

Urbanisation: an historical perspective

The particular racial nature of capitalist development in South Africa has resulted in a unique process of urbanisation. Legislation has been enacted and implemented in the interests of the white race group and the capitalist class and this has resulted in geographically distinct residential areas for the different race groups. Most of the white areas are, in contrast with most black areas, well developed and financially well off. The process has not, however, been without its contradictions for the ruling bloc. Furthermore, the black majority has resisted urbanisation policies in a variety of ways. This article traces the historical development of urbanisation in South Africa with specific references to these contradictions and also outlines areas of resistance.

The mining industry

Urbanisation began on a large scale with the development of the mining industry. A large amount of unskilled labour was required but at this stage African societies still had relatively easy access to land and were not willing to work on the mines.

The Chamber of Mines responded by sending agents into the rural areas to recruit labour. Mine-owners made workers sign contracts and housed them in policed compounds to ensure they remained on the mines for longer periods. The colonial governments and Boer republics introduced hut, poll and labour taxes. These taxes had to be paid in cash, forcing increasing numbers of Africans into the labour market. Pass laws were introduced to restrict people to their area of work.

The majority of Africans, however, worked as wage labourers only as long as was necessary to meet their cash needs and then returned home, despite attempts to keep them on the mines. In other words, they became migrant labourers initially out of choice.

By the 1900s, most of the land in South Africa was owned by whites, but many of the African families that lived on white-owned land still produced their own crops and sold what they did not need.

The developing capitalist farming sector required both land and labour and was opposed to Africans producing their own crops. Small-scale Afrikaans farmers, threatened by competition from African farmers, favoured a restriction on the number of Africans per farm in the hope of obtaining labour. Mine-owners began to recognise that

a migrant labour force could be more advantageous to them than a permanent urban workforce. They encouraged the establishment of African "reserves" because migrant labourers could be paid low wages, just enough for their own needs, as long as their families still had access to land for subsistence farming. All these interests are represented in the 1913 Land Act.

Over the subsequent decades Africans were dispossessed of their remaining land and forced into overcrowded and rapidly deteriorating "reserves" where it became increasingly impossible to survive. As a result, more people were forced to seek permanent employment in the urban areas.

Segregation

Other than the compounds for mine workers, there was little formal accommodation for African workers in the urban areas. Workers stayed in multiracial slums, informal shack settlements and backyard shacks on white properties. Health conditions were poor and bubonic plague, smallpox, TB and influenza spread through overcrowded areas. The authorities feared that these diseases would spread to more affluent white areas. There was also an increasing militancy amongst African urban residents. These factors contributed to a situation where Africans were only tolerated in urban areas if their labour was required. Their status was that of visitors or "temporary sojourners".

The Urban Areas Act of 1923 provided for the clearance of mixed residential areas and the creation of separate "locations" for Africans. This was largely to prevent solidarity within the working class developing across racial divisions. Africans were further restricted in that they could not own property in freehold in the urban areas and their right to trade was curtailed.

Local government

The act also provided for a system of local government along segregated lines. African townships were administered by white local authorities. Africans were, however, expected to finance the development of the townships themselves. Each white municipality had a Native Revenue Account, the income of which was obtained from sorghum beer production and sales, fines and rents. This was the sole source of revenue for the development of housing and infrastructure as well as the provision of basic services in the townships. As the rate of urbanisation escalated, this revenue became increasingly inadequate to meet township needs.

The Urban Areas Act also controlled the rate of urbanisation by restricting the number of Africans in urban areas according to the availability of work. Arrival in an urban area had to be reported, employment of Africans had to be registered and those

unable to find jobs were to leave within 14 days. These regulations were applied systematically for the first time in 1938. Pass laws, which were developed to force Africans into urban areas to provide labour, were thus used for the restriction of their numbers in these very areas.

National Party rule

During the second world war the rapid expansion of industry and the subsequent severe labour shortage resulted in the suspension of influx control enforcement and a massive influx of Africans into the cities.

Large industrialists perceived an increased need for a skilled and permanent African urban labour force. The National Party, however, campaigned for the 1948 elections around the issue of "oorstrooming" (flooding). An emerging Afrikaner capitalist class was still dependent on cheap, rather than skilled, labour. White workers were threatened by competition in the labour market and white farmers were losing labour because they paid wages well below those in the urban areas. They all had an interest in preventing the establishment of a permanent skilled labour force.

On coming to power, the Nationalists tightened influx control legislation and the state machinery started to ruthlessly enforce it. Under the "Section 10" provisions Africans not born in an urban area were denied the right to live there unless they had lived there continuously for 15 years or worked for the same employer for 10 years. The maximum time allowed in urban areas was reduced from 14 days to 72 hours. Passes were to be introduced to women for the first time and all Africans had to carry passes at all times. Pass laws were a major focus of resistance in the 1950s but defiance was accompanied by harsh state repression.

Legislation making reference to acceptable health standards was used to justify removals; the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act enabled the state to demolish structures without the obligation to provide alternative accommodation or compensation.

Labour bureaux

Influx control was also intended to redirect labour to the low wage farming and mining sectors. An extensive network of labour bureaux was established to channel labour to areas of shortage. People without urban residence rights who were looking for employment had to register with these bureaux.

In the early years of Nationalist rule, however, the urban presence of a small proportion of African workers was accepted as necessary to meet the labour needs of industry. It was for this reason that "Section 10" rights were granted to a restricted number of people who were already effectively permanently urbanised.

Ironically, the Apartheid state was responsible for large scale development of the townships, taking significant steps to meet the housing needs of those with urban residence rights. A services levy was imposed on employers, payable to the Native Revenue Account for use in the townships. Central government spending on housing increased dramatically and a national housing fund was established. The fund received a yearly allocation from the treasury and granted loans to local authorities. The loans were to be used for the building of small "economic" housing units and were to be repaid through house rents. It was during this period that most of the houses in townships such as Soweto, Daveyton and Umlazi were built.

The creation of bantustans

Despite the repressive measures used, the state was relatively unsuccessful in limiting the numbers entering the cities and in the 1960s the National Party embarked on an extensive programme of social engineering to reverse African urbanisation. Africans, allocated to different ethnic groups, were thereby defined to be citizens of different bantustans. It was intended that Africans would eventually be settled in their territorially segregated areas which would become economically and politically independent units separate from white South Africa. Policy dictated that urban labour requirements should increasingly be met by contract workers from the bantustans who would commute to work on a daily basis or live in single sex hostels for the duration of their contracts. Extensive steps were taken to stimulate the development of industry in the "border" regions, adjacent to the bantustans.



Pass raids in central Johannesburg - the hated pass laws were introduced to control the movement and settlement of black people in urban areas.

From the late 1960s the state decreased its contribution to housing in the urban areas. In the early 1970s, newly created Bantu Affairs Administration Boards took over township administration from the white local authorities. The boards redirected employer levies to the departments responsible for influx control and large amounts of income obtained from sorghum beer were used to finance housing development in the bantustans. Revenue for use in the townships was almost entirely derived from house rents and service charges to residents and the Administration Boards rapidly slid into financial crisis.

Restructuring

In the 1970s there was widespread re-emergence of resistance, which included worker strikes as well as student and community action. The South African economy, moreover, experienced serious problems. The capitalist class required increasing numbers of skilled labourers to operate machinery and the urbanisation and education policies of the Nationalist government resulted in a severe skilled labour shortage. Furthermore the predominantly white consumer market became saturated and demand for goods dropped. The low wage urban African population was unable to make a significant contribution to consumerism. For these reasons, there was an increased demand for a more skilled and stable urban workforce.



Kwa-Ndebele residents celebrate the rejection of independence - bantustan policies have been rejected by the majority of South Africans.

The National Party was forced to respond to this crisis and has embarked on a restructuring of apartheid in the hope of restoring capitalist profitability as well as crushing resistance. It has come to accept the inevitability of a permanent urban African population, but insists on segregated residential areas administered by racially defined local authorities.

In the late 1970s, Community Councils were introduced in the townships. In the early 1980s, these were replaced by the Black Local Authorities which eventually took over all the functions of the Administration Boards. The government was responding to political resistance by attempting to establish a form of representative government at the local level, but these structures failed to win political legitimacy.

The government was also searching for a solution to the financial crisis of the Administration Boards. The townships are expected to be financially self-sufficient and the councils and local authorities were saddled with the task of raising income. The monthly charge to residents for house rents and services is the only major source of potential income available to them. Since the late 1970s, service charges have been increasing well above the rate of inflation. Residents refused to pay the monthly charges and forced councillors to resign. A rent boycott was started in the Vaal in 1984 and spread to numerous other townships nation-wide. By 1986, Black Local Authorities had collapsed in large parts of the country. Although the state has managed to revive most of these authorities, it is clear that the present structure is unworkable for both financial and political reasons.

The Group Areas Act of 1950 enforced the development of separate residential areas for "coloureds" and Indians and allowed for the creation of "coloured" and Indian local government structures. Most of these structures exist today as advisory bodies to white municipalities, but they do have the option to apply for autonomous status. One of the reasons why these bodies have not applied for autonomy is that they would then have to be self-financing. Once again, income would have to be obtained almost entirely from residents.

White municipalities, however, are able to generate large proportions of their income through rates imposed on the commercial concerns and industries that fall within their boundaries. These, in turn, rely on black spending power and labour and in this way black residents contribute substantially to white municipalities.

Regional Services Councils

The Regional Services Councils (RSCs) represent an attempt to overcome the obvious financial weaknesses of present local government structure. They raise income through levies on employers and use this income for development in all areas within their region. The RSCs allow for some redistribution to poorer communities but also allow for the continued existence of racially segregated local authorities within their regions. They

are therefore additional costly structures that are responsible for tasks that could be undertaken by non-racial local authorities.

The means of control of the rate of urbanisation has also changed in the present era of restructuring. In 1986, the government abolished influx control and replaced the pass document with a uniform identity document for all racial groups. This legislation has, however, been replaced in 1988 with the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Amendment Act through which millions of South Africans are potentially vulnerable to removal. The control of urbanisation on an overtly racist basis, which attracted widespread condemnation, has been replaced with a more subtle strategy of "orderly urbanisation". This "reform", however, has the potential to adversely affect large numbers of people without access to formal housing.

In the 1980s the state has effectively handed over the task of housing provision to the private sector. Africans were granted 99-year leasehold rights and have recently been granted freehold rights. The state is now selling off its present housing stock. All new houses are being built by the private sector, at prices unaffordable to the majority of Africans and at a rate that is too slow to meet housing needs.

Health implications

Urbanisation in South Africa has had serious consequences for the health of the majority of the population in both urban and rural areas. Workers were exposed on the mines to a variety of infectious and occupational diseases and the migrant labour system facilitated the spread of infectious diseases into rural areas. The combined effects of land dispossession and increasingly strict enforcement of influx control led to overcrowding in economically unviable bantustans. This has resulted in widespread malnutrition and lowered capacities to recover from infectious diseases.

In the racially segregated cities, African infant mortality rates have been far higher than those for white infants. Furthermore, the rate of decline of these rates for African infants has slowed down.

The lack of provision of housing in the urban areas is leading to further overcrowding in the townships as well the formation of a large urban squatter population. The present method of financing of the black local authorities, together with increasing levels of unemployment, is resulting in enormous financial pressure being placed on township residents. Urban squatter communities face an insecure future.

These current trends in urbanisation, when seen in conjunction with the deteriorating and increasingly expensive state health service, can only be anticipated to have a negative impact on health in the urban areas.