African cities sit somewhere between the extremes of pessimism – arising from the lived realities of millions – and potential – framed as front page celebrations of Africa’s growth, development and culture.

**African cities are wretched places** – the systems are broken, poverty is rife, dilapidated infrastructure and a whirlwind of unmet demands creates a sense of hopelessness for many.

Irrefutable statistics paint a gloomy picture of inadequate services, rising poverty inadequate and crowded dwellings, lost economies and communities facing assuredly insurmountable trends of climate crisis, population growth, extraction and pollution, ecological degradation, and deepening inequality. Prevalent hunger and malnutrition drive a disproportionate disease burden in many of our cities, with water, sanitation and energy out of reach for many and unreliable for the rest. The devastating effects of climate change further disenfranchise the already vulnerable amongst us. African cityscapes are unbuilt and incomplete, the shells of new or unfinished constructions raising the unspoken questions of “who will live there? how could they live there? and who will be displaced?” The occasional neo-colonial megaprojects of new highways or gated housing developments ignore communities and divide the city – faster movement for elites, through divided neighbourhoods – while noxious old busses chug along, getting stuck in iniquitous traffic. In a continent that is majority youth, it is this very group being locked into the double burden of illiteracy and unemployment, only their opportunism helping to navigate the everyday. The dire situation across African cities has reached an all-time high, driving deep seated discontent in the very places that could offer hope.

**African cities are brilliant places** – unparalleled melting-pots of culture, where community and innovation produce a remarkable energy and sense of vibrancy, unique to our continent.

Soulless statistics fail to convey our cities as mosaics of space and time, made and remade by countless everyday motivations: labyrinthine spaces of interweaving people and smells and noises, setting the scene for the hustle. Endless possibilities and multitudes, ever-changing in form and flow – awake and alive and calling for action. The reclaiming and repurposing of public space sees day-time office parking and streetside spaces replaced with markets and nightlife as wobbly tables welcome diners with the smells of nyama chom. Loud voices, bright chitenge and Afrobeats beckoning abundance and community. Cities with no yardstick but the time and tread of its residents. Ancient cities still supple enough to rethink and remake themselves with new models of urbanisation, mobility and society, to blaze new ground. Cities perpetually under construction, incomplete but ever growing – refusing to stagnate – brimming with untapped potential, awaiting someone to release it.

Our cities are places of immense opportunity, where people, ideas, cultures and economies collide and emerge. Already in practice across the continent, innovations emerge at small and large scale – experiments in digital exchange, circular economy, design, place-making and trade – rewriting the narratives of how we think of our cities and how we think of ourselves in the world.

We fail our urban populations and cities’ potential when we view African cities only through the lens of extremes or through overly sentimental visions of opportunity and ‘soul’. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie cautions against the danger of a single story, warning that “it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of
that place and that person...The consequence of the single story is this: it robs people of dignity”. Thus, we ask where these two narratives meet and merge, and what role do we play in moving them forward? How do we recognise the truths of each and build them into something that is useful now, faithful to our historical and evolving cultures, and sentinels for better futures?

There is value in discontent, because it helps us confront the realities of the cities we have – the cities we live in. It reminds us that we know we deserve better – that there should be more to Africa and her cities than challenges. It reminds us of the urgency with which we need to stop, re-vision and reclaim our cities.

There is value in romanticism and ambition, as it shows the cities we want and deserve are not some abstract concept, but alive in the hopes and dreams of everyday people, the trader, the student, the politician, the artist. We are reminded that the task of realising wellbeing in our cities is not so daunting when sparks of hope abound.

How do we move from the cities we currently have to the cities we want for ourselves and for our children? With the realisation that the ambition of the SDGs to achieve this dignity will not be met by 2030, the continent must more fully embrace the African Union's Agenda 2063, as a blueprint for a dignified and more equitable continent.

Unfortunately, Agenda 2063 overlooks urbanisation as the most important megatrend facing the continent, next to climate crisis, framing ‘The Africa We Want’ as one without cities. While Agenda 2063 is a pan African vision that embraces multiplicities across the continent, it is missing city and regional voices, and the specificities of how the Agenda can support local action.

However, urbanisation and cities could be the heart of its transformative agenda

By failing to recognise cities as the hubs of growth, change and transformation in Africa, Agenda 2063 has overlooked the core role which cities play in trade, innovation, wellbeing, and indeed the development trajectory of nations and regions.

RISE Africa 2023 Action Festival invites all doers, thinkers and enablers, to reimagine and reframe the stories of “The Cities we Want” – to present a bold new narrative that takes the vision of AU Agenda 2063 to new heights and positions cities as spaces in which to celebrate innovation and culture, while resolving many of the reinforcing and stuck challenges on the continent. What do we want in our and for our cities? How do we make space for our everyday needs and for the big dreams and possibilities?

Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, under whose leadership the AU Agenda was conceived and developed implores us that “our development must be steeped in our own heritage, our own culture,” while Akinwumi Adesina, President of the African Development Bank, argues that “We must avoid the trap of viewing Africa only through its poverty – instead, Africa must be developed with pride!”

At the RISE Africa 2023 Action Festival we create a space for dialogue, cross pollination of knowledge and experience, mobilisation and community building towards the visioning and making of the cities which we know are possible. We invite you to join us to challenge locked-in visions of cities and provide new provocations for what is possible – and together, to continue building the movement for learning, unlearning and creating the cities we want.