

'Lock them up or shoot them'

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What solutions does the city have to 'deal' with street children?

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THE Witness (June 20) reported plans by the authorities to cleanse the CBD of street children. On this occasion, none of the non-profit organisations that provide services to street children and homeless adults, and who have participated in previous fora, were represented.

Two such agencies are Youth for Christ (YFC) KZN, which runs the Khayaletu shelters with support and family reunification services for street children, and Project Gateway, which runs the Sunset Overnight Shelter for homeless adults on the streets. They are the only residential facilities for their target groups in the CBD.

The Built Environment Support Group (BESG) has been helping them both to access government housing subsidies for the redevelopment of their facilities. It is a story of endless frustration with the same authorities who want to rid the CBD of what they clearly regard as a nuisance.

YFC operates its shelters from three Victorian double-storey houses, two of which were donated by the municipality in recognition of the need for a facility for street children. YFC purchased the third house outright, but it has battled to raise funds for building maintenance and major repairs. The deterioration has been accelerated by a termite attack. Two of the buildings are now semi-derelict, and parts are in a dangerous state.

In the course of surveying and planning the refurbishment works, YFC spent two years trying to obtain approval from the Department of Social Development to increase the occupancy of the shelters from 40 to 56 beds. The department declined to engage with YFC and eventually refused consent. This is the very same department that now engages in a process to cleanse the CBD of street children.

It is ironic that the municipality served notice on the Msunduzi Housing Association (MHA) to vacate its offices in Jabu Ndlovu Street to make way for a proposed car park for the Premier's Office, when the city was under administration. The side road on the south side of the Premier's Office is a hot spot for street children. No sooner had MHA vacated than the street children invaded the house. The municipality acknowledges the problem of unoccupied houses providing a haven for street children, but left its own back door wide open.

A precondition to access housing subsidies is that projects are reflected in the municipality's Integrated Development Plan (IDP). We are not asking the municipality for a cent towards the redevelopment costs. We are simply asking for the municipality to acknowledge the need for these fa-



PHOTO: JOHATHAN BURTON

A street child asks a woman passing by for anything she can spare. When the city's authorities announced that they were going to cleanse the CBD of street children, neither one of two non-profit organisations that provides services to street children and homeless adults was represented.

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ilities in the city.

It was relatively easy to secure Khayaletu a listing in the IDP. We persuaded the municipality in 2008 to part with R19 000 in order to undertake emergency roof repairs to one of the donated houses. The only way of recovering its funds was to facilitate our accessing the housing subsidy. We informed the municipality in the recent IDP and budget consultation process that the project was ready to be submitted to the Department of Human Settlements for project approval.

The final version of the IDP has just been posted on the municipality's website. Khayaletu has been dropped from the table of prioritised projects. There is only reference to an unidentified special-needs project for 40 beds, in a separate table sourced in 2010, which does not comply with Human Settlements' requirements

and has no budget allocation.

Exactly a year ago, officials from the municipality's Health Department visited Project Gateway and condemned the Sunset Overnight Shelter as being unfit for human habitation. For nearly 20 years, the shelter has provided an overnight bed for 60 homeless men and women out of two converted shipping containers. It is a desperately needed facility. One Christmas, there was a near riot when Project Gateway attempted to close the shelter for a few days. The Health Department agreed not to seek a closure order as Gateway approached us for help to build a permanent shelter to full hostel standards.

Twice, we made written representation to the municipality to include the shelter in its IDP. I also briefed the head of the municipality's Housing Delivery Unit in person. The submission was simply ignored, in spite of the

motivation for the redevelopment coming from its own officials.

It begs the question, how does this group of bureaucrats purporting to be a "structure for all stakeholders" plan to clean up the streets? The answer is partly implied in a statement by municipal spokesperson Brian Zuma, who is quoted: "We need to have a permanent task team that will focus on dealing with the issue of bylaw enforcement in the city." If one reads that statement with other media reports of the city's new draft bylaws, it means you arrest them for begging and lock them up at the taxpayers' expense. When they are released, they will simply go back onto the streets or invade derelict buildings, as there is nowhere else to go.

In the slums of Brazil and parts of India, the authorities had a more novel way of "dealing with the problem", which involved no expense to the tax-

payer. The police, and sometimes vigilantes from the elite classes, simply abducted people sleeping on the street, children included, and shot them in a deserted location: out of sight, and out of mind. I do not know if this practice persists today, but it was able to exist because the victims had fallen out of "normal" society and no one noticed their absence. In India, the practice was underwritten by the caste system, where the "untouchables" (or Dalits) continue to suffer social alienation and discrimination in accessing basic services such as water, sanitation, and health facilities.

Returning to our own tragedy in the making, we shall be attempting one final effort to engage with the officials concerned of the YFC and Gateway projects. They urgently need to rectify what was a bad decision or a crass oversight not to recognise the importance to the city of two projects that are attempting to deal with street children and homeless adults in the CBD in a humane manner.

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