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**Title:**
Not Just Building Houses:  *Reforming the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) Housing Policy in South African Cities to Move Beyond Shelter Provision and Towards the Creation of Food Secure and Sustainable Urban Settlements*

**Executive Summary:**
Moving into the second decade of this century, South Africa is ever keen on incorporating development 'buzz words' like 'food security', 'green' and 'sustainable' into its policy directives, and yet much of this rhetoric remains bound in the lofty cursive of politician speech writing, while outdated programs such as the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) Housing policy continue to drudge on into seeming eternity; ever-building houses for the ever-increasing population of the shelter-less, and not stopping to re-evaluate if this immense and laudable effort is truly creating the desired building blocks for the nation South Africa wants to be. The RDP Housing Policy, responding to a primary demand of the Freedom Charter for "houses, security and comfort" has built over 2 million houses to date, intending to establish the basic conditions for alleviating poverty.[1]  The RDP 'starter' house, typically set in track rows along cleared stretches of peri-urban land, is a step up from the haphazard shantytown dwellings typical of South African townships, but does it really achieve its objectives of poverty alleviation and overturning the legacy of Apartheid? Does this type of construction support the social reforms touted by the Freedom Charter, or create the blueprint for long-term sustainability?

This paper will offer policy recommendations for reforming the South African RDP Housing policy to shift away from a mindset focused on delivery of numbers (the construction of as many houses possible in the shortest amount of time), and towards actions that will create settlements that promote better *quality of life* and that can provide the conditions for poverty alleviation and sustainability in the long-term.  The policy recommendations will specifically focus on urban settlement design to promote food security and environmental sustainability and will provide suggestions for designing a future housing policy for the nation's cities that is both comprehensive and holistic and accounts for the many basic human needs beyond the singular goal of providing shelter.  It will also examine the opportunity cost of budget allocation to housing construction over other needs and why it is critical for the South African government to re-evaluate the RDP Housing policy at this point in time.

**The premise:**
The South African policy of "Housing the Nation" as part of the national Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), brought into effect by the post-Apartheid government in 1994, has a disproportionately large impact on development program implementation in South Africa, particularly in the urban context.  The policy results from the election promise of the ANC government to provide adequate housing for all South African citizens as a priority for ensuring the

basic human right to shelter.  It declares the intention to move society "from shacks to dignity", and is an attempt to address the enormous lack of safe and appropriate housing for a vast majority of the population.[2]  The policy is implemented through the building of cement brick houses to replace the shack dwellings that characterize South African townships, or 'informal settlements.'

This housing policy is powerful – it is the biggest state housing delivery program in the world outside of China – and the more than 2.5 million houses built since 1994 form a firm backbone for the South African government to prove that it is serving its people.[3]  With absolute respect for a government's attempt to ensure the right to housing for all of its citizens, however, this aim seems to come at the cost of other social programs, and incurs an immense opportunity cost in regards to true sustainable development and poverty alleviation.  As the promise that the ANC's election campaign was backed on, the South African government seems determined to see this housing guarantee through, however unrealistic its achievement has become.  The current backlog would require 200,000 houses to be built each year for the next 10 years, with an estimated 45-55% of all households in need of new housing and unable to afford it without government subsidy.[4]  With enormous amounts of financial and human resources being poured into the housing initiative, not only is the window for creative and progressive development interventions ever narrower, but money that could be directed to a myriad of other social programs is being swallowed by the housing sector.

The implementation of the housing policy also has aspects that run contrary to stated development goals.  Construction to meet number targets is the goal, with the aim to create the most houses with the least budget allocated, and therefore the implementation is atrocious in terms of quality of housing and urban planning.  Houses are built from cheap materials, packed in arbitrary rows, with little consideration for previous social organization within the community, for environmental impact of both the houses and their associated services, or for local politics and conflict.  The disregard of these factors is causing the newly constructed settlements to be at high risk for environmental damage and resource conflict, particularly in areas where urbanization has created pockets of incredibly high population density.

Additionally, a great proportion of the housing is being built within existing township areas – designated as 'black-only' settlements during apartheid, and strategically located on the outskirts of major urban business districts and far from city centers so as to have been 'invisible'.  Building new housing within these townships is both reinforcing an unsustainable and inefficient model of urban planning – characterized by long commutes to earn day-wages and settlements in barren, exposed lands with low resource capacity – that is increasing density of areas already experiencing resource scarcity, and reinforcing a social structure of racial division and a socio-economic divide that the country is desperately trying to move beyond.

Thirdly, houses are viewed as individual structures and are not embedded into an urban planning program designed for creating a better quality of life.  Whereas this housing imperative could be an opportunity for re-designing urban settlements, with emphasis on sustainability, incorporating green spaces, community food gardens and centers for social cohesion, it is instead encouraging the persistence of old paradigms.  Rather than using this as an opportunity to break down social barriers, for protecting and restoring city aquifers and improving air quality, and for designing settlements not only to house, but to feed and empower every citizen, the policy is no more than a semi-permanent construction site on the South African landscape, entrenching rather than breaking the nation out of old patterns.

**The Context:**
South Africa today is in a somewhat precarious political position.  Seventeen years after the end of Apartheid, the nation is characterized by rampant unemployment (25% in 2010), a lagging education system, a staggering HIV prevalence rate, and one of the world's widest gaps between rich and poor.  All of these statistics are disproportionately higher within the informal settlements – where HIV/AIDS rates reach upwards of 50%, unemployment is 54%, and 73% of residents live below the poverty line.  And the number of such settlements is only growing.  In 1994 there were only 300 informal settlements documented, in 2001 there were 1066 informal settlements nation-wide, and today the number has grown to 2628.  Johannesburg has the highest concentration of such settlements within its city boundaries – 180 informal settlements, which are home to 25% of Johannesburg's inhabitants.[5]

Service delivery protests, often characterized by violence and vandalism, are common occurrences around the country, with the township of Diepsloot hosting six such protests in the last two years, and a popular political talk radio host recently described Johannesburg as 'a ticking time bomb.'  Author Allistair Sparks spoke this warning in 1994, "Yet for all the new South Africa's advantages, there is one overriding challenge facing it.  Apartheid has left the country with one of the world's widest gaps between rich and poor.  This must be closed or it will become politically dangerous."[6]  It seems we are now arriving at that place in time.

**Scale Beyond Means:**
The program itself is incredibly impressive, and as city planner Tanya Zack said (2009), 'there is no denying the scale of it,' and she is right– the government has built 2.5 million houses since 1994, and continues to do so at the rate of about 220,000 a year.[7]  These houses are not unwanted or unneeded – they are addressing a serious lack of safe and appropriate housing, and citizens remain hopeful that they will receive one. Zack goes on to declare the housing program "one of the state programs benefiting the greatest number of people," while the Banking Association of South Africa declares, "the success of South Africa's housing programme is unparalleled, and we can be proud of our achievements." While it cannot be denied that these statements reflect the impressive achievement of building more than 2 million homes, it is also necessary to look at the impact this massive endeavor has

had on the state of the poor in South Africa, and if truly it has improved people's lives.

Just as the number of informal settlements spread around South Africa's cities has increased exponentially since 1994 (rising from 300 to the current 2628), so has the need for housing grown. In 1994 the housing need was 1.7 million houses, in 2010 the need is 2.1 million.[8] Account for the fact that the government has already built 2.5 million houses and it is clear this is a race with no finish line.

In the Minister of Housing's own estimate the housing backlog can only be cleared at a rate of 10% per year, and the number of people in need of housing is increasing daily. Journalist Anton Harber of The Mail & Guardian writes, "the battle to house people is being lost, the promise of the Freedom Charter receding, along with the pledge of the Constitution."[9] Despite the incredible amount of funds and resources being poured into this objective, the delivery rate of housing is being outpaced by the need for it, and it appears the government will never catch up.

**Re-evaluation:  The government is not blind**
Seven years into the program, in 2001, the government took note of some of these major issues with the RDP and set to improve it, rewriting some of the policy language. The resulting reform to the Housing Policy was a more integrated approach to the housing program – to include more quality of life aspects such as healthcare provision, transport *and* sustainability, meant to achieve the 'viable communities' language in the original bill. One major symbolic change was the renaming of the Department of Housing as the Department of Human Settlement – the title in itself implying that policy must be broader and encompass more than just putting up housing structures.

To act on this shift, the provincial Department of Housing for Gauteng announced an end to the building of RDP houses in 2001, in order to trial an alternative strategy – one of land acquisition and of assisting people with savings contributions to build their *own* houses.  However, then Housing Minister Sankie Mthembi-Mahanyele responded by insisting that the government continue building the RDP homes, stating vast unemployment as the main rationale behind keeping to the old strategy. "There is no way they can be left out," she stated in a 2001 press release, "they can't afford other forms of housing."[10]

Therefore, despite the changes to the housing policy and the intention behind those changes, the program continued to be deployed utilizing the old ways of building – resulting in the same classic RDP housing development of cheaply-built, neat rows of box houses replicating itself all over the country. The government, despite seeing the problems and wanting to change, was caught in its own trap of delivery, trying to come good on its housing promise to the people.

So how to put an end to this ever-popular and yet ever-criticized program that is only half-complete?  What to say to a desperate populous still struggling for basic,

adequate shelter?  In my opinion the government needs to face up to reality, that houses alone are not lifting people out of poverty, and that the promise they made is unrealistic and unachievable.  It does not need to be abandoned altogether, but rather transformed into a policy that not only provides shelter, but also provides a model for the future – an innovative solution that builds up natural resources, creates opportunities for skills development and job creation, and genuinely creates a better quality of life.

**The Ecological Consequences**
Aside from all of these social issues and problems with implementation, the RDP housing program also comes with enormous ecological consequences, which are not being considered in housing program design.  Contours of the land are not analyzed for placement of dwellings and hardscape, and there is no zoning for green space or the planting of trees, which compounds vulnerability to soil erosion especially where settlements are built on slopes or degraded land.  By building houses adjacent to or within incredibly dense settlements, the program is setting the stage for further exploitation of already depleted resources and exacerbating pollution problems.  Within the houses themselves, the use of cheaply-made materials will provide long-term issues of waste creation and consequent refurbishing (some have already experienced collapsed roofs and other calamities) which will require further expense and materials.  They were also designed to be put up quickly and easily, but not for pleasant living conditions within or 'smart' housing which would have incorporated 'green' strategies such as natural insulation and passive solar orientation for natural heating, lighting and ventilation.  It is clear there are better ways of doing this – and there are examples worldwide of innovative strategies, such as the competition for a $300 eco-house for the Dharavi settlement in India, but these types of creative approaches are not being taken into account.[11]

**Policy Recommendations for the Department of Human Settlements to Turn the RDP into a Transformational Housing Policy:**
1) Redesign RDP housing program to embody its reformed name of 'human settlement' and the government's original promise to create 'viable communities', recognizing that housing is a key factor in creating a sustainable society.
2) View Housing Policy as an opportunity to create a model for long-term human settlement and the building blocks of a sustainable future by designing 'sustainable communities'[1] rather than individual houses.
3) Acknowledge that housing provision must be accompanied by measures to support fulfillment of all basic human needs and quality of life, not just shelter, but food, water, healthcare, a clean environment, and opportunities for self-development and meaningful and productive work.

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[1] Fritjof Capra (1996) defines 'sustainable communities' as 'social & cultural environments in which we can satisfy our needs and aspirations without diminishing those of future generations'

4) Make use of the success of the RDP Housing Policy implementation – the fact that thousands of houses *are* being built and there is progress on the ground, to implement a more holistic program that incorporates environmental, social and health objectives.
5) Explore diversified solutions to housing provision that incorporate environmental quality, localized resource management and sustainability at the core of their design.
6) Let urban planning and settlement design be influenced by natural patterns in the environment and by social patterns within communities, rather than vice versa.

**Sustainability**
For most people the challenge of sustainability is too overwhelming to grapple with, as it requires a holistic approach, and thus every aspect of development must be addressed at once, as an integrated whole, and not in separate compartments as most modern governments and societies have come to organize themselves. Therefore, and the RDP housing policy is a great example of this, it is not adequate to build houses alone, those houses must be accompanied by access to education and healthcare, renewable energy, efficient transport, skills development, green spaces, clean environments, job creation, social justice and community cohesion. This type of integrated policy approach is rare if not nonexistent, and thus even when a government becomes interested in addressing an issue in this way, there is virtually no precedent.

While clearly social programs such as education, job creation and health care are being addressed by other parts of the public sector, not only are these efforts uncoordinated with the RDP Housing Policy, but housing has taken precedence. Therefore, my recommendation is that the RDP Housing Policy make use of its prioritized placement in government initiatives to implement a holistic program that integrates housing with these other development objectives.

**Social considerations:**
Existing informal settlements are self-organizing; often many houses are linked in a network around a central space that operates as a tavern, a café, or a shop, with the houses arranged in a circle to serve as security for one another and for the business venture inside, as well as to preserve social networks. RDP housing does not take these social arrangements into account, and rather builds individual houses separated into neat rows. As a result plots are often filled internally with shack housing that maintains these social webs.

Smart policy would be to observe how housing is currently organized within informal settlements and pattern the new housing structures after that organization. Residents themselves can be a part of this process through participatory consultation, allowing settlements to in essence design themselves. Encouraging and designing for collaborative living arrangements will allow for social cohesion, as well as resource sharing and efficiency.

**Environmental Considerations**
**Water**
Any human settlement that is aiming to persist sustainably into the future must be based around a replenishing resource base, and no other resource is more important than water. An integrated approach must include an aggressive strategy for water conservation, regeneration and capture, in order to serve the needs of the population now, and particularly as we move into a water insecure future. In Johannesburg the water situation is particularly precarious – currently 88% of the city water supply is imported, the majority pumped in from the mountains of Lesotho. In addition, the city's own water resources are in imminent danger of being declared irreversibly contaminated by acid mine drainage (arsenic, iron & other heavy metals that are seeping into the aquifers from area gold mines), an issue of rising environmental concern and potentially devastating consequence for Johannesburg. [12] Informal settlements, located on the edges of the city, are also frequently established in flood-prone areas and along tributaries of urban riverways that hold the highest levels of pollution.

No settlement will go far into the future without water, and thus any sustainable settlement policy must have a multi-faceted approach to water resource management, including clean-up of existing waterways, education and technology for water conservation, and rainwater capture at household and community levels.

**Sustainable Waste Management**
Currently, overcrowding and dense settlement patterns combined with insufficient coverage of water and sanitation services result in sewage overflows, water shortages, public toilets that are over-utilized to the point of being health hazards, heavy littering, a prevalence of rubbish fires, and dumping. All of this makes for unpleasant living conditions, along with contamination of local soil, and severe pollution of air and water.

A holistic waste management strategy would organize and coordinate waste collection for maximum recycling, would include recycling education and training, would repair and upgrade existing plumbing and sewerage facilities while beginning to introduce alternative models of waste management such as home-scale and community-scale composting, greywater recovery and recycling, and eco-toilets.

**Food Security:**
The current situation within informal settlements is that of little if any access to fresh fruits & vegetables, while informal settlements house the most vulnerable populations to food insecurity. As stated previously, these populations also experience the highest prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS, disproportionately higher than the rate outside of these settlements, with numbers infected reaching over 50% in some areas.[13] Consequently, these areas are the highest in need of nutrition interventions, of diets high in fruit and vegetables (to support immunity, as well as

to complement anti-retroviral treatments), and also present a large market and demand for medicinal plants to support preventative and primary health care.

Settlement planning through the RDP should incorporate space for food production at the household level – for home-based caregivers and for people living with HIV and AIDS, this type of home gardening of vegetables and medicinal plants could make a critical difference for survival.  In households where there are undernourished children, it is equally critical that they receive the vitamins and nutrients at an early age to support disease resistance and healthy growth. Programs must include education and training around nutrition, gardening for nutrition, and medicinal plant use and production.

Additionally, in urban areas a lack of water and lack of access to land means very few local food producers, with the majority of foods being imported from outside the settlement.

**Trees and Urban Greening:**
Informal settlements on the whole are resource barren, dusty zones of earth and hardscape, presenting enormous run-off problems and causing soil erosion. Generally tree-less, these areas experience greater temperature and climatic extremes, and are thus more vulnerable to the adverse impacts of droughts, floods, and storm damage.

Trees and green zones provide multiple benefits -- acting as 'urban lungs', filtering and cleaning the air, providing habitat, offering shade and climate regulation, and can also provide many uses: functioning as an urban wood lot, providing small amounts of timber for construction, cooking or home heating, as well as for fruit production.  Trees also improve quality of life and give a sense of permanence to a settlement, literally rooting it down into the ground.

**Energy:**
In terms of settlement design, wherever possible to design for small-scale and localized power production from renewable resources, and use of applications that are managed and repaired by community members, and that can be serviced and provided by local entrepreneurs.  Small-scale solar technology, biogas generators and wind and water turbine applications must be integrated into settlement design.

These recommendations are a starting point, and would form part of a larger planning portfolio that must thoroughly address other related and interdependent issues, but the above suggestions will form a blueprint for how to look at the other aspects that make up the complete picture of a 'sustainable community'.

**The bigger picture:**
Of course, the prospect of designing truly sustainable settlements that are socially and ecologically appropriate and that serve an almost impossible demand – that of an ever-increasing population ever-moving to the cities, is very complicated, and

cannot be comprehensive without addressing other major issues that question the very way we live on this planet. That stated, there are still some very difficult questions to grapple with in this particular scenario in order to take this first step.

*Politically:* How to move out of the giveaway mode of 'houses for all' without causing a riot and or without losing national favor and political support? How to transform this outdated political promise with easy-to-quantify deliverables into more relevant, holistic policy?

*Environmentally:* Should we be living in cities at all? Is urbanization the most efficient way to organize an ever-increasing human population whose existence is ultimately dependent on natural resources? How to account for the fact that the urban population is growing exponentially and will continue to do so regardless of housing and settlement planning, and the fact that this in itself might make planning redundant? How far can we go with ecological adaptations to the urban context before we are compelled to question human settlement patterns altogether?

*Morally:* How can we address the housing crisis in isolation of the population crisis? Who gets to make the choices about how we live?

**Policy Integration:**
Probably the deepest and most demanding challenge of all is to alter the compartmentalization mentality that dictates how policies are determined and enacted within the South African government. Currently, house design and construction is determined by the Department of Human Settlements, the Department of Water Affairs & Forestry dictates urban water strategy, and the Department of Land Use deals with zoning and allocation of lands for development. In an integrated sustainable human settlement policy, each of these departments would be need to work together every step of the way and recognize that their areas are both interlinked and interdependent and that they must work in tandem in order to enact a real transformation. The challenge for a government to have genuine integrated planning is a large one, but a reform to the RDP program is perhaps just the guinea pig to demonstrate the viability and value of such an exercise.

**Moving Forward:**
So where do we go from here? Is changing the style of house, making settlements more socially integrated and environmentally sound, and dictating this through policy enough? Or must urban areas be completely re-thought, re-zoned, and re-organized? The bigger issue is urbanization compounded by population increase, and the fact that trends predict that both will get worse with time. Additionally, there is the way that we have come to live as a society, with an ever-increasing amount of resources needed to sustain our lifestyles.

The answer, as always, must come from both ends. Sustainability specialist Marc Swilling predicts that by 2050, 7 billion of the 9 billion people on the planet will live

in cities.[14]  We must re-examine the way we live as humans and begin to integrate more localized and less resource-intensive ways of living.  We also must concurrently seek functional ways to live in high-density high-demand areas, like Johannesburg.  It will most certainly come through a diversified approach with a mix of various types of housing.  But, however it looks, continuing with the RDP strategy of knocking out thousands upon thousands of cookie-cutter homes without further consideration for the socio-cultural or ecological impacts, nor the variety of types of needs that need to be met alongside housing and shelter, is not the way forward.

In economics, we examine the opportunity cost of our choices – i.e. if I do this, what will I be *not* doing?  South Africa must also examine closely the opportunity cost of the RDP housing program.

This month, Housing Minister Tokyo Sexwale stated the obvious – that the government cannot provide free housing forever – while simultaneously presenting to the public that the housing budget for 2011 has been increased by 38%, to a whopping 22.5 billion rand.[15]  How much of that funding could be spent to work towards the things that RDP houses have been found not to provide – like food security, improved education, protection of natural resources, and job skills development?  Minister Sexwale claims that dependency on the state is not sustainable, and that 'sometime in the future there will have to come a need to have a cutoff point on the government's subsidized housing, where people can begin to do things for themselves.'  However, for the moment, that day seems far away in the future.  In the meanwhile, the RDP housing policy trudges forward, gobbling up resources, and hindering a more progressive and integrated development vision, when it could instead be the perfect opportunity and the perfect vehicle with which to drive transformational change.

**More than One Solution:**
Creating sustainable settlements will look different in different contexts, different in Johannesburg than in the rural Transkei, different in the Cape Flats than on the Cape peninsula, different per cultural group, per climate, and per population trend.  It would be worth the government's while to put out tenders, host a competition for different solutions to sustainable community building in different areas, and to fund several of them – see how they unfold on the ground and learn from what works and what doesn't – this is more difficult to quantify and certainly more challenging in terms of PR than saying the virtuous and victorious 'we have built our people 2 million houses!' but will allow for the emergence of long-term and context-appropriate solutions that *work* and that can truly build sustainability.

The factory-style production of one-size-fits-all RDP housing is serving that type of output accounting that governments look for to prove that they are delivering services to their people, but in truth are creating more long-term problems, and we are left with the uneasy sense that there is a bubbling cauldron beneath the urban fabric just waiting to come to a dangerous boil.   It is time to redirect political energy, resources and ideas towards where we are reluctant to, but know that we

must, go – towards creating the world that will still be here for our children, a world we can be proud of, that is beautiful and abundant and feeds a quality of life that we relish and celebrate.  The only pathway towards this heavenly scenario is to design unrelentingly for sustainability.  For this we need an integrated and holistic approach.  Difficult as it may be, it is the only way forward.

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