


African cities by 2063: Fostering theologies of urban citizenship

**Author:**Stephan F. de Beer^{1,2} **Affiliations:**¹Faculty of Theology and Religion, Centre for Faith and Community, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa²Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Stephan de Beer,
stephan.debeer@up.ac.za**Research Project Registration:****Project Leader:** Stephan de Beer **Project No:** 86233689**Description:**

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Grounded in a postcolonial, liberationist urban vision, this article lamented the theological and political paralysis of urban denialism that fails African cities and African urban populations. Considering different possible urban trajectories towards 2063 – ranging from floundering to flourishing, implosion to explosion, and apocalyptic disaster to complete rebirth – it then proposed theologies of African urban citizenship, as response. It sought to articulate a vision of citizen-driven African cities, remaking cities 'from below', through interconnected and intersectional urban movements. It considered urban citizenship not as the decent and orderly conduct of subjects of the nation-state but as the disruptive and transformative presence and participation of citizens of God's new city, breaking into cities across the African continent. While it bemoaned the absence of 'Africa's urban revolution' from mainstream theologies and politics practised in the African context, and the insufficient attention paid to it even by the Africa 2063 manifesto, it dared to evoke hope, in spite of evidence to the contrary. This should be viewed as a conceptual contribution, fusing literature study with deep urban immersion.

Contribution: Grounded in a postcolonial, liberationist urban vision, this article lamented the theological and political paralysis of urban denialism that fails African cities and African urban populations, contemplating theologies of African urban citizenship instead.

Keywords: Urban denialism; African cities; African urban populations; theologies of African urban citizenship; urban citizenship; Africa 2063 manifesto; Africa's urban revolution.

Background

Agenda 2063 is a collective African vision of sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development of the continent by 2063, crafted by the African Union. Its first aspiration is envisioning '[a] high standard of living, quality of life and well-being for all' (The African Union Commission n.d.), inclusive of ambitious targets such as:

Ending poverty, inequalities of income and opportunity; job creation, especially addressing youth unemployment; facing up to the challenges of rapid population growth and urbanization, improvement of habitats and access to basic necessities of life – water, sanitation, electricity; providing social security and protection. (n.p.)

Yet apart from the casual reference to the challenge of urbanisation, no adequate specific attention is paid to the reality of African cities, either as potential cesspools of Africa's final demise or holding the promise for incubating Africa's radical socio-economic turnaround.

In spite of Africa today being the fastest urbanising continent on the planet, politically and theologically this reality has seldom been foregrounded in terms of systematic theorising and pragmatic action.

According to the United Nations (UN) Habitat (2012–2022):

For decades, African governments and the international development community have tended to view Africa through a rural lens, while regarding urbanisation as both a symptom of failure and a deterrent for future development. A complex milieu of postcolonial nationalist ideology and a basic needs development approach has ensured that development initiatives generally target rural settlements. Furthermore, urbanisation and human settlement development is neither given priority by national governments, politicians, bureaucrats and technocrats nor fully grasped by the population at large. This neglect is made salient by a failure by African policymakers to appropriately plan for and manage urbanisation in order to harness the potentials of urban centres as drivers of development. (n.p.)

Note: Special Collection: Agenda 2063 – The Africa We Want – Religious Perspectives, sub-edited by Jerry Pillay (University of Pretoria).

Such failure not only fails to ‘harness the potentials of urban centres as drivers of development’ – with the ability to help mediate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in local contexts, but also the bold visions contained in Africa’s Agenda 2063 – but also, in the worst-case scenario, such failure holds the promise of apocalyptic disaster – collapsing eco-systems, urban hunger at a scale not seen before, and urban populations turning on each other in a battle for survival.

Lagos, Nigeria, is one example. Growing from 200 000 people in the 1960s to 20 million people today, it has become one of the world’s 10 largest cities (Vidal 2018). But, says John Vidal (2018), ‘the changes Lagos has seen in the last 60 years may be nothing to what might take place in the next 60’, if current population growth and in-migration from rural Nigeria persist. This is a prime example, but smaller cities such as Niamey, Niger, and Blantyre, Malawi, are growing at similar rates and, if these growth trajectories remain the same, could reach the size of a New York City towards the end of this century.

Urbanists such as Pieterse and Zevi (eds. 2018) make the clear link between Agenda 2063 and its ambitious African vision and the potential role that African cities could play in mediating its realisation. It is crucial to consider the relationship between the lofty ideals of Agenda 2063 and the scholarship of African urbanism.

In doing so, it is urgent to overcome the theo-political denial that fails African cities in crafting, fostering and supporting new kinds of theo-political imaginaries, agencies and practices. Here, I propose theologies of urban citizenship to be discerned and animated in African cities, not primarily among the postcolonial elite who ordinarily seem to dictate urban futures – and their inclusions and exclusions – but particularly among ordinary urban citizens and the urban majorities who find themselves carving out a living in African slums and informal settlements (‘from below’). Whereas I would describe myself as an urban theologian of liberation, I deliberately use ‘theologies’ in the plural in this article, arguing here that the range of theological traditions and emphases on the African continent need to take urban realities extremely seriously, centring notions of urban citizenship into their own theological discourse and from their own perspectives.

Between imaginaries of apocalyptic doom and revolutionary innovation

African urbanisation evokes vastly different imaginaries of possible urban futures. On the one hand, it could result in apocalyptic realities of doom, implosion and dissolution, but on the other hand, it can also reveal potentials for flourishing and rebirth of the kind never experienced before on the continent.

Pieterse (2021) writes:

The busy cities we live in have momentum of their own. But if we do not put them on to a more sustainable footing, this key source of human connectivity and innovation, may well contribute to our demise. (n.p.)

The challenge is now, if Africa’s urban futures are to be filled with hope.

Pieterse (2021), again, states:

Therefore, even though cities sometimes look and feel like the villains of a sustainability story, they can also be heroes harbouring our growing populations. (n.p.)

But much of the script is still to be written, and how the story of cities turns out depends, to a large extent, on how well we understand them and what we choose to do now.

In the next section, I explore theologising in the African city between the possible extremes of apocalyptic doom and revolutionary innovation. I do so employing the categories of floundering to flourishing, implosion to explosion and apocalyptic disaster to complete rebirth.

Floundering to flourishing

Just reflecting on the South African municipal landscape alone, only 15.95% of cities and towns received a clean bill of health from the Auditor-General in 2022. Forty-one municipalities out of 257 received clean audits. Sixty-four per cent of municipalities incurred irregular expenditure, totalling R20.45 billion (Mkentane 2022).

Such floundering systems of governance – eventually depleting local resource bases, resulting in collapsing infrastructure, increased exclusion of the masses from basic resources, and catastrophic human and ecological effects – might become much more vivid and damning to African urban dwellers, in lieu of urgent and decisive interventions. This is not only the story of South African cities and towns. Cities across the continent cannot keep up with the pace of urbanisation, resulting in exploding urban slums and informal settlements and increasing pressure on existing weak infrastructure and limited local resource bases.

Pieterse (2021) describes how a combination of colonial city-making and postcolonial ‘underinvestment in extending and maintaining infrastructure’ trapped African cities, entrenching inequalities and perpetuating a lack of access to basic services. These factors in themselves deny the possibility of urban flourishing, but of greater long-term concern is how such ‘inherent inefficiencies [...] are a significant risk to the sustainability of the environment in which they operate’.

And yet, although hundreds of urban municipalities across the continent are floundering in terms of good governance, adequate resources, fair distribution of resources and mediating holistic well-being to the majority of their populace,

there exist also visions of urban flourishing, scattered in cities across the continent, often animated by entrepreneurs, activists and civic or faith-based leaders. Whereas many urban governments have ambitious master plans, these are often aimed at modernistic urban developments that might result in isolated success stories and growth trajectories, mostly without impacting the urban masses – predominantly poor and informal – in liberative, transformative or inclusive ways. It seems to be more organic grassroots eruptions that demonstrate possibilities of true – and flourishing – alternatives.

The kind of urban flourishing, theologically, that we should contemplate is derived from the notion of urban shalom, or wholeness, in the fullest sense of the word, and with optimal access for all the city's people to basic sources of livelihood, but in particular for those most excluded or vulnerable. It also considers urban flourishing in its human, social, economic and ecological dimensions.

Douglass (2016) speaks of four pillars of human flourishing in progressive cities: inclusion in social and public life, conviviality, distributive justice and a flourishing biosphere. In most African cities, the majority of urban dwellers do not have high levels of inclusion in socio-economic and public life; justice is often the preserve of those with resources; the biosphere is at risk, both as a result of own actions but also forced upon these cities by the global north. Conviviality can be found in all African cities, yet, too often in disparate ways, not galvanized sufficiently to have the potential life-affirming impacts it can have.

Douglass (2016:8) speaks of conviviality in close relation to 'civicity' and the participation of members of society, creatively and autonomously, in making the city. Although, again, there are exciting and innovative incidents of strong, innovative and often radical civic movements, constructing the city from below, and embodying alternative urban imaginaries to that of dominant modernistic urban visions, such expressions of conviviality and civicity seem not to be broad-based, resourced or interconnected enough to translate into widespread transformative effects.

Implosion to explosion

Whereas African cities in many parts of the continent explode in terms of numbers and possibilities, it remains to be seen whether such possibilities can result in explosive socio-economic and political transformations that will break cycles of poverty and exclusion of millions in cities across the continent. In fact, dominant signs indicate that urban implosion might be more likely, with current statist models of governance and weak infrastructure, unable to match the huge challenges that African cities present.

Mumford (1961) spoke of urban implosion as the process whereby two or more large urban settlements grow towards each other, becoming one new conurbation, or urban implosion, about which he was not necessarily optimistic.

For Dalla Longa (2010), urban implosion is considered differently, as urban social and economic functions that have become obsolete or urban change being of such a nature that it really necessitates revisiting old urban contents and containers. In this sense, urban implosion is not necessarily bad but a result of urban dynamics, growth or changes that can no longer be held in the old 'wineskins'. Urban implosion can also be considered in a third way, however, as the inability to renew itself with new social, economic and political functions and dynamism, experiencing a full-on collapse of governance, infrastructure and urban viability. Such urban implosions can occur not only in Africa but have also been the reality in wealthy northern countries. Places like Detroit, Michigan, and Gary, Indiana, are two of the most poignant examples where the implosion of industry – which basically sustained, employed and fed those cities – led to the gradual implosion of these cities too.

Can the population explosion currently witnessed in African cities be matched by an explosion of socio-economic and political innovation? Or will the acceleration of urban population growth in African cities continue to outstrip the ability of local governments to create infrastructure and human settlements that are healthy, conducive and sustainable, to the point of total collapse?

Of course, comparatively speaking, it is rather perplexing that places like Kibera in Nairobi or Khayelitsha in Cape Town continue to be vibrant, albeit poor and neglected. Yet there is a certain attraction that continues to draw people from rural and other places into these concentrations of urban poverty, where human misery and human creativity, utter vulnerability and surprising resilience exist side by side. It seems as if cities like Detroit and Gary imploded, while, paradoxically, hope still seems to cling in the minds of many slum dwellers across the African continent.

Apocalyptic disaster to complete rebirth

Jones (2017), in his description of the growth of urban populations, mainly in the Global South, states that it is still very uncertain what the end-result might be. Are African cities destined to face apocalyptic disaster – socially, economically, politically and environmentally? Or is there a chance of a different kind of apocalypse that might reveal new potentials arising from the mainly young populations of African cities, ushering in a complete rebirth, mostly from below and from surprising places?

Pieterse (2021) describes the twin threats of climate change and economic inequality to sustainable urban futures. These threats, if left to their own devices, will surely lead to urban disaster and slow self-destruction.

If governments continue to fail urban dwellers on the continent, and if private sector fails to broaden its impacts to include the masses of urban residents, mainly enriching the few, where will hopeful alternative imaginaries spring forth from?

As urban theologians of liberation, with our hermeneutics of suspicion, we would find it very surprising if such alternative imaginaries are indeed born in places of political and economic power, yet such surprises would be welcomed, as the status quo, hundredfold, is too ghastly to contemplate. But, again drawing from a liberationist theological perspective, it is 'from below' that we might expect interventions not seen before – from places regarded as foolish, weak or of little value. God's intervention in history put the rich and powerful to shame (cf. 1 Cor 1:27); this was not necessarily through 'tried and tested' means but through the innovations of those who had nothing to lose.

A revival of African urban possibilities would require all urban dwellers and institutions to collectively foster new imaginaries. Urban people themselves – the citizenry and 'noncitizen' citizenry, local communities, urban municipalities and the private sector – need to consider rather revolutionary innovations if African cities are to be rebirthed into vibrant. Pieterse (2021) holds that the threats of climate change and economic inequality, for example, need to be counteracted, and this needs to be done through transforming:

[O]ld colonial structures and systems into new ones; transforming city structures that are material-intensive and fossil-fuel dependent, to ones that are resource-efficient and regenerative. It means integrating smarter public transport connections, linking technologies that talk to each other to manage energy more effectively, altering our patterns of consumption and establishing a web of water catchments to save every drop of what is, and always will be, our lifeblood. (n.p.)

Inertia in the face of pending disaster will simply fast-track death. What is required, instead of 'the inertia of an entire city, founded on rigid structures designed to endure decades', is to 'break down the existing edifice and rebuild' (Pieterse 2021). But such radical remaking of urban processes requires 'foresight and imagination' (Pieterse 2021), sorely lacking both among urban politicians and theologians. Pieterse (2021) calls for 'a radical change of perspective' among all urban stakeholders: to imagine fresh possibilities, break down old edifices and replace them with life-affirming, organic and savvy processes, practices and policies that possibly stand a chance of arresting and transforming death-dealing urban forces.

Similarly, Jones (2017) argues that an urban apocalypse of doom can only be avoided through 'a radical shift in governance and economic philosophy'. The aim of economic processes should not be maximising profits but sustainable production and distribution of resources, complemented by locally owned renewable technologies. Both power and wealth should be devolved in order to help 'build robust local economies and strong communities, which can mitigate the pressures of global urbanisation' (Jones 2017). Physically, urban communities should be more compact and densely populated to avoid urban sprawl, with 'sustainable and self-governing community developments' (Jones 2017).

Whereas Jones (2017) concedes that this might sound utopian, yet 'if we're to avoid an urban apocalypse, we're going to need strong alternative visions, to change the way we imagine and plan for the cities of the future'.

Just, sustainable African cities: The sustainable development goals, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Society 5.0

The realities and/or lofty ideals of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and smart cities and Society 5.0 need to be reflected upon and integrated into critical discourse on African urban futures.

Sustainable development goals: A dual task of robust critique and localised implementation

The Sustainable Development Goals – even though critique for possible inherent contradictions and inconsistencies – provide a clear and compelling agenda for dealing with some of the most acute challenges the world – and African cities – today face. Although Sustainable Development Goal 11 is explicit in its commitment to 'sustainable cities and communities', almost all the other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) find expression in local urban–rural places. As Pieterse (2021) rightly asserts:

Cities also function as hubs to ensure the most cost-effective means of dealing with interconnected development imperatives. With so many people living and working side by side, infrastructure can coalesce around a structured system, providing a more efficient means of supplying water, energy and sanitation. (n.p.)

The interconnectedness of development imperatives becomes very visible in urban concentrations, and cities hold the promise, if they can get their act together, to mediate holistic well-being at a scale not seen before. In order to make progress and find concrete solutions expressive of the intentions of the SDGs, it is now vital that the SDGs should be demystified and turned into clear and measurable goals that are owned by local urban communities and citizens. This could serve their own inclusive and sustainable socio-economic-political transformations, at local levels.

In their new book, *Localising the SDGs in African cities*, Croese and Parnell (2022) draw together contributions from various urban disciplinary and professional experiences, showcasing the possible implementation, monitoring and evaluation of SDGs at the local level in African cities. It is an attempt at bridging the gap between research, policy and action which should be taken seriously. Organizations such as ICLEI Africa (2021) are developing tools and resources that will enable local governments in African cities to make the SDGs their own in their local contexts, allowing for the participation of local people in driving their own goals.

Faith communities¹ of all persuasions, both locally and translocally, are well-positioned to participate fully in such processes as initiators, supporters or partners. Faith communities should consider integrating SDGs into their local theologies and missional commitments to development and transformation, to help orientate them with clarity in the direction of tangible local challenges and solutions. In assessing the developmental impact of faith-based organizations in urban Africa, the SDGs and their comprehensive indicators should be considered helpful tools for assessing progress. New courses of action should be charted by such organizations, should old ways be stale and without the required impact (cf. ICLEI Africa 2021). Continental ecumenical bodies and local faith communities alike should consider aligning their commitments to achieving the SDGs in the interest of building local cities and communities of shalom.

None of the above should be done uncritically, however. The urgent importance of sustainable cities and communities, and access to basic necessities like water, food, health care and education, cannot be overemphasised or argued with. Yet critics of the SDGs contend with the paradigm or assumptions undergirding the SDGs and the unrealistic expectations for these goals to be met by 2030, considering the nature of the assumptions.

Theorists such as Kothari (2015), London School of Economics anthropologist Hickel (2015) and postcolonial feminist theorist Struckmann (2017) point out inherent contradictions between the social, environmental and economic aspects of the SDGs; the silence of the SDGs on global power inequalities, as if such would not impede on the achievability of the goals; the possibility that women and other marginalised groups might be left behind in the process of implementing the SDGs; the curse of global economic debt that enslaves poor countries and from which they cannot escape without a new global pact to cancel debts; and the underlying assumption that the SDGs should be achieved within dominant economic growth trajectories which have repeatedly proven to have disastrous consequences for both the poor and the Earth.

Kothari's (2015) biggest concern with the SDGs is their continual embeddedness in an economic growth model and their silence on inequalities, or the urgent necessity for wealth to be redistributed globally, if the SDGs had any chance of succeeding. There is nothing about reducing the wealth of the super-rich, of their wasteful consumerism.

Hickel (2015) highlights the contradiction of growth not addressing poverty and contributing to environmental decay; the SDGs not addressing inequality or the causes of poverty; and the meagre amount of \$1.25 by which the SDGs measure the eradication of poverty, whereas most recent studies reckon that for people's basic needs to be met

¹'Faith communities' in this article refers to worshipping communities from various religious traditions, faith-based nonprofit organizations, small Christian communities (SCCs) or other organizational forms that are created, shaped or motivated by faith.

(in terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) they need at least \$5 per day.

The concern of Struckmann (2017:ii), through a postcolonial feminist lens, is that gender-blind politics in certain countries might likely lead to exclusion of millions of women from the gains made by the SDGs.

In different spaces, Pope Francis offered both some of the most constructive critique to the SDGs, as well as penetrating laments of global inequalities, not always in direct relation to the SDGs. O'Kane (2019) quoted him as speaking of the SDGs being 'a great step forward for global dialogue', yet noting with concern how the idea of 'economic growth' still seemed to dominate the developmental discourse, which has resulted in exploitation of both the environment and 'our fellow human beings'. Not only do we require an 'ecological conversion' (cf. also Francis 2015), but the SDGs need to be undergirded by ethical values. In considering African urban futures, replacing a preoccupation with economic growth with a deep ethic of care, both for the environment and for fellow human beings – particularly those who are most vulnerable and poor – is essential if we are to avoid a full-scale human and environmental disaster.

Not least of the challenges raised by Pope Francis is the imperative for debt cancellation of the world's most vulnerable countries, without which the realisation of the SDGs and post-coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) socio-economic recovery in these countries would be virtually impossible (cf. Obenhuber 2020).

Fourth Industrial Revolution, smart cities and the dumbness of justice

Similarly, the gains of the 4IR have not yet been optimised in African cities, and the access to resources, opportunities and liberative education it might enable has not yet materialised for the vast majority of African urban dwellers living in slums and informal settlements. While many local governments across the continent might include technological advancements in their master plans, and local people living in poverty-stricken urban areas might create innovative industries and enterprises through the gains of 4IR, its effects have not reaped the large-scale transformative benefits one would have hoped for (cf. Ndung'u & Signé 2020).

It is in this regard that concepts such as the smart city find traction with many governments, yet the possible gains for the masses of (poorer) urban dwellers and those living in informal settlements or slums are not yet clear. In fact, in many ways smart city imaginaries seem to bypass the stark realities of human misery and depravity, almost skirting over it through peddling answers to questions that the 'least of these' – who are often the majority in African cities – do not have, at an existential or survivalist level, from day to day.

Rosol, Blue and Fast (2019), with reference to Nancy Fraser's theory of justice, argue 'for shifting the discussion away from

the smart city, even an alternative one, towards the just city and a just urbanism in the digital age'. They reference progressive theorists such as Hollands (2015:63), who holds that the idea of smart cities could mediate social justice if it actually started from the premise of actual cities and people, and not technology, and if technology were used 'to empower people through participatory or citizen-based smart initiatives'; or Söderström (2016):

Arguing for a shift from technocratic to place- and knowledge-based smart cities that are informed by the struggles in urban places that 'disturb, resist or create' their versions of smart urbanism. (p. 65)

McFarlane and Söderström (2017) speak of socially just uses of technology by urban social movements, or 'digitizing slums'. For Rosol et al. (2019:5) these alternative visions are important 'counter-narratives' of a more 'progressive urbanism', challenging 'the dominant discourse of transnational corporations' and the neoliberal co-option of local governments. Yet Krivý (2018:14) questions whether such proposals are not simply 'auxiliary critique', adding particular nuances while leaving 'foundational contradictions unexamined'. For Krivý (2018:21), it is doubtful whether smart city imaginaries can be redeemed through 'bottom-up liberation of technologies in the name of people'. These are the proposals of 'affirmative remedies' (Rosol et al. 2019:5) to correct unequal outcomes of socio-spatial arrangements, without fundamentally 'disturbing the underlying framework that generates them' (Fraser 1995:82). Such affirmative remedies still have great value, as they could foster inclusionary processes, unmasking the farcical outcomes of smart city thinking and processes. But Fraser (1995:82) argues for going beyond the affirmative through fostering transformative approaches, 'correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework'.

What is required is shifting the conversation from a commitment to the smart city to a commitment to the '*just city*' or '*just urbanism in the digital age*' (Rosol et al. 2019:6). In the vision of Fraser (2013:195), the just city would encompass a *distributive* dimension, overcoming class and economic inequalities; a *recognition* dimension, overcoming status hierarchies; and a *representative* dimension, enabling transformative opportunities through reframing the 'stage on which struggles over distribution and recognition are played out'.

How many faith communities think 'smartly' – theologically, critically and constructively – about the 4IR and smart cities, in ways that can resist processes that once again exclude the urban majority, while at the same time employing the gains of the 4IR in ways that reflect a clear 'preferential option for the poor'? How many faith communities are in close enough solidarity to disenfranchised urban dwellers to opt, rather, if African cities are to be rebirthed into vibrant and flourishing urban places. Our starting point, theologically, should not be with growth or technological advancement, but with the dignity, well-being and justice experienced – or not – by local

people, places and the Earth. Without such critical theological positioning in relation to the 4IR and its potential benefits or trappings, we might be silent bystanders of the 'recolonization of Africa' (Benyera 2021).

African urban futures and Society 5.0

While governments on the African continent are still coming to terms with the meaning of the 4IR for their own developmental goals, in other parts of the world the idea of Society 5.0 is already being embraced. Initiated in a speech by Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe in 2017, titled the 'Hannover Declaration', he outlined the vision of Society 5.0 as an attempt to balance the gains of the technological revolution by centring human, societal and ecological well-being (Guarda 2020):

Society 5.0 is not about one single country or city. It is about humans, the planet and a balanced sustainable ecosystem. (n.p.)

A compelling vision, much more aligned to a theological vision of shalom as many other techno-centred imaginaries, it argues for exploring ways in which technology and artificial intelligence – the consequences of the 4IR – should be employed in the interest of human and planetary sustainability.

The contrary – large scale disaster and human and planetary annihilation – could also be the result if unethical trajectories of greed, expansion and power overshadow imaginaries of human, societal and planetary well-being:

The exponential disruptive technologies of our time can create dystopia or utopia. (n.p.)

Guarda (2020) describes this as possibly 'the biggest evolutionary acceleration that will shift humanity more in the next 50 years than in all the different stages of human history and evolution'. The first stage, however, is to find solutions for the multiple challenges presented by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. In its advanced stages, employing technology as 'a transformative power', change can be accelerated and Society 5.0 can be implemented 'at a global scale'.

Leading academic Harayama (2017) suggests Society 5.0 as 'a new guiding principle for innovation from Japan to the world'. In galvanising the idea of a 'superintelligent society' (Guarda 2020), it envisions a 'smart, sustainable and circular' economy, with 'data empowered smart cities supported by the digital twins of robotics and AI' (Guarda 2020).

Society 5.0 presents a futuristic utopia that fuses humanity, nature and technology in creative and transformative synergy. Could it be considered a vision of planetary fullness, in a revelatory sense, contrary to visions of planetary doom? How do African cities consider Society 5.0, in contexts where we often lag behind technologically, and the cry of both the Earth and the poor too often remains unheard, both theologically and politically?

Theologies of African urban citizenship

In contexts of urban explosion and uncertain urban futures on the African continent, it is urgently necessary to cultivate African urban theologies that will reflect well on the challenges of African cities, and that are potent in fostering visions and practices of urban citizenship that can build and transform cities, from within and from below.

Parsitau (2022) mourns the fact that a large urban slum such as Kibera probably has more churches than toilets! Our theologies are multiplying ecclesial expressions that have little to offer in terms of life and liberation in relation to the tangibles of their local urban contexts. Perhaps it should be asserted then that such could not be the church of Jesus Christ but rather a perpetuation of a colonial, otherworldly Christianity that preaches life hereafter, while accepting as inevitable the death-dealing forces that condemn the majority of Africa's urban dwellers to abject poverty and urban exclusion.

Not only white or wealthy churches continue to practise a colonial form of Christianity. Colonial Christianity is wherever a local faith community succumbs to the death-dealing forces of urban systems without critique or lament, rather opting to transcend itself beyond the temporary wounds of the city.

In most African cities, the majority of urban dwellers do not have high levels of inclusion in socio-economic and public life; justice is often the preserve of those with resources; the biosphere is at risk, both as a result of own actions but also forced upon these cities by the global north. Conviviality can be found in all African cities, yet, too often in disparate ways, not galvanized sufficiently to have the potential life-affirming impacts it can have.

The kind of theologies that are required in response to the daunting realities of African urbanisation are theologies that are deliberately urban, postcolonial and transdisciplinary, fostering African forms of citizenship that are not enslaved to notions of nation-state, but global and pan-African in conception, while being committed to the *civitas*, in the sense of contributing to the collective well-being of the whole city and all its inhabitants, through actions, advocacy or policy interventions.

It should be theologies centring women, young people and the poor, as these are the populations that either bear the greatest brunt of urban misery and exclusion or represent the largest percentages of Africa's urban population.

These should be theologies that simultaneously hear the cries of the poor and the cries of the Earth, not as separate or competing cries but acknowledging the close relatedness of all of creation and how the urban poor will suffer most as a result of collapsing urban and planetary ecosystems. These are messy theologies as they emerge from marginal

spaces where death-dealing forces have their way, squeezing life from people and places. Yet, in the messiness of the struggle, these theologies offer the hope of reviving alternative, resurrectionist imaginaries, implementable only through the Spirit of a new kind of African urban Pentecost, poured out across the continent.

We need to contemplate such an African urban Pentecost (cf. Agbede 2022) taking the form of African urban 'people's theologies', taking African cities seriously with a view of entrenching urban justice and radical forms of inclusion, transforming urban forms that no longer work, or never worked, and experimenting boldly with alternatives through a wide range of new-looking wineskins, whether in traditional or brand-new ecclesial forms, alternative faith communities or movements of good faith and good will collaborating for urban change. All this should be done by, and in close collaboration with, ordinary people living in communities and seeking change where they have been failed by those holding theological, ecclesial, economic or political power.

People-driven African cities

Whereas theologies and politics often fail African cities, it might be ordinary people who have to find creative ways to make cities work for them. People-driven African cities might be the greatest clue to possible hopeful alternatives – allowing the initiatives, visions, resources and organizations of urban dwellers to conceptualise and implement responses to some of the city's greatest challenges, be they access to urban water or technology, informal settlement upgrading, citizen-based urban management, embracing vulnerable urban populations, or animating creative waste management systems. Theologies of African urban citizenship would participate in and support people-driven processes where they already exist, or, as servants of the city, serve as catalysts or animators for such processes. Understanding itself as part of the urban citizenry of African cities, the church who resides in and with communities of particularly excluded urban dwellers does not have to be apologetic about playing a leading facilitative role in this regard.

From Cape Town to Cairo, evidence exists of people-driven local interventions that stand as examples of urban hope not elsewhere found – from how the Zabbaleen collect and manage waste in Cairo, to how Leap Schools offer quality education and personal development in some of the poorest urban neighbourhoods of South Africa, to occupation and remaking of urban land by the urban poor, in lieu of government interventions on their behalf. While these are not always expressly faith-based or faith-driven, many instances of urban hope across the continent can be traced back to faith sensibilities that orientate brave urban actions.

Today, the seeds of people-driven forms of African urbanism are evident in broad-based civil society collaboratives for urban change; faith(ful) communities responding to urban crises through relief, development, advocacy or justice work; urban social movements

advocating for and, (sometimes) embodying different ways of engaging urban land, housing or financial institutions; research-led initiatives, often in collaboration with local communities and civic leaders, to transform anything from urban health care systems to models of urban education or food production; or local communities of urban dwellers acknowledging their own power and the inability of local governments to make change, taking charge of their own local situations in ways that effect positive change for large numbers of people.

The African Urban Agenda (AUA) (UN Habitat 2012–2022) was formulated in response to the goals of Agenda 2063. Its aim is ‘to raise the profile of urbanization as a force for the structural transformation of Africa’. In order to do this, one of its key objectives is the promotion of democratic governance ‘through mobilization, sensitization and empowerment of nonstate actors to partner effectively with national governments in Africa on urban development concerns’. Unless civil society, social entrepreneurs, urban social movements, faith communities and the private sector embrace the African city, either partnering with the government or intervening proactively and innovatively, independent from the government, Africa’s urban futures seem bleak. The people of African cities need to determine the futures of African cities, and they can no longer outsource this vital task to governments, politicians or business leaders.

Pieterse (2021) argues that it is foolish to persist with centralised, top-down urban planning processes by governments that fail to engage civil society organizations, private sector and citizens in the processes of city-making. He insists that even urban policymaking processes should include ‘the knowledge and perspective of those who the policies will affect’ (Pieterse 2021), stating:

Societal leadership doesn’t only stem from those who are elected to be the political representatives; it stems from a diverse group of actors across different sectors in society. We should be harnessing the power of distributive leadership to stimulate difficult conversations, and then prioritise actions for change, and help manage the inevitable conflict that comes with transitioning. (n.p.)

Processes should be designed that allow the people of the city to participate fully in city-making processes, co-constructing urban futures in terms of their own preferred imaginaries. Where people take active leadership in contemplating, envisioning, designing and constructing local urban spaces, institutions and processes, levels of collective ownership and sustainability of what is being envisioned and implemented just seem so much higher.

Such a shifting understanding of African city-making should be undergirded by a fresh understanding of African urban citizenship, asserting the right of every urban dweller and community to take charge of their own destinies in terms of local urban developmental processes and inclusion in processes of city-making and access to

urban resources. If theologies in Africa are about the *shalom* of their cities,² they should engage in such processes of African urban citizenship, as fellow citizens, neighbours, servants and companions of new and deep kinds of urban journeying.

Remaking cities from below

Elsewhere, with Mark Oranje, we argued for city-making from below (De Beer & Oranje 2019:12–22), deliberately countering top-down urban narratives and city-making processes, excluding the majority of urban dwellers and often at their expense:

A different political imagination is required, with small communities at the bottom of the urban ladder, if they are to be truly included as participants in urban processes, beneficiaries of urban resources, and contributors to urban well-being. (p. 13)

City-making already takes place from below, through the agencies and resilience of slum dwellers, waste pickers, informal traders and homeless persons, navigating ways through a maze of urban obstacles. Such city-making – instead of only being organic expressions of eking out a subsistence existence or surviving urban hardships against the odds – becomes deliberate when:

[P]eople and local institutions start to organize themselves, take collective ownership for their own well-being and futures and build agency and capacity to effect local change that is in the interest of a greater, common good. Once they take charge of their life together and imagine a new future on their own terms, such communities will be able to mediate change from within. Such changes, once made, could be viewed as local irruptions from within or what Pieterse and Simone (2013:15) refer to as the ‘rogue intensities’ that open creative new spaces from below [...]. (n.p.)

Instead of survivalist mode, those on the urban fringes now become intentional, not only about changing their own circumstances but also the urban systems that have made life to be precarious to start with.

One example of such city-making is what Gordon (2005: 330–333) speaks of ‘non-citizenship citizenship’, whereby transnational migrants who often lack legal citizenship in the United States of America shape local neighbourhoods, their economies, religious and cultural landscapes, culinary habits and, indeed, futures through how they invest themselves in these spaces, regardless of their own (often precarious) status. Such forms of urban citizenship are practised beyond the narrow confines of ‘nation-state’ but from a place of asserting local belonging to a broader human citizenry, to the *civitas* or the *polis*.

It exists where Thabo Kgotsi and his partners in the Thandanani community in Mamelodi, Pretoria, take on abandoned buildings and turn them into socially viable projects serving children, young people, substance users and homeless persons. Building on these successful interventions that transform city

2. I refer to urban *shalom* in the sense of wholeness, peace, justice and integral liberation (Gutierrez 1988: xxxviii–xl) or freedom being mediated in, with and on behalf of urban people and places.

blocks, they embark on processes to tar and sustain their own roads, in the absence of responsive local government.

It also exists where local neighbourhood organizations adopt public spaces like parks to provide top-up services where local governments cannot always reach or create parks where nothing previously existed.

Of course, there can also be a downside to such localised forms of city-making and management, if those owning such processes are hell-bent on excluding the 'other', whether they be transnational migrants, the homeless poor or any group posing a perceived 'threat' to the well-being, safety or status of the neighbourhood. There are forms of local ownership that ostracise the poor, the stranger or those outside of heteronormative gender norms.

When I advocate city-making from below, it is precisely contrary to such an exclusivist vision, rather finding innovative ways to demonstrate that local places can be viable, vibrant and sustainable while being radically inclusive and diverse. It speaks of city-making as the art of creating hospitable urban spaces embracing vast diversity, contesting and contrary voices and people of difference in terms of lifestyle, perspective and identity.

De Beer and Oranje (2019:13), in arguing for local ownership and agency in city-making processes, continued to state that local communities have the potential of making deep urban change, if their actions do not remain isolated or disconnected from other communities practising similar agency:

Furthermore, a proliferation of such communities, collaborating through building collective solidarity, have the potential to become significant urban movements, embodying such a different political imagination. (n.p.)

The real transformative power lies in the interconnectedness of multiple local expressions of agency and transformation. Such interconnectedness is an embodiment of a different political imagination, urgently required in cities across the continent.

The power of interconnected, intersectional movements

In the face of overwhelming odds making healthy African cities incredibly difficult, the necessity for interconnected, intersectional movements cannot be overestimated.

There is power in being connected across boundaries of race, class, gender, nationality, denomination, resource base, theoretical discipline or sectoral concern. This is crucial for collaborative thinking and action in local urban contexts. Through building interconnected, intersectional movements, much more can be achieved in terms of deep-seated and city-wide urban change:

Such movements are not simply pragmatic responses to urban challenges but deeply reflective and strategic in how they engage

the '*polis*' collaboratively and with deliberate intent to foster deep-seated change. (n.p.)

There are vibrant movements on the continent dealing with issues ranging from land to gender to education, and collective, synergised efforts to orientate these different activisms towards intersectional local urban change can carry powerful impacts.

Similarly, in terms of cities engaging the SDG imperatives locally, Croese and Majoe (2021:1) argue for 'sideways', lateral or horizontal approaches that can enhance urban learning and optimise the impact of local interventions towards urban sustainability. Such an approach recognises the significance of peer-to-peer exchange and learning between cities and communities at large as an accelerator of progress on the localisation of global policy agendas.

Croese and Majoe (2021:4–7) identify three actors that are uniquely positioned to stimulate such learning movements to accelerate urban change. They speak of city networks (global, regional or national), national governments, and academia and civil society. They encourage more South–South and continental city networks; they refer to voluntary national and local reviews on progress made in achieving the SDGs; they acknowledge a growing commitment in academia to 'produce knowledge that can contribute to solving complex sustainability problems' (Marrengane & Croese 2021:6; in Croese & Majoe 2021); and they emphasise the importance of local governments working with academic researchers and civil society to ensure localised approaches to the SDGs.

Faith communities and theologians would do well to participate in some of the existing platforms: city networks, voluntary local reviews on SDGs and localised research agendas involving civil society and local governments. In addition, urban theologians, faith-based practitioners and urban social movements should be deliberate about connecting transnationally on the continent, in order to share lessons learnt, build intersectional and interconnected solidarities and inform or transform local practices through transversal convers(at)ions.

If flourishing African urban futures were to be realised, it would require all people of good faith and good will to collaborate in shaping strategic movements, practising new and engaged forms of urban citizenship that are dedicated to find solutions for Africa's greatest urban challenges and committed to turn solutions into sustainable practices and policies for generations to come. The church and theologians should not lag behind.

Hopeful African urban futures Disruptive, transformative presence(s)

Extraordinary situations require extraordinary responses. African cities experience extraordinary growth trajectories today, and the majority of newcomers to African cities are

poor and disenfranchised people. In order to ensure their full inclusion in the city, and access to the ordinary sources of livelihoods and well-being, extraordinary responses are required – extraordinary in terms of boldness of action, broadness of collaboration, braveness of vision and newness of approach; but also extraordinary in terms of the ability of the citizenry, urban academics and local governments to reinvent themselves in order to offer apt responses to African cities.

This would require people of faith, activist social movements and engaged scholars to work collaboratively, pushing away at systemic forces of exclusion, through a continuous disruptive or transformative presence in some of the city's most challenging spaces.

Unless the status quo is disrupted – a status quo which accepts the urbanisation of socio-economic exclusion and poverty on the one hand and the banal concentration of wealth and opportunity among small urban elites on the other while urban citizens stand by apathetically, watching their city being taken away – the possibility of multiple smaller and larger forms of urban transformation will not occur.

When urban slums proliferated on the margins of Sao Paulo, during a time of Brazil's worst military dictatorships, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns focused his ministry leadership on two concerns: 'to devise a corporate pastoral response to the vast complex reality of Sao Paulo and a vigorous defense of human rights' (Berryman 1996:10). When he became Archbishop of Sao Paulo in 1970, he noticed that the church's resources and personnel were 'disproportionately concentrated' in the central parts of the city while there was a serious lack of resources and personnel on the urban margins where the poor lived in *favelas* [slums]. In response, Arns and his collaborators launched 'operation periphery', and in only a very short space of time they created 1500 multipurpose centres and chapels in these under-resourced neighbourhoods on the urban periphery (Berryman 1996:12). The right to housing became one of the key foci of the Archdiocese during this period, and a commitment to housing flowed from the liturgy into neighbourhoods and the streets (Berryman 1996:10–11).

I recount the narrative from the ministry of Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns as a pointer towards the kind of comprehensive urban pastoral–diaconal strategies the church in any African city today should employ. Anything less will be an abandonment of the ministry of Christ entrusted to us.

Daring to hope

As a people of 'resurrection', the only alternative to succumbing to urban death is to dare to hope. African cities and African urban citizenship require the kind of hope that is not a vague illusionary emotion but – through continuous faithful acts – birthing organizations, movements and innovations that defy death.

Pope Francis (Mares 2021) spoke of hope as something to be organized. At the World Day of the Poor Mass, Pope Francis said:

'Unless our hope translates into decisions and concrete gestures of concern, justice, solidarity and care for our common home, the sufferings of the poor will not be relieved, the economy of waste that forces them to live on the margins will not be converted, their expectations will not blossom anew.'

He, Pope Francis continued, saying:

'We Christians, in particular, have to "organize hope" [...] to make it concrete in our everyday lives, in our relationships, in our social and political commitments.'

Africa's urban century demands such 'organized hope' in ways never seen before. For cities to be experienced as 'common home' by all who live in them, a critical, prophetic hope will expose, disarm and upend all systems that deny those living on the urban margins from full participation in urban life. It will insist that those currently denied full participation in urban life also belong and have value, contrary to dominant urban discourses that perpetuate a narrative condemning some as 'excess', built on the idea that 'there is not enough'.

It is an imaginative, constructive hope, engaged in making cities in which all inhabitants are enabled to participate through concrete 'decisions and concrete gestures of concern, justice, solidarity and care'.

We need theologies of African urban citizenship, expressed in boldly 'organized hope', resisting and countering apocalypses of urban death and doom.

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