

## OPINION

# JOHN SPYROPOULOS: Rethinking informal settlement upgrading: tackling the problem from below

Government needs to co-ordinated programmes and involve community-based organisations

08 MAY 2023 - 05:00 JOHN SPYROPOULOS



The expansion of informal settlements and the deepening impoverishment of its residents is one of the starkest manifestations of SA's governance and economic redistributive failure. Though the problem is reaching a crisis point, it seldom receives the attention it deserves.

There is a serious need in the government to better understand the reasons for this failure and find more effective strategies for a resolution. The answers are often hiding in plain sight: we need better managed and co-ordinated programmes; we need to focus on improving livelihoods as well as infrastructure; and we need to fund and enable residents to implement the changes that they require.

In 2021 it was reported that there were about 1,900 informal settlements in the country's eight metropolitan areas, ranging from small clusters of shacks to shantytowns of more than 8,000 structures. Together these were occupied by more than 1.1-million households. If the metros of Johannesburg, Tshwane and Cape Town are anything to go by, that number has now increased by a further 20%.

**Reversing current trends and extracting the urban poor from the hole our historical legacy and the government have dug for them will involve resolute, unwavering political will and well-timed action by the state, corporates, and the urban poor themselves.**

This failure by the state and the market translates into generalised monetary impoverishment and personal insecurity. It worsens already stretched financial interdependence among family members, draining the earnings of those who are employed and pushing them over the edge of the poverty abyss.

Reversing current trends and extracting the urban poor from the hole our historical legacy and the government have dug for them will involve resolute, unwavering political will and well-timed action by the state, corporates, and the urban poor themselves. Even then the outcome of this process remains unpredictable. However, success is within reach.

Better governance of interdepartmental and intergovernmental grant programmes is a starting point. This includes informal settlement upgrading programmes and social and economic infrastructure and public works programmes. These programmes exist, and for the most part they remain adequately resourced. Generally lacking are institutional arrangements to deliver the sustained improvement of living conditions and more reliable livelihoods in informal settlements. This is not an easy task, but the road map is clear. It requires three closely-related changes in attitude and practice.

First is to accept the principle of incremental improvement of living conditions and *in situ* provision of municipal services to residents of informal settlements. The rate at which settlements are upgraded *in situ* depends on the capacity of the government to spend money accountably and efficiently. It is also critically dependent on the “readiness” of resident communities to involve themselves in the upgrading processes. At present these essential requirements are inadequate and need support.

The second change involves shifting the discourse away from “service delivery” and dependence on the government for these services. It requires use of a language and a development practice demonstrating confidence in ordinary people and their ability to learn

and do things for themselves, with state support. As trite as it sounds, it is necessary to say that poor people know what they need and, barring internal conflicts over resources and power, how to act to meet these needs.

Furthermore, given the opportunity and time to learn they can be vital agents in transforming their own reality. Community-led action can order priorities and, with time and assistance, overcome internal conflicts that hamper service provision.

### **Livelihoods before land rights**

The third change involves prioritising livelihoods instead of the regularisation of land rights and provision of physical municipal services and infrastructure. Emphasis on livelihoods is not a dismissal of efforts to improve the physical infrastructure in informal settlements. It is rather a recognition of the importance of livelihoods given the time it takes to implement upgrading.

People in informal settlements need their living conditions to be improved, but they also need money. Community dynamics are stressed and volatile, and leadership credibility wears thin without tangible results. Delays in upgrading, coupled with a lack of tangible benefits, compromise the very community structures government needs for effective “delivery”.

Prioritising the immediate needs of the poor for jobs and money raises the general level of buying power of poor families. This can be done, for example, through targeted public employment programmes. Just recently a network of 16 community services organisations and community-based networks combined voluntarily in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban to apply for government public employment funding to generate more than 5,300 jobs. So far funding has been approved in Cape Town and Durban. The communities in more than 90 informal settlements identified the job projects themselves. They include, among other tasks, solid waste management, community safety, mapping and addressing, support for early childhood development, and Wi-Fi access.

Public employment programmes that employ community members in such vital tasks can make settlements healthier, more resilient and safer from petty crimes. They necessarily involve community organisation, including agreement in the community about priority work or jobs in the settlement and agreement on who is employed first and who is employed later. This community engagement, through collective decision-making, has the potential to forge the organisational mettle for collaboration by community leaders with the government over bigger issues.

### **Social facilitation grants**

Funding for community engagement (social facilitation) is built into the informal settlement programme. But municipal procurement procedures are impossible for community organisations to navigate — and often too demanding for the intermediary community

service organisations that work with them. In addition, the system of social facilitation grants is intended to expedite the efforts of the government and its consultant service providers — not those of communities themselves.

The answer to this problem must lie in appropriately designed procurement procedures that enable effective community participation. But even this does not address the fundamental problem: the impulse to blame communities themselves, asserting that they are disorganised and conflict ridden. The real problem is time-consuming and ineffective co-ordination of government expenditure between national, provincial and local government, and the failure to allocate adequate capacity, including community capacity, for steady systematic upgrading.

Addressing this fundamental problem requires co-ordination of citywide land-use plans, infrastructure provision, land and services provision, and year-on-year budgeting. It requires dedicated public employment funding, such as the extended public works programme, and provision of local settlement project funding that systematically builds the social and economic infrastructure of people in informal settlements.

Finally, funding is required for building the capacities of community-based organisations and their support organisations through networks of practical peer-to-peer learning, not tick-box verification of attendance in consultant-driven, classroom-type workshops.

If the literal meaning of the word “irony” is the dissonance between what is intended and what actually occurs, SA’s failure to upgrade informal settlements at scale is a perfect example. The elements necessary for success are largely in place. But they are not synchronised.

Co-ordination of government efforts and resources is essential, and the means to achieve it are at hand. These means are not simply a more efficient and effective department of human settlements, nor even a more representative and decentralised construction industry. What is needed is consistent joint interdepartmental programme co-ordination at each level and strong collaboration with community organisations.

*• Dr Spyropoulos is an urban strategy consultant who has worked as an adviser to the Treasury's city support programme on the development of a community development approach to informal settlement upgrades.*