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Local council's response to street homelessness in Welkom

Okumu, Moses

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Despite many countries having adopted policies and legislation which entrench the right to adequate housing, homelessness seems to be on the increase. The global street homeless population, without a roof above their heads, is estimated to be at least 100 million people (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (*UNCHS*), *1996 cited in Olufemi, 2002*). These are the homeless street people, who sleep rough and live on pavements and streets, under the bridges and trees, in the doorways and dilapidated buildings, in parks and open spaces (*Liddiard and Hutson, 1994*).

The problem of urban homelessness among the black people of South Africa has existed since the turn of the 20th century. It was exacerbated by the Apartheid legislation and economic policy of racial segregation such as the Native Urban Area Act of 1923. During Apartheid, African residents in 'white' urban areas saw the removal of their freehold rights and the control of the African influx from the homelands. This was followed by massive construction of urban townships in which the African tenants could be closely monitored (*Watson and McCarthy, 1998*). During the 1960's, and especially in the 1970's, housing resources were concentrated in building homeland locations at the expense of urban housing development. This resulted in a massive urban housing backlog, which was estimated at 1.5 million units in 1995 (*Olufemi, 1997*).

The 1970's and 1980's economic decline had adverse implications on the government's provision and maintenance of public rental housing. The main problem the government faced was how to provide housing for the urban population, and the escalated African urban population, and at the same time maintain the process of market-driven value. Found within this dichotomy, the State took a radical decision "to sell off the public rental housing stock" (*Watson and McCarthy, 1998, p. 51*). This led to land invasion, proliferation of informal settlements on the urban periphery, and massive homelessness (*Olufemi, 1997*). This trend was exacerbated by the abolition of the Influx Control in 1986, which led to enormous urbanization, resulting in the urban African population reaching 15 million in 1990 (*Free State, 1997*). The end result of the urbanization process

is pressure on the already stressed infrastructure, facilities, financial resources, and employment.

Although the 1996 census revealed that 61 percent of the urban population is formally housed in an estimated 4.3 million formal houses in South Africa, squatting in urban areas remains pervasive. The Housing Minister, Lindiwe Sisulu, has acknowledged that 2.4 million families are currently, living in shacks with only 800, 000 families on the government list, for housing subsidies. The Minister seems to suggest that only 1.6 million families are currently, living in precarious housing conditions (*Daily Sun, 3 September 2004*). Considering that the housing backlog in 1995 was 1.5 million, it seems that homelessness in urban areas is still on the increase (*Olufemi, 1997*). The situation is probably worse than the Minister portrays. It is not clear as to how the Minister arrives at the figure 1.6 million families. The Minister seems to assume that the 800, 000 families on the government list for housing subsidies, have already acquired housing. While this might be correct in principle, it is not correct in reality. People often complain that the waiting list takes about 5 – 10 years before the real house can be delivered. Thus, to assume that the official waiting list is tantamount to housing ownership is mistaken. Moreover, assumptions such as these are the cause, for lack of knowledge, about the housing situation in the country in general, and cities like Welkom in particular.

The claim that Welkom City has a zero housing backlog and only an average of 4.3 people per household does not reflect the truth on the ground (*Matjhabeng, 2001)*. It is not uncommon to find households in Thabong and Bronville Townships, with a family of about 11 members either overcrowded in a single shack in an informal settlement, or in multiple shacks in the backyard. Moreover, the official claims do not take into account the homeless street people. Welkom has an estimated 150 homeless street people scattered on its streets. The underlying message, therefore, is that the magnitude of the problem has not yet filtered into the world of policy makers. The history of Welkom has been closely associated with the mining industry in the Goldfields, which dates back to 1940's with the discovery of mineral deposits. Welkom and other surrounding towns in the Free State Goldfields underwent massive urban growth in the 1950's. Today, Welkom

is the second largest city of the Free State Province, after Bloemfontein. Welkom is strategically located on the NI in the North-eastern Free State at about 250-km South of Johannesburg, and 160km North of Bloemfontein. This makes it accessible from all directions of the country (*Matjhabeng, 2001, Welkom, 1968*).

Welkom is the economic powerhouse of the province, with mining (mainly gold and diamonds) and agriculture, both estimated at 58 and 46 percent, of the provincial production, respectively (*Matjhabeng, 2001, Welkom, 1968*). Some related industries include clover, and maize milling; engineering, and motor industries; jewelry, and construction; among others. This explains, why Welkom, and its neighbouring towns such as Odendaalsrus and Virginia experienced dramatic urban growth from 67, 000 in 1970, to 583, 000 in 1991 (*Free State, 1997*). Currently, Welkom has an estimated population of about 280, 000 people distributed as follows: Africans 83.2 percent, white 14 percent, coloured 1.9 percent, Indian 0.1 percent (*Matjhabeng, 2001*). The African majority occupies Thabong Township, which together with the hostels, was built in 1950 by the mining industry, to provide accommodation for the mineworkers. The economic decline in the 1980's, led to the downscaling of about 120, 000 jobs. The subsequent non-return of the retrenched workers to their original homes, and the arrival of their respective families, contributed massively to informal settlements in Thabong Township (*Free State, 1997*).

The hostels were finally closed around 1992, and today they exemplify dilapidated structures. Those who strip them for material to build their own shacks have vandalized them beyond repair. All these factors, contributed to homelessness, and especially adult homelessness, in Welkom. The local authority's response to this phenomenon is the main aim and focus of this study.

THE AIMS OF RESEARCH

The core aim of this research was to examine how the local authority of Welkom City, is responding to the problem of homelessness in their jurisdiction. The research investigated

issues such as the Welkom City's policies that inform housing, and labour markets; benefit systems, and good governance. The research also attempted to explain the root causes of street homelessness in Welkom. Theoretical explanations, in terms of individual culpability, political and pathological models as causes of homelessness, were also investigated. Equally investigated, were the consequences of homelessness on both the victims in particular and the community of Welkom City at large.

In addition, the research sought to understand the socio-economic characteristics of the homeless street people of Welkom city; which included their origin, age, previous and current occupation, levels of education acquired, housing status in terms of their previous and current abodes, etc. The research also considered whether Welkom City, was adhering to the principles underpinning the government's housing policy, first enunciated in the RDP, to address housing problem. These principles included good governance; partnerships; empowerment; participation; job creation; available and affordable housing; benefit systems; land delivery, development, and procurement; policy options; education, training, and skills development.

RATIONALE

The fundamental basis of this study was to find out, why the problem of street homelessness persisted in Welkom City despite, commitment by the South African government in general, and Welkom Council in particular, to deliver massive housing for its citizens. It was discovered that the local authority's housing policy for homeless people, is highly problematic. While some homeless people are on the government's waiting list for housing, others (especially the homeless street people), are hardly the beneficiaries of such housing delivery.

The democratic government adopted the Reconstruction and Development Programme, as an integrated socio-economic policy framework, to mobilize national, and human resources, to deliver sustainable housing, for the urban and rural poor. Its policies, sought to do the following: eradicate institutional fragmentation (responsible for uncoordinated,

sometimes contradictory decision-making); segregated and isolated projects (through the forces of community empowerment); financial procurement; land delivery, development and procurement *(Harrison, 2001*). Housing and service provision became the main component of the RDP (*ANC, 1994*). Despite all these declarations, the problem of homelessness remains pervasive. The question then, is why is homelessness so pervasive? The response to this question rests with the National Housing Policy.

The South African Housing Policy does not address the problem of homelessness (*Olufemi, 1997*). The White Paper on Housing, while referring to issues such as education, employment, finance, services, and environment (as envisioned by the RDP), it specifically focuses on a single measurable objective of achieving a million houses in a period of five years (*Fitchett, 2001*). Thus, neither the local authority, nor the community understands the problem of homelessness - its causes, consequences, and the strategies needed to solve the problem, namely, participation of the homeless people; quick land delivery, development and procurement; reconstruction, and development of both housing, and labour markets; coordinated policy formulations; good governance, and democratization of all sectors of civil society. Coupled with this lack of understanding, is the shift from a holistic approach that entrenches the above-mentioned attributes in meeting the needs of the formerly marginalized people, to inadequate and inefficient bureaucratic application. These explain the pervasiveness of homelessness, and especially street homelessness, characteristic of Welkom city.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The housing problems result from rapid urbanization, population growth caused by high birth rates, migration, and widespread poverty in developing countries. Financial constraints, provision of unaffordable housing and the inability by the formal urban management and strategic planning procedures, to keep abreast with the growing demand for housing, further exacerbate the problem. The process of rapid urbanization poses great stress to already bleak facilities, financial services, employment opportunities, and infrastructure. The victims of this deficiency are none, but the poorest of the poor; with

either little, or no income, to pay for services. This pushes them into a precarious housing situation. These people are identified in the literature as “homeless” (*Olufemi, 1997).*

South Africa is urbanizing at a tremendous rate, and it is estimated that by the year 2020, its urban population will shift from the current estimation, of between 48 and 65 percent, to 75 percent (*Berriford, 1998*). Yet, the current patterns of land acquisition accessible to economic opportunities, social, health, and recreational benefits, remain historically unchallenged. This is reflected in the absence of a formal and adequate programme to address rapid delivery of urban land for housing. As a result, we see today as in history, enormous land invasion, rapid mushrooming of informal settlements, and thus persistent homelessness (*Berriford, 1998*). The governments of the developing nations such as South Africa have failed to address housing problem, in a coherent way. Although South Africa has been able to construct 1 million houses, the process has been uncoordinated and dismally slow. The destructive clearance of slums and construction of poor quality, and inadequate housing, exacerbate homelessness (*Drakakis-Smith, 1988; Leach, 2002 and Huchzemeyer, 2001*).

Maybe, if the government upgraded most of the slums rather than demolishing them, it would have achieved more than just 1 million houses. These problems, coupled with the governments’ belief in providing housing for the poor through the developers’ exportation of the British Aden legislation of 1948, whose colonial housing policies, and town planning emphasized high rise building in the developing world, further complicate the housing needs for the poor (*Dwyer, 1975 cited in Drakakis, 1988*). It would be unfair however, to generalize the Western housing policies and ideas as homogeneously antisocial and unaffordable for the poor. While it is true that some Western housing policies and ideas advance high-rise building (skyscrapers), other housing policies encourage social and communal housing. Such housing policies and ideas are good, and deserve acknowledgement. Their importation into the Third world’s housing policies would bear positive implications. Unfortunately, the developing nations have always opted for those Western housing policies, which entrench high-rise buildings (skyscrapers). The danger of such policies, is that they restrict, for example, the

construction of affordable residential housing, increases building costs preventing the poor (or those with limited resources), to construct new homes. The end result of this is homelessness (*Abrams 1966 cited in Drakakis, 1988).*

In short, these policies do not promote the interests of the poor, to which whole the homeless street people are part (*Drakakis, 1988*), because enormous capital is required. Thus, the acuteness of the problem requires the governments' intervention, to facilitate housing supply and improve housing facilities (*Hardiman and Midgely 1982, Olufemi, 1997*). Singapore and Brazil are good examples of developing countries that have been successful in housing development. The secret of their success is dependent upon the government's willingness to involve all the stakeholders in the process of housing provision (*Drakakis-Smith, 1988*). Thus the involvement of the homeless people in the resolution of their housing problems is critical. However, problems of comparative claims of socio-economic and political objectives within national urbanization policies, and the claims that the developing countries are too poor to invest in housing amidst broad political philosophies, need redress. Their redress is critical, because of their negative impact on the State attitude towards equality, and efficiency in housing delivery (*Drakakis-Smith, 1988*).

The number of homeless street people sleeping rough and living on the streets of the world cities is evident (*Collins and Fisher, 1993, Olufemi, 2002*). However, descending from international to national level, we discover that South Africa has no such record of its homeless street population. There is a dearth of literature on homelessness in South Africa. One of the most important pieces of research is Makumule's, on homelessness in Hillbrow. Makumule's use of foreign literature is a symptom that homelessness in South Africa is under-researched. Despite Makumule's research effort, several issues remain persistently unresolved. The problem of a lack of national statistics on the homeless population, and Makumule's address of the problem in general, are some of these issues. Failure to categorize homeless people exacerbates failure, to treat each group differently, in relation to their specific needs. Moreover, while Makumule addresses homelessness in general, he quotes only the statistics of street children. What we do not know is whether

or not he did that deliberately. Equally unclear, is whether or not the two different estimations of 5, 000 and 9, 000 street children he quotes, are exclusively on the streets (*Makumule, 1997*). It is also problematic to ascertain whether these figures, are Hillbrow, or National statistics.

Despite being visible, homeless street people become invisible, insofar as official housing policy is concerned. Welkom is a case in point. While the problem is evident to the public, no single statistics about them exist. Even if they did exist, such statistics probably would not reflect the reality on the ground, as evidently portrayed about Hillbrow (*Makumule, 1997*). For example, the estimated 150 adult people literally homeless on the streets of Welkom could increase tremendously, if the population of street children (both in institutions and on the streets) was added. Thus, the absence of statistics, or correct statistics on homeless street people, has adverse consequences on the provision of their housing needs. While there are related issues between Hillbrow and Welkom, my research takes a different approach in addressing the problem of homelessness. My research addresses specifically the response of the Welkom council to the problem of street homelessness in their jurisdiction. Moreover, it deals exclusively with the adult homeless street people, with specific focus around issues of poverty and unemployment, and how these issues have contributed to the street homelessness scenario in Welkom City.

The perception of homelessness as a chosen lifestyle continues to dominate the world of policy makers (*Collins and Fisher, 1993*). David Willets, an official in Thatcher's policy unit used the concept: 'chosen lifestyle'-to argue that the escalation of men and women sleeping on the streets was a direct reflection of an increased taste for individualism and independence (*Independent 24 October 1989 cited in Collins and Fisher, 1993:5).* The danger with Willets' perception of the homeless people is that it may define them as what they are not, rather than what they are. This perception overlooks their housing needs. Although individual culpability may be the cause for homelessness for some people, reasons other than individual culpability are the cause for others. For example, the problems of societal structures such as housing and labour markets, the benefit systems,

poverty and poor urban planning strategies, cannot be veiled away as the main causes of homelessness in general, nor of street homelessness in particular *(Liddiard and Hutson, 1994).* Thus homeless people cannot be defined homogeneously. This has led to the recognition by some of the public, that the homeless street people are not just 'lazy crazy drunks', vagrants, outcast tramps or losers. Rather, that they are normal people, namely, women and children and men, with abilities and talents; youth with hopes and aspirations, that form a group of people with no place to sleep (*Collins and Fisher, 1993).* These are the people identified in the literature as "homeless" (*Olufemi, 1997).*

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A broad review of selected published academic literature on the subject was used, to provide data that would create an understanding of the problem. This was complemented by the findings from the interviews that were conducted with the homeless people and the local authorities in Welkom City. The research categorized homelessness into different groups, with homeless street people as the focus of this study. The study looked into the nature, causes, and consequences of homelessness, and its possible solutions from the victim's perspective. Equally discussed, were the success, failures and the way forward for the local authority, in their commitment to housing the homeless people of Welkom.

The researcher used open-ended interviews as the methodology of study, with a sample group of homeless street people, and local authorities of Welkom City. This was in effort to describe and explain the phenomenon of homeless street people; their conditions of homelessness from their lived experiences; and the local authority's response to the problem. Open-ended interviews were chosen as an ideal method of capturing the real meaning and interpretation of homelessness, as experienced by the homeless street people themselves, and as addressed by the local authority. The methodology is practical, especially in terms of collecting experiential accounts, addressing practical and immediate experiences, as well as values, and beliefs of the victims of street homelessness; and the government's conception, and address of the homeless situation. Equally discussed, were the limitations of the methodology on servicing the information,

that could provide information per se. Sampling methodology and open-ended interview were the only methods employed to collect the data.

10 out of an estimated 150 street homeless people were interviewed. The criteria of identification of the 10 members were purely based on their willingness to participate in the project. 70 percent and 30 percent of street men and women respectively, were interviewed. The local authorities were also interviewed, to establish their response towards street homelessness in Welkom City. Me. Morakane Lebothe, the District Manager in the Department of Housing and the other 3 council officials (who requested to remain anonymous), provided information in this regard. Open-ended interviews or face-to-face communication were chosen for the merit of probing for clarity regarding questions and subsequent answers, as well as for ethical sensitivity. In terms of ethical sensitivity, open-ended interviews avoid questions that would consciously, or unconsciously, clash with the values and beliefs of the sample under study. The main focus of this study is the Council's response, to the street homelessness in Welkom.

TOOLS FOR DATA COLLECTION

Sampling

Sampling is a process that involves random selection of the cases under investigation, without prior planning, knowledge or information. The advantage of random sampling is that it is accidental, convenient, and within reach; these factors, along with the cooperation and willingness of the sample to participate, all work to simplify the task (*Makumule, 1997*). However, it is critical to note that while the tool of sampling has advantages; its disadvantages cannot be veiled away. The problem of sampling lies in its lack of prior knowledge. This aspect is likely to hinder objective evaluation of the biases it constitutes. Equally problematic, is that nobody knows whether or not, the sampled 10 street people, for example, on the streets of Welkom, represent the actual interests of the entire homeless street people.

Open-ended Interviews

The open-ended interview sought to explore the problem of street homelessness critically. Critical probing ensures that the information gathered is clear and without ambiguities. Equally important, about this method, is the ability to provide better understanding of the people under investigation. It ensures (though it may not guarantee), respect for ethical values and beliefs of the people under investigation. The sensitivity of the problem of street homelessness requires that the researcher, respect the dignity of the people he is studying. For example, the researcher must not force personal information deemed by the interviewees as personal, private and confidential.

The information gathered included the main causes of homelessness, from the perspective of the victims. Other information included previous abodes; critical needs; former and current occupation; level of education and skills; experience of homelessness from within and without; and hopes and fears of street people. In terms of the council's response, the following issues were discussed: causes of homelessness; housing policy and legislation frameworks targeting homelessness; and challenges and obstacles affecting housing delivery. These included human and financial resources; legal housing mandate; lack of available and affordable housing; poverty and unemployment and illiteracy; and how the council is dealing with it.

METHODOLOGICAL SHORTCOMINGS

Due to the fact that only 10 people out of an estimated 150 homeless street people were sampled for investigation, it is only probable that the findings of this study would represent the entire population of the pavement dwellers. Homelessness being a sensitive social issue, coupled with its painful experiences and varied causes, it might not be surprising that the findings from the respondents has shortcomings. This could be caused probably by lack of openness and honesty, to impart what the respondents would consider as strictly confidential.

The problem of language might have caused a communication obstacle. The communication was done in the mother tongues of the sample under study, which included Tshwana, Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu. This was hampered by limited education. Bantu education did little to impart a skill of communication in English, other than to promote Bantu socialization. Since there was no professional translator, it is possible that the translation might have affected the information, which in turn could affect the achievement of the findings per se.

The fact that the homeless street people are always under the fear of police raids, is enough evidence that they might not have dispatched the required information considered in their domain as confidential, to anybody called a researcher. This problem is further complicated by the fact that the researcher could not communicate in their local medium of communication. These facts could foist reluctance on the part of respondents; to divulge useful information, for fear that it could work against their own good. This may possibly affect the ability of the findings of this study.

The bureaucracy the study might have applied in terms of specifics, namely, the sample of people; place of interviews; specific time of interview; structured procedures (among other negative indicators) might have impacted negatively on the freedom of the participants to be honest. Using the methodology of sampling and interviewing as the only tools of gathering information is in itself (without doubt) a force of limitations. Such limitations linked with foul play on the part of the group under study, might also impact negatively on the findings of this study, to provide the most accurate results. Finally, I must say that it was not easy working with homeless street people due to the above-mentioned difficulties involved, in extracting the required information from them.

CONCLUSION

The study employed sampling and open-ended interviews, as the only tools and methods of gathering information, on a sample of 10 homeless street people as well as 4 local authority officials of Welkom city. The aim of the study was to investigate the problem of homelessness in Welkom, and what the local authority was doing about it. It became very

clear during the discussion, that Apartheid policy of separatism; urbanization of 15 million Africans; demographic growth through natural population increase and migration; retrenchment of mineworkers and their non-return to their respective homes (for whatever reasons); closure of mine hostels and state withdrawal from providing public rental housing, had enormous impact on the availability and affordability of housing.

This exacerbated the problem of land invasion, mushroomed informal settlements on the urban periphery, and rapid increase in homelessness. During discussions it was discovered that the Housing policy did not entrench the housing rights of street homelessness. While homelessness remains pervasive, there are still no mechanisms in place to addresses it. Equally pointed out, was the lack of statistics about homeless people. This, however, is not a unique scenario to Welkom, or South Africa but also globally. The Methodology of data collection, its merits, and demerits were also clarified.