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NICK BUDLENDER AND FEZEKA LUDIDI: Human settlements policy review requires great care and collaboration

Present version needs to be comprehensively and carefully reworked; minor edits and additions won't solve the housing crisis

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by NICK BUDLENDER AND FEZEKA LUDIDI

SA's human settlements policy is undergoing its first major review since 2004. Land and housing dynamics in the country have shifted significantly in the past two decades, and the publishing of a draft White Paper on Human Settlements on December 18 last year is therefore a welcome development.

However, many long-established organisations working on housing and human settlements in SA feel this pivotal moment of policy reformulation shouldn't be hurried, and should rather follow a more considered, collaborative and inclusive process that reflects the complexity and significance of the issues at hand.

The National Housing Forum, a diverse group established at the dawn of democracy to determine how the government would address the housing crisis, can provide inspiration. It is important to highlight that the minister, Mmamoloko Kubayi, and her department have now extended the deadline for comments on the draft white paper twice in an effort to improve both the breadth and depth of submissions received from the public.

The department has run numerous consultations on the draft white paper around the country, and the minister has personally attended several of those. The department's willingness to open space for engagement is welcomed. However, beyond the collection of more inputs the white paper requires a collaborative, structured consultation body to ensure a cohesive and powerful

document. The current version cannot be fixed with minor edits and additions; ultimately, it needs to be comprehensively and carefully reworked.

Historically, the state's role in relation to housing primarily has been to provide completed, state-funded homes to beneficiaries with low or no income who cannot access them through the private market. The government has built almost 4-million homes since 1994, meaning roughly a third of all SA households have benefited from some form of housing subsidy. That's a remarkable achievement, notwithstanding valid concerns about the quality and location of many of those homes and that housing backlogs are larger now than they were in 1994. The substantial growth of both informal settlements and informal backyard housing are evidence of the challenges in the sector.

As is outlined in the draft white paper, the state's weak fiscal position, rapid urbanisation and our society's socioeconomic profile mean it is no longer possible for government to rely primarily on its role as housing provider. Not only has the housing budget faced repeated cuts, but delivery isn't close to matching the growing demand for housing in towns, cities and rural areas. Instead, and as is recognised in the draft white paper, the state will have to reorientate towards a more enabling role with more clearly defined pathways to scale, so people can more easily build decent, safe homes for themselves within integrated and sustainable human settlements. That, of course, doesn't mean the state should withdraw from its involvement in housing, but rather that it needs to pragmatically shift its approach to meet the current challenges and realise housing rights within the confines of available resources.

It's encouraging that the department has recognised the limitations of the present approach to housing and human settlement delivery and that change is needed, but it remains to be seen exactly what form this change will take and what enabling levers need to be activated. The draft white paper is insufficiently clear on why well-intended programmes and initiatives haven't been successful, nor does it offer clear pathways to effectively address the housing crisis. There is now a rare opportunity to reshape SA human settlements policy to yield broad, transformative outcomes for millions of families nationwide. However, this will rely on a careful, rigorous process that learns from the past and from the experiences of other countries.

Safe, dignified and functional

If SA is going to successfully shift towards a greater focus on self-build and incremental housing, careful consideration will need to be given to exactly how

government will collaboratively support households to ensure they build homes and neighbourhoods that are safe, dignified and functional. For example, how will people access affordable materials and contractors? How will they fund their homes? What forms of financial and non-financial support will be offered? How will incremental planning and tenure arrangements be established outside formally proclaimed areas? And how will more effective partnerships with communities, civil society and the private sector be achieved? How will housing and human settlements contribute towards broader community development?

These are important questions that require proper engagement, and they are made more complicated by different households needing different types and levels of support, which necessitates significant changes to funding, regulatory and institutional arrangements. There could be disastrous consequences for millions of vulnerable, low-income families if the white paper process is rushed or the wrong approach is followed. For that reason the government should set up a structured, inclusive Human Settlements Forum, along the lines of the multi-stakeholder National Housing Forum, which guided the first White Paper on Housing in 1994.

Its purpose would be to determine and flesh out the state's new approach to human settlements and neighbourhood development. Such a forum would need to be diverse and deliberative to leverage the knowledge and experience of a broad range of stakeholders. This offers the clearest path towards a human settlements policy that optimally meets our present and future needs. We remain committed to engaging productively with the department and to contributing to better homes and neighbourhoods – let's make it happen together.

• *The authors write on behalf of the following group of civil society organisations: Afesis, Built Environment Support Group, Centre for Affordable Housing Finance, Community Organisation Resource Centre, Development Action Group, Federation of the Urban Poor, Informal Settlements Network Isandla Institute, Legal Resources Centre, Ndifuna Ukwazi, People's Environmental Planning, Planact, Project Preparation Trust and uTshani Fund.*