

# **Rethinking Scales? Possible Future(s) for Regional Development Planning in South Africa – A Think Piece<sup>1</sup>**

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## *Introduction*

In the last decade or so, there has been a proliferation of literature on new forms of urban and regional governance (Brenner, 2001; MacLeod, 2001; Tewdwr-Jones, 2001). While regional development has been punted as one of the most important subnational activities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Pike et al. 2006); the 'region' i.e. the subnational scale of government – has been viewed as a significant scale in leveraging economic development. For New Regionalism scholars (McLeod, 2001; Jones and MacLeod, 1999; Lovering, 1999; Keating, 1998; Storper, 1995) regions are perceived to be more innovative and resilient in engaging with the complexities of the capitalist global economy. This focused attention on regions as critical units of study is imperative given the complex nature of globalisation and its demand for more institutional agility and competitiveness.

This intensification of the globalisation process is defined by heightened complexity, uncertainty, risk and rapidity of economic, sociospatial, political and cultural change (Pike et al. 2006; Brenner, 2000; 1999). To remain more relevant and functional in the global market, city and regions have

become more aggressive in their quest for economic competitiveness, political relevance and cultural uniqueness. While some regions in both the developing and developed countries are able to fully exploit the advantages of globalisation, most of them become either stifled and/or stagnated by globalisation, leading to all forms of sociospatial, economic and political marginalisations.

Notwithstanding the challenges and opportunities faced by cities and regions world-over, New Regionalism scholars still maintain that regions have a critical role to play in stimulating economic competitiveness and innovation (McLeod, 2008; 2001). While appreciating the analysis advanced by most West European scholars vis a vis the renaissance of the region and its critical position in stimulating post Fordist economic activities, it must be pointed that different regions in different times and places are influenced by unique institutional, economic and political factors. It is the interrelations between the aforementioned actors that arguably determine the region's level of

participation in the global economic arena.

To give an example, the political devolution processes that resulted in the rise of the region in the United Kingdom in the late decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resulted in the rise of unique regional planning systems in England, Scotland and Wales (Healey, 2004; Vigar et al. 2000). Even the development strategies that were employed in the UK at that time were invariably informed by specific political, institutional and cultural currents. Similarly, the interaction between individuals, firms and institutions in the global South, is shaped by everyday experiences, cultures, values and norms defining the developing world.

While the resurgence of the region has been celebrated in some developed countries, South Africa is only beginning to grapple with the subtleties of regional development. Faced with the complexity of a dual economy, jobless economic growth and high levels of illiteracy, South Africa is now compelled to find innovative ways of promoting regional development. This article attempts to give an outline of the

current developments in the South African regional (provincial-scale) planning practice. Influenced by the work of various thinkers in regional development (MacLeod, 2001; Brenner, 2000; Keating, 1998; Storper, 1995), this discussion is premised on the postulation that regional development has become one of the most essential activities for promoting regional innovation and competitiveness. It is also supposed that the success of regions particularly in engaging with regional planning activities is determined by the existence of a sound institutional structure as well as pragmatic and strategic development strategies.

With the pressing realities of poverty, income inequalities, spatial fragmentation, HIV/AIDS, and other challenges characterizing most transitional states, South Africa is compelled to examine the contribution of all scales of government in promoting development planning. In light of the current dominance of the discussion on scales and their role in planning (see Brenner, 1998 in particular), it is important to reflect on the perception as well as the role of South African provinces in promoting regional development planning.

Judging from the literature on the state of provincial-scale planning in South Africa however, it is apparent that the provincial scale is perceived to have been the weakest link in the country's intergovernmental planning system (Makoni et al. 2008; Harrison and Todes, 2001; Harrison and Oranje, 2000, Pottie, 2000). This concern has resulted in the policy-review process targeted at re-evaluating the role of the provincial sphere; at the same time questioning its capabilities (or lack thereof) in driving the nation's regional development agenda.

The review of the province's status in relation to planning is coupled by a number of political (and ideological) dynamics likely to reconfigure the country's approach to development planning. Infact, one would argue that the current political engagements at policy-level are likely to dictate the future design and function of the country's institutional structure (Makoni *et al.* 2008). Thus, in a time as this - when competing views on the state's possible development trajectory are being aired, it is imperative for development planners to advance or at least emphasise the importance of regional development planning. The

first part of this discussion will provide an overview on the significance of the region in promoting regional development. This analysis will be done within the context of New Regionalism. The second part will outline the current challenges faced by South Africa's provinces in promoting regional development. The final part of the article will conclude by projecting the possible future for regional development planning in South Africa, highlighting the rise of new forms of subnational development planning actions at city-regional level.

### *Globalisation and New Regionalism and the 'Politics of Scale in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

The scholarship on New Regionalism seeks to explore the determinants of competitiveness of regions within the context of globalisation (MacLeod, 2008; Keating, 1998; Jones and McLeod, 1999). One of the main arguments raised by New Regionalism scholars is that the region has currently proved to be an influential scale that can best leverage economic development (Keating, 1998; Storper, 1995). This resurgence of the region particularly in Western Europe and North America is credited to various

political, economic and sociospatial activities characterising the capitalist global economy. Citing Lefebvre, Brenner (2000: 369) for instance defines the complexity of globalisation as resulting in the 'multiscalar dynamic of 'implosion-explosion'' – a process that calls for responsivity from all of scales of governance:

On the one hand, the capitalist urbanization process dismantles and reconstitutes historic urban centers to create new, specifically capitalist forms of urban centrality, industrial agglomeration and peripheralization. On the other hand, as capitalist urbanization spreads across the globe, it generates new forms of uneven development, territorial differentiation and core-periphery polarization that are articulated differently upon each geographical scale.

Thus, the conflicting nature of globalisation is evidenced by its 'centring' and marginalisation of certain economic and sociospatial activities in cities and regions calls for more adaptability from all scales of governance. Writing on the resurgence of the region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Deas (2004: 2) describes how globalisation has resulted in the 'reterritorialisation

of the state in which power has dislocated upwards (to an array of supra-national institutional entities), downwards (to cities and regions) and 'outwards' (to non-state bodies)'. In other words, sub-national governments as well as non-governmental agencies are perceived to be strategically positioned to engage with the supra-national as well as the local agencies in a more effective and productive manner.

This political descaling processes defined above is said to have transformed the regional geographical space into a dynamic functional space critical for fostering economic development (MacLeod, 2001 Keating, 1998; Jones and McLeod, 1999, Vigar *et al.* 2000; Deas and Ward, 2000; Tewdwr-Jones, 2001). From a New Regionalism standpoint, the region can provided both global and local firms an opportunity to cluster and effectively exploit economies of agglomeration, thus becoming more productive. To give an example - the rise of the Silicon Valley in the USA as the 'crucible of innovation and technological in electronics and information and communication industry has been credited to the ability of firms to cluster

and innovate together change' (Pike *et al.* 2006: 212). The dynamism of the 'reflexive' capitalist economy therefore, called for more innovation and creativity which emanated from inter-firm networking and collaboration at a regional and city-regional scale (Pike *et al.*, 2006; Brenner, 1999; Storper, 1997).

Furthermore, the emergence of the knowledge economy has not only resulted in need for regions world-over to bolster their innovation systems; it also highlighted the importance of 'untraded interdependencies' (Storper, 1997) in realising innovation and competitiveness within global and local firms. New Regionalism suggests that regional economic innovation and competitiveness stems from the individual, firms and institutions' ability to foster everyday networks through building trust, honesty, strong value systems and other soft infrastructural issues at a regional level. The elements of trust, honesty, values system and other relational issues, define the essence of untraded interdependencies (Storper, 1997).

It must be mentioned however that the rise of the region does not necessarily

result in the complete hollowing out of the nation-state. Instead, the nation state continues to play a central role in the ongoing struggle to 'command, control, reconfigure, and transform social space' (MacLeod, 2001: 813). In accentuating the above point, Brenner (2000; 1999) mentions that the nation states continues to operate as essential sites of reterritorialization for social, political, and economic relations. What the global de/reterritorialisation process did in some parts of the developed world was to transform the regional geospatial arena into a prominent political entity and a crucible space for promoting socio-economic governance (MacLeod, 2001; Deas and Ward, 2000; Brenner, 1999; Keating, 1998). As will be highlighted later in the discussion, the nation-state continues to hold the political and economic reins of power in the developing countries such as South Africa. Infact, the political devolution and the subsequent level of political and fiscal autonomy in most developed and developing countries are determined to a large extent by the nation-state.

The celebration of the rise of the region must be read against a sound

understanding of the 'politics of scale' within the context of globalisation (Brenner, 2000; Cox, 1998). Though there might be varied interpretation of the term, the 'politics of scale' here is used loosely to define the dynamic patterns of interaction and networking between various scales of governance within a given space and time. The space-specific economic, social and cultural processes defining the politics of scale therefore, result in the different interpretations of the New Regionalism as one of the narratives used to explain the composite counters of the scalar debate.

In exploring the possible future of regional development therefore, one must bear in mind that regions do not exist in isolation; instead, they are 'moments in spaces of flows [and] relational places entangled in webs of connections' (Smith, 2004: 9). For this reason, 'urban regions are among the key geographical sites in and through which this multiscalar reconfiguration of capitalist spatiality is currently unfolding' (Brenner, 2000: 361). In transitional state such as South Africa therefore, the level of the provincial scale's involvement in regional development and development

planning activities, must be framed against a rigorous analysis of intra and/or inter-scale interactions. In other words, the local and national scales activities impact on the manner at which regions operate.

Clearly, the dominance of the neo-liberal thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has led the paradoxical collision and collusion of various forces shaping the current political and economic landscape of cities and regions. In instances where cities and regions have been found with weak economic, political and institutional foundations, the *dark side* of globalisation - i.e. global isolation and marginalisation have prevailed (see Pike *et al.* 2006 for examples on this). In Africa in particular, many cities and regions find themselves having to compete for shrinking export markets and the lack of financial resources in some cases makes it difficult for them to diversify their economies (Shah, 2007). The trade liberalisation initiatives and the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s further exacerbated the socioeconomic and political plight of most African cities, regions and nations (Shah, 2007). As Pike and others (2005: 5) note, the liberalisation

policies, often accompanied by 'macroeconomic stability packages' geared towards curbing inflation, reducing fiscal deficits and debt, and low interest rates to encourage long-term investment – created more harm than good for most regions in the developing world.

Thus, while appreciating the role of regions in fostering economic growth and innovation, one must also take cognisance of both internal and external social, political and economic forces that determine the potential of this scale of governance to function optimally. The internal factors such as the lack of infrastructure, high levels of illiteracy and so forth, are likely to limit a region's contribution to sustainable development. In some instances, the institutional design of a particular state as well as the degree of political and economic autonomy a region wields is likely to restrain the latter from realising its full development potential. Some external factors that usually hinder regional innovation are related to uncertainties of the global economic environment as witnessed by the 2008 global economic meltdown.

The above discussion sought to highlight the intensification and

subsequent complexity of globalisation and its impact on regions economic development processes. The rise of the region is therefore not necessarily a universal phenomenon. Instead, there are many cities and regions in both developing and developed countries that have not managed to 'rise' due to a number of factors. The inability of some regions to compete meaningfully in the global market; unfavourable economic and institutional pressures induced by neoliberal policies and other supposed macroeconomic stability packages for instance, has resulted in the intensification of regional economic and social disparities.

While some New Regional scholars in the Western Europe and North America might provide compelling narratives on the rise of the region, in most parts of the developing world, particularly in the sub-Saharan Africa region, there seem to be prevalent instances of 'failed cities'<sup>2</sup> and regions.

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of *failed cities* is advanced by Mike Davis and Mattias Hagberg in one of their commentaries on the neoliberal city such as Gaza Sadr City or the slums of Port-au-Prince in a paper entitled *The New Ecology of War*, (2009) published online: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-01-07-davis-en.html>

Though used to serve a particular analytical purpose, the failed cities (and regions) notion might be extended to encompass and categorise some cities and provinces as currently found in Zimbabwe for example. It can also be argued that failed cities and regions are characterised by their lack of political and economic relevance and legitimacy in the global stage.

#### *The Emergent Regional Planning Discourse in South Africa*

Like most emergent democracies, South Africa is in a process of grappling with its own economic, sociospatial and political challenges. One of the most critical challenges faced by South Africa is related to defining the role and purpose of the provincial scale in promoting regional development (Camay and Gordon, 2004; Kihato and Rapoo, 2001; Jozana, 2000; Pottie, 2000). From the analysis and assessments made by various scholars and institutions (Harrison and Oranje, 2000 Presidency, 2007), it is argued that the provincial sphere has not been able to fully engage with its developmental mandate. While acknowledging the social, economic and institutional disparities characterising the South African

provinces, there is a general consensus that this scale of government has been found wanting insofar as the advancing of regional development is concerned (Makoni, *et al.*, 2008; Presidency, 2007).

In assessing the role of the province in South Africa, it is worth mentioning the tense political conditions that influenced the formulation of this sphere of government. In the early 1990s, dominant political parties held different views about the future of administrative structure of South Africa (Frost, 1993, Humphries and Rapoo, 1993; Croeser, 1993). In a bid to secure their position in the new democratic society, South African political parties battled over the form that the new society was to take. As Lodge (cited in Pottie, 2000: 37) asserts:

The case for South African democracy's assuming of a federal form was based chiefly on the supposed political benefits of a multi-centred political dispensation in ethnically divided societies. Dividing executive authority between central and regional government would give minorities, defined in different ways, a stake in the system.

So, the 'production' of the provincial scale was dictated in most part, by the political interests of various actors who saw the province as a possible entry-point to the state apparatus. As Kihato and Rapoo's (2001: 2) observed, 'provinces were positioned as second-order prizes to be won by political parties which perceived no prospects of capturing power at central level'. What is clear from the literature is that provinces were a result of a political compromise (Jozana, 2000; Kalema, 2000; Pottie, 2000; Rapoo, 1999; Khosa and Muthien, 1998).

Notwithstanding this, provinces as well as other scales of government are still faced with a mammoth task of redressing the sociospatial as well as the economic challenges entrenched by the apartheid regime. The urgent need to deliver basic services such as housing, water and electricity to the hitherto marginalised communities continues to put immense pressure on all spheres of government. When assessing the province's performance in promoting regional development one should take note of the following factors.

The first one is related to the creation of a complex 'quasi-federal'

administrative structure that was 'neither explicitly federal nor centralist in nature (Pottie, 2000: 37). The defining of the national, provincial and local scales as distinctive yet interdependent spheres of government (Republic of South Africa, 1996) is said to have created a breeding ground for tensions and complexities that characterise the South African intergovernmental planning system (Jozana, 2000; Kalema, 2000; Pottie, 2000; Rapoo, 1999; Khosa and Muthien, 1998). In other words, the institutional design of the post-1994 polity is rather too complicated for a transitional state yet to develop its administrative capabilities, sociospatial fabric, broad and inclusive economic base as well as a literate and skilled population.

In explaining some of the challenges confronted by transitional states, particularly in the developing countries Khan (1998: 10) submits that in most instances:

Policies are made in a hurry, often under intense external pressure, new legislatures are inexperienced, and inundated with massive amounts of new legislation; the executive bureaucracy are hamstrung by weak

staff, poor information and logistical support; and inadequate procedures and lack of clarity concerning clear relations between governmental departments.

The above assertion is relevant in the South African case where all spheres of government are experiencing difficulties with aligning their developmental objectives. In fact, there are still some instances where there is confusion between the three spheres on particular powers and functions.

*Secondly*, provinces can be said to be overwhelmed by social development-related issues, thus forced to invest less time and resources on other facets of development. Given the political legacy of the country, provinces find themselves having to deliver on health, education, housing and social development. To this day, most of the provincial budget is spent on providing services related to the abovementioned sectors. The dominance of economic and social development in the provincial agenda is also evident in development planning tools such as the PGDS. This 'economic determinism' of provinces might result in the negation of other development issues

related to human capital development and environmental conservation for instance.

*Thirdly*, while acknowledging that South African provinces are at different levels of development and are not equally endowed with resources - it is imperative for all stakeholders to design pragmatic and strategic provincial or regional development strategies. The failure of provinces to promote regional development has been linked to this sphere's lack of sound and strategic development strategies (Presidency, 2007).

Since 1996, South African provinces have tried albeit in varying degrees and level of success, to formulate Provincial Growth and Development Strategies (PGDSs) as well as Provincial Spatial Development Strategies (PSDFs). One of the primary objectives of the aforementioned development strategies is to promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth that is underpinned by a strong appreciation of the provinces' spatial configuration. The PGDS in particular was formulated to provide strategic direction and scope for provincial-wide development programmes and projects, within a long

term perspective; taking into consideration the resources, economic, political, social and natural constraints and opportunities; they are also expected to act as vehicles for addressing the legacies of the apartheid space economy, promote sustainable development and ensure poverty reduction and employment creation (Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG), 2005).

While there have been some improvements with regards to the formulation of the provincial growth and development strategies in the last four years, the *PGDS/PSDF Assessment Report* compiled by the CSIR for the Presidency (2007) indicates that most of the provinces are still struggling to either formulate strategic and credible development plans and/or are failing to implement the existing ones. Most provinces are still faced with a challenge of grappling with both inward and external economic, spatial environmental and institutional factors that have an impact on the province's competitiveness. Furthermore, much of the analysis in the provincial growth and development strategies 'remains rather static and inward-focused and does not develop a

clear understanding of functional economic regions within and beyond provinces' (Presidency, 2007: 25). Other critical points raised in the *PGDS/PSDF Assessment Report* (2007) highlight the provinces' lack of a shared understanding of their competitive and comparative advantages; the lack of a shared vision on the development objectives and the lack of meaningful cooperation between the provinces, various line departments, the private sector and the civil society.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, Pottie also asserts that provinces have been crippled by political interference in administration; over-centralisation of management; poor budget formulation and spending; insufficient departmental organization; inappropriate human resource distribution and weak strategic planning (2000: 43). Surely, these pitfalls have a negative impact on the capacity of provinces to perform optimally.

It would be worth mentioning however, that the provinces' performance is determined by its level of interaction with other scales of government. The national scale of governance for

example, has proved to be critical in charting the development trajectory for both provincial and local government. The National Spatial Development Perspective [NSDP] (The Republic of South Africa, 2006) strives to set a tone for the development planning in South Africa. Infact, this highlights the significance of the nation-state in providing resources particularly finance, strategic guidance and leadership in development planning, thus dictating the involvement of subnational entities in the development planning dialogue. Instead for that reason, it is imperative for the national, provincial and local scales of government jointly formulate a shared vision – a roadmap that would determine the pace and nature of the country's development.

*Conclusion: The Possible Future for Regional Development in South Africa?*

In sum, while regional development thinking is still unfolding in South Africa, its significance in promoting sustainable development is clear. As the literature on New Regionalism suggested, subnational scales of governance can contribute to regional

economic growth and competitiveness. In the case of South Africa where there is an urgent need for accelerated economic growth and social justice, the promotion of regional and/or subnational development is critical. With the current developments in the country's political landscape, it is clear that institutional change is imminent. While it is difficult to project what the implications of the provincial policy review process (DPLG, 2008) would mean for provincial- scale development planning, there is an urgent need for a coherent regional development and planning framework.

Various political parties have begun expressing their views about the institutional and policy changes they wish to implement with regard to development planning. Commenting in one of the daily newspapers, Mr. Jeremy Cronin of the South African Communist Party for example, muted some of the possible changes aimed at 'fixing' policy and government departments that had not yielded results would include the formulation of a planning commission that would be headed by the Presidency (Business Day, 20 October, 2008). Mr. Cronin also warned of the restructuring of the

cabinet as well as the changes in the role of the treasury; 'Budgetary allocations will (no longer) be the monopoly of treasury. Instead it will be based on a *development plan*. Clusters (of state departments) have not been working. We need better *co-ordination and hierarchy* because ministers often clash' (Business Day, 20 October 2008 – emphasis added).

One can only speculate what the mentioned 'development plan' would entail and where it would be located (in terms of scale) in the proposed 'hierarchy'. Also, one wonders whether the deliberate use of the word 'hierarchy' in relation to development planning suggests a likely change in the administrative structure of government. If there is to be a hierarchical administrative structure (whether the provinces are done away with or not), the regional development agenda must still be prioritised. Infact, the punted National Planning Commission should provide a platform for strategic and inclusive regional development.

Building on the ground-work laid by various actors within the field of development planning, the National Planning Commission should act as a

driver of regional development planning in South Africa. The conceptualisation, formulation, coordination, execution as well as the monitoring and evaluation of regional development strategies for example, should form part of the proposed Commission's main functions. The existence of strong National Planning Commission might assist the government in attracting both endogenous as well as exogenous resources (see Pike *et al.* 2006: 12). Infact, the National Planning Commission might play a pivotal role in promoting the government's quest for an inclusive developmental state.

Thus, the possibilities for regional development and regional development planning in South Africa are boundless. Recently, the move towards city-regional planning in most parts of the country could be signalling the birth of a new subnational planning ethos. The formation of the Gauteng Global City-Region as well as the Cape Town Functional Region for example, is arguably a response to the international resurgence of subnational planning systems. Policy-makers and development planners in South Africa have begun to appreciate the

significance of relational economic and urbanisation forces shaping the destiny of cities, city-regions. Again, the active role played by various district municipalities in driving the development planning agenda highlights the existence of a strong subnational development planning wave in South Africa. Whatever the outcomes of the 2009 national elections, the time has come for South Africans to rethink and re-imagine the best possible ways of making the government scales more efficient, inclusive and developmental.

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