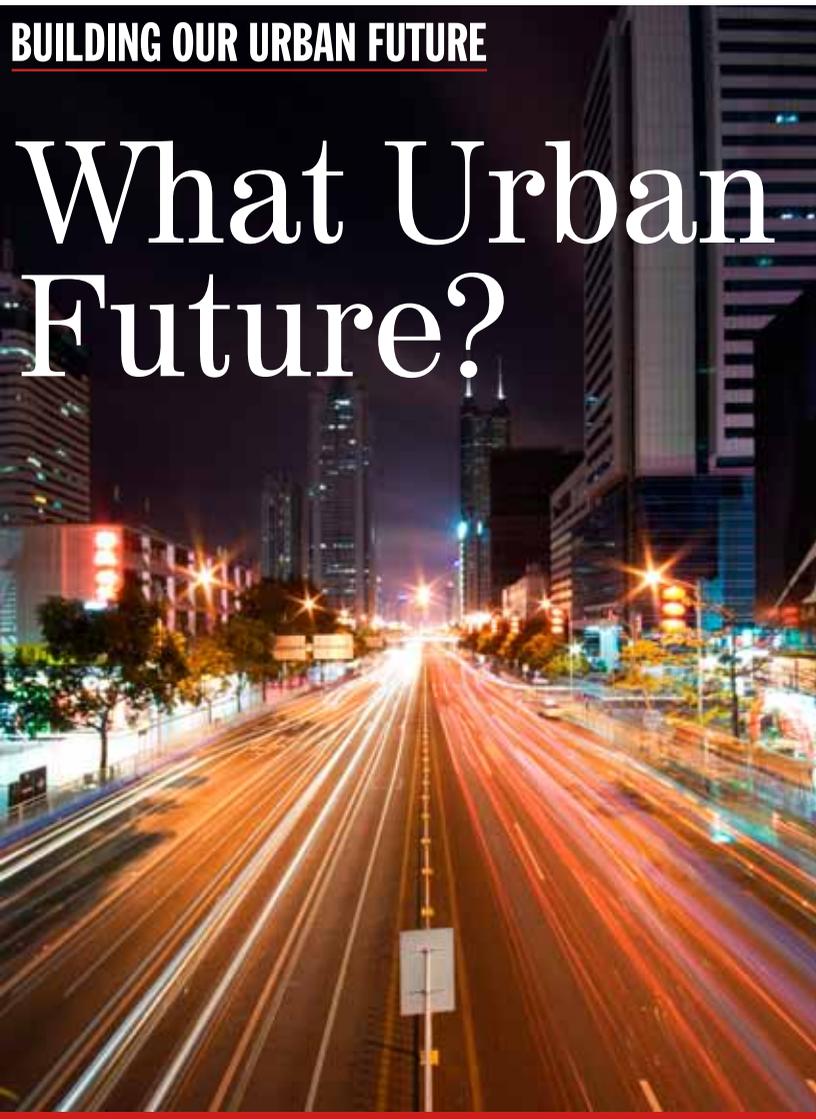


## BUILDING OUR URBAN FUTURE



# What Urban Future?

If the latest global and African statistics are correct, then now more than ever we need to imagine and construct a deliberate inclusive and equitable urban future that fully embraces our rural areas and welcomes the best and rejects the worst of our globalising world.

By Elroy Africa

Between the 1st and 7th of September 2012, UN Habitat will convene the 6th Session of the World Urban Forum in the southern Italian city of Naples. The

theme of the meeting is *The Urban Future*. The World Urban Forum is billed as the global premier gathering on cities since its inaugural meeting in 2002 in Kenya.

In 1994 South Africa entered the world stage as a sovereign democratic nation. Since then we have actively participated in international affairs with zeal on various global platforms affecting the course of all humanity. We have also ably demonstrated our professional abilities and diplomatic expertise by hosting prestigious global events such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, the FIFA World Cup in 2010 and COP17 in 2011.

The upcoming World Urban Forum deserves an equal measure of attention and enthusiasm from South Africans. What is significant about this meeting?

Just over ten years ago in 2001 a UN Habitat report on *Cities in a Globalising World* stated that 40% of the world's population lived in urban areas. It estimated that by 2020, 52% of the world's population would be urban. The report announced the arrival of the urban millennium - where globalisation was having a unique effect and impact on cities. Globalisation was argued to have both positive and negative consequences on cities, ranging from new forms of governance, an increased awareness of citizens and city managers to some negative impacts such as an expansion of corruption and the exclusion of certain social groups. The report argued that at the time 75% of global population growth occurred in cities in the developing world. 33% of Asia and Africa's population was said to be urban.

Other important shifts in cities were also noted. These included trends away from managerialism to entrepreneurialism; urban planning was no longer the prerogative of national and local governments; and the rise of monumental real estate in many cities.

In 2012, policy makers, urban professionals and citizens have the opportunity to assess changes in global urban trends, innovative responses to these trends and indicate how we can improve the lives of millions of urban and rural dwellers.

One document that will probably receive attention is the 2010/2011 UN Habitat report on the *State of the World Cities*. A significant conclusion of this report is that the pace of urbanisation

in the world is not as rapid as was thought earlier. During the 1950s the pace of global urbanisation was at its highest at 3%. This slowed in the 1980s and in the current period, 2011-2015, it is projected to slow even further to 1.7%. The report also argues that "many countries have adopted an ambivalent or hostile attitude to urbanisation, often with negative consequences". These trends have important implications for urban policy makers, urban and infrastructure planning and resource allocation by national governments and for city governments and urban dwellers directly.

On a more positive note the report argues that globally the proportion of the urban population living in slums in the developing world declined from 39% in 2000 to 32% in 2010. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the percentage decrease over the same period was 5%. What is more worrisome is the persistent observation that urban areas in Sub-Saharan Africa retain the highest levels of poverty globally together with the highest prevalence of urban slum conditions.

Recently a world respected geographer and academic, Deborah Potts, also offered similar compelling arguments regarding urbanisation trends in Sub-Saharan Africa. In an article entitled, *Whatever Happened to Africa's Rapid Urbanisation?* (February 2012), she argues that "in November 2010, a perusal of UN-Habitat's 'Urban Indicators' database revealed some curious statistics. The proportion of Kenyans living in urban settlements had seemingly reduced from 34% of the total population in 2001 to 22% in 2010. Was it really possible that such a huge number of people had left Kenyan towns for rural areas in the first decade of the 21st century? ... The UN-Habitat data indicated a reduction in the urbanisation level of 11 other mainland countries in Sub-Saharan Africa between 2001 and 2010." Potts' prediction is that "for much of sub-Saharan Africa, the foreseeable future will remain predominantly rural. Predictions of a majority of Africans living in towns by 2020 or 2030 are not supported by evidence."

This view goes against current established thinking. She then

concludes by arguing that African governments, policymakers and international donors should acknowledge fundamental changes in urbanisation trends, and respond to the irrefutable messages these impart about urban employment, incomes and economic development.

As South Africans we must learn and take a keen interest in these global urban trends and observations. The statistics of the United Nations (2010) indicate that 61.7% of South Africans are urban. Soon we will know the outcome of our recent national census as it relates to urbanisation, circular urban and rural demographic movement

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and the spatial composition of our country. Post-apartheid South Africa is still relatively new to innovations in urban development and urbanisation policy, urban management and urban governance, understanding circular migration, informal settlement/ slum eradication etc.

In 1997 we adopted an *Urban Development Framework* which outlined a 2020 Vision for our Cities and Towns. It outlined four priority action areas: integrating the city; improving housing and infrastructure; promoting urban economic development; and creating institutions for delivery. This was followed by various initiatives such as the Urban Renewal Programme, Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Programme, National Spatial Development Perspective, Breaking New Ground, Neighborhood Development Partnership Grant, Local

Government Turn Around Strategy, Spatial Planning and Land Use Bill, War on Poverty etc.

This modest collage of rural- and urban-focused initiatives has yielded some pockets of development excellence. However some of these and other initiatives remain still-born or forgotten, others continue to be work-in-progress, others have had a limited positive impact, while still others have assumed a programmatic form in the absence of a publicly articulated national urban policy framework. Many of our major cities are making critical local governance and urban development decisions despite, and not because of, national and provincial government. On the urban question, there may just be a need for more coherent national urban policy to inform local urban practice and implementation.

We have many policy-ready and implementation-capable elected representatives, public servants, local professional (e.g. South African Planning Institution), research (e.g. African Centre on Cities), inter-city (e.g. South African Cities Network) and non-governmental (e.g. Good Governance Network) individuals, bodies and institutions that need to interact more closely together.

One of the most difficult policy questions that remains elusive in our country is the appropriate urban-rural interface. Maybe we should take our cue from the Italian intellectual, Antonio Gramsci, when he reflected on *cities of silence*; he argued that "in this type of city there exists, among all social groups, an urban ideology against the countryside ...there is hatred and scorn for the peasant, an implicit common front against the demands of the countryside".

Let us use the upcoming Naples World Urban Forum as one of the policy roadside resting spots to revisit and refine our country's vision for our cities and towns. If the latest global and African statistics are correct, then now more than ever we need to imagine and construct a deliberate inclusive and equitable urban future that fully embraces our rural areas and welcomes the best and rejects the worst of our globalising world. ■