

How fit for the future are South Africa's cities?

By Wayne Visser

The problem with the future - as fellow fox and my co-author Clem Sunter, likes to say* - is that it is uncertain and only happens once. But that doesn't stop us from being interested - and often worried - about the future. At the heart of our concern is basically whether things will be better or worse - especially for us personally, living in this city and in this country.

How we grapple with this fundamental conundrum - as individuals, communities, businesses or governments - depends less on the actual city or country we live in and more on our attitude to change. If we are an optimist - and therefore believe we can shape the future - we will tend towards visioning strategies. If we are fatalistic - believing that the future happens to us in ways we cannot predict or mould - then resilience strategies are likely to be more appealing.

In practice, however, being fit for the future requires both approaches. In other words, fitting into a changing future, like a piece of a puzzle, and being agile enough to respond to the unexpected. Resilience strategies will help us to survive turbulent times ahead, while visioning strategies will make us more likely to thrive, to surf the waves of change, rather than be drowned by them.

Let's see how this dual logic applies to cities and countries. According to policy adviser, Simon Anholt, most of us want to live in a country that is "good" - not necessarily wealthy or happy or competitive, but a country that contributes more to the common good of humanity than it takes away.

The Good Country Index, launched in June 2014, sets out to measure that very thing, using a range of indicators like science and technology, peace and security, planet and climate and health and wellbeing. Ireland tops the table of 125 countries and Libya props it up. South Africa ranks 44th, with strong performance in international peace and security (15th) and poor performance in prosperity and equality (121st).

The Good Country Index follows in the footsteps of other measures like the UN Human Development Index (South Africa ranks 118th), Quality of Life Index (South Africa 53rd) and Happy Planet Index (South Africa 156th).

There are similar measures at a city level. For example, the City Prosperity Index rates productivity, equity, infrastructure, quality of life and environment and finds Vienna performs the best at 0.925. For South Africa's cities, Cape Town scores higher at 0.590 than Johannesburg (0.479). Both perform relatively well on infrastructure (0.933 and 0.880 respectively) and environment (0.875 and 0.816) but shockingly badly on equity (0.217 and 0.083).

In a similar measure, the *Economist Intelligence Unit's* Liveability Index, Johannesburg places 40th out of 70 countries analysed, just ahead of Mexico City (41), Rio de Janeiro

(42) and New Delhi (46), but lagging behind other emerging cities like Buenos Aires (26), Beijing (30) and Lima (35). In this case, Johannesburg scores relatively well on green space, natural assets and connectivity, but poorly on urban sprawl and pollution.

This new generation of league tables is important, because whether cities realise it or not, they are in competition for the best global talent. Our public and private sector leaders need to take note of how quality of life is being measured and actively work to rise up the ranks into the premier league. We need them to provide a compelling vision of our national and urban futures, so that we can feel proud and motivated to help create a better place to live for all our citizens.

Having a clear set of sustainable development goals is half the story. The other half is being prepared to survive shocks when they hit – be they from climate change, energy crises, community conflict, financial meltdowns or resource crunches. This is where Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities Project can help us to prepare, with its five pillars of resilience:

1. Constant learning – The ability to internalize past experiences linked with robust feedback loops that sense, provide foresight, and allow new solutions.
2. Rapid rebound – The capacity to re-establish function, re-organize, and avoid long-term disruptions
3. Limited or “safe” failures – Using circuit-breaker type mechanisms that prevent failures from rippling across systems
4. Flexibility – The ability to change, evolve, and adapt to alternative strategies in the face of disaster
5. Spare capacity – Ensuring that there is a back-up or alternative available when a vital component of a system fails

All of our cities – and indeed the sectors like energy and mining and the nation as a whole – can benefit from applying these principles in their strategic planning. As it happens, the Project shines a spotlight on Durban as one of the 100 cities, observing that although it is the poorest metropolitan area in South Africa, the city has become a global leader in climate change adaptation. On the other hand, with 30% of its population living in one of the city's 500 squatter settlements, poverty and social cohesion threaten to undermine resilience.

One creative solution is being presented by Sohco (Social Housing Company), which buys dilapidated buildings and rehabs them, turning offices into apartments for families of between two and five people. Another is from sugar company Tongaat Hulett, which is planning to convert a 3,000-acre plantation over the next 20 years into a mixed-use \$2.5 billion town called Cornubia.

It is this combination of vision, foresight and innovation that can make South Africa and its cities among the most desirable places to live in the future. But to do so, we need to move from denial to acceptance and then proactivity. We can still celebrate the things that make us great – our spirit of optimism and ubuntu – but we must also break the chains that are holding us back from being unequivocally world-class and truly human-centred.

* We co-authored the book *Beyond Reasonable Greed: Why Sustainable Business is a Much Better Deal*

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