

A successful city makes space for all

IN 2001, the country put in place a bold vision for metropolitan government, recognising that cities are integral to solving some of our biggest challenges.

Disparate administrative structures and systems were brought together to form city-wide authorities. They had new responsibilities to boost social and economic development and to increase community participation. The aim was to integrate municipal resources, to distribute municipal resources more fairly and to ensure viable and sustained service delivery.

Ten years later, the 2011 State of the Cities Report assesses the progress made and offers guidance.

Resilience is the overarching theme, defined as the capacity of a city to withstand and adapt successfully to challenging conditions, such as the decline of traditional industries, pressures of population growth or environmental hazards. It 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 under way, including highway-oriented development, exclusionary neighbourhoods and consumption-driven growth.

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

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

ANOTHER VIEW



Inclusive and dynamic cities can serve as stepping stones to a better life for the poor, and generate wealth for the country as a whole, writes Ivan Turok

Ambiguous attitudes to shack settlements neglect the function of such areas as low-cost entry points to urban labour markets

They have also performed more strongly than flagging rural economies, with GDP per person up to 70% higher than the national average.

This 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 financial and business services, and high-level professional and technical occupations.

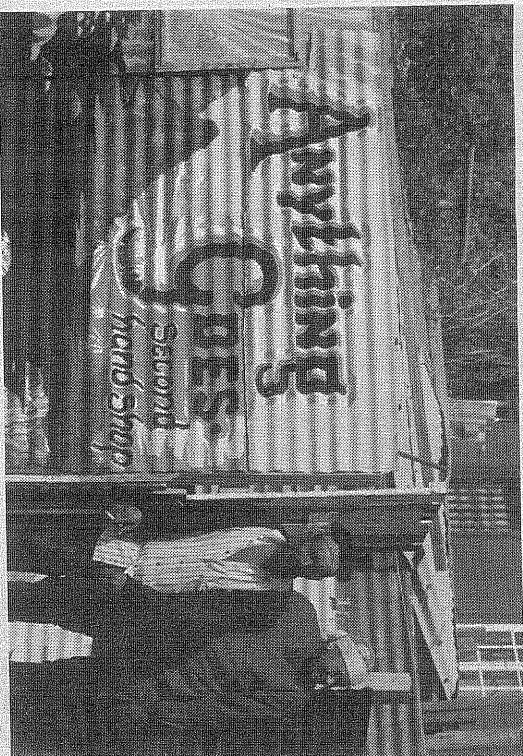
Johannesburg, Tshwane and Cape Town have experienced more vigorous growth than other cities and towns.

Stronger economic growth has exposed bottlenecks in urban infrastructure and shortfalls in the supply of energy and other resources that have undermined local productivity. Only towards the end of the decade did the government respond with increased capital investment in freeway improvements, airport extensions, public transport projects and municipal infrastructure.

Improved economic opportunities had the effect of attracting domestic and international migrant populations to the cities, and adding to the pressure on space and services in poorer townships.

Metro councils have struggled to keep pace, partly through insufficient 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.

This helps to explain why recent community protests have been concentrated in and around the big



MAGNET: Economic opportunities pull people to cities — or informal settlements like Hangberg near Cape Town's Hout Bay

Picture: ESA ALEXANDER

cities. Media coverage of the disputes has focused almost entirely on municipal mismanagement and political intrigue. The underlying problem — that the demands on some councils are much higher than on others — has been ignored.

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.

Ambiguous government attitudes towards urbanisation and shack settlements also neglect the important function of informal areas as low-cost entry points to urban labour markets.

The established policy has been to contain or eradicate “shums”, particularly those that are centrally located and visible from

strategic routes into the cities.

A more sensitive approach would recognise these places as stepping stones or “escalator areas” that enable migrants to gain a foothold in the jobs market 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.

One of the implications is that municipalities should be more responsive to the needs and well-being of the poor. This chimes with other evidence in the report 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. The new Consumer Protection Act could perform a useful role by giving residents new rights to demand improved services.

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 the different spheres and sectors of government to work together more closely.

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

Professor Turok is deputy executive director at the HSRC and is the principal author of the 2011 State of the Cities Report