

**Plenary: Urbanisation, economic density and the pandemic
(Ivan Turok, South African NRF Research Chair in City-Region Economies')**

Abstract:

Africa's urban population is likely to double over the next two decades and to triple to over 1.3 billion by 2050. Without a step change in the current trajectory of low-income, low-investment urbanisation, most of this growth will take the form of crowded informal settlements that lack essential infrastructure and services. Emerging evidence indicates that such settlements pose high risks for the spread of the coronavirus and make communities vulnerable to other public health problems. In the absence of a cheap and effective vaccine, the continent will have to live with the prospect of repeated surges of Covid-19 for some time to come. The presentation will argue that it is important to de-risk dense human settlements through an approach that is more positive and developmental than enforced physical distancing (hard lockdowns, de-densification and travel restrictions). This is because distancing does serious damage to jobs, livelihoods and social interaction and is not sustainable. It addresses the symptoms of the congestion problem rather than the root causes. The idea of 'economic density' lies at the heart of a dynamic and developmental approach to future-proof urban settlements and make them more resilient to repeated shocks and stresses. Investment in buildings and infrastructure lies at the heart of the idea, along with the development of skills, jobs, incomes and more productive and connected environments for enterprise and economic development to thrive. The paper provides an assessment of the predicament facing urbanisation in Africa with some thoughts for the future that literally involve 'building back better' by converting mere population density into more functional economic density.