

# FEATURE

## Advancing Children's Quality of Life through Housing and Justice: Grass-roots Organisations in Collaborative Conversation

Ezekiel Ntakirutimana

### Introduction

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*In South Africa, housing needs in city centres pose a serious threat to children's quality of life. There are perceptions that the cities have a narrow agenda and lack an integrated response to the most pressing needs of communities. In 2018, of nearly 1.7 million children, 9 per cent lived in backyard dwellings or shacks, and Gauteng was the province with the second largest number of children living under such conditions (Hall 2019). Difficulties in prioritising the housing of poor and vulnerable families have led to deprivation and exploitation (Greenhalgh & Moss 2009: 16). As the values of 'family', 'society' and 'shelter' are overlooked, the result is that children face adversity from an early age.*

Being deprived of basic rights, their fate is bound up with the lack of safety and protection they require as a necessity and which can be obtained through proper housing. Living in undesirable conditions destroys abilities and positive self-image. If such conditions are unaddressed, they slow down children's natural environment of growth without the family support they need to reach their full potential. Breaking down child vulnerability is at the heart of this paper, which challenges a society that violates its own norm of 'it takes a village to raise a child' (Mohamed 1996: 57).

Given this background, the City of Tshwane faces a housing crisis. While assessing the extent of the problem, it was observed that children living with their families on urban social margins are among the most affected people. They face poor living conditions in untenable settlements. For example, children and their families live together in highly concentrated backyard shacks that are prone to fire as well as health hazards caused by unhygienic living conditions. Desperate families and their children are forced to live in dangerous hijacked

or abandoned properties, exposing themselves to high levels of crime while paying excessive rent to illegal landlords – this results in exploitation and abuse (Maromo 2016).

These dwellings offer families alternative accommodation, but in reality they are dangerous to live in, particularly for children. Life is challenging as the dwellings lack basic services. Infrastructure is degraded, and the neighbourhoods point to a dying city centre. Children, already vulnerable, are exposed to inhumane conditions. A toxic and contaminated environment; pollution from the continuous overflow of sewage and illegal dumping; and substance abuse – these factors are all unsafe for residents (Sibiya 2021).

Worrying about the future of their children, some frustrated families do not hesitate to tell their stories: 'I didn't know how cocaine looked like before I moved to this building... Any drug you want, it is available ... if you cannot afford the elegant apartments in this city, then you live in hell' (Maromo 2016). These are legitimate

complaints from resilient families conveying a message to the public and to city officials that children in the City are not safe in substandard dwellings.

Attempting to address the housing crisis, the City has adopted a policy on homelessness. Its framework makes reference to mobilising resources ‘to fight poverty, build clean, safe and sustainable communities’ to protect the most vulnerable families and children (Social Development 2016). Regrettably, the objective, to foster urban social change, is not being taken seriously. The local government’s failure to tackle the roots of the proliferation of informal settlements and slums in the city centre widens social inequality.

At the centre of the problem lies government’s poor planning, poor urban management and inability to cope with rural–urban migration (Aigbavboa & Thwala 2015: 1). It appears that the City is aware of the housing crisis, but does not understand how to respond more appropriately and proactively. Within the City’s administration system, the absence of information from a database to assist with measuring the extent of human vulnerability is one of the limiting factors in encouraging transformation (Chatindiara 2019: 7).

## **Children, already vulnerable, are exposed to inhumane conditions.**

A commitment to strong collaborative conversations, involving both grassroots organisations and local government working closely with community representatives, has the potential to break the cycle of the housing crisis and ultimately human vulnerability in general. Turner & Fichter (1972:72) uses collaborative conversation or “implied dialogue” to advocate for quality “low-cost housing”, “self-help housing” and “site-and-services” as models that could be explored to advance quality of life in urban squatter settlements. Turner’s central thinking is that housing crisis cannot be appropriately addressed without building capacity for people take control and ownership of their own housing process. For him, “what really matters in housing, is what it

does for people rather than what it is” and “the economy of housing is a matter of personal...” (Turner 1972).

It is clear that encouraging communities to take charge of their own lives promotes a sense of sustainability, responsibility, and, ultimately, ownership of their own community upliftment. In view of that goal, one of the challenges experienced in the City concerning the right to housing is the difficulty of accessing land for housing development purposes. This has led to ‘land invasions’, as poor and vulnerable people see the City as a big opportunity to advance themselves. ‘Baghdad’ informal settlement in Salvokop is an example of land invasion in the inner city. Land release in order to house affected families and other individuals in housing distress is not just a tactic to stop land invaders or to unlock special urban development projects (Moatshe 2020). The primary objective is ‘redressing the legacy of apartheid’ by prioritising the identified needs of the most historically disadvantaged people’ (Royston 1998). In other words, ‘no house can be built and maintained without land, without tools and materials, without skilled labour, and management’ (Turner & Fichter 1972: 154).

The role of grassroots organisations in collaborative conversations is clear and well-known in that they have a unique way of reaching the poor and others not served by public agencies or commercial establishments, as they act with more ‘empathy’ and ‘compassion’ (Thiesenhuisen 2003). Human values empower them in advocating for land release for housing development in strategic locations closer to, inter alia, schools, clinics, work opportunities, police stations, and child-care facilities (Hall 2019). Another value is ‘justice’, which is entrenched in the penultimate Sustainable Development Goal (SDG).

SDG expectations for grassroots organisations are to remind the government of pledges made, to achieve community participation and representation in decision-making at all levels, and to seek the elimination of discriminatory laws and policies for improving the living conditions of communities by the year 2030. The integration of compassion, sympathy and justice becomes a guiding principle in promoting children’s quality of life in Pretoria West, one of the grey neighbourhoods facing a housing crisis.



## **As the crisis deepens, children are among the most affected people living in overcrowded conditions in old houses and backyard shacks.**

The area in question is one of the segregated neighbourhoods in the inner city, the strongest node in terms of job opportunities, retail space and offices in the metropolitan area (City of Tshwane 2018). It is adjacent to the middle-income neighbourhoods of West Park, Proclamation Hill, Philip Nel Park and Moot. The neighbourhood is a hive of industries, including food-processing factories. This is an indication of how the area contributes to the local and national economy. Another such contribution is Pretoria West Power Station, established in 1920 to supply electricity to the entire city.

A concern is the failure to address the degradation of infrastructure, including the power station itself. Reports reveal the alarmingly poor condition of unmaintained old houses that were built for white workers under the Group Areas Act during the apartheid era. Since then, no development has been undertaken in the neighbourhood. Instead, slumlords and hijackers have taken control, demonstrating the failure of the City to deal with the situation (Mudzuli 2015). In 2019, hijackers took over 80 houses, an indication of the extent of the housing crisis in this important part of the city (Van Petegem 2019).

As the crisis deepens, children are among the most affected people living in overcrowded conditions in old houses and backyard shacks. The Gauteng Premier's speech recommended large-scale investments in low-cost housing to prevent the displacement of the people (Mudzuli 2015). Considering the relationship between children's quality of life and the case of Pretoria West, the Premier's proposal could work well because it proposes integrated mixed land-use providing quality housing for the most deprived families and their children in the city centre.

Besides the Pretoria West case, the children of Salvokop's informal settlements also face a housing crisis while living in a neighbourhood surrounded by well-developed public infrastructure. Freedom Park, the Gar-

den of Remembrance, the Voortrekker Monument and the Department of Correctional Services represent government's commitment to the city's transformation. The Pretoria Station transport node, connecting the City to the rest of South Africa's provinces and beyond the country's borders, raises hope and shows future opportunities for the vulnerable children of Salvokop. Conversely, previous development incorporating the historic Salvokop NZASMA Village does not reflect the City's efforts to advance children's quality of life as they face a housing crisis with their families. Construction led to the demolition of Crossroad Kids Care Centre that provided accommodation to the most disadvantaged children in the city (Tlhabye 2019). The current Salvokop Precinct Development Project to build more department offices does not prioritise the housing needs of poor families who fear that their homes will be demolished, with the possibility of eviction from the City (Maotshe 2020).

The housing crisis arises from this uncertainty and the lack of a strong voice to advocate for proper housing infrastructure that could allow families and their children to rebuild their lives. The current position is that people are trapped in the government's neglected houses without maintenance services. Built between 1890 and 1930 for white railway workers, Pretoria West since then has seen no upgrade. Housing viability started to decay, especially when people started to move to the City to look for better life options upon the reversal of unjust apartheid policies in the early 1994. It was then that Salvokop became a major destination in the City for poor people looking for cheaper accommodation closer to job opportunities.

As the landlord (TransNet) lost control over managing the influx of families, the Department of Public Works failed to stabilise the housing crisis (Ntakirutimana 2017: 5). The neighbourhood now faces an increase of backyard shacks in the middle of overcrowded housing, without proper services including sanitation. As families live in squalor, with broken doors and windows,

leaking roofs and falling ceilings, these problems, along with the collapse of other structural elements, affect children's quality of life. In the absence of any proper housing intervention, 'Baghdad' settlements are very dangerous and concerning. Children live where shacks and houses are intermingled. Illegal taverns operate 24-hours a day and share space with crèches where illegal dumping sites have been allowed (Sibiya 2021; Tlhabye 2017).

Salvokop hosts Jopie Fourie Primary School, one of the more competent government schools in Tshwane. Alarmingly, from interviews conducted before the Covid-19 lockdown, some children alluded to incidents of ridicule by their classmates: 'When teachers are not in class, some kids make fun of us. They ask us to stand up and when you stand, they sing... mokhukhu, mokhukhu... [or shack, shack...]' (Nsibande 2019). Other children said that sometimes they do not attend classes as their parents want them to guard their belongings. This problem occurs when the landlords have locked their shacks due to non-payment of rent, and the parents, when they go to work, cannot leave their property outside unattended (Ledwaba 2019).



## **Open-minded politicians have started to question a system that it is not working.**

The fundamental tenet is that the law must protect the right of these children to live in dignity. Reference is made to the global review of the SDGs for 2030 that frames five dimensions of children's rights: (1) every child survives and thrives; (2) every child learns; (3) every child is protected from violence, exploitation and harmful practices; (4) every child lives in a safe and clean environment; and (5) every child has a fair chance in life (UNICEF 2019).

In the light of those expectations, advancing the quality of life of children is a utopian vision because of many problems apparent in the City of Tshwane. Political

leaders are not supportive when it comes to a need to prioritise challenges facing the most vulnerable families. Politicians are believed to be visible only during election time to sell their political agenda (Chatindiara 2019). In addition, the relationships between grassroots organisations and the local government tend to be adversarial when it comes to the call to address the plight of deprived people.



## **Access to proper housing is a good outcome, and an expression of justice capacitating children to rebuild their lives.**

A big challenge is that the decision-making process is exclusive and top-down (Thiesenhusen 2003). It appears that the principle of 'city politics' in governance is at the heart of the problem. There are 'power games between the members of the council, power struggles between the municipal authorities, pressure from rate payers and power struggles between the planning practitioners' (Hillier 2002: 4-5).

Open-minded politicians have started to question a system that it is not working. The whole point is that 'if you don't get people to feel that they have a way of engaging with government and engaging as a community around a particular issue, then that erosion of trust and sense of belonging will really start to become a problem' (Brown 2019). Hard-line organisations like Abahlali baseMdlondolo and the School of Activism, or Ndifuna Ukwazi, emerged from this political tension to resist exclusion and injustice in the city. Their objective has been to reclaim government's underutilised land and unoccupied buildings for housing, so that deprived people may live a dignified existence while rebuilding their lives to take part in the governance of cities (EWN 2021).

The agenda of these movements is that urban settlements for poor people 'must be upgraded through democratic development methods which are inclusive of their needs in the planning process'. Rethinking ur-

ban policies is to ensure that urban land is not sold for private development before proper housing is delivered to deprived people living in shacks (Mathivet 2009). Given the scale of the identified issues, advancing children's quality of life through quality housing and justice is a matter of urgency in the Pretoria West and Salvokop neighbourhoods, where deprivation has become deeply entrenched over the years. Grassroots organisations will be underachieving by simply undertaking collaborative conversations with a 'service-delivery mind-set'. This kind of mentality should not be promoted as it is rooted in a culture of 'entitlement' that holds people back. If it remains unaddressed, vulnerable children will grow without realising that there is 'a culture of self-sufficiency, of doing things for yourself' (Grootes 2014). This principle is aligned with an 'enablement mind-set' to reimagine a future agenda where government's role will be to 'create the conditions from which good outcomes are more likely to emerge' (Brown 2019).

Access to proper housing is a good outcome, and an expression of justice capacitating children to rebuild their lives. With this in mind, grassroots organisations will also be underachieving if they believe that government represents people and therefore understands their vulnerability better (Brown 2019). As argued, this narrow agenda will weaken grassroots organisations in forging a strong groundswell coalition with other entities such as church groups, trade unions, educators, public officials, human rights activists, political parties, journalists, legal experts and others, to advance children's quality of life.

The world renowned Nobel Laureate and economist-philosopher Amartya Sen once said, 'in the world of fish, big fish are free to devour small fish'

(Edam 2013). Tackling vulnerability cannot be fully realised in a culture where violation of the rights of the most deprived people is permitted to occur. The implications for grassroots organisations and the City of Tshwane are that advancing children's quality of life through proper housing would be an important milestone mirroring justice and empathy.

Given the depth of the housing crisis and the plight of vulnerable children, collaborative conversations should be aligned in order to ensure proper mechanisms for accessing justice to achieve great positive outcomes. A concrete agenda is then required to fast-track land release while brokering an agreement for the easy access to socially inclusive housing opportunities in the two identified neighbourhoods. That agenda would be open in its design, to target the abandoned buildings, to diversify housing opportunities, and to explain that access to housing in the city is for all and well integrated into the city's revitalisation.

In all these endeavours, community leadership is invaluable. Grassroots organisations journeying with vulnerable children can demonstrate and exemplify a strong yet humble leadership model that takes seriously each one of the above suggested recommendations, so moving forward to a greater realisation of transformation for the most vulnerable people in the City.

*Ezekiel Ntakirutimana is a research fellow at University of Pretoria, Department of Theology Centre for Community and Faith. He is also an established housing practitioner working with Yeast City Housing, one of the first social housing companies based in the inner City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.*



**Rethinking urban policies is to ensure that urban land is not sold for private development before proper housing is delivered to deprived people living in shacks (Mathivet 2009).**

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