

A complex tapestry of urban health in South Africa

South Africa (SA), a nation rich in diversity and history, has faced significant challenges with rapid urbanisation in the last two decades, with more than two-thirds of the population now living in urban areas at an annual growth rate of approximately 2% in the last decade.^[1] As a rapidly urbanising country, its cities are grappling with a myriad of issues, such as socioeconomic disparities, infectious diseases and environmental hazards that impact the health and well-being of its residents.

One of the most pressing concerns in urban SA is the pervasive issue of socioeconomic disparities (Gini coefficient 0.67). These disparities are influenced by high unemployment, low wages and significant income disparities.^[2] The legacy of apartheid left a deep imprint on the country's urban landscape, resulting in stark inequalities in terms of housing, education and access to healthcare. This is particularly evident in townships, informal settlements, hostels and among the homeless, where residents often face overcrowded conditions, lack of basic amenities and limited access to healthcare services. These factors contribute to a higher prevalence of diseases, such as tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, diseases of lifestyle and mental health issues among the urban poor.

Infectious diseases continue to pose a significant threat to urban health in SA. HIV/AIDS remains a major public health concern. Tuberculosis is another prevalent disease, particularly in areas with high rates of poverty and overcrowding. The emergence of drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis has further complicated the situation. This is compounded by the increasing prevalence of diseases of lifestyle, such as hypertension and diabetes. Access to clean water and adequate sanitation is essential for preventing the spread of diseases, but many urban residents, especially in informal settlements, lack these basic necessities.

To address these complex challenges of urbanisation in SA and its effect on the quality of life of the residents, a multi-faceted health in all policies (HiAP) approach is required. While significant

progress has been made in recent years, challenges persist in terms of infectious diseases, environmental hazards and socioeconomic disparities. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach that involves government, civil society organisations and the private sector. By investing in healthcare, promoting equity and addressing environmental concerns, SA can improve the health and well-being of its urban population and build a more just and sustainable future.

However, the challenges of urbanisation are a global problem and not unique to SA. SA cities could learn a lot from other cities of similar size and population. Global platforms like C40,^[3] UN-HABITAT^[1] and WHO Urban Health^[4] offer valuable opportunities for collaboration. These affiliations can assist SA cities in benchmarking their progress, especially in terms of their commitment to sustainable development goals (SDG) 11.^[5] For example, several SA cities, such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Tshwane have joined the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, collaborating with other global urban centres to develop innovative climate solutions, sharing best practices and driving local climate actions.^[3] Collaboration among these cities at national and international levels could assist in finding innovative solutions to the problems currently faced by SA cities.

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4. World Health Organization. Urban Health. https://www.who.int/health-topics/urban-health#tab=tab_1 (accessed 30 September 2024).
5. United Nations. The 17 GOALS. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>. (accessed 30 September 2024).