

KATE TISSINGTON and LAUREN ROYSTON: Urban reform

Making up lost ground in SA's informal settlements

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IN THE midst of current debates about access to information and media freedom there are important political developments happening around another vital part of South African society. And no, it's not the National Health Insurance or public sector wages (although these are critically important).

We're talking about the upgrading of informal settlements.

According to Statistics SA, as of mid- 2009, 13,4% of households in SA lived in informal dwellings. There are more than 2700 informal settlements consisting of about 1,2-million households.

In spite of a progressive upgrading of informal settlements programme being in the National Housing Code since 2004, informal settlements have been characterised as sites of illegality, and shack dwellers treated in a heavy-handed and undignified manner. In recent months Hangberg residents, and members of the shack-dweller movements, Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Landless People's Movement, have experienced this treatment in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg.

A far cry from the "eradication" discourse that has characterised informal settlement approaches in the past, the upgrading of informal settlements programme highlights the importance of assisting people with tenure security and access to services on site, and states that relocation is a last resort — to be undertaken only in exceptional circumstances on a voluntary, co-operative basis.

It's about land and services first, houses later. This is the message the National Upgrading Support Programme — a partnership between the Department of Human Settlements and the Cities Alliance, set up to support the implementation of the informal settlement upgrading programme — is seeking to reinforce through, among others, the creation of a "community of practice", a forum of public-sector practitioners in which lessons can be learnt and capacity-building can take place.

It is at the municipal level that pressures are most acutely felt, and where the planning for development takes place, including identifying informal settlements for upgrade and setting targets for delivery using municipal planning instruments — integrated development plans and their associated "housing chapters", or housing-sector plans.

The accreditation of municipalities with the housing function is under consideration for the metropolitan municipalities and some of the secondary cities. Depending on the accreditation level, municipal autonomy over the application of the provincial housing subsidy is set to increase. This should give local planning in the housing sector more teeth and reinforce the municipal priorities.

As a result, however, communities living in informal settlements need to be "on the list" or "in the integrated development plan " if they are to have any hope of upgrade in the foreseeable future (or at least the five-year term of office, which is the planning horizon of municipal plans). If they are not, then there are no other options, as they are excluded from the "normal" residential property market. Unless people register on the housing demand database (a new name for a housing waiting list) and wait patiently for houses to be built or their name to come up, they are identified as queue-jumpers at best, and very often as illegal. Clear, open and well- understood rules for inclusion on these lists are essential, as need far exceeds what the government is able to supply.

Reality, as always, is complex. Implementation of the upgrading of informal settlements programme has been slow or poorly conceived, and plagued by various obstacles, not least the lack of capacity at the local level as well as political will to do incremental settlement upgrading for

poor people on what is often very well-located land. For some officials and politicians, this smacks too much of historical "site and service" schemes and does not have the immediate political clout that cutting ribbons on houses does.

Further, identifying informal settlements for upgrade is often the subject of much less obvious processes than the rational allocation of resources and participative planning methodologies envisaged in policy. This is a particular risk in a local government election year, when delivery promises are routinely made, sometimes to specific communities.

The question of access and inclusion — of being on the list, or in the integrated development plan — is not new but it was recently reinforced at a workshop in Johannesburg organised by LANDfirst, a network of civil society organisations advocating a pro-poor approach to land access that emphasises incremental settlement, together with the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of SA. This event brought together community-based organisations, social movements, nongovernmental organisations, think-tanks, lawyers and academics working on informal settlement upgrading and managed land settlement, as well as the Department of Human Settlements. The issue of informal settlement identification — of being on the list — was given a new emphasis because of a shift in our development context.

Earlier in the year we heard President Jacob Zuma and ministers Tokyo Sexwale and Edna Molewa talk about the government's plan to provide tenure and services to 400000 households in well-located informal settlements by 2014. This is central to Zuma's signature outcomes-based approach to service delivery.

Recently, the delivery agreement for outcome eight — sustainable human settlements and improved quality of household life — signed between Zuma and Sexwale has entrenched this objective. The next step is for Sexwale to sign agreements with provincial MECs, and for the identification of informal settlements for upgrading to be finalised.

As promising as the renewed emphasis on on-site upgrading appears to be, for those at the workshop a priority question was about how the process for the identification of informal settlements for upgrading is taking place. Transparency, flexibility and the involvement of community organisations, social movements and other civil society groups should be critical to this process, as with the upgrading process in general. The workshop identified the need to create a national platform for discussion on informal settlement and land-access issues, as well as the need to bridge the gap between community needs and technocratic "delivery". A call for dialogue between all parties and enhanced collaboration between different role-players on the ground, was articulated.

We need to identify and learn from a range of "good practice" happening throughout the country, in order to replicate these at scale. The political space being created by current developments is welcomed by many who have consistently campaigned in various ways for the implementation of the upgrading programme over the years.

The creation of equitable towns and cities that provide dignity and quality of life for all inhabitants is not a pipe dream.

However, to become a reality, it requires the collective buy-in and energy of local government officials, communities, social movements, planners, engineers and nongovernmental organisations.

The right kind of policy instrument is in place. The political space appears to have opened. A programme of support has been established. The time is now, and we cannot afford to make the same mistakes again.

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