

BRICS lessons in (un)sustainable urbanisation

- Patrick Bond
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Some very dubious public policy lessons are being passed along within the Brazil-Russia-India-China-SA nexus. Durban's Luthuli International Convention Centre will ring with even more bad advice this week, during the BRICS ministerial conference entitled "Towards Sustainable Urbanisation."

Tragically, on everyone's mind is the terrible [explosion in one of China's largest cities](#) last Friday morning. What spin-doctoring should BRICS delegates believe regarding Sinopec Corporation's oil pipeline leak and deadly blast in Durban's sister city of Qingdao?

With an estimated 60 lives lost, 130 injured and 18,000 evacuated, China's [State Administration of Work Safety](#) quickly announced the culprits: "poor designs of the pipeline and local drainage networks, negligence on the part of safety officials, bad maintenance of the oil pipeline, as well as officials' failure to seal off the affected area and evacuate residents after they detected the leak, seven hours before the explosions."

Sinopec responded by [blaming Qingdao municipal officials](#). Here in Durban that would indeed be a plausible line of argument, given the city's decades-long failure to come up with an [emergency evacuation plan](#) notwithstanding repeated pipeline leaks and refinery explosions in South Durban.

KwaZulu-Natal's provincial politician responsible for city government, [Nomusa Dube-Ncube](#), sent condolences on Monday, acknowledging that "Qingdao's delegation is set to make a presentation on building productive and sustainable urban economies at the Urbanisation Forum."

Will that presentation concede that [China's cities](#) suffer massive real estate speculation, extreme pollution, a migrant labour system akin to Apartheid's, and prolific social protests?

If you take advice from Qingdao on sustainable urbanisation, well why not ask Russia for help with [nuclear technology](#) post-Chernobyl, or beg the Pentagon to train SA National Defence Force [against terrorism](#) after US troops were kicked out of Iraq and Afghanistan? Oh, we do!

Sadly, Durban is in desperate need of sustainable urbanisation. For one, the city is strewn with [white-elephant projects](#), including the money-losing ICC itself.

Just as the Qingdao delegation landed in Durban, their airplane flew not far above a [crumpled shopping mall](#) under "construction", easily visible as it lies in Tongaat near the mainly empty King Shaka "international" airport. That great barn also remains a model of an unsustainable economic strategy: an ["aerotropolis" wannabe hub](#), just a 45-minute flight from Africa's biggest airport, OR Tambo.

Since the old South Durban airport was perfectly functional for many more years, the R7 billion spent on King Shaka International could have been put to use in bottom-up development – were it not for the unsustainable 2010 World Cup that catalysed its too-early construction, as well as the empty albeit world-class Mabhida Stadium next door to our world-class rugby stadium.

Popular hatred for the mall collapse now centres on [Jay Singh](#), the tenderpreneur-builder who wrecked so much of the nearby Phoenix community's low-cost (and [upon rebuilding, high-cost](#)) housing, not to mention the city's public bus service, and on former city manager [Mike Sutcliffe](#), who egged on Singh and similar cronies, all those years, with hundreds of millions of taxpayer rands.

So holding a BRICS urban conference now is terribly bad timing, at both ends of the sister-city

relationship. “As we extend our condolences to our partners from Qingdao, we also hope to exchange with them our own insights from the rescue operation in Tongaat,” said Dube-Ncube on Monday.

Rescue? What about sharing insights about the causes, in Durban’s *systematic corruption*? Much more information about Singh can be drawn from the vast Manase Report that Dube-Ncube had herself commissioned and [then tried to keep secret](#).

Or perhaps the Chinese team can share Sinopec insights into *expanding* oil transport through dense-packed residential sites? Sinopec seems to have no qualms about pollution, in a context, in many Chinese cities, where it is unsafe to breathe outside air-conditioned buildings.

Yet Sinopec is so irresponsible that in late August, the Chinese government [suspended the huge firm](#) from engaging in any new refining and chemical projects because it didn’t meet the government’s 2012 emissions targets.

The same crime – [ignoring air quality legislation](#) – is daily committed by our own leading energy corporation, Eskom, as well as by the South Durban oil refineries. Yet all continue moving forward with multi-billion rand expansions, including the doubling of capacity in the Durban-Joburg [oil pipeline](#) which was recently rerouted from white through black residential areas due, it would appear, to [Transnet planners’ racism](#).

So if Sinopec is having trouble expanding at home, no doubt filthy South Africa offers a welcoming business environment in which to invest. In March, during the BRICS summit, Sinopec announced its partnership in the R80 billion Mthombo project at Port Elizabeth’s Coega zone, which will by 2015 allegedly build [Africa’s single largest refinery](#).

These firms, urban officials and local government ministers will be pleased at the outcome of the Warsaw Conference of the Parties 19 to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change last weekend: ["let the planet burn!"](#) (Even if that means chunks of coastal cities like Durban and Qingdao sink.)

Durban’s emissions remain [higher](#) than even London’s and Beijing, at eight tonnes per person, with heavy industry and transport to blame. The failure of Singh’s bus service has a bit to do with that, but the main problem is the economic development strategy of our city and of the National Development Plan, based as it is on sports tourism, on petrochemical expansion, and on raising the port’s container traffic from 2.5 million to [20 million per year](#) (please, not all routed over [Field’s Hill](#), guys).

Just prior to SA hosting the COP17, the R250 billion plan for [South Durban](#) was conjured secretly by [Transnet](#) and [Sutcliffe](#), with public information flowing like water-drip torture. In 2012, it suddenly became the country’s second largest Strategic Infrastructure Project (after coal exports through Richards Bay).

But resistance may turn the tide. Last month, for example, Transnet’s Environmental Impact Assessment for a huge berth expansion in the existing harbor was rejected by national government. By way of disclosure, on several occasions I questioned the draft EIA’s climate-change denialism, alongside the [South Durban Community Environmental Alliance](#) (SDCEA) which firmly opposes the port-petrochem mega-project for health, social, ecological and economic reasons.

SDCEA’s new six-minute [YouTube video](#) threatens Transnet with a financial sanctions campaign if their and allied oil companies’ many attacks on local communities persist:

- In traditionally coloured Wentworth township south of the Bluff, for example, Treasure Beach is going to be destroyed by Shell and BP (Sapref), as the [Single Buoy Mooring](#) pipeline that brings in 80 percent of SA’s oil is being moved to the main beach traditionally used by South Durban’s black residents.

- The [Reunion farmers](#) on land next to the old airport were just given notice they will be evicted, so Transnet can dig out a fully-privatised R100 billion port, bringing many South Durban residents out to a [solidarity protest](#) last week.
- The area's other green lung, the Clairwood Racecourse, is now being redesigned as a trucking logistics site in spite of [unanimous opposition in neighbouring Merebank](#).
- The historic Indian suburb of [Clairwood itself remains under heavy pressure](#) from [trucking firms taking over and demolishing small houses and yards](#) for the parking and repairs, leaving ten of their residents murdered under their wheels since 2005.
- A bit further southwards, [Isipingo residents](#) who will lose their main beach are now also opposed to the Transnet expansion. They join concerned communities as far north and west as Queensburgh, Pinetown, Sarnia, the Bluff, Umbilo and Glenwood [fighting the new trucking routes](#).

Durban's other BRICS-twin cities presenting at the ICC this week have also had their hands full with protesters: tens of thousands of democrats who swarmed [St Petersburg](#) in late 2011; in [Mumbai](#), a constant cat-and-mouse struggle [by slum-dwellers](#) to survive the increasingly mean streets; and millions who hit the [Rio de Janeiro](#) streets in the middle of this year to fight public transport rate hikes and Sepp Blatter's Zurich mafia.

The worst lessons in crowd control, though, are homegrown: cops at [Cato Manor's police station](#) who murdered an estimated 50 suspects since 2005, and top ruling-party figures who [incited](#) an [Abahlali baseMjondolo](#) community leader's [assassination](#) at a Cato Crest mass meeting five months ago.

BRICS from above will probably keep such lessons fresh this week. Perhaps in future years, a "[brics-from-below](#)" side event can teach the cities' elites about genuine urban sustainability. **DM**

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