From the past, we look to our possible futures

The South African Cities Network has spent over two decades turning city data into evidence. The next 25 years depend on what cities do with it.

TIANA CLINE

01 JUNE 2026

Overlaying the city's streets, households and communities is another map of data: the billing systems, service requests and infrastructure records.

The gap between these two systems is where Nosipho Hlatshwayo, CEO of the South African Cities Network (SACN), has spent more than two decades working.

Data is the evidence base that makes it possible for cities to understand what is happening, justify decisions and motivate for change. Without data, progress cannot be measured, trends can't be tracked and municipalities have no credible basis for arguing their case for change.

SACN publishes its flagship 'State of Cities Report' (SOCR) every five years, and is built around a "barometer" that tracks performance metrics, sectoral data such as water, sanitation and power, as well as themes such as productivity and sustainability, over time.

"When you compare one municipality to the other, you start asking why a particular municipality was able to achieve so much more than the other?" says Hlatshwayo. "Is it a funding issue? Is it a capability issue, or is it something beyond that?" Even though the barometer is compiled using hard data, Hlatshwayo says not everything can be quantified. The SOCR pairs these indicators with qualitative case studies and research that show how these shifts are experienced by citizens.

> ” Municipalities don’t operate in a vacuum, but we haven’t been good at aligning and combining data sets across cities to support regional, data-based decision-making.

The report has also served as an early warning system for utilities. “Years ago, we indicated that municipalities like Cape Town, Nelson Mandela Bay and eThekwini would face water shortages,” says Hlatshwayo. “When those things happened, people went back and referred to that document.” But the network can only play an advisory role, and while some recommendations in the city report are acted on immediately by leaders, others only make sense in hindsight when the crisis is already upon the city.

Nosipho Hlatshwayo

Hlatshwayo says cities already have more data than they realise, and most of it is going to waste. Huge amounts of administrative data is generated every day, such as when someone pays a rates bill, submits a building plan application or logs a fault on a service app. “It’s only when 100 000 people are transacting with the municipality and the IT system fails, [that] you know exactly what you can’t collect,” she says.

Instead of using administrative data to keep basic services running, cities could use it to understand risk, unclog bottlenecks and guide long-term investment decisions. When city developers are deciding where to build, they want to know how long a rates clearance certificate takes to process, or how quickly a building plan gets approved. This information exists inside every municipality, and Hlatshwayo says administrative data should not be seen as just a governance tool, but the basis of economic infrastructure.

REPORTING FOR DUTY

The South African Cities Network, founded in 2002, is a network of South Africa's metropolitan municipalities and their partners, built on the idea that cities learn best from each other. Its flagship output is the State of Cities Report (SOCR), which has over five iterations tracking how South Africa's cities are performing against their constitutional mandate, covering roads, water, electricity, spatial transformation and economic resilience. The sixth edition, due in April 2027, is the most ambitious yet. Instead of reviewing the past five years, it reaches back 25 years, and then looks 25 years into the future.

Getting cities to actually use the data they have on hand is a different challenge entirely. The SACN has found that even relatively high-performing cities had significant gaps in how their data systems connected to each other. Hlatshwayo says that while financial data and built-environment data were generally in good shape, neither were linked to social data, such as who actually lives in a city, under what conditions and in which areas. Poorly performing municipalities may have outdated or broken IT equipment, rely on paper-based processes, and have a lack of skilled people to make sense of the data. In these cases, when a decision-maker needs information, it simply won't be ready in time.

In Hlatshwayo's experience, the same logic applies beyond individual cities. A planning decision in Tshwane has consequences for Johannesburg, but shared cross-boundary datasets that would enable regional decision-making are largely absent. The Department of Cooperative Governance has made progress with its National Strategic Hub, launched by Minister Velenkosini Hlabisa in 2024, but it operates at a national level and cannot capture the granular, cross-municipal detail that cities need when planning housing, transport or water responses together. "Municipalities don't operate in a vacuum, but we haven't been good at aligning and combining data sets across cities to support regional, data-based decision-making," says Hlatshwayo. "That's exactly where a network [like the SACN] can help cities learn from each other instead of each one struggling on its own."

> Huge amounts of administrative data is generated every day, such as when someone pays a rates bill, submits a building plan application or logs a fault on a service app.
>
> -

Digital transformation has a role to play, but Hlatshwayo believes municipalities need to adopt technology on their own terms, starting with what clearly supports basic service delivery and economic growth rather than investing in the newest innovation. And, with public funds at stake, digital projects that don't clearly improve services or enable economic activity shouldn't be at the top of the priority list. Whatever municipalities end up doing with digital tools, the test has to be whether it enables economic growth and improves the lives of people who depend on municipal services.

Twenty-five years of data gives the SACN a foundation that most organisations simply do not have. For its sixth SOCR, the network is mapping possible outcomes for cities informed by geopolitics, technological shifts and changing social behaviour, to help cities prepare for more than one possible future. From fuel price shocks to desalination, the erosion of public trust in institutions and, of course, AI, all the data feeds into a picture that no single city could build alone. "We don't work towards one future," says Hlatshwayo. "There are many futures that could materialise. Our exercise is to co-create those futures with people from different walks of life."