

Mainstreaming resilience into urban planning practices

Objective of the note

It is highly likely that natural and human-made hazards will in future occur more frequently, and that extreme climatic events will become more severe (IFRC, 2010; IPCC, 2007). Combined with urbanisation, this trend will put more people in South African cities at risk of losing their lives, livelihoods or assets, so as to become progressively more vulnerable to everyday hazards over time. Critical urban infrastructure will also be at risk of being damaged or destroyed. The IFRC calls this a ‘strange new urban world’ that is developing (IFRC, 2010).

Disaster resilience aims to reduce losses by equipping cities to withstand, absorb, adapt to or recover from external shocks. Planning for disaster resilient cities is a long-term process, whereas spatial planning practices in South Africa are consumed with immediate development priorities and challenges. Issues of development planning thus take precedence over issues of sustainability and resilience (Oranje & Van Huyssteen, 2011). Only if urban planners understand disaster resilience as a means to secure a city’s development path while simultaneously addressing sustainability, will disaster resilience more likely be translated into spatial planning practices (Van Niekerk, 2013). This note considers the challenges of and rationale for mainstreaming disaster resilience into spatial planning practices and is written with policy makers and practitioners in spatial planning, regional planning and disaster management in mind.

Context of the problem

Towns and cities are home to the biggest part of the South African population. Even though cities are places of great opportunities, wealth and relative safety; the reality is that the continued urbanisation in South Africa combined with other global and local processes such as poverty, exclusion, unemployment, crime, etc. are making cities high-risk areas, and the people living in them susceptible to all kinds of natural and human-made hazards. A geographical risk divide is developing in cities as they become increasingly unjust, polarised, divided and fragmented: the well-connected elite barricade themselves in well-serviced and regulated high-security villages (Watson, 2005; Todes, 2011), while some communities struggle to survive along the fault lines of urban risk (IFRC, 2010). Furthermore, infrastructure and assets that are not well planned and maintained become vulnerable to extreme weather events, and if damaged or destroyed, the development gain is wiped out and scarce funds and resources are diverted towards reconstruction. Vulnerability of people, places and assets is therefore no longer only a rural issue. Towns



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and cities are becoming the stage where disaster risk and vulnerability have to be managed and mitigated (Pelling & Wisner, 2009), but many urban authorities do not have the experience and ability to manage such (ICLEI, 2010).

Vulnerability is a complex phenomenon – a combination of social, ecological, physical, economic, political, institutional, ideological and cultural root causes, dynamic pressures and unsafe conditions (Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon, & Davis, 2004). Risk is the combination of a hazard and vulnerability. In South African cities, most hazards are of a compound, everyday nature, i.e. crime, HIV/AIDS infection, motor car accidents, informal settlement fire and flooding, xenophobia, service delivery protests, etc. Resilience seeks to reduce these risks and vulnerabilities, but also imply creative coping and adaptation options (Collins, 2009). It is clear that addressing urban disaster risk and vulnerability is critical in protecting the assets, lives and livelihoods of people, as well as the infrastructure and development gain.

Commentary on current issues

Policy makers and practitioners in spatial planning, regional planning and disaster management would agree that disaster resilient cities are of great consequence, but in a country like South Africa with major immediate development challenges, the pursuit of resilience seems 'optional' (Van Niekerk, 2013). Or as Oranje and Van Huyssteen (2011) put it, development planning in South Africa is characterised by a conflict in intent, action and outcome between service delivery and transformation. The short-term focus on attaining 'servicing' targets (which are immediate and bottomless) often comes at the expense of long-term and transformative planning such as planning for disaster resilience. If building disaster resilient cities are seen as an issue distinct from what urban planners and disaster managers are already doing, the idea would be met with contempt or despair, for they would either see it as insignificant compared to addressing the many developmental backlogs and challenges, or become overwhelmed by the responsibility. 'If however it is regarded as a means to secure a city's development path while simultaneously addressing sustainability, then disaster resilience is more likely to be translated in spatial planning practices in South Africa' (Van Niekerk, 2013). Policy makers and practitioners thus have to be entrepreneurial and innovative in seeking to promote an emerging policy domain.

Recommendations

Urban planning has thus far done little to consciously reduce vulnerability to everyday risks in South Africa. By presenting disaster resilience as a means to realise a city's immediate development priorities whilst protecting the development gain, it is more likely that resilience would be translated into spatial planning practice in South Africa than if it were presented as a policy paradigm inconsequential from what planners are already doing. The goals of a resilient city therefore need to be mainstreamed into planning policy and everyday planning practices (Coaffee, Wood, & Rogers, 2009). Some recommendations that can be made in this regard are:

- **Moving beyond mere definitions:** Clear terminology is crucial for a good understanding of the problem, but it is more important to understand the underlying processes that contribute to risk and vulnerability and how to intervene in those processes, than being able to categorise each threat. This is because risk in South



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Africa is compound and complex, and categories of risks cannot easily be distinguished from each other. Furthermore, risk is often a vulnerability under different circumstances. Also, many urban planners are not experts in this field, yet they have to manage risks and vulnerabilities. An integrative approach towards reducing risks and vulnerabilities is therefore more important than attempting to mitigate a single type of hazard (Pelling, 2011).

- **Basics are important:** Planning for resilient cities involves more than being occupied with minimum standards or widely-accepted spatial designs, it involves accommodation of and adaptation to changing conditions over the long-term (Collins, 2009). Having said this, guaranteeing basic services, food security, policing, running water and sewerage, and respecting building codes go a long way in reducing the risks and vulnerabilities of people and places towards building resilient cities (IFRC, 2010).
- **Adopting an approach more suited to resource and data scarce environment:** South African cities do not have the capacity or funds to conduct a risk and vulnerability analysis for every potential threat. It is thus important to rather identify those proxies that reflect composite socio-economic vulnerability. In this way, the overall indication of the risk and vulnerability of places can be made available more easily to role players and decision makers.
- **Enabling integrated interventions:** An individual analysis of every potential risk and vulnerability would cause policy makers and practitioners to think about interventions in the same way. Composite analyses will result in integrated and strategic interventions that address a number of underlying processes while simultaneously promoting pro-active planning.
- **Utilising technology and capacitating practitioners:** The advances in the fields of geoscience and spatial analysis tools and platforms together with more and better data being available, allow for more planning based on evidence. Risk and vulnerability data can also effortlessly be integrated with spatial development frameworks, integrated development plans, disaster risk management, municipal reporting, etc. Awareness-raising and capacity-building of the users of the data, tools and platforms are crucial.

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