



“State of the Cities” Reports Help Transform South Africa’s Urban Management Process

South Africa’s nine largest cities contribute more than 60 percent of the gross domestic product to the continent’s largest economy. But despite their importance, there was a glaring and longstanding absence of current data and analyses of the country’s urban sector. Officials were left to make policy decisions without a solid understanding of the links between policies and outcomes, or what makes some cities thrive and others stagnate.

So in 2004, the Cities Alliance-supported South African Cities Network (SACN)—a membership-based organisation comprised of the mayors and city managers of these nine cities—commissioned the first of three “state of the city reports” (SoCRs), initially covering the nine metropolitan cities.

Such reports provide an overall picture of a city and how it works. Producing and analyzing the information encourages cities to compare approaches and identify best practices. The reports can also improve accountability and city performance and bring about systemic change.

“The analysis ... tells us far more than any other available source about the urban situation. [It] creates a platform for corporate actors and community organisations to engage in policy debate on where the cities are going, and raises tough questions for government and big municipalities.”

Alan Mabin, Head of the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand

The first State of South African Cities Report examined the forces that had transformed South Africa’s largest cities in the decade since the transition to democracy, and what to

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Duration: 2005 - 2006

Financing: USD 500,000

Key Results:

- Promoting the role of cities
- Providing data and analyses to improve urban policy decision-making

expect if those trends continued. It also set out to highlight the importance of big cities to the national government, government-owned enterprises, and provincial governments; raise the profile of cities in national debates and policy-making; prompt urban centres to think about key issues and operations; compile and disseminate reliable and consistent statistics on these issues; and contribute to the general body of knowledge in this sphere.

The first Report accomplished this by consolidating available data from many sources into a “statistical almanac” and analysing the data to glean insights about key trends, how they were likely to evolve over time, and what strategic challenges and opportunities they would usher.

Results

The benefits began to be felt even before the report was complete: City officials learned a lot by participating in the process, which also raised the national profile of urban issues. Then, by assessing both the trends and the current responses to them, the completed Report pointed the

way to further research, planning, and action that would be most likely to improve urban life in South Africa.

It also sparked debate on the need for a policy and processes to improve local resource allocations and management. And it shaped relations in the country's most urbanized province, Gauteng, by revealing that its three largest urban centres would form the world's twelfth-largest city region by 2015.

A second State of South African Cities Report was produced in 2006, again with Cities Alliance support, to update and reexamine the urban situation. It exceeded expectations, having been seen by thousands of people and receiving generous media coverage. It identified 10 key challenges for South African cities in the next decade:

- Thinking in new ways about urban space economy
- Managing population dynamics
- Economic growth and equitable distribution of wealth
- Enhancing urban transport
- Overcoming the "apartheid city"
- Delivering basic services and promoting productivity and inclusivity
- Building an urban citizen
- Taking sustainability seriously
- Streamlining urban governance
- Mainstreaming innovation

A third Report was produced in 2011, after Cities Alliance support ended. And a number of organisations—either working with SACN or independently—have also followed up with more detailed reports on some of the topics covered in the SoCRs, such as finance and energy.

Together, the three Reports have had a strong influence on urban policy and governance, and their impacts continue to be felt both inside and outside the country. To help other countries achieve similar results, SACN prepared a free SoCR toolkit and has been helping a number of other nations in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East to prepare similar reports.

Lessons Learned

The SoCR toolkit contains a wealth of lessons learned from South Africa's experience. The first is that the

process itself, which creates a partnership platform, is the primary outcome, on par with the report itself. And it is best to begin with a clear purpose and target audience, as well as a prioritization of goals, which will drive the report's timing, process and content.

Involving academics and other experts helps ensure quality, but it's important for the content to be informed by city officials and managers, and to incorporate the views of a range of other key urban stakeholders, including political leaders at all levels, and representatives from the private sector and civil society. It's also crucial to manage the process in a way that ensures that both the city- and national-level governments feel ownership.

It is useful to base the analysis on statistics that underpin indicators, such as those used for UN-Habitat, and to widely disseminate the report at a time when it can have a real impact on policy and practice—for instance, leading up to an election, so it can help set the development agenda both for incumbent and incoming leaders.



State of the Cities reports provide a useful picture of a city and how it works.