



Good governance and strong political will: Are they enough for transformation?



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ABSTRACT

By the year 2050, more than 70% of the world's population will be living in cities. The rush to the cities, along with subsequent increased consumption patterns, has dire consequences, for the ecological systems that sustain human life. Some find hope in the potential that cities can be built differently, that green infrastructure and denser forms of development, will satisfy human needs while decreasing the stress on valuable resources and mitigating consequences of climate change. Some say that “strong political leadership and robust governance” is critical for this need to drive sustainable urban transitions. However, are “political will” and “good governance” enough or is the issue more complicated than this? Using a critical political economy approach this paper shows the fundamental difficulties that arise when attempting to transition urban centres to “smarter”, more “sustainable” and “resilient” cities. Ultimately, the paper argues that “good governance” and “strong political will” are inadequate for understanding the requirements for transformation.

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1. Introduction

Cities are expanding in an unsustainable manner. This is problematic for goals of maintaining environmental integrity and human well-being. UNESCO's World Biosphere Reserve programme is a network of areas that have committed to implementing land use strategies that encourage conservation or more environmentally supportive forms of development. Where one might expect decision-making to be more sensitive to environmental and social needs such as where lands are gazetted as UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, in places with a long track record of democratic decision-making (Canada) and in places where a relatively new democratic government is intentionally aiming at social and environmental sustainability (South Africa), one sees instead a scramble for resources with mixed outcomes (see [Watkins et al., 2003](#)), many of which are suboptimal and founded on environmentally unsustainable land-use practices that privilege particular elements of society. Why is this so?

This paper aims to answer this question by examining two case study areas: (1) Jamestown, Western Cape, which is located

within the Cape Winelands Biosphere Reserve, South Africa; and (2) the most southerly portion of the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve, Ontario, Canada, commonly known as the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

These cases have been chosen because they are located in two very different countries socially, politically and economically, yet both have rural landscapes that experience pressure for development. Areas within Biosphere Reserves were chosen because it is assumed that if sustainable development and protection of greenspace can occur anywhere in the world, it should be within these areas because their stakeholders must demonstrate a commitment to the pillars of the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme before obtaining the status. The overall intent of Biosphere Reserves is to promote sustainable development based on local community efforts and sound science ([UNESCO, 2014](#)).

The areas were also chosen because both Biosphere Reserves are close to rapidly expanding major international metropolitan areas (Cape Town, South Africa and Toronto, Canada). Accordingly, it is assumed that because of this, tension between protection and development should be much greater than if the Biosphere Reserves were located far from major urban centres. Examining the tension between the requirement to adhere to UNESCO Biosphere Reserve goals and pressure for development due to proximity of rapidly expanding metropolitans provides insight into the key factors that cause land to be developed or protected.

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This paper is based on nearly 100 interviews located in both Canada and South Africa, conducted between 2011 and 2013. The interviews were transcribed and coded for emerging themes.

2. Cape Winelands Biosphere Reserve, Western cape, South Africa

The Cape Winelands Biosphere Reserve is located in the Cape Winelands District and the Overberg District Municipalities of the Western Cape Province, South Africa. The majority of the Biosphere Reserve is located in the Cape Winelands District Municipality. For this reason, the paper does not discuss the specifics of the Overberg District Municipality but focuses within the Cape Winelands District Municipality area (see Fig. 1), and more specifically Stellenbosch Municipality (see Fig. 2). Stellenbosch Municipality's plans aim to intensify within the urban edge, at specific nodes identified for development. However, development continues to occur outside of the urban edge and outside of identified nodes for development. Research conducted in the area has revealed why this is occurring, and is elaborated below.

First, influential factors within the urban edge of Stellenbosch Municipality (e.g., growing population, student accommodation needs and land market behavior) affect expansion outside of the urban edge. An important factor that affects housing prices is the student market. Some parents purchase homes for their children to live in while in university, increasing overall prices in Stellenbosch town. This, combined with already high housing prices due to the wealth in Stellenbosch, makes it very unaffordable for many people (including professionals) to live within the built boundary. For this reason, 75% of Stellenbosch workers commute from Cape Town and nearby towns such as Kuils River.

The current density within the urban edge is 6–7 units/hectare on average, with 3–7 units/hectare in affluent areas and 50 units/hectare in low-income areas. The Provincial Spatial Development Framework calls for 25 units/hectare as an overall target, including flats, and a planning firm identified locations for 17,000 units within the current envelope. This indicates that there is plenty of space for densification within the current boundaries. However, planners are competing with the market because the Municipality has its own vision of where they want to geographically grow while the influential players in the market are trying to dictate direction and push growth in a different direction.

There is also an increase in informal settlements that generally emerge beside existing townships (where black or colored people were forced to live during Apartheid) such as Kayamandi and Jamestown. The land for government-supplied housing is located on municipal land, which is often located at the rural–urban fringe, yet outside the urban edge (in areas such as Jamestown). This, in turn, contributes to urban expansion in these areas.

Study participants (#1, 7, 8, 9 and 15) said that many people believe construction is a primary economic stimulant. This, combined with foreign investment and land valued for its development potential rather than its agricultural potential affect whether land becomes developed or protected. This is one of the ways in which capitalist property development influences land-use planning. Developers tell people that development outside of the urban edge is required to stimulate employment in the area (the jobs promised are typically in the form of construction labor, and then as maids and gardeners for those who eventually purchase the homes).

Prior to the most recent economic recession that resulted in a collapse of the housing market, property development was viewed as the solution to social and economic problems. Since such developments were sold or marketed as stimulating economic growth, politicians supported plans that could have been considered as

contradicting planning legislation (or they amended plans). Over the past 7–8 years, a great amount of land within the Municipality of Stellenbosch was rezoned from industrial to residential use. However, study participants indicated that many people who are concerned with property development in the region are no longer linking economic growth to the construction and property development industries; rather people increasingly believe that it is better to strengthen agriculture and tourism industries.

Greenfield development continues to thrive outside the urban edge, despite municipal goals of increasing development within the edge. Gated/lifestyle communities dominate Greenfield development with owners beginning with the planting of vines, and then building a wine tasting area. The building of a restaurant follows, next a hotel, and a golf course. Homes on wine estates are purchased as vacation homes, making the market highly vulnerable to global economic conditions. This leads to difficulty for planners who must create plans that are inclusive of all, when there is such a large gap in income levels:

The Gini coefficient [of income inequality] in the Municipality is one of the highest in the world, there is very rich and very poor—no middle class (Study Participant #11).

You have to plan for both groups of people (Study Participant #13).

Planning for the rich and the poor is extremely challenging for planners, as is creating integrated communities where both groups can live and work.

Land is valued by its residential potential rather than agricultural worth, meaning that land value is linked to the profit that would be realized should the property become developed. Farms located on the urban edge are often converted to residential and urban development when there is sufficient infrastructure and market demand.

People only see land value in the context of it being converted to lifestyle and gated community estates. Land is viewed as valuable in the context of what they could get for it if they sold it to a developer ... production is compared to real estate production rather than being compared to agricultural production (Study Participant #11).

Land may be worth R2 million in terms of land value for agriculture, but then developers will offer R8 million for them to develop it for residential use. What are they [landowners] going to do? (Study Participant #3).

Study participants overwhelmingly support a permanent urban edge as a primary method of managing growth, and feel it is necessary if there is real commitment for compact growth.

Having an urban edge is a very effective policy tool because it brings a lot of clarity to the process even if that clarity is resented by some people (Study Participant #4).

However, an urban edge has historically been nearly impossible to get legislated in Stellenbosch Municipality because of tremendous political backlash. How often the edge should be reviewed is also an issue that was identified during interviews. Should it be reviewed on an annual basis, every five years, or should it be a permanent line? The answer to this varies from individual to individual.

A private planner described the urban edge as the most ideal speculative commodity because as soon as it is established, developers purchase land that surrounds it and then begin to lobby the government for the line to be extended. Simply put, plans can be changed and that change can happen quickly and in favor of the developer. Developers wait until the municipality changes zoning restrictions or the urban edge before selling the now divided subdivision lots to individuals. Because of the record of urban edge expansion, drawing an urban edge significantly increases the price

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