

Beyond zama zamas - an alternative future for the Gauteng mining belt

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There is an alternative future for the Gauteng mining belt that offers solutions beyond the current tensions between mine owners, local residents and zama zamas.



Source: Mchalakisi Ppalis © [123RF.com](#)

Instead, a revitalised region has the potential to support a vibrant economy and attract job-creating investments which do not depend primarily on extractive industries.

At many locations, mining companies are already working together with government, environmental groups and communities to repurpose operations and free up land for new activities, including housing.

A collaborative approach offers more workable options to spatial planners to address the current situation where the focus has too often been on singular elements such as the presence of survivalist miners – or zama zamas – and the reaction of local communities who have become thoroughly 'gatvol' of criminal activity.

The reality is that there are practical solutions for the future redevelopment of the vast metropolis stretching from Springs and Tsakane in the east, through Johannesburg and Soweto, to Klerksdorp and Merafong, the focal points of the current spate of community activism.

Solutions needed to complex challenges

Decision-makers have for many years been looking for solutions to the legacy of mining activities – closed shafts, burgeoning unemployment, widespread poverty and the toxic scars of acid mine draining, decanting, tailings, dust pollution and the hollowed-out tunnels left on the landscape.

The challenges are complex, but solutions can be found. How do you inject vibrancy and sustainable growth into areas that have been overly dependent on a single commodity? How do you create viable living spaces for communities and protect them from the ravages of environmental decay? How do you engender a revitalised mining belt which can breathe life in flagging local economies and generate new opportunities for prosperity?

In the west, where some of the world's deepest shafts, such as Mponeng, have been sunk, the industry has produced a solution to consolidate tailings into a single facility. This will not only make mining activities more efficient, but also solve some of the most pressing environmental issues and free up vast tracts of land for other development.

In the south of Johannesburg, the reintegration of former mining land into the rest of the city has been taking place for decades. The iconic FNB Stadium and Gold Reef City were constructed on mining land and residential suburbs such as Booyens, long considered to be a 'bad address,' now has the potential to be a hub for the growth of a future 'smart city'.

Other areas in the south can benefit from the existence of infrastructure such as roads, water and power networks and have huge potential for high-density housing, light industries, small-scale farming and agri-processing.



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Spatial Planning Policy for the Mining Belt

A Spatial Planning Policy for the Mining Belt, commissioned by the Office of the Gauteng Premier, sets out the broad framework of how this can be achieved.

It recognises the potential to create a flagship development that can contribute to the province's broader vision to create a fast-growing and dynamic Gauteng City Region. And it concludes that it is possible to unlock the intrinsic value of the mining belt through targeted spatial interventions and integrated development.

It calls for higher levels of collaboration between the mining sector, developers, spatial planners and regulatory authorities. It highlights the importance of access to quality data and intelligence regarding mining timeframes which will influence future regional infrastructure planning.

It emphasises the importance of improving the quality of speed of decision-making with regards to mining-related environmental issues and to streamline bureaucratic processes.

It expresses support for effective enforcement against illegal mining without constraining job-creating opportunities within smaller mining operations, and enterprises involved in rehabilitation and subsidiary industries.

Gauteng mining belt a connected system

From a spatial perspective, it is important to note that the Gauteng mining belt is a connected system rather than isolated fragments of a forgone era. Throughout the landscape, communities that have grown around mining activities share common characteristics, although immediate priorities might differ from place to place.

Solutions will, thus, require a whole-of-society approach in which government decision-makers work closely with spatial planners, researchers, mining houses, law enforcement and local communities to develop coherent policies.

The implementation of the policy will be dependent on a number of critical success factors including the need to elevate it as a strategic priority for the province. A lack of action will have its own consequences and, thus, sufficient resources must be allocated to this issue in terms of budgets, leadership support and political buy-in.

One initiative which might hold potential is the establishment of incentive development zones that can attract the attention of investors.



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Incorporated into future urban growth

There is a growing realisation that mining areas that were previously considered to be undevelopable have the potential to be rehabilitated and used for future urban growth. There are thousands of hectares of open land in the heart of Gauteng which have been underutilised for decades which can be released for development.

The fact that it is already served by Africa's most sophisticated road and logistics network will increase its ability to become a hub for the location of future industries and commercial enterprises.

Such initiatives will not only contribute to the broader economic development of Gauteng – as Southern Africa's regional core – but also redress decades of apartheid spatial planning and create a more equitable spatial form.

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