

SOUTH AFRICA | DISCUSSION PLATFORMS

South Africa's National Urban Forum: Policy Dialogues on Sustainable Urban Development

The South African Local Government Association, an autonomous association of all 257 local governments in South Africa, coordinates the South African National Urban Forum. The forum is a strategic platform bringing together diverse stakeholders to address urban challenges through structured policy dialogue.

257 SOUTH AFRICAN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Number of local municipalities by province:
Eastern Cape (39), Free State (23), Gauteng (11),
KwaZulu-Natal (54), Limpopo (27), Mpumalanga (20),
Northern Cape (31), North West (22), and
Western Cape (30)



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Background and Challenges

Today, more people than ever live in cities—places of cultural, economic and political opportunities and intense social interactions. Cities, however, exert pressure on urban infrastructure and access to basic services and jobs. Moreover, they contribute to intensified and frequent natural and human-induced disasters and governance challenges.

In South Africa alone, two-thirds of the population now live in urban areas, and it is projected that this will increase to 80% by 2050. Urban governance in South Africa is shaped by a constitutionally defined three-sphere system (national, provincial and local government). While this system offers opportunities for multi-level

cooperation, it can result in coordination and planning misalignment. At the same time, although South Africa is one of the most urbanised countries in Africa, its cities continue to face deep structural challenges such as:

- Persistent spatial inequality rooted in apartheid-era planning
- Housing backlog estimated at over 2 million units¹
- Infrastructure investment gaps at the municipal level
- High urban youth unemployment at above 40%²
- Increasing climate-related shocks including droughts, floods and heat stress

|| The National Urban Forum showcases good practices and approaches to confronting urban challenges through all-of-society and whole-of-government engagement. ||

To respond to these challenges, the South African Cabinet adopted the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) in 2016 as the national urban policy to manage urbanisation and achieve the goals of economic development, job creation and improved living conditions. However, implementation requires a structured mechanism and institutionalised platform for coordination, monitoring and inclusive dialogue.

Against this backdrop, it is critical for urban actors to come together to assess the efficacy of local, national and global efforts in addressing urban challenges. Stakeholders need to debate current policies and practices, test the understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities, showcase good practices and consolidate positions on critical urban matters for local and international advocacy.

To enable this, South Africa hosted its inaugural National Urban Forum (NUF) in October 2024 for stakeholders to work towards sustainable urban development. The forum has since become a regular platform convened by the

South African Local Government Association (SALGA), Department of Human Settlements and South African Cities Network, supported by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). The aim of the NUF is to align and localise global, regional and local actions for urban development as articulated in the New Urban Agenda, the IUDF and the United Nations SDGs.

Among other objectives, the NUF showcases good practices and approaches to confronting urban challenges. It does this through all-of-society and whole-of-government engagement, providing a platform for cross-thematic dialogue grounded in practice and empirical evidence.

Implementation

The NUF goals are operationalised through three key approaches.

1. Using a structured institutional design where SALGA working groups are established and aligned to IUDF priorities, regular engagement is maintained through the NUF and other thematic technical dialogues.
2. The NUF covers a broad spectrum of thematic focus areas, including urban resilience and climate adaptation, informal settlement upgrading, infrastructure finance and municipal fiscal sustainability as well as digital governance.
3. Participation metrics are tracked to ensure that a diverse group of stakeholders take part across NUF sessions, including ministers, mayors and councillors, academics, industry professionals, civil society and community groups. The most recent cycle in August 2025 saw over 800 participants, including female leaders, technical officials, and representatives from secondary cities and small towns.



South Africa hosted its inaugural National Urban Forum from 9 to 11 October 2024, attracting a diverse group of delegates.
Image: SALGA



The 2024 NUF saw lively discussion by delegates.
Image: SALGA

Key Priority Areas

Through the NUF discussions, stakeholders have identified several key priority areas.

At the macro level, the focus is on strengthening institutional mechanisms. This was done by establishing a national mechanism to coordinate efforts of the whole of government and all of society, and by institutionalising accountability through the District Development Model. This has also led to improved alignment between national urban grants and municipal Integrated Development Plans.³

There has been better integration between policy and planning as well, such as with increased incorporation of spatial transformation principles and climate resilience measures in municipal planning. At the same time, municipal plans tackle themes such as urban mobility (by prioritising public transport) and urban safety, and aim to achieve a balance between rural and urban

growth. Of equal importance is efficient land governance and management systems based on authentic cadastral boundaries and spatial maps to support municipalities in institutionalising long-term development plans.

In terms of financing, there has been a review of the local government funding model. The emphasis is on streamlining inter-governmental fiscal instruments, pooling resources, encouraging public-private partnerships and exploring alternative funding models.

This is complemented by enhancing skills in municipalities. Such efforts include peer-learning exchanges among metropolitan and intermediary cities, and speeding up professionalisation of both the public sector and the built environment industry. In addition, to boost resilience, cities are developing capacities for disaster preparedness and management.

Citizens will be kept at the centre, with the mobilisation of communities in planning and implementation, especially youth, women and marginalised groups.

Another key priority is the empowering of youth in the shaping of cities, urban spaces and governance. Beyond including their voices in consultations, cities will promote youth-led initiatives and solutions. National youth policy and development strategies will also be implemented at the provincial, district and local levels.

Lastly, for global positioning, South Africa will have coordinated municipal inputs into urban platforms like the Africa Urban Forum and World Urban Forum. This also involves participation in global reporting and policy dialogues facilitated by the United Cities and Local Governments and UN-Habitat.

Lessons Learnt

The NUF has yielded valuable insights that can guide future urban policy dialogue. Institutionalised dialogue platforms improve policy continuity, prevent fragmentation and ensure sustained engagement. The inclusion of stakeholders of various backgrounds enhances legitimacy while strengthening policy ownership and accountability.

Through SALGA's leadership, municipalities are being positioned not only as implementers, but also as strategic partners in shaping national urban policy. In contributing to long-term spatial transformation, fiscal sustainability and inclusive urban development, the NUF showcases South Africa's commitment and aspirations in achieving SDG11 which is to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. 🌐

[1] Department of Human Settlements. National Housing Needs Register and Backlog Estimates.

[2] Statistics South Africa (2023). Quarterly Labour Force Survey.

[3] Republic of South Africa (2016). Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF).

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