



## Silence vs dissent

If we want to reconstitute the humanities and social sciences, we first have to critique them

Getting Ahead

# Greening our growing cities

In the face of Africa's rapid urbanisation, there is a critical need for environmental sustainability

Kristin Palitza

**R**apid urbanisation will be one of the major developments on the African continent over the next few decades, and it will be key for cities to work out how to handle urban expansion and much-needed economic growth while creating more environmentally friendly cities and reducing their carbon footprint.

Most of the world's GDP is generated in cities and urban centres are the powerhouses of the economy, the places where innovation and change are originated. But, because of that, they also cause the most pollution and environmental damage.

"Cities are responsible for more than 75% of greenhouse gases because they are the places where most people live," said Marlene Laros, policy and strategy adviser for the South African chapter of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (Iclei), a global association of local governments committed to sustainable development.

Laros spoke at the opening of the Inspiring Change conference, which was held in Cape Town last week and explored ways in which African cities can respond to climate change.

"By 2050, 60% of Africa's population will be living in cities, up from the current level of 40%. That is a fact we cannot change. Our challenge is how to embrace urbanisation," said Laros. That could be done by integrating the realities of climate change with development and economic policies so that poverty, employment creation and environmental issues could be tackled at the same time rather than in isolation.

Laros said climate change was interconnected with the environment, the economy, politics, poverty, food security, access to water and the built environment. If

Africans wanted to create greener cities, they would need to consider all these factors.

But a major hurdle to creating greener cities is that African nations need to double their infrastructure by 2050 to service their rapidly growing urban centres. That will mean major construction – with the construction industry being one of the biggest polluters.

Independent environmental consultant Robert Zipplies said: "The building sector consumes 30% to 45% of global energy production. We use 6% to 8% of global fossil fuel demand to build. Those costs are very high and very unsustainable. We need to find different and more environmentally friendly ways of building our cities."

But, Laros said, this would not be easy to realise because economic development continued to take precedence over the environment on a continent where poverty alleviation and job creation were the top priorities of every government. So building parking garages had the highest commercial value in African cities like Cape Town, not creating communal spaces or parks, Laros said.

Owing to spatial planning practices and market forces that favour the wealthy, Africa's urban poor, the majority of households, are increasingly vulnerable to the potential effects of climate change. This threatens the resilience of urban communities to climate change.

Therefore, city planners are in an ideal position to contribute to the fight against climate change. But in Africa they have been slow to get involved. Few municipal strategies analyse and monitor hazard and vulnerability factors, or contain risk assessments of the present and future effects of climate change on urban areas.

Leonie Joubert, a South African environmental writer who has authored several books on climate



**Buildings and houses are seen through the window of an airplane above Cairo. Cities are already responsible for the largest percentage of greenhouse gas emissions and further urbanisation will exacerbate the situation.**

Photo: Amr Abdallah Dalsh/Reuters

change, said that bringing down a city's carbon footprint would have many positive spinoffs, such as a healthier population.

"African cities are spread widely and thinly, which means it takes time and money to move goods. They are designed to be carbon-heavy. Every calorie that comes into the city requires an ecosystem service to produce that food and transport it," she said.

As a result, food transported into expansive urban centres had a high carbon footprint, and were generally highly processed and less fresh.

"Cities make us fat and sick," Joubert said. "We have an obesity epidemic in Africa, combined with severe malnutrition. And at the root of this lie significant climate problems."

A solution would be to densify African cities to create better economies of scale. "It would be easier and cheaper to introduce public transport systems, which would

mean fewer cars and more people walking. Denser cities would also reduce the cost of healthy food and its carbon footprint, because it would be cheaper to transport it into town," Joubert said.

People should start demanding greener cities at municipal level. Climate change was not an issue for national governments to deal with alone, she said, as its effects were felt, particularly, by people at local government level.

She said that local governments were the closest to where the consequences of climate change would pan out and were thus best positioned to build resilient cities while avoiding major setbacks in hard-won economic and social development.

Joubert said every African urbanite could play a role: "As an ordinary person, national government policy feels impenetrable but, on a city level, it's so much easier to mobilise as a community." — IPS