

**R**EPORTERS Sabelo Nsele and Thabang Mathebula covered several challenges with the provision of, and access to, low-income housing in the front-page article "Still waiting for homes" (*The Witness*, December 28). What was most striking was the gap between public perception, bred of a sense of despair and hopelessness, and official statements that suggest the Department of Human Settlements is on top of the problem.

One sobering comment came from KZN departmental spokesperson Mbulelo Baloyi, who was quoted as saying that it will take at least 40 years to deal with the backlog in applications. He then talks up the department's response to fast-tracking delivery by suggesting that "we had to think out of the box by being innovative". The innovations he mentions are site-and-services projects where people are encouraged to build for themselves, and slum clearance. Both are self-contradictory statements. The vast majority of homeless people do not have the financial means to build their own formal houses. They do not have financial means, period. Our cities, towns, and other nodes are magnets for people looking for a better chance in life, or simply a means of survival.

The result is that people try to establish themselves near potential sources of employment of any description, and on the first rung of having a roof over your head. That may be a shack on the edge of the Dorpspruit, a room or even a bed space, or a room in someone else's back yard if your income is reliable. The amount you can afford is a measure of your safety as well as comfort. Being washed away in an extreme summer storm, or losing your identity and life possessions because a neighbour's candle fell on to a blanket, are life-threatening events. But survival is a relative concept.

At the opposite economic extreme, we, as part of the Rainbow Nation, live in high-security gated estates. Our taxes pay for possibly the largest direct public housing investment in sub-Saharan Africa. We had RDP housing in the first five years of the new dispensation. It developed a bad name — much as fast-tracked post-World War 2 housing did in both sides of Europe. In our case, the choice faced by our political leaders was whether to go deep and narrow — with the perpetuation of the two-bedroom sub-economic house — or wide and shallow in order to reach as many people in as short a time as possible. So became the first generation of RDP housing — very often located on the periphery of our towns and cities, with services that were poorly designed, constructed, and maintained, and no access to amenities and employment opportunities.

Take France on the R56, so called because it was launched when France hosted the Soccer World Cup in 1998. The majority of residents of the then Jika Joe informal settlement relocated for a better life. There is nothing but RDP housing in France, although a small minority of township entrepreneurs have made it good. They will always be a minority, so what about the balance of the population? Faced with no work, no clinic, no school, many sold or rented their RDP houses and moved back into Jika Joe and other informal settlements.

A house is an asset and source of income, as is back-yard renting. It is testimony to the resilience of those who live on the very margins of our society. And yet our government's response is to create a policy of regulating informal rental and sub-letting and slums clearance, through the provision of capital housing subsidy. It is very much a carrot and stick approach,



being the forced evictions in Johannesburg carried out by the Red Ants.

It is a policy that is structured to fail. The problem will not go away. Globally we are not building enough housing to keep pace with urbanisation and/or population growth. As we moved from the early nineties with its site-and-service ("toilets in the veld") through RDP housing, to the 2004 "Breaking New Ground" (BNG) housing, the quantum of a housing subsidy has risen from R15 000 to R155 000. The product has changed from a serviced site with "assistance toward a rudimentary top-structure" to a 40 m<sup>2</sup> block house, two bedrooms, kitchen and internal bathroom, with the latest thermal insulation requirements. The legacy of the late Housing minister, Joe Slovo, to adopt a populist approach and reach as many people as possible, has been abandoned in favour of a bigger and better BNG house.

Our capital housing subsidy scheme is a necessary state intervention to address the humane and public health issues around high-density settlements faced with challenges of lack of potable water, sanitation and refuse removal. To that end, and in light of government concerns about the increase in incidence of service delivery protests between 2006 and 2009, then Human Settlements minister Tokyo Sexwale signed a Performance Agreement with the presidency — Outcome 8. Most importantly among other measures, it committed the government to provide security of tenure and basic services to 400 000 households living in informal settlements by April 2014 — just in time for elections. It did not meet the target, and has now extended the deadline and the numbers to 2019.

But it was a case of thinking out of the box,

have backlogs in the order of 40 years, informal settlements will remain a feature of our urban landscape. The reintroduction of site-and-services will not eradicate slums if targeted at the urban poor. It may assist those in the gap market who earn more than R3 500 a month to qualify for a free house but not enough to raise a mortgage bond.

We have a whole range of assistance for those who can afford to contribute to their housing needs — rental, site-and-service, building materials, supplier-assisted loan finance, the Finance Linked Individual Subsidy. But the demand for free housing far outstrips supply and, according to a study commissioned by the Financial and Fiscal Commission of Parliament in 2012, housing subsidy in its present form is unsustainable. It is not a message that finds political traction.

Human Settlements Minister Lindiwe Sisulu was reported in Africa Check addressing an awards ceremony in Cape Town in September 2015. She lamented: "It is shocking and unbelievable that over the past six years, one of these years being in my time, we have delivered almost half of the number of houses that we delivered at the height of our delivery."

Wind forward to the Govan Mbeki housing awards ceremony held in Durban in late November, where Sisulu proudly announced that we have created 4,3 million "housing opportunities" (that is not the same as "houses built"), and she aims to reach six million by 2019. That would involve an unprecedented doubling of budget and capacity, when many players in the construction and engineering sectors are shying away from high-risk, low-return housing subsidy work.

Uncertain times lie ahead.

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