

2026/27–2030/31

STRATEGIC BUSINESS PLAN

A credible urban intelligence and learning hub
that curates, analyses and translates evidence
into insights and foresights for cities.

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South African Cities Network (SACN)
Joburg Metro Building
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Braamfontein, 2017
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PREFACE

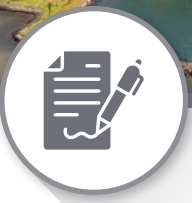
The South African Cities Network (SACN) enters the 2026/27–2030/31 strategic cycle in a demanding urban and local government environment. Cities are facing compounding pressures linked to urbanisation, governance complexity, constrained municipal finances, infrastructure backlogs, rising inequality, climate and disaster risk and rapid technological change. These pressures are intensified by shifting political dynamics and evolving intergovernmental delivery models.

South Africa's developmental outcomes are mainly delivered in cities, which contain high concentrations of economic activity, innovation capability and opportunities for inclusion. Therefore, strengthening city governance and delivery is central to advancing the national development agenda and improving the lived experience of residents.

This Strategic Business Plan retains SACN's mandate and core purpose, while sharpening the strategic logic for impact. SACN continues to focus on the urban agenda, applying its mandate through a city-region lens, including selected intermediate city municipalities that shape functional urban systems and corridors linked to metros. The strategy is anchored in SACN being a credible urban intelligence and learning hub that turns evidence into decision-ready insight, peer learning into measurable practice change and city experience into a stronger urban agenda.

The plan sets out clear strategic pillars and objectives for 2026/27–2030/31 and translates them into a coherent programme portfolio and enabling framework. It strengthens delivery discipline by embedding data and foresight into programme design, building adoption pathways into learning platforms and positioning the State of Cities Report as both a flagship publication and a change platform that synthesises intelligence, practice evidence and policy influence from across SACN's work.

This document is intended to guide annual planning, resource allocation and performance management across the organisation. It provides a practical basis for governance oversight, partnership design and monitoring, evaluation and learning, so SACN can demonstrate outcomes, adapt quickly and deliver sustained value to participating cities and partners.



OFFICIAL SIGN-OFF

This Strategic Business Plan has been prepared by the SACN Secretariat and reflects the organisation's strategic priorities and implementation approach for the period 2026/27–2030/31. It guides annual business plans and supports consistent delivery and adaptability.

As Chairperson of the SACN Board, I hereby acknowledge the SACN Strategic Business Plan 2026/27–2030/31 and confirm that the Board of Directors endorse and are committed to supporting and ensuring the implementation of this plan.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, representing Yolisa Kani.

YOLISA KANI
Chairperson of the SACN Board
30 June 2026



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Acronyms

CDS	City Development Strategy
ICM	Intermediate City Municipality
IUDF	Integrated Urban Development Framework
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NbS	Nature-based Solutions
NDP	National Development Plan
PDIA	Problem-driven Iterative Adaptation
SACN	South African Cities Network
SCM	Supply Chain Management
SCODA	South African Cities Open Data Almanac
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprises
SOCR	State of Cities Report

Glossary

ADOPTION PATHWAYS: Practical mechanisms and support steps that help SACN's knowledge, tools and learning to be taken up, applied and sustained in city practice.

AGILE: The ability to move, think, or adapt quickly, easily and effectively.

CITY-REGION: A functional urban system, which is centred on a major city and extends into surrounding municipalities.

NATURAL ASSETS: Natural resources (e.g., wetlands, aquifers) that provide essential, cost-effective and sustainable municipal services (e.g., water filtration, flood control) similar to engineered infrastructure.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The SACN's Strategic Business Plan for 2026/27–2030/31 is aligned with national and international urban frameworks, in particular the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), which is South Africa's national policy framework to guide the growth and management of urban areas. This strategic cycle retains the SACN vision, mission and mandate (Figures 1 and 2) and continues to focus on the urban agenda.

FIGURE 1: SACN's vision, mission and values



FIGURE 2: SACN's mandate





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In this strategy cycle, the SACN strengthens its strategic logic by broadening its focus to include selected intermediate city municipalities (ICMs) and by adopting a city-region lens. This reflects how urban systems function through shared economies, mobility networks, infrastructure systems and natural assets that extend across boundaries. It also strengthens SACN's ability to deliver on its mandate by aligning its evidence, learning platforms and advocacy with the functional geography of the urban system.

SACN's strategic pillars (Figure 3) translate the vision and mission into the main priorities that guide delivery over the next five years, while the strategic objectives (Figure 4) provide clear outcomes and the basis for prioritising work, allocating resources and measuring performance.

FIGURE 3: SACN's strategic pillars

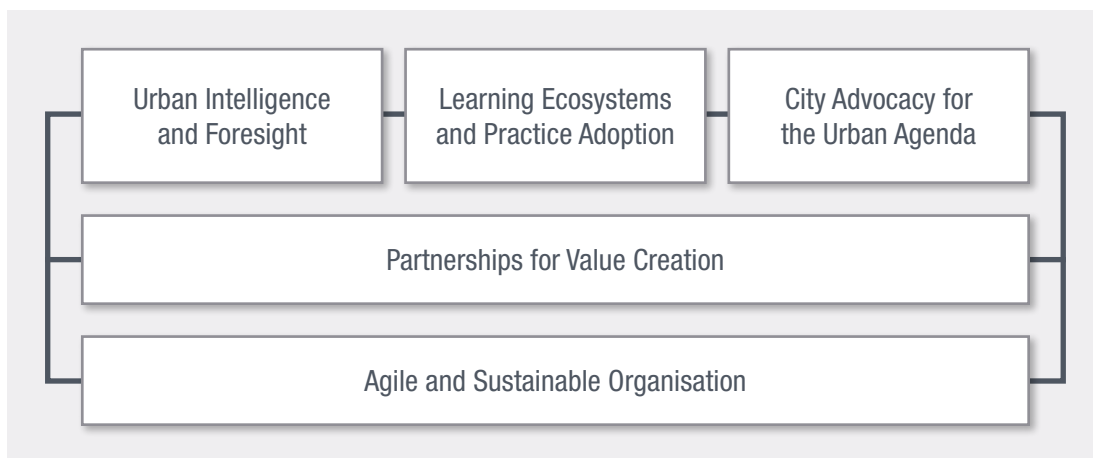


FIGURE 4: SACN's strategic objectives



The 2026/27–2030/31 cycle takes shape within a context of higher delivery risk and tighter resources, with growing pressure for credible evidence, practical adoption pathways and stronger coordination across spheres of government and across municipal boundaries. In response to this context, SACN applies an integrated approach that is built on four connected elements (Figure 5) and sets out a clear five-year plan to strengthen city governance and delivery through urban intelligence and foresight, peer learning and partnerships that turn evidence into practical adoption. The State of Cities Report (SoCR) is positioned as both a flagship publication and a change platform that synthesises insights, practice evidence and policy influence from across programmes and supports wider system shifts.

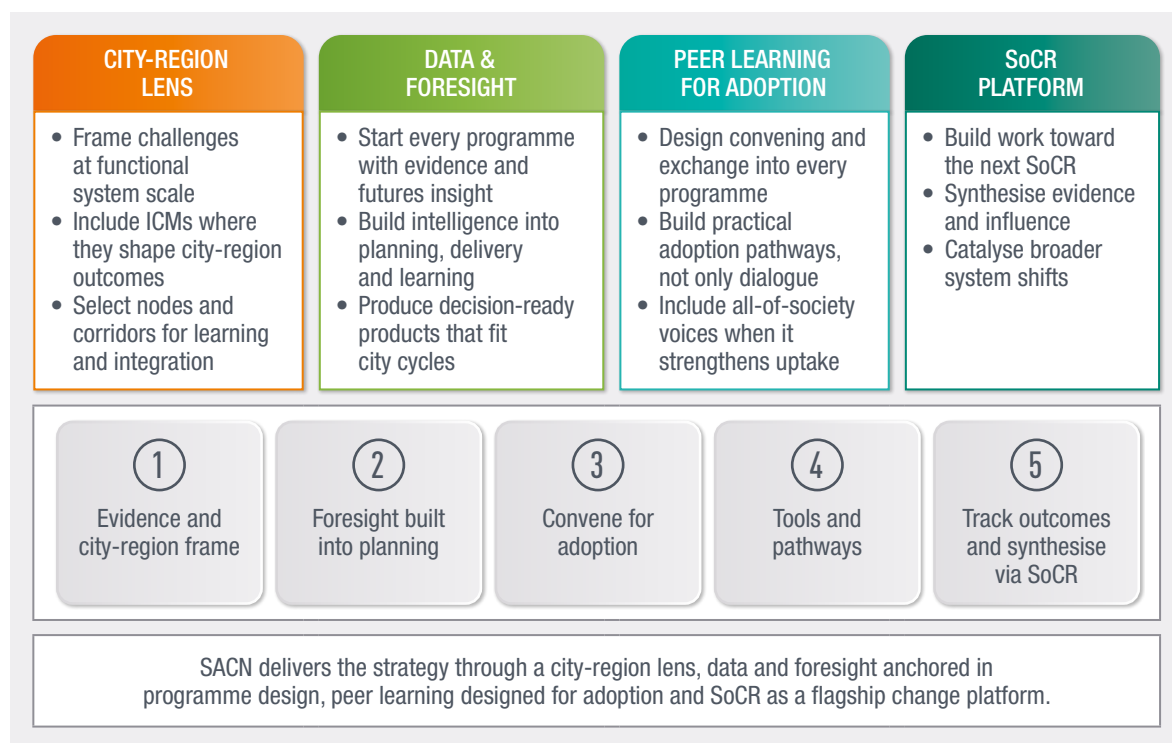
The plan is informed by the SWOT analysis, from which strengths to build on and gaps to address were identified (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Strengths and gaps from the SWOT analysis

STRENGTHS TO BUILD ON	GAPS AND UNEVEN PERFORMANCE (TO CORRECT)
• Credible research and convening power that bring cities and partners into the same room with a shared fact base • Peer-learning platforms that build practitioner communities and support the adaptation of workable approaches • Comparative data and benchmarking capability, including SCODA, that provides an evidence spine for learning and decision-making	• Uneven participation and traction across cities – reduces collective value and learning • Limited outcome tracking and weak adoption logs – reduces proof of practice change • Role overlap in the ecosystem – can create duplication without clearer niche definition and partnership agreements • Funding volatility and reliance on subscriptions and short grants – constrains continuity

In the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle, SACN applies an integrated approach that is built on four connected elements: a city-region lens, data and foresight as the anchor for programme design, peer learning and the SoCR as a flagship change platform (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: SACN's integrated approach





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SACN's thematic programmes and delivery streams provide the organising framework for how the organisation advances the urban agenda in practice. The thematic programmes speak to the core urban outcomes that SACN seeks to influence, i.e., Well-Governed Cities, Productive Cities, Sustainable & Resilient Cities, and Inclusive Cities, while the delivery streams provide the cross-cutting pathways through which SACN develops, connects and applies evidence across these thematic areas (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6: SACN's thematic programmes and delivery streams

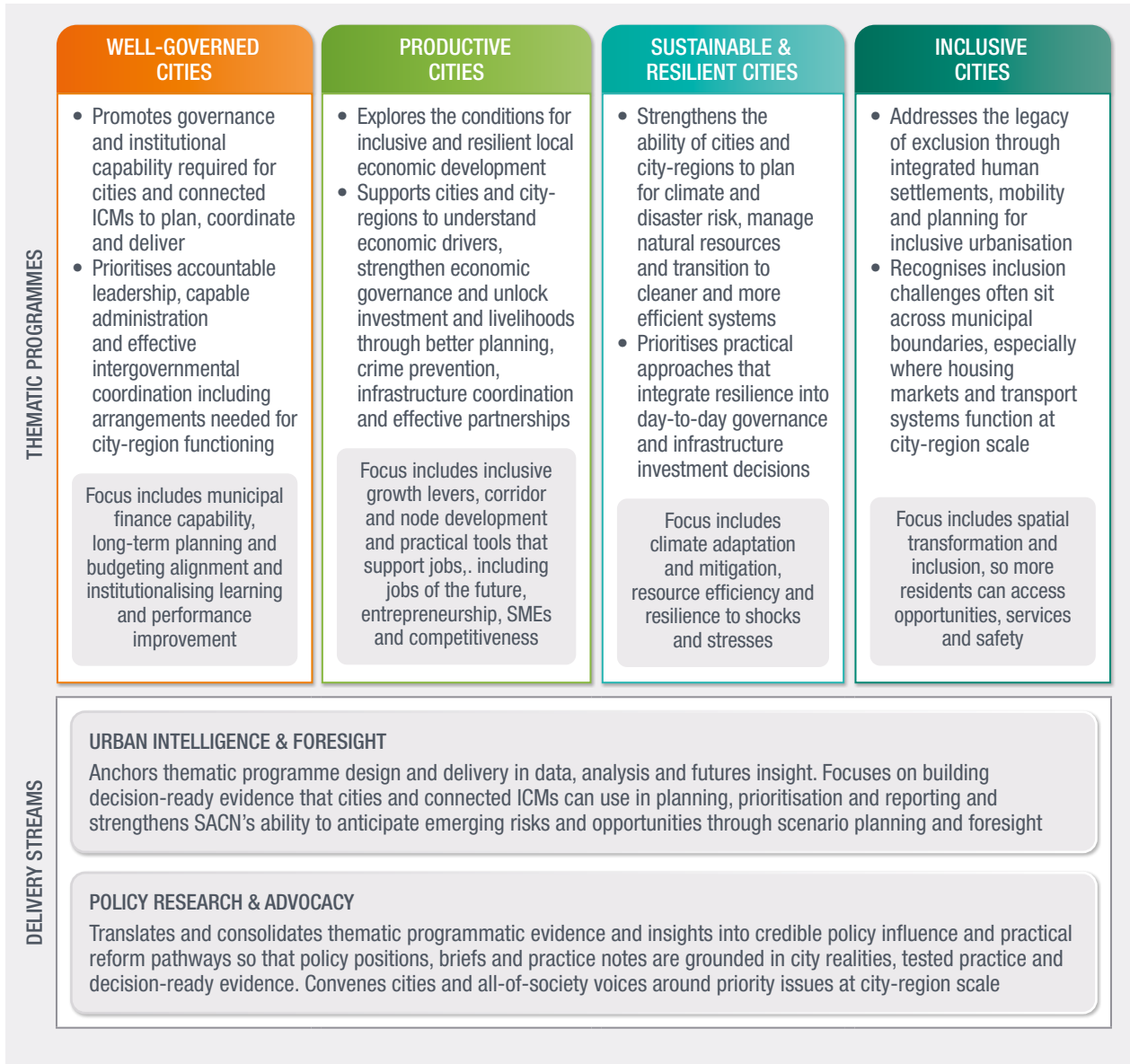


Table 2 summarises the link between the strategic objectives, pillars and delivery mechanisms.

TABLE 2: Link between strategic objectives, pillars and delivery mechanisms

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE	LEAD PILLARS	PRIMARY DELIVERY MECHANISMS
Strengthen city governance and delivery through urban intelligence and foresight that turn evidence into decision-ready action	Urban Intelligence and Foresight	Flagship reports, intelligence briefs, indicators, dashboards, scenario planning and foresight monitoring
Enable cities to translate peer learning into measurable change in practice	Learning Ecosystems and Practice Adoption	Reference groups, learning pathways, toolkits, PDIA methods and adoption tracking
Advocate for the urban agenda by enabling cities to influence policy and practice through a credible, evidence-led city voice	City Advocacy for the Urban Agenda	Policy briefs, submissions, convenings for influence, alliances and advocacy pipeline management
Strengthen strategic partnerships and ensure an agile, well-governed and sustainable organisation	Partnerships for Value Creation and Agile and Sustainable Organisation	Partnership framework, fundraising strategy, governance strengthening, budgeting discipline, systems and people capability

Partnerships are central to SACN's work. In the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle, partnerships will be managed more deliberately and with a stronger focus on strategic value, prioritising fewer, higher value partnerships that make a distinct contribution to learning, influence, delivery or implementation support.

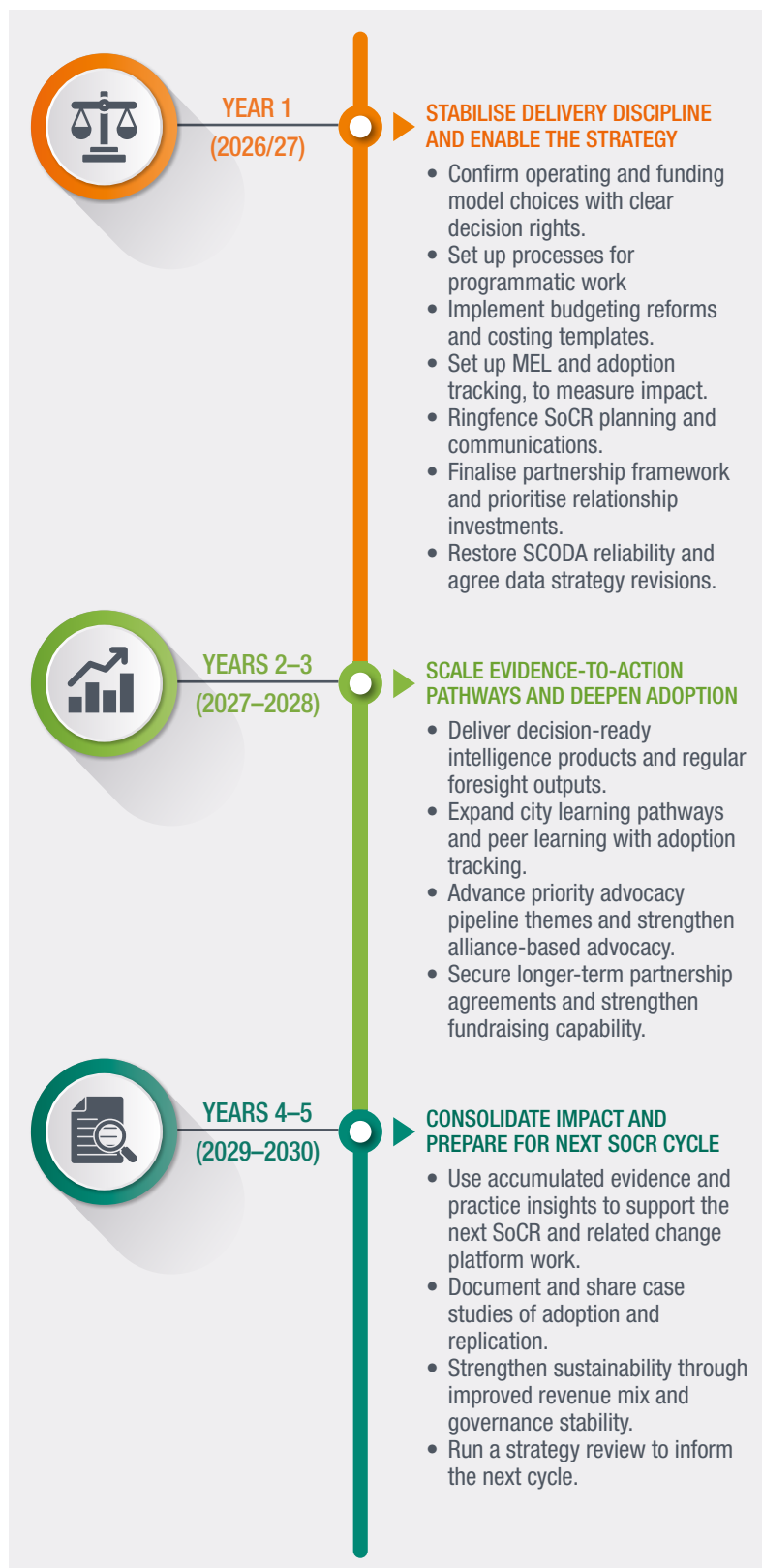
Supporting SACN's thematic programmes and delivery streams are enabling functions that protect credibility and support quality delivery. They include Finance & Corporate Services and Strategy, Partnerships and Communication. SACN's organisational structure for 2026/27–2030/31 supports the strategic shift to an integrated approach (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7: Organisational structure



Figure 8 describes the roadmap that will guide execution through annual business plans while allowing agility in a changing environment. The first 18 months will focus on enabling conditions and flagship commitments.

FIGURE 8: Implementation roadmap



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Partnerships are central to SACN’s work.”



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INTRODUCTION

Following the conclusion of the 2020/21–2025/26 cycle, SACN is embarking on a new five-year strategic cycle. The Strategic Business Plan for 2026/27–2030/31 is conceived within a longer term outlook that is aligned with the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 Vision, the New Urban Agenda, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 11 on inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities), the Paris Climate Agreement and the African Union’s Agenda 2063.

Underpinning the strategy is the IUDF, which is South Africa’s national policy framework to guide the growth and management of urban areas, that advances spatial integration, inclusion and access, economic vitality and effective governance. These goals are central for cities that are managing rising service demands, infrastructure stress and fiscal constraints, while responding to climate risk and deeper social and spatial inequality.

SACN was established to assist cities in navigating complex social, economic, financial and governance challenges, while addressing the legacy of spatial injustice and exclusion. The 2026/27–2030/31 cycle takes shape within a context of higher delivery risk and tighter resources, with growing pressure for credible evidence, practical adoption pathways and stronger coordination across spheres of government and across municipal boundaries.

This strategic cycle retains the SACN mandate and continues to focus on the urban agenda. SACN strengthens its strategic logic by broadening its focus to include selected intermediate city municipalities (ICMs) and by adopting a city-region lens. This reflects how urban systems function through shared economies, mobility networks, infrastructure systems and natural assets that extend across boundaries.



The SACN sets out a clear five-year plan to strengthen city governance and delivery through urban intelligence and foresight, peer learning and partnerships that turn evidence into practical adoption. The State of Cities Report (SoCR) is positioned as both a flagship publication and a change platform that synthesises insights, practice evidence and policy influence from across programmes and supports wider system shifts.

This strategy document has three main sections:

SECTION
01

The Strategic Overview

Confirms SACN's foundational elements and strategic direction.

SECTION
02

The Strategic Review

Summarises key lessons and operating realities.

SECTION
03

The Strategic Business Plan 2026/27–2030/31

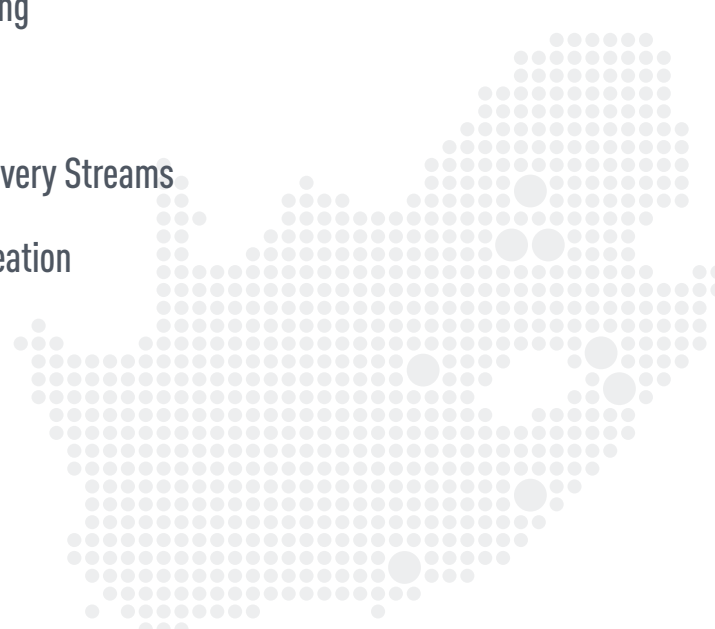
Sets out the strategic pillars, objectives, thematic priorities, enabling functions and the implementation roadmap for the five-year period.

A photograph of a city skyline at sunset. The sky is filled with orange and yellow clouds, and the city lights are visible. A large orange circle is overlaid on the left side of the image.

SECTION

01

STRATEGIC OVERVIEW

- 1.1 Vision, Mission, Values and Mandate
 - 1.2 Strategic Pillars and Strategic Objectives
 - 1.3 Value Proposition and Positioning
 - 1.4 SACN Theory of Change
 - 1.5 Thematic Programmes and Delivery Streams
 - 1.6 Strategic Partners for Value Creation
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- A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consisting of a cluster of dots of varying sizes, arranged in a pattern that resembles a stylized map of South Africa.

1.1

Vision, Mission, Values and Mandate



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SACN's vision, mission, values and mandate are retained in this strategic cycle (Figures 1 and 2), but the organisation's strategic logic is strengthened by broadening the urban lens to include intermediate city municipalities (ICMs) and by adopting a city-region lens. This shift reflects the reality that urban outcomes are produced through functional systems that extend beyond single municipal boundaries.

The vision describes the future that SACN seeks to advance across the urban system, while the mission states how SACN will contribute through its core strengths. The values define how SACN works with cities and partners, shaping the organisational culture and standards applied in producing evidence, convening and collaborating.

FIGURE 9: SACN vision, mission and values



FIGURE 10: SACN's mandate





City-region lens and ICMs

A city-region lens allows SACN to engage at the scale where people live, work and access opportunities, recognising that labour markets, housing markets, transport networks, infrastructure systems and natural assets operate across municipal jurisdictions. It also recognises that many ICMs are tightly linked to metros through commuting patterns, labour flows, logistics corridors, service catchments and investment flows, and that these linkages shape city performance, spatial transformation and resilience outcomes.

A city-region is defined as a functional urban system, which is centred on a major city and extends into surrounding municipalities. Its key characteristics include:

- Functional integration of people, goods, services and capital across municipal boundaries.
- A multi-nodal settlement and economic structure including a core city and connected nodes, such as ICMs, industrial areas and logistics hubs.
- Shared infrastructure systems, including water, energy, transport, waste and digital services, that require coordinated planning and investment.
- Linked land and housing markets, meaning that decisions in one municipality shape affordability, access and spatial justice in another.
- Cross-boundary natural assets and risks, including catchments, floodplains, biodiversity corridors and climate-related hazards that require coordinated management.
- Multi-jurisdiction governance and intergovernmental coordination, where collaboration is essential for delivery and accountability.

The city-region lens strengthens SACN's ability to deliver on its mandate by aligning SACN's evidence, learning platforms and advocacy with the functional geography of the urban system. In practice, SACN will apply the city-region lens by:

- Producing urban intelligence and foresight that reflects functional urban systems, including relevant ICM trends where they shape city-region outcomes.
- Convening peer learning that brings metros and linked ICMs into shared problem-solving spaces on cross-boundary priorities.
- Developing practice notes, tools and case studies that address coordination challenges and delivery models across municipal boundaries.
- Strengthening advocacy for the urban agenda through evidence that demonstrates where policy, governance and funding reforms are needed to enable city-regions to function.

This strategic logic ensures that SACN remains focused on the urban agenda, while becoming more accurate and useful in how it frames urban realities, identifies levers for change and supports adoption in city systems.

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The vision and mission guide SACN's strategic pillars, thematic work and delivery approach.”

1.2

Strategic Pillars and Strategic Objectives

SACN's strategic pillars (Figure 3) translate the vision and mission into the main priorities that guide delivery over the five-year period. They provide the organising framework for programmes, partnerships, resources and performance management.

FIGURE 11: SACN strategic pillars



SACN's strategic objectives translate the vision and mission into clear outcomes for the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle. They define what success looks like and provide the basis for prioritising work, allocating resources and measuring performance. The objectives are designed to strengthen decision-making through evidence and foresight, move learning into adoption, amplify a credible city voice and secure the partnerships and organisational capability needed for consistent delivery.

FIGURE 12: SACN strategic objectives

- 01 To promote city governance and delivery through urban intelligence and foresight that turn evidence into decision-ready action
- 02 To enable cities to translate peer learning into measurable change in practice
- 03 To advocate for the urban agenda by enabling cities to influence policy and practice through a credible, evidence-led city voice
- 04 To strengthen strategic partnerships and ensure an agile, well-governed and sustainable organisation



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1.3

Value Proposition and Positioning

SACN's value proposition sets out the specific ways in which the organisation creates value for participating cities and partners. It clarifies why SACN exists in the urban governance ecosystem and what cities can expect to gain through SACN's research, convening and partnerships. In this cycle, the value proposition is anchored in SACN's niche as a credible, data-driven urban intelligence and learning hub, guiding how SACN designs evidence, learning platforms and advocacy to support adoption and impact.

FIGURE 13: SACN value proposition



SACN's role is to turn evidence into decision-ready insight, peer learning into measurable practice change and city experience into a stronger urban agenda. SACN creates value through urban intelligence and foresight, structured learning, evidence-led advocacy and strategic partnerships that support uptake and system change.

SACN is not a delivery agency and does not replace the statutory or operational roles of government institutions. Its role is to strengthen system performance through data-driven evidence, learning and convening, while maintaining a clear focus on its distinctive niche in the urban ecosystem.

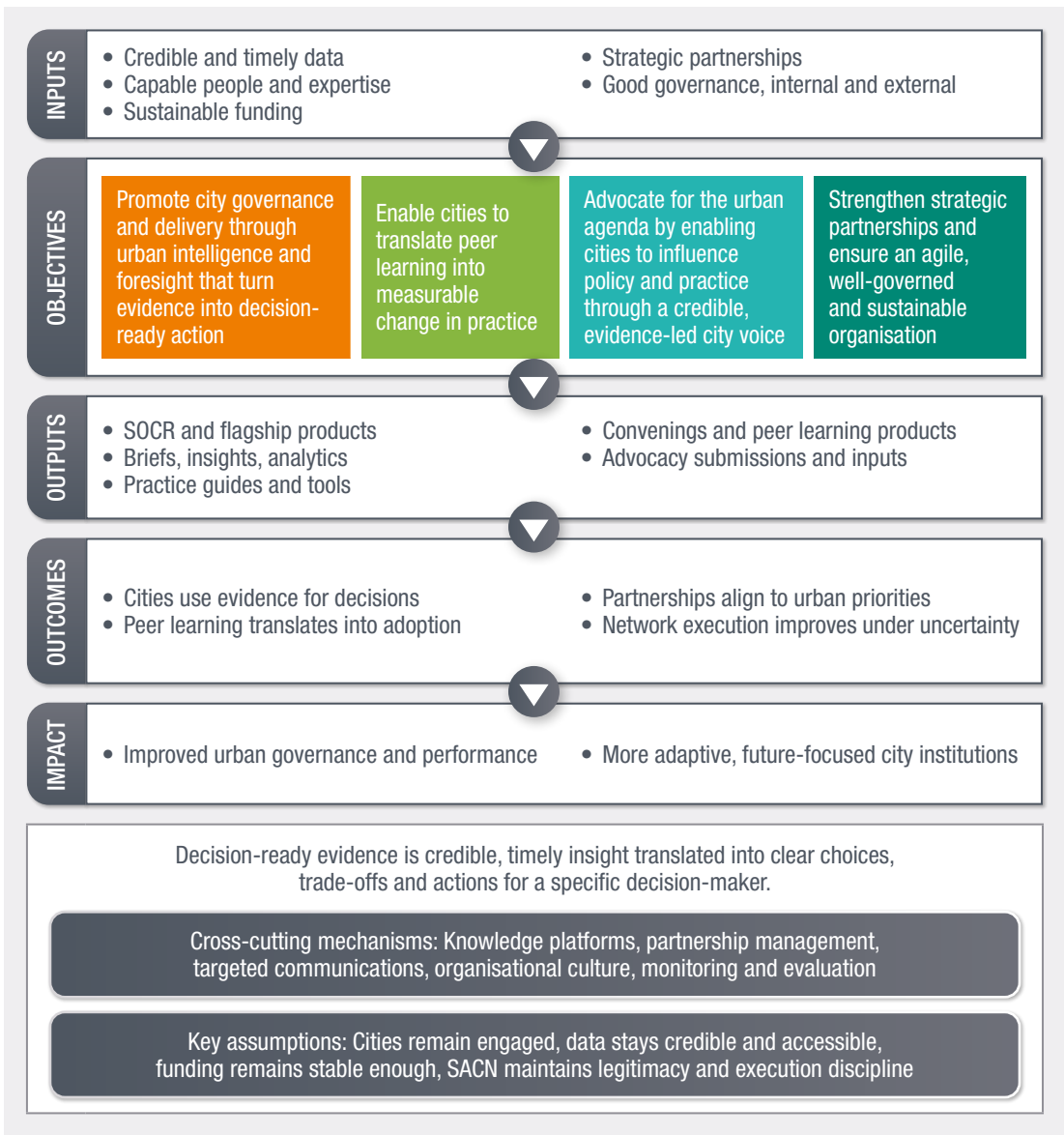
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SACN Theory of Change

SACN’s theory of change explains how the organisation expects to achieve impact over the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle. It sets out the logic that connects SACN’s inputs and capabilities to the outputs it produces and the outcomes it seeks in city governance and delivery. The theory of change guides programme planning, partnership choices and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). It strengthens accountability by making explicit the pathway from evidence to learning to adoption and clarifies what SACN will measure to demonstrate progress.

In this cycle, the theory of change is driven by data and foresight as the anchor for programme design, peer learning that is designed for adoption and the SoCR as both a flagship publication and a change platform. A well-governed and sustainable SACN, with credible data, skilled people and strategic partnerships, can produce decision-ready urban intelligence and foresight, enable learning that leads to adoption and strengthen conditions for improved city governance and urban performance.

FIGURE 14: SACN theory of change



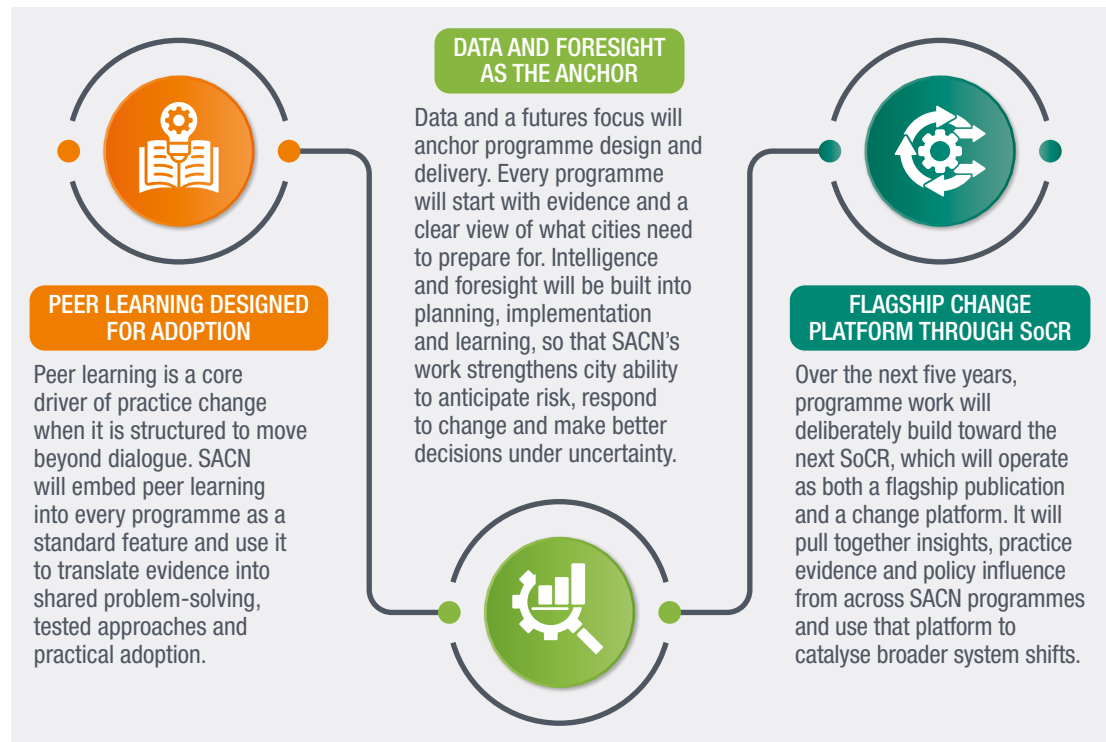
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SACN's theory of change is anchored in three reinforcing drivers that shape how SACN designs programmes, chooses partners and measures results (Figure 7).

FIGURE 15: Theory of change drivers



SACN's mechanism of change follows an evidence-to-adoption pathway:

- **Sense and anticipate** – strengthen data, indicators and foresight to identify emerging risks, opportunities and priority reform questions.
- **Translate into decision-ready intelligence** – curate and package evidence into insights, tools and guidance that fit city decision cycles.
- **Convene for shared problem-solving** – design peer learning and practitioner exchange that includes all-of-society voices where this strengthens legitimacy and improves solutions.
- **Support adoption** – build practical adoption pathways into each initiative including implementation guides, practice notes, demonstration approaches and follow-through support.
- **Measure and learn** – track uptake, replication and durability of practice change and use MEL feedback to refine programmes and strengthen impact.

What this means for programme design and delivery

Every programme will include the following standard elements:

- A clear evidence base and data approach including indicators and, where relevant, a foresight component.
- A peer-learning design that includes convening, exchange and structured learning journeys.
- Practical adoption pathways, so that learning translates into measurable practice change.
- Inclusive convening that brings in all-of-society voices where needed, including civil society, academia, communities and the private sector.
- An explicit linkage to the SoCR through either indicator alignment, case study development, practice evidence or policy influence contributions



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Outputs that support the theory of change

SACN's outputs will be designed to reinforce the drivers above. They include:

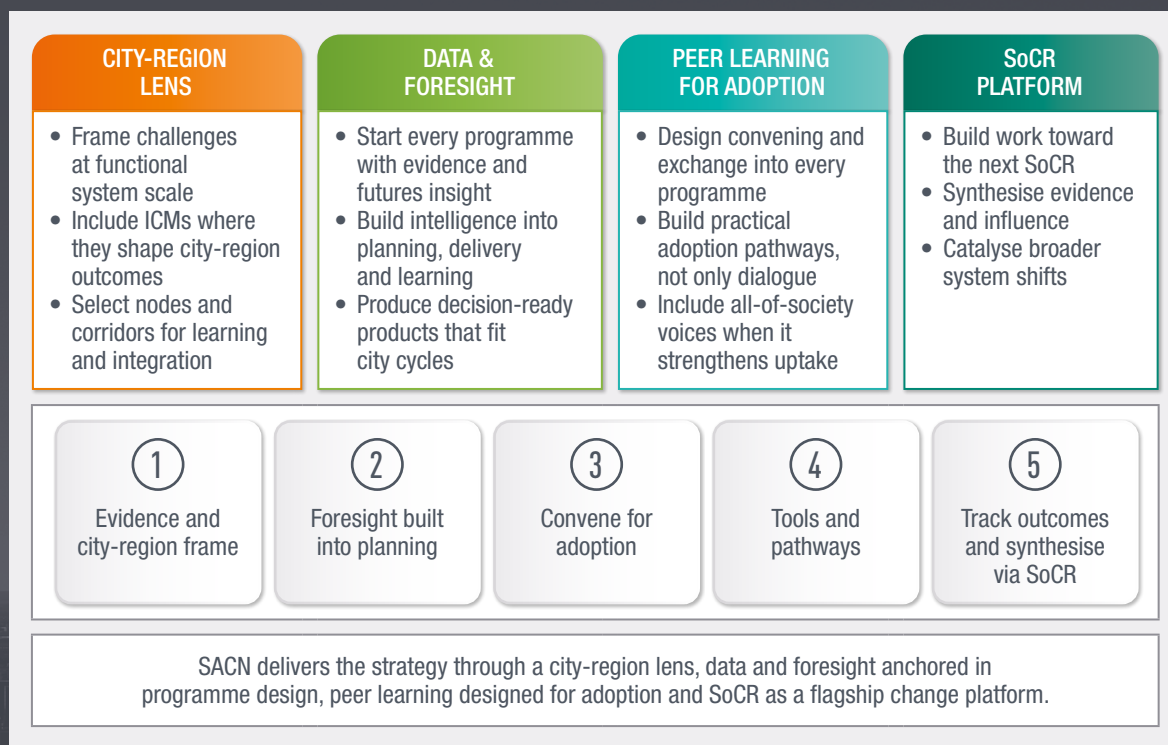
- SoCR as a flagship publication and change platform that synthesises evidence and strengthens policy influence and system learning.
- Urban intelligence and foresight research, including briefs, dashboards, scenario insights and decision notes.
- Convenings and peer-learning platforms, including reference groups, leadership dialogues and practitioner exchanges.
- Practice notes, tools and “how-to” products that support adoption.
- Policy briefs and advocacy inputs grounded in programme evidence and the realities of city practice.

This theory of change provides a clear basis for measuring outcomes, improving relevance and demonstrating impact over the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle.

SUMMARY: SACN's integrated approach

In the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle, SACN applies an integrated approach that is built on four connected elements: a city-region lens, data and foresight as the anchor for programme design, peer learning and the SoCR as a flagship change platform.

FIGURE 16: SACN's integrated approach



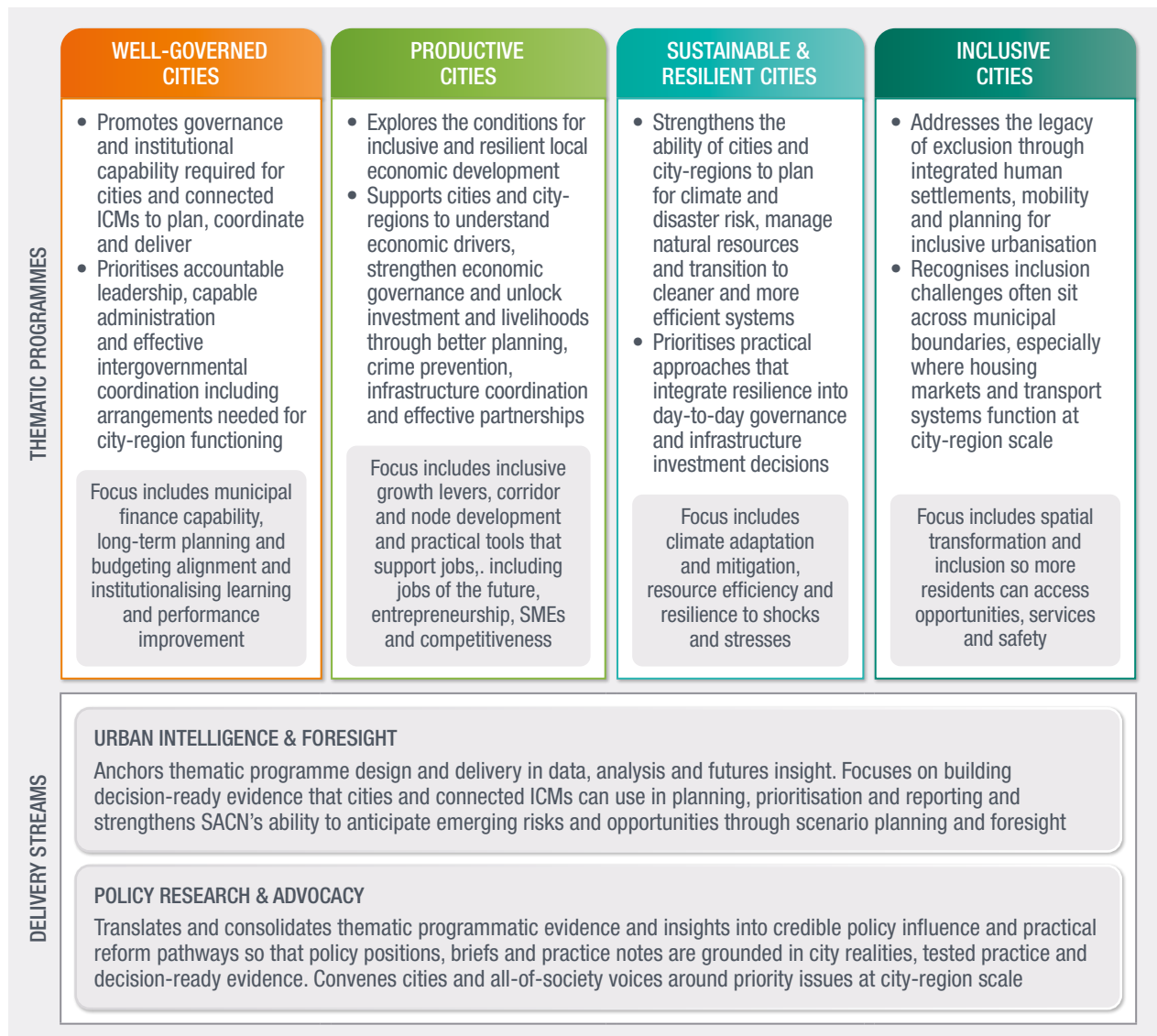
1.5

Thematic Programmes and Delivery Streams

SACN's thematic programmes and delivery streams provide the organising framework for how the organisation advances the urban agenda in practice. The thematic programmes speak to the core urban outcomes that SACN seeks to influence, i.e., Well-Governed Cities, Productive Cities, Sustainable & Resilient Cities, and Inclusive Cities. These areas translate the strategic pillars into applied domains where SACN can generate decision-ready intelligence, convene peer learning, support adoption and strengthen city practice. As mentioned, programmatic work is pursued through a city-region lens and grounded in data and foresight, so that programmes respond to real system dynamics that extend across municipal boundaries.

The delivery streams provide the cross-cutting pathways through which SACN develops, connects and applies evidence across these thematic areas. Urban Intelligence & Foresight anchors programme design and delivery in data, analysis and futures insight, while Policy Research & Advocacy translates programmatic learning and research into credible policy influence and practical reform pathways. Together, the thematic programmes and delivery streams create a shared structure for planning, reporting and learning across SACN and participating cities. They also help align outputs to the SoCR, strengthen integration across programmes and support more consistent tracking of outcomes and practice change.

FIGURE 17: Thematic programmes and delivery streams



1.6

Strategic Partners for Value Creation

Partnerships are central to SACN's value proposition and delivery model. SACN operates as a network and a partnership platform, working with strategic partners to strengthen the credibility of its evidence, extend reach, deepen peer learning and enable forms of joint delivery that support adoption, practical uptake and system change. In essence, partnerships are both a way of working and a means of creating shared value for cities, institutions and the wider urban agenda.

In the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle, partnerships will be managed more deliberately and with a stronger focus on strategic value. SACN will prioritise fewer, higher value partnerships that are clearly aligned to the city-region lens and the evidence-to-adoption approach, and that make a distinct contribution to learning, influence, delivery or implementation support. These partnerships will be structured around clear roles, expected value, deliverables and review mechanisms, so that they remain purposeful, accountable and results-oriented.

Partner categories

SACN's strategic partners include:

- Participating cities and selected ICMs in city-regions, as SACN's primary partners and anchor constituency.
- National government and local government institutions, which shape the urban agenda, funding and implementation systems.
- Provinces and intergovernmental forums, which influence regional planning and coordination.
- Research and academic institutions, which strengthen analytical rigour, data quality and foresight capability.
- Civil society, communities and practitioner networks, as all-of-society convening improves legitimacy, solutions and adoption.
- Private sector and industry partners, which support adoption, innovation and city-region economic priorities while protecting SACN's independence.
- Development partners and donors, which support flagship research products, demonstration initiatives and longer term sustainability.
- Continental and global city networks, which strengthen learning, partnerships and comparative insight relevant to South African cities.

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Partnerships are central to SACN's value proposition and delivery model.”



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SECTION

02

STRATEGIC REVIEW

- 2.1 Outputs, Outcomes and Impact
- 2.2 Operating Environment and Trends
- 2.3 SWOT Analysis
- 2.4 Key Messages from the Strategic Evaluation



2.1

Outputs, Outcomes and Impact

SACN operates as a knowledge, intelligence and convening platform, producing comparative diagnostics, thematic research, flagship publications and learning platforms that brought metros, national departments and partners into structured dialogue.

Outputs

SACN's core outputs are a connected set of research products and learning platforms that enable the use of evidence, learning and coordination in the city system:

- Impactful research, synthesis and interpretation research that frame city-system challenges and options.
- Data and indicator products that enable benchmarking and decision support, including the South African Cities Open Data Almanac (SCODA) updates and related analytics.
- Convenings, reference groups and exchanges that enable peer learning and intergovernmental alignment.
- Targeted communication and translation of research products, including tools and practice briefs.

Outcomes

The evaluation indicated that SACN's strongest outcomes are when evidence is current, packaging is fit for purpose and convening is paired with clear follow-through. Uptake is highest when the outputs are short, practical and supported by agreed next steps and ownership.

- Agenda setting and shared problem framing through credible comparative evidence.
- Knowledge translation that supports decision-making by leaders and practitioners.
- Improved coordination across national and local actors through neutral convening spaces.
- Capability lifting through peer learning that enables adaptation of practice across cities.

Impact

SACN's influence is widely recognised, although the line of sight from outputs to durable practice change is not always consistently measured. Impact is strongest when programmes include adoption pathways, practical tools and feedback loops that track uptake and learning over time.

This section summarises SACN's performance and learning from the previous cycle within the local government environment, highlighting SACN's outputs, outcomes and impact. It also synthesises stakeholder perspectives, reviews the operating context across global and local trends, and presents the SWOT analysis and the key findings and recommendations from the evaluation that informed the 2026/27–2030/31 Strategic Business Plan.



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SACN is operating within a period of accelerated transition shaped by intersecting demographic, economic, technological and environmental forces.”

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Operating Environment and Trends

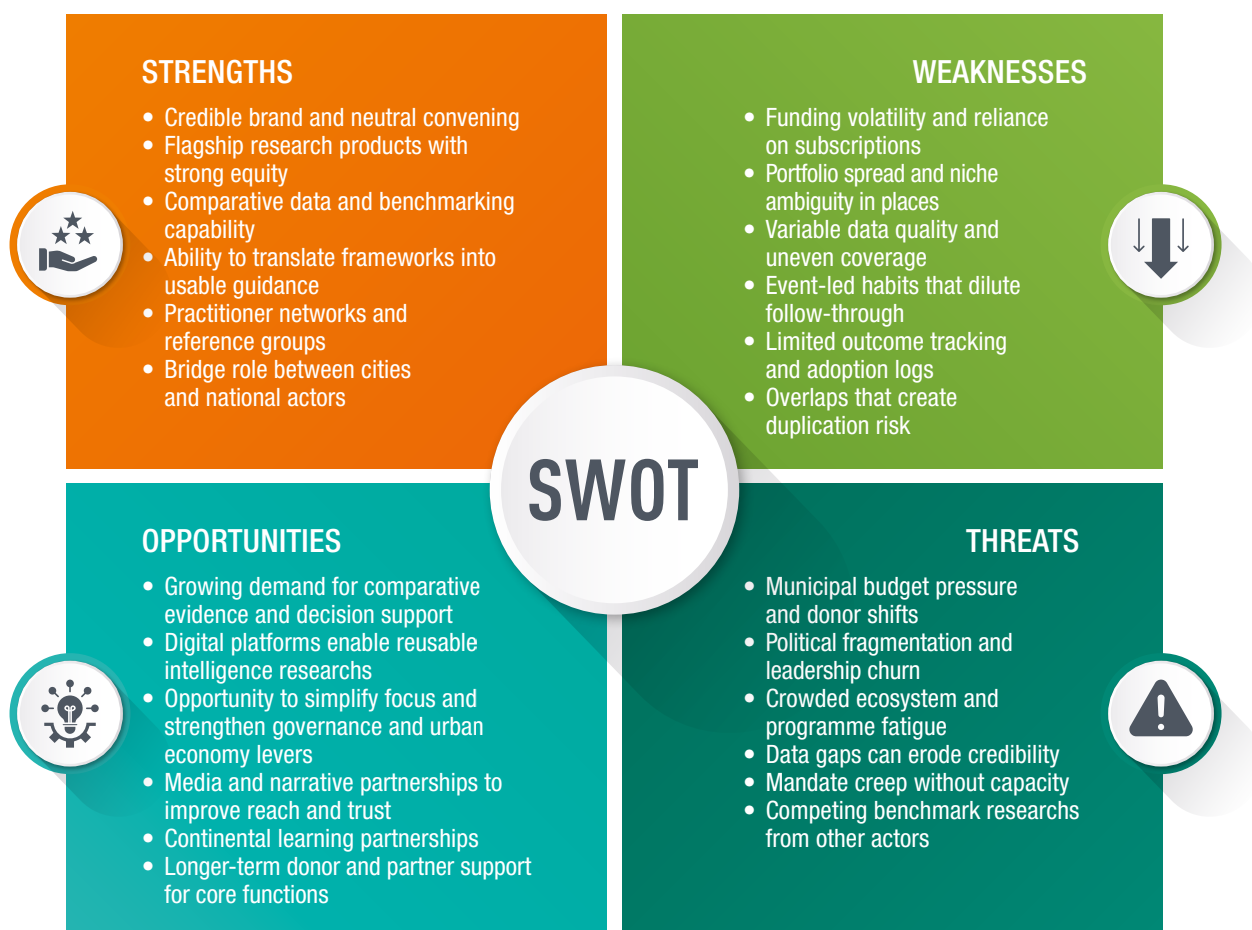
SACN is operating within a period of accelerated transition shaped by intersecting demographic, economic, technological and environmental forces. South Africa's cities remain pivotal to national growth and transformation but are facing widening fiscal strain, governance volatility and uneven service outcomes.

FIGURE 18: Impact of global, African and South African context



2.3

SWOT Analysis



From the SWOT analysis, strengths to build on and gaps to address were identified:

STRENGTHS TO BUILD ON	GAPS AND UNEVEN PERFORMANCE (TO CORRECT)
• Credible research and convening power that bring cities and partners into the same room with a shared fact base • Peer-learning platforms that build practitioner communities and support the adaptation of workable approaches • Comparative data and benchmarking capability, including SCODA, that provides an evidence spine for learning and decision-making	• Uneven participation and traction across cities – reduces collective value and learning • Limited outcome tracking and weak adoption logs – reduces proof of practice change • Role overlap in the ecosystem – can create duplication without clearer niche definition and partnership agreements • Funding volatility and reliance on subscriptions and short grants – constrains continuity



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2.4

Key Messages from the Strategic Evaluation

Stakeholders value SACN as a trusted platform for comparative evidence, neutral facilitation and peer learning. They want SACN to retain:

- Neutral convening that allows honest practitioner exchanges
- Flagship research products that anchor credibility and provide comparative diagnostics
- A strong evidence spine, including data work that supports decision-making
- Practitioner networks and reference groups that sustain shared learning

The Strategic Evaluation identified the following ways in which SACN should evolve:

- Move from outputs to outcomes through a minimum engagement model that names owners, dates and follow-through.
- Build systematic follow-through mechanisms that track adoption after convenings and report back on what changed.
- Strengthen data as a practical decision tool through dashboards, indicator refreshes, toolkits and usable intelligence research, with a clear update calendar that protects credibility and improves reuse.
- Clarify SACN's niche within the urban governance ecosystem through partnership agreements and role clarity that reduces duplication and strengthens leverage.
- Diversify funding to protect continuity through a deliberate funding balance plan and longer-term agreements with clear deliverables and adoption measures.
- Strengthen the packaging of research for different audiences, including action briefs for executives and finance teams and quality assurance notes for data research, and ensure outputs land in city decision cycles.
- Strengthen the narrative and public-facing translation without losing neutrality, so evidence reaches wider audiences and supports trust and action.
- Plan for uncertainty using foresight, so SACN and cities can anticipate plausible futures and adjust priorities early.

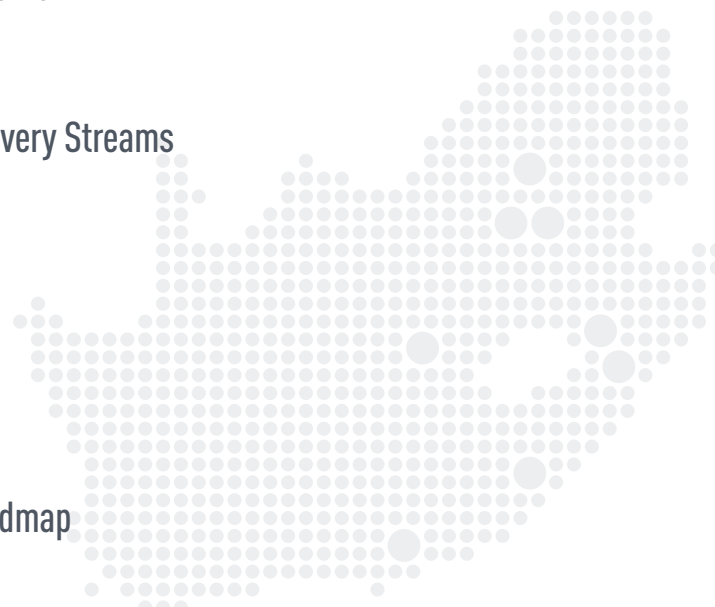




SECTION

03

STRATEGIC BUSINESS PLAN 2026/27–2030/31

- 3.1 Strategic Intent
 - 3.2 Strategic Pillars and Commitments
 - 3.3 Strategic Objectives
 - 3.4 Thematic Programmes and Delivery Streams
 - 3.5 Enabling Functions
 - 3.6 Organisational Structure
 - 3.7 Partnerships
 - 3.8 Assumptions and Risks
 - 3.9 High-level Implementation Roadmap
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The Strategic Business Plan 2026/27–2030/31 translates SACN’s mandate, vision and strategic logic into an actionable five-year plan. It sets out the strategic pillars and objectives, the thematic priorities and the enabling functions that will guide delivery across the cycle. The section also clarifies how SACN will apply the city-region lens, anchor programmes in data and foresight, design peer learning for adoption and use the SoCR as a flagship change platform. It provides the basis for annual planning, resource allocation, performance management and MEL over the five-year period.

3.1 Strategic Intent

SACN will strengthen city governance and delivery by operating as a credible urban intelligence and learning hub that helps cities adapt and act on evidence. SACN will do this by producing decision-ready urban intelligence and foresight, convening learning that leads to adoption, advocating for the urban agenda and building partnerships that support joint delivery and sustainability.



3.2

Strategic Pillars and Commitments

The strategic pillars provide the organising framework for delivering the 2026/27–2030/31 strategy. Each pillar sets out what SACN will focus on, how value will be delivered to cities and partners and how progress will be measured across the five-year cycle. The City Advocacy pipeline will be generated from programmatic work and integrated into delivery rather than operating as a separate stream – each thematic area and initiative will identify the policy and practice constraints that block implementation, test approaches through peer learning and then translate the strongest evidence into policy briefs, practice notes and coordinated city positions.

PILLAR 1 URBAN INTELLIGENCE AND FORESIGHT

Strategic intent: To position SACN as a credible source of comparable evidence and futures insight that supports decision-making and practice in cities.

WHAT SACN WILL DELIVER	HOW SUCCESS WILL BE MEASURED
A strengthened SoCR platform with communications and uptake planned from the start	Research referenced in city planning, budgeting and performance routines
Urban intelligence briefs, dashboards and decision notes designed for use by the leadership and practitioners	Annual or mid-term indicator updates with strong narrative and clear decision implications
Scenario planning and foresight research that help cities anticipate risks and opportunities	Feedback from cities that research is usable, relevant and timely
Improved indicator governance, standardisation and data credibility for comparative learning	Demonstrated use of foresight research in leadership-level conversations

PILLAR 2 LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS AND PRACTICE ADOPTION

Strategic intent: To shift SACN's learning model from convening for participation to convening for adoption and measurable practice change.

WHAT SACN WILL DELIVER	HOW SUCCESS WILL BE MEASURED
Minimum engagement standards for reference groups and learning platforms	Tracked adoption of tools and practice notes in participating cities
City learning pathways that sequence learning, tools and follow-through support	Evidence of replication across cities through peer learning
Toolkits and practice notes designed for uptake in municipal systems	Changes in practice sustained over time and reflected in routines and plans
An adoption tracker that monitors usage, replication and durability of practice change	Stronger city capability to test, learn and adapt
PDIA (problem-driven iterative adaptation) as a flagship method for learning-by-doing, quick wins and adaptation	Application of PDIA by cities



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PILLAR 3 CITY ADVOCACY FOR THE URBAN AGENDA

Strategic intent: To enable cities to influence policy and practice through a credible, evidence-led city voice grounded in practitioner realities.

WHAT SACN WILL DELIVER	HOW SUCCESS WILL BE MEASURED
Evidence-led policy briefs and submissions linked to flagship research and programme insights	Policy briefs and submissions referenced in policy processes and consultations
Convenings that connect city practice to national policy processes and reforms	Clearer influence pathways through SACN convenings reported by cities
Advocacy alliances around priority city challenges and delivery bottlenecks	Joint positions and follow-through actions produced by these alliances
An advocacy pipeline that connects programme evidence to policy influence and practice reform	Traceability from evidence to advocacy to decision shifts where possible

PILLAR 4 PARTNERSHIPS FOR VALUE CREATION

Strategic intent: Strengthen relationships with cities and partners and form new strategic partnerships that deepen impact and support sustainability.

WHAT SACN WILL DELIVER	HOW SUCCESS WILL BE MEASURED
A partnership framework that defines partnership types, roles, decision rights and outcomes	Improved participation and follow-through by cities
Deliberate strategic relationship investment plans aligned to the SoCR, policy influence and partner convening	Longer term partnership agreements and improved funding stability
Longer term agreements with government departments and funders where feasible	Joint delivery outcomes achieved with partners
Partner involvement in flagship research products where this strengthens legitimacy, reach and uptake	Reduced duplication through clearer partnership boundaries

PILLAR 5 AGILE AND SUSTAINABLE ORGANISATION

Strategic intent: Strengthen governance, capability and financial sustainability, so that SACN can deliver consistently.

WHAT SACN WILL DELIVER	HOW SUCCESS WILL BE MEASURED
Budgeting reform treated as an operating discipline with improved costing templates and planning depth	Improved delivery predictability and fewer unplanned delays
Ringfenced resourcing for flagship outputs, including communications, editing and production support	Higher quality outputs with communications and production built into delivery
Stronger governance support for Board and Council and clearer internal decision rights	Improved audit and compliance performance and clearer risk controls
Enhanced cyber security resilience and knowledge management systems	Evidence of improved revenue stability and diversified funding sources
Organisation-wide MEL integrated into planning and reporting	Applied MEL framework
Strengthened fundraising capability and diversified revenue mix	Resources and increased revenue

3.3

Strategic Objectives

The strategic objectives define the outcomes SACN will drive across the urban system. They are designed to strengthen evidence-based decision-making, convert peer learning into adoption, amplify a credible city voice and secure the partnerships and organisational capability needed for consistent delivery.

SACN will strengthen the ability of cities and linked ICMs to govern and deliver by improving the quality, usability and timing of evidence that informs decisions. The focus is on curating data, interpreting trends and translating evidence into practical decision products aligned to municipal planning and budgeting cycles. The objective includes:

- Strengthening the evidence spine through improved indicators, analytics and clear quality assurance.
- Embedding foresight in programme planning, implementation and learning, so cities anticipate risks and opportunities.
- Producing decision-ready research, including briefs, dashboards, scenario insights, practice notes and leadership-level decision packs.
- Using the city-region lens to frame evidence and options at the functional system scale, including relevant ICM dynamics and corridor implications.
- Strengthening the role of SoCR as both a flagship publication and a synthesis platform that consolidates cross-programme evidence and supports system shifts.

Success will be evident when SACN research is routinely used in city planning, budgeting, prioritisation and performance routines and when foresight becomes a normal input into leadership decisions and programme design.

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To promote city governance and delivery through urban intelligence and foresight that turn evidence into decision-ready action



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To enable cities to translate peer learning into measurable change in practice

SACN will ensure peer learning becomes a practical mechanism for adopting improved practices that are measurable. The focus is on moving from discussion to implementation through structured learning pathways, minimum engagement standards and clear follow-through. The objective includes:

- Designing peer learning into every programme, as a standard feature with a clear purpose, learning journey and adoption pathway.
- Convening practitioners, leaders and all-of-society voices, where this strengthens legitimacy and improves solutions and uptake.
- Packaging learning into practical tools, guides, templates and case studies that can be implemented in municipal systems.
- Establishing mechanisms to track adoption, replication and durability of practice change across cities and city-regions.
- Strengthening feedback loops through MEL, so programmes improve based on what works in practice.

Success will be evident when learning platforms produce documented shifts in practice, when tools are adopted across multiple cities and when SACN can show replication and sustained use over time.

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To advocate for the urban agenda by enabling cities to influence policy and practice through a credible, evidence-led city voice

SACN will strengthen the collective influence of cities by providing a credible, evidence-led platform that amplifies city priorities and supports policy and practice reforms aligned to the urban agenda. The focus is on linking advocacy to the evidence base and to real implementation constraints and opportunities experienced by cities. The objective includes:

- Producing evidence-led policy briefs, submissions and practice notes linked to programme insights and flagship research products, such as the SoCR.
- Convening structured dialogues between cities, spheres of government and partners on policy processes and reform priorities.
- Strengthening the SACN platform for coordinated city positions while maintaining neutrality and credibility.
- Building advocacy alliances with partners where it improves reach, legitimacy and follow-through.
- Connecting advocacy to adoption by tracking whether reforms influence funding, regulation, planning frameworks and delivery practice.

Success will be evident when SACN evidence is cited in policy processes, when cities report improved influence through coordinated platforms and when advocacy contributes to visible shifts in policy design or implementation practice.

SACN will improve its long-term sustainability and delivery capability through stronger partnerships, clearer operating discipline and improved governance systems. This objective secures the enabling conditions required for the other objectives to succeed and focuses on:

- Managing partnerships more deliberately through a partnership framework, prioritisation criteria, clear roles and defined deliverables.
- Strengthening relationships with participating cities, as SACN's primary partners, and deepening city-region collaboration where it improves outcomes.
- Securing longer-term funding support and diversifying revenue sources to reduce volatility and protect continuity.
- Strengthening organisational governance, decision rights, risk management and internal operating rhythms.
- Building capability in key areas, such as data, foresight, facilitation, strategic communications, fundraising, programme management and MEL.
- Improving execution discipline, including costing, budgeting, planning and embedding communications and production support into delivery.

Success will be evident when SACN delivers predictably, maintains credibility and stability, strengthens funding resilience and operates with clear governance and agile decision-making.

04

To strengthen
strategic partnerships
and ensure an agile,
well-governed and
sustainable organisation



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Each thematic area contributes decision-ready intelligence, learning pathways and practical tools that support measurable practice change and a stronger urban agenda.”

3.4

Thematic Programmes and Delivery Streams

The thematic programmes and delivery streams translate SACN’s strategic pillars and objectives into a coherent programme of work for the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle. SACN’s substantive programme priorities are defined by the thematic areas, while the delivery streams provide the cross-cutting mechanisms through which evidence, learning and influence are generated, connected and applied – together, they give practical effect to SACN’s strategic logic. Each thematic area contributes decision-ready intelligence, learning pathways and practical tools that support measurable practice change and a stronger urban agenda. City-regions and corridors that include ICMs, particularly those linked to metros, will provide the spatial logic for connecting work across programmes. Programme design will be anchored in evidence and futures thinking, so that SACN’s work responds to both current system realities and emerging urban risks and opportunities.

Integration across the portfolio will also be driven by the SoCR, as a flagship publication and change platform. Over the cycle, programme outputs will deliberately build towards SoCR by strengthening indicator work, generating practice evidence and producing policy insights that can be synthesised and amplified. This provides a common platform for aligning convening, research and partnerships around shared priorities, evidence and follow-through. In this way, the SoCR will help reduce fragmentation across the portfolio while strengthening SACN’s ability to connect programme learning, practice change and policy influence.

Thematic programmes

SACN's thematic programmes provide the practical means through which the organisation contributes to both the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Its programme architecture serves as an applied platform through which the priorities of the IUDF and the SDGs are translated into urban intelligence, peer learning, practice adoption and advocacy within the city system.

Well-Governed Cities

This programme promotes the governance conditions that enable cities and connected ICMs to plan, coordinate and deliver at city-region scale. It supports the IUDF's emphasis on effective urban governance, integrated planning, capable institutions and accountable leadership, while also contributing to SDG 16 on effective, accountable and inclusive institutions and SDG 17 on partnerships. The programme's focus is on practical governance and finance reforms that can be adopted through peer learning and translated into decision-ready tools and guidance. The programme will generate practice evidence and reform insights that feed into the SoCR synthesis and advocacy pipeline.

LONG-TERM GOAL	CORE FOCUS AREAS	KEY LINKAGES
Accountable, capable and forward-looking cities and city-regions that translate urban policy into effective governance, improved delivery and better quality of life for residents.	• Define city-region governance and regional governance in practice, by clarifying workable coordination models, decision rights and implementation arrangements across municipal boundaries and corridors. • Revise city development strategy (CDS) guidelines aligned to city-regions and futures planning, so that long-term strategies reflect functional urban systems, anticipate risk and translate into prioritised investment and delivery choices. • Continue PDIA as a flagship method to support learning-by-doing, quick wins and practical adoption in governance and delivery improvement. • Extend the State of City Finances publication to include ICMs, to strengthen the evidence base for city-region planning and improve comparative learning across the broader urban system. • Strengthen relational governance and downward accountability by improving how cities build trust, communicate decisions, engage communities and demonstrate performance and learning in ways that support legitimacy and adoption.	▶ Sustainable & Resilient Cities – energy, disaster governance and financing climate change adaptation and resilience ▶ Inclusive Cities – CDS and built environment ▶ Advocacy – reform and accountability themes



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Productive Cities

This programme strengthens the conditions for inclusive and resilient local economic development across city-regions and connected corridors. It advances the IUDF's goals of inclusive economic development, spatial transformation and more efficient urban systems, while contributing particularly to SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, SDG 9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure, and SDG 10 on reducing inequality. The programme's focus is on the functional economic system, nodes and corridors that link metros and relevant ICMs, anchoring priorities in evidence and foresight on economic drivers, risks and opportunities. Peer learning is designed for adoption, so cities can test and implement practical economic governance tools. The programme will generate practice evidence and reform insights that feed into the SoCR synthesis and advocacy pipeline.

LONG-TERM GOAL	CORE FOCUS AREAS	KEY LINKAGES
Future-focused cities and city-regions that build inclusive, resilient and sustainable urban economies, retain investment and create lasting livelihood opportunities for current and future generations.	• Explore city-region economies and corridor competitiveness, focusing on nodes and corridors, freight and rail and cross-boundary coordination that enables investment, mobility and jobs. • Link urban safety to access to opportunity, investment confidence, business activity and inclusive livelihoods. • Strengthen the link between capital prioritisation, maintenance and delivery sequencing and economic outcomes in infrastructure-driven economic development. • Identify SMEs and procurement levers that enable inclusive growth through procurement reform, supplier development and stronger local enterprise ecosystems. • Promote the Just Urban Transition as an economic transformation and investment pathway linking transition priorities to jobs and entrepreneurship, city-region competitiveness and bankable projects, with clear interfaces to climate and resilience work, funding pathways and governance arrangements across SACN's portfolio.	► Sustainable & Resilient Cities – green and blue economy interfaces ► Inclusive Cities – infrastructure-driven development and ease of doing business ► Advocacy – PEP exit strategy work



Sustainable & Resilient Cities

This programme strengthens the ability of cities and city-regions to manage climate and disaster risk, improve resource efficiency and invest in resilience as part of everyday governance and infrastructure decisions. It is anchored in evidence and foresight, designed through peer learning for adoption and aligned to the SoCR change platform by generating practice evidence, indicators and policy insights on resilience and sustainability. The programme supports the IUDF's concerns about sustainability, resilience, infrastructure and resource efficiency, and aligns strongly with SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities and SDG 13 on climate action, while also linking to broader environmental and infrastructure goals. Its focus is on shared natural systems, cross-boundary risks and corridor-linked infrastructure and economies. The programme will generate practice evidence and reform insights that feed into the SoCR synthesis and advocacy pipeline.



This programme strengthens the ability of cities and city-regions to manage climate and disaster risk, improve resource efficiency and invest in resilience as part of everyday governance and infrastructure decisions.”

LONG-TERM GOAL	CORE FOCUS AREAS	KEY LINKAGES
Cities and city-regions are better equipped to build resilience and sustainability into how they plan, invest and operate and to access the finance needed to protect communities, adapt to climate risks and support a more sustainable urban future.	• Strengthen inclusive disaster readiness, response and recovery for both formal and informal vulnerable areas. • Promote the mainstreaming of nature-based solutions (NbS) and strengthened management of natural systems including catchments, wetlands and urban ecosystems. • Translate green and circular economy priorities into practical municipal actions, indicators and adoption pathways. • Strengthen coastal resilience and port-linked corridor planning, integrating risk, logistics and investment at city-region scale (blue economy).	▶ Well-Governed Cities – regional disaster governance ▶ Productive Cities – blue economy and coastal resilience links ▶ Resilience governance and coordination – climate finance interface shifts to Well-Governed Cities, while maintaining clear coordination, roles and joint workstreams across programmes



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Inclusive Cities

This programme advances spatial transformation and urban inclusion, so more residents can access opportunities, services and safety across functional urban systems. It strengthens the IUDF's commitment to spatial integration, inclusion, access and urban justice, while contributing directly to SDG 11 and to related goals on inequality, participation and human development. The programme's focus is on the cross-boundary dynamics that shape inclusion, especially housing markets, mobility systems and built environment decisions that connect metros and applicable ICMs. The programme is anchored in evidence and foresight, designed through peer learning for adoption and will generate practice evidence and reform insights that feed into the SoCR synthesis and advocacy pipeline.

LONG-TERM GOAL	CORE FOCUS AREAS	KEY LINKAGES
Liveable, dignified and connected human settlements, where all residents, especially vulnerable groups, have more equitable access to services, mobility, safety and economic opportunities.	- Sharpen focus and strengthen the link between spatial development frameworks, spatial transformation and CDS, so that spatial intent is translated into long-term strategy, prioritised investments and implementable delivery pathways. - Focus on inclusive urbanisation and built environment integration, by strengthening coordinated planning across land, housing, infrastructure and social services, with practical approaches that can be adopted within municipal systems. - Reintroduce urban mobility as a core lever for inclusion, focusing on access, affordability and integration of transport systems that shape daily life at the city-region scale. - Use applicable ICMs as a starting point for the city-region lens, by selecting priority nodes and corridors where inclusion outcomes depend on aligned cross-boundary decisions and shared planning. - Track the progress made by cities in achieving inclusive urbanisation through relevant indicators linked to local and global urbanisation frameworks. - Continue to drive research and advocacy that supports dignified and liveable human settlements with a focus on informal settlement upgrading.	- Well-Governed Cities – governance levers - Productive Cities – city-region economies and corridor competitiveness - Sustainable & Resilient Cities – urban heat islands and NbS - Policy Research & Advocacy – partnership frameworks and informal settlement upgrading

Delivery Streams

Urban Intelligence & Foresight

This programme strengthens SACN's role as a credible urban intelligence and learning hub by anchoring the entire portfolio in data, analysis and futures insight. It provides the evidence backbone that enables decision-ready research, comparative learning and targeted support to cities and connected ICMs. The programme embeds scenario planning and foresight as a discipline across SACN's work, so cities can anticipate risk, respond to change and plan under uncertainty. It also supports the SoCR flagship publication and change platform by maintaining and refreshing indicator systems, producing mid-term narratives and ensuring intelligence research is usable in city decision cycles.

LONG-TERM GOAL	CORE FOCUS AREAS	KEY LINKAGES
Cities become learning and adaptive institutions that use data, intelligence and collaborative innovation to respond to change, solve problems and advance more inclusive, resilient and sustainable urban futures.	• Urban data intelligence for decision-ready insight, refocusing on analysis and interpretation that directly supports flagship research and city decision cycles. • Scenario planning and foresight discipline, embedding futures scanning, scenarios and risk sensing into programme design, implementation and learning. • Data strengthened and refreshed more often, while improving reliability, usability and refresh frequency to support comparative learning. • SoCR indicator system with annual updates, updating SoCR indicators annually and publishing mid-term narrative research that interpret trends and implications for practice.	► All programmes – data, indicators and scenario planning ► Finance & Corporate Services – systems reliability and data architecture



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Policy Research & Advocacy

This programme advances the urban agenda by translating SACN's programmatic research into credible policy influence and practical reform pathways. Advocacy is not treated as a separate stream but is generated from SACN's thematic work and integrated into delivery, so that policy positions are grounded in city realities, tested practice and decision-ready evidence. The programme anchors advocacy in the SoCR, as a flagship change platform, and in relevant reform agendas. It consolidates insights and adoption lessons from across programmes, converts them into policy briefs and practice notes and convenes cities and all-of-society voices around priority issues. Through alliances with research and policy partners, the programme strengthens legitimacy, reach and follow-through, so that advocacy supports real implementation shifts at city-region scale.

LONG-TERM GOAL	CORE FOCUS AREAS	KEY LINKAGES
A stronger and more coherent urban agenda shaped by evidence-led city advocacy and translated into practical reforms that improve how cities and city-regions are governed, planned and managed.	• Programme-to-advocacy pipeline generating advocacy priorities from thematic work, peer learning and adoption evidence, while maintaining traceability from evidence to advocacy to decision shifts where possible. • Advocacy anchored in the SoCR and the White Paper on Local Government, translating SoCR evidence and White Paper reform priorities into clear positions, briefs and implementation-oriented recommendations. • Policy briefs and practice notes producing concise, decision-ready research that address delivery bottlenecks, governance reforms and implementation gaps. • Convening of cities and all-of-society voices around urban agenda priorities and structuring dialogues to support follow-through, not only discussion. • Alliances with research and policy partners, building partnerships that strengthen analytical rigour, legitimacy, reach and coordinated advocacy action.	▶ Well-Governed Cities –relational governance and accountability themes ▶ Productive Cities – PEP exit strategy work ▶ Inclusive Cities – partnership frameworks and informal settlement upgrading

3.5

Enabling Functions

SACN's enabling functions protect credibility and support quality delivery. The strategy strengthens enabling functions as part of delivery, not back-office support.

Finance & Corporate Services

This function enables SACN to deliver its strategy with credibility and discipline, by protecting the conditions that make the integrated approach work, with evidence and foresight anchored in reliable systems and partnerships managed with clear governance, contracts and risk controls. The function will be run as a strategic enabler of delivery quality, sustainability and accountability, with the following priorities:

- Budgeting and costing, as an operating discipline, strengthening planning depth, improving costing templates and enforcing early project initiation, so budgets, timelines, owners and deliverables are confirmed before work begins.
- Ringfenced resourcing for flagship commitments, protecting SoCR and core intelligence research by budgeting the full production chain including editing, design, layout, digital publishing and communications.
- Financial sustainability and control, strengthening subscription management, cashflow forecasting and variance tracking and supporting revenue diversification through stronger financial models and reporting for partners and funders.
- Governance support and decision rights, strengthening internal controls, delegations and decision pathways, so delivery is faster and clearer across programmes, partnerships and corporate functions.
- Procurement and contract management that supports delivery, improving supply chain management (SCM) planning, supplier performance management and contract discipline, so convenings, publications, data services and digital work are delivered on time and to standard.
- Systems reliability and cyber resilience, strengthening IT controls, cybersecurity and backup and disaster recovery to protect data credibility, continuity and knowledge assets, including SCODA and indicator systems.
- Risk management integrated into programme delivery, strengthening risk identification and mitigation across programmes, flagships and partnerships and improving audit readiness and compliance performance.
- People and capability support for strategy delivery, strengthening HR systems, performance management and capability planning to protect critical skills in data and foresight, facilitation, policy and advocacy, communications and MEL.
- Records and knowledge management, improving document control, retention and knowledge systems, so learning, research and partnership records are accessible, traceable and reusable across the cycle.

These priorities ensure SACN can deliver consistently while protecting credibility, improving uptake of research and strengthening the organisation's sustainability.



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Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

MEL is a core delivery function in the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle, providing the accountability and learning system that connects SACN's integrated approach to measurable results. MEL will track whether data and foresight are being used in decisions; whether peer learning is translating into adoption; and whether SoCR is functioning as a flagship change platform that consolidates evidence, strengthens influence and supports wider system shifts. It also supports governance oversight and portfolio integration by providing consistent performance signals across thematic areas and strategic pillars.

In this cycle, MEL will be designed to match SACN's strategic logic. It will strengthen the line of sight from research and convenings to practice change in cities and city-regions, including applicable ICMs. It will also track the advocacy pipeline by linking programmatic research to policy briefs, engagements and influencing outcomes where possible, with the following priorities:

- A results framework aligned to strategic objectives and pillars with clear outputs, outcomes and indicators that reflect SACN's niche as an urban intelligence and learning hub.
- Evidence-use and foresight indicators, tracking how SACN intelligence research, indicators and scenario insights are used in city planning, budgeting and performance routines.
- Adoption tracking as a standard feature, establishing an adoption tracker that monitors usage, replication and durability of tools, practice notes and programme approaches across cities and city-regions.
- Measurement of peer learning outcomes, tracking learning quality and whether convenings produce agreed actions, follow-through and changes in practice rather than participation only.
- Measurement of the SoCR as a change platform, tracking how SoCR recommendations, indicators and narratives are referenced, adopted and used for policy influence and system learning across the cycle.
- Measurement of portfolio integration and city-region lens, ensuring data is analysed at functional system scale where relevant and tracking cross-boundary collaboration and corridor-related outcomes when these are part of programme designs.
- Learning loops and adaptive management, running structured learning reviews to capture what worked or did not work and what should change, which then feed into annual planning and programme redesign.
- Quality assurance and verification, strengthening methods, data quality checks and verification sources, so research remain credible and comparable.
- Reporting rhythms for governance and partners, producing concise reporting for Council, Board and partners that links delivery to outcomes, highlights risks early and supports timely decisions.

MEL will be embedded from the start of each programme and flagship research product. Every initiative will define what success looks like, what will be measured, how uptake will be tracked and how learning will be captured and applied. This strengthens SACN's ability to demonstrate value, improve relevance and deliver impact consistently across the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle.



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Governance

SACN's governance for 2026/27–2030/31 protects credibility, improves decision speed and strengthens delivery discipline. Governance is designed to support the integrated approach, by clarifying who decides, how performance is tracked and how risks are escalated, so that SACN can deliver consistently. SACN will continue to operate through its established governance structures with clear roles and accountabilities.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE	PRIMARY ROLE IN THE 026–2030 CYCLE	KEY GOVERNANCE OUTPUTS
SACN Council	Strategic constituency and oversight platform representing participating cities and Council organisations	Strategic direction input, city leadership engagement, mandate alignment, approval support for strategic priorities
Board of Directors	Governance oversight, fiduciary responsibility and strategic assurance	Oversight of strategy delivery, risk and compliance, organisational sustainability decisions
Board committees	Focused oversight on audit and risk, governance and strategy and human resources and ethics	Committee recommendations, risk and audit oversight, governance effectiveness, people and ethics oversight
Secretariat	Executive delivery arm responsible for implementation, partnerships, research and organisational management	Delivery of programmes and flagships, operational management, reporting, MEL implementation, partnership execution

Governance principles

Governance will be applied through the following shared principles that protect neutrality and strengthen execution:

- **Clarity of mandate and decision rights:** Decisions are owned and documented across Council, Board and Secretariat with clear escalation paths.
- **Consistent governance rhythm:** Annual planning, quarterly performance reviews and risk reporting with disciplined preparation and follow-through.
- **Transparency through timely reporting:** Clear reporting on delivery, finance, risks, outcomes and impact signals using consistent formats.
- **Integrity and neutrality:** Research and convenings remain credible and impartial with quality assurance and ethical standards.
- **Compliance and risk readiness:** Audit readiness, risk management and legal compliance treated as non-negotiables.
- **Learning discipline:** MEL feedback informs course correction, portfolio prioritisation and improvement in delivery practice



Governance focus areas

Governance attention will concentrate on the few areas that unlock delivery quality and measurable outcomes.

FOCUS AREA	WHAT WILL CHANGE	WHAT GOVERNANCE WILL LOOK FOR
Council engagement as a leadership platform	Stronger engagement at leadership level to support city-region thinking and cross-boundary collaboration	Regular leadership dialogues, clear agendas, participation signals, follow-through on agreed actions
Oversight of flagship research products	Stronger governance oversight of the SoCR, SCODA and indicator updates	Ringfenced planning and budgets, delivery milestones, quality assurance checks, communications and uptake plans
Adoption and outcomes reporting	Adoption tracking and outcomes reporting embedded into governance packs	Evidence of uptake, replication and durability of practice change, not only counting outputs
Project initiation discipline	Early approval of concept notes, budgets, communications plans and owners	Fewer late changes, clearer accountability, improved delivery predictability and reduced execution and budgeting risk

Decision rights and escalation

This cycle tightens decision rights, so that delivery is faster and risks are handled early.

DECISION TYPE	PRIMARY DECISION OWNER	ESCALATION TRIGGER
Strategic direction and priority shifts	Board with Council input	Material change to mandate alignment, strategic pillars or reputational risk
Annual plans, budgets and performance targets	Secretariat (preparation), Board (oversight)	Budget variance, funding gap risk, delayed subscriptions, threat to flagship delivery
Flagship commitments, including the SoCR and indicator updates	Secretariat (execution), Board (oversight)	Quality risk, timeline slippage, budget shortfall, data credibility concerns
Partnerships and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with strategic implications	Secretariat (execution), Board (oversight where required)	Role overlap risk, independence risk, long-term financial exposure, public positioning risk
Risk incidents including cyber and data governance	Secretariat (management), Board (oversight via Audit and Risk Committee)	Any incident affecting continuity, trust, data integrity or legal compliance

Governance rhythm and reporting

Governance will run on a predictable rhythm to support decision-making and learning.

RHYTHM	PURPOSE	TYPICAL CONTENT
Annual planning cycle	Align priorities, resources and delivery commitments	Annual business plan, budget, flagship schedules, partnership plan, MEL plan, risk register
Quarterly performance reviews	Track delivery, risks and outcomes	Progress against objectives and pillars, adoption signals, finance and variance, key risks, corrective actions
Risk and audit reporting	Protect credibility and continuity	Risk updates, audit issues, compliance status, cyber and data governance posture
Post-event and post-research learning reviews	Strengthen learning discipline and adoption	What changed, what was adopted, what to improve, implications for SoCR synthesis and advocacy pipeline



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Communication

Communication is a strategic enabler of SACN's delivery model that increases uptake of SACN's intelligence research in city decision cycles, strengthens credibility and supports the evidence-to-adoption pathway by translating technical work into usable guidance and clear narratives. In the 2026/27–2030/31 cycle, communication is designed to reinforce the integrated approach.

Communication will be built into programme design from the start – each initiative will identify audiences, research, channels and timelines. In addition, research will be packaged in layers, so that the same evidence can serve different decision makers – for instance, concise decision briefs for executives and finance teams, tools and templates for practitioners and clear narratives that build legitimacy and public understanding among stakeholders.

COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES	COMMUNICATION APPROACH	KEY COMMUNICATION PRODUCTS
Increase uptake of SACN intelligence research in city decision cycles	Build communications into every programme from the start, including audiences, research, channels and timelines	SoCR flagship and campaign products, including summaries, city profiles and decision packs
Strengthen SACN's credibility and visibility as an urban intelligence and learning hub	Use layered packaging: executive briefs, practitioner tools and public narratives	Urban intelligence briefs, dashboards and mid-term indicator updates
Amplify an evidence-led city voice through accessible insights and policy briefs	Strengthen digital publishing, dashboards and evidence storytelling, while keeping quality assurance visible	Policy briefs and submissions linked to evidence and programme learning
Improve translation of learning into adoption through clear toolkits and practice notes	Support all-of-society convening with clear messaging and feedback loops that capture learning and support follow-through	Case studies and practice notes that show what changed, how and what others can adopt
Build public understanding of urban challenges and solutions where it supports legitimacy and action	Position SoCR as a flagship change platform with a multi-channel campaign and partner amplification	

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

- Evidence uptake in city routines: SACN research is referenced in planning, budgeting and performance routines.
- Adoption of learning outputs: Peer learning outputs are packaged into tools and practice notes that are adopted and replicated.
- SoCR reach and follow-through: SoCR strengthens influence and drives visible uptake across the Network through campaign products and partner amplification.
- Trust and credibility: Communications increase clarity, consistency and confidence in SACN's evidence and methods

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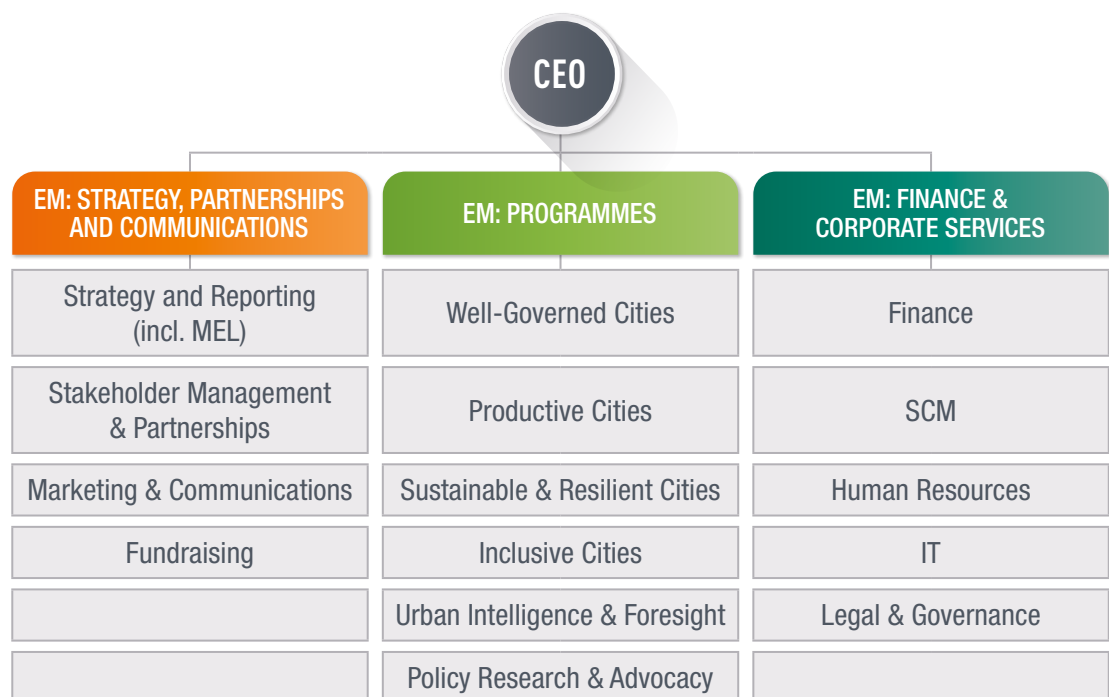
Organisational Structure

SACN's organisational structure for 2026/27–2030/31 supports the strategic shift to an integrated approach. The structure remains lean and delivery-focused with clear accountability for programmes, cross-cutting capabilities and enabling functions. It is designed to improve coordination, reduce silos and strengthen the end-to-end delivery chain from evidence creation to communication, convening and adoption tracking. As part of the shift to measuring impact, an approach will be to design projects for the long term, i.e., multi-year projects.

The structure is designed based on the following principles:

- Structure aligned to strategic pillars and flagship commitments: Clear ownership for pillars and flagship delivery including the SoCR, indicators and priority convenings.
- Protection of core capabilities: Dedicated capacity for data and foresight, facilitation and learning design, policy and advocacy, communications and MEL.
- Strengthened partnership management and fundraising: Clear accountability for relationship investment, partnership delivery and diversified funding.
- Clear interfaces between programmes and enablers: Agreed workflows so finance, SCM, IT and communications are built into delivery early.
- Strengthened cross-team collaboration routines: Regular coordination rhythms and shared planning to avoid duplication and improve integration.

Organisational Structure



Key interfaces and delivery discipline

The organisational structure is aimed at strengthening how teams work together, so that delivery is predictable and integrated.

CRITICAL INTERFACE	WHY IT MATTERS	PRACTICAL DISCIPLINE FOR 2026/27–2030/31
Thematic Programmes ↔ Urban Intelligence & Foresight	Ensures work starts with evidence and includes foresight	Early data requirements, indicator alignment and quality checks built into concept notes
Thematic Programmes ↔ Learning Ecosystem	Ensures peer learning leads to adoption	Standard learning design and follow-through requirements for all initiatives
Thematic Programmes ↔ Marketing & Communications	Ensures research land in decision cycles and get used	Communications plan, packaging and campaign elements built in from the start
Thematic Programmes ↔ Strategy & Reporting and MEL	Ensures outcomes and adoption are measured	Results and adoption metrics defined at initiation and tracked consistently
Stakeholder Management & Partnerships ↔ All delivery teams (i.e., Strategy, Partnerships & Communications and Thematic Programmes)	Ensures leverage and reduces duplication	Clear roles, deliverables and governance for each partnership and regular partnership reviews
Finance and Corporate Services ↔ All delivery teams (i.e., Strategy, Partnerships & Communications and Thematic Programmes)	Ensures resourcing and compliance support delivery	Early budgeting, procurement planning, contract management and risk escalation

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

- Teams collaborate across the delivery chain.
- Flagship research products are delivered predictably.
- Adoption and outcomes are tracked consistently.
- SACN maintains the critical capabilities needed to deliver its niche as a credible urban intelligence and learning hub.



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Partnerships

SACN's partners fall into complementary categories that reflect how SACN delivers impact across the knowledge and adoption value chain.

STRATEGIC PARTNER CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	PARTNERSHIP FOCUS
1 Participating cities and city-region partners	Participating cities are SACN's primary partners and core constituency. In this cycle, SACN will deepen engagement with participating cities and strengthen purposeful connections with selected ICMs that form part of functional city-regions and corridors linked to metros.	• Strengthening participation and follow-through in reference groups and leadership forums. • Selecting city-region nodes and corridors for targeted peer learning and adoption. • Building cross-boundary collaboration platforms where shared outcomes depend on aligned decisions.
2 Local government institutions and national government departments	SACN works with key public institutions that shape the urban agenda, local government funding, policy direction and implementation systems. These partnerships are central for policy alignment, coordinated convening and scaling adoption beyond individual cities.	• Working jointly on support for urban policy implementation from the perspective of cities. • Aligning research and indicators to policy priorities and decision cycles. • Participating in structured dialogues to address delivery bottlenecks, governance reforms and funding models.
3 Provinces and intergovernmental partners	Provincial governments and intergovernmental forums influence planning coordination, infrastructure programmes and regional development. SACN will partner where this improves city-region coordination, strengthens learning and accelerates adoption.	• Identifying city-region and corridor coordination challenges that cut across municipal boundaries. • Organising convenings that align planning and investment priorities where appropriate.
4 Research, academia and knowledge institutions	These partners strengthen SACN's evidence credibility, methodological rigour and analytical depth. They also support innovation in how knowledge is translated into usable research.	• Collaborating on data, indicators and analysis for intelligence and foresight research. • Conducting joint research, peer review and translating knowledge into practical tools. • Participating in scenario planning and futures capability building.
5 Civil society, communities and practitioners	SACN will convene all-of-society voices when it strengthens legitimacy and improves solutions. Civil society and community partners contribute practical insight, accountability perspectives and lived experience that strengthen adoption.	• Including these voices in framing problems and designing solutions for complex cross-cutting issues. • Organising structured participation in learning platforms and reference groups where appropriate. • Strengthening citizen-centred narratives through evidence and transparent reporting.



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STRATEGIC PARTNER CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	PARTNERSHIP FOCUS
6 Private sector and industry partners	Private sector partners contribute investment insight, innovation capability and delivery partnerships, especially where cities need new financing and service delivery models. SACN will engage the private sector in ways that protect independence and evidence credibility.	• Developing partnerships that strengthen adoption of tools and models. • Collaborating around city-region economies, logistics corridors and infrastructure systems. • Promoting responsible innovation and digital capability that strengthens evidence-use and delivery performance.
7 Development partners and donors	Development partners can provide long-term support for core functions and flagship research products, while enabling targeted innovation and demonstration initiatives. SACN will pursue longer-term, multi-year funding partnerships where possible.	• Providing core funding for evidence, learning and convening functions. • Funding the SoCR as a flagship change platform and its uptake and dissemination. • Funding pilot initiatives that demonstrate adoption at city-region scale.
8 Continental and global city networks	SACN will continue to participate in continental and global platforms where this strengthens learning, credibility and access to partnerships and funding, while ensuring the core focus remains on South African city priorities.	• Sharing peer learning and practice insights on African urbanisation challenges. • Developing joint intelligence and comparative learning aligned to global agendas where relevant.

Partnership principles

SACN will apply the following principles when designing and managing partnerships:

- Align partnerships to SACN's mandate, strategic pillars and objectives.
- Prioritise partnerships that strengthen data credibility, foresight, adoption and policy influence.
- Strengthen relationships with cities as SACN's primary partners and anchor.
- Convene with an all-of-society orientation where it improves legitimacy and outcomes.
- Define roles, decision rights and deliverables clearly, and then track delivery.
- Protect SACN's independence and credibility through evidence-based practice and transparent methods.

Partnership management and governance

SACN will strengthen partnership management through:

- A partnership framework that defines partner categories, partnership types and decision rights.
- A partnership pipeline and prioritisation process linked to strategic objectives.
- Partnership agreements with clear deliverables, reporting and review mechanisms.
- Regular partnership reviews to focus effort on high-value collaborations.
- Clear and consistent partner communications aligned to SACN's strategic narrative.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

- SACN's credibility and the usability of its evidence and foresight research strengthened.
- Increased adoption of tools and practices across participating cities and linked ICMs.
- Joint delivery that achieves outcomes that SACN could not achieve alone.
- Stronger policy influence for the urban agenda through aligned evidence and convening.
- Improved financial sustainability through longer-term agreements and diversified support.

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement is a delivery mechanism. SACN will engage stakeholders through structured platforms that convert evidence into shared learning, adoption and policy influence.

ENGAGEMENT APPROACH	PRIMARY ENGAGEMENT PLATFORMS
Segment stakeholders and tailor engagement to decision cycles and roles	SACN Council and leadership dialogues
Deepen engagement with participating cities as the anchor constituency	Reference groups and practitioner networks
Expand the urban lens to include selected ICMs through a city-region and corridor focus	Thematic learning pathways and communities of practice
Convene all-of-society voices where it strengthens legitimacy and adoption	Partner forums with national departments and strategic institutions
Link engagement to clear outputs and follow-through actions with owners and timelines	SoCR launch and follow-through platforms focused on adoption and policy influence
Track engagement quality and adoption outcomes through MEL	Across all engagement platforms



3.8

Assumptions and Risks

The successful implementation of this strategy depends on a set of critical assumptions about the external environment, the continued commitment of participating cities and partners and SACN's own organisational capacity to deliver. The 2026/27–2030/31 cycle will be implemented in a context of higher delivery risk, tighter resources and increasing pressure for credible evidence, measurable adoption and stronger institutional discipline. For this reason, SACN has identified the key assumptions that underpin the strategy, the principal risks that may affect delivery, and the response themes required to manage those risks. This approach recognises that risk management is not separate from strategy execution but is an integral part of ensuring that SACN remains focused, credible and able to deliver on its strategic intent over the five-year period.

KEY ASSUMPTIONS	KEY RISKS	RISK MANAGEMENT RESPONSE THEMES
Participating cities remain committed to SACN and sustain participation in learning platforms.	Funding volatility arising from delayed member subscriptions or reduced grant funding may affect planned outputs, delivery continuity and the protection of core strategic commitments.	Ringfence flagship research products, core programme commitments and critical enabling functions in budgeting and planning. Strengthen medium-term financial planning and prioritise delivery where resources are constrained.
Access to credible data and indicators remains feasible and can be refreshed on a predictable cycle.	Data gaps, inconsistent quality, weak quality assurance or delayed updates may weaken SACN's credibility as an urban intelligence and learning hub and reduce uptake of its research.	Implement stronger data governance, quality assurance processes, research standards and update calendars for data and intelligence research.
Partners support co-creation and joint delivery aligned to SACN's niche and strategic value proposition.	Role overlap, ecosystem competition or poorly structured partnerships may create duplication, confusion regarding SACN's niche or misalignment in delivery.	Formalise partnership agreements with clear roles, deliverables, governance arrangements and strategic criteria for partnership selection and review.
SACN maintains organisational stability and retains critical technical, programme and institutional skills.	Capacity constraints, staff attrition or insufficient technical capability may slow delivery, weaken institutional memory and affect implementation quality.	Strengthen organisational planning, succession management, skills retention and internal coordination. Protect critical technical capability required for intelligence, MEL, communications and programme delivery.
Funding remains sufficient to protect core research including the SoCR, intelligence work and communications.	Internal delivery risk may arise from fragmented execution, weak project initiation discipline, budget misalignment or insufficient operational controls.	Strengthen decision rights, project initiation discipline, governance rhythms, reporting lines, budget oversight and organisational controls.



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KEY ASSUMPTIONS	KEY RISKS	RISK MANAGEMENT RESPONSE THEMES
The city-region and ICMs lens can be applied selectively through targeted partnerships without mandate creep.	Mandate drift, over-extension or role ambiguity if the city-region and ICM approach is not tightly defined and applied selectively.	Apply clear selection criteria, define scope boundaries and ensure that the city-region and ICM approach remains tightly linked to SACN's urban mandate and strategic purpose.
SACN's advocacy role remains evidence-led and aligned to its mandate and partnership orientation.	Advocacy may create reputational sensitivity or stakeholder tension if it is not clearly grounded in evidence and appropriately positioned within the intergovernmental context.	Ensure advocacy remains evidence-led, balanced, mandate-consistent and closely linked to programme work, city realities and SACN's convening and network role.
Learning platforms continue to be relevant, and cities remain willing to engage in peer exchange and collaborative practice.	Convening fatigue may emerge if events and peer learning activities continue without clear adoption pathways, follow-through support or measurable practice change.	Redesign learning platforms for adoption, embed follow-through mechanisms, track practice change and prioritise measurable outcomes rather than participation alone.
External stakeholders remain sufficiently stable to enable continuity of engagement and programme delivery.	Political shifts, leadership turnover, fiscal stress and changing intergovernmental dynamics may reduce participation, continuity and follow-through in city-level work.	Use adaptive planning, regular stakeholder scanning, stronger relationship management and flexible engagement models to sustain continuity under changing conditions.
SACN's digital and information systems remain reliable, secure and fit for purpose.	Cyber risk, data governance failures or system disruptions may undermine continuity, trust and the integrity of SACN's information-based research and operations.	Strengthen cyber security, access controls, data governance protocols, backup arrangements and institutional awareness regarding digital risk and information handling.
The shift from knowledge generation to urban intelligence, foresight and adoption can be supported by appropriate systems and capability.	SACN may struggle to demonstrate adoption, institutional change or measurable outcomes even where participation and visibility remain strong.	Strengthen MEL, adoption tracking, theory of change application and reporting discipline, so SACN can show what changed, learn quickly and adjust implementation where needed.



3.9

High-level Implementation Roadmap

The roadmap (Figure 19) guides execution through annual business plans while allowing agility in a changing environment. The first 18 months focus on enabling conditions and flagship commitments.

FIGURE 19: Implementation roadmap



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