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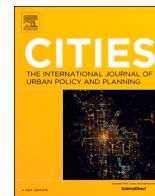
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# Unpacking planners' views of the success and failure of planning in post-apartheid South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses post-apartheid planning reform in South Africa and identifies the successes and failures thereof, as understood by South African planners. We noted a perception of success regarding the reform of planning legislation; however, the general feeling was that planning had failed to achieve spatial transformation in the post-apartheid era. A variety of reasons were given for this: the failure to achieve reservation of planning work for planners, political interference, weak planning tools, lack of capacity, and planners' lack of key skills. We argue that underlying these failures was a deeper issue, namely that many powerful stakeholders in the built environment seemingly did not ascribe value to the planning process. In other instances, they may accept the value of the process, but not the uniqueness of planners' skills. This divergence of opinion of and power struggle between the legitimacy of planning versus planners shapes both the form that planning reform takes, but also the perceptions of the successes or failures of planning reform. Consequentially, this means that to achieve 'successful' planning reform, it is necessary to account for how the interaction of micro (individual) and macro-meso (organisational, societal) agendas shape these processes.

## 1. Introduction

South African planning provides interesting insights into the reform of planning systems, especially planning systems in the Global South, given the frequency of attempts made to overhaul the planning system to achieve new goals, and the constant failure to achieve the desired objectives. To quote Mabin and Smit (1997, p. 217) in the review of planning from 1901 to 1997 in South Africa, "On all previous occasions in South African history when reconstruction fervour ran high, the follow-through into actual urban reconstruction was disappointing to the enthusiasts, with the single and major exception of apartheid's racial reconstruction of the cities."

In this paper, we focus on South African planners' perceptions of the success and failure of the reform of the planning system in the post-apartheid era. These perceptions provide insight into how planners grapple with change, especially in contexts where the legislative demands exceed the capacity and abilities of what planning can realistically achieve. It draws on data from a 30-month research project on

planning practice and education in South Africa, including a survey of 219 planners, and, subsequently, 89 extensive interviews with planners and planning educators. This was one of the largest surveys undertaken with planners in South Africa.

We showed that planners' responses tended to occur on a continuum, with one end of the continuum recognising the need to develop the social skills needed to encourage other professionals to buy into planning proposals. This recognises the 'negotiated' nature of planning (Cirolia & Berrisford, 2017). On the other end of the continuum, we encountered a belief that the failure of planning reform stems from the inability of planning to prevent the 'intrusion' of other professionals and politicians into planning work. Indirectly, this implies a belief that planning systems could be made to work if planners held the power.

The novel contribution of this paper is that we show that the success or failure of the reform on planning systems in the Global South is linked, but discrete, to the success or failure of planners. Planners have individual concerns regarding employability, and a need for a set of professional skills that are valued by other built environment

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professionals. This agenda logically influences their perceptions of the success and failure of planning systems. In so doing, we draw attention to the interaction between the micro-meso-macro levels of planning reform, and the need to account for individual needs alongside the tactics of wider collectives.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Success, failure and power

This paper is premised on the idea of perceived success and failure of planning systems that requires an understanding of what is meant by success and failure. Van Assche et al. (2012) argued that recognition of both failure and success is performative. Notions of failure are necessary to justify the need for future planning, but too much failure brings into question the validity of the planning system, hence the need for a narrative of success. This recognises that assessments of success and failure are linked to wider agendas of powerful stakeholders, and “that preferential treatment of one knowledge/semantics, will have effects on the distribution of power and vice versa” (Van Assche et al., 2012:579).

In response to such issues, authors such as Newman and Head (2015) have argued for failure to be understood as issues of fact and of understanding, namely breaking perceived failures into questions of both what failed, and failure for whom? This brings into tension the rationalist (i.e., politically neutrally, objective) and constructivist (political, subjective) approaches to understanding failure, recognising the value of both. Failure can also be analysed as interaction of micro-meso-macro level factors, namely failure of the individual actor, failure of the organisation, and societal failures (Derwort et al., 2019).

McConnell (2010) presented this issue as a spectrum from success to failure, broken into process, programme, and political success:

- Process success is the preservation of government policy goals, obtaining legitimacy and support for policies.
- Programme success is the policy initiative that produces the results desired by government.
- Political success is where the policy enhances the reputation of the elected government and its leaders.

Importantly, this recognises that different forms of success can contradict each other. For example, if a policy achieves its stated objectives, but that success reduces the reputation of the government, then a policy can both be perceived to have succeeded and failed (see also McConnell, 2015). This needs also to be tempered with an understanding of unintended and unanticipated consequences, meaning a programme can result in failures or successes that were not part of the original design. However, again, the question of criterion for determining success or failure is important. In such instances, success and failure is judged not only by policy and political objectives, but wider meta-policy objectives (O’Leary & Simcock, 2020), and more ambiguous social norms and values.

In summary, the key message here is that the very notion of what is success and failure in the context of the public sector is nuanced, and while having objective elements, is deeply affected by the web of power relations within the public sector. This also necessitates an agnostic perspective towards conflict, seeing it as a necessary and omnipresent force for institutional change (Landau, 2021). The challenge then is on understanding optimal arrangements of conflict that lead to desirable changes, and being aware that any definition of *optimal*, *failure* and *success* will be a value judgement.

### 2.2. Reform of planning systems in Africa and the Global South

The experience of planning reform in Africa and the Global South has largely been read as a story of failures (at least, according to the academic literature), with some notable exceptions in Latin America

(Watson, 2009). Many of the planning systems were inherited from previous colonial regimes. Planning was valued by colonial administrators as it provided a means to impose their control on the urban form in areas designated for European population groups, using planning to create a quality living environment. Conversely, indigenous areas had limited planning controls, but the demarcation of where the indigenous population could live was strictly regulated (Njoh, 2009).

In the post-colonial period, plans from the colonial era or new plans that largely follow the same approach remain in place, especially in Africa. Central to the continuation of such urban visions has been the belief that African cities will catch up with cities in the North, and that phenomena such as informality are temporary (Bakare et al., 2020; Watson, 2009). Despite the mounting body of evidence, and failure to achieve these goals, these visions persist, with the most recent iteration being Wakanda-like proposals for new sustainable cities that elected officials seem to accept, despite the failure to actually deliver any of the supposed promises of these cities (Watson, 2014). This trend builds on similar ‘grand’ (failed) experiments undertaken in other Global South areas, such as Brasilia and Chandigarh (Moser & Côté-Roy, 2021). Notably, such grand visions of city reform are often led by architects and urban designers, with (local) planners playing a supporting role.

Given the lack of congruence between these plans and the actual reality of cities in the Global South, as well as the limited ability of the state to police urban development in these cities, compliance with planning controls in most cities remains extremely low, outside of formal middle-income areas (Baffour Awuah & Hammond, 2014; Ochieng, 2020). However, some exceptions exist: in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (Cirolia & Berrisford, 2017), due to the construction of formal buildings being state-led, compliance is high in parts of the city noting, however, large informal areas; and in Kigali, Rwanda, where the political dynamics encourage compliance and enforcement of planning regulations, compliance is similarly high (Goodfellow, 2013). This is not a simple picture; often, a single area has varying degrees of compliance, depending on the level of income, age of the area, and nature of the land use (Cirolia & Berrisford, 2017; Hansmann et al., 2018).

However, the retention of outdated planning standards means that compliance can result in suboptimal outcomes, especially for low-income households (Charman et al., 2017). For example, Lusugga Kironde (2006) demonstrated in a hypothetical example how compliance with the regulated standards resulted in a development of 3900 units, whereas when alternative regulations were applied, that same site could accommodate 15,000 units. Various studies have also pointed out that the livelihood and dwelling practises of households who are monetarily poor are often criminalised by planning regulations (Charman et al., 2017). This is unsurprising given the emulation of Euclidean zoning approaches from the US, which were intentionally designed to exclude households who are monetarily poor from wealthier suburban areas (Manville et al., 2020). In such instances, while compliance could be seen as an objective indicator of planning success, if compliance leads to a suboptimal urban form that does not work for households or firms, then lack of compliance with planning systems could in certain instances be a more desirable outcome. Again, the question is, success according to whom?

Various reasons have been posited for the difficulties experienced in developing progressive planning systems in the Global South and the compliance with these systems. The first has already been discussed, namely the conflicting rationalities between the state and those planned for, with the former rigidly adhering to the unrealistic ideal of achieving a modernistic, Northern style of urban development. In such visions, where planning is unable to erase informality, then it is typically perceived by state actors to have failed, whereas the blend of formality and informality may be a necessary compromise given the economic realities of households who are monetarily poor (Massey, 2013).

The second reason concerns issues of power, politics, and corruption. Some studies have found that political interference prevents the enforcement of land use management (LUM) regulations (Boamah,

2013), and others have focused on how political interference affects the decision-making process (Ciroli & Berrisford, 2017; Goodfellow, 2013; Moodley, 2019). However, some studies have focused on the role of officials, many of whom are bribed to approve developments or not to enforce LUM regulations (Agheysi, 2018). In essence, in certain circumstances, the network of power relations both support the retention of unrealistic planning standards, and paradoxically, the continued lack of compliance with such standards, given that such arrangements benefit certain actors despite harming the overall system.

Third, in African cities especially, there are often parallel forms of land governance, with certain areas controlled by traditional leaders. In such contexts, it is common for both officials and traditional leaders to disregard the authority of the other (Dubazane & Nel, 2016; Siiba et al., 2018). However, given the typically stronger control of the traditional leaders, traditional land governance will take precedence over formal systems. Notions of failure here are important, as the state may perceive this as an area of failure due to it being unable to exercise total control, whereas traditional leaders may see state incursion into what they perceive as their customary role as problematic. In other words, both actors see this as a failure, for contrasting reasons.

Fourth, there is a lack of capacity for planning in the Global South. The core argument is that many states have insufficient planners to implement LUM regulations and processes (Agyemang & Morrison, 2018; Owusu-Ansah & Atta-Boateng, 2016). This issue often results in planners with limited experience or training, or even members of other professions that deal with LUM applications. This leads to poor quality LUM in terms of process, value capture, and decision-making (Agyemang & Morrison, 2018; Sihlongonyane, 2018). However, this view is often expressed without consideration of the demands imposed by planning systems; in other words, the issue in many cases may not be a lack of capacity, but rather an unrealistic regulatory system that is not designed with the consideration of the available human, political and financial resources.

Bringing this literature together, arguably one of the key issues is a fundamental disagreement on the future of cities in the Global South. Plans and regulations continue to be created with the idealistic premise of a strong and capable state, and a future in which economic prosperity has enabled most citizens to rise from poverty, and to be able to afford a middle-class lifestyle. For many officials and politicians in the Global South, success and failure seems to be determined based on the ability to realise said visions. For much of the Global South academic literature, the vision of urban life in the Global South is far 'grittier', with an underlying sense that success is determined by the ability of the poor to maintain a livelihood and live a good life, regardless of the state of formality in which it occurs.

### 2.3. Context of planning reform in post-apartheid South Africa

In this section, we describe the trajectory and success of the attempts to reform the planning system in South Africa. This is both to provide context for the remainder of the paper and to continue the previous section, noting that South Africa's attempt to reform its planning systems has been one of the most extensive and well-documented examples in Africa. However, as this section shows, despite the successes in creating a progressive, normative approach to planning, which considers the reality of South African urban areas, this framework has largely failed to change planning practice, or to effectively guide the development of the built environment in South Africa (outside of a few notable exceptions). Fig. 1 summarises the various regulatory reforms, providing a simplified visual depiction of the current (as of writing this paper) system of plans that govern municipal planning in South Africa.

The first major planning legislation drafted in the post-apartheid era was the 1995 Development Facilitation Act (DFA), which was created to enable the swift processing of applications for reconstruction and development efforts. The DFA introduced principle-led law into South African legislation, which mandated that all land development in South

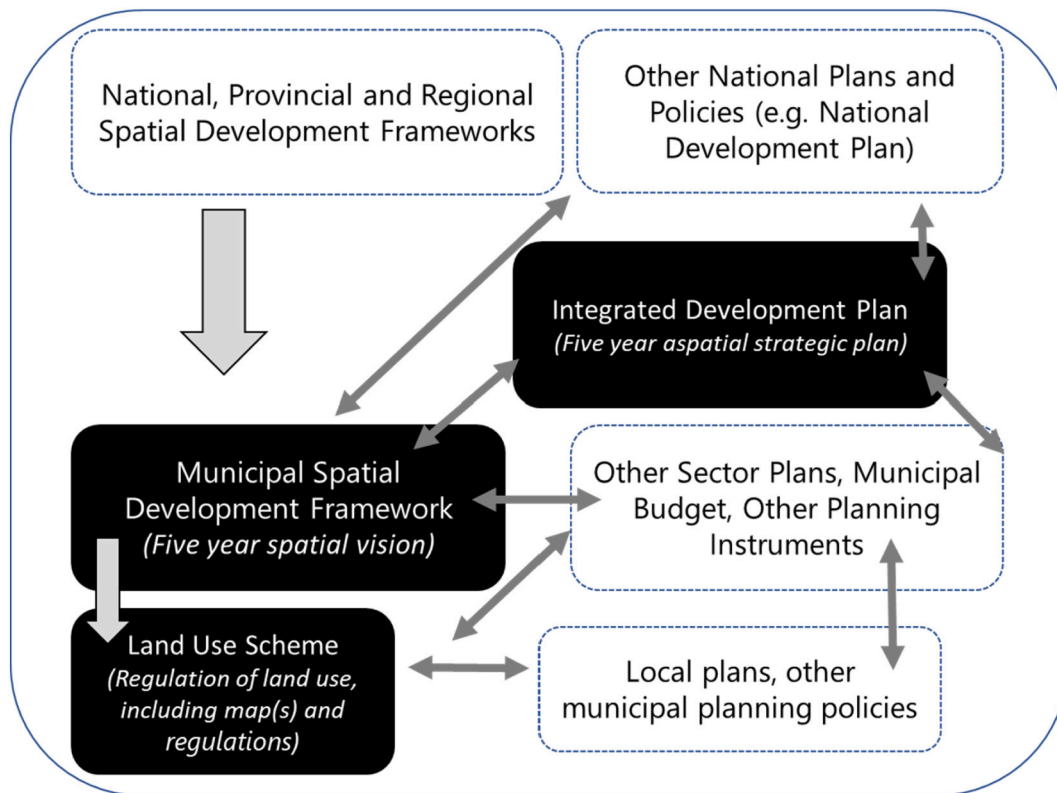


Fig. 1. Simplified schematic showing the system of municipal planning documents that govern the development of the built environment in South African municipal areas.

Africa complied with the series of normative ideas described in the act. The DFA also required municipalities to draft strategic plans related to land development (Berrisford, 2011). This saw the role of planners change from acting largely as technocrats, to take on more developmental roles.

Following the DFA, the next major legislative development was the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000. This act introduced the requirement for each municipality to have an integrated development plan (IDP). This is a five-year business plan, including an analysis of socio-economic conditions, a long-term vision for a municipality, and strategies to achieve that vision, followed by a strategic plan listing all the projects the municipality plans to undertake importantly, it includes a municipal spatial development framework (SDF), which provides a strategic direction for the spatial reconstruction of a municipality. Through these laws, there was a significant legislative push to encourage a more normative, strategic approach to municipal spatial planning. However, these laws had limited impact on LUM regulations, which generally remain unchanged.

While access to services and the alignment between population growth and economic opportunities have improved (Turok & Borel-Saladin, 2014), these reforms have largely failed to change urban development patterns. Current evaluations of urban growth indicate a pattern of locating a substantial number of new developments (particularly low-income settlements) on the urban periphery, with strained existing infrastructure, increased financial burden of households who are monetarily poor (particularly transport costs), and exacerbated patterns of spatial exclusion (Geyer et al., 2012). Notably, while the density of South African cities has increased modestly, this has mostly occurred peripherally (Du Plessis & Boonzaaier, 2015); thus, densification has greatly exacerbated current spatial inefficiencies.

There has been limited compliance with the desired development patterns suggested in SDFs. Du Plessis (2015) considered changes in the built-up ratio, land use mix, economic activity, and population density, and demonstrated that these mostly occurred outside areas identified for development in the SDFs. This implies that the SDFs had limited effect on urban development in South African cities from 1994 to 2010. As most new developments necessarily underwent the LUM process, there is a significant disconnect between the decisions made through LUM processes and the policy directives of the SDFs.

More recently, the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) 16 of 2013 was promulgated, and has impacted South African planning practice in five major ways (De Visser & Poswa, 2019; Nel, 2016; Van Wyk & Oranje, 2014; and the observations of the authors):

1. It has strengthened the notion of principle-based planning as the core to planning practice in South Africa, although the actual expression of this in practice remains limited (Moonsammy, 2017). Specifically, the principles of spatial justice, spatial sustainability, spatial resilience, efficiency, and good administration were made applicable to all land development decisions in South Africa.
2. It devolved all LUM decisions to local municipalities.
3. Municipal decision-making was, de jure, transferred from politicians to a planning tribunal comprising officials and persons with knowledge of planning. However, decisions on appeals are, in most cases, still made by elected representatives in the municipality.
4. Municipalities were required to draft municipal planning by-laws in the absence of provincial legislation.
5. Municipalities are replacing older LUM regulations with a single document covering the whole municipality, a Land Use Scheme, which includes zoning parcels of land previously excluded from LUM regulations (in particular, informal settlements and areas under traditional leadership).

There is limited evaluation to date of the effectiveness of these reforms; however, initial signs do not appear promising. For example, the regulations of the five big metropolitan municipalities established in

response to SPLUMA are methodologically mostly the same as those prior to SPLUMA, and pay lip service to the normative principles mandated by SPLUMA. Except for the City of Johannesburg, none of the regulations made any significant attempt to link the LUM regulations to the implementation of the SDF (City of Cape Town, 2015; City of Ekurhuleni, 2015; City of eThekweni, 2020; City of Johannesburg, 2019; City of Tshwane, 2014). Where this is particularly problematic, is the continued use of Euclidean zoning approaches (Gorgens & Denoon-Stevens, 2013; Nel, 2016), which are incompatible with the livelihood and dwelling strategies of households that are monetarily poor (Charman et al., 2017), and are based on a set of values that date back to the colonial and apartheid eras.

### 3. Method

The data for this paper comes from an extensive set of hour-long semi-structured interviews (n = 89) conducted from February to May 2018 and, to a lesser extent, from a questionnaire conducted in 2017 (n = 219). The profile of respondents is shown in Table 1. We included respondents across the country (noting that we had limited interviews with planners in KwaZulu-Natal), across different scales of settlement (from metropolitan areas to small towns), and from academia, the public sector, and the private sector. We captured the diversity of experiences of working in planning in South Africa. The interview themes included the relevance and role of planning education in South Africa, and what was working and not working in planning in South Africa.

Based on the number of registered planners who obtained their registration after 1994, this sample roughly reflected the gender balance of registered planners in South Africa. More white planners were interviewed, compared to the proportion of White and Black (which included black African, Coloured, Indian/Asian, or other) registered planners in South Africa. Both the interview and open-response questionnaire data were coded in NVivo using a combination of deductive (theory-led) and inductive (data-led) approaches. For this paper, an additional step was taken to do a word search to identify all mentions of success and failure in the transcripts. Following the identification of the relevant quotes, these were grouped into themes, which provided the initial structure for the findings section. After this, an iterative process was used in this paper, with the selection of quotes used carefully nuanced to ensure that they reflect the broader themes of the sentiments conveyed by the respondents. The one limitation that should be noted is that the interviews were limited to planners, and thus the views and discussion are based on planners' perceptions of the issues discussed, not the views of the wider built environment professionals.

**Table 1**  
Profile of respondents.

	Interview respondents		Survey respondents	
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	44	49 %	95	43 %
Female	44	49 %	86	39 %
Other/unknown/undisclosed	1	1 %	38	17 %
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
White	50	56 %	91	42 %
Black	35	39 %	75	34 %
Other/unknown/undisclosed	4	4 %	53	24 %
<b>Current sector</b>				
Public	40	45 %	66	31 %
Private	29	33 %	70	33 %
Education	14	16 %	13	6 %
Non-profit organisation	3	3 %	7	3 %
Other/unknown/undisclosed	3	3 %	56	26 %



## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Interview respondents' views on the successes of planning in South Africa

While many respondents had major concerns about planning in South Africa, some successes were noted. Many noted that while the legislative reform of planning law in South Africa was lengthy, it had resulted in what they considered as sound legislation and provided good visionary policies and plans. As one respondent noted, *"I would classify the law reform that has taken place [as], I think, one of our major achievements. Long overdue, we've been waiting for that for a very long time, but it is definitely something that assists us in facilitating and inducing spatial transformation."* Noting the arguments in the literature review concerning the lack of transformation of planning from colonial times to the present, this reform of planning marks a notable transformation towards a planning system that is responsive to the needs of an African country, at least at a legislative level. Such arguments point to a belief that, for the interviewed planners, success of planning in South Africa is in part related to reforming the underlying planning systems and legislation.

Beyond this issue, there was limited overlap in answers on the achievements of the planning profession in South Africa. Some focused on the successes that the respondents, or the organisations for which they worked, had achieved. Other achievements noted included the complete shift from the apartheid era thinking to progressive planning ideals (in theory), questioning around what it means to plan in an African context, and the provision of state subsidised houses. Many respondents were not entirely pessimistic about planning in South Africa, and there were many positive comments. However, unlike the weaknesses of the planning profession in South Africa, the lack of overlap in the responses makes identifying definitive trends in these responses impossible. Key exceptions are the comments related to the quality of laws and policies in South Africa.

### 4.2. Interview respondents' views on the failures of planning in South Africa

The most common response was that planning had failed to achieve spatial transformation, especially given the spatial inequalities in South African cities due to colonialism and apartheid. One respondent stated, *"I think the thing is we most probably haven't managed to get transformation, spatial transformation, inclusive growth on the agenda."* Supporting this, one respondent argued that *"the theory that we have put forward has never been implemented, in reality. If you look at this, how spatially our townships are laid out for instance. They continue with the apartheid type of planning, they use old, pre-industrial, industrial planning."* This shows an awareness of the implementation challenges identified quantitatively by [Du Plessis \(2015\)](#). This also indicates a clear expectation on the part of South African planners of what is defined as success, namely the justifiable need to change the form of settlements, given the racially segregated, sprawling nature of South African cities and towns.

Most responses thereafter focused on explaining why planning had failed to achieve spatial transformation. First, there were concerns about the limited implementation of spatial plans such as SDFs and IDPs. One respondent argued that, *"So, you draw up a plan, you are not going to be the person to approve that plan. The person who implements that plan. The person who decides land use applications based on that plan is a vast network of different departments and different competencies ... When what my most reality is, is that's an area that is of interest to this community. This community has spoken to this City department, this City department has spoken to us. In order to respond to the needs for the area and the plan, it's not myself and the community and the planner ... It's a vast network of people who I will never see and I will never actually really know what they do."*

It is important to note that in South African planning law, compliance with plans is, in theory, mandatory. SPLUMA requires that only in 'site-specific' circumstances may any authority deviate from the

provisions of a municipal SDF (S22). Regarding IDPs, the Local Government: Municipal Planning and Performance Management Regulations, 2001 specifies that *"all known projects, plans, and programs [sic]"* of all government departments and organisations in the municipal area must be listed.

However, the assessment of compliance with the SDF is often extremely limited in practice and usually focuses on whether a land development proposal complies with the broad category of future development specified on the SDF map, ignoring the various policies and nuances contained in the SDF. Most IDPs have a list of all projects to be undertaken by the municipality as an appendix to the document; however, there is often little to no correlation between the content of the main plan and the list of projects at the end of the document. Hereby, the state and the private sector comply with the letter of the law but circumvent the spirit. In such circumstances, the plans become, as one respondent put it, *"coffee table documents"*. Noting the arguments concerning lack of compliance with planning tools in the literature review, this demonstrates that this issue is not merely an issue of state-society conflict but starts with conflict within the state itself ([Andres et al., 2020](#)).

Some respondents noted these issues and argued that plan implementation requires both technical and social skills, *"Walking that line between planning fundamentally being about whom, because that who you plan for, that's who implements your plans, who approves your plans, who funds your plans, who commissions your plans. That's all people. And the more technical aspect of the discipline understanding the complex network of bylaws. Understanding hard physical limits like flood mains and soil conditions and dolomite ... Because if you [are] a technical expert but you have no social skills. You not going to get anything on the ground ... If you [are] socially very fluent but can't put together a good technical plan, you gonna get things on the ground but they gonna be lousy ... So, constantly working as a person between the troubled past and a less troubled future, between a technically determined profession and a socially fluent phenomenon."*

This highlights the importance of recognising that simply requiring in law that a plan be complied with, is insufficient. This recognises the role of relationships, the need to convince other professionals and politicians of the validity and value of the plan's proposals, while still acknowledging the importance of planners' technical skills.

Some respondents were negative about this process of dialogue, particularly regarding politicians' role. As one noted, *"So you have to mediate it but I also think that the political people also have to understand and support us at a point where we may be technically correct, but socio-politically not acceptable to the communities ... I just feel that often the politicians turn around and say well, this no, the communities are right and this is wrong and then you must move it."* Concerningly, politicians were mostly referred to negatively, with almost no mention of their adding to the planning process. They were considered unwanted, uninformed individuals who stood in the way of good planning decisions. Many respondents argued that to achieve spatial transformation, politicians should have less power in the planning process. These concerns around power and politics echo the arguments of [Moodley \(2019\)](#).

It is worth noting that the role of politicians in the planning process has been a matter of constant debate in South Africa. In the apartheid era, all decisions on planning matters were made by politicians, usually in consultation with officials, but the politicians had the final say. In the post-apartheid era, the aforementioned DFA was the first act to challenge this, with elected representatives setting the policies, and officials and professionals being in charge of interpretation and application ([Development & Planning Commission, 1999](#)). Until SPLUMA was implemented, there were a variety of arrangements in each province concerning decision-making; however, except for applications under the DFA, in most arrangements, politicians had the final say. Under SPLUMA, initial decision-making is made by professionals, but the mayor has the say over the type of appeal structure used, with in most cases mean that the type of appeal structure chosen is one that consists of elected representatives in the municipality.

Importantly, even under SPLUMA, planners are not given an exclusive domain of decision-making in the tribunals; rather, the tribunals consist of a mix of officials and outside persons, “*who have knowledge and experience of spatial planning, land use management and land development or the law related thereto (S36(1)(b)).*” In essence, this opens tribunal membership up to any non-elected person who can demonstrate experience in this area, or legal professionals who deal with such matters. Hypothetically, in many municipalities in South Africa, a decision on a LUM application could be made with no involvement of a trained and registered planner whatsoever.

This issue of other professionals doing planning work<sup>1</sup> was one of the most common cited failures of planning reform in South Africa, with many blaming the poor quality of planning work in South Africa on this issue. As one argued when asked where planning had failed in South Africa, “*I think well, in terms of town planners per se, I think it’s because at this point in time anyone can do what we’re supposed to have learnt and what we are supposed to do. Engineers don’t always know what town planning is but they always advise clients on what it is. The same with architects, there’s a lot of architects that we have to explain to what it is but they are advising clients on stuff that we have to try and fix then later on.*” Supporting this, a recent survey of South African planners found that reservation of planning work was fundamentally important for 71.29 % of the respondents, and very important for 15.79 % of the respondents (298 and 66 responses, respectively, of 418) (Ahmad, 2020). Furthermore, a recent petition with 2185 signatures called for protection of the town planning industry in South Africa, with reservation of planning work as a key issue (Maphupha, 2020).

It is also worth noting that this claim of exclusive control over planning work has been heavily contested by other professionals, including the surveying and legal professions. The basis of these claims is premised on the fact that professionals such as surveyors, engineers, architects, and lawyers had been doing planning work for many years, in effect, challenging the exclusivity of planning work (Andres et al., 2020; Sihlongonyane, 2018). This is important regarding the perception of planning work, as few professionals would claim to be able to do the work of a lawyer, engineer, surveyor, or architect without the requisite training. Planning work was instead perceived as something that could be learned by other built environment professionals. In other words, many built professionals did not perceive planning as a unique skill held by planners.

Some respondents had similar concerns, “*When I started working I felt like anyone who has not studied Town Planning can do this because everything I do on a day-to-day basis I learned on the job.*” Dovetailing on this issue, some respondents considered planners in South Africa to lack the skills needed to be effective. As one respondent stated, “*And I think we, town planners, [need] to be more open-minded, more problem-solving because even now I’ve gathered that a lot of town planners here, and even some of my friends in the industry, we don’t really know how to design a township. You know, really that’s skills that you need to ... yes I know it’s a university, so you have to base more your studies on theory, but I think we really do lack a practical approach and skills to really be able to do your work.*” Several responses also emphasised a key skills gap in understanding planning and administrative laws and ability to apply the law successfully. However, countering this was the result from our earlier survey with planners in South Africa with 76 % answering that their education did prepare them for work as planners. However, as noted in the study by Denoon-Stevens et al. (2020), this contradiction in views seems to be explained by most respondents who feel that they had the

<sup>1</sup> Regarding this term, most planners refer to reservation of planning work as job reservation; however, this has connotations associated with the apartheid regime that used this same term for reservation of jobs for the White population. Given this, this paper has opted to use the term *reservation of planning work*, despite this not being the term used commonly by planners in South Africa.

general training when they left university, but lacked the technical skills and ability to apply the theory that they had been taught at university.

For some respondents, the issue with skills related to the lack of continuing training within planning, which was especially pertinent given that many older planners were trained during apartheid. As one respondent noted, “*I would say one of the other failures in planning today still is that we’ve changed the planning system. But, many of the old style planners did not change.*” This is important given the experiences of implementing SPLUMA, which allows for a more radical approach to planning. However, existing approaches to planning continue to persist, many of which were developed under colonial or apartheid rule.

Another common theme was capacity. One respondent argued, “*South Africa has a very transformative agenda at the policy level, but when it comes to implementing this transformative agenda ..., we don’t necessarily have the tools, maybe we do have the tools but then we don’t have the capacity to implement those tools to effect the change that we need to effect.*” Another argued, “*But at municipalities, [I] don’t think they’ve got enough capacity. Either they’ve got none, or they’ve got so little that their efforts that they put into planning is also watered down.*”

This ties into the earlier discussion concerning capacity constraints as described in the literature review; however, when looking at this issue combined with the concerns regarding skills, the issue is not merely one about the number of planners, but having sufficient planners with the requisite skills. Furthermore, concerns over capacity and job reservation are potentially contradictory. If there are insufficient planners to do the existing work, logically, other professionals will become involved in planning work. However, with reservation of planning work, even fewer individuals will be involved, thereby aggravating the capacity crisis.

Some respondents also noted concerns regarding the nature of planning instruments used in South Africa, with one stating, “*The big failure now is trying to force zoning when people need houses, people need different approaches, mixed zoning ... Also, a lot of [planners], they penalise the small businesses, the upstarts, the start-ups ... even your spazas are so highly regulated and controlled by planners.*” This response is particularly important considering many respondents’ views that legislation reform has been a major success in South Africa. It highlights that many of these reforms may not have reached the level of planning tools, such as LUM, arguably one of planners’ most powerful tools (Watson, 2009). This reflects a level of path dependency within the planning system (Marais et al., 2019).

Linking this back to the issue of capacity, some respondents also noted the lack of congruence between the demands of the planning system, and the available human and financial resources. As one respondent noted, “*Okay and yes there are small little places, but they would still need planning okay and they are very under resourced ... But .. there’s a huge capacity gap for planning. And there’s a very big compliance request ... You must have SDF, you must have land use management system, you must have all of those things in terms of SPLUMA. But they don’t match the environment ... But the compliance will insist that you must have a water plan and this plan and a that plan and a everything. And possibly the town is fifteen thousand people.*” This view reflects a core weakness of the reform of planning systems in South Africa under SPLUMA, namely that the systems proposed are the same regardless of the size or capacity of the municipality.

## 5. Discussion

As noted in the introduction, the views expressed here represent two ends of a continuum; on the one end are the views that recognise the need for social skills representing a recognition of the role of planning as both a social and technical exercise. Herein, multiple stakeholders hold power over different parts of and steps in the planning process, and the role of the planner is to influence and convince the various stakeholders to comply with the plan and the normative ideals of planning. On the other end of the continuum, views call for the reservation of planning work for planners, despite the issue of limited capacity, and see the

intrusion of politicians and other professionals into planning as a core reason for the failure of planning to achieve spatial transformation. This view takes a technocratic view of planning where compliance with plans and the normative ideals of planning are achieved through legislative force. Importantly, this is a continuum, not a binary distinction; most respondents' views had elements of both ends of the continuum, but a distinct leaning to one or the other end of the continuum.

The deeper issue behind this continuum of views is the implied perception of the value proposition that planning, and planners, have for governance and the development of the built environment by other powerful stakeholders in the built environment (at least according to the planners we interviewed).<sup>2</sup> The challenge is two-fold; in some instances, the challenge is to the value of the planning, with planning processes being treated as an exercise in compliance (Brown, 2021); however, limited effort is actually made to actually use these processes to guide regulation and investment. In other instances, the value of the planning process is accepted; however, planners are not viewed as uniquely qualified to do this work, with politicians and other professionals taking roles that many of the respondents to this study felt should be the exclusive role of planners. In other words, the value of the planner as a professional uniquely qualified to do planning work is being challenged.

This speaks to the constructivist nature of understandings of success and failure, and to split the issue into planning success and failure, and the success and failure of planners, as linked but discrete concerns. Continued failure of planning brings into question the legitimacy of planners as individual agents (i.e., micro level concerns), regardless of the wider institutional and societal factors (meso and macro). The goal for many South African planners then is not merely to show the success and the need for planning, but to achieve a version of success that validates the role of planners. This is understandable as a version of planning success that does not involve planners as lead change agents, threatens the livelihoods of planners and the validity of their skills and training (Denoon-Stevens et al., 2020). This is important as, historically, planning was an extension of the work of architects, engineers, and surveyors, and only later seen as a separate profession. It is clear from this paper that the identity crisis as a unique discipline has not been fully resolved in South Africa, and this is likely emulated in many other cities in the Global South.

However, it does create a clear political dimension to how planning success and failure is understood by different powerful stakeholders and circumscribes possible ideas of appropriate reforms to planning systems. In some cases, a planning system that maintains the roles of planners may be viewed more favourably by planners than a planning system that has less need for the existing skills set of planners, regardless of whether the latter is better or worse for the settlement as a whole. It also explains the resistance by some respondents to move away from versions of planning that are still reminiscent of high modernism (Moodley, 2019), given that the idea of a planner as a technocrat is a version of planning where the planner retains both powers, but also the status of being an expert.

What this means for the broader agenda of reforming planning systems is that while planning is a 'negotiated exercise' (Cirolia & Berrisford, 2017), shaped by the tactics of collectives of powerful actors (Andres et al., 2020), planners need to be treated as a discrete interest group. Planners will attempt to shape the process towards an outcome that is individually beneficial, i.e., political success as per McConnell (2010)'s framework. As the findings of this paper show, planners are logically concerned about their employability, and will attempt to shape any planning reform exercise to maintain the power they have, and

<sup>2</sup> One important note here is that this paper is based on the views of planners; thus, the perceived lack of value assigned to planning and planners by other stakeholders in the built environment was the underlying issue of how planners saw the failure of planning reform in South Africa. This distinction is important as this is the view of one sole profession of these issues.

ideally increase that power, to maintain their livelihoods and professional identity. (In other words, the interaction of micro-meso-macro factors, as described by Derwort et al., 2019.)

Similarly, the success and failure of planning according to planners will be viewed through this lens. Thus, the successful reform of planning systems needs to account for the individual identity of planners, recognising planners' need for a unique professional identity with a discrete set of skills that are recognised and valued by other built environment professionals will colour their perceptions of what constitutes a successful reform of a planning system. But also, within a perspective that sees conflict as necessary and desirable (Landau, 2021), if harnessed correctly, this need for a valued professional identity could also be used as energy to drive (desirable) changes to planning systems.

This is important in terms of seeing planning as a facilitative skill. Namely, for planners to be open to working with politicians and other built environment professionals, this requires planners to have confidence in their professional identity, such that these actions will not undermine their own employability or professional identity. With such confidence, planners are likely to be more open to models of planning that see planning as a shared activity, where the role of the planner is focused on changing the thought styles of politicians, communities and other built environment professionals regarding how urban areas should be developed. In such a perspective, plans become a means to an end, not the end itself (Kornberger et al., 2021).

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that one of the core issues underlying the difficulties in reforming planning in South Africa has been a lack of belief or understanding by other stakeholders in the built environment of the value of planners and planning, which is not entirely unjustified. This is reflected through the lack of implementation of forward plans, despite clear legislative mandates requiring such compliance, and the belief by other professionals and politicians that they are equally capable of doing certain forms of planning work. The reaction by some respondents was to recognise the need to develop both technical and social skills of planners. Other respondents seem to blame the poor quality of planning outcomes on the intrusion of politicians and other professionals into planning work and argue that work reservation for planners is essential for achieving a successful planning system. However, this supposes that planners are the professionals most capable of doing planning work, which is questionable, given the concerns raised by many respondents about the level of skills of South African planners.

The relevance of this for the wider literature on reform of planning systems, especially in Africa and other contexts where the legitimacy of planning is challenged, is that planning system reform is not merely a technical exercise, but also a tactical one. This requires a perspective that distinguishes between the reform of planning, and the role of planners in the planning process, noting that planners will work to protect their professional standing and employability, and in so doing, shape and limit the forms in which planning reform can be undertaken. This recognises that the outcomes of planning reform processes are mediated through the interaction between individual, organisational and societal agendas, and are not objective. For the urban studies literature, this emphasises the need for more studies focussed on the alignment between the interests of planning and planners, and the consequences of divergences in this alignment for the form and operation of cities.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Stuart Paul Denoon-Stevens:** Project administration, Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Lauren Andres:** Funding acquisition, Project administration, Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Verna Nel:** Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review



& editing. **Phil Jones:** Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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