

RELEVANCE OF SPATIAL PLANNING INTERVENTIONS IN REDUCING POVERTY AND MARGINALISATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSHIPS: CAPE TOWN TOWNSHIPS

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Abstract

Urban planners have been at the forefront of identifying and proposing solutions to problems of decaying and non-performing physical environments associated with townships within South Africa. These areas are regarded as the epitome of poverty and marginalisation and are typically described as dormitory townships as they have limited employment opportunities and function, in essence, as poverty traps. The design and resultant poor performance of townships as urban living spaces have been attributed to the importation and application of planning models such as neighbourhood units and garden city planning, distorted through race based apartheid planning.

Since the emergence of South Africa's new democracy, planners have presented new spatial planning and urban design interventions aimed at changing townships to fully functional urban areas and integrated into the city wide urban fabric. Proposals in this regard include concepts such as activity/mobility corridors/streets and nodes as foci for mixed-used activities. The overall objective is to generate the pre-conditions for more safer and 'dignified' environments and more so, for private sector investment and associated employment opportunities to follow suit. However, although these type interventions have been proposed in most townships in South Africa for more than a decade now, the dismal performance of townships have remained essentially unchanged. Evidently, widespread poverty and economic marginalisation remain endemic for most of these townships.

It is therefore not clear what the relevance and impact of recent spatial planning interventions, aimed at achieving social objectives, are. Can planners realistically claim that focussing on spatial planning and urban design interventions will reduce poverty and marginalisation; irrespective of the prevailing macro-economic policy environment? A key question for spatial planners revolves around what are the options in moving forward?

Key notes

Modernist planning, developmental state, sustainable livelihoods

Introduction

Townships are typically characterised by their extensive public sector housing developments. Functioning primarily as dormitory suburbs, they lack employment opportunities; have poorly defined public and open

spaces; poor public transport facilities; roads designed to function primarily as separators; they lack integration with the surrounding urban fabric and have a legacy of being racially defined. Planners have argued that these physical features contribute toward ongoing marginalisation and widespread poverty in townships.

In response, post-apartheid urban planning solutions have included concepts such as activity corridors and streets as foci for mixed used activities; the densification of residential areas, introducing traffic calming measures, providing spaces for informal activities, pedestrianised public spaces and landscaping; with the overall objective to generate the pre-conditions for safer and dignified environments, and for private sector investment and associated employment opportunities to emerge. The basic assumption is that households can accrue assets through state subsidised housing interventions and thereby gradually improve their well-being.

However, the recent pattern of affordable housing developments, although aiming to generate sustainable living environments, appears to be no different from the older townships. Although they sometimes include design elements, such as activity streets and mixed land use, townships have remained for the most part dormitory in nature, with the tendency to increase the size of those townships located on the urban periphery. It appears that this pattern has now gaining acceptance as the 'inevitable' consequence of pursuing neo-liberal macro economic policies supported by a constitution that protects property rights and requires the public sector to accrue land for affordable housing within the ambit of the free market.

Brief overview of planning approaches

There are some marked similarities between past and current patterns of township development in South Africa. Although the post-apartheid planning era was ushered in through extensive debate and support for spatial planning principles that should guide new settlement form 14 years after their introduction, these have not been realised.

Modernist planning concepts and apartheid planning

Research on the form and pattern of the Apartheid City and its disastrous impact on the lives of people, in particular those most marginalised and poor, are well documented. Early planning interventions were based on the neighbourhood unit concept (e.g. Charles Perry; early 1900s) and garden cities from UK (e.g. Ebenezer Howard). These planning concepts advocated the separation of land uses; self-containment and inward orientated neighbourhoods with embedded social facilities, spatially buffered from surrounding areas; with employment provided elsewhere in the case of the neighbourhood unit and close-by (green belt) in the case of garden cities.

Later influences include work of modernists such as Le Corbusier, who's ideas incorporated living environments 'consisting of tower blocks', within green open space and provided with a primary school and cultural centres. During the 1970s and 1980s new ideas emerging out of the New Town movement, advocated by planners such as Runcorn and Milton and consisting largely of inward orientated, self-sustained neighbourhoods linked through a grid of freeways, with limited job opportunities (UPRU, 1990). These models of urban planning are characterised by their simplicity; and this usually lends their application to misinterpretation and partial implementation (UPRU, 1990). However, in the case of the

RSA, their application can be regarded as wholesale abuse, aimed at achieving racial segregation; tenaciously designed as poverty traps as they purposefully excluded work opportunities.

In South African cities urban growth in higher income areas has been dominated by private sector investments through suburban developments, also historically influenced by the neighbourhood unit and garden city planning and more recently the location of shopping centres and gated communities at nodes of high mobility and access (e.g. freeway interchanges).

The shopping centre locations are car orientated, on cheaper land and through income leakage, undermine the historic main streets with their associated mixed use and mainly small businesses. Historically these routes functioned as city-wide 'integrators' where both the poor and rich could shop for goods and services and thereby increasing their thresholds and financial viability. The trend to develop retail centres at freeway interchanges, resulted in separating out shopping opportunities for the wealthy from those areas frequented by the poor and thereby reinforcing the segregated city along both racial and income lines.

It is therefore not surprising that given the dominance of the neo-liberal macro-economic context, both the private and the public sector housing developments display similarities in urban form, albeit the quality of housing, community facilities and retail opportunities are far less and inferior in townships in addition to their sparse job opportunities and their location on the edge of cities.

The current development state approach

New planning paradigms emerged since 1994, and these have evolved into the current 'development state' approach. Swilling argues that the agenda of the developmental state is "...about vision-driven, enterprising and empowerment performance orientated government, active citizen participation, reducing inequality and providing public services" (2005: 4). The role of the state in the development process is, however, defined in a context of neo-liberalism, with minimalist state interference in the market.

Research by Swilling (2005), demonstrates that in spite of increasing expenditure of the state between 1994 and 2006 on social services (57%, R70.2 billion to R196.6 billion increase) and economic services (71%, R16.2 billion to R49.4 billion increase) in order to reduce poverty and inequality, the poverty gap as well as the gini-coefficient¹ have increased. Reasons for this identified by Swilling, includes the challenging task of institutionalising developmental institutions as well as dysfunctional institutions that are producing qualitative poorer outcomes. These observations have relevance for institutions involved in city building and housing delivery, who are failing, in spite of their best intentions to create (or enable) integrated and sustainable communities.

In terms of spatial planning, new concepts have emerged such as activity streets and corridors, urban nodes, urban edges, and were included in planning frameworks such as the MSDF² and MuniSDF³. These were explored and applied in the larger cities, while decision makers were also significantly influenced through exposure to planning occurring in South American cities such as Curitiba, Bogota and Port Alegre as well as growth management in US cities such as Portland.

¹ Measuring Income Inequality

² Metropolitan Spatial Development Framework

³ Municipal Spatial Development Framework

With the introduction of the Breaking New Ground (BNG) Housing Programme in Cape Town (through projects such as the N2 gateway), the emphases has shifted to from the design of neighbourhoods and single-storey housing to greater focus on the design of the unit (e.g. duplexes and semi-detached) and infill housing. Informal settlements and back-yard shacks have also increased significantly and remain a permanent feature of urban centres, in spite of attempts by authorities to remove these during the periods before and post-apartheid.

Watson observes that "...recently planned lower income environments, such as Delft, display very similar spatial principles to earlier environments;market-driven and neo-liberal forms of development with standardised and universalised approach to the provision of housing and services, driven by quantitative targets are now primarily shaping Cape Town" (2005:15). State intervention has, therefore, occurred within a context of a neo-liberal agenda, the price of land and housing are determined by a racially distorted property market; there are significant fiscal constrains on state expenditure; property rights impacting on rezoning and subdivision processes are protected and environmental legislation in essence entrenches the interest of the wealthy in urban areas.

Implications for spatial planning

It is therefore clear that growth over the last decades in South African urban centres have occurred within the confines of the market; with private sector housing estates, on expensive land, preferably close to major freeway interchanges and state subsidised housing, primarily on cheaper land on the edge of cities or through infill housing on the periphery of townships. For those that cannot access even the state subsidised housing options, the only remaining option is to become squatters. The continued growth of informal settlements underscores the need for a wide range of shelter options and highlights issues of affordability, given that a significant number of newly housed residents cannot afford the costs associated with basic services.

At the level of urban form, the older historic main roads have been overtaken by shopping malls as the primary retail centres for the wealthy, while shopping and possible small business opportunities for the poor are generally decreasing and becoming less sustainable. It is unclear whether the tax rebates for business within the declared urban development zones, will have a significant impact. Therefore, to some extent the location, function and performance of townships have remained marginal. They remain largely introvert in design and this is re-enforced through recent interventions from the state. They continue to be dormitory suburbs, depended on distant locations for shopping and working opportunities and reliant on expensive and capricious public transport.

The challenge therefore is to reflect on the way forward and to ascertain the relevance of spatial planning and urban design interventions on reducing poverty and marginalisation. For the purpose of the remainder of this paper the implications of work undertaken by scholars such as Swilling on the 'pragmatic developmental state'; and Watson through her work on 'conflicting rationalities' as well as research by institutions such as the DIFID⁴ on the sustainable livelihoods approach, are briefly considered.

⁴ UK Department for International Development

Pragmatic development state

Swilling (2005) argues for a move towards 'pragmatic developmental state' with the state as a more progressive developmental force that takes into account the rise of the civil society formations. He further argues that the South African state has followed neither the classical neo-liberal state model, nor the developmental state model and has been caught between making a trade off between "...no progress in achieving broadly defined transformation goals and achievable more narrowly defined short-term strategic advances....under these pressures many discourses were copied and adopted from the international experiences..." (2005: 9).

Swilling (2005) suggests an operational framework that distinguishes between seven platforms or clusters of anti-poverty action:

- i) Facilitating access to good quality employment and economic opportunities;
- ii) Increasing the physical asset-base of the poor, i.e. land, housing, equipment for economic enterprise;
- iii) Facilitating access to basic services for the poor, including water and sanitation, solid-waste management, affordable and safe energy, transport, education, health and shelter;
- iv) Strengthening community management of own initiatives and external programmes and ability to self-organise;
- v) Enhancing democratic participation by the poor in public decision making to ensure effective monitoring and influence over public resource allocations and service delivery;
- vi) Ensuring access of the poor to legal entitlements and security; and
- vii) Ensuring access to safety nets to strengthen ability to manage shocks and stresses.

According to Swilling (2005), the pragmatic developmental state must achieve economic and developmental goals within a context where capital investments are globally mobile and centralised bureaucratic hierarchies are no longer the only way to deliver public services. The pragmatic developmental state has to combine the resources it controls with leadership strategies aimed at building coalitions, partnerships, alliances and institutional inducements to win consensual hegemony for a progressive developmental pro-poor growth path. According to Swilling, the methodology on how to proceed with this new kind of state-craft have, however, not yet been formulated; necessitating policy-makers and leaders to rather 'muddle through' highly complex 'non-linear dynamics'. He concludes that it may well take another half decade before this 'craft' starts to emerge.

It appears that Swilling accepts the realities associated with global capital and therefore does not outright reject neo-liberalism. This approach also does not necessarily challenge the spatial form of the current city building process, but merely seeks ways to increase access to opportunities for the poor. It can also be argued that the state is already pursuing many of the proposed framework elements and that these do not necessarily change the status quo. The proposed operational framework also shares significant similarities with components of the sustainable livelihoods approach, discussed below. Therefore, if radical social change is not on the agenda, what impact would localised spatial planning and urban design really contribute to reduce poverty and marginalisation?

Sustainable livelihoods approach

Poverty reduction strategies emerged during the 1990s, with subsequent use of the term 'asset-vulnerability' frameworks, based on the experience of poverty as a lack of secure conditions of life. Analysis of the 'threats' the poor face is then considered in relation to the 'assets' they are able to deploy to deal with these threats. According to Rakodi (1995) poverty is more than a lack of income; poverty and deprivation should rather be conceptualised as a set of relationships and processes, rather than a 'state'; this recognises that it is complex and dynamic.

Rakodi argues that a number of policy approaches is needed and that provision must be made for a selection of the most appropriate to respond to the needs and priorities articulated by the poor themselves. These approaches include the provision of 'safety nets' to provide temporary relief to vulnerable groups (however, these are ineffective as a means to enhance employment and income-generating potential in the longer term); opportunities to increase assets; enablement to take advantage of opportunities or provision of basic utilities and services.

Carney identified the main components of a household's livelihoods assets framework, namely natural capital, human capital, social and political capital, physical capital and financial capital (in Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones, 2002). The development of the pentagon represents a new shift in the development of measures to reduce poverty and it introduced the notion of *sustainable livelihoods*. According to DFID (Norton and Foster, 2001) the livelihoods approach can be regarded as the first step in regularising, institutionalising and standardising an approach to reducing poverty by mainstream organisations.

The following definition of livelihoods (adapted from Chambers and Conway, 1992) was put forward by DFID: "A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base". The sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF) views people operating in a context of vulnerability, but with access to certain poverty reducing factors, within a given social, institutional and organisational environment. The development of assets as advocated by the SLF approach argues, therefore, for a number of policy approaches, and includes strategies dealing with provision of basic services, tenure and shelter; health and health services; spatial planning, access and infrastructure. Operationalising a livelihoods approach could include improving access to assets and resources; support for the more effective functioning of organisations, policies and processes that influence access to assets, etc.

Critique and concerns

Although the sustainable livelihoods are in its early stages of being implemented by institutions such as DFID, a number of authors have raised concern with this approach. Norton and Foster (2001) note that although the SLF approach may work more effectively at a *local level*, its success is conditional on the degree to which decentralisation has been given to local government over resource allocation. Further complexities regarding *political processes* and issues of *power and authority* are not addressed in the framework. SLF approach also facilitates and encourages multi-sector *working* and this is dependent on existence of structures within government able and willing to do so. Therefore, the multifaceted process of planning, environmental and housing approvals and delivery between the various spheres of government within the RSA context is a major stumbling block to realise such a framework for poor households.

Further conceptualising and exploration

Application of the SLF approach was further explored through the DFID funded publication, *Urban Livelihoods. A People Centred Approach to Poverty* (Rakodi and Lloyd Jones, eds. 2002). This publication does not address the critique highlighted by Norton and Foster (2001), but rather seeks to conceptualise it further and to explore its implementation. Amis (in Rakodi *et al.*, 2002) argues that municipalities should create an enabling economic environment by providing and renewing public infrastructure, a more facilitative regulatory environment, facilitating human capital development, facilitating security of tenure and allowing houses to be used as productive assets. He concludes that municipalities should concentrate on their traditional roles of providing infrastructure, ensuring health and education and appropriate planning and regulation.

Brown and Lloyd-Jones (in Rakodi *et al.*, 2002) explores the spatial and access implications of urban livelihoods analysis and the implications for urban spatial planning policy. Policy proposals include allowing land uses that have a greater potential to support a variety of livelihoods; accommodating the needs of small enterprises, progressive transport practices as well as a review of all regulations and other restrictions, bylaws and licensing. For Devas (in Rakodi *et al.*, 2002), policy measures proposed include ensuring access to land for the poor (natural capital); universal quality education and training (human capital); access to suitable housing finance (financial capital); access to safe, reliable water supply (physical capital); building community organisations (social capital); access to ward-based councillors (political capital).

Further concerns

An obvious observation emerging from these proposed interventions is that virtually all of these have been around for decades. The extent to which the SLF approach, therefore, presents an alternative approach to western modernism is questionable, as its primary focus is on micro livelihood strategies that are compatible with policies emanating from the current neo-liberal policy framework. Excluding a few exceptions, virtually all of the proposals already form an integral part of the RSA public sector policy frameworks. This, therefore, raises issues of whether the SLF framework approach merely conceptualises, theorises and repackages existing proposals and if it does offer any new solutions.

The major constraints of townships, in terms of lack of significant job opportunities and the unwillingness of the state to interfere radically in the land use and property markets, considerably reduces the potential impact of localised spatial planning and urban design interventions. It also appears that other actors do not share assumptions emanating from planners that the introduction of new spatial planning and urban design concepts would address poverty and deprivation in townships. Evidently, the emphasis is rather on how access to opportunities for the poor can be increased, within a framework of providing basic services and using property as an asset, without necessarily challenging the macro-economic policy framework.

Conflicting rationalities

Watson argues that most planning theory is based on a set of assumptions around the universal nature of human beings and human societies, however, "... at levels which begin to matter for planning and development there are fundamental differences which we cannot assume away" (Watson, 2005: 1). A neo-liberal traditional view of city building and development is being imposed through "...extending a grid

of formalised and regulated development over what is often seem to be unreliable parts of the city” (Watson, 2005:14). Watson also observes that the spatial planning model promoted by planners is ‘urban modernism’ and planners simply assume that ‘the west knew best’.

The assumed universalism and neo-liberal approach to development and the realities of many households not being able to afford the housing and associated utility services provided, sets up what Watson calls ‘conflicting rationalities’. Watson argues that our thinking should rather be informed by acknowledging differences, “...by a recognition of the specifics of our context, and by an understanding of the situated and the differentiated nature of people and groups in the areas in which we plan” (Watson, 2005:16). Watson argues for a “...more critical and cautions approach to adopting ideas from other parts of the world and from very different contexts” (Watson 2005:17).

Watson does not elaborate on the implications of recognising differences and associated ‘conflicting rationalities’ on development aspects such as spatial planning. Does this imply that households and communities should be allowed to define and secure their own spaces within the urban fabric (for example, through establishing informal settlements) and the nature of state intervention should therefore only relate to aspect such as health and safety? Also where intervention is required, should this be only through the explicit invitation and support of the beneficiary community? Does it imply that planners should restrain from suggesting urban forms that may be biased towards their own experiences and believe systems? One interpretation of applying this approach would be that mass-state, top down, housing schemes should not be pursued and that planners should rather become culturally and socially sensitive in relation to the communities they are providing assistance to.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the role of the state in general and planners, as agents of the government in development planning, is undergoing some serious review. It appears that the contribution of spatial planning in reducing poverty and deprivation remains undeclared. In fact, critics of mainstream neo-liberal policies have not necessary rallied around the ‘new’ spatial planning principles and these remain the exclusive concern of urban planners. Unwillingness of the state to interfere radically in the land use and property markets considerably reduces the potential impact of localised spatial planning and urban design interventions.

This should be viewed together with remarks from Scott (1998), who observes that states produce simplified and schematic models of reality in order to control and intervene and this is dangerous and results in unintended consequences. He also points out the danger of high modernisation, its appeal to universalism, its pretensions of epistemic knowledge and its emphasis on social engineering and state power. Scott argues for the need to take small steps, favour reversibility, plan on surpluses and plan on human inventiveness. According to Schuurman (Watson, 2006) western style modernism paradigms have resulted in universalist, market-driven and neo-liberal forms of development and have been the primary force attempting to shape cities in the global south.

Perhaps the third alternative is to recognise that needs differ significantly for various combinations of inhabitants of the city and this, in itself, necessitates generating multiple options and opportunities. It is obvious that the dominant approach of comprehensive state intervention has been disastrous and even with noble intentions by the democratic state; the results have not been desirable for poor communities. Correspondingly, if the state moves to a position of limited and reduced intervention, it is obvious that the

levels of inequality and poverty would increase dramatically, given the huge social and income disparities that exist in the South African society. Perhaps the state should rather move towards a position of not only generating development opportunities, but also allowing those that are marginalised to determine the pre-conditions for state intervention. This implies allowing and facilitating opportunities ranging from land provided only with basic services, to infill housing and current conventional state interventions.

At a micro spatial planning level, planners should perhaps also be less prescriptive and more facilitative in the process of seeking appropriate solutions. However, at a macro level radical land use and market interventions are required to undo the apartheid city and this implies focussing on inner city, well located, land close to work and other opportunities. This would require a radical change to current environmental, planning and property related legislation and this would be against the grain of our current neo-liberal political context.

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