

30 October 2023

The shifting landscape of South Africa's informal settlements

By [Lyse Comins](#)



Shacks in Tembisa, Gauteng. Photo by Delwyn Verasamy

South Africa's tough economic conditions have made living in overcrowded informal settlements and urban apartments the only viable option for many struggling households, and despite the government making inroads in the provision of formal housing, these homes appear to be a permanent feature of our country.

Census 2022, released earlier this month, shows that 88.5% of the population live in formal housing and that the number of traditional and informal [houses](#) has decreased over the past 10 years.

This is an improvement from Census 1996 and 2011, when 65.1% and 77.6% of people, respectively, reported living in formal dwellings.

Architecture and urban planning experts this week put into context how the national [department of human settlements](#), and the provincial and local government housing departments, have contributed to this improvement over the past 30 years, to the point where 29.9% of the population has received access to government housing.

They also say there are signs that the rapid rate of urbanisation could be about to slow, as it has in Latin America, even if populations have not shrunk, creating the perception of a growing number of structures in informal settlements.

According to the latest housing data supplied by the department of human settlements, there are 4 297 informal settlements across the country — which are home to more than two million households — most of which are concentrated in the major metropolitan areas of Johannesburg (210), Cape Town (464) and eThekweni (530).

Annually, building even as many as between 38 632 (the number of homes the department constructed in 2022-23) and 53 655 homes (the department's 2023-24 target) is but a drop in the ocean, compared to the enormous demand for housing in cities, close to work and economic opportunities.

“The population growth rate, combined with the rapidly rising [urbanisation](#), are the main reasons why there is a growth of informal settlements irrespective of the work that the department has been doing,” departmental spokesperson Nozipho Zulu says.

“The department has made huge strides in this regard, as noted by the recently released census that the growth of informality has stabilised and has been shrinking,” she says.

In addition, the government is investing resources to manage and contain the growing number of informal settlements in the form of the Urban Settlements Development Grant and the Informal Settlements Upgrading Programme Grant (ISUPG) for metros (including the provision of water and sanitation and electricity), Zulu says.

It is also collaborating with the department of co-operative governance and traditional affairs to support development within non-metro municipalities (secondary cities) as a long-term plan to deal with inward migration, which contributes to the growth of informal settlements.

Of the one billion global slum dwellers, 238 million live in Southern Africa, Zulu added.

“Africa’s population is projected to double between now and 2050 and two-thirds of this growth will be absorbed by urban areas. It is in this context that the upgrading programme must be comprehended,” she says.

[Gauteng](#) department of human settlements spokesperson Tahir Sema says that in spite of municipalities preventing illegal land occupation, upgrading settlements in terms of ISUPG, and the fact the province had built 793 766 houses since 1994, a total of 621 informal settlements had been mapped in 2019.

“Gauteng has the largest population growth rate of 25%. This population boom is happening at a much greater rate than formal, subsidised housing is being provisioned for. As a result, people end up creating informal settlements,” Sema says.

“In-migration in Gauteng is estimated at 300 000 people per annum. This continues to create a housing gap as more people are flocking into Gauteng metros and municipalities to seek better work opportunities to improve their lives.”

In [KwaZulu-Natal](#), the province that houses the metro with the biggest number of informal settlements, human settlements spokesperson Mbulelo Baloyi says a total of 687 715 government housing units had been built since 1994.

“But, at the last provincial count, there were still 937 informal settlements with about 730 (77.9%) located in eThekweni metro.

“There are almost 400 000 households living in informal settlements across the province and the population number in these dwellings is between 700 000 and a million,” Baloyi says.

“We are not alone in our resolve to upgrade informal settlements. We remain totally committed to following the Global Action Plan Framework on Informal Settlements and Slums which was launched in October last year.

“We understand that informal settlements are the direct result of the increasing rate of urbanisation and we are responding in a systematic way as it is a national priority.”

He says the province had targeted 35 informal settlements for upgrading projects to undergo Phase 1 planning, and 20 projects to undergo Phase 2 planning, in 2022-23.

Development, architectural and spatial planning experts shed light on the socio-economic conditions that drive people to live in shacks, signs that urbanisation might be starting to flatline and the perception that informal settlements are burgeoning despite strong government interventions.

[University of the Witwatersrand](#) School of and Planning Professor Marie Huchzermeyer, whose research interests include informal settlement policy and urban planning, says the make-up of informal settlements is shifting, while the problem of cramped urban living, where several households live in one apartment (a family in each room), in urban areas persists.

‘Consolidating’ informal housing

“Many informal settlements in the greater Johannesburg area are ‘consolidating’, meaning residents are converting their more makeshift shack structures into brick-and-mortar buildings,” she says.

“Often this trend and the confidence to invest in this way is triggered by the electrification of such areas, which is carried out by Eskom or municipal power utility companies, and is often delinked from an upgrading process, which would be run by municipal or provincial housing departments and would ultimately lead to an informal settlement transitioning into a neighbourhood fully integrated into the planning, land registration and infrastructure system.”

She says this could also be why Census 2022 statistics showed such a high number of people living in formal homes.

“If households in informal settlements no longer live in a shack, they will have indicated to the census enumerators that they live in a formal house. It would take careful interrogation of the census data at the level of individual enumeration areas to ascertain the prevalence of this trend,” she says.

Huchzermeyer says the growth of informal settlements is paralleled by the growth in backyard rental structures in areas developed with “RDP” (Reconstruction and Development Programme) housing.

“It’s clear that, with a reduction in the pace of constructing free-standing ‘RDP’ houses, and a move toward building ‘walk-ups’ (low-rise apartment buildings) for the same subsidy qualifiers, the growth in backyard rental structures will inevitably decline and informal settlements will be absorbing more of the housing need,” she says.

The family life-cycle trend meant people would eventually move out of backyard rentals to live independently, which contributed to the growth in Joburg’s informal settlements.

“As backyard rental requires the payment of rents, any economic decline will necessitate households moving out of rental into informal settlements. However, rental is also prevalent, to varying extent, in informal settlements,” Huchzermeyer says.

South African Research Chair in Spatial Analysis and City Planning with the National Research Foundation and University of the Witwatersrand Professor Philip Harrison, who previously served on the National Planning Commission, says while Census 2022 data showed a decline in the number of informal structures this did not necessarily mean the population had dropped.

He says this could be due to people building with bricks and mortar in these settlements and to the rise in small-scale developers in townships producing rental stock.

While there had been a decline in the construction of government housing over the past decade, 29.9% of households live in formal state-provided houses, which is “significant in international terms, and this should not be discounted in any critique of the state’s housing programme”.

Harrison added: “The perception of continued rapid growth of large cities with a ‘mushrooming of informal settlements’ may be misplaced.

“Urban growth rates may in fact be reducing. This is partly to do with the fact that our level of urbanisation is already approaching 70% and so the urbanisation curve will invariably start to flatten.”

“This has happened in other contexts, including Latin America, for example, where the period of rapid urbanisation and mega-city development came to an end by the early 2000s,” he says.

“The other South African reality is life in cities is precarious and a decade or so of constrained economic growth may be reflecting now in census figures of reduced urban growth rates and higher-than-average growth in some (not all) so-called rural areas which offer more long-term household security”.