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### OBSERVATIONS ON THE CHANGING PLANNING LANDSCAPE OF SOUTH AFRICA

MARCUS LANE <sup>a</sup>, DARRYL LOW CHOY <sup>b</sup>, JOHN MARSH <sup>c</sup>, LEX BROWN <sup>d</sup> & CATHY OELOFSE <sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Landscape, Environment and Planning, RMIT

<sup>b</sup> School of Environmental Planning, Griffith University

<sup>c</sup> University of Melbourne

<sup>d</sup> School of Environmental Planning, Griffith University

<sup>e</sup> Geographical and Environmental Science at the University of Natal, Durban

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MARCUS LANE is a Post Doctoral Research Fellow, Department of Landscape, Environment and Planning, RMIT. DARRYL LOW CHOY is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Environmental Planning, Griffith University. JOHN MARSH is a postgraduate scholar at The University of Melbourne. LEX BROWN is Professor and Head of the School of Environmental Planning, Griffith University. CATHY OELOFSE is a Lecturer in Geographical and Environmental Science at the University of Natal, Durban.

# OBSERVATIONS ON THE CHANGING PLANNING LANDSCAPE OF SOUTH AFRICA

## *Implications for local authorities*

**S**ince the transition from minority to majority rule in South Africa, change has been both rapid and profound. These changes go far beyond the constitutional changes which enfranchised the black (endnote 1) and coloured populations of the country and dismantled apartheid. The current period of 'transition' involves a series of legislative and policy changes that are designed to transform South African society and bring much needed material benefits to the marginalised and the poor. Economic growth, reconstruction and development are the most immediate and pressing priorities of the African National Congress (ANC) Government. Across the country, at all levels of government, a new planning apparatus is being developed, effective economic development plans are being sought, and policies for the material and social development of previously disadvantaged communities, which are predominantly African, are in

different stages of implementation. On this final point, the task is considerable as the majority of the urban black population lives in townships, or in informal settlements, that some would prefer to label apartheid 'gulags'.

The dimensions of reconstruction and development are almost overwhelming. In Cape Town alone, one million (mostly) black people live in townships that provide only rudimentary housing and other basic services. They live on the sandy Cape Flats, far from the pleasant suburbs, which are still predominantly white, nestled on the flanks of Table Mountain, and far from centres of employment. A further 1.3 million live in informal or squatter settlements. These people, who have drifted towards the Cape Town metropolis from impoverished rural areas and small towns, live in hastily built shanty towns, some without basic sanitation, water and power. 'Developing' such areas is an enormous task requiring a coordinated domestic and international planning effort.

Planning instruments played an active role in implementing apartheid and the geography created during those years is easy to read in the urban landscape. Most of the townships built were carefully sited and planned, with purposely con-

trolled (im)mobility, in a way that reinforced separation of peoples – close enough to commercial centres to provide a pool of labour, but far enough away from white residential areas and the urban core. Their residents largely lack the financial ability, and shelter and work opportunities, to move away. These townships reflect the legacy of a segregated society. The development planning which is currently underway is seeking to bury the social, economic and geographic legacies of apartheid in a participatory way which enfranchises Africans politically and which encourages, rather than represses, African civil society. South African planning, emerging from a long isolation from international contact and trends, appears to be leap-frogging from a heavy-handed, repressive style of directive and physical planning, to approaches that emphasise sustainable development, participation, and a range of social and cultural imperatives.

This paper briefly examines some of the major changes being made to South Africa's planning apparatus. In particular, it considers the implications of these changes for local authorities in terms of their capacity to respond effectively to the new challenges being thrust upon them.

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## PLANNING IN TRANSITION

Major structural changes are occurring in relation to the systems of governmental administration and wider institutional arrangements. These changes, which are rapid, affect all levels of government. In the first instance, new provinces have been created, altering the political landscape from four provinces during the apartheid era, to nine regions under the new dispensation. These regions enjoy greater autonomy than in the past and also represent different political parties as a result of the transformations of provincial government. Secondly, local government has been reviewed and rationalised, new boundaries for local councils have been drawn and new councillors and officers elected in the first ever democratic local elections. In some cases, new local authorities have been established with new planning powers and requirements. This has included a number of new metropolitan councils for major urban centres such as Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban.

Third, there is an apparent trend toward devolution of responsibility to provincial and local government. These changes are occurring very rapidly with limited consideration for the ability of provincial and local governments to implement their new agenda, and not without considerable legal confusion (Kidd 1997). A major implication of this new participatory approach has been the projection of local government into the emergent development limelight. All of these local and provincial initiatives are occurring against an overarching policy background emphasis on 'sustainable development', as set out in the national government's *White Paper on Environmental Management* (Jordan 1997; Kidd 1997; Harrison & Mabin 1997; Government of RSA 1998).

As a result of socio-political transformation, far greater interaction at an international level, and the impacts of globalisation, five discernable trends can be observed in development and environmental planning in South Africa.

First, although the legislative and policy impetus for change has come from central government, there is a distinct emphasis on community-based and participatory planning for environmental sustainability and development. Maharaj (1996) has noted that "the struggle for the transformation towards a post-apartheid society is being played out largely at the local level" with the pres-

sure for change coming from civic, community, ratepayers' and residents' associations. A second concomitant trend is that of decentralisation of planning activity. This has a number of dimensions, including: privatisation of planning actions and government functions, (particularly land development and housing functions); a concerted effort aimed at involving local communities in planning agenda; and an emphasis on community empowerment. Third, there is widespread statutory and non-statutory legitimisation of sustainable development as a major national planning goal which was first articulated as a component of the 'vision' in the *Urban Development Strategy* produced by the Reconstruction and Development Program office in 1995 (Government of RSA 1995). This strategy was later translated into the *Development Facilitation Act 1995*.

A fourth discernable trend is an emphasis on trying to improve the immediate living conditions of township residents in terms of shelter, sanitation, water, power and transport. In view of the numbers requiring resettlement and housing, the scale of the task confronting the new South Africa in this respect is daunting. A fifth apparent trend relates to the important role of civil society in a functioning democracy and its importance in ensuring that the state is sensitive to the multiplicity of interests in a multi-cultural society. It is clear that the development agenda in South Africa is also concerned with enhancing the profile and capabilities of the civil sector. After decades of oppression under apartheid this is a crucial, if difficult, task.

The national government has attempted to address these issues at the national level by its focus on sustainability in environmental policy and its stated commitment to the implementation of Agenda 21 (Kidd 1997; Jordan 1997; Government of RSA 1998). However, in other policy areas, most notably the new national macroeconomic plan (the GEAR strategy), the commitment to sustainability appears to be lacking. An important policy question that must now be addressed concerns the integration of the sustainability agenda with other currently more dominant policy areas, such as national economic planning.

The legacy of apartheid is ugly and intimidating, the imperative and the will to change is great. There is much to be done, quickly and with limited resources and capabilities. The pressure on political

parties at the national and regional level to deliver continues to increase as politicians face the challenges of a general election in 1999. These political imperatives may prove the most significant determinants of South Africa's response to the economic growth versus sustainability conundrum.

## The changing planning apparatus

During the apartheid era, the statutory basis for much of South Africa's planning was provincial town planning ordinances and, nationally, the 1967 *Physical Planning Act*, which was replaced by a 1991 Act of the same name, though the new Act has not been utilised to date (Kidd 1997). During the period in which governmental transition and constitutional change was being negotiated, the *Physical Planning Act* was reviewed and was deemed an inappropriate tool to plan for the development of the new South Africa. During this period of constitutional review, rural and urban development, as well as the responsibility for regional planning and development, became provincial responsibilities. Following the decision to suspend the *Physical Planning Act* as the basis for provincial planning, the Forum for Effective Planning and Development (FEPD) was created as the means of planning, facilitating and managing social and economic development. In this highly dynamic period however, the creation of another planning framework at the provincial level and retention of national powers resulted in the fragmentation of planning legislation and systems (Platzky 1997).

Transformation in the planning field required new legislation, new institutions, new policy frameworks, and mechanisms for the rapid delivery of services and infrastructure to previously disadvantaged communities (Harrison & Mabin 1997). By the time that the epochal 1994 elections transformed South Africa politically, consideration had already been given to replacing the statutory basis of planning in South Africa. The result was the *Development Facilitation Act 1995*. The title of this statute captures the central agenda in South Africa today: development. It was this Act which was, in the intentions of its authors, to change the 'planning paradigm' (Platzky 1997) and ensure fast-track development projects. The *Development Facilitation Act* established a series of principles of planning, required the set-

ting of land development objectives by all authorities, bypassed old planning mechanisms and created a new decision-making machinery in the form of Planning Tribunals and the Development and Planning Commission (D&PC). It was the D&PC that was to have responsibility for overall coordination of the development planning process.

The *Development Facilitation Act* was an important first step in the change of development and planning in South Africa. By the time it was proclaimed however, several of its key provisions were already out of date. Central among these was the need for greater devolution to local government to provide for development at the local level. Although the *Development Facilitation Act* provided for devolution to provincial government (although, interestingly, on a voluntary basis) the planning and development problems at the local scale demanded a more highly devolved machinery.

As a response to this need, the *Local Government Transition Act Second Amendment Act* was introduced in 1996. This statute, in both intent and effect, should revolutionise planning and development processes in South Africa in two key ways. First, it articulates a series of land development objectives that seek to provide a series of measurable principles for land development. The imperative for tangible change and the benefits of development is great and, accordingly, this new planning statute places significant emphasis on measuring progress. The implications of this feature of the *Local Government Transition Act* are considered below.

The second important feature of the Act is its requirement that all 811 South African local municipalities formulate integrated development plans (IDPs). IDPs have been designed to operate as management tools for local government to ensure sustainable development; organisational restructuring; financial sustainability; and service excellence. This devolution of responsibility to local government is designed to ensure that the focus of planning and development work remains at the township, rural village and/or district level. IDPs will, in accordance with the *Local Government Transition Act*, make provision for municipal visions, missions and strategies for development. At the level of strategy, the most important of these are (Platzky 1997) local economic development; strategic environmental assessment; water provision and usage; transport

planning; housing and servicing; and budgeting and collection of revenue. These are, needless to say, some of the most pressing of problems in South Africa today.

At the metropolitan level, local governments in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban have embraced the Local Agenda 21 (LA21) approach to participatory sustainable planning and have formed the South African Cities Network on LA21. In doing so, they have noted that the LA21 program shares many of the ideals and objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Project (City of Cape Town and Private Agencies Collaborating Together 1996). Each metropolitan council is implementing LA21 programs and pilot projects at present, although the approach and focus in each case is very different. The role that LA21 programs can play in integrating environmental concerns into planning and local government functions is yet to be proved.

These challenges will be the responsibility of the planning profession whose prominent role continues a long tradition in South Africa. As Mabin and Smit (1997) have argued, throughout South Africa's history reconstruction has been a recurring theme that has been closely associated with periods of turmoil and transformation. Urban planning has often been seen as a primary tool for restructuring society (Mabin & Smit 1997). The former South African Council of Town and Regional Planners acknowledges that the profession was deeply implicated in the implementation of apartheid policies, and former professional organisations such as the South African Institute of Town and Regional Planners (SAITRP) consequently have lacked credibility in the post-apartheid era. In 1996, SAITRP was replaced by the new South African Planning Institute, which embraces wider social objectives and has greater black leadership (Mabin & Smit 1997).

### Implications and problems for sustainable planning at the local level

Clearly, the current planning and development agenda in South Africa is momentous and pressing. While the country has moved quickly to embrace new approaches to planning, and to enact a new development and planning apparatus, there is little time in this period of frenetic change to consider the potential

implications and problems of these new prescriptions. At the broadest level, the necessarily top-down approach to policy and legislative change could create problems in interagency coordination, quality control, effective implementation, and duplication and waste.

A more important issue lies in the extent of devolution of power and decision-making to local authorities. Local authorities in South Africa now find themselves with a significantly greater role in development and planning. They are now required to develop IDPs under new legislation and approaches that are at variance to those employed for decades, although there is limited guidance available from higher levels of government. In addition, among local authorities there are differences in the level of appropriately skilled human resources, in political priorities, in financial capacity, and in political willingness to follow through and embrace the new changes. There are also differences in approaches and structures of implementation. Given the complexity and dimensions of the task, central government will find it difficult to ensure appropriate monitoring, quality control and program evaluation.

Recent rationalisation of local government has resulted in organisational change. There are therefore new teams working on complex problems with pressing timelines, with capabilities of varying qualities, operating in an entirely new legal, political and social environment. The new arrangements are fundamentally untested. The fear among those close to the problems of development and planning in South Africa is that these new agencies and teams will fall back on what has worked in the past, and repeat past failures rather than create the new South Africa everyone wants. As Mabin and Smit (1997) have observed, South Africa's record in urban reconstruction is largely restricted to apartheid's racial reconstruction of major cities. It is, at this stage, difficult to tell whether the 'reconstruction and development' theme is merely a political discourse or whether it can be translated into tangible benefits for the majority. On the other hand, some might rise to the challenges offered by the new era.

Across more than 800 recently empowered local authorities, education about new governance arrangements and training on new approaches to planning and development, especially sustainable

service provision, emerge as key issues. There is also a need for an intergovernmental forum, or some other mechanism, to achieve required levels of coordination and articulation among local authorities in order to realise the kind of integration envisaged in integrated development planning.

## Conclusion

In South Africa today there is a great deal of conceptual and operational reform in the area of development and planning. New approaches and ideas (in the South African context) about planning, sustainable development and community participation are being incorporated in policy and legislation. And at the level of the black township and informal settlement, there is much to be done to improve the material conditions of life. The demand and expectation for change is high. Implementing the new planning paradigm and realising improvements on the ground is a critical and pressing issue for the future of the country, both in terms of local needs and aspirations, and also, potentially, for the continued stability of the new democracy. The developing planning system in South Africa needs to respond to the political imperatives for change and reform and also address the challenges of achieving sustainable development outcomes at the township level.

The role of the planner has changed dramatically. In apartheid South Africa, the planner operated with significant control and authority, was concerned with physical land-use planning and was remote from some communities. The planning profession apparently had little regard for the social and environmental dimensions of life for black South Africa. In the new era, the planner must address a multiplicity of planning goals encompassing a range of objectives – political, environmental, social, economic, and cultural. Considerable emphasis is being put on planners and the agencies in which they work to implement the enormous task of reconstruction and development.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the planner is being asked to work at the local community level and to use facilitation, community participation and empowerment as the primary tools to create sustainable development. These approaches are far removed from the practices of the past. Planning syllabi in tertiary institutions across the country as

well as in-service training courses for those already working within the planning arena therefore need to be aimed at meeting these needs. South Africa needs planners, imbued with an environmental philosophy, who are trained to work with diverse communities, to unlock the capabilities of these communities in order to gain control over their lives and the spaces they inhabit and to realise the sustainability agenda. The challenge of implementation therefore needs to be addressed in terms of effective coordination, improved institutional arrangements, and capacity building and training at all levels. ■

## ENDNOTE

1. While not wishing to perpetuate the iniquitous system of racial classification, an understanding of planning and development in the South African context requires such classification.

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