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NATIONAL URBAN POLICY: A GLOBAL ANALYSIS

South Africa is one of a growing number of countries around the world that has begun to take the process of urbanisation more seriously. It recognises the need to become more strategic in responding to the threats and opportunities posed by rapid urban growth. In a recent report written for the United Nations, *Ivan Turok* reviewed the experience of national urban policies across the Global South in order to distil lessons for a new generation of such initiatives.

The growing urbanisation of the global population in poor and middle income countries during the 21st century has the potential to generate substantial benefits for economic development, social progress and the efficient use of natural resources. However, burgeoning cities with high population densities also expose countries to heightened risks of social dislocation and environmental degradation. The form and character of urban growth over the next few decades will have a major bearing on the well-being and life chances of several billion people. It will also influence global migration flows and international stability, and affect the resilience of the world's ecosystems in the

context of climate change and increasing resource scarcity.

National governments around the world are increasingly seeking to plan and manage urbanisation in a way that is more sustainable, productive and inclusive than in the past. In a major review of 20 of the most respected national urban policies (NUPs), I found they were more aware of the gravity of what's at stake, more ambitious in scope, and more integrated than earlier urban programmes. At the heart is the need to mobilise active support across the different spheres and sectors of government to implement a coherent approach to planning and developing cities and towns.



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Of course the challenges are very different in different contexts, so the responses need to vary accordingly. Effective NUPs are tailored to suit specific national conditions. It matters whether the country is urbanising slowly or rapidly; what is driving the process (push or pull factors); the level of prosperity (and hence the resources available for investment in infrastructure and housing); the relative capabilities of local and national institutions, and the overarching political vision and values.

A deliberate political process is required to align decision making with long-term national priorities.



Four lessons

Deliberate political processes

One of the general lessons emerging is that a deliberate political process is required to align decision making with long-term national priorities and to co-ordinate investment flows across the conventional line functions of government.

It means some places being treated differently from others because of their distinctive needs and potential. This requires a political champion who is capable of building a coalition of interests around an urban agenda. The argument is likely to be more persuasive if it relates to the national economic benefits that will stem from better urbanisation, rather than repairing the damage caused by dysfunctional urban development.

Shifting the trajectory of urban growth requires a broad effort because inertia and vested interests will otherwise ensure that business as usual prevails. Housing, transport and basic infrastructure policies need to be more flexible and adapted to the realities of cities and towns. Government departments need to be held to account for ensuring they help rather than hinder this cause. NUPs also require stakeholders outside government to adapt their policies and practices to the new agenda, including financial institutions and property developers. Successful cities cannot be built by government alone.

Outdated land-use planning regulations and laws need to be made more relevant to contemporary conditions.



Sustained legislative, institutional and financial instruments

Another lesson is that implementing an NUP means a sustained technical process of building legal foundations, institutional capabilities and financial instruments. It requires arrangements to co-ordinate the various actors and agencies involved, including new forms of public-private-community partnership. Outdated land-use planning regulations and laws governing the ownership, use and development of land need to be made more relevant to contemporary conditions and equipped to deal with growing informality. The high cost of urban infrastructure requires financial innovation, such as capturing a share of the rise in land values that accompanies the development of land.

Decentralise power

Third, it is difficult to implement an NUP from the centre because it is remote from the real-world challenges and opportunities to get things done. The active participation of cities is vital to achieve the core goals. NUPs benefit from the decentralisation of selected powers, responsibilities and resources to city governments. They are best placed to make a difference because of their superior knowledge and perspective to manage urban growth in a rounded and responsive manner. They can engage more effectively with local communities and private investors to build a common strategic agenda for the future of the city.

City development strategies help to identify and resolve difficult tensions and trade-offs between economic, social and environmental objectives, and to align future plans with investment in infrastructure and other facilities. Local spending decisions funded by local taxes often result in the best outcomes because they reinforce local accountability. Building municipal capabilities is particularly important in many African countries given the weak state of local governments. NUPs can assist with technical advice, dedicated funding streams, training programmes, and opportunities for municipalities to learn from each other.

Promoting compact development requires more than restrictions on the expansion of the urban edge.



Higher density and integrated urban

Fourth, a core objective of NUPs is to manage the peripheral expansion of cities in the interests of encouraging higher density and more integrated urban development. This requires metropolitan-wide planning and co-ordination across administrative boundaries to limit municipal competition for investment and rate payers. Left to themselves, housing developers favour building on lower cost peripheral land. This shifts the

burden of ongoing transport costs onto households and capital infrastructure costs onto government. Sprawl also damages ecosystems, consumes agricultural land and destroys biodiversity.

Promoting compact development requires more than restrictions on the expansion of the urban edge. Positive efforts are needed to renew and upgrade existing urban infrastructure, promote multi-storey redevelopment within inner urban areas, and encourage more intensive use of infill sites and under-used land. This goes hand-in-hand with mixed-use projects that combine different land uses together. This implies a shift in the attitudes of developers and households to recognise the value of convenience and proximity in urban living. Higher levels of investment in public transport systems and hands-on management of the public realm are required if households are expected to live at higher neighbourhood densities.

The informal sector needs to be taken more seriously given its role in the provision of housing, livelihoods and essential services.



Plan ahead

Finally, it is far more cost effective and less socially disruptive to plan ahead for urbanisation by preparing the land and laying down the infrastructure in advance, rather than trying to redevelop or relocate informal settlements after they are established. Understanding urban growth pressures and early action to prevent haphazard physical forms is generally better than treating them once they exist. Nevertheless, informal settlements cannot be ignored and should not be condemned in the name of progress. Considerable pragmatism is required to formulate plans for in situ upgrading and improvement, depending on settlement location and site-specific conditions.

A crucial message for African countries is that the informal sector needs to be taken more seriously because of its role in the provision of housing, livelihoods and essential services. In many ways, informality is a 'second best' environment characterised by poverty, insecurity and survival. However, it fills important gaps in urban society and its existence is generally better than if there was nothing else. The objective should be to strengthen its function over time so that productivity is enhanced and living and working conditions are improved. ■

Author: Professor Ivan Turok, acting executive director, Economic Performance and Development, HSRC.

Professor Turok is the principal author of The Evolution of National Urban Policies. A Global Overview, published by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat).