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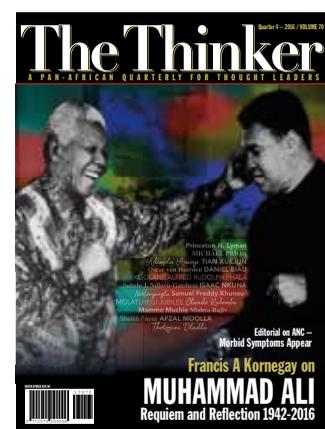
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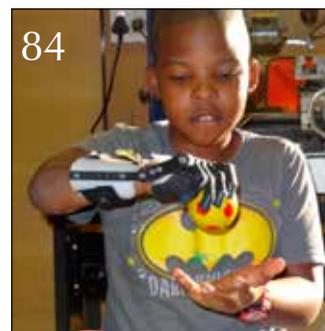
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Re-inventing African Cities

It is time to fundamentally reinvent African cities, to put the problems on the table, to develop ambitious solutions and apply them with determination by dedicating all necessary human and financial resources to urban development.

By Daniel Biau

An impressive urban transition
The world's urban population has risen sharply since the mid-twentieth century, from 750 million in 1950 (30% of the total population) to 4 billion today. It is expected to reach 5 billion in 2030 (60% of the total population).[1] Demographers predict a stabilisation of the world population at about 10 billion people in 2070 with a vast majority living in large and small cities, and a substantial majority in the developing world. Although the urban transition is largely complete in Europe and the Americas, it is still fully underway in Africa and Asia.

Cities, whatever their size, offer citizens the opportunity to share public spaces, to exercise their rights and to find jobs. They also allow for the adoption of common social values and democratic modes of governance. But cities do not provide equivalent conditions and opportunities to all social groups. The majority of the urban population is subject to multiple economic, social, cultural and environmental hardships. In many cities, the social and spatial divide between the rich and the poor

is an obvious factor of instability. It generates economic and social costs, not just for disadvantaged people, but for the whole society.

Africa, in turn, is a continent in transition which is undergoing a demographic explosion. The continent had 228 million inhabitants in 1950 and 808 million in 2000. It counts now 1.2 billion people and is expected to reach 2.4 billion in 2050. Africa is also experiencing an economic transition with a reduction of the share of agriculture in the GDP, a monetisation of the economy and an expansion of services.

This transition is equally taking place on the social front with an increasing gap between the rich and the poor (measured by Gini coefficients above 0.5), a growth of the middle classes, and an urbanisation of lifestyles. Finally the continent is witnessing a rapid urban transition. The urban population of Africa, which now amounts to 480 million people (41% of the total), will reach one billion by 2040. Its growth rate is now 3.83% per year, by far the highest in the world, although this average hides significant regional variations (1.3% in South Africa, 5.3% in Uganda).

Urban growth is both the cause and the consequence of the continent's socio-economic growth. The cities represent over 75% of the continent's GDP and countries' development level is correlated with their rate of urbanisation. UN-Habitat studies have shown that the most urbanised countries are also the most economically and socially advanced.[2] This process of urbanisation is not just relevant for large cities. In fact more than half of urban Africans live in cities with less than 500,000 inhabitants. These medium-sized cities, with weak institutional and financial resources, are the most commonly forgotten by urban policies and projects. South Africa is more urbanised than most other African nations with 65% of its population living in urban agglomerations (36 million out of 55 million). This is a reflection of its higher level of economic development. Twelve South African cities count more than 300,000 inhabitants, including six above one million; and Johannesburg

will soon reach the megacity status (10 million+ people).

Challenges and opportunities

The effectiveness of cities can be measured in social, economic and environmental terms. In all these areas, African cities are underperforming. Sustainable urban development for the benefit of present and future generations remains a distant prospect. In fact it is time to fundamentally reinvent African cities, to put the problems on the table, to develop ambitious solutions and apply them with determination by dedicating all necessary human and financial resources to urban development. The rationale for this investment is clear: well-planned and well-managed cities are a powerful

> ❝ **Well-planned and well-managed cities are a powerful lever of economic growth, a factor of social harmony and environmental balance, and a condition for positive regional synergies.** ❞

lever of economic growth, a factor of social harmony and environmental balance, and a condition for positive regional synergies. Return on urban investment is considerable and has been demonstrated in all regions of the world since the beginning of the industrial revolution. Asia has well understood this point in the last half-century.

Cities are very different from each other but they suffer, to varying degrees, from the same problems (spatial inequalities, transport congestion, air and water pollution, lack of safety, deficient public services, etc.). They should learn from each other, as governments learn from each other, particularly within the United Nations. This is should happen in Quito, at the third UN Conference

on Human Settlements (Habitat III) in October 2016.

Particularly important challenges common to many African countries include territorial imbalances, the rigidity of land markets, the importance of informal settlements and slums, inadequate basic services (typically sanitation and electricity), lack of public transport, the consequences of climate change, urban violence, unorganised internal and external migration, insufficient generation of decent jobs, undersized education and health facilities, the marginalisation of vulnerable groups such as street children, the disabled and migrant workers, inadequate or outdated institutional and regulatory frameworks.

On the other hand, the positive dynamics at work in African cities must be appreciated. These include the inventiveness and adaptability of the informal sector, the growth of civil society organisations, family solidarity and the expanding role of women, the emergence of a young generation eager for education and new technologies, the hybridisation and diversity of popular cultures, the growth of the middle classes and evolvement of elites towards more consensual and transparent leadership, and the lessening of ethnic tensions in the urban melting pot.

The challenges of sustainable development can and must be met, provided cities fully play their leading role. But urban investment must be organised, planned and coordinated. African states have to adopt genuine urban policies and strategies at both national and local levels. To this date, very few countries have implemented such policies. African urbanisation, largely chaotic and spontaneous, is essentially marked by corrective and remedial interventions. It seems that governments are constantly overwhelmed with housing, land, services, and infrastructure shortfalls and that they can only fill gaps or attend to urgent matters. But nothing is inevitable: all countries can develop coherent and ambitious urban policies and mobilise resources for their implementation.

National Urban Policies

According to the UN-Habitat

definition, a National Urban Policy (NUP) is a set of decisions derived from a consultative process led by the national government which includes a shared vision, principles, goals and programmes of action to promote sustainable urban development. A NUP is a national framework of institutional, regulatory and financial responses to the problems of urbanisation. It deals with territorial balance and city networks and offers implementation, monitoring and evaluation tools. It is divided into sectoral chapters covering, *inter alia*, infrastructure, services, land and housing. A NUP should also organise the relations between central and provincial governments and local authorities for upgrading urban areas, reducing inequalities between territories or tackling climate change.

In the NUP formulation process, the importance of objective analysis and consensus building cannot be overemphasised. It requires a legitimate leadership, organisational know-how, effective consultative mechanisms, an open mind and good negotiation skills. It can rely on the organisation of Urban Forums in which actors on the urban scene exchange ideas, discuss various proposals, different scenarios, and make recommendations to the government and local authorities. So far only a few African countries have established such consultative mechanisms.

Three pillars of Urban Governance

National Urban Policy implementation depends not only on public actions but more widely on the modes of urban governance at work in the country. Good governance must be participatory, accountable and transparent. It should be based on three main pillars: an institutional partnership framework, a facilitating regulatory framework and effective financial instruments. National governments have to build these pillars, in cooperation with all their partners.

An adequate institutional framework is essential to the implementation of any NUP. Public institutions involved in a NUP are very numerous. Responsibilities have to be well established and supervisory and coordinating bodies clearly defined.

In addition public authorities must involve private stakeholders, including landowners, investors, banks, developers, construction companies, private service providers, architects and consultants, planning agencies, surveyors, etc. They should provide consultative mechanisms with civil society organisations, residents and users associations, women and youth organisations, research centres, small businesses in the informal sector, traders, and others.

The institutional framework must take into account the evolution of most African nations towards greater decentralisation and the need to strengthen the powers and resources of local authorities. This universal evolution was the subject of International Guidelines on Decentralisation, adopted in 2007 by

> **❝South Africa is a good case of legislative inflation, with overlapping instruments and often unclear allocation of responsibilities between spheres of government.❞**

the UN-Habitat Governing Council.[3] But decentralisation does not mean that local authorities should be left alone to design autonomous local policies. The State machinery should be in the driving seat, starting with the national level.

A facilitating legislative and regulatory framework is the second pillar of good urban governance. Too often the absence of such a framework hinders the implementation of policies. There are many cases of overabundant, obsolete, unenforceable or simply ignored urban regulations. South Africa is a good case of legislative inflation, with overlapping instruments and often unclear allocation of responsibilities between spheres of government. The main regulations to be assessed and adjusted are about land use,

responsibilities of stakeholders, quality of buildings, respect for the environment, human rights and protection of the vulnerable. In all areas, simple rules should be adopted, rules that are easy to understand and applicable, being facilitating rather than punitive.

Land regulations constitute the absolute core of urban governance. Tenure rights, zoning, land transactions and registration, pre-emption and expropriation rules, regularisation of informal settlements, territorial planning standards, building permits, all such elements should be subject to national laws, regulations and codes capable of ensuring social equity, economic efficiency and quality of the urban space. This is a significant challenge that requires a strong political will. Land-use planning and management should be a top priority of local government which could be evaluated against its performance in this area.

The relationship between landowners and tenants as well as the contractual relations between local authorities and basic service providers (water, transport, etc.) should also be subject to regulations. The former should encourage the expansion of the rental housing sector and the latter should allow public-private partnerships benefiting both users and taxpayers.

Without adequate *financial instruments* it would be futile to expect anything from any urban policy. Fortunately two extraordinary factors make possible the development and adoption of such instruments. The first is economic: the price of urban land is much higher than the price of rural plots and, in market economies, it increases rapidly with urban growth and densification. The second is political: public authorities can decide on the allocation and use of urban land and derive considerable income from it. This is somehow the miracle of urbanisation, that it can feed itself by producing its own fuel and its own financing.

Important sources of land-based finance include:
• the annual tax on property, land and real estate occupations;

- the betterment tax on improved infrastructure beneficiaries; and
- taxes on capital gains in land transactions.

The addition of these multiple incomes may represent several hundred US dollars per capita and per year in Western countries, reaching hundreds of millions of US dollars for a city of one million inhabitants. Total land-based revenue represents more than 1% of GDP in OECD countries and South Africa is performing quite well in this area.

The terms of the equation are clear:
- cities automatically produce land wealth;
- public authorities should make every effort to capture significant portions of these immense benefits; and
- these should be allocated to urban development to cover investment and operating costs, completing a virtuous circle.

Among other financial instruments used by a majority of countries, inter-governmental transfers, on which many African municipalities rely, must be transparent and fair, as must business taxes and tariffs charged on marketable services (especially water and electricity).

Four coordinated sectoral strategies

From the perspective of urban planners, land is the flesh of the city and infrastructure its backbone, housing units are the most precious individual belongings and services are essential collective assets. These four areas constitute the main components of any urban policy, requiring clear and coordinated national strategies.

The first strategy relates to urban land. African cities extend rapidly and their peripheries invade agricultural lands. This unplanned expansion is characterised by low densities, pockets of poverty and gated communities. Usually infrastructure cannot follow the pace of urban growth. This is not inevitable. Land, as the urban development raw material, can and must be publically planned, regulated and managed to meet the needs of urban growth. Priorities must go to reducing urban sprawl and spatial

inequalities. Unfortunately very few countries have met this challenge, with negative consequences on urban finance.

The second strategy concerns infrastructure. Given the level of congestion of African cities, a clear priority should be given to transport networks, as part of an overall plan covering both primary and service roads. Promoting a variety of transport modes, with strong focus on public transport, should be the rule. Other priorities are related to water and electricity networks. In the last 15 years many African cities have made undeniable progress in water supply but urban mobility has deteriorated everywhere. The infrastructure strategy should encourage local governments to associate infrastructure planning to land-use planning and to link physical

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planning with financial and budgetary planning.

Infrastructure development requires significant public investment, close coordination between government spheres, careful phasing and continuity of interventions. African countries should draw inspiration from East Asian countries (China, Korea, and Japan) whose economic success of recent decades is closely linked to strategic investments in infrastructure (roads, railways, subways, ports, airports etc.).

The third strategy is about housing for all. All over the world housing expenses represent on average 25 to 30% of household incomes and the sector is a powerful mobiliser of domestic savings. Urban and housing policies must be articulated and connected through land policies.

African housing policies have long been limited to the public production of housing units for civil servants. Only South Africa has implemented a large programme of subsidised housing. But all governments still ignore the reality and potential of rental housing which can be a major option for the urban poor (as in Europe).

A housing strategy should particularly: (i) promote diversity in housing supply both in terms of standards and status; (ii) regularise and improve informal settlements and slums (which represent 50 % of urban housing in sub-Saharan Africa) and (iii) establish appropriate housing finance systems, attractive to household savings. This strategy has to rely on key players in the housing sector, namely real estate developers and construction companies, not to mention investors, financial institutions and credit agencies.

The fourth strategy should cover urban services. These are numerous and varied. They include the delivery of safe water, sanitation, waste management, transport and communications facilities, electricity, etc. Some services require significant investment in infrastructure while others involve more operating costs and staff resources. The service strategy must:
- take into account inter-sectoral and inter-jurisdictional linkages between the services to ensure an integrated and consistent supply;
- adopt quantitative and qualitative targets and standards for service delivery, particularly in sensitive areas such as water supply and sanitation, waste management, energy and transport;
- establish rules for the selection of service providers and a legal framework for delegation and/or privatisation; and
- promote pricing mechanisms for a proper cost recovery while making services affordable for everyone.

South Africa is doing relatively well in this area, providing free and sustainable services to millions of people.

This multi-services strategy does not prejudge the status of service providers. These operators can be public,

municipal, private or community-based, depending on their comparative advantages in each particular context.

NUP and local authorities

As a rule National Governments must lead the definition of the NUP while Local Governments should coordinate its implementation through planning and management procedures and processes. Based on the national policy, local governments should be supported to design specific territorial and environmental strategies and plans of action.

Implementation responsibilities need to be clear about the respective duties of different ministries, provincial governments and local authorities. Institutional capacities, legislative and regulatory framework and funding arrangements need to be improved and strengthened. Urban indicators as well as mechanisms for monitoring and adjustment of actions, involving public and private partners, professional associations and civil society, must be developed. The challenge is to implement in a participatory way an ambitious, flexible and coherent policy which meets citizens' needs and aspirations.

Municipal policies

Cities always have two faces. They are the engines of economic growth and prosperity but also places of inequality, poverty and exclusion. They are areas of culture, education and democracy but also of tension and insecurity. They are places where people find jobs but also discrimination and exploitation. They can be friendly public spaces or gated ghettos closed in on themselves. An urban policy must strengthen the positive dynamics while tackling urban ills, helping remove obstacles to sustainable development in large and small communities and mobilising municipal energies and civil society. It must irrigate and empower local governments.

Local and regional authorities play an increasingly important role in urban planning and management. This role has recently been highlighted in the International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning, approved in 2015 by the UN-Habitat Governing

Council.[4] These guidelines provide a reference framework to guide the reform of urban policies and promote a variety of planning approaches tailored to different contexts and scales. They include universal principles and recommendations aimed in particular at governments and local authorities.

The guidelines invite local authorities to take key actions such as:
- approving and updating urban and territorial plans;
- associating urban planning to municipal management;
- cooperating at the inter-municipal level for the integrated management of urban infrastructure and services;
- ensuring that informal settlements and slums are renovated and integrated into the urban fabric

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with minimal displacements and relocations;
- developing safe and reliable public transport systems in order to promote energy efficiency and affordable urban mobility; and
- formulating plans that include measures for adaptation to climate change and for increasing resilience, particularly in vulnerable neighborhoods.

Municipal policies should try to associate representative democracy and participatory democracy, involving people in the planning and monitoring of municipal actions. This is the case in some Latin American countries such as Brazil but not yet in Africa.

It is important to distinguish

between urban policy and strategic planning on the one hand and urban management and operational planning on the other. Urban Policy and strategic planning define objectives and strategies but are not legally binding, unlike land-use plans which apply to all stakeholders. Operational urban planning refers to public, private or mixed concrete operations of development. While municipalities should associate the long and short term planning, they must above all manage the city every day. This means raising taxes, balancing the municipal budget, ensuring the financing of non-marketable services, upgrading informal settlements, supporting local economic development, approving construction permits, etc. Avoiding getting mired in day-to-day management, while adopting a longer term perspective despite political uncertainties, is a continuing challenge faced by African local governments.

South Africa as an inspiring practice

To this day no African country has developed and implemented a comprehensive and integrated national urban policy. South Africa has begun to consider that matter in recent years. The country urban population grew from 54% of the total population in 1994 to 65% today. The legacy of apartheid and segregation still marks the urban space. Cities are sprawling and experiencing pockets of high density in peripheral townships and informal settlements (which together represent 50% of the urban population). South African agglomerations are still considered as the most unequal and violent cities in Africa.

So far the government has focused on two priorities: decentralisation on the one hand, and services and housing delivery on the other. It has promulgated a Spatial Planning and Land-Use Management Act (SPULMA) in 2013 and an Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDP) in 2016. These normative instruments should encourage cities to formulate long-term strategies and plans. The IUDP has four main objectives:
- to ensure better access to services;
- to promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth;

- to strengthen institutional capacity and participation; and
- to define new spatial forms.

This would imply actions on infrastructure and transport, land governance and urban restructuring, and the reform of urban planning. This is a good starting point for a national urban policy, but more work is needed to reconfigure the urban institutional set-up, overcome the 'silo approach' to planning, and to promote inclusive cities.[5]

Twenty-two years ago, on 27 October 1994, an historic Housing Accord was signed in Botshabelo, opening a new era in the country housing strategy. While the collective commitments of all South African partners on that day – to "establish viable, socially and economically integrated communities with convenient access to economic opportunities and social services" – remain to be fulfilled at scale, other African countries could certainly learn a lot from the South African experience.

Re-inventing African Cities

The New Urban Agenda to be adopted in Quito is particularly relevant to African countries. There is clearly a need to reinvent urbanism and urbanity, to give a new meaning to urban life and to 'living together'. This need not be an impossible mission if governments show enough willingness and if they understand that sustainable development, and primarily economic growth, is played out in cities and towns. The African continent, currently in a process of extensive demographic and urban mutation, should take the lead in this worldwide process of reinvention. It has everything to gain in the process.

Setting priorities for the whole continent is a challenge but basic principles are well known and agreed upon. They can be summarised in some keywords: democratic governance, progressive decentralisation, flexible planning, optimal densification, strengthened capacities, facilitative regulations, participation and partnerships, increased investments, disaster resilience, connectivity, mobility, inclusiveness, safety, accessibility, conviviality, diversity, identity…

Based on regional discussions on the road to Habitat III, it appears that the African Urban Agenda could indeed be structured around some common lines of action:[6]

- The institutional arrangements governing cities will be reviewed to ensure the convergence of public policies, decentralisation and strengthening of responsibilities and resources to local authorities, inter-municipal management of cities and effective public-private-population partnerships (PPPP);
- The legislative framework of urbanisation will be reformed and simplified and focus on land regulations to boost land supply, contribute to the densification of the urban fabric, regularise informal settlements and allow an orderly urban growth;
- Financial instruments will be subject to a radical revitalisation, giving public authorities a chance to significantly increase municipal revenues and to ensure transparency and fairness of inter-government transfers;
- Land strategies will become more directive, seeking to ensure a good knowledge of land cadaster and transactions, to keep land prices within reasonable limits and to better meet needs by opening new peripheral areas to urbanisation;
- Transport infrastructure will be considered as a priority investment at national, regional and local levels, and will promote public transport and multi-modality;
- National housing strategies will focus on the resorption of inadequate housing and the upgrading of slums, without forgetting to support the development of the real estate and rental markets;
- Basic services will be programmed and managed through a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach and adequate contractual relationships between public authorities and service providers, taking fully into consideration their impact on the environment and public health;
- The national urban system will be revitalised by a socio-economic and environmental strategy aiming at a prioritisation of urban functions based on the respective potential of each agglomeration;
- Measures for adaptation to climate change and for enhancing resilience to natural disasters, including protection against flooding, will involve agreements and joint actions between central government and local authorities;
- The methods of urban planning and management will be completely revised, capabilities enhanced, and the participation of private and community stakeholders put into practice in a systematic way.

The determined implementation of these commitments, that each government should adapt to its national context, would contribute to enhance the economic efficiency and competitiveness of the continent, and transform African cities into healthy, safe and inclusive places, whose inhabitants, with recognised rights and duties, would be proud to share and enjoy.

In their desire to transform our world, Heads of State and Government stated in September 2015: "we recognize that sustainable urban development and management are crucial to the quality of life of our people. We will work with local authorities and communities to renew and plan our cities and human settlements so as to foster community cohesion and personal security and to stimulate innovation and employment."[7] It is the responsibility of African leaders to make every effort to turn this commitment into reality, if possible within the next 15 years, and to mobilise all national and international partners to found the new city planning and management approaches of the twenty-first century. ∎

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3. UN-Habitat, 'International Guidelines on Decentralization and Strengthening of Local Authorities', Resolution 21/3 of 20 April 2007.
4. UN-Habitat Governing Council Resolution 25/6 of 23 April 2015.
5. See the recent 'State of South African Cities Report, 2016', a very detailed and professional survey of the situation in the (9) largest SA cities.
6. These 10 lines of action are part of the Declaration adopted by the first African Ministerial Forum on Housing and Urban Development (AMFHUD) held in Rabat, Morocco on 11-12 May 2016.
7. Resolution 70/1 of the UN General Assembly establishing the Sustainable Development Goals.