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## **National cohesion relies on local cohesion**

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Recent events in an ordinary Pietermaritzburg suburb encapsulate the risks involved in mismanaging urban growth under conditions of austerity and inequality. The episode also epitomises our current national predicament of social division and policy indecision.

Residents of Northdale have endured increasing blackouts because their neighbours in the Nhlalakahle informal settlement have been hot-wiring the municipal electricity boxes for illegal connections. This overloads the electricity network and causes it to fail. The informal settlers have also been stealing cables to make their connections.

When the municipal engineers come and disconnect the illegal cables the lights go back on for the ratepayers, but the informal settlement is thrown into darkness. This provokes an angry reaction and threats of revenge against both the suburban residents for reporting them and the municipal workers for cutting them off.

The informal settlers protest that they are only stealing electricity because the municipality refuses to supply them with power, which they are entitled to as voters and citizens. They know their make-shift connections are dangerous because members of their community get electrocuted every so often. This reinforces their general sense of insecurity.

The municipality is cash-strapped and reluctant to electrify the settlement because it's on a slope and not ideal for formal housing. It is hard to justify the fixed investment unless the place has permanent status. Officials worry about the fragile state of the city's electricity network to cope with the extra demand, after a decade of low maintenance. They're also concerned that upgrading the settlement will attract further migrants from outlying rural areas and intensify the pressure on all municipal services. This chimes with a deeper national ambivalence towards urbanisation and informality.

Without material support from central government for the upgrading, the local authority ends up 'just managing' the problem. Meanwhile, the ongoing vandalism is squandering scarce resources to replace the stolen cables, remove the illegal connections and hire security to guard the infrastructure. Different groups may become less tolerant and more suspicious of each other, eroding the goodwill required to create a more integrated and inclusive city. The municipality feels pressurised to 'eradicate' shack areas, resist urbanisation and relocate low income groups to leftover land on the periphery.

The obvious solution is for the municipality to electrify the settlement and thereby remove the immediate source of the problem. This fits with the core service delivery function of local government. It should take the heat out of the situation and improve the living conditions of destitute communities.

However, municipalities have legal obligations to operate prudently. These limit their ability to electrify areas where most residents are unemployed and can't afford to pay. They hesitate in the knowledge that the scale of theft could escalate if the electricity poles are within easier reach of people's shacks. Municipalities with a modest economic base and burgeoning informal settlements will go bankrupt if they get the balance between spending and revenues wrong. Their assessment also depends on the support from local ratepayers, on whom the viability of local government depends.

Cities clearly need a way to break out of the current impasse. There are at least two things that might help.

First, some kind of social contract at the city level would give communities greater confidence in the future and help to shift horizons beyond short-term grievances. Informal settlements need to be given stronger assurances that their services will improve before too long. Suburban fears about collapsing municipal infrastructure and wasteful spending also need to be allayed. City dwellers share a common destiny that has not been adequately articulated by our civic leaders to date.

Second, an unambiguous national policy to support settlement upgrading would send a powerful signal of commitment and help to overcome municipal doubts. National cohesion is built on a foundation of strong and cohesive local communities. There are exceptional costs incurred up-front in accommodating and managing urban population growth effectively.

Improved living conditions will enhance workforce productivity and boost life chances. Timely investment in social and economic infrastructure will also save on the costs of rectifying failure later. There is a compelling case for settlement upgrading to feature prominently in the national infrastructure programme.