



The Transformation of Metropolitan Regions in South Africa Post-1994: A Reflection on Progress, Prospects and Challenges

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Cities, and especially metropolitan regions, have featured prominently, not only in South Africa's troubled past, but also in its unfolding future. More than anywhere else in the country, these areas have been both the sites of struggle against oppression, as well as the key beneficiaries of the major spatial, social and economical achievements by the State in redressing the legacy of hundreds of years of colonial and apartheid rule. At the same time they have also been the areas in which the new challenges facing the country are most acutely expressed and felt.

In this paper the transformation in South Africa's three major metropolitan regions from apartheid rule to democratic order is explored in quantitative terms. As such a strong emphasis is placed on changes in economic activity, quality of life and the ecology, as well as the spatial profiles and implications of these datasets. This rich set of data was extracted from the outputs of a recent high-level project (2009) for the South African Cities Network and The Presidency in which trend-analyses on a number of social, economical, spatial and ecological attributes were done for the three major metropolitan areas in the country for the period 1997-2007.

What clearly emerges from the data is the increasing significance of the metropolitan areas as attractors and generators of economic activity and jobs with a continental span. While relatively small in spatial footprint, these three areas alone generate more than 64% of the country's economic output. The data also suggests that these areas are playing an increasingly important role in the provision of housing, schooling and health services and by doing so, bringing hope to the poor and most vulnerable individuals and communities in society. Equally important is the growing movement of those in their productive years from smaller urban and rural areas to these metropolitan areas, as the data bears testimony to.

However, as noted earlier, these three metropolitan areas have not only been the sites of progressive transformation. Unfortunately the data presented in the paper also paints a picture of the deepening of historical divisions and ills, as well as the arrival of a set of new challenges and divides. These include growing inequality, deepening poverty, escalating municipal service backlogs, hugely inefficient home-work commuting patterns, water shortages and pollution.

While the paper has a distinctly South African and African flavor, the challenges brought about by rapid urban growth, globalization, greed and natural resource depletion and shortages, are sure to strike a chord with planners from many other metropolitan regions elsewhere in the developing and increasingly so too, the developed, world.

KEY WORDS: Transformation, metropolitan regions, challenges, inequality, urban growth.