

Community halls and the challenge of integrated human settlement development

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Community halls, when built as an integral part of a housing project, have the potential to act as a hub for social, cultural, educational, and welfare activities. Yet they are very frequently a low priority if they are considered at all.

Some 6 years ago, acknowledging the demand for community halls from communities, and the escalating costs of managing and maintaining such facilities, Msunduzi Municipality in KwaZulu- Natal adopted a policy of “local halls.” These were to be a new generation of halls, with a maximum capacity of 300 people, which would be built in the main using Municipal Infrastructure Grant (MIG) funds and directly managed by an elected community structure. BESG piloted two such hall projects in Glenwood 2 and Nhlazatshe, where the project started with a needs assessment, resulting in two distinctly different products, and through construction, a training programme was run in leadership skills, property management and maintenance, and financial management. These were an integral part of the development of the halls and added between 3 and 5 % to the total project cost. The construction cost for each hall (related to available funding and end product size) was between R420,000 and R650,000.

Most recently, on 15th June, the local Witness newspaper featured a story of the sad neglect of one conventionally procured “local hall” in Panorama Gardens, in a “municipal watch” series. The Ward Councillor was quoted as saying the community must “take ownership” of the building to prevent the neglect reoccurring. On 22nd June, the Witness published a letter from BESG addressing the “ownership” issue and the potential waste of public funds arising when a process of building “ownership” is not built into the development of a hall. The letter is reprinted below:

The neglect of the Panorama Gardens community hall (Witness 15th June) is not by any means unique. Sadly, many funders and procurement agents only value the bricks and mortar. It simply does not work to “encourage” communities to take ownership of their facilities, particularly after they have had a history of vandalism.

The Built Environment Support Group (BESG) has assisted many communities with the provision of community facilities, and empowered them to manage them as an integral part of the development process through a programme of participatory training and business plan development – before construction even commences.

Even when capacity has been built at local level, poor communities need access to grant in aid to cover at least part of their management and maintenance costs – and a regular review process through a renewable lease or occupation agreement to ensure that proper access to and care of the facility is maintained.

There is provision in the Msunduzi municipal budget for 2007/8 for 4 new halls, at a total cost of R6m. An evaluation of the facilities that have been built since the local (community) halls policy was adopted some 6 or 7 years ago is urgently needed in order to ensure this public investment is well spent and sustainable.