

Nipping the housing problem in the bud

By [Professor Hangwelani Hope Magidimisha-Chipungu](#)

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The perpetual mushrooming and burgeoning of informal settlements across cities is extremely distressing to the planning fraternity of the democratic South Africa. While, commendably, there has been much focus on construction of subsidised housing to redress the spatial imbalances of the past, there have been precious few advances towards a more sustainable and permanent approach to curb the phenomenon of informal settlements and bury it together with the shameful history of apartheid. More than 26 years into democracy, a better life for all South Africans is still a dream for many people, especially for the disenfranchised urban poor who reside in informal settlements across the country.



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Spatial policy reform is proving inadequate to alleviate the plight of the spatially and economically marginalised urban poor or slow down the on-going human tragedy that emanates from the proliferation of informal settlements. The urban poor are on the receiving end of most of the misfortunes that beset our cities and endanger their lives in their tireless attempts to cope with these urban spaces. The aspirations and/or symbolic moniker of cities like Durban is lost in the reality when confronted by places like Quarry Road Informal Settlement in Durban. This area bears no resemblance to “Africa’s most caring and liveable city”. The settlement has encroached onto the adjacent pedestrian sidewalk of the extremely busy Quarry Road. Residents use this road for normal everyday activities, i.e., socialising, and informal and/or small-scale retailing, while children use it as a playground. The settlement is also located along the floodplain of a stream which runs through it. All these factors put the community’s safety at risk, creating a recipe for disaster.



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Silent treatment solves no problems

I believe that the informal settlement did not abruptly emerge in its current state, but gradually expanded over time. I’m also convinced that at least some municipal officials or law enforcement agents have travelled through this area at some stage and witnessed the settlement being developed, without saying or doing anything about it. Such silent treatment solves no problems, and only worsens them. This scenario is not unique to Quarry Road Informal Settlement but is replicated across all such settlements throughout the country. It almost seems like the *modus operandi* is to wait until the situation gets out of hand and thereafter the responsible authorities start to react. It is common knowledge that such reaction rather than a proactive approach has failed to address the issue of informal settlements or the spatial injustices of the past and the calamities that befall the urban poor who dwell in them.

It is my submission that if one is going to tackle the problem of spatial disparities in the form of informal settlements and the subsequent socio-economic imbalances, one must nip it in the bud. In other words, target the cause(s) rather than treating the symptom(s) without delay. The longer we wait for the informal settlement problem to grow, the costlier and more complicated it becomes to solve. There is a need for a dynamic shift in the approach to eradicate or curb the proliferation

of informal settlements. This should emphasise a proactive rather than a reactive approach.



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Struggling land reform programmes

It is in the public domain that land reform programmes are struggling to meet their target, especially in relation to urban land where informal settlements are a common sight and urgent action is needed. Land is still largely and disproportionately owned by the minority, particularly Whites. This leaves much of the Black population with little land and resources, which is one of the factors at the root of the problem. According to the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform's (DRDLR) 2017 Land Audit, individual land ownership by race is 72% White, 4% Black, 15% Coloured, 5% Indian, 3% others and 1% co-owned. This imbalance points to one of the major problems. It also signifies one of the root causes of the problem of informal settlements.

It is not by mistake that the majority Black Africans who disproportionately own less land than any other race in the country are those who are most likely to live in informal settlements. Statistics show that the more land one owns, the less likely one is to stay in an informal settlement and the South African White population is living proof of this statement. Urban land reform policies and programmes need to be revised to respond to the needs of the urban poor who are mainly Black Africans. It cannot be stressed enough that the sustainability of these reforms and programmes does not rest exclusively in mere provision of a piece of land or a housing unit, but also requires consideration of the availability and strategic location of the land. If the available land is not strategically located, we are bound to continue getting it wrong and, a century from now, the problem will remain and, indeed, will be worse and more complex than it is today.



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Tackling this serious issue

The housing problem, as manifested by informal settlements and the shortfalls of the land reform policy and/or programmes, calls into question the role of development control and its effectiveness. It also shines a spotlight on the role of planners and responsible law enforcement agents in curbing the issues at hand. Extensive research has been conducted and published that provides evidence on the nature, source, and remediation of the problem of informal settlements. These findings should inform policymakers and other stakeholders in tackling this serious issue.

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