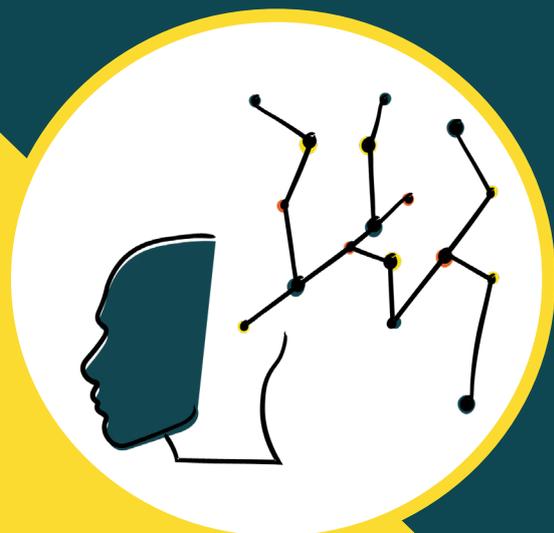# RISE AFRICA

Discussion Series

Inspiring Action for Sustainable Cities

How research, teaching and learning in tertiary institutions can drive improved local governance in South Africa

THEME:
Futures literacy
and decolonising
knowledge systems

Authored by Kobie Brand, Paul Currie
& Meggan Spires

The age of extractive social research is over. The perception of researchers as separate from society, as apolitical, as developing knowledge for knowledge's sake, as being interested in the world only to increase publication and citation statistics, is a dangerous perception which many researchers internalise. It is a perception that we need to challenge, internally and externally. It is a perception and a practice that is incompatible with the existential crisis that we are now facing as people on this planet. We need researchers to re-embed themselves in society, to be political, to develop knowledge for action's sake and to publish with the aim of sharing ideas that can drive change.

Increasingly in politics, we are seeing a growing disinterest in intellectual leadership. The rise in populism and disinterest in the use of evidence is striking. This means that we need to question our assumptions that knowledge will inevitably inform action, and understand that universities and researchers must now take on a stronger advocacy role to legitimise robust research as the basis for decision-making.
More and more, researchers are being invited to become partners in driving systems change with societal actors. Many researchers are already doing so, and in this reflection, I would like to invite the research community to join the many movements that are going to ensure that we achieve sustainable, just, inclusive, vibrant African cities.

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Local Governments
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AFRICA

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urbanism from an african perspective

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I am delighted to be giving this inaugural Prestige Lecture for the SARChI Chair in Cities, Law and Environmental Sustainability. I have been asked to speak to the role of research, teaching and learning in tertiary institutions for improved local governance in South Africa. As the Regional Director of ICLEI Africa, I will draw on lessons from our work across the continent. This has been a wonderful opportunity for me to reflect on our relationship with research and researchers in a number of our projects and to explore what has made these relationships work, as well as how researchers and universities could improve, and even lead, societal change processes.

I will note upfront that, of course, not all research and teaching is geared towards achieving societal change, and in this respect, my lecture is not aimed towards these fields, but rather towards those that explore and analyse our social fabric and the processes of change.

In this reflection, my call to the research community, universities and researchers, as well as to knowledge seekers in other organisations, is that:

- We must Embrace uncertainty and challenge singular truth.
- We must Reduce the barriers to publishing and accessing research.

- We must Shift from dissemination to engagement.
- We must Partner with change agents in society.

I will structure this lecture to firstly reflect on our new paradigm of uncertainty, the role of local governance in driving global change, and our need, as active researchers, to equip local government officers with the motivation and ability to meet this uncertainty. I will then reflect on the experience from a number of our ICLEI research projects, before expanding on the role of researchers, universities and the research community in driving change.

Growing uncertainty

We are entering a new paradigm of uncertainty. The global megatrends, such as climate change, rapid urbanisation, increasing access to information and communication technologies, widespread degradation of natural ecosystems, and the occurrence of new diseases, most notably Covid-19, are all increasing the volatility of our society and increasing the uncertainty we face in promoting sustainable development and good governance in our cities.

Just as our uncertainty about the future has increased, so too has the certainty that we need to do something to improve our world. Since the popularisation of the concept of sustainable development in the late 1980s, which entwined social wellbeing with environmental protection, we have seen growing global motivation for improving both the living conditions of all people on earth, as well as the natural environment. These are visible in the

growing number of international summits that have taken place since 1992.

- Agenda 21, declared in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, received commitment from 178 states to achieve sustainable development,
- The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 set targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, updated in the 2015 Paris Agreement to enable nations to set their own contributions to climate mitigation,
- The Millennium Development Goals, added by adopting a comprehensive set of strong priorities for the reduction of poverty and the building of livelihoods,
- The 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg and the Rio+20 UN Conference for Sustainable Development reaffirmed commitment of 180 states to the goal of sustainable development.

- There have been 26 Climate COPs and 14 Biodiversity COPs, which have moved the sustainability agenda forward step by hard-won step, and this year we will add to these numbers, hopefully with ever stronger recognition of - and support for - the role of local governments.

- Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, outlines 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and represents our strongest call to action for global change. We are now in the Decade of Action to Achieve the SDGs by 2030. We are also in the UN Decade of Action for Nutrition (2016-2025), the International Decade for Action – Water for Sustainable Development (2018- 2028) and now also entering the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030).

ICLEI has participated in these global meetings for 30 years,

since its founding in 1990, to - together with our constituency partners and sister networks such as UCLG - give agency to, and provide a voice for, local governments in global sustainability agendas. ICLEI has ever argued that local governments are vital in the implementation of any sustainable development agenda, given their proximity to citizens and development issues, as well as their contextual understanding.

The argument for the importance of cities was validated most visibly with the inclusion of SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities - into the SDGs, which acknowledges cities as important arenas for achieving global sustainable development and the New Urban Agenda, adopted in 2016, which presents a manifesto for achieving sustainable cities. This is articulated as requiring a whole-of-society approach, given the relative strengths of different societal actors in mobilising and driving change.

As I have described here at length, there is abundant global motivation to achieve sustainability across many fields. Yet here again local governments either find themselves unsure of the impact of their ongoing work, unsure of the specific actions that can catalyze transformative change, or unable to motivate for resources for environmental work.

Here, the research community can find a leading role in translating these global agendas to local level, in identifying institutional bottlenecks and barriers to action, in finding the acupuncture points that can catalyse wider transformative

change, and in sharing evidence and lessons from successful change processes.

In addition, where there is abundant motivation to achieve sustainability, cities find themselves at odds with the enormity of their task, compared to their available resources. Greenhouse gas emissions are increasing globally, with African citizens the most vulnerable to climate related shocks such as flooding, drought and displacement. Just like cities around the world, African cities are responsible for 80% of our economic production, for about 60% of our material consumption, 80% of our energy demands and 75% of our carbon emissions.

However, unlike most developed cities, their total consumption is still low, looking almost efficient. Yet we know that if we were to grow along the same developmental path as others, neither Africa, nor the world would achieve any of our sustainability targets. Africa produces about as much energy as Germany does now - about 516 Terawatt-hours. If Africa energises using fossil fuels, we are in trouble. This represents an opportunity to chart a different route.

UN data suggests that we have just passed 548 Million people living in African Cities. This is expected to reach 824 Million by 2035 and 1.4 Billion people by 2050. That's 85 thousand new people born in, or arriving into, our cities each day! That's a new Lagos or Cairo every year, a new Gauteng City Region every 3 years. This growth is resulting in widespread informal settlements and new economies. And this growth is

not concentrated in our megacities, but will see the transition of villages into towns, and towns into small- and medium-sized cities. These cities are least equipped with the infrastructure to support this growth, or the governing capacity to meet this challenge. The path that our cities choose in the next decade, as they lay new infrastructures and develop their strategic plans, will set the trajectory of their development, and global sustainability outcomes, for the next century.

Our continent is also the youngest in the world, with a median age of 19.5. Our Youth need to be well nourished and receive education that will equip them with the skills they need to navigate a changing world. We owe it to our new generations to ensure that their homes are safe, nurturing, inspiring, and full of opportunities for dignified work and participating in shaping their environments. Our new generations will also become our city leaders, and must be equipped to lead in our new paradigm of uncertainty.

These are just a few key trends which are shaping our cities, and I'm sure we could name plenty more. These trends also remind us of the importance of cities as role-players in global sustainability and the need for fluid local governance that can meet these trends. What is clear is that the institutional arrangements that have seen us through periods of relative stability, are ill-equipped to guide us through our new paradigm of uncertainty. In this respect, the advent of Covid-19 pandemic and the associated governmental responses has shown us three key things:

1.   First, anyone who suggests that rapid change is unattainable is simply wrong. This argument can no longer stand in the way of transformative change. South Africa, for example, has made many vast changes in response to the threat of the global pandemic, and is therefore able to do so in response to other threats, if only it chooses to see them as such. Anyone who suggests that rapid change is unattainable is wrong - we simply need to understand what can motivate this change - even if the science that would normally back such change is not fully out.

2.   Second, the vast structural issues that have existed in our country, have been made more visible. Food insecurity, unequal access to basic services, including healthcare, and widespread homelessness, while visible in our country before, are now even more accentuated. The widespread networks of solidarity that have emerged to feed, house and care for those made more vulnerable by the Covid-19 lockdowns, have come face to face with the depth of structural crisis, and are paralysed by this depth of challenge. It is our duty as change agents to fully comprehend these structural crises, particularly once the direct threat of the pandemic has passed, and to take action to address not the symptoms of the crisis, but the structural drivers. Given the multi-faceted nature of these drivers, working across fields and sectors is necessary.

3. Third, Local governments, who are not typically invested with the mandate for food, disaster relief, and health, among many more, have been expected to provide food, finance, shelter and healthcare facilities, demonstrating their importance as

the level of government most closely engaged with the people who find themselves residing or simply being there when a crisis hits as rapidly as many disasters do - including citizens, residents, commuters, temporary visitors and of course existing and incoming refugees. It has also demonstrated gaps in the legal status and implementation of these and related mandates.

The key tool for navigating uncertainty with confidence is systems thinking: a way of thinking that centres around relationships, that can identify, cause, effect and feedback and can articulate the hidden drivers of our many visible urban and social challenges. This necessarily requires accepting that there are multiple ways of approaching any challenge, and that there are multiple ways of knowing that can support such approaches.

Thus we need to equip our institutions and civil service with systems approaches, and the motivation and support to work across sectors. We need to equip them to take risks and to learn as programmes evolve. We need an adaptive and civil service who can strategize for the long term, but adapt in the face of new challenges, and change course quickly where necessary. However, in our examination of institutional readiness to lead implementation of sustainability projects, we see a number of important issues.

Integrated approaches to sustainability are still typically champion-led, ad-hoc and project-based, often occurring because of

the relationships of this champion, and their ability to draw links between departmental priorities. These champions are often going beyond their key performance requirements.

This is a far-cry from an institutional, programmatic approach that can be relied upon for long-term processes. Municipal budgets are also typically allocated based on a departments' previous spend as opposed to be truly zero based and realigned with the core strategic documents, such as the Integrated Development Plan or Sector Strategies. Political priorities to receive that often elusive clean audit from the Auditor General, also completely remove the motivation for civil servants to take risks and experiment. Not that ICLEI will ever call for anything else than clean and transparent governance, this can sometimes mean that compliance culture has replaced adaptive governance, which prizes innovation and learning while implementing. Instead, movement forward is often made in large catalytic projects which take years to achieve impact, rather than small experiments which can deliver value while they are being evaluated and improved.

The Chair for CLES (Cities, Law and Environment Sustainability) has a unique opportunity in combining questions of law and environment at local level to help practitioners demystify the bottlenecks that restrict transformative change. For example, our work at ICLEI has shown that the elusive "political will", which is often cited as the key barrier to change is a multifaceted concept. Yes, it sometimes relates to the temperament of a mayor or city leader, but more often is related to:

- Whether or not the mayor has been informed of ongoing work
- Whether or not the right information is at hand
- Whether there is a champion pushing this agenda in the government
- Whether there are financial resources that are aligned with strategic plans
- Whether city officials hold the appropriate technical skills
- Whether policies are too restrictive or punitive for officials to take risks
- Whether local and national policies are in alignment
- And whether local government mandates are clearly defined.

Illuminating the interactions between national and local policy, legal frameworks in cities, local strategies or actions plans, and those who are intended to implement environmental sustainability agendas is necessary to take the next step in achieving ACTION for sustainable development. I would propose that there is much existing research on what types of technologies or practices can support sustainable living and environmental protection. What is needed is research that explores how to mainstream these technologies and practices across our cities, most particularly research which provides guidance for navigating institutional bottlenecks.

New models for action research
We face a tension between two discourses. One which states that you cannot manage what you cannot measure, and which advocates for local governments to invest in robust data collection

and analysis systems, which can guide them to the most important, appropriate or strategic solutions. The other is the need to acknowledge that quantitative understanding can only get us so far, and that the qualitative understandings that already exist within local government officers, urban communities, indigenous peoples and traditional practices also offer robust evidence that can support decision making. In parallel with these two discourses is a tension around decision making:
A traditional approach, which proposes detailed plans and policies that prescribe action to meet defined targets, AND another, which proposes to equip decision makers with adaptive thinking and to embrace the inherent uncertainties posed by complex systems change.

Finding ways to bring these traditional and emergent practices together represents an exciting time for our research and practitioner communities and offers opportunities to define new paradigms of knowledge creation and sense-making, that can provide stronger guidance for our decision makers.
Our work at ICLEI Africa, both as researchers and as brokers between academic communities and local governments across the continent, has provided ample lessons for supporting impactful research. In reflecting why some research partnerships have worked and others have not, the keywords that emerge for me are Humility, Trust-building, Equal partnership, Mutual interest in change processes, Acknowledgement of different ways of knowing, and Shared journeys.

I want to share a number of examples from our projects and

beyond, and reflect upon their lessons.

In the FRACTAL programme funded by the UK government, ICLEI Africa with a diverse consortium of 25 partners, shepherded by the Climate Systems Analysis Group at UCT, have spent the past five years working in 9 different Southern African cities to co-produce climate change knowledge and information, that is fit for city-scale and city-relevant decision making. I use the term shepherded because at the outset and throughout the past five years - the culture, ethos and approach of FRACTAL has been that of breaking down power dynamics, humble learning and sharing across disciplines and organisations; living out a transformatively different approach to research into practice - where research is NOT produced by scientists and then linearly shared with so-called "users" of this research, but rather that labels such as "producer", "user", "researcher" and "practitioner" are replaced with a shared appreciation of diverse perspectives and what they can offer to a co-production process.

Two lessons come to mind from this project:

1. First, working across disciplines and sectors, and moving into the so called "third space", will inevitably lead to some awkwardness, some conflict, and slower start-up times, BUT the benefits of transformative thinking that cannot be arrived at without this diversity, far outweigh these challenges. We experienced tipping points in our FRACTAL journey. Where the slow build of trust-based relationships led to break-throughs previously not thought possible, and faster action as networks were solidified and expanded.

2.   Second, organisations and individuals that possess the ability to be effective knowledge brokers are of paramount importance, especially in the current times, where everyone is needed to solve the world's problems. Getting diverse groups to work well together, in a catalytic and highly creative fashion, is a skill, as much based on the culture and ethos of engagement, as expertise and experience.

It is here that ICLEI Africa has found a space where we can offer significant value-add. At ICLEI Africa, we have managed to build a team of professionals who are able to straddle research and practice. Listening and responding to the unique challenges and opportunities of research into practice, and cognisant of bringing tangible value to stakeholders involved in such endeavours.

Our IMPACT programme - funded by the IDRC - has sought to interrogate how collaboration can tangibly enable climate resilient development in African cities. Taking a similar approach to that of FRACTAL, co-production has been at the heart of this programme. Here one of our stand-out lessons has been the value of working with funders and partners that are open to agility and flexibility, and willing to pivot objectives and workplans in ways that best suit local stakeholders, based on current contexts and needs, and responsive to emergent opportunities.

During implementation of the IMPACT programme we quickly realised that a vital component of collaboration - multi-level

governance - was paramount to building local-level climate resilienceinthecontextsinwhichwework.Engagementbetween levels of government, departments within government, and government and other sectors of society, has to be improved for us to have any hope of achieving national and sub-national climate change and other SDG goals, and importantly - raising their ambitions.

Our journey of interrogating how improved multi-level governance can enhance climate resilience, began by working with stakeholders to see the value of this collaboration, in achieving existing mandates, and stepping up action. Once this had been achieved our knowledge broker role shifted to finding mechanisms to support this collaboration in ways that are the least transactionally onerous as possible, sometimes using existing governance structures, sometimes establishing new ones.

Part of this journey has also been about not fixating on making processes work that are no longer fit-for-purpose, and being comfortable with experimentation, where not every approach should or does work. Recognising the need to change tack as early as possible is essential, and we have found our ability to do so has been aided when we create space for reflective moments, and practice humility, openness and transparency in those moments.

It is one of our goals to take the African proverb that says: "If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together", and find

ways to increase speed (after all, we know we have less than a decade to avoid irreversible damage from climate change and to restore our relationship with the natural world we all depend on and are part of) without sacrificing the deep engagement and relationship building that make or break long-term sustained action.

The role of researchers, research institutions, and the research community

The abundance of information available online and in the world is ever growing. I understand the role of research, teaching and learning institutions to be about curating this knowledge and providing learning journeys that can harness and direct this information. Tertiary institutions are also vital for the tacit learning and networking that accompanies coursework and research. In order to broaden the reach and impact of research, I return to my initial provocation. We must:

- Embrace uncertainty and challenge singular truth
- Reduce the barriers to publishing and accessing research
- Shift from dissemination to engagement, and
- Partner with change agents

We have discussed the need to embrace uncertainty at length, but I will go through the final three with a bit more detail.

Reducing barriers to publishing and accessing research necessarily requires tangling with quite a powerful global knowledge creation and dissemination apparatus. Here, there are both small and large actions which can ensure that research feeds into societal processes.

1. Firstly, ensure that research products are accessible. The research can't go further if it is locked behind pay-walls. Where possible, research institutions should allocate funds to support open-access publishing. This will ensure that urban practitioners and decision makers are able to read, cite and incorporate new knowledge into their practice. Accessibility is also about language, and therefore, if articles are written with too much jargon, they may leave practitioners behind. Here, researchers could write academic articles in accessible language from the start, or ensure that they include time to translate research products into policy briefs or other materials.

2. Secondly, put your research products directly into the hands of those who will use it. It is no longer enough to publish research on platforms that only serve to receive citations. Sharing your research with decision makers or organisations is vital, particularly if your research offers critique of their processes, and, by virtue of an external perspective, can identify ways to change course or adapt these processes for stronger outcomes. This takes a supreme form of bravery and energy, but is rewarding if the research can help individuals, organisations and movements to introspect and strategise. City networks such as ICLEI can help make connections between government and researchers, but these links are often better if made at the beginning of the research process.

3. Finally, challenge the power of the global gatekeepers of knowledge. Most well-cited journals or publishing houses are based in the global North, as are their editorial boards, which often leads to a form of discourse

management that may lock out new ideas. Such challenge can be done by submitting papers to, and citing papers from, local journals, and, by sharing the published articles further, drawing attention to these discourses, and improving their impact factors. When submitting to global journals, it is also important to be discerning about the comments from peer-reviewers who may not recognise their contextual biases. Challenging peer comments effectively can help to shift discourses in large journals.

For impactful research, I propose a shift from "dissemination" to "engagement". All too often ICLEI or our local government members are approached in a project to be the disseminator of research which was undertaken without our, or their, participation. While the research may be interesting, it often lacks a specific hook which makes it relevant to the strategic priorities or challenges that were articulated by the City. By inviting local governments into research processes from the beginning, the research can benefit from contextual, institutional and process knowledge of city officials or leaders and also have champions who will operationalise the research outcomes.

As discussed earlier, this does require navigating different modes of working, and supporting time for reflection among busy practitioners. A number of South African Cities are increasingly demonstrating interest in welcoming researchers to support understanding their challenges or shaping city agendas. The City of Joburg's Integrated Policy Planning and

Research Unit provides cross-cutting departmental support to guide strategy development. The City of Cape Town has a Research Management Framework which welcomes research proposals, requiring that final research is shared with the city, but also connecting the researchers to the most appropriate city officials, and legitimising their time spent on the research.

We've spoken about access to research, and engaging with change agents while research is conducted, but the final point is to partner with change agents as co-researchers and as co-convenors of trainings, knowledge exchanges and political processes.

- Partnering with societal actors in any research that aims to understand change processes means that the research is more effectively contextualised. It also potentially offers access to communities unreachable by universities, and it guarantees that someone already has a vested interest in the research outcomes. As shared in reflecting on the FRACTAL programme, this may be exceedingly uncomfortable, given that there are many world-views interacting and different ways of working at hand. Spending time to develop a collective understanding and way of working pays off with more robust learnings, research and actionable outcomes.
- Inviting societal actors as lecturers or to co-design a teaching curricula will enrich the lessons and conversation. Inviting local government officers as discussants can juxtapose how the system is supposed to work with how it actually works, which is a valuable learning outcome. This process also provides a space and motivation

for local officers to reflect on the processes in which they are involved, and to articulate any successes or inertia.

- While there is excitement about the potential of collaborative research, we must continue to validate disciplinary research as well as inter- and trans-disciplinary research. In our eagerness to promote science with society, and to support integrated approaches for sustainability, we must not overlook or demonise the specialists who are doing vital work in their specific realm of expertise. Taking a lesson from ecology, a thriving ecosystem requires both the niche operators who do a specific role very well, and generalists, who can thrive in multiple roles and bridge niche roles. Tertiary institutions should strive to establish an institutional culture that can support both specialists and generalists to operationalise their research in different ways. This means being open to developing different forms of performance measures for faculty, championing different forms of thesis supervision, and thesis evaluation, providing support services for research translation and uptake, to name a few.

Equipped with these approaches, tertiary institutions and researchers are able to lead appropriate processes of change, attuned to our dynamic world, and dependent on evidence. It is vital that we build better knowledge, competencies, data sets and expertise to better manage our cities today and tomorrow. At the same time, we simply cannot afford to wait to have all or even most of the answers, let us take hands in support of our local governments and learn together, by doing, carefully

documenting our learnings, encourage safe spaces where new ideas and ways of solving problems are welcomed and new unusual partnerships can flourish.

In closing, I reiterate that the age of extractive social research is over. But we are entering a new age of collaborative, emergent research processes, which are more attuned to the needs of society. More and more, researchers are being invited to become partners in driving systems change with societal actors. Many researchers are already doing so. Will you accept this invitation to join the many movements who, together, will achieve sustainable, inclusive, vibrant African cities?

Thank you to CLES, the Faculty of Law and North West University for inviting me to share these reflections with you today. Wishing the Chair of CLES and all involved the very best of success as you embark upon what will no doubt be a very exciting and much needed path - for a more sustainable, equitable and inclusive future for all.

About the authors:

Kobie Brand | Deputy Secretary General: ICLEI | Regional Director: ICLEI Africa
Kobie has more than 25 years of practical and managerial experience in Environmental Management and Urban Development. Her expertise range from biodiversity, climate change, coastal management to urban sustainability and planning. She is responsible for the strategic direction, growth, partnerships, programmes and scope of work for ICLEI in Africa. Kobie is also Global Director for ICLEI's Biodiversity and Nature-based solutions work, and in this capacity heads up the Cities Biodiversity Center embedded in ICLEI Africa.

Dr Meggan Spires | Director: Climate Change: Energy & Resilience
Meggan believes that African cities are places of innovation and potential, where globally relevant solutions are found. She leads the Climate Change, Energy and Resilience workstream at ICLEI Africa, where a diverse team works with African city stakeholders to build resilience, enable low emission development, and improve access to finance and energy. Meggan holds a PhD in Environmental Science and before joining ICLEI Africa worked as a municipal official.

Paul Currie | Manager: Urban Systems Unit
Paul is fascinated by the multi-layered relationships that give each city its unique flavour. With his Sustainable Development MPhil and current doctoral research, Paul uses urban metabolism, resource nexus and political ecology as lenses for shaping sustainable, inclusive cities. At ICLEI, he supports local governments to apply systems perspectives to food, water, energy and nature, and facilitates the development of policies and plans appropriate to contexts of change and uncertainty.

About RISE Africa:

RISE Africa is ICLEI Africa's platform for inspiring and fostering new connections that lead to swift and impactful actions for enhanced sustainability and resilience in Africa's urban areas. Exposure to forward-thinking ideas from different disciplines through a range of curated interactions will provide an antidote to outdated "silo" thinking that is well recognised to inhibit innovation. Instead of being another 'talk shop' amongst like-minded individuals, RISE Africa will bring a diversity of city role players together in innovative sessions to identify new opportunities for collaborative action.

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