QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

South African CitiesNetwork



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Editor's Note

Dear Stakeholder, Welcome to our Quarterly Newsletter



Nosipho Hlatshwayo
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"Our contribution to the review of the White Paper on Local Government, approved by Cabinet in September 2026, marks another important milestone in SACN's work to inform national policy and strengthen the local government sector."

As we begin a new strategic chapter with SACN's Strategic Business Plan 2026–2031, we are broadening our focus to include seven Intermediate City Municipalities (ICMs): Stellenbosch, Drakenstein, Msunduzi, KwaDukuza, Rustenburg, eMalahleni, and uMhlathuze. This broader city-region approach reflects our commitment to strengthening urban intelligence, peer learning and collaboration, and to supporting better-governed, inclusive and resilient cities.

As we look ahead, what urban future are we preparing for? Reflecting on 25 years of democratic local government, South Africa's sixth State of South African Cities Report (SoCR VI) assesses the country's urban journey and considers the forces, uncertainties and possibilities shaping cities over the next 25 years. To support this work, SACN and Wits University's Tayarisha Centre for Digital Governance held a three-day National Futures Conference from 31 August to 2 September 2026. City, government, academic, civil society, intermediary-city and private-sector representatives explored emerging trends, drivers of change and alternative urban futures to 2050. Their insights will inform SoCR VI's prospective component, due to launch in April 2027.

SACN also continues to contribute to national policy development and to strengthening the local government sector. Our contribution to the review of the White Paper on Local Government, approved by Cabinet in September 2026, marks another important milestone in SACN's work to inform national policy and strengthen the local government sector.

This edition highlights the work underway across SACN's programmes and the important contributions of our partners and stakeholders to advancing South Africa's urban agenda.

From playing a central role in South Africa's contribution to the global review of the New Urban Agenda to preparing for the launch of the latest State of Crime and Safety in South African Cities Report, our work continues to generate evidence and inform conversations about the future of our cities.

We also share progress on community-led air quality initiatives in Tshwane, discuss proposed reforms to the White Paper on Local Government, and report on Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) engagements with Tshwane and Johannesburg. We also reflect on SACN's contribution to national conversations on digital transformation in local government and to the National Futures Conference, which is helping shape the forward-looking component of the sixth State of South African Cities Report.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate the value of knowledge, partnerships and collective action in tackling urban challenges and shaping tomorrow's cities. We invite you to explore this edition, engage with the insights and share the stories shaping our cities.

Best Regards,

Nosipho Hlatshwayo

South African CitiesNetwork



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SACN plays a key role in South Africa's contribution to the global review of the New Urban Agenda



In July 2026, the United Nations General Assembly convened a High-Level Meeting in New York to undertake the midterm review of the New Urban Agenda (NUA), ten years after its adoption at the Habitat III Conference in Quito in 2016. Held on 16–17 July, the meeting brought together Member States and urban stakeholders to assess progress, consider persistent challenges and identify priorities for the next decade. The meeting was informed by the 2026 Report of the UN Secretary-General on progress in implementing the NUA, which provides a global assessment of progress since 2016. The General Assembly concluded the meeting by adopting a Political Declaration, reaffirming its commitment to sustainable urbanisation and calling for accelerated action, stronger partnerships and increased investment in the implementation of the Agenda.

South Africa contributed to the global review by submitting its 2026 National Progress Report on the Implementation of the New Urban Agenda, published by the Department of Human Settlements. The report assesses the country's progress in implementing the NUA, identifies ongoing challenges and highlights initiatives and case studies that demonstrate South Africa's urban development experience.

SACN played a central role in this process, serving as project manager for the development of the national report. This involved bringing together contributions from national and provincial government departments, municipalities, civil society, academia, business and other urban stakeholders. The process helped consolidate South Africa's experience and evidence into a national account of progress, challenges and priorities. The report also provides an opportunity to showcase South African initiatives and lessons on the international stage, contributing to the global exchange of knowledge on sustainable urban development. Its inclusion in the UN's 2026 review process connects the experiences of South African cities and communities with wider international discussions on the future of urbanisation.

The Secretary-General's report presents a sobering assessment: while countries have made progress in developing national urban policies and expanding infrastructure and basic services, implementation has not kept pace with the scale and complexity of global urban challenges.

The report identifies several key findings:

- **The global housing crisis is deepening.** Up to 3 billion people worldwide face inadequate housing, while more than 1.1 billion live in informal settlements and slums. Housing affordability, homelessness and insecure tenure remain major challenges.
- **Urban inequalities remain deeply entrenched.** Access to services, transport, public spaces and economic opportunities remains uneven. Progress in social inclusion and poverty reduction has been slow, with vulnerable communities disproportionately affected.
- **Cities are critical drivers of economic growth,** but opportunities are unevenly distributed. Cities generate more than 80% of global GDP, yet informality, unemployment, spatial inequality and barriers to accessing jobs continue to constrain inclusive urban prosperity.
- **Climate risks are intensifying.** Cities are increasingly exposed to extreme heat, flooding and other climate-related hazards. Although urban climate action has expanded, adaptation remains significantly underfunded, particularly in developing countries.
- **Local governments need greater capacity and resources.** Cities and local governments are increasingly at the forefront of implementing the NUA, but their responsibilities are often not matched by adequate financing, institutional capacity, skills and authority.
- **Policy commitments are not translating sufficiently into implementation.** Fragmented governance, weak coordination between spheres of government, limited urban data and gaps between national policies and municipal planning continue to hinder progress.

Priorities for the next decade

The report calls for a renewed focus on well-planned and well-managed urbanisation as a driver of social inclusion, economic productivity and environmental sustainability. It emphasises adequate housing, land and basic services; stronger local and regional government; improved urban planning and coordination; more predictable and accessible urban finance; and better data to support evidence-based decision-making. Importantly, it reinforces that the New Urban Agenda can only be realised through local action. National commitments must translate into effective municipal policies, plans, investment and partnerships, with communities actively involved in shaping their urban futures.

For SACN, the global review reinforces the importance of its work in supporting South African cities through research, knowledge sharing, peer learning, collaboration and advancing the Integrated Urban Development Plan (IUDF). South Africa's National Progress Report is not simply a record of commitments and achievements; it is an opportunity to strengthen the country's urban development agenda, share local experience globally and identify where further action is needed.

Links:

- **South Africa's Progress Report on Implementation of the New Urban Agenda:** https://www.urbanagendaplatform.org/node/2774
- **Secretary General 2026 Quadrennial Report:** https://www.urbanagendaplatform.org/2026-SG-Report



Productive Cities



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Urban Safety & City Economies

Coming soon: The State of Crime and Safety in South African Cities Report 2026

The South African Cities Network (SACN) will soon launch the third edition of its State of Crime and Safety in South African Cities Report. This smaller publication updates only on city-level crime trends, providing continuity with the regular State of Urban Safety in South Africa Reports. Drawing on the latest available police statistics and a 20-year city-level time series, the forthcoming report offers municipal leaders, urban safety practitioners, businesses, and civic representatives and organisations a shared evidence base for safer, more economically resilient cities.



The Report comes at a watershed moment, as SACN transitions the urban safety thematic focus from Inclusive Cities to the Productive Cities Programme. Within its 2026-2031 Strategic Cycle, the impact of crime and violence on the functioning of city economies becomes a focal point. Crime and violence are not only public safety concerns; they shape liveability, the social fabric, and the conditions under which city economies function. When people and businesses feel unsafe, everyday decisions are affected, including where to invest, open a business, travel, trade, and which public spaces to use. Safety therefore affects business continuity, labour-market participation, mobility, and the vibrancy of urban centres.

For South Africa's largest cities, this connection is important. Examining crime and safety trends across Johannesburg, Cape Town, eThekwini, Ekurhuleni, Tshwane, Nelson Mandela Bay, Mangaung, Msunduzi and Buffalo City, the forthcoming report is a crucial enabler of improved planning, budgeting and evidence-driven responses. Together, these cities represent a substantial share of the national population, economic activity and output. The SACN looks forward to providing stakeholders with an opportunity to engage with the evidence, reflect on its implications for local economic development, and identify practical pathways towards safer, more inclusive and more resilient urban economies. Stakeholders can expect city-level crime and safety trends and analysis, spatialised crime insights, and city-specific profiles to support better targeting of resources, as well as partnership and coordination around safety interventions.



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Communities at the Centre of Tshwane's Clean Air Agenda

The South African Cities Network (SACN) hosted five workshops for community-based organisations (CBOs) as part of the City of Tshwane Air Quality Capacity Building Programme. The Clean Air Fund funded these workshops, which took place between 29 July and 23 September 2026. The sessions brought together participants from community-based organisations, including environmental groups, health volunteers, youth and faith networks, and residents' associations from five regions in Tshwane.

These workshops established and capacitated communities on what air pollution is within their local lived experience. Participants then mapped the sources that shape the air in their neighbourhoods, such as open burning of waste, illegal dumping, coal and wood fires for heating and cooking, e-waste burning, and traffic and industrial emissions along key corridors. Sessions then linked these sources to their health effects, particularly respiratory illness in children and the elderly, especially during the winter season.

A practical focus ran through each session. Participants worked through solutions to minimise air pollution, how the National Environmental Management: Air Quality Act applies locally, how to log and escalate a pollution complaint with the City, and where community monitoring and evidence can strengthen that process.

The sessions also laid the groundwork for a lasting structure, the Tshwane Civil Society and Industrial Air Quality Forum, which will give CBOs and industry a standing platform to engage the City on air quality issues.







Urban Intelligence & Foresight



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SACN Contributes to Dialogue on a Shared Digital Foundation for Local Government

The South African Cities Network (SACN) participated in the Sovereign Digital Transformation Forum, a Microsoft-hosted side event to the GovTech Conference in Durban on 22 September 2026. The forum brought together government and technology stakeholders to explore how digital transformation can strengthen the public sector's capability and resilience.

SACN contributed to the discussion on "Building a Shared Digital Foundation for Local Government", offering a city and local-government perspective. The contribution challenged the sector to consider whether municipalities should continue addressing common digital challenges individually, or whether collective approaches could unlock greater value in areas such as interoperability, cybersecurity, common standards, shared specialist capabilities, and digital infrastructure.

Using the analogy of coalition government, SACN emphasised that collaboration does not require uniformity. Municipalities have different mandates, contexts, systems and levels of digital maturity, yet can still agree on a "minimum programme" of shared digital capabilities while retaining the autonomy to innovate locally.

The discussion also highlighted that South Africa is not starting from scratch. Several institutions and initiatives already contribute different elements of the digital-government ecosystem. The opportunity is therefore to better connect existing capabilities, identify genuine gaps, and determine what should be shared, standardised, coordinated, or retained locally.

SACN advocated a practical, municipality-led approach: listen, map, choose, pilot, learn and scale. Rather than starting with a new institution or technology platform, the starting point should be the challenges municipalities are trying to solve and where collective action can add the greatest value.

The engagement also allowed SACN to strengthen relationships with key partners, including eThekwini Municipality, and to position the Network within the broader national conversation about the future of digital local government.

Ultimately, SACN posed a simple question: What should no municipality have to build alone, what should every municipality be able to access, and what should rightly remain local?





Well-Governed Cities



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Community of Practice in Urban Governance and Municipal Finance





The quarter began with two webinars on the Revised White Paper on Local Government (WPLG) in the first two weeks of July, chaired by Tania Ajam, Professor of Public Policy, Finance and Economics at the University of Stellenbosch School of Public Leadership.

The first session reviewed and discussed the WPLG proposals to reform municipal structures and categorisation, focusing on Chapter 2 of the white paper: “Institutional System: Revised categories and differentiated powers and functions.” This chapter addresses structural flaws in the current municipal categories and the pitfalls of a one-size-fits-all approach to allocating powers and functions. It highlights overlapping and blurred accountabilities between District (Category C) and Local (Category B) municipalities, which often lead to gridlock, inefficiencies, and unfunded mandates.

The second is a review and discussion of the WPLG proposals to reform the local government fiscal framework, focusing on Chapter 8 of the white paper: “Municipal Finance.” This chapter deals with declining municipal fiscal health, uneven revenue collection, and the structural limitations of the current local government fiscal model. It addresses issues such as poor billing systems, failures in indigent policy targeting, and the misuse of conditional grants for operational survival rather than protecting capital assets.

Each webinar followed the same format.

The main speaker addressed three key issues to set the stage for the discussion:

1. What reforms are proposed?
2. Why were they proposed?
3. How will they be implemented?

Respondents answered the following questions:

1. What are your views on the proposals in the WPLG gazetted for public comment?
2. Are the proposals (1) desirable and (2) feasible?
3. How do you phase in the proposals without affecting service delivery?

The main speakers were Pascal Moloi, one of the leaders of the team overseeing the WPLG review, and Philip van Ryneveld, who co-authored the municipal finance chapter.

The respondents on the first webinar were:

- Johann Mettler, City Manager of the City of Tshwane
- Dr Paul Radikonyana, Senior Manager: Advisory and Research, Municipal Demarcation Board

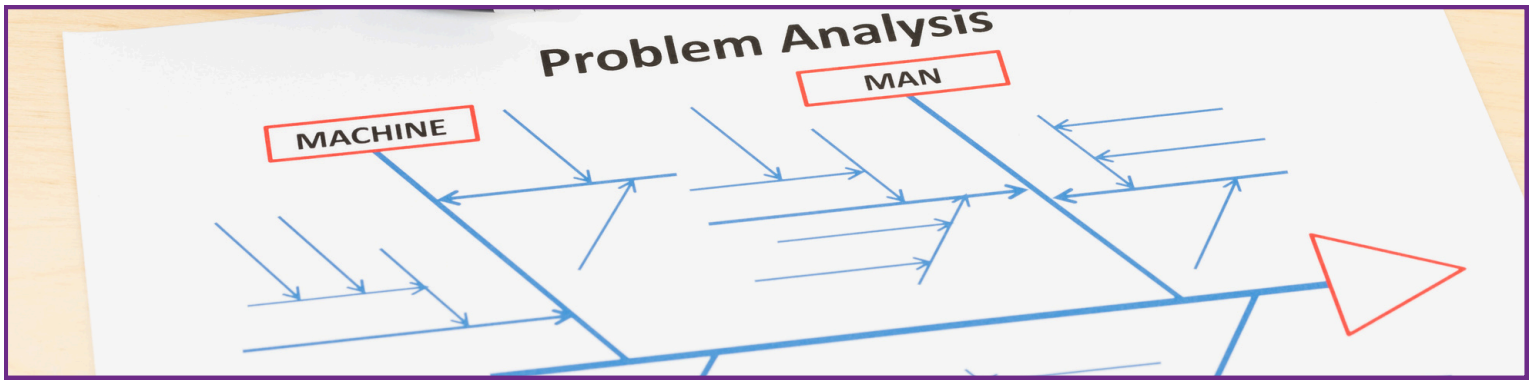
The respondents on the second webinar on municipal finance were:

- Jugal Mahabir, Local Government Lead, PARI and co-author of the municipal finance chapter
- Dr Letsepa Pakkies, Acting Chief Director, National Treasury
- Charity Wurayayi, Group Head, Group Accounting, City of Joburg
- Trevor Fowler, Commissioner, Financial and Fiscal Commission

Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA)

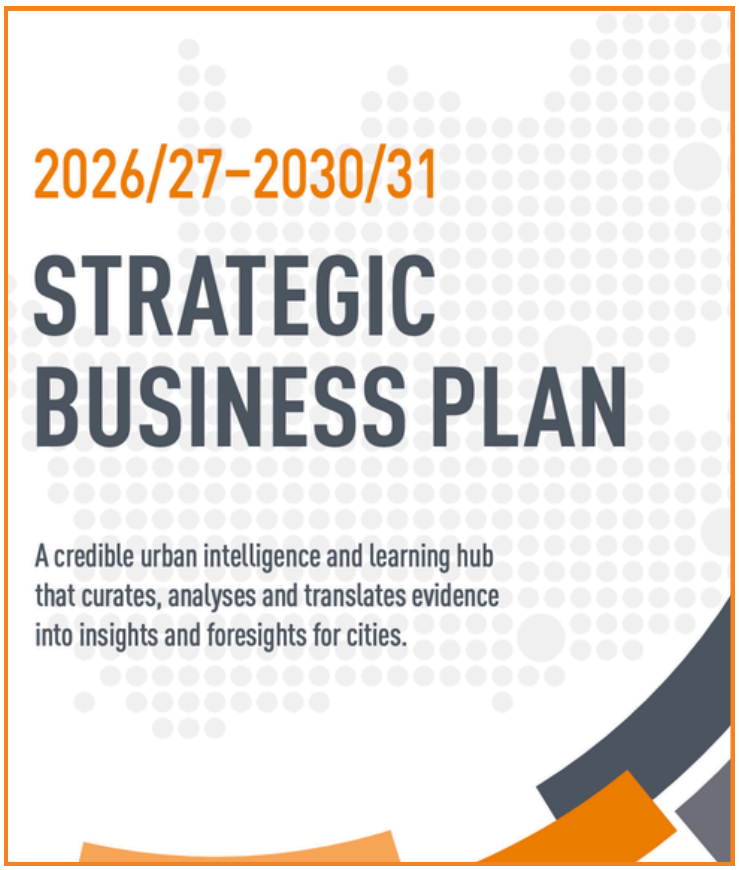
This quarter, we discussed holding further PDIA workshops with the City of Tshwane and the City of Joburg. In the City of Tshwane, feedback from participants in the first PDIA workshop, held on 8 April, was very positive, and they expressed interest in continuing with a series of workshops to further develop their PDIA practice. These are due to start in Q2. In addition, the Tshwane Leadership and Management Academy requested that SACN explore the possibility of training the trainers so that PDIA could be added to their transversal management toolkit.

In the City of Joburg, the PDIA team from the Special Projects Management Office (SPMO) in the Office of the COO was enthusiastic about continuing to apply the PDIA method in additional workshops and requested that SACN hold PDIA workshops for a second cohort of staff.



SACN Charts a New Strategic Direction for South African Cities: 2026–2031

The South African Cities Network (SACN) is entering a new chapter with the implementation of its **Strategic Business Plan for 2026–2031**, which sets out the organisation's strategic direction and priorities for the next five years. Building on more than two decades of experience and contribution to urban development, the strategy positions SACN to strengthen its role as a credible, data-driven urban intelligence and learning hub, supporting cities in navigating complex challenges and shaping more inclusive and resilient urban futures.



Aligned with national and international urban development frameworks, particularly the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), the strategy reaffirms SACN's commitment to promoting good governance and management in South African cities. Its vision is to promote well-governed, adaptive cities that act on evidence to deliver inclusive and resilient urban futures.

The strategy is anchored in five strategic pillars: **Urban Intelligence and Foresight; Learning Ecosystems and Practice Adoption; City Advocacy for the Urban Agenda; Partnerships for Value Creation; and an Agile and Sustainable Organisation.**

Together, these pillars provide a framework to strengthen evidence-informed decision-making, translate peer learning into practical change, amplify cities' voices in policy processes, and build partnerships that support meaningful urban development outcomes.

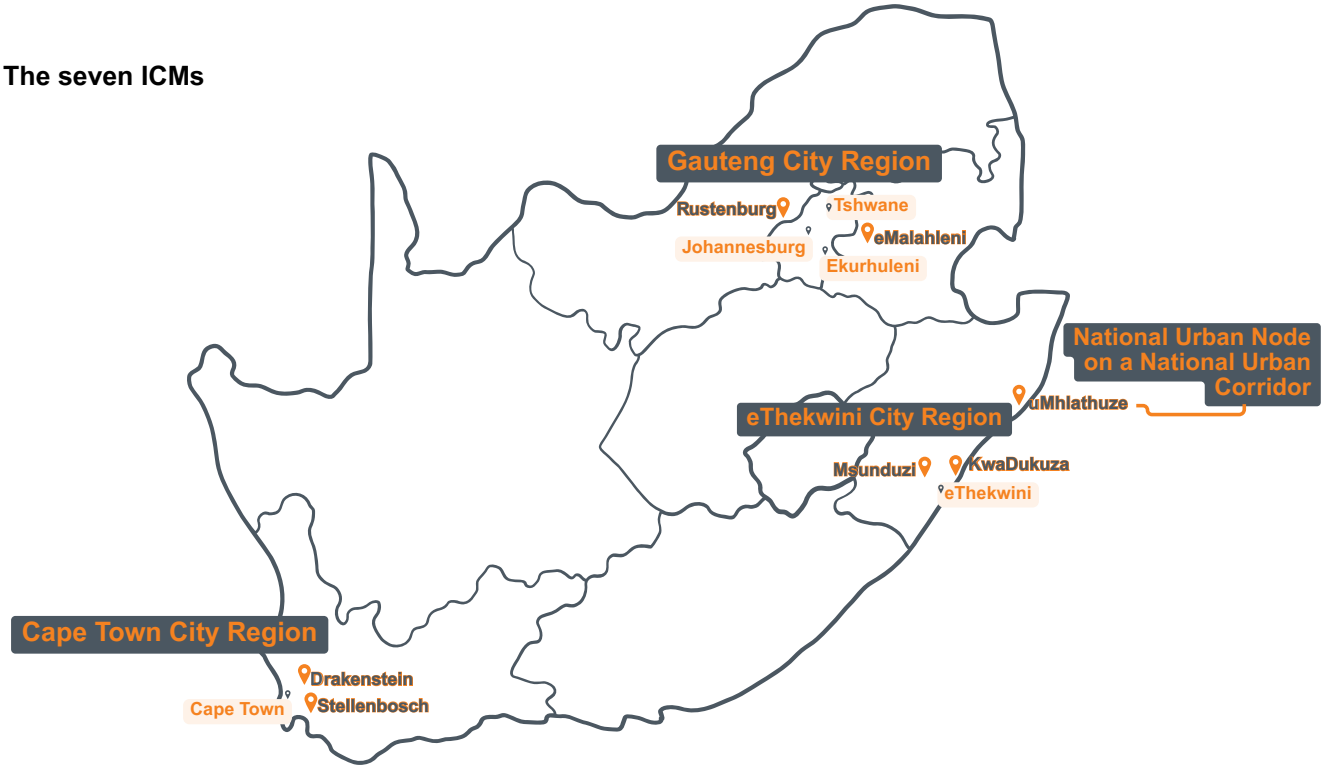
An important development in this strategic cycle is the expansion of SACN's engagement beyond metropolitan municipalities to include selected **Intermediate City Municipalities (ICMs)** and the adoption of a broader city-region approach. This recognises that urban economies, transport networks, infrastructure systems and patterns of movement extend beyond municipal boundaries, requiring stronger collaboration and coordination across interconnected urban areas.

During the first two years of the strategy, 2026/27 and 2027/28, SACN will initially focus on seven ICMs: **Stellenbosch, Drakenstein, Msunduzi, KwaDukuza, Rustenburg, eMalahleni and uMhlathuze**. Through this expanded engagement, SACN aims to strengthen peer learning, knowledge exchange, partnerships and access to urban intelligence, supporting these municipalities in addressing shared challenges and opportunities within their respective city-regions.

Read our ICM Strategy.

Team News & Events

The seven ICMs



The **State of Cities Report (SoCR)** will also remain a flagship initiative, serving not only as a key source of urban intelligence but also as a platform for strengthening policy dialogue, influencing the urban agenda and supporting the uptake of evidence into practice.

As SACN looks towards 2031, the focus is on ensuring that knowledge translates into action, that partnerships deliver greater value and that cities are better equipped to respond to changing urban realities.

Through this strategic direction, SACN reaffirms its commitment to connecting cities, knowledge and partnerships to help shape South Africa's urban future.

SoCR's over the years



Looking Ahead: SoCR VI National Futures Conference



What kind of urban future are we preparing for?

As South Africa reflects on 25 years of democratic local government, the sixth iteration of the State of South African Cities Report (SoCR VI) offers an opportunity not only to take stock of the urban journey to date but also to look ahead to the forces, uncertainties and possibilities that could shape South African cities over the next 25 years.

Against this backdrop, the South African Cities Network (SACN), in partnership with the Tayarisha Centre for Digital Governance at Wits University, convened a three-day National Futures Conference from 31 August to 2 September 2026 as part of the prospective component of SoCR VI.

The closed working conference brought together a diverse group of participants from cities, CoGTA, SALGA, human settlements, academia, civil society, intermediary cities, the private sector and the futures community. This diversity was intentional: meaningful thinking about the future of cities requires different experiences, disciplines and perspectives around the same table.

Rebecca Gatang'i, Programme Manager: Urban Intelligence & Foresight and Project Lead for SoCR VI, opened the discussions, situating the futures work within the broader SoCR VI journey. The conference drew on specialist contributions from Prof Geci Karuri-Sebina, Anticipatory Governance Specialist; the Wits Tayarisha team; and futures practitioners, bringing expertise in foresight, horizon scanning and anticipatory practice.

Over the three days, participants engaged with emerging signals and drivers of change, challenged assumptions about the urban trajectory, considered critical uncertainties and explored alternative possibilities for South African cities towards 2050.

The conference represents an important part of the "future-focused" dimension of SoCR VI. While the retrospective component of the report examines the evidence and experience of the past 25 years, the prospective work creates space to ask a different set of questions: What is changing around our cities? What could happen next? And what might different futures mean for South African cities?

Importantly, the exercise is not about predicting a single future. It is about widening the range of possibilities that can be considered and strengthening our collective capacity to think beyond the immediate.

The insights generated through the conference will now feed into the ongoing futures synthesis and ultimately into SoCR VI, scheduled for launch in April 2027.

The National Futures Conference provided a space to pause, look beyond the immediate, and explore the forces, uncertainties and possibilities that could shape the futures of South African cities.

The conversation continues.





As our loyal readers of our Quarterly Newsletter, we would love your feedback!
Please click here.



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