

# Housing now a political football

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The furore over the municipal housing sales has become a political game. The voice of the poor, through the concerned citizens' forum, engaged the officials and councillors to address the needs of the poor and the pathetic conditions of their dwellings in the late 1990s.

About three years ago, certain officials like Derek Naidoo, Dr Mike Sutcliffe and councillor Nigel Gumede, among others, came up with a plan of action. Naidoo pioneered a solution through the Sydenham Heights model that has since become one of the best approaches in the country to address the genuine concerns and grievances of the tenants around municipal housing stock.

Durban took a giant leap in its upgrade of the housing stock through renovation, redecoration and creating short-term employment opportunities for the poor tenants. The "municipal team" upstaged the United Kingdom and other countries that are still besieged by unresolved issues around disposing off their housing stock with an all inclusive approach. The purchase cost, rental arrears and the conditions of the dwellings were some of the factors contributing to tenants' resistance, here and abroad.

The eThekweni municipality had to find a way to help the poorest of the poor. It had a duty to invest in its people's future and security of tenure. It was necessary to write off arrears but where to secure

additional money and to prevent abuse were some of the major challenges that prevented the sales. The national Ministry of Housing had to be lobbied and the city treasurer had to buy into the proposals. The subsidy increase was approved only recently. The way around possible abuse, to prevent a new owner from being induced to sell after rental arrears were written off and the dwelling given free of charge, was finalised in December 2005. It is unfortunate that this coincided with the municipal elections and the pressure from the tenants, who are entitled to ownership, given the history of the municipal housing policy deeply rooted in the apartheid past.

Yet, there are many more issues that need to be addressed. The rating of the properties for one, and the many dwellings owned by the provincial government and the municipality that are in urgent need of repairs and renovation. All stakeholders will use the political weapon to ensure their slice, unaware of the internal difficulties in fine tuning solutions that are now going to be rolled out. The "municipal team" had committed itself to deliver; irrespective of the elections, those who bought into the process, especially the poor tenants, are not prepared to wait.

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