

Reimagining global urban governance and institutional justice: South Africa's G20 presidency and the push for sustainable cities and strong institutions

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Abstract: South Africa's G20 Presidency in 2025 presents an unprecedented opportunity to advance a global agenda centred on inclusive urban development and institutional justice. This paper explores how South Africa can leverage its leadership to influence Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). By drawing from its own urban and institutional transformation experiences, South Africa can drive a G20 discourse that addresses the rising fragility of cities, the democratic deficit in global governance, and the persistent exclusion of the Global South from decision-making forums. Through championing equitable urban development, inclusive digital infrastructure, and accountable institutions, South Africa's presidency can shape a new multilateral consensus on urban resilience, peacebuilding, and governance reform. The paper concludes by proposing key G20 actions, including the establishment of an Urban Resilience Task Force and a G20 Accountability Charter, to mainstream SDGs 11 and 16 into global policy frameworks.

Keywords: South Africa, G20, SDG 11, SDG 16, Urban resilience, Institutional reform, global governance

Introduction

The Group of Twenty (G20) has traditionally functioned as the preeminent forum for global economic coordination, focusing primarily on macroeconomic stability, trade liberalization, and financial regulation. However, in an era marked by intensifying climate crises, growing socio-economic inequalities, and declining trust in public institutions, there is an urgent need for the G20 to evolve into a more inclusive and developmentally oriented body. As such, the G20's influence must now extend beyond monetary policy and fiscal governance to engage directly with the structural determinants of sustainable development, including urban resilience and institutional justice (Bradlow & Fakhry, 2023; Bhattacharya et al., 2024).

South Africa's 2025 G20 Presidency occurs at a time of growing momentum among Global South actors to reshape multilateral institutions and global governance frameworks. As the only African member of the G20, South Africa holds a unique representational role for the continent, offering an opportunity to infuse the agenda with priorities often excluded from dominant policy narratives (Chikozho, 2024; Naidoo & Sithole, 2023). This includes addressing persistent spatial inequalities, the legacies of colonial and apartheid-era urban planning, and the need for transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance systems.

This paper argues that Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) should form the backbone of South Africa's G20 strategy. These goals are not only mutually reinforcing but also foundational to realizing the broader 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Urban centres are increasingly the locus of social, economic, and environmental challenges; at the same time, the strength of institutions – both formal and informal – shapes the extent to which cities can respond equitably and effectively (UN-Habitat, 2023; ODI, 2022). A focus on SDG 11 and SDG 16 enables the G20 to move

beyond crisis response toward structural transformation, embedding justice, inclusivity, and resilience in global development pathways.

Moreover, the intersections between these two SDGs reflect the complex realities of the 21st century. Fragile institutions exacerbate urban inequalities, while poorly managed urbanisation can fuel institutional breakdown, social unrest, and environmental degradation. Cities that are well-governed, inclusive, and sustainable are essential to building peaceful societies and democratic legitimacy, particularly in rapidly urbanising regions of the Global South (Satterthwaite et al., 2024; UNDP, 2023). Thus, South Africa's leadership provides an opportunity to reconceptualise the G20 not merely as a platform for economic policy, but as a catalyst for holistic, people-centred development rooted in solidarity, accountability, and local empowerment.

South Africa's urbanisation experience and global relevance (SDG 11)

South Africa's urban development trajectory since the end of apartheid presents a complex and instructive case study for the Global South. Despite the country's progressive constitutional framework – which guarantees the right to adequate housing, basic services, and environmental protection – deep-rooted spatial inequalities continue to define its urban landscapes. Historical legacies of racialised planning, combined with neoliberal development approaches and uneven service delivery, have led to persistent segregation, chronic underinvestment in informal settlements, and increasing urban precarity (Harrison & Todes, 2017; Turok & Visagie, 2021).

Today, approximately 65% of South Africa's population resides in urban areas, with significant growth projected over the next two decades (Stats SA, 2022). Yet this growth has often occurred in the absence of inclusive urban governance, resulting in sprawling informal settlements, inadequate public transport, limited access to affordable housing, and insufficient social infrastructure. Despite notable initiatives such as the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), implementation has been hampered by intergovernmental coordination challenges, funding constraints, and limited community participation (SACN, 2023; Houghton, 2024). These experiences underscore the need for more holistic, participatory, and context-sensitive urban planning.

South Africa's G20 Presidency offers an opportunity to elevate these urban development challenges – and the lessons learned – to the global agenda. First, it can promote inclusive urban planning that prioritises the integration of informal settlements, recognising the agency of grassroots urban actors such as community-based organisations, informal traders, and urban social movements. International evidence suggests that upgrading informal settlements through co-produced, participatory models leads to more durable and socially just outcomes (Mitlin, 2022; UN-Habitat, 2023).

Second, South Africa can champion sustainable transport and infrastructure financing, particularly for secondary and intermediary cities, which are often excluded from global investment pipelines despite being critical nodes for migration, employment, and regional integration (Cirolia et al., 2022). The expansion of integrated public transport systems such as Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), while promising, has had uneven success in South Africa – offering important policy lessons for other emerging economies navigating similar transitions (Salon et al., 2023).

Third, South Africa is well-positioned to advocate for climate-resilient urban development, given the country's acute exposure to environmental risks – including flooding, drought, and heat stress – particularly in peri-urban and informal areas. Climate vulnerability is often exacerbated by intersecting socio-economic inequalities, making urban climate adaptation not only a technical imperative but also a justice concern (Ziervogel et al., 2021; van Huyssteen et al., 2023). South Africa can lead G20 dialogue on green urban infrastructure, equitable adaptation financing, and inclusive urban climate governance.

By positioning cities as frontline actors in global development, South Africa can call for the creation of a G20 Compact on Urban Resilience. Such a compact would seek to integrate infrastructure finance with principles of social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and participatory governance. It would also align with global frameworks such as the New Urban Agenda and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, ensuring that urban resilience is not reduced to technocratic risk management but is understood as a multidimensional developmental challenge.

South Africa's urbanisation experience – characterised by both innovation and persistent structural challenges – offers valuable insights for other G20 and Global South cities. Its presidency represents a strategic moment to reshape global urban policy by advocating for a more just, inclusive, and resilient urban future.

Advancing peace and institutional accountability (SDG 16)

Sustainable Development Goal 16 – which promotes peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and effective, accountable institutions – remains one of the least funded and least prioritised SDGs in international policy-making,

despite its foundational role in sustaining all other development goals (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2023; OECD, 2022). As global governance institutions face rising legitimacy crises, exacerbated by democratic backsliding, endemic corruption, and declining civic space, the urgency of SDG 16 has never been greater. South Africa, with its history of negotiated transition, institutional reform, and ongoing struggles with corruption, is uniquely positioned to champion SDG 16 during its G20 Presidency.

South Africa can first promote stronger judicial independence and anti-corruption frameworks, drawing on its national experience with the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture. The Commission revealed how systemic corruption and elite patronage networks had eroded state institutions, while also demonstrating the role of legal accountability mechanisms in restoring public trust (Zondo, 2022; Southall, 2023). As the country implements post-capture reforms – including prosecutorial revamps, procurement law reforms, and oversight mechanisms – South Africa can offer valuable lessons to other G20 and Global South countries facing similar integrity challenges (Goga et al., 2023). These efforts also align with the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group’s objectives, providing momentum for stronger global norms on asset recovery, whistleblower protection, and beneficial ownership transparency.

Second, South Africa can advocate for inclusive and transparent governance systems, emphasizing the importance of gender-responsive institutions, participatory democracy, and civil society protections. As authoritarian tendencies rise globally – often under the guise of national security or populist nationalism – civil society actors and human rights defenders face increasing threats (CIVICUS, 2024; Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2022). South Africa’s Constitution and its institutional framework – including the Chapter Nine institutions like the Public Protector and the Commission for Gender Equality – serve as examples of how institutional architecture can safeguard rights while enabling democratic accountability (De Visser & Powell, 2022). The G20 under South African leadership should renew commitments to civic space and support the development of global norms protecting freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

Third, South Africa can facilitate global dialogue on transitional justice, particularly for post-conflict or fragile states across Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), though imperfect, has become a touchstone for transitional justice globally. Its core principles – truth-telling, reparative justice, and reconciliation – can inform new G20 frameworks for supporting peacebuilding, especially in contexts where international justice mechanisms are often perceived as externally imposed or politically biased (Llewellyn & Sriram, 2023). This could include a G20-supported fund or knowledge-sharing platform for community-based reconciliation efforts, hybrid justice mechanisms, and post-conflict institutional rebuilding.

Underpinning these approaches is South Africa’s philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasises human interdependence, dignity, and the moral imperative of collective well-being. When applied to governance, Ubuntu offers an alternative to technocratic or coercive models of statecraft, favouring participatory, inclusive, and ethical approaches that build public trust and social cohesion (Metz, 2021; Khunou, 2022). A G20 agenda grounded in Ubuntu diplomacy would prioritise not only the efficiency of institutions but also their legitimacy in the eyes of the people they serve.

In this way, South Africa’s G20 Presidency can catalyse a shift in global governance discourse – from a narrow focus on institutional capacity to a broader emphasis on institutional legitimacy, equity, and justice. By advancing SDG 16, South Africa has the opportunity to help redefine multilateralism in ways that are more responsive to the lived realities of citizens, particularly in the Global South.

Bridging urban and institutional agendas: Towards holistic development

The nexus between urban inequality and institutional fragility has emerged as a defining obstacle to achieving the SDGs, particularly SDG 11 and SDG 16. Urban areas – especially in the Global South – are increasingly the epicentres of compounded vulnerabilities, where socio-spatial exclusion converges with weak governance systems (UN-Habitat, 2023; Satterthwaite et al., 2023). Informal settlements, often characterised by insecure tenure, substandard housing, and limited service delivery, reflect not only the failures of urban planning but also the erosion of institutional legitimacy and responsiveness (Harrison et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2020). These patterns exacerbate cycles of poverty, deepen inequality, and undermine democratic resilience (Pieterse & Parnell, 2014).

South Africa’s G20 Presidency offers a unique opportunity to champion a holistic policy framework that addresses these interconnected challenges. The imperative is to bridge sectoral silos and integrate spatial, institutional, and socio-political dimensions of urban transformation.

First, linking urban planning to institutional capacity development is essential. While many cities have adopted spatial development frameworks and integrated development plans, implementation often falters due to insufficient fiscal

devolution, limited technical capacity, and fragmented governance arrangements (Todes et al., 2023; Watson, 2022). For example, urban governance in South Africa is characterised by a disjuncture between progressive planning ideals and the realpolitik of institutional inertia and spatial legacies of apartheid (Parnell & Robinson, 2017). A G20-endorsed agenda must promote multi-scalar institutional strengthening – enabling municipalities with the authority, resources, and human capital needed to deliver on inclusive urban development. This includes capacity-building programmes, knowledge-sharing platforms, and conditional infrastructure financing tied to equity-based performance metrics (Angel & Lamson-Hall, 2020; OECD, 2023).

Second, the proposal to establish a G20 Urban Justice Observatory is both timely and innovative. Urban exclusion is often normalised through the invisibilisation of structural violence and systemic marginalisation – whether through forced evictions, discriminatory policing, or denial of basic services to informal settlements (Cirolia & Scheba, 2023; Dhanani & Islam, 2023). The Observatory would collect and analyse disaggregated urban data – disaggregated by sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, age, income, race, and legal status – on access to housing, public space, justice, and safety. Such a mechanism would support evidence-based policymaking, enable comparative learning, and create accountability for G20 and partner governments under global compacts such as the New Urban Agenda and SDG 11.7 (UN-Habitat, 2023; Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Importantly, the Observatory must be participatory in design, incorporating civil society actors, urban poor federations, and grassroots data initiatives to ensure legitimacy and relevance.

Third, public sector innovation is central to rebuilding institutional trust and fostering participatory urban governance. Digital identification systems have transformative potential in addressing legal invisibility – an issue faced by over 1 billion people globally, many of whom reside in urban peripheries (World Bank, 2023). However, such systems must be embedded in strong data governance frameworks to prevent exclusion, surveillance, and the exacerbation of inequalities (Mann & Daly, 2023; Gelb & Metz, 2022). In parallel, tools such as participatory budgeting, citizen report cards, and open government platforms have shown success in redistributing power and enhancing transparency. Porto Alegre’s participatory budgeting model, for example, not only increased public investment in low-income areas but also fostered civic pride and trust in local institutions (Cabannes, 2021). Cape Town’s ward-level participatory mechanisms and Seoul’s Digital Governance Portal provide further examples of adaptive, inclusive urban governance (OECD, 2023; Harrison et al., 2021).

Ultimately, bridging the urban-institutional divide requires more than technocratic fixes – it necessitates a paradigm shift in global governance thinking. Urbanisation must be seen not merely as a demographic or economic phenomenon but as a site of political contestation and institutional transformation. Cities are where rights to housing, public space, mobility, and participation are either realised or denied (Purcell, 2013; Rolnik, 2019). South Africa, grounded in principles of Ubuntu and a constitutional commitment to social justice, can use its G20 platform to articulate a development vision rooted in care, solidarity, and accountability. This would resonate across the Global South, offering an alternative to exclusionary, growth-centric urbanisation models and contributing meaningfully to global debates on just transitions, inclusive governance, and sustainable futures.

Strategic initiatives for the G20 agenda

To operationalise a transformative vision for sustainable and equitable development, South Africa’s G20 Presidency must go beyond declaratory commitments and mobilise concrete, scalable mechanisms. This requires institutional innovations that embed inclusion, transparency, and justice at the heart of global urban and governance systems. The following strategic initiatives offer a blueprint for embedding these priorities in the G20 process:

G20 Task Force on sustainable cities and urban equity

South Africa can propose the establishment of a G20 Task Force on sustainable cities and urban equity, co-chaired by cities from the Global South and Global North, to inform global urban policy and financing frameworks. Such a platform would address the critical imbalance in urban investment criteria, which often privilege economic efficiency and bankability over inclusion, resilience, and climate justice (UN-Habitat, 2023; Sverdlik et al., 2022). Research shows that municipal governments – particularly in Africa and South Asia – are structurally underfunded and lack access to global capital markets, limiting their ability to deliver on SDG 11 and climate targets (Farole et al., 2022; Cities Alliance, 2023).

The Task Force could develop equity-oriented investment guidelines, ensuring that global urban financing mechanisms – including those managed by the G20 Infrastructure Working Group and multilateral development banks – prioritise affordable housing, informal settlement upgrading, climate adaptation, and social infrastructure (Pieterse et al., 2023; Dodman et al., 2022). It could also facilitate multi-level governance dialogues, linking city leaders with

national policymakers, global financial institutions, and civil society to co-create spatial justice frameworks and monitor urban SDG implementation (Watson, 2022).

A G20 Accountability Charter

A second strategic initiative is the introduction of a G20 Accountability Charter, which would establish binding norms on governance, transparency, and anti-corruption applicable to both G20 member states and the multilateral institutions they influence. Despite recurrent commitments to good governance in G20 communiqués, there remains a persistent accountability gap in how infrastructure, climate, and social development resources are allocated and monitored (OECD, 2023; Transparency International, 2022). Studies have shown that corruption and opaque procurement systems significantly erode development outcomes, particularly in large-scale urban projects (Schouten & Swyngedouw, 2021; Flyvbjerg et al., 2021).

The Accountability Charter could include enforceable standards for public financial management, civic participation in budgeting, beneficial ownership transparency, and independent oversight of infrastructure and urban development investments. It should also reinforce commitments under SDG 16.5 (substantially reduce corruption and bribery), SDG 16.6 (develop effective, accountable institutions), and SDG 16.10 (ensure public access to information). Lessons can be drawn from existing initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership and Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, which have shown the value of peer accountability, independent monitoring, and civil society inclusion in promoting good governance (World Bank, 2023; OGP, 2022).

Global South knowledge exchange platforms

Third, South Africa should champion the creation of Global South knowledge exchange platforms that enable sustained collaboration between urban planners, civic technologists, community organisers, and justice innovators. These platforms would address the entrenched asymmetries in knowledge production and innovation diffusion that often privilege Euro-American epistemologies and technologies, marginalising contextually grounded solutions from the Global South (Parnell & Robinson, 2017; Cirolia & Scheba, 2023).

Such exchanges can amplify socially embedded innovations – ranging from informal settlement data mapping, participatory budgeting, and mobile justice clinics, to co-designed public space interventions – that have emerged across cities like Nairobi, Cape Town, Medellín, and Jakarta (Appadurai, 2022; Van Donk et al., 2020). By investing in South-South peer learning and technology adaptation, these platforms can support scalable yet localised solutions that reflect lived realities, governance constraints, and cultural norms. Moreover, they can foster epistemic justice by recognising the intellectual contributions of grassroots actors and subaltern urbanisms (Santos, 2016; Escobar, 2018).

International donors and multilateral agencies should support these platforms not as peripheral “learning hubs” but as central sites for co-creation, experimentation, and translocal solidarity in urban governance. Anchoring them within the G20 framework can help institutionalise knowledge equity, shift power in development cooperation, and catalyse inclusive innovation ecosystems.

Conclusion: Reimagining global governance through African leadership

South Africa’s G20 Presidency represents more than a geopolitical milestone; it constitutes a moral and strategic inflection point for the global governance architecture. At a time when overlapping crises – climate change, democratic erosion, economic inequality, and forced urbanisation – are challenging the coherence of the multilateral system, South Africa has the opportunity to infuse the G20 agenda with a distinctly African ethos of justice, inclusion, and communitarian development (Nhema & Zeleza, 2023; Taylor, 2022). By centring SDG 11 and SDG 16, the Presidency can help reframe global priorities toward building societies that are not only functional and efficient but also fair, participatory, and humane.

Critically, this reimagining of governance is not solely about physical infrastructure or technocratic legal reform. Rather, it entails restoring public trust in state institutions, reinvigorating democratic norms, and reaffirming the dignity and rights of historically marginalised communities – particularly women, youth, and informal workers in the Global South’s rapidly urbanising contexts (Pieterse & Parnell, 2022; Dodman et al., 2023). As studies in urban political ecology and postcolonial governance show, development that overlooks the lived experiences and agency of the poor often exacerbates exclusion and reinforces colonial legacies of spatial and social injustice (Parnell & Robinson, 2017; Cirolia & Scheba, 2023).

South Africa’s leadership can therefore catalyse a paradigmatic shift: from governance as command-and-control to governance as care, accountability, and co-production. This means recognising urban space as a site of rights and

recognition, not merely of productivity and service delivery (Appadurai, 2022; Watson, 2022). It also means confronting the political economy of global inequality by reforming multilateral institutions, amplifying Southern voices in decision-making, and mobilising resources for transformative social investments (UN-Habitat, 2023; Sverdlik et al., 2022).

By advancing an agenda rooted in the African philosophical traditions of Ubuntu and participatory solidarity, South Africa can inspire a more responsive and inclusive multilateralism – one that reflects the interconnectedness of human dignity, ecological sustainability, and institutional legitimacy. In doing so, it has the potential to help reposition the G20 not simply as a forum for crisis management, but as a laboratory for planetary justice and regenerative futures.

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