

THE URBAN NEXUS: PUTTING PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE

About 60% of South Africans are living in urban areas, and by 2030, this is projected to rise to more than 70%, according to the [National Development Plan 2030](#). But cities are already struggling to keep up. Many communities have resorted to destructive protest action to express their dissatisfaction with housing, service delivery and access to economic opportunities. There is a need to restore communication and trust, HSRC CEO Prof Crain Soudien said at a recent symposium.

By Antoinette Oosthuizen

The integrated planning of housing, transport, and the management of energy, water and food resources are key to the long-term sustainable development of South Africa's fast-expanding cities. This needs to be based on quality data, but communities should be included in the research process. This is why the HSRC has used participatory action-based research approaches in several of its projects, CEO Prof Crain Soudien said at the recent [eThekweni Research Symposium 2019](#) in Durban.

Criticising a top-down service-delivery model, Soudien said that researchers, policymakers and service providers need to recognise that they can learn from people on the ground and build relationships with them.

"A lot of our service-delivery protests are about the breakdown in this relationship. Policy planning and implementation shouldn't be working with people as consumers but as partners. We have to find ways to involve people in co-creating our data and participating in the way that the data is used."

The theme of the symposium was The Urban Nexus: People and Data in the Centre, focusing on the nexus between urbanisation and service delivery. It was organised by a consortium of the eThekweni Metropolitan Council, the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban University of Technology, Mangosuthu University of Technology, the University of South Africa, the University of Zululand, the HSRC and the Durban Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

In his keynote address, Soudien highlighted two HSRC projects that followed a participatory action-research approach, where communities played a central role in how data was collected and used.

The Ikhaya Lami research project

The recent controversy around homeless people being fined in the City of Cape Town highlighted the chasm between researchers, policymakers and municipalities, and people on the ground. The city decided to enforce the provisions of existing by-laws that prohibit certain behaviour and the erection of

structures that block public spaces. A City spokesperson told [News24](#) that 85% of the homeless people refused assistance offered by reintegration workers and many did not want to live in shelters. It was [reported](#) that some street-dwellers were fined R200 – R800. But how can people living in extreme poverty pay such fines? And why won't they accept help?

The challenge is not unique to Cape Town. A decade ago, the HSRC estimated the total number of homeless people in the country at between 100 000 and 200 000, but exact numbers are not known.

In 2015-2016, HSRC researchers conducted a mixed-methods participatory action-research study to explore the plight of street-and shelter-living people in central Durban. The Ikhaya Lami research project was a partnership between the HSRC and the eThekweni Metro.

The researchers first set out to build a relationship with homeless people who were the subjects of the research. "You can imagine how difficult that was. How do you begin with someone who is almost

inherently distrustful of anybody looking vaguely bureaucratic?" Soudien said.

In the second phase, the researchers needed to find ways to talk to them to develop a database. "We had to ask them really difficult questions about violence, access to employment, about drug abuse, about their basic sense of well-being. This was a crucial phase in trying to put the evidence on the table."

The researchers built an important database for the city. The data was analysed and discussed at roundtables and used to develop a policy brief. A total of 3933 homeless people were counted in February 2016, half of them sleeping in formal shelters and the rest on the streets, in parks or other places outside. Many had become homeless after coming to seek employment in the city (36% and 40%), family trauma (20%), substance abuse (11% and 4%), the death of a family member (9%) or simply because they had "nowhere else to go" (6% and 13%). The majority believed that finding employment would help them overcome homelessness.

Community Scorecard project

Interactions around service-delivery challenges in South Africa are often characterised by conflict and high levels of mistrust between communities and officials. This is where the Community Scorecard project in the City of Cape Town came into play. HSRC researchers, city officials and residents of Nyanga, a marginalised area, worked together on this project.

"Nyanga has been described as the crime capital of South Africa," said Soudien. "Preparation was crucial. We needed to understand the context into which we were moving and the needs of the residents."

Researchers involved the residents in developing a scorecard with indicators of progress. "It is really difficult to do that, because people will start at the extreme end and say they want a house, but you have to put measurements in the scorecard that are realistic and will help monitor

a sense of progress. This process required building trust."

The HSRC researchers found that poor communication, and a lack of understanding of how city processes and services worked, contributed to this conflict. With regards to water provision, the researchers learned that pipe infrastructure in the area was insufficient for the growing population. This resulted in frequent breakdowns, witnessed on the scorecard day when community members and officials walked the sites together. Access to maintenance sites was hindered by criminal activities, which included vandalism and city officials being threatened.

Putting people first

Resource constraints and other challenges may lead to some research reports ending up on shelves. Soudien cautioned that a perception of no response may lead to communities becoming disillusioned and not eager to participate when new groups of researchers and officials attempt to work with them. Communities should be respected, he said, even if it means giving disappointing feedback about the challenges encountered to implement research findings and recommendations.

He urged researchers and cities to communicate more effectively, be more pragmatic and put the interests of the people first.

Legitimacy

Soudien emphasised that communities need to trust the standards and benchmarks that researchers and policymakers come up with. "For example, if we tell people a reasonable benchmark is that every household should have access to 200 litres of water a day, we have to be able to back it with research to convince people it is a reasonable offer, that it is not arbitrary, but practical and affordable. People should realise the data is not made up by bureaucrats and imposed on them, but realistic."

Communities need to view institutions as legitimate. They need to see that science is in their interest, that it will serve their needs and it is not only

intended for the elite. "This is what is going to stop our communities from destroying that very tap that is being used to provide those 200 litres of water ... that tap must be a symbol that represents their own 200 litres and something they want to defend."

The way forward

The HSRC has the scientific resources to support cities, but some research efforts have been duplicated. "The City of eThekweni has done a wonderful survey on public perceptions and the premier's office has done a satisfaction survey, but the HSRC conducts an annual attitudes survey too. Unfortunately, our datasets don't relate to each other sufficiently." Soudien suggested that research institutions and administrative entities partner to find practical solutions to collaborate on, rather than compete. During the visit, the HSRC renewed its memorandum of understanding with the eThekweni Metro.



HSRC CEO Prof Crain Soudien and Siphon Nzuza (eThekweni City Manager) signing a renewed memorandum of understanding.

Photo: Antonio Erasmus