Published by the UFS
http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/trp
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How to cite: Moloi, N.Y. 2025. Advocacy planning in South Africa and its role in contributing to sustainable development/endeavours. *Town and Regional Planning*, no. 86, pp. 1-4.

Advocacy planning in South Africa and its role in contributing to sustainable development/endeavours

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Commentary
https://doi.org/10.38140/trp.v86i.8700

1. INTRODUCTION

South Africa's transition to democracy represents a significant shift in the political and social landscape, marked by a concerted effort toward reconciliation and reconstruction. The country's diverse population, often called the 'Rainbow Nation', embarked on a journey of reconciliation and transformation, aiming to redress past inequalities and promote inclusive development. This commentary examines the role of Advocacy Planning within the context of South Africa's Planning Systems, assessing its impact on achieving the National Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and encouraging sustainable development in both urban and rural settings (DDP, 2023).

The transition to democracy in South Africa aimed to address historical obstacles and traditional practices that hindered the realisation of a truly democratic society, seeking to establish new institutional arrangements that would facilitate the selection, oversight, and promoting participation and consultation in governance (Fikeni, 2012; Munck & Leff, 1997; Nkondo, 2016; Wieczorek, 2012; Wittenberg & Pirouz, 2013).

To fully understand advocacy planning in South Africa, this commentary briefly examines the literature on legislation and policies that impacted the town and regional planning discipline in South Africa, pre- and post-democratic South Africa, and investigates what the discipline seeks to achieve in terms of living environments for both urban and rural communities. It explains how, through advocacy planning, increased participation in policy formulation can be achieved and influence the planning systems. The commentary focuses on the role of planners in advocating for planning in their communities, living environments, and working environments. It emphasises that the understanding of advocacy planning from a South African context and to a certain extent practising it, empowers communities to understand the benefits of planning and policy influence in living environments.

2. THE HISTORY OF TOWN AND REGIONAL PLANNING IN SOUTH AFRICA THROUGH LEGISLATION POLICY FRAMEWORKS

According to Oakfield (2021), the history of town planning in South Africa was somewhat influenced by the British planning system as a result of colonialism. Oakfield (2021) further states that, unlike the British system, in South Africa, the main purpose of town planning was not so much a matter of social welfare but the control of land use with hardly any concern for the poor and disadvantaged people of the country.

Between 1948 and 1990, town planning policy and legal mechanisms were put in place to enforce spatial control, and legal mechanisms were implemented to enforce racially based spatial segregation in urban areas. These included the Population Registration Act 30 of 1950; the Group Areas Act 41 of 1950; the Black Education Act 47 of 1953; the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act 49 of 1953; the Group Areas Act 36 of 1966; the Black Local Authorities Act 102 of 1982; the Community Development Act 3 of 1966, and the Black Communities Development Act 4 of 1984 (Kaywood, 2021).

These statutes all contributed, in one way or another, to constructing the legacy of spatial injustice in South Africa's contemporary towns and cities, by either demarcating or controlling Black urban settlement. In essence, the state used this legal framework to regulate the use and development of land designated for Black occupiers and to consolidate apartheid-based principles applicable to land, planning, and urban settlement. In terms of land-use management, for instance, legislative and policy

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measures were key to eroding the remaining land rights such as labour tenancy that Black persons had in sectors reserved for White persons.

The advent of democracy in South Africa marked a significant shift in urban planning strategies. Initially, post-apartheid planning was shaped by the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which aimed to establish a more equitable society through reconstruction and development. However, economic pressures soon led to the adoption of the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) framework, a macro-economic policy focused on economic growth. A key distinction of this policy shift was its lack of attention to addressing spatial inequalities in urban areas and promoting rural development. Drewers and Van Aswegen (2013) note that the RDP, as a national programme, lacked a physical spatial plan to guide development decisions. In contrast, the Development Facilitation Act (DFA) and the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) emerged as post-apartheid legislative frameworks specifically designed to address these spatial planning needs. Furthermore, a strategic long-term plan, the National Spatial Development Framework (NSDF), was adopted for implementation in March 2022 with the enactment of the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) of 2013 further advancing South Africa's spatial planning agenda.

3. THE CONCEPT OF ADVOCACY PLANNING

Advocacy planning emerged in the 1960s as a transformative approach to urban planning, championed by Paul Davidoff, an activist lawyer and planner, who recognised the imbalance in representation within the urban planning process, where low-income and minority groups often lacked the influence of their wealthier counterparts (Larsen & Frandsen, 2022). Davidoff (1965) argued that urban planning should not be viewed as a neutral, technical exercise but rather as a democratic process that actively engages diverse community interests, particularly those of underrepresented groups (Davidoff, 1965).

Davidoff's vision was for planners to serve as advocates, working alongside disadvantaged communities to create plans that address their specific social and economic needs. This approach was not only about providing technical assistance, but also about empowering people to participate fully and cooperatively in the planning of their communities.

While Davidoff's framework was initially focused on marginalised communities, it is equally important to assert that all communities, including those in South Africa, have a right to advocacy planning. Planning, through advocacy, becomes a conduit for translating concepts into accessible understandings and a vehicle for disseminating crucial information. Advocacy is a powerful tool for mobilising communities, influencing policy, and addressing the root causes of societal issues. In South Africa, if advocacy planning is fully accepted, it has the potential to empower all communities with knowledge and the agency to shape their urban or rural living environments.

3.1 Planning advocacy in South Africa

Advocacy in the South African context is a human rights-based, people-driven activity aimed at empowering and informing citizens to realise their rights effectively. Advocacy provides communities with the literacy, knowledge, and skills necessary to engage in various aspects of life, from understanding governance processes to seizing new opportunities. It instils awareness, enabling individuals and groups to safeguard their rights and avoid exploitation (SA Human Rights Commission, 2020).

Planning advocacy in South Africa is a multi-faceted endeavour that involves civil society organisations, governmental bodies, and legal frameworks. These entities collaborate to influence policy development, promote public participation, and ensure the implementation of policies that address citizens' needs. A notable observation is that the vast majority of civil society organisations have focused on urban planning-related advocacy, highlighting a specific emphasis within the advocacy landscape.

3.2 The implications of limited advocacy planning for rural communities

South Africa's rural landscape is diverse, encompassing various forms of rural living, from large-scale mechanised agriculture to closely-knit, subsistence-based communities. This diversity highlights the need for nuanced rural development policies that address the distinct realities of these communities (Mubangizi, 2023). The primary challenge in rural planning is providing services across geographically dispersed and topographically challenging terrains while managing financial limitations and a limited tax base. This complexity necessitates innovative strategies, including alternative revenue sources, tailored service models, and collaborative governance to drive transformational leadership.

Limited advocacy planning in rural areas has far-reaching implications, particularly in terms of access to essential services, infrastructure, and development opportunities. Overcoming these challenges requires targeted efforts to address the unique needs of rural communities and advocate for policy changes that can enhance quality of life.

3.3 Empowering communities through planning advocacy in the context of sustainable development goals

Planners play a critical role in implementing policies and advocating for the creation of living environments that benefit both urban and rural communities. The importance of advocacy planning, especially at the grassroots level, cannot be overstated. Friedmann (2008) asserts

that planners are the champions of public interest, particularly in democratic states where their role is to advocate for the majority of the population. In South Africa, where the government's mantra is "leave no one behind", planning systems must be inclusive and adaptable to the diverse realities of both urban and rural communities (Watson, 2009).

The Integrated Development Plan (IDP) is a key strategic planning tool in South Africa at the local government level, embodying the post-democratic government's people-centred approach (Puren, Goossen & Jordaan, 2013). The IDP, along with the SDF, demonstrates how advocacy planning can be integrated into existing planning systems. These frameworks enable urban communities to better understand land-use management and its implications for their well-being. By supporting community involvement in forward-planning policies, residents are empowered to shape policies that affect their environments, particularly with regard to environmental challenges such as climate change.

Advocacy planning in rural areas is crucial for advancing sustainable development. Participatory planning empowers rural communities, by enhancing their ability to engage with decision-making processes and form meaningful connections with broader governance structures. While challenges persist, including limited resources and infrastructural deficits, addressing these issues through effective advocacy planning can significantly improve the quality of life in rural areas.

4. THE ROLE OF THE PLANNING PROFESSION IN PLANNING ADVOCACY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The role of the planning profession in South Africa extends beyond the technical aspects of land-use management and urban development; it is deeply rooted in advocacy for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable environments. As professionals in this field, planners are responsible not only for executing policies, but also for actively engaging with communities to ensure that planning processes reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of the people.

Planning advocacy, as conceptualised by Paul Davidoff in the 1960s, calls for planners to serve as advocates for underrepresented communities, ensuring that their voices are included in the decision-making processes that shape their environments. Davidoff's vision emphasises that urban planning should be a democratic process, not a neutral or purely technical exercise, and that it must include diverse community interests, particularly those of marginalised groups (Davidoff, 1965). Advocacy planning in the South African context goes beyond simply representing marginalised communities. It is about encouraging an inclusive planning system that ensures that both urban and rural communities have a right to be part of the planning discourse. This empowerment helps communities understand the impact of planning decisions on their living environments and equips them to challenge decisions that may not serve their best interests.

In addition to advocating for marginalised groups, planners in South Africa play a critical role in developing and maintaining healthy living environments. Health is shaped not only by biological factors, but also by social and environmental determinants (Mourits, Van der Velden & Molleman, 2021). Un-Habitat (2025) argue that urban environments designed with health in mind can promote longevity and mental well-being, by incorporating features such as green spaces, quality housing, and reduced pollution. These principles are equally applicable to rural areas, where thoughtful planning can create environments that support healthy communities and mitigate the adverse effects of poor living conditions (Rautio, *et al.*, 2013). In this context, planning advocacy becomes a crucial tool for creating environments that promote positive mental health and overall well-being. Planners are, therefore, called upon to advocate for policies that address these environmental determinants of health, ensuring that all communities, whether urban or rural, benefit from healthy living conditions.

Advocacy planning also involves addressing the unique challenges faced by rural communities. South Africa's rural areas are diverse and require a tailored approach that recognises their unique characteristics and needs (Mubangizi, 2023). In many cases, rural communities face significant challenges related to service delivery, infrastructure, and economic opportunities. Advocacy planning in rural areas involves not only addressing these challenges, but also ensuring that rural communities are empowered to actively engage in the planning process and influence decisions that affect their lives. The role of planners in this context is to facilitate the inclusion of rural voices in the planning process, ensuring that policies and strategies are developed to meet their specific needs. By empowering rural communities through advocacy, planners can help overcome some of the persistent barriers such as limited access to resources, services, and opportunities to development. The Integrated Development Plan (IDP), for example, is a strategic planning tool used at the local government level in South Africa to promote people-centred development (Gueli, Van Huyssteen & Liebenberg, 2007). The IDP is a critical instrument for advancing planning advocacy, by allowing communities, particularly rural ones, to participate in shaping development policies that directly affect them (Puren *et al.*, 2012).

Planning advocacy in South Africa is not limited to urban or rural settings; it is an integral part of encouraging inclusive, sustainable development across the entire country. As Friedmann (2008) notes, planners are the champions of public interest, advocating for policies that prioritise the well-being of the majority. This responsibility is central to the planning profession, especially in a democratic state where inclusivity and equity are fundamental principles.

5. CONCLUSION

Advocacy plays a crucial role in empowering communities, advancing social justice, and influencing policy development, both in South Africa and globally. Town planners in South Africa, in particular, have a pivotal role in advocacy planning, especially when it comes to encouraging healthy, sustainable living environments. Their responsibilities extend beyond technical expertise to include active engagement with marginalised communities, ensuring that their voices are heard and incorporated into development processes. By embracing advocacy planning, planners can help empower both urban and rural communities, enabling them to shape their environments and access essential resources for improved quality of life.

In rural areas, effective town planning is essential to address the unique challenges these communities face. Advocacy planning can harness strategies such as smart growth, support from advocacy organisations, and stronger connections between rural and urban areas to promote economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Policymakers and local leaders must recognise the interdependence of rural and urban areas and create policies that benefit both, supporting a more integrated and equitable development landscape.

Ultimately, advocacy planning is not only about promoting inclusive development, but also about risk management. By reframing environmental challenges and planning concepts in accessible ways, advocacy planners can turn potential risks into opportunities, ensuring that policy development is both comprehensive and responsive to community needs. Through thoughtful advocacy and planning, town planners can bridge the gap between policy and practice, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

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