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Planning is Local: A Systematic Review of Decentralised Urban Planning Research and Practise in the SADC Region

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1 ABSTRACT

Urban planning is vital for enhancing sustainable development and addressing urbanisation challenges. However, in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, planning frameworks often overlook local realities, resulting in ineffective outcomes. This study critiques the tension between utopian aspirations in urban planning, marked by idealised, standardized models, and the grounded realities of local settings. Using a systematic review methodology, the research synthesises existing literature on decentralised urban planning practices within the SADC region. The findings reveal increasing recognition of participatory planning and local governance but identify persistent gaps, such as limited incorporation of indigenous knowledge and reliance on generic models unsuited to local settings. The paper highlights the importance of localising planning processes through participatory governance, indigenous knowledge integration, and context-sensitive approaches. The work proposes a SADC Contextual Urban Planning Framework, stressing participatory planning, collaborative governance, capacity building, and sustainability. This framework aims to bridge the gap between utopian ideals and local realities, advocating inclusive, contextually relevant urban planning that aligns with regional socio-economic, cultural, and environmental conditions.

Keywords: Systematic Review, Indigenous Knowledge, Decentralisation, Localised Urban Planning, SADC Region

2 INTRODUCTION

Urban planning is a critical tool for enhancing sustainable development and addressing the complex challenges of urbanisation. However, within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, many planning frameworks fail to adequately reflect local realities, resulting in ineffective and unsustainable outcomes (World Bank, 2022). Urban planning has long been driven by visions of ideal cities – utopias where infrastructure, society, and the environment coexist in perfect harmony (Mihaylov & Sala, 2022). These utopian ideals often manifest in grandiose projects and standardized frameworks that, while ambitious, may overlook the nuanced realities of local settings. In the SADC region, such approaches have frequently clashed with on-the-ground socio-economic, cultural, and environmental conditions, leading to ineffective and unsustainable urban development outcomes (Cinnamon, 2023; Guma & Monstadt, 2021). This paper contends that while utopian aspirations can inspire progress, they must be balanced with pragmatic, community-centered approaches that prioritise local knowledge and participatory governance. The paper begins by exploring the historical and conceptual foundations of utopian ideals in urban planning and their influence on local settings. It then critiques the gap between these aspirations and the realities on the ground, illustrated through global and regional case studies. The paper concludes by proposing a SADC Contextual Urban Planning Framework.

3 UTOPIA IN LOCAL URBAN PLANNING

A review of global and regional urban planning models reveals a spectrum of approaches, from centralized, top-down frameworks to decentralised, participatory systems. The concept of utopia, derived from Sir Thomas More's 16th-century work, represents an idealised society where perfection is achieved in law, politics, and social conditions (Fisher, 2023). In urban planning, utopian ideals have historically driven the design of cities that aspire to embody perfect order, efficiency, and beauty (Ma, 2017). However, the imposition of such idealised models often fails to account for the complex, dynamic, and diverse nature of real-world urban settings. This work adopts a conceptual framework that critiques the uncritical application of utopian ideals in urban planning. Ebenezer Howard (1898) introduced the Garden City concept, a planned settlement featuring a central business district (CBD) at its core, surrounded by concentric rings of greenbelt and residential areas. The design ensures accessibility through an integrated network of roads and railways

along its periphery. Howard's vision aimed to merge the benefits of both urban and rural living. However, Jane Jacobs (1961) criticised the Garden City model for its rigid and detached planning approach. She highlighted the significance of community interaction, advocating for neighborhoods where people actively engage with and support one another in the planning process. In the 1890s, Daniel Burnham highlighted the importance of grand-scale planning, focusing on orderliness and harmonious design. He is renowned for advocating ambitious and visionary urban plans, believing that only bold ideas have the power to inspire and endure. His famous quote reflects this philosophy:

"Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably will themselves not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will not die."

He firmly believed that great plans, rather than small ones, have the potential to ignite passion and drive meaningful progress. However, based on Jacobs, and Howard; it is easy to conclude that there is no definite definition, design, or concept of a utopia, which forces us to explore utopian aspirations and realities in local settings.

3.1 Utopian Aspirations vs. Local Realities

In an attempt to explore the gap between local realities and utopian aspirations, the study focuses on the cases of Songdo City in South Korea, Sentosa Island in Singapore, and Sejong in South Korea as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Case Studies. Left: Songdo City Skyline, South Korea. Centre: Sentosa Island, Singapore. Right: Sejong, South Korea.

According to Tura and Ojanen, (2022), Smart cities incorporate cutting-edge urban planning, utilising advanced technologies and sustainable practices to improve the quality of life for residents. Designed free from the limitations of existing infrastructure, they offer a blank slate for developing futuristic urban environments that transform modern living. As depicted in Figure 1, Sejong, South Korea, was designed as an administrative capital and a model city for 500,000 residents. It features cutting-edge technology, including extensive CCTV surveillance, electric buses, and autonomous vehicles. The city's master plan integrates eco-friendly initiatives such as solar-powered homes and zero-waste systems. Additionally, Sejong offers natural scenic elements, highlighted by a 1.9-square-mile central park encircling an artificial lake, which serves as a communal gathering space (Zahran, 2024). Also, in Figure 1, Sentosa, Singapore's resort island, was developed as a premier leisure and entertainment destination to attract tourists worldwide. Boasting over 240 attractions – including hotels, amusement parks, and nature trails – Sentosa offers a diverse experience tailored to families and corporate travellers alike (TTG Asia Media, 2015). Conversely, Songdo, as shown in Figure 1, aspired to be a futuristic model city, attracting a global community of residents and businesses. However, its top-down planning approach struggled to present a genuine sense of community. Despite its green buildings and technological innovations, the city was often perceived as sterile and overly corporate (Zahran, 2024). Unlike Sejong, which stressed collaborative governance, Songdo lacked meaningful public participation in urban planning, leading to a disconnect between the city and its residents. The cases in Figure 1 and the discussion above present the contrast between utopian aspirations and the limitations of local realities that include a lack of participation and collaborative governance, which can result in failed developments.

3.2 Local Knowledge as an Alternative to Utopia

In contrast to top-down, utopian planning models, approaches that value local knowledge and participatory processes have shown greater effectiveness in achieving sustainable urban development. The innovative methodological approach, known as participatory utopian sketching is conceptually grounded in a utopian framework that encourages imaginative and speculative thinking about the future. It challenges citizens to reflect on "the kinds of people [they] want to become and [the] different forms of society [they] will promote or inhibit" (Levitas, 2013). This process unfolds through four interdependent stages: 1) Experiencing the Space, 2) Sketching Utopias, 3) Sharing Utopias, and 4). The framework's key strengths include collaboration, inclusivity, creative experimentation, and an iterative process of reflection (Törnroth et al., 2022).

4 METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

This study uses a systematic review methodology to examine decentralised urban planning practices in the SADC region, selected for its capacity to synthesize diverse research, identify gaps, and provide a comprehensive overview of trends and challenges (Mengist, Soromessa & Legese, 2020). As shown in Figure 1 below, the review process involved three phases: a structured literature search using Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, with keywords like "decentralised urban planning," "participatory planning," and "SADC region," covering sources from 2000 to 2024.

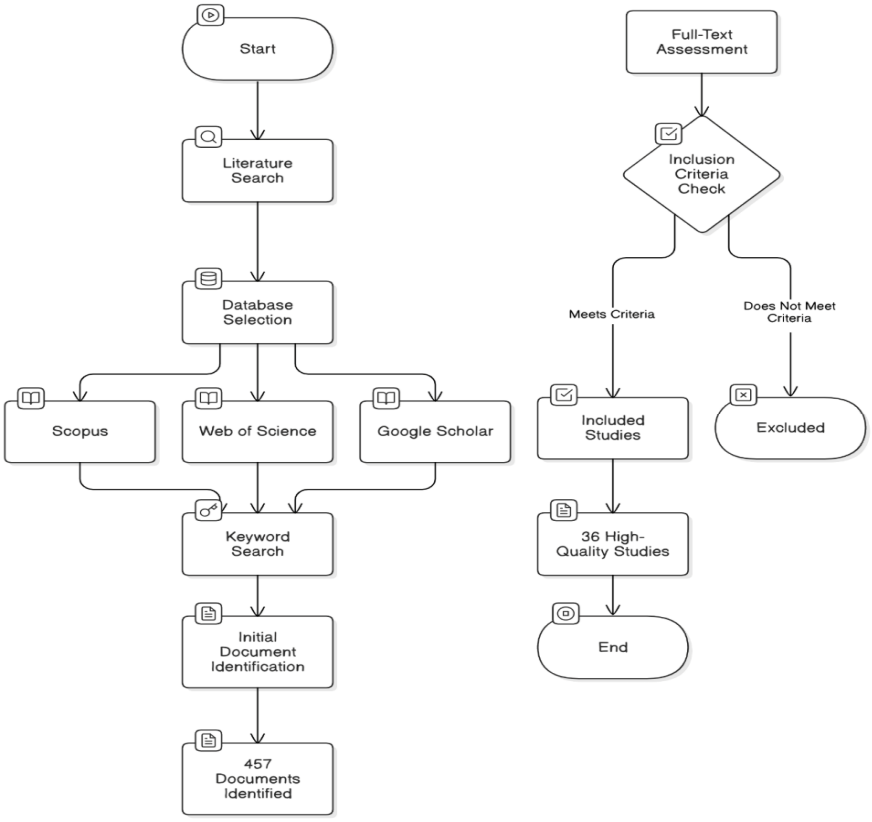

Figure 2: Research Process

The research initially identified 457 documents, which were screened through a two-step process involving a title and abstract review followed by a full-text assessment. This rigorous selection process, guided by inclusion and exclusion criteria, narrowed the pool to 36 high-quality and relevant studies. Studies were included if they focused on decentralised planning models, participatory governance, or capacity building within the SADC region, excluding those that lacked regional relevance. Thematic analysis, utilising coding techniques, was then applied to the selected studies to identify key concepts such as participatory planning, collaborative governance, and capacity building, evaluated concerning sustainable urban development principles.

5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS OF SELECTED CASE STUDY EXPERIENCES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

The tension between utopian aspirations and local realities is evident in several urban development projects within the SADC region. Grand plans, often influenced by international models, have sometimes resulted in projects that are misaligned with the needs and capacities of local communities.

A case in point is the N2 Gateway Housing Project in Cape Town, South Africa, which was envisioned as a large-scale solution to housing shortages. However, it faced significant criticism for inadequate consultation with affected communities, leading to social unrest and legal challenges. The project was described as a "beautification project" for the 2010 FIFA World Cup, prioritising aesthetics over the needs of displaced residents (Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, 2009). The N2 Gateway project was an initiative by the Cape Town government to upgrade the Joe Slovo informal settlement along the N2 freeway. Launched in 2004, it served as the pilot project for the Breaking New Ground Housing Plan introduced by the National Department of Housing (now the Department of Human Settlements) (Baptist, 2009). Intended to be the first of many informal settlement upgrades, the project faced significant challenges. The government adopted a top-down approach rather than a community-driven, bottom-up strategy, leading to poor communication with residents. This lack of engagement resulted in mistrust and misunderstandings about the community's needs in the upgrading process (Tissington, 2009).

In another case in 2016, the Bulawayo City Council (BCC) signed a build-operate-transfer (BOT) agreement with Terracotta to redevelop the Basch Street terminus into a multi-purpose mall (The Standard & NewsDay, 2021). There has been political discord and external interference (Zichire, 2022). Moyo (2021) also alleges that councilors mismanaged and embezzled project funds. The project's failure indicates the importance of contextualizing master plans to local contexts and involving all affected stakeholders.

In the case of the city of Manzini, Eswatini, a new taxi rank called satellite was proposed, and over E3.5 Million for the facility was paid, about 95 per cent of that amount came from ratepayers (Times of Swaziland, (2009). According to Sibisi (2012), the failure of the project was the result of not engaging community stakeholders, including commuters whose interests should have been central to the whole proposal.

In South Africa, BusinessTech, (2019), in 2014, Zendai Developments, a Chinese development firm, unveiled plans for an $8 billion (about R84 billion) smart city in Modderfontein, east of Johannesburg. The 1,600-hectare development aimed to rival Sandton with nine functional zones, including a central business district, entertainment hub, and residential and educational districts. Scheduled for completion by 2030, the project was expected to house 30,000 families and create up to 200,000 permanent jobs, contributing significantly to local economic growth and urban expansion. The project faced setbacks due to divergent visions between the developer and the City of Johannesburg. Reboredo and Brill (2019), Zendai's vision for an upscale, mixed-use development diverged from the City of Johannesburg's priorities. Instead of a luxury global hub, the city sought a more inclusive project aligned with the principles of its 2014 Spatial Development Framework. Furthermore, these spatial patterns conflicted with the objectives of South Africa's new democratic government and its efforts to address the impacts of apartheid-era planning (Reboredo and Brill 2019). The findings provide a clear need for a framework in the SADC region that advises and guides critical development in urban areas.

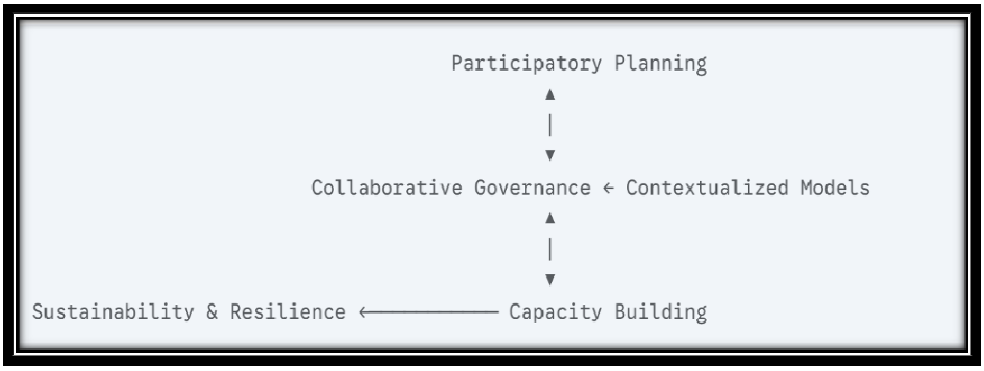

Figure 3: Hierarchical relationship between different concepts related to planning and development. Source: M. Mndzebele (2025)

6 TOWARDS A SADC CONTEXTUAL URBAN PLANNING FRAMEWORK

The SADC Contextual Urban Planning Framework is designed to guide urban development within the SADC region by prioritising local knowledge, participatory governance, and adaptive planning models. It is grounded in insights from the study's findings, which highlight the critical importance of engaging local stakeholders and aligning projects with regional priorities.

The proposed framework in Figure 2 integrates essential components essential for achieving effective, locally driven urban planning projects in the SADC region. At its core, participatory planning enhances inclusive engagement by incorporating local knowledge and community input into urban development processes, ensuring that planning initiatives align with local needs and priorities (Sebunya & Gichuki, 2024). Building on this, collaborative governance and partnerships between local governments, community organizations, and stakeholders facilitate shared decision-making, thereby enhancing transparency, trust, and accountability in the planning process (Njezula, 2024). Complementing these participatory mechanisms, contextualized models promote locally tailored urban frameworks that address unique socio-economic, cultural, and environmental conditions, enabling solutions that resonate with community realities and mitigate project failures Chang (2017). To support these efforts, Capacity Building is critical, as it strengthens local government competencies and empowers community-led initiatives through knowledge sharing, technical training, and institutional development Ndou and Sebola (2016). Together, these components drive sustainability and resilience, ensuring that urban planning frameworks address environmental challenges, promote social equity, and create long-term, adaptable urban solutions that can withstand socio-economic and environmental shocks. This integrated approach forms a robust, locally grounded framework for advancing sustainable urban development in the SADC region.

6.1 Future Research

Comparative studies across different African regions could also help identify best practices and challenges in implementing contextualized urban models, enhancing knowledge-sharing and regional collaboration for sustainable urban development.

7 CONCLUSION

The systematic review highlights the importance of localising urban planning initiatives within the SADC region through participatory approaches, collaborative governance, contextualised models, capacity building, and a focus on sustainability and resilience. The findings stress that urban planning frameworks must prioritise local knowledge, inclusive decision-making, and modified solutions to address the unique socio-economic, cultural, and environmental conditions of the region. Case studies from the SADC region further illustrate the consequences of neglecting community participation and local contexts in urban development projects. Therefore, the proposed framework in Figure 2 offers a pathway for creating more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient urban environments.

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