## Cities can help rather than hurt our planet

With congestion, pollution and urbanisation all presenting environmental threats recently highlighted at COP-17, are these places that are good or harmful to our future?

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AS WE return to places of work, and in SA these are as often as not cities, the contrast from more bucolic holiday destinations may be striking. With congestion, pollution and urbanisation all presenting environmental threats recently highlighted at COP-17, are these places that are good or harmful to our future? And what will their social fabric be — how will residents respond to their urban homes?

While urban living, a seemingly inevitable feature of modern life, may seem like an environmentally hostile act, recent thinking, articulated in the US context by Harvard urban economist Edward Glaeser, points to the contrary. It shows there is an efficiency in urbanised living that can mitigate the carbon footprint of human settlements and optimise public-service delivery. What is also pertinent is that research around cities is shifting to developing countries, with more "megacities" in Asia than anywhere else in the world. Unsurprisingly, about 75% of the world's population is expected to be urbanised by 2050.

A fresh look at the efficiency of cities lends greater appeal to the concept of a global city region, a place of not only economic but also ecological economies of scale, however counterintuitive this may seem. But waste-to-energy projects, such as the one pioneered in Durban, demonstrate the potential of pooled resources to deal with urban challenges. These resources include not only large rates bases in cities, but also skills that are hard to match outside cities.

This aside, what is the experience of urban dwelling likely to be? Our Hotspots Monitor consistently shows a high proportion of service delivery protests take place in metros, despite these cities' often stellar efforts to roll out infrastructure to growing communities. Quite simply, supply of housing and basic services cannot meet the dramatic demand, especially in Gauteng and the Western Cape.

Last year's protest activity, however, contained a noteworthy and encouraging feature — a lull in April and May (during the local government elections), which suggests that there can be a mitigation of protest activity due to increased consultation with communities. This mitigation is most noteworthy in Gauteng, where protest activity last year dropped considerably compared with aggregated 2004-11 figures. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the province's MEC for housing and local government regularly responds to protests with personal visits and undertakings to protesting communities.

It has always been our contention that urbanisation (accompanied by trying conditions in informal settlements, including high unemployment) underlies a core number of protests and these are unlikely to disappear soon.

Gauteng and the Western Cape remain the provinces to watch for fundamental changes to the numbers of protests — a fall in the former's case will lower figures, but this could be mitigated and even overtaken by rising activity in the latter's. While communities will not want to live in informal settlements forever, adequate consultation and programmes to formalise informal settlements may help to ease dissatisfaction and allow for the potential benefits of an urbanised life to be reaped — better access to resources, education and employment.

And if Glaeser's research can be applied to SA, this will all allow for a preferable environmental outcome.

For South African planners, who should be guided by the projections and concepts released by the National Planning Commission, the challenge is to make sure that cities do not become an agglomeration of strip malls and townhouse developments — insular middle-class cores surrounded by huge, marginalised townships and informal settlements. It is critical that growth is planned and that development follows a consistent vision of integration and connections that works for all city residents.

To this end, proposals for a development charge that passes on the up-front cost of infrastructure to developers will ensure that the full cost of development, especially those of private projects targeting the wealthy, are considered in urban expansions, although this may necessarily undermine the feasibility of privately financed working-class and lower middle-class developments.

Cities are at the forefront of innovation and best practice and a certain feature of the future, with the world's rapidly growing urban population estimated to be at 52% of the total this year.

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