

Exploring Themb'elihle protests

Themba Sepotokele & Nthatise Modingoane

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As the dust settles over the chaos that engulfed the Themb'elihle informal settlement near Lenasia, south of Johannesburg, it is important to take a closer look at facts that have either been ignored or neglected by the media.

It has become a practice that whenever there are so-called service delivery protests, the media descends on the trouble spots before law enforcement agencies arrive. This is because those behind such violent protests use the media as a platform to drive their point home.

Radio, television channels and various newspaper houses assign their journalists to such hot spots to capture the events as they unfold, with photo-journalists clamouring for potential award winning shots.

The protest that took place in Themb'elihle is the fourth such event in the settlement this year. However, it was one of the most violent demonstrations in the area in the past decade. The first protest took place during Mathole Motshega's term as premier of Gauteng when a few hundred residents marched to the premier's office in Simmonds Street.

One of the authors of this article was previously a journalist and had covered the story on Themb'elihle, with information from a geologist who confirmed that the land which had been illegally occupied was dolomitic. This message had been disseminated to the people.

Since then, it has been widely reported that the area is not suitable for habitation as it could sink any time between now and the next 50 years, as geotechnical studies found. Government would be held liable and responsible if disaster were to befall any of the people residing there.

The Gauteng provincial government, and the city of Johannesburg, have on countless occasions engaged with people who have invaded land there through various structures, informing and educating them about the dangers of the area.

The government first moved people to vacant land in Vlakfontein Extension 1, 2 and 3 in 2002 where about 1500 families were resettled. Funding was later secured for suitable land to build more houses. Initially, 4600 shacks were erected. Of those, 1500 were relocated to Vlakfontein.

The government has also identified a suitable piece of land near Lenasia – a stone's throw away from Themb'elihle and started a new housing development project known as Lehae, where the remaining 3100 families were relocated. Relocations to Lehae Phase 1 started in 2006 to which 613 people from Themb'elihle were relocated.

In December 2010 and January 2011, an audit of Themb'elihle was conducted and the findings were that there were 6775 shacks in the remaining three blocks of Themb'elihle, namely Blocks D, F and N. Of these, 3597 are main shacks and 3178 are subtenants. This means that despite moving people into houses, we faced the challenge of more illegal structures sprouting up due to pressures of migration and urbanisation.

Since 2002 when the first relocations were undertaken to date, Gauteng has surpassed

KwaZulu-Natal as the most populous province in South Africa – leading to housing challenges such as those seen in Themb’elihle.

The challenge of the proliferation of informal settlements is not a unique characteristic of Gauteng. The fact is that the province has seen a huge influx of people from other provinces and from outside the country. Despite enforcing the land strategy to discourage people from illegally invading land, people still find ways of circumventing the process, because they know that by erecting shacks in Themb’elihle they stand a chance of being allocated houses.

Phase 2 is underway and will accommodate some of the people of Themb’elihle. The city of Johannesburg has also identified land for Phase 3 to accommodate the remaining people.

To date, bulk infrastructure, such as water and sewer, have been installed at about 1000 stands in Lehae. During this financial year, a process of building “top structure” will commence. The city is conducting a feasibility study on two portions of land – one on the north of Lehae and a farm called Misgund, next to Lehae. It is estimated that both these sites would yield stands for about 8000 people.

The government will continue to educate members of the community about the dangers of illegal connections in the area, land invasions and, most importantly, violent protests.

Residents of Themb’elihle should bear in mind that no amounts of protests are going to change the fact that the land they are living on is dangerously unsuitable for human settlement.

We hope that the law enforcement agencies will deal harshly with those masquerading as leaders whose sole aim is to wreak havoc and disrupt services to our communities.

We hope that while covering the violent protests under the guise of lack of service delivery, where school children and the aged are being used as victims and end up being caught in the cross fire, the media would see the motives of the instigators rather than get excited about billowing smoke and stone-throwing escapades.

Themba Sepotokele works for the Gauteng department of local government and housing while Nthatise Modingoane works for the city of Johannesburg.