

HSRC RESEARCH OUTPUTS

3794

Urban Spatial Policy and Research in South Africa

Alison Todes

Human Sciences Research
Council

Paper presented to the UNESCO International Forum on the Social Science-Policy Nexus, 20-24 Feb. 2006

Introduction

- Presentation reflects on the relationship between research and urban spatial policy in SA post-apartheid
- Research undertaken for book on urban policy and urban research in SA
- Compared to several other areas of urban policy, research in this arena did shape policy, but policy itself was not strongly implemented

Evolving Relationships

- Post-apartheid urban spatial policy emphasises the need to restructure towns and cities towards greater compaction and integration
- It intends to enable the urban poor to live closer to areas of work, to enable housing developments which have a range of facilities, and to move away from racial segregation

Evolving Relationships

- Policy reflected a common sense reaction against the effects of apartheid, which located black people on the periphery of the city, with poor access to urban opportunities and employment
- It also accorded with political critique of apartheid and popular struggles against apartheid

Evolving relationships

- Research also played an important part in creating a dominant discourse on the need to restructure the city
- Research included studies that showed the economic and social impact of apartheid removals and segregation on black people
- Research on spatial planning showed the costs of the sprawling SA cities, and academics developed alternative proposals for restructuring the city
- Transport researchers showed the costs of transport and how it could be restructured

Evolving relationships

- Research was conducted by academics and NGOs, of different orientations – some close to business, others to popular movements
- Both were influential in the local government negotiating forums of the early 1990s which began to plan a new urban future once it was clear that a political transition was to occur

Evolving relationships

- The forums themselves generated research on these issues, particularly on urban land
- World Bank Urban Mission in early 1990s also provided support through showing how inefficient SA cities were
- Ideas also taken through in the National Housing Forum, and some research undertaken in support here too

Evolving relationships

- Ideas were taken through in several policies after 1994
- In practice, however, implementation was weak.
- Constraints to implementation in the early post-apartheid period:
 - resistance in the bureaucracy
 - fragmented local government
 - state had to demonstrate stability
 - Focus on delivery

Evolving relationships

- Lack of a strong centre for urban policy and urban spatial policy
- Absence of urban land policy and systematic reform of planning system
- Lack of a strong political constituency
- Abstracted spatial concepts – insufficient engagement with urban spatial dynamics and their economic and social underpinnings and ways to address them

Evolving relationships

- By late 1990s, the plausibility and desirability of compaction was debated, and concept was modified to reflect urban realities
- Reflected a level of research:
 - showing new spatial trends towards class divided cities, and greater sprawl
 - the failure to implement new principles of compaction and integration
 - Problems with assumptions in relation to transport, and potentials for restructuring

Evolving relationships

- By late 2004, ideas of urban restructuring seemed to be resurgent in policy, although not as strong as initially
- Reflected shifts in government policy, in part influenced by research
 - 10 year review and concerns about poverty and the dual economy
 - research showing dissatisfaction with housing product, including location and access to facilities
 - reference to literature debating urban integration ideas, but arguing for more nuanced approaches
 - emerging evidence of costs of sprawl

Evolving relationships

- At same time, some research questioning compaction ideas on arguments that levels of unemployment are so high that access is less important for the urban poor
- Different arguments partly reflects methodologies - but it also points to the need for a closer understanding of urban spatial dynamics
- But impact on policy has been limited
- Questions about how seriously policy will be implemented, and whether it will be overshadowed by other more immediate issues (services, informal settlements)

Conclusions

- Compared to many other areas of urban policy, research was more important to policy formulation
- However this has been primarily at the level of discourse in the early phases
- And policy implementation was weak due to factors outside of research
- Most recent policy shifts are partially informed by research

Conclusions

- But there is still very limited use of evidenced based research to formulate policy in this arena
- Nor is much research commissioned to understand trends/dynamics and respond to them, or to develop appropriate mechanisms to facilitate appropriate policy implementation
- Research commissioned tends to be short-term, and limited
- But there are still big gaps in understanding of urban socio-spatial dynamics and mechanisms to address them – need to move beyond broad ideas

Conclusions

- Partly a reflection of the uncertain position of cities and urban issues in policy
- Also to do with the lack of a strong institutional location and champion for urban policy, and its status as a cross cutting issue
- Urban spatial issues in particular are difficult to address given the weight of history, and its support for it is not clearly manifest