

FOREWORD

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The COVID-19 pandemic aftermath allows us an opportunity to reimagine Africa's cities, towns and villages to create more ecologically sound human settlements. Africa's chaotic cities and towns are relics of colonial social engineering not fit for purpose in the 21st century. The city architecture reflects deliberate distancing of the centre and the periphery. The centre as the locus

of power and privilege for colonial elites is distinguished by the best amenities and public services, whilst the periphery inhabited by the majority of poor people is characterised by a neglect of essential basic infrastructure.

The mushrooming of townships and shantytowns across the African continent over the last five decades reflects the dismal failure of post-colonial governments and private sector actors to reimagine these dysfunctional cities and towns as spaces of dignified human settlements. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the gross inequities of access to essential infrastructure critical to effective public health responses. Social distancing, washing hands frequently with soap, and wearing masks were luxuries out of reach of most people in the peripheries of Africa's cities.

Reimagining post-colonial African cities and towns requires shedding of colonial mindsets and legacies. We need to imagine what a 21st century African city, town and village should look like. Reimagined smart ecologically sound human settlements need to provide platforms for innovative sustainable essential public services.

Such cities need to restore the dignity of citizens to unleash their talents and innovative energies to take ownership of shaping the futures they desire. Investments in processes to enable people who are often treated as subjects, to liberate themselves to become critically thinking citizens, is essential. Sustainable cities need active citizens to demand their rights to equitable basic services and to assume their responsibilities to be good stewards of their neighbourhoods.

A fundamental shift in mindset is needed to put human beingness - Ubuntu - back at the centre of governance. Ubuntu based governance promotes participatory democracy and promotes collaboration in the stewardship of the commons. The "I'am because you are" is an attitude of mind that affirms human beings inextricable links to one another, and to the web of life. Human beings are wired for interdependence and interconnectedness to secure wellbeing for all and of our planet.

Good neighbourliness is not only about social and physical proximity but empathetic connectedness in good and bad times. COVID-19 has in many cases brought out the best in us. People reached out to neighbours and those vulnerable to support them and ensure their wellbeing. The virus opened our eyes anew to the fact that wellbeing for a few is wellbeing for none. Wellbeing is a shared status and responsibility. Securing safety and wellbeing of our neighbourhoods harkens back to the ancient wisdom of Africa that one should always enquire about the wellbeing of others to ensure wellbeing for all.

Post-COVID reconstruction and development gives Africa an opportunity to celebrate the resilience of its people despite the pre-existing conditions (poverty, inequality and unemployment), that made the continent most vulnerable. The resilience of Africa's people that has surprised many, including scientists, may well lie in the endowments of our ancient genes. Genetic endowments that enabled humanity's evolution in tough ecosystems aeons ago, are yet to be fully understood.

Ancient wisdom, science and technology in architecture, materials engineering, use of local materials to build sustainable human settlements, offer opportunities to harvest Africa's natural capital. Cities, towns and villages need to be nested in the vast tracts of land that enable smooth transitions between wilderness and residential areas to create harmony between human settlements and sensitive ecosystems. Sustainable agriculture with food baskets on the edges of cities need to be nurtured to enhance the wellbeing of people and the planet.

The African continent's new beginnings would benefit from being set on ancient foundations. Leveraging the hitherto unacknowledged indigenous knowledge, long history of science and technology is the best path forward for this ancient continent. Africa has for too long not heeded the Shona proverb that – those who wear other people's clothes, remain naked. It is time for Africa reimagine its cities, towns and villages into authentic spaces that showcase the beauty and creativity of its own architecture and materials engineering.

This issue of FACTS explores the huge opportunities offered by the much needed infrastructure investments to provide equitable access to essential public services to restore the dignity of all citizens. Understanding obstacles to past developments, harvesting innovations and technology solutions in resource constrained environments, are essential to successful sustainable interventions. It is a feast.