

# Bringing new homes to the townships

Visitors to South Africa are often shocked when they drive out of the upmarket areas of major cities and suddenly find themselves passing vast expanses of slums. These informal settlements are the legacy of apartheid, but now that that regime has been abolished, why are the shacks still standing? **Kirsty Tuxford** reports from Cape Town



Military Heights near Cape Town

Walking through the shanty town of Khayelitsha on the edge of Cape Town is a sobering experience. In stark contrast to the fashionable new apartments and hotels overlooking the city's waterfront, the water here consists of dirty puddles in which shoeless children are playing. Kilometre upon kilometre of squat, dilapidated makeshift 'homes' have been banged together from scrap sheets of corrugated metal and planks of old rotting wood. No one has their own bathroom, and rubbish is piled up on street corners.

An outsider would assume that poverty has driven people to live in these slums yet one is struck by the contrast between the new cars of the slum

residents which shine in the afternoon sunlight next to their dingy homes.

How can people in these pitiable shacks afford such vehicles?

"People must not think that people are in informal settlements just because they need a house – it's not like that at all and this perception that if you live in an informal settlement it's just because you are poor – again, that's a fallacy," says Bonginkosi Madikizela, the Minister for Informal Settlements in the Western Cape. "An informal settlement does not actually indicate a housing need. Not at all. People reside in informal settlements for a variety of reasons – some had a house and they sold it and they went to live there; some go there because you don't have to pay – you just build your

shack; some go there because they're involved in criminal activities."

There are, of course, genuinely poor people living in these shanty towns with no choice at the moment but to put up with the appalling conditions, and a visit to other settlements – including Military Heights in the Lavender Hill area where there are no cars and not even paved roads – highlights the dire state in which some people are living.

"I had a house before," says Berry, a 35-year-old mother of six who lives in a shack in Military Heights. "I lived with my family, but I heard that if I came here I could get a house of my own so I came, but it wasn't true. I've been here seven years now, but I can't leave." In Berry's case, she and her husband are heavily involved in

community initiatives and education for the children – one reason they cannot leave.

## Limitations on new housing

The question of which shack residents can afford what is difficult to answer, as the informality of their existence and for many, their cash-in-hand income, makes the gathering of statistics regarding the number of residents and their economic status a complicated matter.

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*Bonginkosi Madikizela,  
Minister of Informal Settlements,  
Western Cape*

To understand why people are still living in shacks also relates to supply and demand. The central government's post-apartheid constitution promised to provide adequate housing for all, and government-subsidized RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) houses are being built at a rapid rate and given for free to the most needy at a cost of ZAR 100,000 (US\$12,300) per unit to the local government.

But in the Western Cape alone the current housing backlog is for around 500,000 people according to Madikizela. What's more, the local government has a grant of ZAR 2 billion, which will allow for the building of only 16,000 units and 16,000 serviced sites (sites connected to water and electricity). "If we continue with our current approach of building, it will take 28 years to clear the backlog," says Madikizela. "And that's not including the migration to the province, which keeps increasing the demand."

There are several grumbles from some waiting for RDP houses: they won't be able to afford the bills once they move into the house, or the houses are too small or their

family life will be too upset by a move. "We were offered houses but they were too far away from our children's schools," says one resident in Military Heights township. "We would have to relocate and start all over again," she complains.

The houses go to poor people without jobs who cannot afford their own home. "This situation doesn't bode well for the government, it isn't sustainable," says Madikizela. "You cannot go around the cities, flooding them with free houses for people who cannot afford to pay because that will affect the revenue collection of the municipalities and the ability of the municipalities to provide free services to the people who really deserve to be subsidized."

According to the minister, the biggest problem with the RDP houses is that they do not encourage people to seek employment. "If the government is going to give you a grant, send your children to school for free, make healthcare services available to you for free and if the government is going to give you a house for free, then it's a complete disaster, because it really doesn't encourage people to go out there and look for work," says Madikizela. "The taxpayers are angry because what this means is that the few people that are working have to pay more taxes in order for the government to subsidize this luxury. It is not sustainable."

## Legislation encouraging informal settlements

Despite the effort towards building the promised houses, there are aspects of South African law which also exacerbate the problem by contributing to the growth of informal settlements.

The Prevention of Illegal Eviction Act (PIE) states that people cannot be moved from land they have occupied (once 48 hours have passed) until the authorities have found them alternative accommodation – thus encouraging the illegal occupation of land by those who are either desperate for a proper house, or less inclined to work to earn money to pay rent because free houses are on offer.

"That Act might have been established with good intentions," says Madikizela, "But we are getting people

invading land all over and demanding free services and free houses. You can earmark land for development, with the intention that you prioritize people who've been on the waiting list the longest, but then, if it is occupied by people who arrived there yesterday, there is a problem because you can't evict them. As a result, the people who've been on the waiting list the longest end up being compromised



Berry (right), a resident of Military Heights, says she came there because she was promised her own house

and unfairly treated because the Act says that you must move these people [the invaders] to an alternative accommodation and that ends up stalling the development for years at the expense of the people who should be prioritized."

"I would agree that the current policy is not addressing the problems of poverty, as evidenced by the lengthening waiting list of houses," says Professor Anton Harber, Director of Journalism and Media Studies at Wits University and author of the book, *Diepsloot* – a book about life in a Johannesburg slum. Harber believes an approach that facilitates more people building their own houses or contributing to their own housing is ▶

needed, rather than the expectation for housing to be handed down.

The People's Housing Process (PHP) is a process whereby beneficiaries are actively involved in the decision making over the housing process and product, and, must make a contribution towards the building of their own homes. "Instead of employing a constructor, which would cost a lot more, we are saying that skilled people from the community must be brought on board: bricklayers, plumbers, carpenters etc," explains Madikizela. The idea is to give residents a sense of pride and ownership of their homes and a desire to improve the community in which they live. Initiatives include involving women and

"None of the other issues such as housing and health will be solved until there are improvements in these fundamentals," says Harber.

#### Services over houses

One such fundamental is access to services. Minister Madikizela has committed to making sure that there are no more informal settlements without basic services in the Western Cape by the end of 2014. The focus isn't solely on building houses, but on also providing decent living conditions for those who are waiting. There are about 134,000 shacks in Cape Town, and 51,000 in the rest of the province – with an average of five inhabitants per shack. Thousands of people are waiting

#### Private sector assistance for housing

• The Southern African Housing Foundation (SAHF) is a private sector initiative aimed at bringing housing professionals together to support the development of sustainable communities. The SAHF aims to improve the quality of life of local communities through training initiatives, job creation programmes, harnessing of indigenous technologies, facilitation of the manufacture of building materials and construction programmes, and the promotion of community-based projects relating to self-help, empowerment, capacity building and skills development.

• Old Mutual Investment Group South Africa (Omigsa) Alternative Investments recently raised ZAR9 billion for its housing impact fund for South Africa. The money goes to help those earning less than ZAR15,000 per month. Affordable homes for sale and rent are to be built and housing loans made available.

professional workers cannot get access to government housing subsidies or mortgage loans and are left unable to afford housing even though they have an income. These are workers such as nurses, teachers and policemen who typically earn between ZAR 3,500 and ZAR 12,000 per month and therefore do not qualify for a government subsidy, but neither do they qualify for a housing loan from the banks. Some private sector funding is available to assist (see box) but the position of such workers is often overlooked. "They also need to be able to own houses, yet currently it's very difficult for them to do this," admits Madikizela.

Building houses for people living in informal settlements won't eradicate the shacks. But using funds to provide access to water, electricity, refuse collection and sanitation for those that are awaiting new homes at least reaffirms their dignity and can encourage people to look for work and seek education.

"I cannot allow our current approach of measuring our success by the number of houses we build to continue while people are waiting in such difficult conditions," says the Human Settlements Minister. "This is why I am shifting the Department's focus to first make sure that the basic services are provided, so at least people can live in dignity and health while they wait." ■



Residents of informal settlements complain that they cannot afford the bills that come with new housing

youth in the construction of houses and for the financial year 2010/2011, 3,500 housing units were delivered as a result of the combined efforts of government and communities.

"We need to give people security of tenure, even in informal settlements, and allow them to monetize and trade in their property and houses as assets," argues Harber. He also recognizes the scale and range of demands on state resources, and suggests that education and job creation should be prioritized.

for housing in terrible conditions, without access to the basic services of clean water, sanitation and refuse removal.

"It costs ZAR 100,000 to build one house but it will cost us only ZAR 14,000 to make sure that each household has access to water, electricity and sanitation," says Madikizela. "If we use this money wisely we will be able to cover everybody and the majority will have access to basic services."

Another issue that local government has promised to look into is that some

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