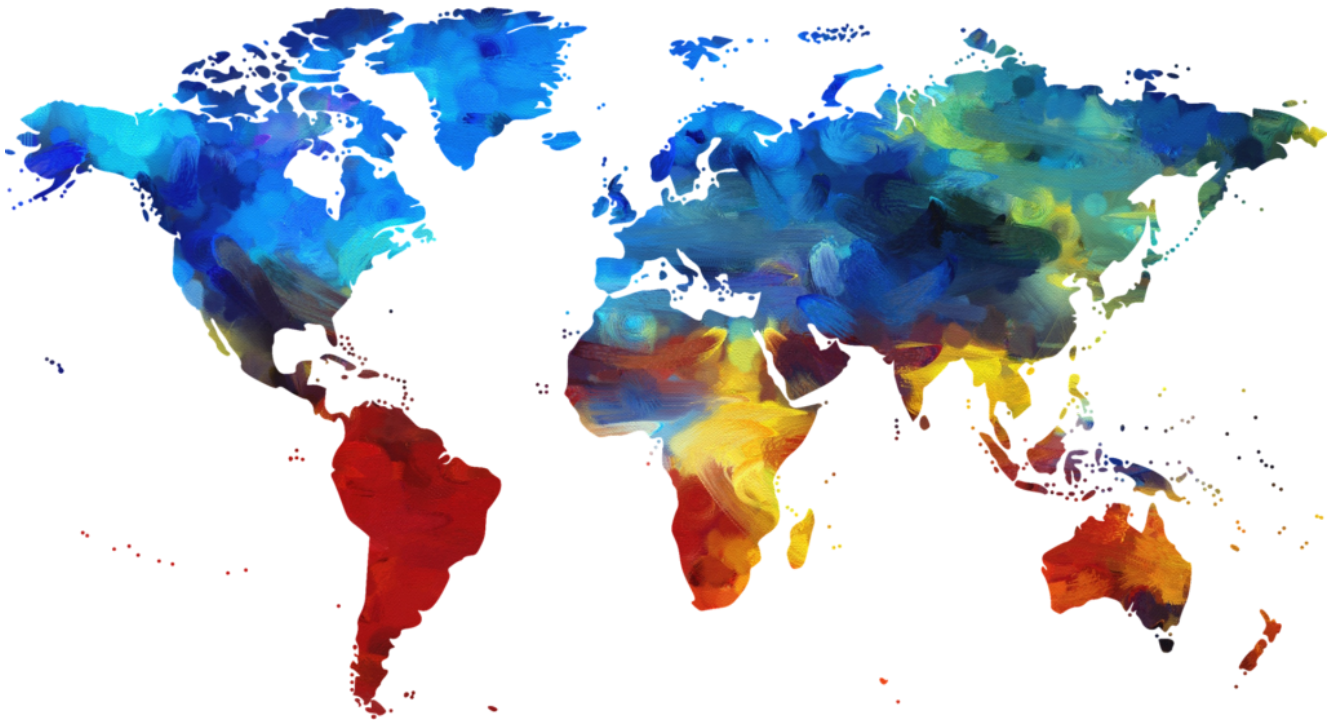


RSA Global Webinar Series - South Africa - Plenary on Urbanisation, economic density and the pandemic



By Professor Ivan Turok, RSA Ambassador South Africa and South African NRF Research Chair in City-Region Economies at the University of the Free State

Ivan Turok talked about the risks and opportunities associated with rapid urbanisation in Africa. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the twin vulnerabilities of mushrooming informal settlements to public health disasters and economic stagnation. A clearer and more compelling vision of the future of cities is required to galvanise the collective energies and resources of civil society, the private sector and government. In essence, the imperative is to convert pure population density into a virtuous circle that builds more functional economic density.

The fact of the matter is that Africa's urban population is projected to double over the next two decades and to triple to over 1.3 billion by 2050. Without a step change in the current trajectory of low-income, low-investment urbanisation, most

of this growth will take the form of overcrowded settlements that lack essential infrastructure and services. Such places pose high risks for the spread of many infectious diseases, and make communities vulnerable to other public health and social problems. In the absence of a cheap vaccine, the continent will have to live with the prospect of repeated surges of Covid-19 and its socio-economic consequences for some time to come.

The presentation discussed several weaknesses in government responses to the pandemic. They have typically been too top-down and authoritarian, without winning the trust and support of local communities for important safety precautions, such as wearing masks. Government responses have also been too short-term and oriented towards palliatives. They have offered temporary relief rather than constructive engagement in real problem-solving.

The presentation argued that it is important to de-risk dense human settlements through an approach that is more positive and developmental than enforced physical distancing (hard lockdowns, de-densification and travel restrictions). This is because distancing does serious damage to jobs, livelihoods and social interaction, and is simply not sustainable. It addresses the symptoms of the overcrowding problem rather than the root causes, which include unemployment and poverty.

The idea of economic density lies at the heart of a more dynamic and constructive approach to future-proof urban settlements and make them more resilient to repeated shocks and stresses. Investment in buildings and infrastructure lies at the heart of the idea, along with the development of skills, jobs, incomes and more productive and connected environments for enterprise and economic development to thrive.

The presentation showed examples of the predicament facing low-income urbanisation in Africa with thoughts for the future that involve 'building forward better' by transforming population density into more functional economic density. It illustrated places where this is beginning to happen through the spontaneous efforts of enterprising households to construct solid rental units in their backyards. This is helping to meet the enormous pent-up demand for decent affordable accommodation in well-located neighbourhoods.

The process generates an ongoing income for poor households and enhances the

value of their property assets. It also creates skills and jobs in the construction value chain, from building materials to contract labour and various built environment services. The most successful examples occur where these developments are clustered together in well-connected, mixed-use precincts, with retail activities and service industries emerging at ground floor level. Government support is required to simplify the regulatory framework and to enhance the capacity of the public infrastructure to accommodate the enlarged population.

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2nd—16th November 2020

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