

**RIGHT TO THE CITY AND FIGHT AGAINST URBAN INEQUALITIES:
THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE
UCLG WORLD CONGRESS, RABAT, MOROCCO
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PERCEPTIONS OF A CITY

A typical layman's response to the picture of "**A CITY**" is that "**A CITY** is about **the big, 'giant' buildings towering above the horizon, comfortable jobs, big business and easy access to services**". Very little is said about communities, community life and general living experiences.

CRUDE REALITY OF CITIES

Community life is slowly being pushed out of our city environment. Cities have become very expensive to live in making it completely inaccessible to the (urban) poor.

Should we not be posing the following question?

Is the right to the city only about individual liberty to access urban services or is it about the demand for transformed and renewed access for urban life?

THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

Up until recently, only the needs of business and the middle class were carefully catered for by the city to ensure continued economic growth and, hopefully, create new jobs; whereas the poor were left to rely on self-help solutions to address structural problems in our cities and economy.

With **nearly 20 years since democracy South Africa is still challenged with the legacies left by apartheid urban planning and human settlement**. Two **(2)** patterns are instantly recognizable:-

1. In our city environment; the physical separateness and inequality of the lives of ordinary people continue along race and class lines;

2. Our city environment remains a precarious and vulnerable place of the urban poor.

The ability to modify and improve the existing infrastructure, opportunities and facilities remains a huge challenge for municipalities. The costs of access to urban land and well-developed public places are sky-rocketing.

SOUTH AFRICAN RESPONSE

For a long time, the vast majority of South Africans felt as though they have no right to their cities. The levels of inequality, poverty and injustice in our cities require us to provide quick responses, in terms of growth or redistribution. Everything we know about the economic prospects and environmental sustainability of our cities demands that we are all involved in finding sustainable and creative solutions.

Spatial planning, design and quality of the built environment are receiving focused attention by municipalities. This response built within the conception of the Right to the City; is aimed at promoting:

1. **The right to *participation*:** the right of the city residents and the surrounding communities to play a central role in decision-making process, concerning the production of the urban space.
2. **The right to *appropriate urban space*:** the right of city inhabitants to live in, play in, work in the urban space. This right stands against the conception of urban space as private property or as a commodity to be valorized (or used to valorize other commodities) by the capitalist production process.

There is still a strong sense among city administrators that the poor only want services. The civil society movement continues to remind us that - growth plus service delivery - does not always equal greater equality or sustainability. In fact it feeds the divisions between different social groups and different parts of the city, and worsens the city's impact on our environment.

So what is to be done?

1. It is imperative that in our policies, we **recognise that informal settlements** will be a feature of cities for the foreseeable future. This is an **acknowledgement of the right of these residents to be in**

the city (on the land they currently occupy) and make these settlements safer and more healthy places to live. **Until informal settlements are incorporated as part of the city-scape, they will continue re-emerge irrespective of government top-down solutions.**

2. The second area of response has to do with **increasing the access** of these communities **to the benefits and opportunities** to be found in our cities. This is about building more inclusive and employment generating economies that create real opportunities for the poor to begin to convert survival strategies (like small-scale hawking) into sustainable livelihoods.
3. Thirdly, substantial **incentives should be offered** to stimulate patterns of densification and mixed-use developments, increase the 'infill' development of pockets of vacant urban land, and support the development of 'inclusionary' housing and state-subsidised rental stock.
4. Fourthly, **increasing the public participation** in those political and technical planning and decision making processes that shape the development of cities.

This response have emerged from a series of dialogues co-hosted by government and civil organizations, about understanding the contextual relevance and practical potential of a concept drawn from international development discourse - the Right to the City.

This is fundamentally about re-asserting the poor's right to be involved in the making and shaping of their city, and claim the benefits of being urban citizens.

The debates within this conference will be used by SALGA to more clearly indicate to the municipalities the kinds of priorities, activities and partnerships that are required to ultimately enable the urban poor to claim their right to their city.

I thank you.