

# The state of South African cities

A decade ago, South Africa put into practice a bold vision for metropolitan government, recognising that cities are integral to solving some of our biggest challenges. Disparate local administrations were brought together to form large citywide authorities that correspond broadly to functional economic areas. IVAN TUROK reports on a study to assess the progress made in improving conditions for citizens in these big metropolitans.

The new citywide authorities had new responsibilities to promote social and economic development and to encourage community involvement in decision-making.

The aim was to integrate divided communities, to distribute municipal resources more fairly across the whole urban area, and to ensure viable and sustained service delivery. Metro government was given a leading role in driving national development as an equal and distinctive sphere with the right to govern on its own initiative.

In the Constitution, all three spheres were regarded as 'interdependent and interrelated', and the principle of 'cooperative government' required them to work together and support each other in mutual trust and good faith.

Ten years later, the South African Cities Network commissioned a study to assess the progress made in improving conditions for citizens in the nine largest urban municipalities from five perspectives: economic, spatial, environmental, governmental and financial. Broad proposals were also made for the new generation of civic leaders responsible for planning and managing cities after the May 2011 local elections.

## Resilience a key factor

Resilience was the overarching theme of the analysis, defined as the capacity of a city to withstand and adapt successfully to challenging conditions, such as the decline of traditional industries, problems of food security, water

Resilience was the overarching theme of the analysis, defined as the capacity of a city to withstand and adapt successfully to challenging conditions

scarcity or other looming environmental hazards. Resilience captures the reality of being connected to an increasingly open and uncertain world, while also recognising the intrinsic local characteristics of a place.

Resilience is particularly relevant to the transition taking place in South African cities, with questions raised about the durability of the changes underway, including the pressures of in-migration and population growth, and the extension of suburban sprawl and exclusionary neighbourhoods.

Political resilience is vital, meaning cities governed by institutions with the administrative capabilities and leadership to help local citizens and firms tackle problems and respond positively to change.

## Economic growth reveals strengths and weaknesses

Over the last decade cities have enjoyed a period of more robust economic growth and job creation than in the previous two decades. They

have functioned as the country's 'job machines' and performed more strongly than flagging rural economies, with GDP per person up to 70% higher than the national average.

Stronger urban economic performance has also funded the roll-out of public services and social grants to towns and rural areas. Their economic vitality has something to do with economies of scale enabling better labour market matching, shared services and learning between firms. It is also linked to the presence of expanding industries such as finance, business and consumer services, and high-level professional and technical occupations. Johannesburg, Tshwane and Cape Town have experienced more vigorous growth than other cities and towns.

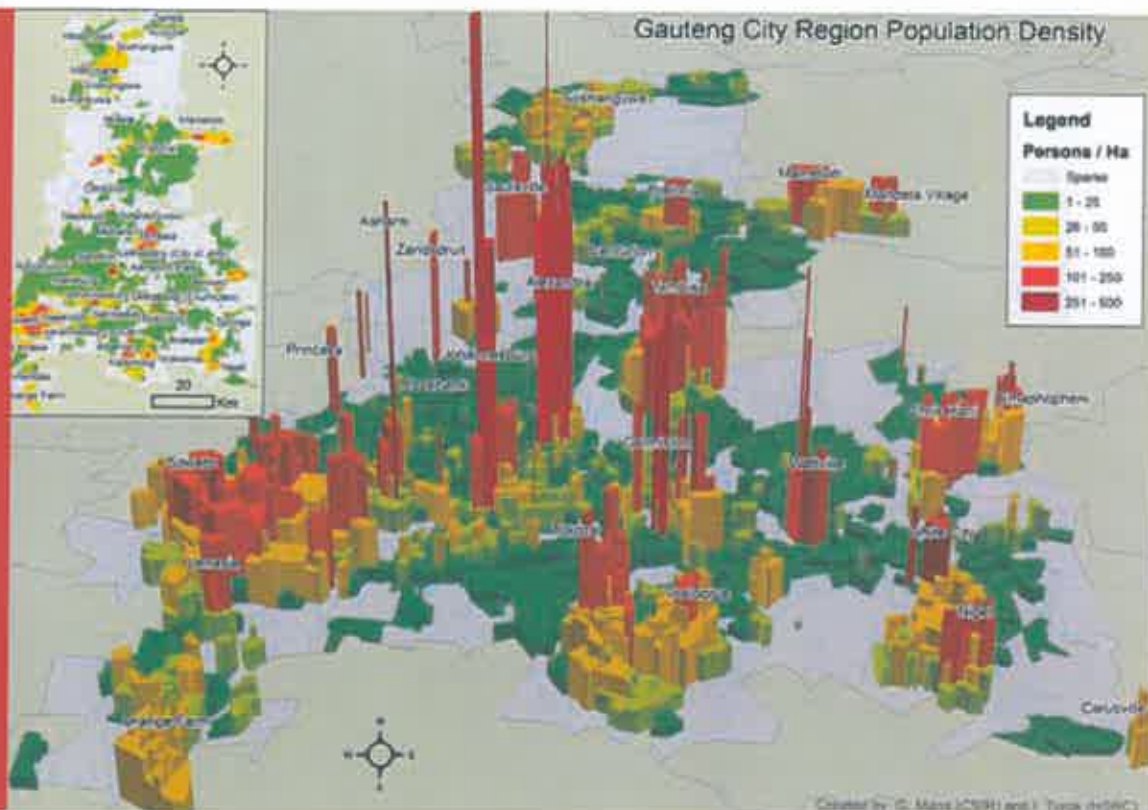
Yet stronger economic growth has exposed bottlenecks in urban infrastructure and shortfalls in the supply of energy, water and advanced skill-sets that have undermined local productivity and restricted future growth potential.

Only towards the end of the decade, and after a period of fiscal austerity dating back to GEAR in the 1990s, did the government respond with increased capital investment in freeway improvements, airport extensions, public transport projects and municipal infrastructure.

It is too soon to say whether capacity constraints in urban infrastructure will hold back job creation in the decade ahead.

Improved economic opportunities over the last decade had the effect of attracting domestic and international migrant populations to the cities.





This added to the pressure on space and services in poorer townships. Metro councils have struggled to keep pace, partly through insufficient financial support and flexibility in national housing, land and social infrastructure policies. So the share of households living in informal housing without access to essential services has risen in the cities, against the trend everywhere else.

#### Counteracting negative attitudes

This helps explain why recent service delivery protests have been concentrated in and around the big cities.

Media coverage of the disputes has focused almost entirely on municipal mismanagement and political intrigue. The underlying problem that the demands on some municipalities are much higher than on others has been overlooked. It is probably not surprising that the metros have battled to cope with the rising level of social and physical need, given their constrained revenue streams and administrative capacity.

The task facing the new metros was underestimated when they were established, with their enlarged boundaries and extra responsibilities to service extensive low-income communities.

National attitudes towards urbanisation are beginning to change, although there remains some ambiguity towards the process. There appears to be insufficient recognition that informal settlements function as low-cost entry points to urban labour markets. The instinctive reaction has been to

contain or eradicate 'slums', especially those that are centrally located and visible from strategic routes into the cities.

#### Priorities for the future

A more sensitive approach would recognise these places as stepping stones or 'escalator areas' that enable migrants to gain a foothold in the job market, to accumulate skills, to increase their earnings, and in due course to move on to better housing elsewhere.

Cities that are dynamic and inclusive need such areas to accommodate growth and social mobility. We need to recognise that informal settlements are here to stay and that they need investment to improve living conditions and how they function.

One of the implications is that municipalities should be more responsive to the needs and livelihood strategies of the poor. This chimes with other evidence in the analysis that local government is perceived by citizens to be insufficiently open, transparent and consultative. In fact, its standing in society has deteriorated to the point where it is one of the least trusted public institutions in the country, after political parties.

A priority for new municipal leaders is to restore confidence in the integrity of metro government. Following recent negative publicity, civic leaders should acknowledge past problems and rebuild credibility by tightening up internal procedures. Oversight mechanisms such as ward committees should strengthen the voice of communities.

Such arrangements are necessary to strengthen local participation and accountability, and thereby counteract the danger of the large size of the metro jurisdictions undermining local democracy. In addition, the original vision of metro government should be revisited. Greater focus is needed on building productive and inclusive cities in which all citizens can lead useful and fulfilling lives. It means giving priority to economic development and job creation above all else.

Developing human capabilities and active citizenship is a better way forward than welfare or consumerism. This will require a renewed emphasis on the different spheres and sectors of government working together more closely to ensure that every city develops to its potential.

Looking further ahead, the government deserves praise for its recent efforts to devolve housing and transport functions to the metros. An integrated approach to transport, housing and land-use planning should help to manage urban growth more efficiently and equitably in the future. The metros will need to rise to the challenge, and will require sufficient resources and technical assistance to fulfil these functions effectively. ◀◀

*Professor Ivan Turok is the deputy executive director of the HSRC's research programme on Economic Performance and Development, and the principal author of the 2011 State of the Cities report.*





**HSRC**  
Human Sciences  
Research Council

# review

Volume 9 no. 2 June 2011

**State of  
the force**  
THE VERDICT IS IN

**Indigenous  
Knowledge**  
STEALING OUR IK  
IS NOT OK

**World  
Cup**  
Did we  
score?

**XENOPHOBIA**  
Stopping the hate

