

# Housing issues south africa



Allison GoebelA Environmental Studies and Women's Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Ont. , Canada K7L 3N6 Abstract Low-cost housing provision has been a major focus of government in post-apartheid urban South Africa. While successes can be noted, there is growing concern regarding the social and environmental sustainability of housing programs and the impacts upon both the surrounding environment and human health.

Utilizing key informant interviews, survey research, Census data and documentary review, this essay identifies the major impediments to a sustainable low-cost housing provision in urban South Africa. The essay also points to hopeful signs in new policy directions, particularly attention to health issues and informal settlement upgrade programs. However, the major obstacles to a sustainable low-cost housing process, including macro-economic conditions, enduring historical legacies of race and class, the scale and rapidity of urban growth and institutional challenges show little indication of abating. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd.

All rights reserved. Keywords: Low-cost housing; South Africa; Sustainable habitats; Health; Urban environments; Environmental justice Introduction: the urban housing crisis in South Africa Low-cost housing provision has been a major focus of government in post-apartheid urban South Africa, as the government attempts to address historical race-based inequalities, poor municipal service provision and contemporary rapid urbanization. The White Paper on Housing of 1994 prioritized the needs of the poor, encouraged community participation and the involvement of the private sector, and committed to deliver 1 million houses in five years (Jenkins, 1999, p. 433). The African National Congress (ANC) Reconstruction and Development

Program document (RDP) of 1994, and the Constitution (1996, p. 12) also commit to providing housing for the poor (Republic of South Africa, 1994, 1996). Since 1994, the low-cost housing program has mostly involved building serviced townships on urban peripheries, which in itself presents a myriad of environmental, social and political concerns. By early 2006, 1, 877, 958 housing units have been constructed or are under construction according to the Department of Housing. However, many problems with the process have become clear as the process has unfolded. ATel. : +1 613 533 6000x77660; fax: +1 613 533 6090. 1 E-mail address: [email protected] ca. <http://www.housing.gov.za/> (accessed 2. 03. 06)

However, government also responded to the Habitat Agenda with the Urban Development Framework (1997), which critics on the left say supports market-led urban development and reform (Huchzermeyer, 2001, p. 320). Informal settlements, or shack dwellings have caused much government debate, with forced removal policies being displaced by other, less draconian models. The new Department of Housing plan Breaking New Ground (released in September 2004) demonstrates some of this new openness to diversity in low-cost housing approaches (DOH, 2004a).

Furthermore, a “ Housing Indaba” held in September 2005, bringing together stakeholders in low-cost housing from government, the private sector, civil society and academia, identified as the first of their “ Targets”: “ The removal or improvement of all slums in South Africa as rapidly as possible, but not later than 2014. ”<sup>2</sup> New government positions also include attention to the health of the urban environment and the concept of sustainable habitats. While sustainability is a broad term interpreted in many

ways, this paper adopts the UN approach, which defines “ sustainable development” as human development that promotes human well being in the present without compromising ecological integrity over the long term (see WCED, 1987). A 2004 report by the South African Department of Housing submitted to UN-Habitat as part of its commitment to the “ Sustainable Habitats Agenda”, pledged commitment to attaining human settlements that are environmentally and socially sustainable, whilst still meeting the goals of economic growth (DOH, 2004b).

These policy developments provide some hope for positive change, although still not fully responding or addressing the dualistic challenge of providing services, in this case housing and amenities whilst ensuring a safe and sustainable environment. However, analysis of South Africa’s urban settlements reveal a past, present and projected future of unsustainability (Plessis & Landman, 2002). Indeed, “ South African cities rank among the most inefficient and wasteful urban environments in the world” (Plessis & Landman, 2002, p. 5). This paper identifies the major impediments to a sustainable habitats agenda in terms of low-cost housing in urban South Africa, and identifies some of the possible ways forward. The study looks at both the national picture and a case study of Pietermaritzburg (PMB, known formally, now as Msunduzi Municipality). <http://www.housing.gov.za/Content/Social%20Housing%20Contract/Social%20Contract.pdf> ARTICLE IN PRESS A. Goebel / Habitat International 31 (2007) 291–302 293

**Methodology** This paper draws on statistical and other documentary evidence such as the South African Census data from 1996 and 2001, government policy documents, and the growing housing research literature <https://assignbuster.com/housing-issues-south-africa/>

on South Africa. 3 The paper also draws on a case study of Msunduzi Municipality (formerly PMB), using empirical field-based research including key informant interviews with municipal officials, NGO leaders and Ward Councillors, and a household survey of 293 households conducted in April and May of 2006 in eight wards in Msunduzi Municipality.

The household survey utilized a cluster sampling method to select areas that represented the major types of low-cost housing options in the city (informal housing, traditional homesteads, older formal townships, in situ upgrades and new RDP townships). Survey questions were based on the expert advice of key informants and other stakeholders, and insights from the literature, and targeted issues and interrelationships among issues of housing, health (including measures of well being), and environment.

PMB is the provincial capital of KwaZulu-Natal Province, a medium sized South African city. 4 It is a microcosm of South African urban conditions as they have evolved historically and geographically. The city of PMB was a racially segregated city prior to and during the apartheid era. Today it is a fragmented city of suburbs and townships (formal and informal), struggling with this legacy of social engineering and strongly marked with enduring social and environmental, infrastructure and service inequalities along race and class lines.

Impediments to sustainable low-cost housing: historical and contemporary realities Neo-liberal macro-economic policies At a general level, many experts on low-cost housing and service delivery in South Africa, identify the neoliberal macro-economic policies of the ANC government, especially since

1996 with the introduction of the growth, employment and redistribution or GEAR program, as the root of the failures in addressing sustainable habitats in urban areas.

Experts claim that neo-liberal economic policy has deepened the marginalization and poverty of the already poor, causing, for example, very high rates of unemployment (Beall, Crankshaw, & Parnell, 2002; Bond, 2003, Chapter 3). The poor cannot pay for the services essential to healthy urban living (Municipal Services Project <http://www.queensu.ca/msp/>). There are heated debates about the reasons for, and the efficacy of the macro-economic policy choices made by the government since 1994 (see Hirsch, 2005). The government struggled with its dual commitment to fiscal responsibility and the need to uplift the historically disadvantaged. What is clear, however, is neo-liberal policies limited funds available for public, welfare-oriented programs, meaning that the low-cost housing program is under funded, placing delays on delivery and resulting in housing of poor quality, built on cheap land on urban peripheries (Huchzermeyer, 2003). While these critiques are certainly valid, it is also true that the low-cost housing and service delivery programs have dramatically increased access to urban services by the poor.

These successes have been recognized internationally. 5 Apartheid legacies and persistent inequalities More specifically, South African cities have unique and complex histories that deeply mark post-1994 developments. The legacy of segregated neighbourhoods is stubbornly persistent, and new African arrivals typically settle in areas, or on the periphery of areas, historically reserved for Africans, such as See the South African housing <https://assignbuster.com/housing-issues-south-africa/>

bibliography at [http://housingstudies.wits.ac.za/housing\\_bib\\_1\\_e.htm](http://housingstudies.wits.ac.za/housing_bib_1_e.htm) The current population of the city is very difficult to determine. The municipal boundaries were expanded after 1994 to include former farmland, former Tribal land and other peri-urban areas, hence dramatically increasing the population under municipal jurisdiction, which has further rapidly expanded with rural-urban migration. The 2001 Census puts the municipal population at 553, 223 with the following racial breakdown (in classic South African fashion): African Blacks: 424, 799; Coloureds: 18, 450; Indians and Asians: 64, 944; Whites: 45, 030. However key informants in the study estimate current (2005) figures at between 800, 000 and 1. 5 million. 5 See for example, “ UN housing awards for SA. ” (2003). [http://www.southafrica.info/ess\\_info/sa\\_glance/social\\_delivery/update/unhousing\\_061003.htm](http://www.southafrica.info/ess_info/sa_glance/social_delivery/update/unhousing_061003.htm) (accessed 30. 08. 06). 4 3 ARTICLE IN PRESS 294 A. Goebel / Habitat International 31 (2007) 291–302 townships. Elite blacks may move into formerly white-only suburbs, but these areas remain exclusive, often gated and social interaction among different race and ethnic groups remains limited.

Another common racialized spatial feature in PMB and other South African cities is that the central business district has become accessible as public space to black Africans, but whites have withdrawn to suburban shopping centers precluding the need to venture to the CBD. Hence, urban geography, including residential areas and mobility patterns of the city’s inhabitants remains strongly racially defined. In addition, the skewed patterns of minority privilege endure.

The racial breakdown of the wards that make up Msunduzi Municipality as of the 2001 Census, 6 reveal a historically white city that has expanded to include black townships and formal Tribal areas. Most wards in the city remain strongly characterized by specific racial groups. While it is perhaps unsurprising that these patterns persist, arguably the biggest concern is that historical race and class inequalities in the quality of services, housing and the urban environment also persist. For example, Census, 2001 data on rates of improved toilets in the different wards of Msunduzi graphically illustrate continuing inequalities: while significant improvements of services have taken place in historically disadvantaged areas, many wards mostly populated by black people still have the lowest rates of improved services, and the historically uneven development of infrastructure means that addressing these inequalities will be a complex and expensive urban development task. This complex context of race, space and urban poverty poses difficult challenges to pro-poor and pro-black housing and service delivery policy. For example, while policy documents do acknowledge the importance of densification in urban planning for new housing, both to address racialized geography and environmental concerns, most new development of low-cost housing continues to be on the urban periphery. Inner city land is expensive and often controlled by powerful business interests. The market-led approach favoured by housing policy, which means government would have to pay a fair market price for such land, arguably precludes development of expensive inner city land (Pieterse, 2004). Some scholars caution that location near the CBD is not always good for poor blacks.



For example, drawing on case studies in Johannesburg and Durban, Biermann (2004) cautions, that the central business district may not be where opportunities for low skilled work lie, and residents of low-cost housing estates may be better positioned close to elite suburbs or other areas where they are likely to gain employment. Further research needs to be undertaken to establish the actual location of job opportunities and the cost of transport (Todes, 2003), thus including the factor of habitat situation as opposed to merely site location.

Certainly in Msunduzi, there are black-inhabited informal settlements such as Ash Road, centrally located near the N3 highway and Willowton industrial area in Ward 33. Our household survey sample there revealed that people lived there because of the proximity to the CBD and at least the perception of better economic opportunities as a result. It is clear that a sustainable habitats agenda in Msunduzi will have to include some elements of densification, which will in turn imply some levels of racial integration. Under current conditions, however, densification will clearly be a slow and expensive process.

Extent and rate of contemporary urbanization South Africa has a higher proportion of urbanized dwellers than elsewhere in Africa as a result of its relatively high level of industrialization and role as economic powerhouse of the continent. South Africa's urban population was estimated at 56.9% for the year 2000, with its projected 2010 figure at 64.2% (UN-Habitat, 2003, Table B. 2, p. 253). However, like elsewhere on the continent, urbanization is linked with massive unplanned peri-urban growth (Mbiba & Huchzermeyer, 2002) as well as informal settlements within urban boundaries (Durand-

Lasserve & Royston, 2002, pp. –4). In South Africa, according to the 2001 Census, an estimated 16.4% of households nationally are of an “informal” (or “squatter”) type, including those that are in backyards and elsewhere, such as municipal or private land. Informality tends to go with insecurity of land tenure and instability of other conditions such as services and rental rates (Durand-Lasserve & Royston, 2002, p. 23). These patterns are linked to high levels of unemployment and a growing wage gap. Source: Adapted from Statistics South Africa (2004). Census 2001. Primary Tables KwaZulu-Natal.

Census '96 and 2001 Compared: 92; South African Census 2001 Atlas (2003) at <http://www.statssa.gov.za/census2001/digiAtlas/index.html> See the South African Census 2001 Atlas (2003) at <http://www.statssa.gov.za/census2001/digiAtlas/index.html> ARTICLE IN PRESS A. Goebel / Habitat International 31 (2007) 291–302 295 between higher and lower sectors of the labour market (Beall et al., 2002, pp. 13–14). In response, civil society agitates for change because of increased poverty and intensities of economic inequalities (Baumann et al., 2004, pp. 94–195). Indeed, South Africa in general and PMB in particular, have seen vociferous public protests regarding the perceived slowness of housing and service delivery programs. As the economic centre of the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands region, Msunduzi Municipality is responsible for 80% of the region's economic turnover. As such, the municipality attracts rural and international migrants. As mentioned above (see footnote 4), redemarcation of city boundaries and high levels of migration to the city have more than tripled PMB's population in the last 10 years.

Informal settlements have expanded, and often border industrial zones and other “dirty areas”. Some, such as those located in the Msunduzi River flood plain, much of which is “shack farming”, are also exposed to high levels of risk to natural disasters such as flooding, which indeed occurred in the city on Christmas day in 1995 with approximately 160 lives lost and over 500 families lost their homes—all of these people were settled in flood risk areas. These conditions pose short- and long-term health and environmental risks, and eventually, costs to the city, province and nation.

The 2001 Census records that 13% of households in Msunduzi Municipality are of an informal type of dwelling, slightly lower than the national average of 16.4%, but higher than the provincial average of 11%. (See footnote 7.) At the provincial level within KwaZulu-Natal, the percentage of households occupying informal dwellings has remained stable between the two Census dates of 1996 and 2001 (although actual numbers have increased from 186,000 to 226,000 as the numbers of households in the province has grown from 1.7 million to 2.1 million).

Meanwhile, the percentages of households in the category “Other” dwellings (which include backyard or shared property and other undeveloped dwellings) have decreased, as have those in traditional dwellings. The percentage of households in formal dwellings has increased dramatically, a testament to the national housing policy. It is important to take these numbers with caution, however, as the situation on the ground is highly dynamic. UN-Habitat recently reported, for example, that overall, 33% of South Africa’s urban population is comprised of slum dwellers (UN-Habitat, 2004, Table 5.4, p. 107).

Both the Censuses of 1996 and 2001 measured dwelling types by racial category. In the province of KwaZulu-Natal, the key finding in this sense is that the biggest increase in percentages of households occupying formal dwellings is among the black African population (35–48%). As expected, it is among this group that we see the decline in the proportion of people in traditional dwellings, as well as the highest proportion of people living in informal dwellings. 10 These data indicate that at the provincial level, it is among the black African population that the greatest changes are occurring, but also where the greatest insecurities endure.

Census 2001 data also indicate a relatively high proportion of “ traditional” dwellings within the Msunduzi municipality. This is a result of the expanding of municipal boundaries after the elections of 1994 to include areas formerly under KwaZulu Tribal authorities. Such high rates of traditional dwellings within municipal boundaries of the former apartheid cities are rare. For example, Johannesburg has only 1. 0% of its dwellings recorded as “ traditional”, while Durban (the largest city in KwaZulu-Natal), which has also incorporated former tribal areas into its boundaries, still only records 7. % of its dwellings as “ traditional”. 11 Typically less dense, unevenly serviced, and with unique institutional histories within the city, these areas provide particular challenges to the municipal housing and service delivery.

New responsibility for housing is one of the more important of these new roles for municipalities in South Africa. By the mid-1990s the ANC recognized that centralized planning for housing made it difficult for local governments to address local needs effectively (Huchzermeyer, 2001, p. 303). The Housing Act of 1997 empowered municipalities to participate in housing

developments under the national policy, acting as either a developer or to contract a developer to deliver new housing stock (Huchzermeyer, 2001, p. 321).

However, there are also Housing Boards at both National and Provincial levels, and funding is still controlled by National government (Jenkins, 1999, p. 434), causing bureaucratic complexities in obtaining funds to administer programs at local levels. Local Agenda 21 programs as mandated by the Agenda 21 process also added to the role of cities in environmental protection. These new roles and responsibilities, in the context of declining economic growth rates and few new revenue streams, have resulted in what is known in South Africa as the “ unfunded mandates” (Beall et al. 2002, pp. 16–17). Indeed, in the South African context, nonpayment for traditional municipal services is leading to cities nearing bankruptcy and new innovative funding solutions are being sought (Huchzermeyer, 2001, p. 318).<sup>13</sup> This situation is not unique to South Africa. The background document to the recent World Urban Forum held in June 2006 discussed the challenge for cities world-wide in providing services for expanding urban populations: Financing basic urban services, especially trunk water supply and sanitation, is a formidable challenge for sustainable urban development.

As urban populations continue to expand, the demand for these basic services will continue to outpace local government ability to bring these services online. With severely constrained fiscal abilities, self-sourced revenue by cities to invest in these projects is unthinkable. As a result, cities will increasingly find themselves in new partnerships with central and provincial spheres of government, domestic and international capital

markets, multilateral and bilateral financial institutions. This web of partnerships is an essential platform for cities for the development of self-sustaining municipal finance systems (McCarney, 2006, p. 23). In Msunduzi, key informants in the municipality emphasize lack of capacity, and complicated, multilayered bureaucracies as the critical impediments to fulfilling both its housing and environmental mandates. New staff members often have inadequate training and/or rapidly move on to more lucrative positions within the civil service or private sector. Posts are slow to be released or advertised and this adds responsibilities and pressure on the already overstretched, under-skilled and resourced dedicated few.

None of this is conducive to delivery. In short, there is a crisis of human capital in South Africa, arguably the biggest obstacle to development in the nation: Apartheid education policy set back human capital creation more than a generation, unconsciously forming the most serious of all economic constraints on the future expansion of the economy of a democratic South Africa (Hirsch, 2005, p. 17).<sup>13</sup> See the Municipal Services Project (<http://www.queensu.ca/msp/>) ARTICLE IN PRESS A. Goebel / Habitat International 31 (2007) 291–302 297

Making progress The historical legacies and contemporary social, political, institutional and economic context provide formidable challenges for urban development within a sustainable habitats framework of ensuring “the integration of social, economic and environmental factors into planning, implementation and decision-making so as to ensure that development serves present and future generations”.<sup>14</sup> The extreme social inequalities and urban fragmentation mean that municipalities are struggling to deliver

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basic housing and services to the massive numbers of people marginalized by the apartheid past.

The vision of building ecologically healthy and sustainable settlements remains, for the most part, a distant dream. There are, however, some hopeful signs in low-cost housing policy shifts that seem more sensitive to the material realities of the poor, and which have positive environmental implication. One critical observation, however, is that the poor play only a small role in the ecological footprint of cities. An environmental justice approach helps to set priorities and targets for sustainable development in the low-cost housing sector.

Environmental justice There are some serious environmental impacts in some low-cost housing sector contexts, such as surface and groundwater contamination associated with some informal settlements without proper sanitation facilities, and disturbance of fragile ecosystems such as estuarine or wetland areas (DOH, 2004b, p. 26). There are also concerns regarding increases in vehicular traffic that releases greenhouse gases in the case of building new townships on city peripheries (Irurah & Boshoff, 2003).

However, as Irurah and Boshoff (2003) admit, since the low-cost housing sector is populated by poor people with comparatively miniscule energy and water use, the sector's overall ecological footprint is negligible. Others make a similar point: In low-income settlements, environmental problems are a major cause of disease and death, while the contribution to global environmental degradation remains small. As settlements become more af?

uent, environmental burdens tend to become more diffuse, delayed and indirect. This tends to result in the displacement of environmental burdens.

Because of their low levels of resource consumption, and their tendency to re-use and recycle, poor communities also have a negligible distal environmental impact, compared to more affluent communities (Plessis & Landman, 2002, p. 58). As an example, South African cities lose more municipal water to decayed urban infrastructure than the poor can consume through the 25 litres/person/day “life line”, and the suburban elite consumes approximately 50% of South Africa’s domestic water usage (Plessis & Landman, 2002, p. 52).

In our household survey work in Msunduzi, many households continue to use dangerous fuels such as paraffin and wood for cooking and heating despite electrification because the latter is too expensive for their budgets. It is not the urban poor who are straining the energy supply in contemporary South Africa. It is critical that reducing the environmental impact of cities does not become defined primarily as a task focused on low-income areas and people. The DOH (2004b) document noted above makes reference to the need to alter consumption and production patterns, although little progress can be noted yet on these fronts.

Certainly the rising new black elite is noted for its tendency to over-consume including ecologically destructive ways such as purchasing large personal vehicles and homes, and industries continue many environmentally destructive practices with impunity. Positive signs The Breaking New Ground initiative includes some positive signs for addressing a sustainable habitats



agenda. These include some support for in situ upgrades, accepting critiques of the green? elds, massive delivery approach to housing, social housing options and explicitly linking health and housing.

In situ upgrades of informal settlements, long advocated by pro-poor groups, involve many dif? culties in tenure issues and land management (Cross, 2002; Marais & Wessels, 2005; Marais, Van Rensburg, & Botes, 2003; Mitlin & Satterthwaite, 2004). While forced evictions are still occurring, often accompanied by 14 National Environmental Management Act (Act 107 of 1998). Principle xxix. As cited in Stanton, 2005, p. 253. ARTICLE IN PRESS 298 A. Goebel / Habitat International 31 (2007) 291–302 Fig. 1. In situ upgrade process in Peace Valley 2, Edendale, Msunduzi Municipality. isturbing local political struggles, 15 new policy supports upgrades in some cases. In Msunduzi, for example, upgrades have been supported in a few locations including two of our study sites, Peace Valley 2 in Edendale, and Cinderella Park in Willowton. See Fig. 1, which shows the upgrade in progress in Peace Valley 2 wherein formal housing, electri? cation, municipal water and sewerage have been supplied where people had informally settled. This type of program allows people to stay settled close to economic opportunities and established transportation routes.

It also treats people in a more respectful way in comparison to forced removals usually associated with the clearing of informal settlements, and can provide a framework for skill development such as in training residents to build their own houses as was achieved with the assistance of the Built Environment Support Group (BESG), under a People’s Housing Process. 16 In our household survey, we found that people living in upgraded areas had a

greater sense of satisfaction with their homes compared to people living in the new development on the periphery of the city included in our study.

Thus a sense of place, belonging and community cohesion and identity has developed within these communities despite the desperate living conditions. Not surprisingly, both areas were more positive about their homes than the informal settlement, Ash Road, in our survey, where there is communal water provision, but no electricity or sanitation services, and the housing is of very poor quality. Much of the housing is below the food line and there is a high level of crime. Residents move into this highly risky and unpleasant housing because of the proximity of the settlement to the central business district.

This area has been targeted by the municipality in its recruitment of people for the new low-cost housing in peripheral areas. However, it appears that some residents return to Ash Road after removal, explicitly stating that the location and lack of services in the new township compromises their livelihood strategies. Clearly, the new policy openness to in situ upgrading of informal settlements is a positive step that takes into account some of the livelihood needs and other preferences of the poor. However, many areas, such as Ash Road, are not environmentally suitable for formal settlement.

Indeed, Peace Valley 2 is also somewhat problematic, being located right next to an oil refinery which impacts significantly on the air quality of the neighbourhood, and one of its outer boundaries is a food plain. Such upgrades will need to be made on a site by site basis. This willingness to support some upgrading projects is part of a wider willingness to accept

critiques of the massive developments of new townships in peripheral areas, which dominated the first stage of the low-cost housing programs. In our early work in 2002 and 2003, municipal officers in Msunduzi were clear that the new developments were very politically sensitive. In a stakeholder workshop in June 2006, our partners in the See for example, “ Motala Heights: Corruption and intimidation as eviction crisis deepens. Motala heights, Pinetown, 19 August 2006. ” <http://southafrica.indymedia.org/> (accessed 30. 08. 06). 16 Interview with Cameron Brisbane, Manager, Operations and Programmes, Built Environment Support Group, Msunduzi Municipality. March 24, 2006. 15 ARTICLE IN PRESS A. Goebel / Habitat International 31 (2007) 291–302 299 unicipal government stated that new models of low-cost housing delivery were now being actively sought and supported at all levels of government. Another such option is found in social housing. 17 These programs aim to provide subsidized rental accommodation to low-income households, generally in multi-unit buildings in central urban areas. While there were municipal council flats in the apartheid era, social housing options have not until recently figured strongly in the national low-cost housing program.

<http://www.gov.za/about-sa/housing>

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