

# Renewal after shack fires must be created by a multiple partnerships

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THE DESTRUCTIVE fire in Masi-phinemele that razed 1,500 shacks, caused three deaths, untold injuries and made 3,000 people homeless is the latest of several hundred fires in Cape Town's informal settlements this year. Some families in Masi have apparently had their shacks burnt down seven or eight times over the last few years.

The disaster has prompted a huge wave of sympathy and practical assistance for people to rebuild their homes and replace lost furniture, clothing and other belongings. This is clearly the priority.

However, there has been little public discussion about how to prevent such disasters from recurring. Crises of this kind should prompt questions about what is being done to develop lasting solutions.

When people simply rebuild their shacks in the same places using identical basic materials, fires are bound to happen again and again. A civilised society must learn lessons and strengthen its commitment to minimise these sources of vulnerability in the future.

Evidence suggests that there are at least two necessary ingredients of a lasting solution. One concerns the physical nature of renewal, and the other is the way the process is carried out. Some observers have said that Masi's problem is the lack of access roads for emergency vehicles. This is a symptom of a bigger issue – the exceptional density of shacks. Densities in informal settlements are often more than 15-20 times higher than in the suburbs, and often over 200 persons per hectare. Homes are crammed together because of pressure on the supply of

land and restrictions on expansion.

More land needs to be found to reduce the overcrowding and to increase the amount of space between dwellings. This would, by itself, reduce the speed and extent to which fire can spread. This was one of the reasons why urban planning and building regulations were introduced in other countries more than a century ago.

More space between homes would also reduce some of the everyday stresses facing communities. Places for children to play and other public amenities could also be provided. Casual observation suggests that there is vacant land around Masi. Some of it is wetland and unsuitable for development, but there are other neighbouring sites that appear to present no obvious physical reasons for blocking the settlement's expansion.

The state would need to acquire the land, service it with basic infrastructure, and negotiate access with local residents. There would clearly be some cost involved in this, the financing of which should probably come from a combination of local and national sources. National policy appears to be becoming more supportive.

A lasting solution also requires that cheap flammable building materials are replaced by more durable structures. If people were offered greater security of tenure on their sites they would have an incentive to invest more in incremental upgrading of their homes. Over time, single-storey units should be replaced by multi-storey buildings to economise on the land. Building costs would be higher, but three to four storey walk-ups seem to be viable for people with modest

incomes, according to work by the Development Action Group.

Higher public investment in Masi is justified if one accepts that such places are here to stay. The attitude of all spheres of government and all political parties towards shack areas remains ambiguous. Yet these areas function as important gateways to the city for poor incomers – entry points to the urban labour market and stepping stones to a better life. We must avoid such areas becoming places of entrenched disadvantage. With suitable state support, household incomes will grow in the course of time as skills improve and people get jobs. Therefore, these places have rising capacity to pay municipal taxes. Although individual residents cannot pay as much as in affluent areas, in aggregate they can and will pay enough to sustain better services. We should not

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regard such areas as temporary locations or bottomless pits into which state subsidies need to be poured forever.

Turning to the process of renewal and upgrading, it is important to go beyond a top-down model of state delivery to passive citizens, towards a more developmental approach. Residents should be active participants rather than spectators. The state is easily blamed when things don't go to plan. The conflict over the Makhaza toilets illustrates

how problems can arise with a traditional delivery paradigm. Instead, the energy and anger of disgruntled communities should be channelled in a more constructive direction.

The engagement of the local community can contribute to a broader process of building human capabilities and creating active citizens. It can help to transfer skills, generate expertise, strengthen community organisation, and help people to lead productive and fulfilling lives.

Strong multi-sector partnerships can generate a lasting consensus and momentum for development that municipalities can never achieve on their own. It may take slightly longer than direct municipal provision, but the outcome is likely to be more enduring.

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