

The future for informal settlements

The agenda has changed and the pressure to deliver services is on

THE WITNESS, MON. 10.6.2013

CAMERON BRISBANE

LAST Monday, *The Witness* carried a side story titled "Life in a squatter camp", which described in first-hand detail, the challenges in accessing government housing and the indignities of having to use a bucket for daily ablutions. The impressions are valid, but the title "squatter camp" carries its own indignities for those who live in them. It implies, firstly, something illegal that should not be, and, secondly, something that is temporary.

I had the same criticism of *The Witness* court reporter in 2008, when she referred to the Mkondeni Sacca settlement as "informal settlers". It is marginally better than "squatters", but still implies transience.

After five years of appeal against arbitrary eviction (which the Built Environment Support Group (BESG) took to the Supreme Court of Appeal in Bloemfontein), a reversal of the original eviction order, and a further eviction order, with the benefit of alternative land for permanent settlement, the Msunduzi Municipality and the Department of Human Settlements have resolved to buy the land underlying the settlement for permanent residential development.

Adjoining land will also be expropriated in order to reduce the density of the settlement, thereby reducing the risk of fires and facilitating access to the basic services of water, sanitation, refuse removal and emergency services. These are all things that we take for granted

— in spite of our challenges with the Msunduzi Municipality — but are denied to "informal settlers".

As I watched Tuesday evening's news, communities in the Cape Flats were up in arms over the perennial flooding of their shacks. They want decent services and housing. In spite of the government having funded 2,7 million subsidised housing units since 1994, we are still estimated to have a backlog of 2,3 million — and that is an increasing target as demand continues to outstrip supply.

More people are moving from urban to rural areas. Extended families have been broken up as a consequence of a generation of poorly located, undersized and defective RDP housing. Back-yard shack dwellers living in former townships, as well as newly developed areas, and the unseen families living on "tenant farms" in the city are not even counted, as a result of the old housing waiting list having been abandoned over 10 years ago.

Out of that official backlog, the government estimated in 2010 that 1,2 million people were living in informal settlements. Those were only the ones enumerated by their local municipality. Mkondeni Sacca was not among them, because they were not Msunduzi's problem until the municipality was joined to the court action — in order to secure alternative land for the community. In other words, the scale of homelessness on all indicators is worse than officially declared.

Which brings us back to the af-

fect members of our society. They are fed up. We even have a social movement called Fed-Up — the Federation of the Urban (and subsequently rural) Poor. In 2006, weeks after the local-government elections, so-called service-delivery protests broke out around the country. The majority of them took place where citizens had just returned the ANC to power. What went wrong?

Senior politicians and officials went on a campaign to hear the people. The outcome was a "National Turnaround Strategy for Local Government", published in November 2009. The government was not making itself accessible, and people were not being heard.

The Security Cluster, in order to quell the rising discontent, drove an agenda to provide secure tenure and basic services to 300 000 households — a third of the official number living in informal settlements — by April 2014. It was signed into a performance agreement between the Presidency and the Minister of Human Settlements, known in the industry as "Outcome 8", in October 2010.

Since 2006, recorded service-delivery protests have escalated from two per month to 16 — one every second day. They have been accompanied by increasing levels of violence, as we saw most recently in the shooting of a resident of Enhlalakahle by a municipal security officer during an illegal electricity disconnection. What is the solution?

Last month, the National Upgrading Support Programme (NUSP), an arm of the National Department of Human Settlements, rolled out a programme to make Outcome 8 a reality for the city and 44 other local municipalities across the country. Consultants have been appointed to do a rapid assessment of informal settlements across Msunduzi.

In January, faced with the dilemma of accommodating the permanent settlement of Mkondeni Sacca and Jika Joe, the head of the municipality's Housing Delivery Unit asked me what we would have to do to "eradicate informal settlements". The Department of Human Settlements, formerly Housing, used to call it "slums clearance". The agenda has changed. The rapid assessment will identify which settlements can be upgraded in situ (where they are) and which, for technical, economic, or other strategic reasons, have no option but to be relocated to land that has not yet been identified.

The consultants then have to secure buy-in from councillors, the municipality, and of course, the communities themselves — all in 16 weeks. Added to this, election fever has already started. A section of Glenwood 2, frequently referred to as Tamboville, is due to be upgraded within months, after waiting 16 years for development. The branch executive of the majority party was opposed to the development proceeding while the ward is under DA control. Rather wait until

2016.

The MEC for Human Settlements sent a message to me to eradicate the "bucket system" as a matter of urgency. Residents of North East Sector 2 were unhappy at the idea of blocks of communal toilets — albeit linked to waterborne sewerage — being foisted on them. They are also *gatvol*. They just want the development that was promised to them 16 years ago to be delivered.

And what of the 1,2 million households caught up in the backlog? There is no possibility of a "rapid assessment" delivering by April 2014. The province and the local municipalities, our own included, think this is a programme driven by the national department. NUSP is very clear in its mandate: to support local municipalities in the delivery of Outcome 8. But the record of local municipalities in the delivery of basic services is the very fuel of service-delivery protests.

How do we break the impasse? For years, BESG has been involved in delivering development that is technically sound and socially acceptable. It comes though process management. It is a foundation stone of NUSP methodology to guide the formalisation of the urban poor living in informal settlements. But the combination of technical and social skills is insufficient to meet market demand. As a nation, we need to build capacity in many sectors. Human settlements is just one such sector facing challenges that will either make or break the new dispensation.

By way of another example, basic education has been in the spotlight recently, over the Limpopo (and elsewhere) school books' saga. We would not be the first country to be transformed from liberation to administrative failure if we do not critically engage citizens in the process of delivering development.

We also have to recognise as a nation that free housing is an unsustainable development option. It is recognised by senior organs of government, but it is not a popular message to foist on a politician who has to be elected every five years, when the waiting time to acquire an RDP house is anything between five and 40 years. The reality, for the majority of our "slum-dwellers", is the same worldwide: you are an essential part of the socio-economic fabric of our society. To be brutal, you are our maids, gardeners, car mechanics, and everyone else who makes it possible for us to function on a daily basis. The least we can do is to provide security against arbitrary eviction and basic, emergency services for those most vulnerable sections of our society. That has to be within our means. Do we have the political will, technical capacity, and ability to listen and engage as leaders and ordinary citizens, in order to derive inclusive and sustainable solutions to the development challenges facing us?

• Cameron Brisbane is the executive director at Built Environment Support Group.