



# URBAN AFRICA RISING

Africa is second only to Asia in its number of city dwellers, and its cities are growing at an unprecedented rate. Yet very little is known about how African cities are evolving. UCT researchers are rising to the challenge of creating a knowledge base that will support the building of more equitable African cities, making them liveable, accessible and sustainable for all – with policymakers, planners and builders working off a critical mass of usable knowledge.



# AFRICA'S CITIES

## CRYING OUT FOR REIMAGINATION



**Stereotyping would have you believe that Africa is a mass of undeveloped land where poverty rules. But the reality is something quite different. At present, the African continent is 40% urbanised. There are currently 414 million urban dwellers – and only Asia has more city-based people. The continent's largest cities all have populations of more than a million people.**

Moreover, the continent is developing at an unprecedented rate: the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) predicts that Africa will be 50% urban by 2030 and 60% urban by 2050.

The implications for both city dwellers and policymakers are staggering. In the words of Professor Edgar Pieterse, director of the African Centre for Cities

(ACC) and DST/NRF SARCHI Chair in Urban Policy, an interdisciplinary research and teaching programme at UCT, "The mind boggles, and it's impossible to wrap one's head around what that might mean in terms of the speed at which you build cities and the speed at which you need to provide services, what that could possibly mean for governance, how citizenship is instituted, and the overlay of that; the tumult of the post-colonial era in the last 50 years and what that has meant for the economic insertion of these countries into the global economy."

Urban population growth in Africa is taking place at such a rate that – if there is not an adequate understanding of the situation, and if solutions are not developed quickly – the continent is heading towards a crisis of poverty, inequality and lack of resources for its city people, warns Professor Pieterse.

To put the current situation in perspective, UCT research estimates that the middle-class population of South Africa is expected to double by 2050 and the population of informal dwellers to treble. Only three percent of urban dwellers are eligible for a mortgage and only 28% have stable jobs (including minimum-wage employees). Sixty-three percent are in vulnerable jobs, ie sources of income they could lose at any time. The implication is therefore that urban planners have to build infrastructure that is desperately needed, but that might fall apart at any time because tax bases might not be maintained. In a nutshell, the number of urban dwellers is increasing dramatically, and economic development is not always keeping up. In many cases, there is in fact economic stagnation and contraction, yet city populations continue to expand and there are increasing demands on resources and expectations of economic opportunity.

### THE NEED FOR KNOWLEDGE

Understanding what is driving this growth is becoming a key concern for researchers. While migration is a factor in the growth of these cities, it is not the primary factor – and more than one scholar has pointed out that migration is not, in fact, as dramatic an influence as has been previously believed, so attempts to stem the tide of migration are not addressing the problem.

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Professor Pieterse, together with the University of Bristol's Dr Sean Fox, a contributor to Professor Pieterse and Professor Sue Parnell's recent edited volume *Africa's Urban Revolution*, argues that cities are actually expanding from within, owing to a decrease in mortality rates and an increase in fertility. Furthermore, rural development can actually increase, rather than decrease, the movement towards cities: people who migrate to cities tend to be young, healthy and aspirational, so improving conditions rurally and providing hope and education are likely, in fact, to create more of the kinds of individuals who are likely to move rather than stay where they are.

Furthermore, Africa has been identified globally as a potential growth market, which is encouraging the pattern of development even further. However, because cities are growing so rapidly, often they – and their structures – are not fully understood. In this environment, it is becoming crucial to build a knowledge base that interrogates the patterns, structures and likely outcomes of Africa's new urban centres.

Many scholars have pointed out the necessity of increasing the knowledge base surrounding Africa's cities. "Bad theory leads to bad policy," as Dr Fox puts it. Professor Parnell, an urban geographer in the Department of Environmental and Geographical Science, explains how the dearth of data on African urbanisation – ranging from a lack of



historical understanding to a basic lack of practical information, such as maps and censuses – can lead to poor policymaking. “We have not given adequate cognisance [to this area] ... Africans themselves have ignored the urban revolution,” she says.

Professor Parnell further points out that there is a critical lack of understanding of African economics. “We don’t understand the informal sector, so we stereotype,” she says. “We don’t understand Africa’s urban labour market very well.” There is also a tendency to inflate increases in wealth, because it is coming off such a low base, and there is a lack of knowledge about where to invest, she says. In this respect, however, corporates understand what academics have missed: the numbers, although they may be inaccurate, are “sufficiently large to be important”, and the economic future is, as Professor Parnell puts it, “opportunistically urban”. Now the challenge is to understand how to leverage that.

The solution, believes Professor Pieterse, is a paradigm shift to a truly democratic urban environment, where people’s needs inform engineering plans instead of the other way around. But it is easier said than done, and the need for scholarly input is enormous.

## GETTING BEYOND THE STEREOTYPES

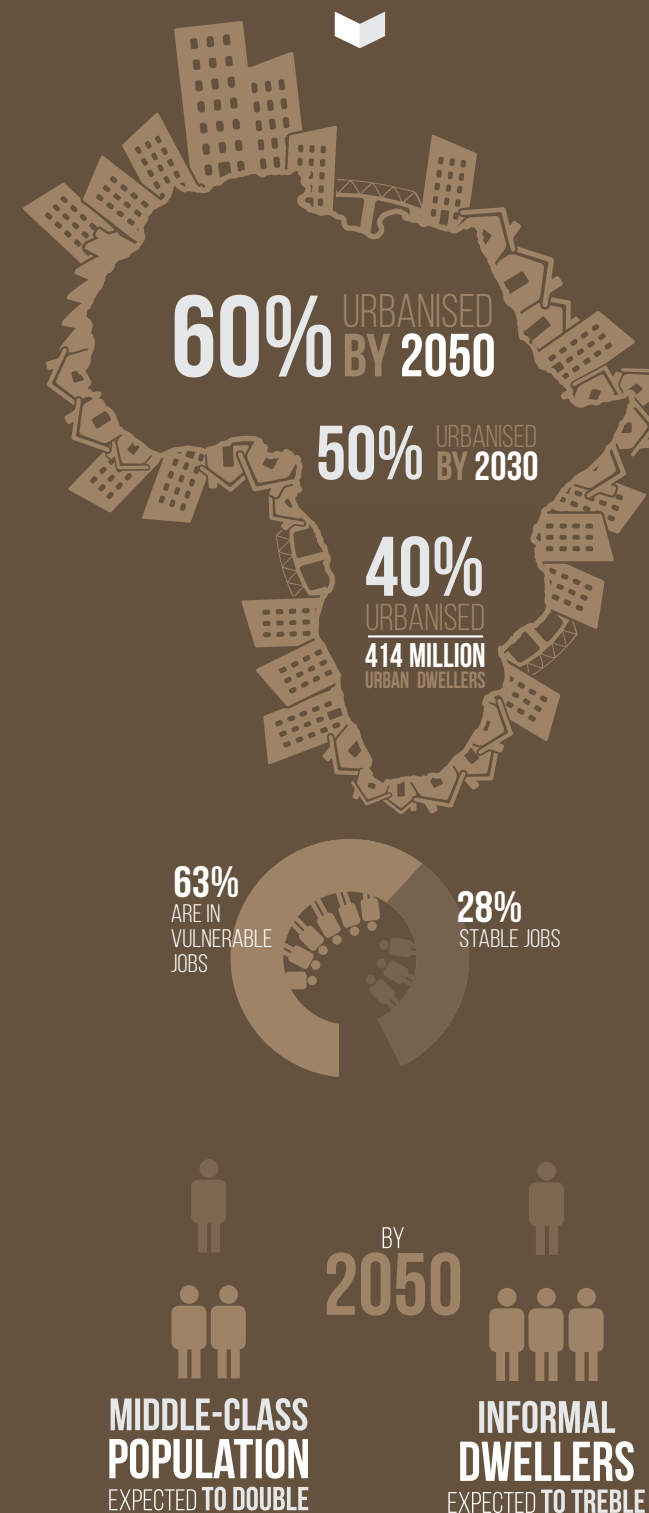
One of the major challenges facing African urbanisation today is an anti-urban bias, believes Professor Parnell. “Ninety percent of the funding (from donors) will go to rural development,” she says. “This speaks of a definite anti-urban bias.” However, through the painstaking work of scholars and academics, attitudes and thought patterns are slowly changing.

Scholarship is also doing its bit in carving out a spot for Africa in what Professor Parnell calls the “international imagination” where, she believes, Africa has traditionally been sorely underrepresented. There is simply a lack of current understanding of Africa, says Professor Parnell, so “we need detailed, comprehensive histories”. Most importantly, we need this information for individual cities, because Africa is *not* a country. “We need to be careful that we don’t generalise about ‘the African city’.”

One of the major generalisations that have to be overcome is the belief that the African city is a slum city. This stereotype is an unhelpful designation. While there is poverty, and most Africans do not have a mortgage,



# URBAN AFRICA



many are, in fact, building themselves up slowly: there is a youth bulge, and rapid development. We may look back on this time very differently in decades to come.

## LIVEABLE CITIES

However, Professor Parnell warns that the crucial time is now: without access to basic services and unless it is ensured that individuals’ building methods on their homes enable upgrading, waste removal and sanitation for public health purposes, then slums will eventually develop. Again, she points out the need for engagement with a suitable knowledge base in order to ensure that liveable cities are being constructed over time. “To assume planners can do everything on their own is deeply problematic,” she says.

Furthermore, there is a critical need to engage African cities with the global challenges of climate and environmental change. For instance, urban areas are where people are most dependent on, for example, dammed water, and disease profiles in cities are shifting because of temperature change.

**THE SOLUTION IS A PARADIGM SHIFT TO A TRULY DEMOCRATIC URBAN ENVIRONMENT, WHERE PEOPLE’S NEEDS INFORM ENGINEERING PLANS INSTEAD OF THE OTHER WAY AROUND.**

The challenge, of course, is to make this workable for all: for instance, Cape Town’s Green Point Common or the Promenade are attractive urban spaces, but they fail at being democratic because they are largely inaccessible to a large percentage of the population owing to distance and transport limitations.

A further complication is that of polylocality. There are many circular migrants in cities: people who extract what they need from the city economically, but invest elsewhere; or, to put it another way, they inhabit the city for working purposes but live, or set root, somewhere else, developing a split identity. This naturally has implications on housing policy and the broader economy. How are city planners and policymakers to tackle this when it is not a pattern



that is yet fully understood? The answer, once again, lies in developing a deeper understanding of these fast-developing patterns. There is little time to be lost in getting to grips with Africa's urbanisation process, particularly in breaking through stereotypes and establishing a high standard of scholarship in this rapidly developing field.

And develop it has to. "There is not enough potential in rural development," says Professor Parnell. "There is a lightness and optimism associated with the urban future, and I subscribe to that."

## INFORMAL SETTLEMENT UPGRADING HAS THE POTENTIAL TO ADDRESS A RANGE OF BASIC NEEDS OF URBAN RESIDENTS AND INCREASE THEIR PARTICIPATION IN URBAN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES.



One of ACC's flagship projects is the innovative Sustainable Human Settlements CityLabs, which are a forum for the co-production of knowledge between academics, practitioners and civil society. Over the past 18 months, academics and practitioners have engaged in the eight active CityLabs focusing on Central City, Philippi, Urban Ecology, Urban Flooding, Human Settlements, Healthy Cities, Alcohol and Public Culture and Urban Violence.

During 2013, the CityLabs, in collaboration with the Isandla Institute, brought together researchers and practitioners to document and explore good practice in the upgrading of informal settlements. The lessons from several such interactions (or co-productions of knowledge) are being developed into a book on informal settlement upgrading in South Africa.

The research shows that informal settlement upgrading has the potential to address a range of basic needs of urban residents and increase their participation in urban decision-making processes. This is most likely to happen if upgrading projects are linked into broader urban development processes and form part of city-wide upgrading strategies.



Professor Edgar Pieterse.

## NEW PERSPECTIVES ON AFRICA'S URBAN REVOLUTION

An important new book, edited by professors Edgar Pieterse and Sue Parnell and featuring input from several scholars, has put African urbanisation firmly in the spotlight. Published in 2014 by Zed Books, *Africa's Urban Revolution* offers fresh perspectives on how to build more livable cities in Africa and brings readers up to date with current debates and research in the rapidly developing field of urban development.

At the Cape Town launch, Professor Pieterse pointed out that one of the key drivers behind the book was the sense that policymakers and political leaders were not willing to engage with substantive and qualitative aspects of the change taking place across Africa – and that there was therefore a need to convene some of the key voices that needed to be heard.

"We have access to an incredible array of scholars," he pointed out, adding that transport, climate change and food security, as well as the role of conflict in the development of cities, are all issues that need to be analysed in more depth – and which the book tackles as a starting point. "This is not the end of the story – it is very much the beginning," says Professor Pieterse.

The result of these combined studies is a book that is, according to reviewer Hannah Gibson, policy researcher at the Africa Research Institute, "a welcome and vital addition to a burgeoning field". By framing the issues at stake and providing a springboard for creating solutions, it is one of a number of engaging and readable solutions for scholars, stakeholders and practitioners alike.



## INVESTING IN CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Without strong local government, properly capacitated, the future of cities is in jeopardy. Professor Gordon Pirie, deputy director of the ACC, identifies a number of crises around city planning and the urgent need to begin teaching and writing about cities differently. One of these is a serious shortage of a professional cohort of city officials and technical experts, especially those trained to comprehend and deal with every aspect of hugely complex cities (in resource-constrained contexts), including finance, engineering, services and environment. Another is a shortage of urban professionals and practitioners (not just city planners); yet others are outdated urban training courses and outmoded public thinking and debate about cities.

All of these issues can, of course, be challenged, but it takes time and different ways of thinking. Among its many activities to redress this, the ACC runs an MPhil course directed at mid-career professionals interested in thinking differently about cities and upgrading their skills, ensuring that those in the field already can maintain freshness of thinking. It has also raised funds for the past three years to exchange doctoral students and Cape Town City officials in placements that are cross-fertilising ideas and action specifically in the areas of green economy, energy, climate change and the built environment, thereby ensuring that there is not a limiting gap between academics and practitioners.

## FUNDING FOOD SECURITY

In 2014, the African Centre for Cities (ACC) was awarded close to £2 million from the ESRC-DFID (Economic and Social Research Council – Department for International Development) joint fund for poverty alleviation research (Poverty in Urban Spaces theme) – a significant achievement and opportunity for research. The research team will be led by Vanessa Watson, professor of city planning in the School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics and deputy dean of the Faculty of Engineering & the Built Environment. It will focus on urban poverty, specifically through the lens of food, in three secondary cities in Africa: Kisumu in Kenya, Kitwe in Zambia and Epworth in Zimbabwe. This work builds on existing ACC networks and partnerships, including the African Food Security Urban Network, the Association of African Planning Schools and Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising.

The project aims to contribute to frontier research on the articulations and remediation of poverty in urban Africa, and the research is particularly innovative in its focus on food and on secondary cities. It anticipates theoretical and applied research contributions, in addition to academic capacity development within the region and the strengthening of local government institutions.




## EMPOWERING CITIZENS

However, even if the state were better capacitated, it could not, on its own, solve the problems presented by rapid urban development. Massive systemic reform is needed when it comes to making cities livable for all, says Professor Pirie. Specifically, it is through allowing widespread agency that the inequality gap can be tackled, and acceptable urban dwellings and facilities can be made for all. "It is not just a case of bypassing, but also of reforming the state to ensure an appropriate legal regime that has legitimacy when it is enforced," says Professor Parnell, a founding member of the ACC and member of its executive committee. "Across Africa there is an urgent need to empower residents and NGOs themselves to take charge – not just of building, upgrading or formalising the informal, but of processes that can help to create change."

"Citizens can be empowered to make representations, to debate and challenge local government, and to monitor inactivity, servicing and billing. Recourse to privatisation is not an option for poor people in cities."

To this end, the ACC aims to improve the level of public discourse – not only through the channels of open talks and public media, but also through a series of public-facing exhibitions that will take place in Cape Town throughout 2014.

"We want to invite other scholars and the public to engage with us to build some sort of critical mass [of knowledge] around this discourse," says Professor Pieterse. Professor Pirie agrees: "The ACC's purpose is to get people thinking imaginatively and progressively about cities. Often, African cities are seen as just too bewildering."

But, bewildering or not, as professors Parnell and Pieterse put it in *Africa's Urban Revolution*, "increasing levels of urbanisation are probably inevitable and must be confronted". There is no escaping the reality of Africa's rapidly growing cities, or the fact that development is not always occurring at the same rate. To prevent gross inequalities from being perpetuated, it is critical to have scholars, practitioners and the public working together to re-imagine the construction – and ongoing development – of Africa's cities. UCT's scholars are working overtime on a viable starting point. 



## BUILDING A KNOWLEDGE BASE

Much of the research at UCT around cities is linked to the ACC. The initiative is focused on scholarship regarding the dynamics of unsustainable urbanisation processes in Africa, with a view to identifying system-wide responses. Professor Edgar Pieterse holds the DST/NRF SARChI Chair in Urban Policy, and leads a team of experts developing an Urban Development Framework for South Africa.

Professor Pieterse says the birth of the ACC came at a time when there was an increasing global discourse about urbanisation – and the question became unavoidable: why is there never an African voice?

The ACC seeks to be that voice and in seven short years has built an impressive record of scholarship and research.

Professor Pieterse believes it is possible to completely rethink the notion of resource allocation. "It's a story of widening inequality, of intensifying grinding poverty, and the intensification of disproportional risk on the part of the urban majority across the Global South," he says. He believes that if one combines the knowledge and creative power of

## THE ACC IS A MAJOR PLAYER IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN DISCOURSE INTERNATIONALLY.



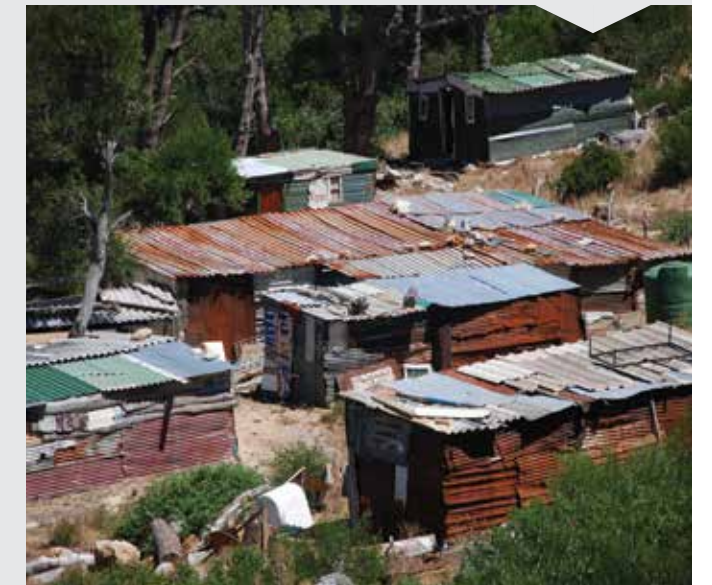
four types of people, this can be achieved. The first type is the philosopher-ethicist, who will provide the critical mass of knowledge needed. The second is the artist, who is in tune with the interior voice of human beings. The third type he refers to as the hacker, who is able to both master machinery and systems, and subvert these for a greater purpose. The final type would be the designer, whose creativity can make an urban space that works for everybody.

These principles certainly underpin some of the work done by the ACC, although its emphasis is considerably broader. Professor Gordon Pirie, deputy director of the ACC, says the ACC exists primarily to generate new knowledge about urban processes and provide an evidence base for making African cities more efficient, equitable and sustainable.

To this end, its purpose is to spread awareness among national and urban policymakers in Africa and globally about the many crises facing cities on the continent, and the potential that cities have to ease and resolve continental problems, such as poverty, inequality and climate change, as well as to build a new generation of urban scholars and practitioners.

For Professor Pirie, there is no shortage of achievements at the ACC. It has maintained an impressive record of publication since inception and has established itself as the pre-eminent hub of multidisciplinary urban research in Africa.

In the past year alone, several major publications have been produced by academics at the ACC, including *Africa's Urban Revolution*, edited by professors Pieterse and Parnell and published in 2014 by Zed Books, and *Rogue Urbanism: Emergent African Cities* (Jacana), which was edited by Professor Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone. According to Professor Pieterse, the books seek to get policymakers and political leaders to engage with the substantive and qualitative aspects of the African urban discourse. A third volume, *The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*, edited by Professor Parnell and Associate Professor Sophie Oldfield, published by Routledge in 2014, works towards a geographical alignment of urban studies, employing a southern



urban lens to stimulate scholarly discussion about and engagement with the city.

The ACC is a major player in contemporary urban discourse internationally and it continues to attract significant research grant income. As a result, it is a sought-after research partner, source of advisory services, and a go-to place for postgraduate researchers and established scholars.