The Durban Functional Region (DFR) has often been regarded as a metropolitan region displaying elements which lend it a distinct or specific character. The interwoven nature of the geographic sub-regions of the former province of Natal and the former homeland of KwaZulu, certain physical attributes, notions of a distinct political culture, and a diversified economy are often invoked by local actors as distinct in order that ‘special claims’ can be made on behalf of the region.

At present this metropolitan complex is at a crossroads: the region is experiencing a development crisis comprising, inter alia, rapid population growth, declining economic growth, high unemployment, an inadequate supply of services and shelter, and institutional complexity and legitimacy problems that render public sector responses exceedingly difficult. Endemic violence between the African National Congress (ANC) and regionally-based Inkatha over the past decade has added a dimension to these problems that makes efforts to resolve them an extremely challenging undertaking. That some of these problems reflect the manner in which the Durban area has been affected by the pressures, both competitive and otherwise, of patterns of global economic restructuring is not in doubt. Neither is it disputable that certain of them have arisen because of policies implemented, and the manner in which political developments have unfolded, at the level of the nation-state. However, it has been suggested that some of these problems have clearly derived from the proclaimed specificity and particularity (in spatial, political, and economic terms) of the DFR. It is held, therefore, that this makes it imperative that attempts to redress them take cognisance of this dynamic.

Against notions of the distinctiveness of the DFR alluded to above, this paper examines features of this metropolitan region in an attempt to shed light on suggestions that the locality is a unique one. The paper begins with a discussion of Durban in historical perspective. The next section, essentially the core of the paper, describes in contemporary terms the key local dimensions of this metropolitan region, identified as the spatial, the
economic, and the political. Insights are offered on aspects of these dimensions that give this metropolitan region a decidedly local feel. Some concluding comments synthesising the findings are then provided.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Durban Functional Region refers to the broader Durban Metropolitan Area (DMA). It is an area comprising Durban and a complicated array of sixty-six local authorities and other such bodies. Falling within the newly demarcated province of KwaZulu-Natal (formerly the separate entities of the Natal Provincial Administration [NPA] and KwaZulu Government), and defined in a recognition of the functional interdependence (in spatial and economic terms) of the various politico-administrative components of Natal/KwaZulu's metropolitan areas (Figure 1), the DFR became a white settlement in 1824, more than three centuries after the bay had been named Natal by Vasco da Gama. At this time the African population was sparse, but their numbers grew as a result of upheavals associated with the growth of the Zulu kingdom. The settlement was named Durban in 1835 and the arrival of about five thousand British immigrants to Natal between 1849 and 1852 (after the province had been annexed by Britain in 1845) prompted some economic development and experimentation with different crops, including sugar, and enterprises such as coal mining (Durban Housing Survey 1952).

Topographically, Durban is fairly uneven and this, together with an initial lack of capital and a poor communications network, hampered the development of the local economy in the late 1800s. However, development soon crystallised around Durban’s port city status and the fact that it represented the country’s main depot for transit trade to the interior. Harbour traffic and related activities increased during periods of war in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often characterising the city as a boom-and-bust town. The local state played a critical role in developing the tourist potential of the city which, by the turn of the century, resulted in Durban being regarded as the premier holiday resort in southern Africa. During this period, the Council retained control of the beach and its surrounding environs, encouraged the development of flats and hotels in the area, continued to develop the beaches, and increasingly provided recreation amenities (Barnes 1943).

The Indian community in Natal had their origins in the indentured labour system which was introduced in the province between 1860 and 1911. Their numbers grew and they became increasingly active in Durban’s sugar, wattle, and tea plantations, as well as in the city’s hotel and burgeoning municipal employee trade (Kuper et al. 1958). They numbered 12 000 in a city where, by 1900, total population had grown to 39 000. By 1910, the sugar industry was becoming vital to Durban’s growth and was stimulated