



# SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT IN AFRICAN CITIES

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## **Introduction: The contextual landscape of African cities**

Cities across the globe are facing rapid urbanisation and are expected to be at the frontline of addressing issues of global sustainability (UN-Habitat, 2016; UN, 2018). The majority of the world's population growth is expected to be concentrated in the urban areas of what is considered to be the 'global south'<sup>2</sup>. Cities across Africa in the main are characterised by multiple forms of poverty, growing inequality, environmental degradation, slums and informal settlements, social and economic exclusion, and spatial segregation.

In this regard, African cities are facing significant challenges in terms of both planning for and coping with rapid population growth and urbanisation (UN-Habitat, 2014; OECD, 2016). The challenges we face in Africa are specifically centered around high levels of poverty; high levels of inequality; spatial separation of residential areas from access to economic opportunities; and burgeoning informal settlements that lack the adequate infrastructure and services to sustain human life in the long term (Robinson, 2008; UN-Habitat, 2014). It is important to note that cities of the global south display the most acute forms of ecological degradation, economic disparity and spatial apartheid when compared to their counterparts in Latin America and South East Asia (Dawson and Edwards, 2004; van Dijk, 2006; UN-Habitat, 2014).

An additional challenge that faces African cities, is the existence of a dual approach by governments across the continent in their spending policies. The duality occurs where African cities are promoted in the global economy in order to stimulate investment and development in a particular country or urban region but at the same time governments have a spending policy that is aligned with the upliftment of the urban poor (Lemanski, 2007). Both of these objectives should be viewed in a positive light, but it creates an unmanageable tension for governments where on the one hand they are driving economic opportunity in being globally competitive, but on the other hand are creating an environment for the continued exclusion of the urban poor and a resultant continuation and steady growth in the social and spatial segregation of those

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'cities of the global south' refers to countries that do not have fully industrialized economies i.e., in postcolonial terms it refers to countries that have experienced some form of colonial domination which has left a permanent mark on their economic, cultural and political landscape. Source: Pieterse (2010)

communities most in need of assistance (Lemanski, 2007; Ding, Lai and Wang, 2012; Watson, 2013; Currie and Musango, 2016).

Moreover, many African cities are characterised by varying levels of institutional under-development and an inability to facilitate the development and management of sustainable cities. Brass (2014) highlighted that the unintended consequence of this has resulted in a significant growth in the number of non-state actors playing a key role in service delivery mechanisms to the urban poor, a situation that is not unique to cities of the global south. The challenge with the prevalence of these 'non-state actors' is twofold. Firstly, it has the potential to overlay a form of urban governance that may not necessarily serve the interests of the majority of the local populace (Reckhow, Downey and Sapotichne, 2019). Secondly, it has the potential to replicate historical Westernised development paradigms that are seen to be a significant contributor to economic and social exclusion and the declining quality of life in our cities (Wolfram, 2017; 2019).

The rapid rate of urbanisation in African cities brings with it additional challenges for national and local policy-makers across the continent in that they now need to mediate between rapid and unregulated urbanisation and achieving sustainable development (Zetter and Watson, 2016). These issues remain significant obstacles to sustainable development on the continent. The built environment sector has a meaningful role to play in addressing these challenges via the effective planning, designing, financing, developing, governing and managing of property in human settlements, urban precincts and cities.

### **Sustainable urban development and management – what does it mean?**

Sustainable development and management may be seen to be the defining challenge of the 21st Century. The concept of sustainable development was conceived through the Brundtland Report, which defined it as development that *"... seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future"* (Brundtland, 1987, p. 39). Essentially, this report sought to reconcile environmental considerations and with that of human development. As human development is concentrated in urban areas, global sustainability needs to be addressed at the urban and sub-urban levels. The challenge with the relying on the Brundtland definition is that epistemologically it is grounded in the 'triple bottom line' (people, planet, profit) and that in relation to the urban poor, the concept of sustainability is too narrowly defined. In African cities, the need to address the widespread socio-economic crises is a more urgent priority than that of urban environmentalism (Mchunu, 2016; Puneekar, 2016). Hence, it is essential that urban sustainability in cities of the global south focus primarily on the socio-economic concerns related to urban poverty.

Allen (2002) and Pieterse (2010) argue that there are five dimensions to sustainable urban development: social, economic, environmental, physical and political. Where:

- *Social sustainability* refers to the creation of communities and equitable access to the utilisation of the natural and built environment,
- *Economic sustainability* pertains to the ability of a local economy to sustain itself,
- *Ecological/Environmental sustainability* is primarily focused on the impact of urban production and consumption on the integrity and health of the local environment,
- *Physical sustainability* focuses on the ability and capacity of man-made structures and the urban built form to support productive activities and the capacity for human life, and,
- *Political sustainability* concerns an understanding of the tension that exists in achieving the optimal balance between the social, economic, environmental and physical (i.e., institutional and governance frameworks that regulate the performance of the other four dimensions).

The above five dimensions to sustainable urban development are encapsulated in The Habitat III – New Urban Agenda which makes significant strides in addressing the narrower definition of sustainability. What the majority of this work fails to do is to articulate the actual implementation of these policies and strategies. More often than not the policies also fail to articulate how the sustainable developments are to be managed and more importantly, do not require built environment professionals to be cognizant of the management of property and urban precincts in the development phases of projects. What is needed are frameworks that are capable of accommodating the uniqueness and complexities of different urban environments in a way that focuses on mobilising community resources and social capital. More importantly, what is required are innovative new ways to promote urban sustainability within cities of the global south need to be developed. It is critical that these frameworks draw on the experiences of local stakeholders to generate participatory, collaborative and integrated initiatives to drive sustainability and alleviate urban poverty whilst remaining grounded in good governance that is characterised by decentralisation, responsiveness and flexibility (Tanner et al., 2008). Furthermore, these frameworks need to be founded on the premise that the built environment disciplines cannot operate and exist independently, especially when driving urban sustainability. The systemic nature of the issues associated with sustainability requires unity and collaboration in the pursuit of equitable and environmentally conscious development (Stephens, 2000).

### **Towards a framework for sustainable solutions**

This raises a question as to how one begins to pull the sustainable development agenda into a management framework that can begin to provide a holistic response to the challenges outlined above. Research to date has highlighted a series of imperatives that we 'need to get right' in order to achieve sustainable urban development and, more importantly, sustainable urban management. These are depicted in Table 1 below with the associated possible policy implications.

**Table 1: Imperatives for sustainability frameworks (Source: Adapted from Boyle, Michell and Viruly, 2018, p. 14)**

Imperative	What is required	Policy implications
Nature of the framework	Flexible, neighbourhood-sensitive frameworks; introduce time dimensions so that assessment is continuous, iterative, and remains relevant.	Disassociate policy development from prescriptive, mechanistic tools toward dynamic, iterative assessment and analysis. This entails allowing better articulation and experimentation with policy at local level.
Environmental, Social & Economic Criteria	Focus frameworks to better represent a balanced approach toward sustainability that sees aspects as interacting and codependent, and better able to incorporate local socio-economic conditions.	Overcoming environmental bias requires mandating an increased role of civil society in the design and implementation processes. Thus, encouraging inclusive collaboration for development and management.
Expertise Required	Create a balance between expert-knowledge and local-knowledge by relying less on technical/data driven outcomes. Divorce policy from the idea that standardisation offers widespread solutions.	Embed more qualitative/culturally oriented methodologies into sustainable urban development and management frameworks i.e., use less comparable "softer" data, such as sense of well-being, to influence policy.
Market-Driven	Shift focus away from sustainability frameworks as the "final goal", place emphasis on collaborative and inclusive engagement. Thus, representing a shift from "market-driven" to "civic-driven".	Offering grant prioritisation, density bonuses, and other incentives for projects that display more meaningful urban governance and management practices.
Recognise Complexity & Institutional Aspects	Frameworks should look specifically at the processes, trade-offs, decision-making, and actors involved in order to develop holistic approaches to both the development and management of urban precincts.	Introduce policy that prioritises projects that can provide evidence of collaborative approaches and consider holistic strategies that consider a multitude of stakeholders across various sectors.

## Challenges we face going forward

The challenges are numerous and what is proposed in this keynote is not the panacea for the problems we face in African cities. It is clear that it is imperative in meeting the challenges we face in African cities that sustainable urban development would need to embrace the five dimensions to sustainable urban development. Another critical aspect to achieving sustainable urban development and management would be the need to approach property development and management in an inclusionary, safe, resilient and sustainable manner. This requires active mechanisms on the part of governments and built environment professionals to assist in the planning, financing, developing, governing and managing of the property development process and the subsequent urban precinct and/or city. It is only in taking this holistic view of the development process and the subsequent management of the product that the developer and society as a whole are able to capture the

true social, economic and environmental value embedded in the sustainable development and management process.

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