



South Africa's Cities Share Knowledge to Spur Development

South Africa's cities present unique challenges, having been designed to reinforce decades of apartheid policies. Neighbourhoods were racially segregated, with non-white townships relegated to the urban fringe. They received poor services and had strict restrictions on economic, civic, and political activities. Already severely weakened by the end of the 1980s, the policy of "separate development" finally ended with the country's first democratic elections in 1994. Hopes ran high for changes in all spheres of society, including an urban transformation, but thus far, progress has been uneven.

Johannesburg was the first city to start attempting to change these patterns; other cities watched and began their own sets of reforms. Rather than support individual cities, the South African Government chose to create a network that would better enable all of them to flourish, by helping them learn from one another, and building their capabilities for development strategy, planning and implementation.

The South African Cities Network (SACN) was launched in 2002 with funding from the Cities Alliance, USAID, South Africa's Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG), and the South Africa Local Government Association (SALGA). It was set up as an independent, membership-based organisation comprised of the mayors and city managers of the country's nine largest cities. It established a small secretariat to mobilize resources and experts to provide needed services. It has also established a broad and strategic network of partnerships with academia as well as with national, provincial and local governments. It has, subsequently, attracted an international reputation.

Its goals are to: promote good city governance and management; analyse the strategic challenges facing cities; collect, assess and apply cities' experiences; and promote learning partnerships between different

Project: Establishment of the South African Cities Network and production of two State of the Cities Reports (2004 and 2006)

Partners: USAID, South Africa's Department of Provincial and Local Government, South Africa Local Government Association

Duration: 2002 - 2006

Financing: USD 1.25 million

Key Results:

- Promoting the role of cities
- Providing data and analyses to improve urban policy decision-making
- Fostering partnerships among urban stakeholders

spheres of government to support cities.

Impact

SACN has been on the cutting edge of urban research and policy dialogue in South Africa, having assembled and examined current data on the social, economic and ecological changes occurring in the country's urban centres. Among the themes it has explored through the urban and city lens are: demographic changes, municipal finance, HIV and AIDS mitigation, environmental sustainability, human settlements development, urban governance, and pro-poor economic development. It has also considered international urban analyses and how they might apply in the South African context.

The Cities Alliance funded SACN's first *State of South African Cities* report in 2004, which filled a glaring hole for contemporary urban data and analysis. It reignited the debate on the need for a policy and processes to improve local resource allocations and management, and it demonstrated how to use data collection and

analysis to drive planning. The Cities Alliance then funded a second Report, in 2006, which built on that foundation and expanded its scope to secondary cities, identifying 10 key challenges for South African cities in the next decade.

Besides the dues received from its own members, SACN has secured additional grants from other sources, allowing it to conduct many follow-on projects. City officials have also come to view SACN as a respected urban development partner. Its support is guided by the City Development Strategy model (popularised by the Cities Alliance), which helps cities achieve equitable growth by integrating a strategic approach and a long-term perspective into their planning.

SACN has promoted knowledge sharing and stimulated debate at the provincial and national levels. Its work is geared toward producing practical knowledge and information, and it has reached a wide audience by making this information freely available through web-based media (www.sacities.net); organising capacity-building activities such as seminars and workshops; staging conferences; and producing publications.

In a relatively short time, SACN has raised the profile of South Africa's cities and fostered relationships among members as well as with the larger local government sector. Its advocacy has been aided by being well-positioned politically and by staging well-publicised launch events around election times, so incoming officials are empowered with the latest data. It has also catalysed two other urban research and policy centres: The African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town and the Gauteng Global City Region Observatory.

The organisation's impact has also spread beyond South Africa's borders. Other countries experiencing rapid urbanisation—including Ethiopia and Tanzania—have engaged with the group to learn about strategic urban data collection and analysis, and the establishment of the Ethiopian Cities Association and the Tanzanian Cities Network built largely on the lessons and experience of the SACN. They are now preparing their own “state of the cities” reports, guided by a **free toolkit** SACN developed. The SACN has also been supporting

local authorities throughout the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to assess and improve their municipal finance efforts.

Lessons Learned

The transition to a new local government system proved an optimal time to establish such a network, and SACN was well-positioned to push the envelope and open debates. The inclusion of key line ministries (local government, human settlements, transport, and public works), the national local government association, and city politicians and officials in SACN's governance structure has established an effective learning network in and of itself.

SACN's success can be attributed to the quality and relevance of the knowledge it generates, along with its role in facilitating dialogue and partnerships among a diverse range of urban actors. SACN was initially intended to provide a platform for horizontal learning, but it has also led to vertical learning between cities and other spheres of government, and thus to a more sophisticated understanding of cities' development issues. The SACN experience has also proven the tremendous value of south-south partnerships.

It has been important for the SACN agenda to remain dynamic and respond to members' needs, which is what prompted the organisation to reformulate its programmes to focus more holistically along thematic rather than sectoral lines. Having a good dissemination strategy ensured that knowledge products reached the widest possible audience, and engaging political representatives ensured the materials' relevance.



The South African Cities Network promotes sharing among partners as well as with other Southern Hemisphere countries.