

# URBAN RENEWAL UNIT

## to round up experts for cities

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**A** massive redevelopment task faces South African towns and cities. Many manufacturing and central business districts are in decline because of the recent economic recession, coupled with the combined impact of globalisation and political isolation.

More than 55% of national production takes place within our six largest urban centres: Durban, Johannesburg, Cape Town, East Rand, Pretoria and Port Elizabeth. Since these cities account for a large and increasing portion of the country's total population and economic production, any decline in those centres puts the nation's political and economic stability at risk.

To contribute to stemming such disintegration, the HSRC established the Urban Renewal and Development Research (URD) unit – a South African urban research facility that aims to co-ordinate urban research into a more coherent programme of urban policy intervention.

The URD unit's flagship project, entitled *State of our Cities*, involves commissioning research outputs by top urban scholars that will eventually feed into a seminar series and a high-quality HSRC publication. Scholars will respond to a competitive grant application process and be selected on merit, according to the way their proposed output aligns with the thematic focus of the HSRC publication.

The research priorities, focus areas and terms of reference in relation to all facets of the project will be set by an urban reference group, consisting of eight members. These prominent local and international urban scholars and practitioners will help the URD unit to become a central hub of urban social research in South Africa and Southern Africa by establishing partnerships and collaboration projects.

Focusing on cities and towns will help set the stage for South Africa's international and continental role in the future. Globalisation



and the internationalisation of capital have advanced some of the world's major cities while excluding others. For example, The Globalisation and World Cities Network currently ranks Johannesburg in category 6 (out of 12) – a 'minor world city', on a par with cities like Amsterdam and Washington. Cape Town, however, has been rated in the lowest category – showing minimal evidence of world city formation, like Brasilia and Glasgow. Such conclusions have serious

policies of the apartheid past. As a result, towns and cities have a well-developed formal component along with an underdeveloped informal component. These two components are usually separated not only by financial status but by distance: often people in the poorer economic category live much further from the cities where they work than those with a higher economic status.

The government recognises the need to narrow this gap in South African cities.

### A decline in SA's urban centres puts the nation's political and economic stability at risk

consequences for South Africa's larger cities, and warrant a concerted programme of research around the issues of globalisation and city transformation.

Two factors that distinguish South African urban centres – dualism and a distorted spatial economy – stem from the segregationist

Recent policies addressing urban development issues, such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme and the Urban Development Framework, reinforced such national development priorities but they lacked a way to make a difference in the urban development processes.

# HSRC review

www.hsrc.ac.za **2** VOLUME No. | MARCH  
01 | 2004



Human Sciences Research Council

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