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To All HSRC Office's
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Subject Business Day 11-07-2006: SA's global city region of the future

For Follow Up: No Urgent Priority

Dear All

HSRC RESEARCH OUTPUTS
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STEERING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT/Udesh Pillay

SA's global city region of the future

IN LATE May this year, the mayors of Gauteng's 15 municipalities gave their support to a proposal that has been championed by Gauteng Premier Mkhazima Shilowa, since 2004 — to build the province into a globally competitive city region.

The global city region perspective, according to the premier's office, is in line with the national spatial development plan and has been under discussion at municipal and provincial level. The idea is that municipalities keep their autonomy but — in recognition of Gauteng's unique character as an economic hub and an urban province with a high degree of interconnectedness between its regions and neighbouring provinces — work more closely on issues of common interest, such as economic development, transport and planning.

Globalisation has become a growing force and subject of intense debate. An emerging global phenomenon that economic geographers, in particular, have pointed to is a new regionalism, rooted in a series of dense nodes of labour and consumption scattered across the world.

The new regionalism stands in opposition to the view of the world as a borderless flow of spaces, which is sometimes set out in discussions on the future of international development.

cannot yet be — abolished. The nodes have begun to constitute distinctive subnational (regional) social and spatial formations, whose local character and dynamics seem to be undergoing major transformations due to the effects of globalisation.

Many of these nodes are the focus of significant new experiments in local political mobilisation and economic reorganisation, as different social groups within them strive to deal with the stresses and strains to which they are subjected as a result of globalisation. Many of these nodes are starting to take on a definite identity and force as economic and political actors on the world stage.

The new regionalism differs from an older regionalism in which regions within any national territory were apt to be much more subsevent to the dictates of the central state.

These new regional social formations have been referred to in recent literature as "global city regions", and are an emerging feature in the developed and developing worlds.

Indeed, it is recognition of the emergence of such a sociospatial

concept of the global city region, and its relevance to SA's metropolitan space economy, has concluded — not surprisingly — that Johannesburg is by far SA's most globally competitive urban prospect.

Gauteng's urban core... contributes about half SA's gross domestic product

However, the city does not independently qualify as a global city region in terms of the comprehensive definitions that have been presented on the subject. SA's most formidable global city — if one is to talk about dense subnational so-

cial and spatial formations that have developed as the principal concentrations of advanced economic activities, and which function as territorial platforms from which concentrated groups or networks of firms contest global markets — is a considerable tract of land spanning an east-west and north-south axis in the "urban heart" of Gauteng.

With a population of close to 12 million, the urban nodes of Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni and the West Rand constitute the economic heartland of SA.

In fact, in the corridor between Johannesburg and Tshwane alone,

years of the new millennium.

Gauteng's urban core, comprising the four nodes described above, while constituting just 1.4% of SA's land area, contributes about half of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), and 65% of fiscal revenue.

In fact, the province generates 10% of the GDP of Africa. As such, this subregion of Gauteng would seem to be well on its way to joining cities such as Dhaka, Istanbul, Tianjin, Hyderabad, Lahore and Lagos as "new" megacities (or global city regions) in the developing world.

The commitment by the premier's office to drive efforts to build Gauteng as a globally competitive city region is a commendable one — and makes economic sense.

However, where I differ with champions of the concept in the premier's office is in terms of how the geographic area that may approximate city-region status is defined.

While the premier's office sees the entire province as a potential city region node, it is argued here that it is a sub-region of Gauteng, the urban core of the province, that stands the most chance of being developed into a globally competitive, urban megaregion.

The necessary population and infrastructure, and the densification thresholds that warrant provincial consideration as a city region, simply

the economic infrastructure development programme of the province that began in 2000 — and compare this boundary with those that represent the province's urban core. They largely coincide, and present a useful basis for investigation into the applicability of the city region concept to Gauteng.

Having said that, the attempt to reconfigure Gauteng into a holistic programme of economic infrastructure development while simultaneously nurturing social inclusivity is an extremely positive one, and needs to be encouraged.

With the various levels of transport and infrastructure planning that will occur before the 2010 FIFA World Cup, a unique set of opportunities exists to fast-track the global city region process. Planners must be cognisant, however, of the scale at which economies of agglomeration work best, and the importance of local context.

While our cities need to become globally competitive, we must not subscribe to a restrictive and formulaic global city agenda, which often imposes limitations on the imagining of possible futures for our cities.

Udesh Pillay is executive director of the Urban, Rural and Economic Development Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council and author

It does not represent the address information in Gauteng that has led to recent calls for the province to be launched as a global city region. Much of my research into the country's surface area, close to 30% of SA's gross geographic product growth took place in the first five years around Gauteng's Blue IQ projects — do not exist at this stage. In this regard, planners in the province would do well to draw a line around Gauteng's Blue IQ projects — of the economy competitive city regions developing in South Africa's formidably aspirational or New Imaginations

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