

STRATEGY FOR THE POOR OP-ED

# The City of Johannesburg does have an inner-city housing plan – it just hasn't implemented it



Residents run with their personal belongings as a fire burns in their building in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, on 16 April 2020. (Photo: EPA-EFE / Kim Ludbrook)



By Tanya Zack and Sarah Charlton

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There has been much said about the failure of the City of Johannesburg to carry out its mandate with respect to basic health and safety conditions in the inner city, but far less about specifically what interventions are needed. Critical among these is to upgrade housing conditions, expand accommodation choices and increase housing supply, including for very poor people.

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This is a formidable task, requiring an evidence-based and tailored strategy. Yet one exists, one that offers many of the building blocks needed – but it has been little actioned.

Joburg's inner-city housing problems are complex. Multifaceted interventions are needed.

In an emergency phase, safety must be improved within buildings. In the short term, criminals and networks that exploit and profit from residential vulnerability must be tackled. And the housing response must include rehabilitating buildings in disarray, and radically improving the supply of cheap accommodation. A diversity of responses is needed.

The approach must include differentiating carefully among existing building situations. Informally let buildings in the city mask a wide variety of circumstances. Physical and organisational conditions vary considerably, and the fact that a building is run down does not necessarily evidence criminal takeover. The term "hijacked" is being used far too loosely in the aftermath of the devastating fire at 80 Albert Street last week.

To make progress on the many housing failures and gaps, multiple simultaneous actions must take place. The government cannot manage this alone, though it has a fundamental role to play. Partnerships across state, private sector, residents and support organisations are essential to providing housing for the poor.



*Windows are boarded up in a 'hijacked' building in Johannesburg during a raid by metro police officers in 2019. (Photo: EPA-EFE / Kim Ludbrook)*

These ideas are not new. Working with diverse actors and partnerships is central to the City-commissioned strategy known as ICHIP (the [Johannesburg Inner City Housing Implementation Plan](#)). The plan was approved by the mayoral Committee in 2017 but never fully adopted and implemented.

ICHIP considers all income groups but emphasises the housing needs of poor people. This recognises the inner city as an entry point and a place of opportunity for many, including the poor. Read the presentation on the Inner City Roadmap [here](#). The final draft version can be found on the Johannesburg Inner City Partnership [website](#).

### **Obstacles and strategies**

Providing affordable housing is no easy task.

The bald facts are that many households have exceedingly low and precarious incomes; their earnings are tied to being in the inner city; and they need to live as cheaply as possible there. But there is an almost negligible supply of reasonable, compliant accommodation in the price range or at the affordability levels of these households.

No ready-made formal housing model meets this situation. There is no rental subsidy in place for the poor. Inner-city rentals are often exorbitant. And utility costs such as water and electricity are additional, but tenants and landlords face high municipal charges and erratic billing and supply.

*The plan advocates for emergency action to secure conditions of health and safety, including emergency water points, toilets and refuse removal.*

Rental charges cannot be brought down low enough for poor people to afford, even in the state-supported accommodation known as social housing. This is because the government does not have a subsidised rental model suitable for the inner city. This gap in the national housing programme is long recognised and has been debated since the early days of formulating the post-apartheid housing policy.

Based on an in-depth analysis of incomes, demographics and available housing in the inner city (which can be found in Section 3 of the document), a key thrust in the ICHIP proposed ways to stimulate the supply of budget accommodation, including by the private sector or commercial suppliers, social housing institutions and the state itself. Strategies aim to help both commercial landlords and social housing institutions provide cheaper accommodation.



*A woman is shocked after the door of her room is kicked down by a police officer during a raid by metro police officers on notorious hijacked 'dark buildings' in downtown Johannesburg on 12 June 2019. (Photo: EPA-EFE / Kim Ludbrook)*

The ICHIP proposed ways to deliver and operate municipal-owned housing and shelters. It put forward incentives and direct funding to increase the supply of accommodation, and decrease rental costs. The plan has an area-based approach, suggesting what kinds of housing should be supported in different places. It looks at the vast potential for supplying low-rise rental supply in the near-inner-city suburbs.

Among a set of actions, the plan advocates for emergency action to secure conditions of health and safety, including emergency water points, toilets and refuse removal.

In short, the ICHIP requires the City to commit to its role as an agent as well as an enabler of development, as a provider of services, as a subsidy agent and as a provider of social and welfare support. But it recognises the need to act in concert with many partners, including inner-city residents.

The ICHIP exists. But it has mostly not been actioned. It offers much to draw on for the reinvigorated housing strategy the inner city urgently needs.

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