Addressing South Africa's urban challenges

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Abstract
South Africa is among the most urbanized countries in Africa and has an urban population that is growing rapidly. The country's urban challenges sometimes are considered as distinctive and separate to those of rest of Africa because of the apartheid legacy of a fragmented and racially splintered urban landscape. Nevertheless, 20 years after democratic transition the issues that confront its cities increasingly exhibit a set of sustainability challenges that typify those problems of many other fast-growing African urban areas. This introduction locates the collection of articles as a contribution to the expanding corpus of scholarship on urban South Africa.

Keywords: urban challenges, urban development, South Africa

Introduction

One recent United Nations report offers the prediction that by 2034 50 percent of Africa's population is expected to be living as 'urban' dwellers (United Nations, 2012). Arguably, for at least the past 50 years Africa has experienced the world's most rapid rate of urban population growth and is likely to continue to do so for the next century (Turok, 2012a; United Nations, 2010). As has been pointed out by several urban scholars, the scale and velocity of contemporary urbanization in Africa is markedly different to the historical urbanization experience of the global North (Beall et al., 2010; Parnell & Pieterse, 2014; Grant, 2015). The rapid expansion which is occurring in African cities is a component of what is termed the 'second urban transition'. This transition is producing a situation that most of the world's urban population is now no longer resident in rich countries but instead is found in low and middle income economies, including sub-Saharan Africa. The urbanisation processes taking place in the global South differ in many respects from the first urbanisation wave as experienced in now advanced economies (Grant, 2015). Most importantly, the first wave of urbanisation was accompanied by and aligned to industrialization processes and the growth of what would be described as formal work opportunities. The second urbanisation wave is markedly different and thus poses an array of complex issues around sustainable socio-economic development. It is distinguished firstly by its scale and rapidity of growth of urban populations. Another difference is that the urbanisation trends impacting upon urban Africa are occurring and reflecting a state of crisis which is manifest in the growth of informality in urban life (Parnell & Pieterse, 2014). As Grant (2015: 135) reflects, the mass of urban dwellers in Africa "work outside of the formal economy, live in informal housing, and conduct business without using banks".

It is calculated that Africa needs to generate productive employment opportunities and livelihoods for the 7-10 million young people who are entering the labour force each year, a disproportionate amount of whom will live in cities as a consequence of the youthful nature of migration streams (Turok, 2012a, 2012b). For the majority of inhabitants of urban Africa the informal city – as mirrored in informal settlements and the primacy of informal sector employment – is the real African city (Grant, 2015). The limited growth of industrial employment in sub-Saharan Africa starkly demonstrates the sharp contrasts that must be drawn between Africa's contemporary urban transition and that of the first urban transition as was experienced in the global North. The management and sustainability challenges of this new urban expansion are not simply to be felt in 'mega-cities' but are reflected increasingly also in the challenges facing secondary cities and small towns. The critical agenda of sustainability challenges for African researchers must incorporate questions around building resilient cities, local economic development, service delivery, food security, informal livelihoods and environmental change (Beall et al., 2010; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2010; Simon, 2010; South African Cities Network (SACN), 2011; Parnell & Pieterse, 2014; Grant, 2015). Moreover, Taylor & Peter (2014: 2) alert us that "as climate change becomes increasingly acknowledged as a key driver of global, regional and local scale impacts that exacerbate the vulnerability of human systems, the question of how to conduct 'climate compatible development' within urban systems has become more pressing", not least in urban Africa. Overall, therefore, the transition from rural to urban lives has multiple implications in economic, social and political spheres and in particular underscores a critical need for undertaking applied urban research in order to strengthen capacities for urban management and planning (Parnell, Pieterse & Watson, 2009).

South African Issues

South Africa's urban challenges sometimes are considered as distinctive and separate to those of the rest of the continent because of the apartheid legacy of a fragmented and racially splintered urban landscape. Twenty years after democratic transition many of the urban challenges facing South Africa still are tainted by the apartheid past. Nevertheless, the issues that face its cities increasingly exhibit a set of sustainability challenges that typify those problems of many other fast-growing African cities. South Africa is already among the most urbanized countries in Africa and has an urban population that is growing rapidly. Current estimates are that the proportion of the national population living in cities is 62 percent but expected to reach 71 percent by 2020 (Turok, 2013). By 2050 the urban population is expected to increase by an additional 13.8 million residents (National Treasury, 2011). South Africa's cities are drivers of national economic development as well as major hubs for enterprise development (Turok, 2012b; Rogerson, 2013; CDE, 2014). Indeed, economic activity is disproportionately concentrated in the country's large urban areas and in particular its metropolitan areas where 59 percent of country's economic output is generated by just 37 percent of the population.

As argued by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE 2014: 2) South Africa's "relationship with urbanisation is complicated and ambiguous, if not outright hostile". For Turok (2013: 170), however, the underlying approach of government to the space economy remains broadly neutral with no explicit national urban policy currently but with rural development the stated priority of the ruling African National Congress. Place-based initiatives for promoting economic development in large urban areas as well as secondary cities and small towns have been one of the most distinctive aspects of the South African development over the past 15 years (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2010; Rogerson, 2014). Unleashing the full economic potential of the country's cities is a challenge faced by local policy makers in common with cities across Africa (UN-Habitat, 2013). It is argued that the

country's cities "are not performing to their potential or reaping the benefits of agglomeration because of shortages of energy and water infrastructure, transport congestion and shortfalls in education and skills" (Turok, 2012b: 1). Widespread agreement exists that modest rates of economic growth are not translating into improved livelihoods for all urban residents in South Africa. Accordingly, as the pace of urban population expansion is outstripping rates of economic growth South Africa's cities "are increasingly becoming home to expanding poor populations" (National Treasury, 2011). Core challenges exist for expanding job creation and especially for generating new opportunities and livelihoods for the country's youth (CDE, 2014). In common with the rest of the continent therefore South Africa's cities are confronting the multiple challenges of managing the urbanization of poverty (Turok, 2012a, 2013). Apartheid patterns of segregation exacerbate the management challenges of transforming the inefficient and inequitable layout of the country's cities. Exclusionary spatial patterns from the past continue to be reproduced as evidenced by the rapid expansion of urban informal settlements in peripheral and marginal zones and often subject to environmental hazards such as flooding. One frank assessment recently offered from national government is that "South Africa has yet to find an appropriate model for effectively harnessing the potential of its cities to drive economic growth and redress the spatial patterns that continue to marginalise poor people" (National Treasury, 2011).

Urban Scholarship

Over the past 20 years urban scholarship in South Africa has made considerable strides with the appearance "of a rich body of scholarship" (Visser, 2013: 75). In examining trends in this body of urban studies several important points are raised (Visser, 2013; Visser & Rogerson, 2014). First, the most well-developed sets of writings have focused upon issues of local economic development, housing, urban tourism and leisure, citizenship and city planning. Second, there is a heavy emphasis upon various dimensions of aspects of urban poverty, the needs of the urban poor and planning that might inform alternative and improved futures for the urban poor. Three, marked geographical imbalances in research focus are observed with the city of Cape Town the best documented. By contrast, other large cities, and most secondary centre and small towns, have received much less attention. Four, many knowledge gaps remain as several critical urban issues are so far sparsely investigated including most importantly, urban economic and environmental challenges. In addition, Visser (2013) calls for investigations that go beyond the urban poor and highlights our oversight of the "not so poor" and of the realities of wealthy urban dwellers.

It is against this backdrop that this special issue of *Urbani Izziv* was prepared. The issue offers a set of new applied urban research work from scholars who have contributed original papers on both well-established themes as well as newer research foci concerning urban South Africa. Among issues under investigation in this collection are spatial planning, informality, desegregation, housing and land, tourism and leisure, gentrification, small business development and the green economy. These themes are explored from various perspectives and methodological approaches. Taken together the articles in the issue address a range of concerns about the challenges of contemporary urban policy and practice as well as interrogating little documented aspects of the South African urban fabric.

Acknowledgements

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