research, and advisory.

Photo by Timon Studler on Unsplash.com

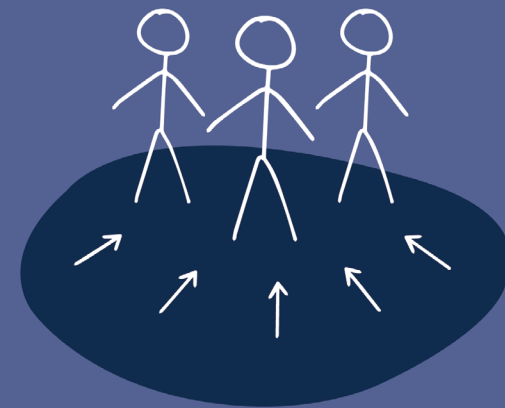
People-centred

At IHS, we prioritise human well-being, inclusive participation, social equity, and empowerment. Our people-centred approach informs how we work together as colleagues, and how we engage as a partner and educator. We draw on our staff's competence and transdisciplinary expertise to catalyse sustainable, equitable urban development outcomes for people and communities globally.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of this people-centred approach, involving a diverse range of stakeholders such as current students, alumni, urban professionals, academic and research institutions, think tanks, government entities,

international organisations, non-governmental organisations, and private sector partners. This broad engagement ensures that our programmes are responsive to actual needs and that solutions are co-created with those we aim to reach.

Internally, we apply this value at IHS by fostering a workplace culture where staff collaborate inclusively, feel supported, and are empowered to contribute effectively. This alignment between internal and external operations ensures that our value for people-centredness is embedded across our education, research, and advisory pillars, and amplifies our impact.



Committed

At IHS, we are dedicated to our mission of inspiring and empowering urban professionals and residents to confront complex urban development challenges. We collaborate with diverse stakeholders to achieve impactful, inclusive, and resilient outcomes at the individual, organisational, and systemic levels. Commitment is embedded across our education, research and advisory pillars,

driving measurable change and excellence in our mission.

We ensure our efforts remain relevant and effective by focusing on education, research, and advisory programmes that benefit people across urban geographies, both in our traditional focus areas of LMICs and also in deprived communities elsewhere.



Professional excellence

At IHS, we uphold the highest standards of quality, integrity, and transparency in all our work, striving to deliver professional excellence across our three pillars. Our expertise is rooted in competence and a commitment to continuous learning and improvement, so we can capably respond to complex urban development challenges with cutting-edge, transdisciplinary approaches.

This value extends internally to fostering an inclusive, supportive workplace culture where collaboration and innovation thrive. Externally, our dedication to professional excellence ensures we consistently provide impactful, high-quality services to diverse stakeholders, including under-resourced individuals and communities.



Strategic direction areas

Our strategic direction areas inform the steps we will take as an institute over the next five years. They will guide decisions across our three operational areas, shaping how we work and allocate our resources.





Photo by Ramprasad Kansari on Unsplash.com

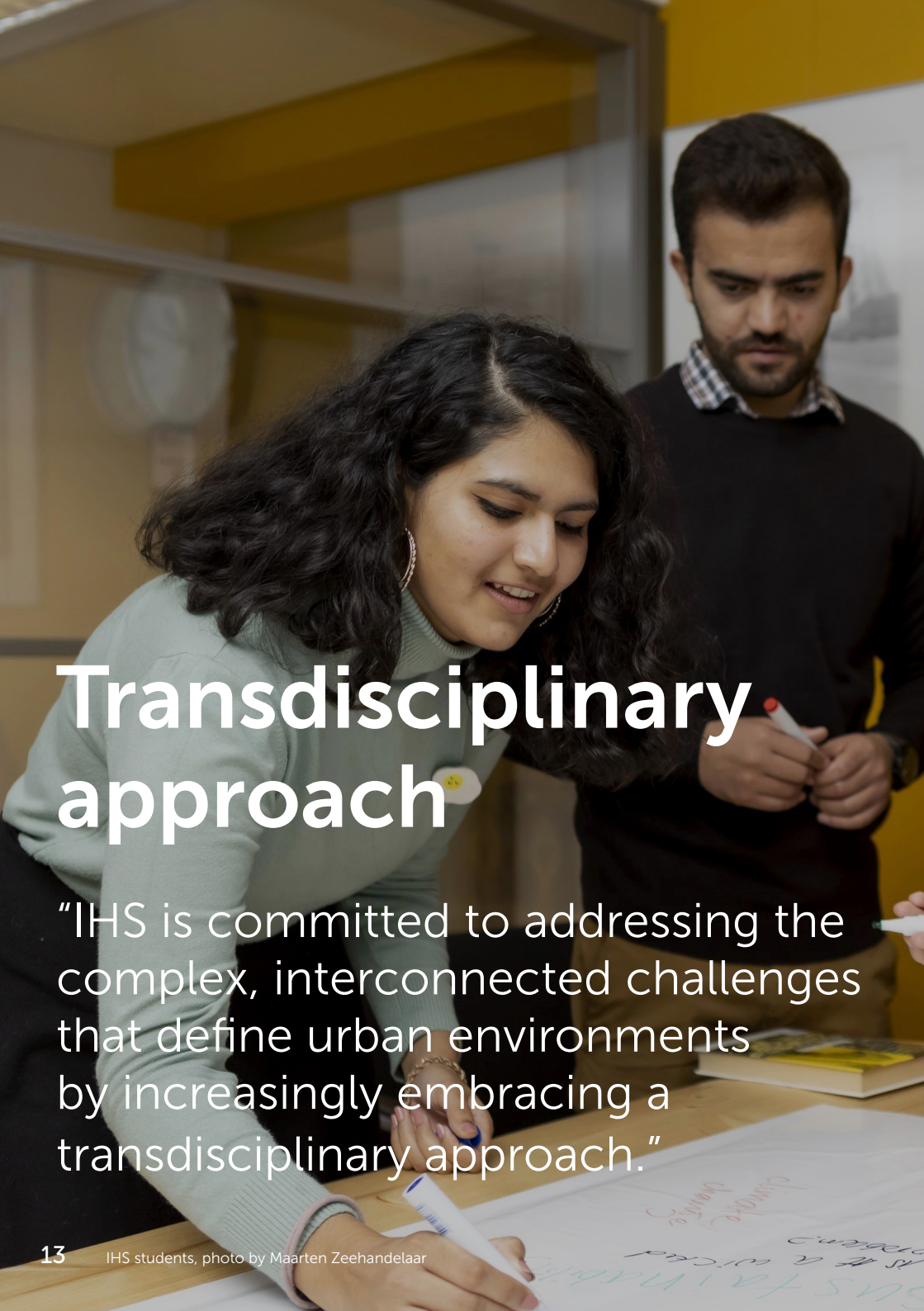
Impact

“IHS will become an increasingly impact-driven organisation.”

As cities have grown rapidly in recent decades, the extent and effects of urban development challenges, such as urban poverty and inequality, have increased. These challenges are wicked: the problems and solutions are widely debated among a wide range of conflicting actors without clear solutions at hand. At the same time, the number and intensity of disasters and uncertainty increases, as witnessed by COVID-19, armed conflict and natural disasters. These have led to more extreme poverty and set back progress made on other SDGs as well. Cities are struggling to cope, and those facing the most wicked problems are likely to have the least capacity to address them. In this context, our mission to create liveable, just, socially, economically and environmentally sustainable cities remains as relevant as ever. By being committed to and entrepreneurial in our mission, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of urban problems and to building capacities to tackle them. This enables us to contribute to meeting the SDGs.

We develop our new strategy in challenging times. Challenging because cities are subject to problems of incredible complexity that require new transdisciplinary knowledge and governance approaches. Challenging because IHS operates in a politically and financially volatile context, putting our traditional sources of funding under stress. Despite the challenges we face, we are even more committed to actively engaging with our international partners, local communities, funders and extensive network of alumni and urban professionals to create an inclusive impact.

For us, impact is characterised by measurable, meaningful, and transformative outcomes of our work across our education, research, and advisory pillars, aimed at catalysing sustainable, inclusive, and resilient urban development. Impact is individual (micro), organisational (meso) and systemic (macro) levels. Individual—reflected in the growth and empowerment of our staff, researchers, and urban professionals. Organisational—demonstrated through capacity building, research contributions, influence on urban policies and practices, community engagement, collaborative networks, and recognition. Systemic—evidenced by policy changes, improved livelihoods, and equitable development outcomes in cities globally, particularly in LMICs.



Transdisciplinary approach

“IHS is committed to addressing the complex, interconnected challenges that define urban environments by increasingly embracing a transdisciplinary approach.”

Urban systems are multifaceted and interdependent, with interactions that span various actors, disciplines, and geographies. Our strategy recognises this complexity and embraces a transdisciplinary approach that bridges multiple disciplines and stakeholders in diverse contexts based on the understanding that solutions to complex problems require comparative insights from across fields and contexts.

We recognise that urban development choices in one context or system often ripple into others, reinforcing the need for a holistic and inclusive approach for equitable urban development outcomes. Through our transdisciplinary focus, we aim to produce insights and solutions that address specific urban issues while considering the broader, interconnected systems within which they exist.

We will increasingly prioritise transdisciplinary initiatives that create impact across global geographies, particularly in LMICs such as in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America, but also beyond, as similar processes of exclusion lead to poverty and inequality elsewhere. Thematically, our comparative work addresses critical areas such as adequate housing, digital transformation and artificial intelligence (AI), climate change, urban planning and resilience, sustainability, and gender and inequality. By tackling these issues through a transdisciplinary lens, we seek to drive meaningful, equitable urban development that actively involves and benefits local communities, our partners, and stakeholders within the interconnected global landscape. We will, therefore, seek funding partnerships and prioritise opportunities that enable us to leverage this unique transdisciplinary approach.

Internally, this strategic direction encourages synergy across our institute’s pillars: our educational programmes continually feed insights into our advisory work and vice versa, while the hands-on experience gained in our advisory roles informs and enriches our scholarly research. In turn, our research brings advanced academic insights back into our educational offerings, creating a dynamic, iterative process that strengthens each facet of our work. A transdisciplinary focus also enhances the integration of expertise across our institute, promoting innovation and cross-collaboration among our experts.

Our transdisciplinary, cross-pillar strategy lies at the heart of every decision we make and shapes both our geographic reach and thematic priorities. This approach ensures our work is not siloed but interconnected.

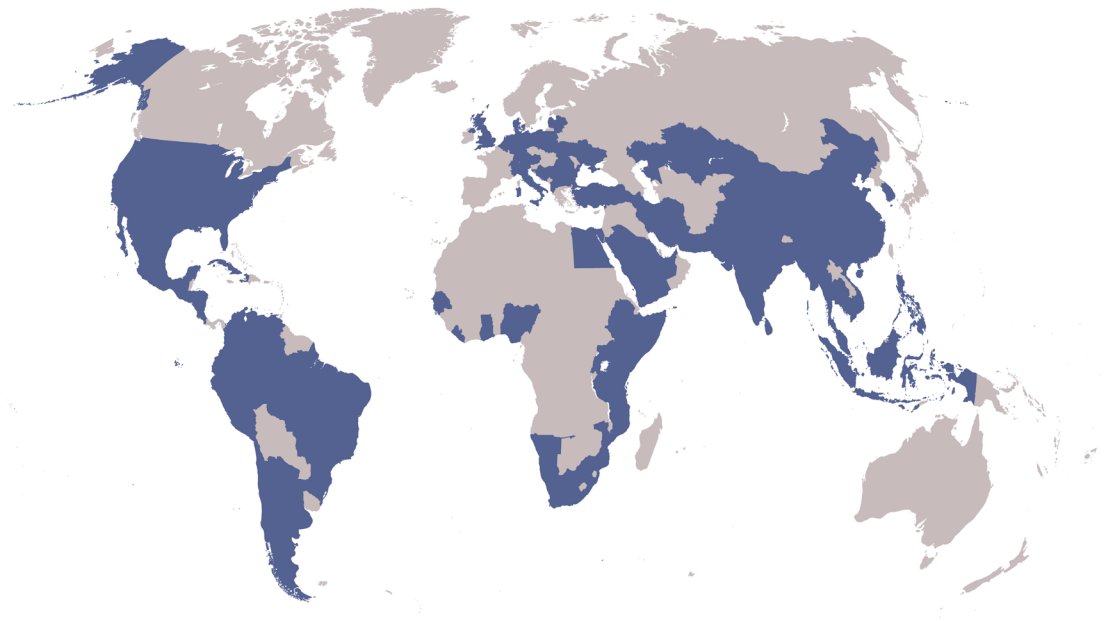
Positioning and partnerships

“IHS will redefine its positioning through partnerships that prioritise inclusivity, cross-sector collaboration and decolonisation for sustainable urban development.”

At IHS, we are committed to reimagining our role in collaboration with academic institutions, government entities, the private sector, and civil society. We will focus on enhancing our position within a rapidly evolving global network of experts and practitioners.

In the face of changing policies and regulations, we must deploy adaptive strategies and collaborate across various sectors. These dynamics create both challenges and opportunities for our work, requiring a robust partnership strategy. We will actively foster collaborations that bridge different sectors and perhaps even divergent perspectives, so that we can collectively work together towards sustainable, resilient, and inclusive urban development outcomes.

IHS has long been a catalyst for collective impact through meaningful partnerships with diverse stakeholders. At the same time, we acknowledge our position as a Northern-based institute and will continue to strengthen our efforts towards adopting a decolonial approach and addressing systemic inequities globally. We are dedicated to reflecting on our role in both current and future collaborations, ensuring that we create opportunities for our partners in LMICs and across the globe to take on leadership within their contexts and beyond.



Internal organisation and culture

"IHS will cultivate a supportive and inclusive workplace, ensuring financial stability to drive innovation, resilience, and meaningful impact."

At IHS, we are committed to enhancing our internal systems and processes to fulfil our mission as effectively as possible and to foster an environment where staff members feel valued and recognised.

Our commitment to nurturing a professional, inclusive, and supportive workplace culture directly aligns with our ambition to foster fresh and diverse perspectives, innovation, and agility. By promoting collaboration, embracing diversity and inclusion, and encouraging continuous learning and development, we aim to create a dynamic work environment that attracts, forms, and retains skilled professionals. This, in turn, enables us to deliver our mission with excellence, adaptability, and relevance.

Investing in financial resilience is equally essential. By building a solid foundation of fiscal and financial responsibility, we ensure that IHS can remain steadfast and adaptable, regardless of economic fluctuations or sector-specific challenges. This resilience allows us to focus on making a difference and staying true to our values while driving meaningful impact in our core areas. Together, these efforts empower us to forge a robust and entrepreneurial institution that continues to thrive and expand outreach.

In short, we are setting this direction to strengthen our capacity to serve, empower, and adapt—fostering a workplace and organisational framework that not only supports our mission but elevates it to new heights.

"IHS gives me the opportunity to exchange knowledge about cities with people from all over the world. But more than that, I know that no matter where I am on Earth, I always have a friend nearby."
Laura

"We are a small institute, but we make a big difference in the world."
Sharon

"IHS is IHS: dynamic, busy, and great!"
Cocky

"IHS thrives on diversity. Bringing together interdisciplinary urban specialists fuels a dynamic workplace, uniting our institute with a shared mission: to enhance cities as better places to live."
Paula

Operationalising the strategy

The values and strategic direction areas outlined above will be brought to life by being operationalised in the different departments and teams within the Institute. They will provide a framework for collaboration, internal processes and resources going forward. By operationalising the strategy across institutional positioning, education, research, projects and partnerships, professional services, human resources, and finance, we aim to ensure a cohesive and impactful approach to addressing complex urban development challenges.

EDUCATION

This strategy will help us make decisions about changes in courses, curriculum, and pedagogy in the coming years. Moreover, it will guide our commitment to supporting academic staff in their career development to reach high standards in research and teaching, and to support impact-driven development outcomes. Priority will be given to our participation in master programmes with other partners, building academic partnerships, and introducing decolonial academic approaches.

ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Strengthening academic research and culture at the institute has been a long-term commitment and a complex process. In the next five years, we continue to sustain this positive change. In particular, we aim to 1) foster a transdisciplinary research culture at the institute, 2) create academic and societal impact, including through the co-creation of research for and with communities across geographies, 3) be at the forefront of policies by being more closely involved in policy discussions around research and compliance, and 4) make our scholarly achievements and impact increasingly visible. Our strength is our transdisciplinary approach in which scholarly research, education, and practical advisory work are reinforcing one another.

PROJECTS AND PARTNERSHIPS

The Projects and Partnerships pillar (central to implementing IHS's advisory work) is a key element of our institutional strategy and shaping how we are perceived by partners, clients, and stakeholders worldwide. The recent establishment of the Team of Projects and Partnerships (ToPP) coordinates decision-making, enhances fund-raising capacity, strengthens management, and streamlines the execution of projects and partnerships. ToPP focuses on building meaningful, equitable partnerships and delivering projects on time, within budget, and to the highest quality by enhancing processes, data collection, and collaboration.

As a central hub for integrating expertise, resources, and innovative approaches, ToPP enables IHS to achieve its mission more effectively and deliver impactful, sustainable outcomes. A key priority is decolonising partnerships by fostering mutual respect, equity, and inclusivity in all collaborations, ensuring that our global engagements reflect shared values and diverse perspectives.

A partnership strategy will be developed to serve as a framework, outlining specific activities for scoping, building, maintaining, and sustaining equitable outcomes. This document will also include a list of priority topics, countries, partner institutions, and more detailed timelines for implementing change.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

During the implementation of our previous strategy, a professional services structure was established, that includes the Professional Services Department. This department is responsible for a wide range of tasks and activities, including, but not limited to corporate communications, educational recruitment and admissions, library services, facilities, educational management, and alumni relations.

Looking at the upcoming period with our core values in mind, this department will continue professionalising and facilitating smooth organisational operations across departments to enhance the mission-driven impacts.

HUMAN RESOURCES

As part of the organisational refresh in 2024, the HR assignment has been redefined, moving away from traditional office assignments to focus on strategic priorities. Achieving our mission relies on our ability to attract, retain, and develop talented and enthusiastic employees who share our core values. The operationalisation of our strategy in HR aims to bring out the best in all employees, enabling them to realise their full potential.

Over the next five years, guided by our core values, we will concentrate on our strategic HR areas: creating a great place to work, professionalisation, culture and values, and strong leadership.

FINANCE

Delivering on the ambitions in this strategy will require effective management of the institute's financial resources. IHS has relied heavily on a base subsidy from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for many years, which may be reduced in the coming years.

The priority for finance in this strategy period is to restore a solid financial basis on which we can deliver our mission and strategy. This will require diversification of funding sources, maintenance and strengthening of organisational reserves, and a clear identification of financial resources for investment in long-term institution building.

INSTITUTIONAL POSITIONING

IHS recently celebrated its 65th anniversary. Since its formation, our institute has shown consistent dedication to producing and sharing knowledge globally, and training professionals around the world. Initially operating as a Stichting (Foundation), since 2003 IHS has functioned as a private limited company (Besloten Vennootschap – BV), wholly owned by Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR), and managed through the EUR Holding. Since then, IHS has made a significant societal impact, both as an institute and in relation to the broader mission of EUR.

However, IHS's BV status increasingly creates significant constraints in our ability to deliver on our mission and meet the aims of this strategy. In the coming strategy period, we will actively seek options for positioning IHS formally within the public university as a means of strengthening our ability to extend our educational offerings and to access funding for high quality research.



IHS staff on retreat, October 2023

Conclusion

This strategy is our commitment and focused roadmap for navigating the complexities of urban development towards transformative change. By focusing on measurable impact, fostering transdisciplinary approaches, building equitable partnerships, strengthening our financial position, and enhancing our internal organisation, together, we will empower individuals, transform communities, and shape cities that can work for all. This approach will also ensure that we are equipped for responding to emerging challenges and seizing new opportunities.

As we implement this strategy, our focus on operationalisation ensures that this vision can be translated into more detailed annual action plans. By fostering a culture of inclusivity, collaboration, and continuous learning within our organisation, we are building a resilient foundation that will operationally and financially sustain our efforts and amplify our impact globally.

Looking ahead, IHS will continue to expand its reach, deepen its engagement, and harness the collective expertise of staff, partners, and all stakeholders, including local communities, to address some of the most pressing urban development challenges of our time. This strategy is not just a plan—it is a commitment to making better cities possible.

Success depends on our ability to implement these priorities with integrity, agility, and inclusivity. As we embark on this journey, we call on our staff, partners, local communities, and stakeholders to hold us accountable to these goals and join us in making better cities possible.



Explore the full strategy



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