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Beyond Bricks and Mortar: South Africa's Low-Cost Housing Program 18 Years after Democracy

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"Everyone has a right to have access to adequate housing … the state must take reasonable legislative and other measures within its available resources to achieve progressive realization of this right."

The South African Constitution, 1996

Phindile tightened the belt of her heavy black coat and stuffed the scarf around her neck to fend off the chilly August winds. Her body gave an involuntary shudder as she waited for a mini-bus taxi to take her to work at one of Johannesburg's wealthy northern suburbs. From the frozen streetlights, she could make out the silhouette of the even-patterned Reconstruction and Development Program houses. RDP houses—as they are known colloquially—are homes for low-income South Africans, provided by the country's post-apartheid government. A typical house is 36 square meters, with an open-plan bedroom, lounge and kitchen and separate bathroom (Moolla et al., 2011). In an hour and a half, it would be light and the humdrum of daybreak would swallow the night's silence as families prepared to go to work, send children to school or open their businesses. For now, the 4am quiet provided her much-needed stillness before the busy day ahead.

Phindile is among 3 million South African families who have benefited from the government's housing program. In 1994, the democratically elected African National Congress (ANC) government embarked on the Reconstruction and Development Program—an ambitious framework for building a democratic non-racial future for South Africa. The RDP document reads: "Our history has been a bitter one dominated by colonialism, racism, apartheid, sexism and repressive labor policies. Our income distribution is racially distorted and ranks as one of the most unequal in the world—lavish wealth and abject poverty characterize our society" (ANC, 1994: 2). Given apartheid's legacy, the new government committed to providing housing for all. In what would be a remarkable, if ambitious, housing policy, President Mandela's government and subsequent administrations embarked on building poor South Africans a place they could call home and start their life in a new South Africa with dignity and hope for a better future. Over the last 18 years, South Africa has spent R60bn (USD7.5bn) and delivered 3 million houses to poor households (FFC, 2012).

Three million families have benefited from the government's housing programs.

Phindile was born in Soweto in 1969, 17 miles from Johannesburg's city center. Soweto, which is short for South Western townships, began as a settlement in 1905 that housed black laborers who worked in the city's gold mines and the growing manufacturing and service industries. Phindile's mother was a domestic worker who made a living cleaning and taking care of white families' homes and children. When Phindile turned two, her mother could no longer afford to keep her and her older sister in Soweto. "She was suffering because she worked for an Afrikaans family who would pay her and then take her money away. If she refused to give them the money they had paid her, they threatened to fire her." I was sitting at a dining table across from Phindile in an apartment in one of Johannesburg's wealthy suburbs where she worked as a domestic cleaner once a week. She looked at me and continued, "My mother had no choice but to take me to my granny in Richmond in rural Kwa Zulu." Phindile spent 18 years with her grandmother. On the rare occasions that she and her sister visited their mother in Johannesburg, apartheid's racist laws reminded them that they were not welcome. "I remember one holiday, we stayed in my mother's small room in Orange Grove (a former white suburb in Johannesburg) in the garden of her *baas*' [Afrikaans word for boss] house. Every time we heard the *madam* coming, my mother would hide us under the bed and tell us to keep quiet. We stayed in the room silent because it was illegal for us to be there. You had to carry a *dompass* (pass) to live in Johannesburg if you were black at that time, and my mother's pass could be taken away just because she had her children with her."

Apartheid's Laws

Apartheid's laws forbade blacks to own land or property in white South Africa. Indeed, black people were considered temporary sojourners to the city, a place where they had temporary residence for the duration of their working lives. As Johannesburg's economy grew in the 50s and 60s, large black townships like Soweto were built miles from the city's center to

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house black laborers. Politically, blacks were permanent outsiders, with no suffrage or decision-making powers to determine how the city was run. Moreover, apartheid laws forbade the location of business and industry in places like Soweto. With no industry, there was no revenue to invest in infrastructure, schools and urban services. In fact, black families paid more for water and electricity in apartheid South Africa than wealthy families because they lacked the industries that subsidized household consumption. What money black working-class families made was spent in white areas—this expenditure made white areas richer and poor areas poorer. The apartheid city was a divided one, where those who toiled in its mines and worked in its industries lived in third-world squalid conditions, while a white minority lived in first-world comforts.

Given apartheid's legacy, the democratic government's housing program could not have come at a better time. In many ways, South Africa's liberation was as much a political as an economic one. Black urban dwellers were now not only able to vote for their local councilors and have a say in how money was spent in the city, they also had the opportunity to have equity in it—own property or a piece of land which they could bequeath to their children. Indeed, the transfer of houses to the poor through the housing program aimed at just this—leveling the inequalities of apartheid and providing an asset to people who had been denied rights to the city. The notion of housing as an asset was an important one. Housing was seen as the means through which the poor could borrow, invest and grow their wealth in ways that would improve their life trajectories and get them out of the structural barriers created by the apartheid state. The housing program was a means of giving full meaning to the term citizenship, for a majority who had for so long been excluded from South Africa's wealth.

But recent hearings held by the constitutionally-mandated Financial and Fiscal Commission (FFC) have highlighted that the government's supply-side approach has set itself up for the impossible task of catching a moving target. No matter how many houses the state provides, the list for qualifying households earning less than R3,500 (USD 438) per month continues to grow. Even with its impressive record of delivery, 2 million South Africans remain homeless. Yet despite the government's redistributive efforts, economists calculate that since the democratic government has come into power, the gini coefficient, which measures inequality, has increased and is among the highest in the world (Leibrandt, 2012). The 2011 census puts the country's unemployment rate at 29.8%. When comparing the black and white populations, the inequality is stark. Fully, 35.6% of the black population is unemployed in South Africa, while only 5.9% of whites are unemployed. With the current population growth rates, migration to cities and the economic downturn, the number of households needing state assistance is likely to increase.

The program has been dogged by corruption.

Spatial Marginalization

But there are other problems facing the housing program. By the late 1990s, both scholars and practitioners began to point out that the emphasis on the delivery of bricks and mortar overshadowed the importance of building sustainable communities (Huchzermeyer, 2001; Rust, 2003). Analysts contended that the poor location of the subsidized homes–often at the margins of cities where land is affordable—the lack of social infrastructure such as schools, police stations and clinics; and the "ghettoization" of the poor was inadvertently creating unviable, dysfunctional settlements. A recent study of subsidized housing across the country showed that few have viable economies (Shisaka, 2011). Those built around the city are located in peri-urban areas, about 18 to 25 miles out of town, where transport is non-existent or too expensive for residents to travel to find work. Yet it is not just that these settlements are spatially marginalized. Even where they are well-located—such as Thembalethu, which is close to the tourist town of George in the Western Cape, beaches, nature reserves and a thriving service economy—they remain economically isolated. Indeed, Thembalethu remains poor despite its location close to the former white town of George (Shisaka, 2011). Unwittingly, the democratic government's housing program has perpetuated the marginalization of poor black households—failing to unite apartheid's racial divisions. The Department of Human Settlements has made attempts to review its policies and build mixed-income households, but the success of these initiatives has been dampened by middle-class not-in-my-back-yard fears of race and class integration. The outcome has been that poor urban households continue to live far from work and business opportunities, while the well-to-do live in high-walled enclosures in areas with world-class infrastructure, schools and economic opportunities.

A year before Mandela's release and the end of apartheid, Phindile moved to Johannesburg. "I came because you know at home when you are young they would test your virginity every month. One day my boyfriend took my virginity and I knew if the big mama's, the virginity testers, found out everybody would be talking badly about me." Phindile's eyes fixed on her ironing as she continued, "knowing what would happen to me, I tried

to hide in the trees so I would not be tested. But the old women found me and forced me to walk through the village to test. That is when they found out I was not a virgin, and everybody knew. It was a big shame for me, and I had to leave the rural areas and go to Johannesburg." Using her mother's connections in Johannesburg, she slowly got piece jobs as a domestic worker—a day here and there, where she cleaned people's houses and did their laundry for a daily rate. A few years later, she married and had two children, a boy and a girl, and was just settling into building her family when her husband was killed in a car accident. With the loss of an income in the household, Phindile's life was plunged into disarray and teetered on the brink of poverty. "I was desperate. I had two small children, my husband had died and I was living in a one-room *mkhukhu* (shack) and paying too much for rent." Phindile had heard about the government's housing program, and she and her late husband had put their names on the municipal council list in Thembisa (a township east of Johannesburg) to receive a house. "I was on the list for more than ten years. Many people would come and ask us to pay a lot of money, promising us a house. I would pay because I was desperate. I don't know how many people I paid and how many lists I never went on. There was a lot of corruption, our names were never called for a house."

Phindile's experience is not unique. One of the FFC's findings has been that the housing program has been dogged by corruption, with local officials extorting money from vulnerable households with promises of an RDP house which they never receive. And it is not just the very poor who are falling for these scams. The extent of corruption was brought home two months ago in a recent exposé into the fraudulent sale of land in Lenasia, a township south of Johannesburg. It is alleged that some government officials were illegally selling and issuing fraudulent titles to unsuspecting working-class families. The private sector has not been blameless. A household survey conducted by Statistics South Africa showed that one-third of RDP beneficiaries were unhappy with the quality of the houses (Masombuka, 2010). The corruption, delays and substandard housing has sparked nationwide service delivery protests, with people marching against the continued exclusion of the poor in South Africa's teen-age democracy.

With the government so actively involved in the housing sector, experts have argued that it has distorted the housing market, creating a gap where a large number of households who earn too much to qualify for the subsidy, but too little to get a bank loan, remain without adequate and affordable choices for shelter. But the government also admits that it can no longer afford to sustain such an ambitious program—coffers are just too limited to provide housing for all in the same way as it envisaged 18 years ago. In April 2011, the Housing Minister Tokyo Sexwale told Parliament that "the current increasing dependency and pressure on the state are not sustainable for the country going forward. Somewhere, sometime in the future," he argued, "there will come a need to have a cutoff point on the government's subsidized housing, where people can begin to do things for themselves."

Beyond Bricks and Mortar

After waiting ten years, Phindile's desperation for a home where she could raise her children reached its peak. "One day, I picked myself up and went to the council in Thembisa and pleaded with them. 'You eat my money,' I told them, 'you take other people and give them a house, and because I don't have a husband you don't take me.' I think that man felt sorry for me, and one day they called my name to go to the RDP house."

There is a bright side to South Africa's housing program—one that is not measureable in Rands and cents or in the number of bricks delivered. "For the first time in my life, I felt like a somebody, I had a home," Phindile said to me. "When I got my key I could not believe it. I jumped up and

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down, I screamed until my children were worried about me. I barely had any furniture to fill the house, but I did not care. The first thing I bought myself was a red dress, I remember buying it for R40 (USD5) in Johannesburg, I wanted to be presentable when I went to church to thank God." Sarah Charlton, based at the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, argues that for many beneficiaries, the house is more than the bricks and mortar that provide shelter. "On it, beneficiaries pin immeasurable outcomes, such as dignity, pride and hope for the future. Although dignity has no immediate material benefits, it is integral in developing people's capabilities, aspirations and beliefs in themselves which may translate into tangible material benefit. This is not to say that the challenges of race, inequality and shelter are unimportant, but that these need to be seen within the context of the less tangible gains around identity, belonging and a sense of self."

The Department of Human Settlements is also currently revisiting its housing policy, trying to find ways it can support poor South African households while building sustainable human settlements with limited public resources. Eighteen years into democracy, the Department is asking difficult questions around whether an entitlement program that was aimed at redressing the ills of the past still applies for new generations of black South Africans. Indeed, it has to question whether it can afford to provide housing for future generations in the same way as it has been doing. Mark Napier, director of Urban LandMark —a non-profit organization in Pretoria, that aims to make urban land markets work for the poor—put it this way: "If you've got new household formation, coming out of households already living in government housing and people who were born after independence, do the same issues around reparations apply as those of your parents who lived under apartheid? But at the top of officials' minds," Napier continued, "is their constitutional mandate to provide adequate shelter to all." It is precisely how policymakers resolve this dilemma that will shape the nature of low-cost housing interventions in South Africa. Amidst the entitlement debate remains a concern for developing mixed-race and -income settlements. According to Sarah Charlton, "what we seem to be creating is fruit bowl developments, rather than fruit salads or smoothies." But the need to build non-racial, mixed-income settlements seems to have taken a back seat in the Department's new housing policy review, where the major concern seems to be the fiscal and economic sustainability of the program. Of course, achieving fiscal sustainability and racial and class integration are not mutually exclusive. But it remains to be seen whether the next generation of South Africa's housing policy for low-income households creates a more diverse and inclusionary society.

The housing program gave full citizenship for the majority.

Phindile still is a domestic worker and leaves her home at 4am every weekday. But over the seven years she has had her house, she has saved to build five extra rooms for rent to meet an ever-growing demand for housing from migrants moving to the city. "Something happened to me when I got that house," she said to me one afternoon in her living room. "I changed, I had the courage to become what I wanted." The extra rental income helps her buy clothes for her children and pay for school fees.

"I have also built a room for my mother so that she can retire and have a place to stay where her grandchildren can play without worrying about the madam." She smiled as she poured me a second cup of tea. "No words can explain how that feels." ❑

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