

The Daily News Thursday May 16 1991

Lack of housing a major problem

Reality of homeless families living on Durban's streets not far off

SAYED IQBAL MOHAMED, chairman of the Durban Central Residents' Association, takes a look at the enormous and growing problem of the lack of accommodation and informal settlements.

THE reality of homeless families of "all colours" living on the streets of Durban is not far away. The periphery is bursting at its seams with "informal settlements" inevitably becoming the cities of tomorrow. Durban's approximately 3 500 pavement people population is increasing and is a reminder of the present cities having to accommodate more homeless individuals and families. Would State President F.W. de Klerk's reform therefore ease the housing crisis? What lies beneath the euphoria of the proposed scrapping of the Lands and Group Areas Acts?

According to Mike Fowids, of the South African Housing trust, the equivalent of 40 cities about the size of Soweto need to be built to shelter the homeless. This excludes the housing backlog in urban areas which, according to the Urban Foundation stood at 850 000 units in 1988. These figures also exclude the homelands. What really lies below the imminent housing and land "revolution" is a nightmare of experiences for the masses.

To glean an idea of some of the hardships experienced by both the formal and informal residents, let us firstly examine the shacklands or informal settlements perceived by authorities in particular as a growing problem.

"Squatters" an inappropriate word suggesting temporary sojourners, and shack settlements are synonymous with social pathology. That is to say the high rates of crime and unemployment and the possible outbreak of diseases are almost always linked with squatter settlement."

On the contrary, shacklands are solutions to the Government's failure to provide shelter. It is the absence of essential services which present problems. The myth of social pathology originated in the 50s by studies on "squatting" in Britain and America. Why is there such a growing housing crisis? Studies by academics and information from community-based organisations show that economic, social and cultural factors are the major reasons for the rural-urban migration. Natural growth is another major reason for urbanisation and is not unique to South Africa.

What about people living in rented accommodation, the tension between landlord and tenant and the rights of tenants? The plight of Mrs Alena de Wit, a pensioner who was suddenly displaced from her flat in Durban central, which she has occupied for the past 40 years, exemplifies the new trend. The change of ownership

last year literally meant the change of lifestyles for tenants. Within weeks of the property changing hands tenants, including Mrs de Wit were faced with evictions to allow the landlords to convert the flats into holiday apartments.

Many tenants over the past 20 months were displaced from several high rise buildings because of the increased conversion of existing residential accommodation to office blocks. In sharp contrast, no rented accommodation has been built in the city over the past decade, according to one leading estate agent. Ironically, the same estate agent was waiting for permission from the Durban City Council to convert about 60 flats for non-residential use. All the tenants moved out by December last year.

As for the Albert Park and Point areas white residents see the “intrusion” of blacks into these areas as the main cause of “lowering of standards”. They are right...in so far as the standards of maintenance and repairs and the general upkeep of premises are concerned. It is the slumlords who have lowered the standards because of their attitude towards blacks. Black tenants are victims of the housing crisis, which is the result of the ever growing demand with almost no supply. White tenants too are becoming victims to similar attitudes over the last 10 months.

Housing schemes for low income families have failed simply because the target growth is usually missed. These houses are taken up by the middle income group who themselves are in need of housing. In some instances, incorrect income is produced by middle income families to qualify for ownership. In certain cases more than one house is purchased by the same family and then rented out.

In the townships, allegations of corruption by government officials are growing. The resultant tension or conflict is understandable when the feelings of the permanent residents are considered. In Kwa Dabeka, which came into existence because of the overpopulated adjoining township of Clermont residents who have lived in pre-fab structures or “shacks” for 21 years are witnessing the mushrooming of low income housing schemes. Even though they are eligible and can afford to own these houses they are excluded from securing tenure for themselves.

Behind the expensive curtains of officialdom and De Klerk’s reform, plans are being hatched, a top downward approach, to make *ex gratia* money available for the purchase of sites. The small amounts will not be sufficient to build a toilet but will definitely give rise to more shack-lands. Sadly though, the occupants of shacks and rented accommodation, those living in over-crowded conditions and the homeless are waiting for a miraculous housing revolution. The foundation for a better, just and peaceful future has not even begun if one were to accept that shelter is a basic necessity.