

## **The Politics of Space: Where to for the Urban Agenda?**

Cape Town, 17 September 2009

It is noteworthy that Isandla Institute, on its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, has chosen “The Politics of Space” as its theme for today’s conversation.

This is almost akin to what German philosopher Karl Marx noted during the classical discourse on the causality of poverty. Whilst many of his fellow philosophers were preoccupied with the philosophy of poverty, he brilliantly turned the question on its head with the retort: **the poverty of philosophy**.

Today’s topic, “The Politics of Space”, can likewise be examined differently: “The space of politics”.

In this respect, everything boils down to development: The politics of space in development, or the space of politics in development?

In today’s conversation, we should not lose sight of this dialectic -- lest politics occupies a bigger space in issues of development than otherwise should be. The over-politicisation of development issues ought to be cautioned against. A role must be clearly defined for other disciplines, including economics, philosophy, planning, architecture and so on.

Our purpose of coming here is to acknowledge the role played by Isandla and similar initiatives in the deepening of our democracy. The sector in which Isandla operates -- the think industry -- is littered with a litany of think-tanks. Whilst the important role played by think-tanks in society is acknowledged, their relevance is determined by the extent to which their ideas go toward assisting society on issues of development.

Therefore, it is praiseworthy that the second part of today’s topic, “The Politics of Space”, goes on to ask the specific question: “Where to for the Urban Agenda?”

This is instructive and appropriate given the current socio-economic environment in South Africa, which requires our collective focus.

Let us make a bold statement which only failure can water down.

**By the end of this century, the majority of the people of the world will be living in urban areas.**

In 2008, according to UN Habitat, the world’s urban population had more than doubled over the last 30 years from 1.5 to 3.3 billion, with Africa’s urban population projected to double over the next 20 years.

In our view, the form of this global urbanisation will be two-pronged:

1. The intensifying densification of existing urban areas.
2. The urbanization of the hinterland.

For purposes of urban planning, it would be useful to know the exact situation in terms of urbanization trends in South Africa over the next 20 years.

What we know for sure is that South Africa is experiencing a grotesque form of rapid post-apartheid urbanization, driven and characterized by a massive increase in informal settlements.

In this regard, a related bold statement to make is the following: in as much as the majority of the world's population will be living in urban areas by the end of this century, therefore South Africa must end up as a developed state in the socio-economic sense. We cannot have this country entering the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century as a developing country – or as an emerging market. South Africa must take its rightful position as an industrialized nation.

**Consequently, the nature of our development must not be the urbanization of poverty but the industrialization of the country.**

In respect of human settlements, the question of spatial development requires new thinking.

This means the creation of integrated, sustainable settlements where housing is accompanied by other elements such as places of work, leisure and learning, underpinned by integrated and holistic planning.

In this respect, this means a negation of the failed attempt at social engineering premised upon apartheid-era development.

It is important to understand the drivers of South African urbanization, and the politics of space itself,

Beyond theory, as practitioners in the Human Settlements Ministry, we have embarked on our own learning process – studying documents and reports, hearing presentations from those involved in housing development, and assessing the current policy tools and environment.

But the centre of our learning has been practical experience in urbanization – in particular, a series of visits to informal settlements and new housing developments to hear first-hand from those who are participating in urbanization, rather than merely studying it. These visits have taken us to some of the most depressed communities in the country: Diepsloot outside Johannesburg; N2 Gateway outside Cape Town, where we are today; Duncan Village in Buffalo City; and the hostels and informal settlements of Tokoza in Ekurhuleni.

It has not been an easy experience. But it has given us direct and real insight into the causes of urbanization --- an understanding which will better equip us to deal with the consequences of urbanization, and the consequences of our past itself.

We have realized the stark reality that faces us within the mud, dirty water and human waste of more than 2 000 mainly-urban informal settlements scattered across the country.

We have already learnt much from the visits we have undertaken. These settlements provide illuminating evidence of the impact of modern-day urbanization, and of the many reasons for the rapid rush to the cities. In the current circumstances, of note is the ever growing number of informal settlements in the wake of the flood of the poorest of the poor migrating in increasing numbers to the urban areas of South Africa.

The rush began decades ago, with several “push” and “pull” factors.

The pull began in the early 20th Century, when the rush to work on the gold and diamond mines began. Spurred by the thought of access to jobs and work opportunities, the hope of earning an income, access to urban facilities, the attraction of bright city lights and the thought of being closer to loved ones, hundreds of thousands of people left their rural homes to come to the cities.

By the same token, landlessness, joblessness, poverty and the imposition of taxes on rural people created a push factor that saw people leave rural areas in large numbers, headed for the city.

This was compounded by the fact that land was often in poor condition, and people were unable to make a viable living – not to mention the lack of development and infrastructure in the rural areas.

Throughout the latter part of the 20th Century, there was active resistance to the Influx Control Act - which was aimed at preventing migration by black people -- in line with international migration trends.

In the wake of freedom in the 1990s, this wave of migration turned into a deluge. The abolition of apartheid legislation after Nelson Mandela's release from prison, and the associated democratization and freeing of society, saw increasingly large numbers of people flock to the metropolitan areas.

Others fled to the urban areas to escape cruel farmers, or landowners who forcibly removed black people from farm land prior to and following legislation aimed at according security of tenure for farm workers not to be moved unless provided with alternative accommodation.

In more recent times, several new factors have contributed to the rapid growth of informal settlements. They include the following:

- The global economic meltdown, resulting in a global economic downturn.
- The local economic recession, resulting in massive job losses, the loss of properties and the loss of the contents of houses, and the loss of livelihoods.
- Poor gross domestic product (GDP) growth, which has never reached the critical 6% mark which would keep it in line with population growth.
- The decrease in national revenue collection by SARS – estimated to be close to R60-billion in this financial year – which will result in cuts in departmental budget allocations, and in the case of the Department of Human Settlements will mean less home-building projects and other projects related to human settlements.
- Poor planning and weak leadership

However, of chief concern on the question of urbanization in SA, is not only the question of informal settlements. Alarming, this major human phenomenon has not been planned for, neither has it been budgeted for. Hence the growing and worrying trend of violent protests on issues to do with service delivery.

There is no way this trend of urbanization will be easily reversed.

Whilst government must be applauded on the realization and implementation of the rural development strategy, as has been cautioned by the recently released World Bank Development report, such a rural development strategy, must be fundamentally underpinned by sustainable job creation endeavours.

On its own, it cannot succeed. Therein lies the challenge of the politics of space.

The rural-urban issue should not create binaries or dichotomy. When we treat it as a dichotomy, we create a barrier. Turok and Parnell urge us to see these as interdependent and therefore complimenting each other. We must not be shy to advance urban policies and interventions. We want to acknowledge as government that we do not have all the answers to the problems faced by society. Yes we have an important contribution, but we cannot be everything. We want to challenge thinkers, civil society and others to play their role.

Ladies and gentlemen, your questions must inform ways and means of influencing policy and enhancing executive responsibility of practitioners. It is only in such an intellectual environment, where you fully play your role as intellectual champions, that the risk of being irrelevant is avoided.

Which allows us to conclude by using the same approach applied at the beginning of this paper, and asking: Are we intellectual activists -- or activist intellectuals?

I wish you fruitful deliberations, and thank you.