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De-densification of informal settlements as a strategy to improve the quality of life

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Abstract: Human settlement patterns in the South are clearly inequitable and dysfunctional, with tenure insecurity remaining a significant issue. Consequently, there has been a dramatic increase in housing demand driven by rising household sizes and accelerated urbanization. Local governments have a clear mandate to ensure socio-economic development and promote democracy, which necessitates ongoing consultations and renegotiations with citizens. This paper critically examines the de-densification of informal settlements as a pivotal strategy to enhance the quality of life for citizens, all while maintaining essential social networks. Governments must take decisive action against pandemics by transforming spaces into liveable settlements that improve livelihoods. A qualitative method was employed, analyzing data drawn from interviews to gain insights into individual views, attitudes, and behaviors regarding the improvement of livelihoods in informal settlements. The study utilized a simple random sampling technique, ensuring that every individual in the population selected had an equal opportunity for inclusion. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty community members in Cornubia, alongside discussions with three officials from eThekweni Municipality and KwaZulu Natal (KZN) Provincial Department of Human Settlements. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, and the findings hold substantial benefits for the most disadvantaged citizens. Therefore, municipalities have an obligation to transform urban areas by reducing inequality, bolstered by national government policy, to achieve a resilient, safe, and accessible urban future. The evidence presented in this paper underscores that local governments, through municipalities, must prioritize de-densifying informal settlements in response to pandemics or hazards. It is vital to leverage community-driven initiatives and reinforce networks within these communities. The paper calls for the establishment of a socially centered government through the District Development Model (DDM), emphasizing socio-economic transformation as a pathway to enhance community quality of life.

Keywords: de-densification; informal settlements; social networks; District Development Model; integrated human settlements

1. Introduction

The redesign of cities is not just important—it is essential for mitigating the sprawling of informal settlements in urban areas. According to the Guardian (2020), redesigning cities presents the only viable solution for allowing people to live socially without being crammed into overcrowded spaces. Current demographic trends, particularly strong population growth due to immigration, are exerting immense pressure on already constrained resources. Urban density is a fundamental characteristic of city life that profoundly affects city identity and relationships with other institutions. Addressing urban density, therefore, demands robust legislation and regulations (Barak et al., 2021). This article analyses the de-densification of informal settlements as a strategic approach to elevating the quality of life in the eThekweni

Municipality. Strategically positioned on the eastern coast of South Africa, the eThekweni Metropolitan area is the country's third largest municipality, following Johannesburg and Cape Town. Spanning approximately 2555 km², it shares borders with three districts: Ugu to the south, iLembe to the north, and uMgungundlovu to the west, with easy access via the N2, N3, and King Shaka International Airport (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), 2020).

The upgrading of informal settlements is a top priority for eThekweni Municipality, particularly targeting those settlements in their current locations. This imperative demands the adoption of higher-density housing solutions essential for minimizing community disruption and maximizing urban efficiency. However, some informal settlements may not see upgrades in the immediate future. For those, the municipality is implementing a comprehensive package of interim services, including ablution facilities, drainage systems, essential access infrastructure, electricity, refuse removal, fire prevention measures, and a labor-based infrastructure maintenance program engaging local community members. The following sections will delve into the background and literature on densification, the resulting expansion of informal settlements, constraints on informal housing development, densification strategies, and the District Development Model's role in service integration. Through this analysis, the anticipated impact of the District Development Model (DDM), introduced by President Cyril Ramaphosa, will be examined in terms of its transformative potential for progress in South Africa. DDM is a proven solution designed to tackle the ongoing governance challenges faced by municipalities across the country. The concept is fundamentally rooted in local social compacts and intergovernmental coordination, which will decisively eliminate service delivery backlogs and promote alternative local economic development focused on the localization of product markets and job creation (Public Service Association, 2020).

2. Background

Barak et al. (2020) demonstrate that varying characteristics of decision-makers and political institutions directly influence trust levels, political dynamics, and economic conditions, all of which significantly impact population density. For instance, housing programs are strategically directed towards integrated land development, compact housing, inner-city regeneration, and the enhancement of settlement quality. To combat the growing numbers in informal settlements, the eThekweni Municipality has proactively initiated the construction of low-income housing and has begun relocating residents as mandated by national government directives (IDP, 2020). Despite these efforts, the municipality still faces an overwhelming housing backlog, leaving the ambitious goal of ensuring housing access for all citizens by 2015 unfulfilled (IDP, 2022). This ongoing struggle has led to pronounced societal disparities in service provision and facility maintenance, which are explicitly addressed in Outcome 4 of the IDP. Therefore, service provision must extend beyond mere housing to include comprehensive neighborhood amenities and their sustained maintenance (eThekweni Housing Sector Plan, 2012).

According to Kgobe and Momekhere (2023), the implementation of DDM approaches is crucial for fostering collaboration, coordination, and efficiency among

various government spheres and stakeholders, effectively addressing community challenges and accelerating service delivery. However, it is essential to recognize that such innovations may encounter resistance in an already difficult landscape for service provision. Local government bears the responsibility to drive socio-economic development and uphold democratic values, which necessitates ongoing engagement and renegotiation with citizens (Mohale, 2020). Genuine participation from all community structures is critical for tackling the issues that affect these communities. Kgobe and Momekhere (2023) also identify challenges in DDM implementation, including resistance to change, limited financial resources, and the imperative for thorough district-based planning and monitoring mechanisms. As Mohale (2020) advocates, local governments cannot overcome these challenges in isolation; they require robust support from other government spheres. Effective cooperative governance is mandatory, engaging contributions from the private sector as well. Furthermore, Mohale (2020) asserts that the concept of functional municipalities entails their ability to deliver high-quality services sustainably, enabling them to navigate the complexities of diverse societal pressures effectively.

3. Literature review

3.1. Densification in informal settlements

In the eThekweni Municipality, density is fundamental in planning, urban, and architectural design, serving to delineate, predict, and regulate land use effectively. The pressing demand for enhanced efficiency in urban environments underscores the need for optimal utilization of financial and human infrastructure, resources, land, and natural assets (eThekweni Municipality, 2013). Turok (2011) defines two essential components of density: Physical infrastructure and residential population. Urban planners must prioritize the quantification of physical structures in terms of dwellings per hectare. The ultimate objective is to significantly increase the current population density. Notably, Turok (2011) highlights that this correlation is variable, influenced by factors such as household size, orientation, life cycle changes, income dynamics, and social conventions.

To expand the built-up area while accommodating people and businesses, the World Bank report (2016) advocates for the integration of areas into urban planning. This increased density is anticipated to elevate land prices, necessitating that infrastructure can adequately support this growth. Consequently, property taxes and other income-generating strategies can produce essential revenue. The World Bank (2016) asserts that well-designed urban planning is crucial for fostering economically productive metropolitan regions and sustainable cities. Additionally, Boyko and Cooper (2011) insist that policies promoting urban food growth must consider high urban density. Communities must be proactive in converting uncultivated land into temporary vegetable gardens and be prepared to utilize available land for food production (Boyko and Cooper, 2011).

Research (Barrett, 1996; Newman and Kenworthy, 1991; Nijkamp and Rienstra, 1996; Owens, 1986; Stead and Marshall, 2001) cited by du Plessis and Van Niekerk (2014) reveals significant connections between mixed-use land and travel patterns. The evidence is clear: Mixed-use development and higher density deliver tangible

benefits, including reduced car dependency, shorter commutes, and lower transport expenses. Proximity to workplaces translates into monetary savings on local transport, thus illustrating the advantages for communities. To achieve effective integration within human settlements, it is imperative that designated areas are situated close to essential amenities. Turok (2011) delineates three strategic approaches to fostering densification: (a) Government procedures for acquiring and providing land for development aimed at creating new housing for low-income populations; (b) fiscal measures that influence household preferences and choices; and (c) incentives for market producers to encourage higher density in new developments. Thus, implementing targeted incentives and controls is essential to ensure sustainability, enabling cities to realize these vital investment goals.

3.2. District development model as a strategy for integration

The DDM implementation framework has been decisively adopted to enhance the execution of DDM processes. This framework fosters a profound understanding and collaborative approach among all participants in service delivery, thereby facilitating joint planning, budgeting, and implementation processes (COGTA, 2020). Teti et al. (2024) assert that the DDM consolidates pivotal priority projects with significant catalytic impacts. It operates as a strategic blueprint that advocates for “One Plan”, “One Budget”, and “One District”. Its aim is to integrate all plans to ensure the cohesive planning and execution of catalytic projects. Settlement dynamics undeniably influence the resources required by local governments, particularly in terms of infrastructure and basic services, as emphasized in the White Paper on Local Government (1998). The White Paper identifies that household affordability, the costs of additional services, and access to bulk services hinge on factors like population density and the economic base. To enhance service delivery, it is imperative to strengthen local government coordination. The establishment of robust intergovernmental relations between districts and municipalities is essential to fulfilling the local government objectives outlined in the South African Constitution. Scholars, such as Reddy (2016), contend that the White Paper has been instrumental in prioritizing developmental outcomes, stressing the delivery of services and infrastructure, the creation of liveable integrated cities, community empowerment, and the promotion of local economic development initiatives. The Local Government Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 was enacted to facilitate municipal coordination through integrated development planning between districts and local municipalities (Shopola and Mukonza 2020; Shopola et al., 2021). Consequently, the State President launched the DDM during his Budget Speech in 2019, a move that received approval from the Cabinet, the Presidential Coordinating Council, the extended Presidential Coordinating Council, and the Ministers Executive Committee (MINMECs) (COGTA, 2020). The DDM mandates cooperation among all municipalities and across various government sectors, targeting the creation of a unified strategic plan for all levels of government (The Presidency, 2020).

The DDM has clear and resolute objectives:

To organize a comprehensive governmental effort that addresses poverty, unemployment, and inequality, while specifically targeting the needs of women,

adolescents, and individuals with disabilities. Local gender budgeting must prioritize the desires and requirements of our communities to promote true inclusion; There must be an active effort to reduce the gap between public expectations and government action by bolstering coordination at district and city levels; A practical framework for intergovernmental relations must be established to collaboratively develop strategies, allocate resources, and implement initiatives that deliver a unified governance approach to the populace of the Republic, thereby eliminating silos, duplication, and fragmentation; The execution of “One District, One Plan, One Budget” will optimize outcomes and ensure the effective coordination of plans and resources, while also strengthening government capacity to assist municipalities.; It is critical to improve assessment and monitoring processes at both district and local levels; and A development strategy must be adopted that balances the needs of rural and urban regions, with a commitment to responsible and transparent oversight of budgets and initiatives (COGTA, 2020).

Sausi et al. (2023) assert that a comprehensive review of South African governance literature, alongside a study of district development strategies in other African nations and a survey of stakeholders engaged in implementing DDM in three pilot districts—Eastern Cape O.R. Tambo, KwaZulu-Natal, and Limpopo, specifically Waterberg—must yield evaluations to determine whether DDM is truly achieving its intended objectives. The national government must pilot the DDM in the identified districts, and any improvements in service delivery will serve as definitive evidence of whether the model meets its goals. The identified municipalities, including the eThekweni Municipality Integrated Development Plan (2020), underline their commitment to implementing programs focused on upgrading and developing human settlements, relocating communities from hazardous areas, and providing integrated services to those living in informal settlements (eThekweni Municipality, 2020).

For this to be effective, an integrated plan must be approved, ensuring that all departments responsible for developing integrated human settlements adhere to the same strategies. DDMs for each district must clearly articulate the roles of each governmental sphere by prioritizing: Managing growth, urbanization, and development; Supporting local economic drivers; Accelerating land development and land release; Investing in infrastructure to facilitate economic activity and deliver basic services and integrated human settlements; and Addressing service delivery in municipalities (IDP, 2020).

Prioritizing the upgrading or development of informal settlements is essential for achieving integrated human settlements. This integration necessitates that municipalities prioritize infrastructure provision, which directly leads to the delivery of basic services to communities. The National Development Plan (NDP) of 2012 emphasizes that no government sphere can fulfil its mandate without the support of the others. Therefore, the three spheres of government must focus on building and sustaining coordination, which is critical for establishing a developmental state (Mohale, 2020). Scholars like Mohale (2020) further emphasize that Intergovernmental Relations (IGR) are fundamental for functional and responsible social pacts, aspirations any developmental state actively seeks to achieve.

4. Research methodology

This article presents a robust case study rooted in a qualitative research method. Data was collected from the residents of eThekweni Municipality and representatives from the Provincial Department of Human Settlements. Through one-on-one interviews, essential insights were obtained to clearly establish the significance of de-densification of informal settlements as a strategic approach to enhance the quality of life. The secondary data utilized in this research was meticulously examined, encompassing textbooks, journal publications, government documents, acts and regulations, as well as credible internet sources. The study employed thematic content analysis, which effectively identified and organized significant patterns and themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that thematic analysis serves as an invaluable method for identifying, analysing, and reporting on relevant themes. To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, the researcher took decisive steps to eliminate bias, relying solely on the information provided by participants throughout the data collection process. Consequently, the themes highlighted in this article serve to reinforce the critical understanding of de-densification of informal settlements as an essential strategy for improving the quality of life for poor households.

5. Discussions

5.1. Integrated human settlements

The 1994 White Paper on Housing unequivocally acknowledged South Africa's increasing urbanization, which has resulted in a stable rural population. This shift has been accompanied by a painfully slow provision of housing, leading to a significant and growing backlog that demands immediate attention (DoH, 1994). Joseph and Karuri-Sebina (2014) highlight that the primary catalyst for service delivery protests is the lack of access to housing, coupled with urgent calls for economic inclusion and strategies to close the widening inequality gap (South African Cities Network, 2014). The White Paper identified the enduring spatial legacy of apartheid, which continues to manifest through housing developments on the city peripheries. With the demand for housing escalating in tandem with the increasing backlog, it is imperative that future policymakers formulate effective housing policies without delay. To enhance the socio-economic circumstances of surrounding communities and foster sustainable livelihoods, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) of 1994 initiated the creation of a comprehensive and coherent socio-economic framework (Reddy, 2016). The Housing Act explicitly identified spatial inequalities in housing between urban and rural areas, as well as among provinces, as critical issues that require urgent redress. Income inequality has reached a level where a significant portion of the population is unable to afford adequate housing (DoH, 1994), further exacerbating the situation.

According to influential research by Mukonza and Shopola (2020) and Shopola, et.al. (2021), an Intergovernmental Relations (IGR) system is essential for creating a platform where various sectors and institutions can share best practices to enhance service delivery to communities. Alternative service delivery mechanisms are therefore crucial in addressing the challenges municipalities face in realizing housing

rights through DDM. However, Mohale (2020) draws from Turok (2010) to underline that the nine provinces have recognized a need for stronger coordination across government sectors. There is a clear necessity for enhanced connections with municipalities and meaningful engagement in local development strategies.

To uphold the constitutional right to housing and to facilitate the reconstruction of towns and cities, thereby improving living standards for urban households, the NDP insists on a review of government housing policies (The Presidency, 2012). Strengthening collaborative relations between local and district municipalities, as emphasized by the Intergovernmental Relations Framework (2005), is non-negotiable for effective service delivery (Republic of South Africa IGR Framework, 2005). Scholars like Magagula et al. (2019) assert that district and local municipalities have distinct yet complementary roles: The districts focusing on macro-level functions while local municipalities handle essential services like waste removal and housing. When both types of municipalities fulfil their respective responsibilities, they can guarantee the success of Breaking New Ground (BNG) and the post-1994 housing policies designed to stabilize an environment fraught with the challenges of fragmented and outdated financial and institutional frameworks.

The Department of Human Settlements adopted the Sustainable Human Settlements methodology in 2009, with full backing from the President regarding delivery arrangements. This strategy aims uncompromisingly to create sustainable human settlements and elevate the living standards of urban households (The Presidency, 2019). Kanyane (2014) emphasizes that planning within local government must align and coordinate effectively with national and provincial levels. Failure to achieve the vision of integrated human settlements designed to enhance community living standards should not be accepted as a possibility. De-densification demands rigorous long-term planning that enables cities to restructure effectively, addressing emerging issues and enhancing municipal performance. Cities must adapt to these evolving challenges to meet the needs of their citizens. The dynamics within urban environments lead to shifts in challenges and realities over time (Allopi and Yusuf, 2004). The primary goals of density management are twofold: Sustainable resource utilization and the establishment of sustainable human settlements. The eThekweni Municipality's need for density arises from these pivotal factors (eThekweni Municipality, 2016). Therefore, Magagula et al. (2019) assert that empowering local municipalities through district municipalities is essential for the effective execution of their functions.

As a result, district municipalities can devote their attention to critical tasks, particularly addressing the housing backlog by ensuring that all services meet expected standards. The government's failure to develop a comprehensive and accessible transport infrastructure has isolated many impoverished groups from participating in the metropolitan economy (Joseph and Sebina, 2014). The National Strategy for Sustainable Development (2008) sought to rectify this by introducing innovative approaches for managing the nation's environmental, social, and financial resources effectively. This strategy recognizes sustainable development as a long-term goal, encompassing environmental preservation, economic efficiency, and social justice (Reddy, 2016). Reddy (2016) further emphasizes that local government's key developmental objectives now include: 1) Fostering sustainable and integrated human

settlements through the coordination and provision of infrastructure and services; and 2) promoting sustainable local economies via Local Economic Development (LED) strategies focused on infrastructure provision and maintenance.

However, the extent to which local government can achieve these ambitious goals has not been adequately addressed. Today, municipalities face significant challenges in accommodating the rising number of people migrating to urban areas. To address these challenges, comprehensive plans must be incorporated into the municipality's IDP. According to Munzhedzi et al. (2022), the IDP represents a thorough consideration of a wide array of socioeconomic, environmental, legal, and contextual factors.

5.2. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on informal settlements

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in 2020, has significantly intensified unemployment for individuals residing in informal settlements, exposing their economic vulnerabilities. This global crisis has resulted in considerable job losses, particularly impacting marginalized groups, including women and immigrants. Scholars such as Gil et al. (2021) have highlighted that the pandemic created a profound health and social crisis worldwide, with millions of cases and deaths reported by March 2021. In response, governments globally enacted various regulations, including lockdowns and social distancing measures, which disproportionately affected vulnerable communities, particularly those living in informal settlements, often referred to as slums. It is noteworthy that Gil et al. (2021) have indicated that nearly one billion people inhabit informal settlements in the Global South, a number that has escalated over recent decades due to a range of social, economic, and political factors.

Research by Güven and Özçatal (2022) calls for urgent policy interventions to tackle issues related to informal employment. This includes advocating for the legal recognition of informal work, inclusion in social security systems, and the establishment of frameworks that ensure fair working conditions, particularly for women. The study emphasizes the need to address the specific challenges faced by women in informal employment during the pandemic, aiming to raise awareness about the structural inequalities present in the labor market. It further encourages the formulation of gender equality-based policies to rectify these disparities and enhance overall working conditions for women. According to Gil et al. (2021), the pandemic has also fostered a sense of cooperation within neighborhoods in informal settlements. They argue that this crisis presents a unique opportunity for long-term improvement within marginalized communities, underscoring the necessity for support and targeted policy interventions to address challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. Okem et al. (2022) explored the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic on informal settlements, identifying several key areas of concern: a) Economic hardship, where residents experience loss of income, resulting in increased economic instability and poverty; b) food insecurity, complicating families' access to adequate nutrition; c) gender issues, which resulted in heightened inequality and increased gender-based violence, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to support vulnerable populations, especially women; and d) evictions, which have further undermined these

communities, indicating a pressing requirement for protective measures. Khambule (2022) emphasizes the necessity for strategic measures post-COVID-19 to address governance challenges that support informal workers. The author argues that South Africa faces significant difficulties in combating the high levels of poverty and unemployment exacerbated by the pandemic. Effective governance strategies in the post-COVID-19 era are essential to protect and uplift the informal economy.

5.3. Housing missing middle communities as a strategy to improve the quality of life

Advocates of the Missing Middle unequivocally identify housing types such as townhouses, duplexes, and courtyard apartments as essential components of modern urban planning. These housing forms represent a significant opportunity to achieve residential density while remaining compatible with the character of existing suburban neighborhoods, unlike their larger multifamily counterparts. Promoting Missing Middle housing is crucial for enhancing affordability in high-demand housing markets through the prudent, incremental addition of smaller units and more efficient land use (Mich, 2017). Despite the evident demand for Missing Middle housing and the proactive measures taken by many municipalities to relax zoning by-laws and encourage infill, developers remain hesitant to invest in medium-density family housing. They often cite challenges including limited land supply, planning red tape—ranging from restrictive zoning to burdensome building codes and parking mandates—and escalating development costs. Consequently, the housing market increasingly trends toward “tall and sprawl” development, favoring projects at the end of the density spectrum (Parker, 2023). Allatt (2022) emphasizes the urgent need for targeted policy considerations to ensure the successful implementation of the Missing Middle Housing Market. It is essential for planners and developers to critically reassess existing zoning laws and building codes, actively dismantling the barriers that currently obstruct the development of Missing Middle Housing, including regulatory hurdles and community resistance. Collaboration among planners, developers, and community members is imperative to cultivate a supportive environment for this innovative housing model. Le Roux (2014), in his seminal work on the Missing Middle, argues that bridging the divide between affluent and lower-income communities is essential for fostering social, economic, and conceptual growth. Achieving this vision demands innovative approaches that embrace a wide range of architectural engagement. Municipalities must prioritize co-designing housing projects in true partnership with urban communities. This collaborative approach ensures that local knowledge and needs are integrated into the design process, resulting in structures that are not only relevant but also profoundly beneficial to residents.

6. Findings

6.1. Poor spatial planning in cities leading to displacements of communities

The integrated strategy for human settlement development is firmly established as Spatial Development Planning (SDF). The SDF must prioritize the development of

human settlements. The growth of urban areas hinges on effective spatial planning, which can only be realized through the densification of cities and the construction of high-density, mixed-use public transport systems designed to seamlessly connect urban areas (IDP, 2020; Sim et al., 2015). The strategic aim is to redress historical imbalances and foster the creation of equitable communities by accurately addressing development patterns, trends, and requirements (Spatial Framework Plan, 2016). By establishing new nodes in historically disadvantaged communities, the city guarantees these areas maintain connectivity.

The Apartheid regime utilized natural barriers—mountains and rivers—as well as artificial ones, like power lines and motorways, to divide communities. We must now reverse these divisive mechanisms and instead employ them to foster community cohesion and ensure equity where it has long been absent (4).

New nodes formed as part of the city's integration strategy have successfully connected previously disadvantaged populations to the broader urban landscape. Urban boundaries are deliberately structured to prevent the proliferation of informal settlements while also addressing spatial segregation. Additionally, these boundaries work to safeguard open space networks and protect agricultural and ecological resources.

Retrofitting human settlements atop an existing apartheid-era city poses significant challenges; it is inherently more complex than starting from a blank slate (2).

Furthermore, the inadequacy of human settlements has led to the systematic exclusion of impoverished communities from essential social networks, employment opportunities, and urban amenities, as residents expend excessive amounts of time and money on transportation. Locating human settlements closer to job opportunities not only benefits households by enhancing their savings but also mitigates the higher housing costs that may come with such proximity (Khan and Khan, 2012).

Participants have clearly indicated that the municipality has initiated the application process for human settlements with the support of a consultant to facilitate urban upgrades. This application is designed to ensure collaboration across all relevant departments to promote genuine integration in development efforts.

As a responsible department, we must ensure that every stakeholder comments on the application to maximize the integration of outcomes based on diverse departmental feedback (2).

The Human Settlements template must be a comprehensive package involving the development of settlement infrastructure to guarantee integration. Moreover, such submissions must align with the municipality's SDP and the community development plan, which encompasses essential social facilities and infrastructure (IDP, 2020).

If we integrate the human settlement development strategy into our SDF, we can strategically locate all related projects (4).

The findings underscore the necessity for spatial development to accurately reflect the strategic direction of the city, alongside investment and economic opportunities. The settlement plan must prioritize the creation of sustainable communities; settlements must not be constructed indiscriminately but must align with the objectives laid out in the IDP (SDF, 2006). Development should drive housing construction toward specific goals rather than defaulting to generalized spatial designs.

Todes (2008) emphasizes that domestic workers and other unskilled labourers are consistently overlooked, as once a project is identified, the focus often shifts solely toward local talent. The reality is that impoverished communities are disproportionately reliant on government assistance (Reddy, 2016; Todes, 2008). It is now imperative for cities to retool to align with the housing objectives of the Department of Human Settlements, providing a clear pathway for the development of compact, integrated urban environments (Harrison and Todes, 2015). As part of the IDP, the Spatial Development Framework is crucial for ensuring that housing is constructed in strategic locations while simultaneously enhancing infrastructure and transport facilities.

6.2. Misaligning of plans to achieve integrated human settlements

In an integrated human settlement, the number of household sites allocated for development and the funding available for infrastructure construction are crucial in determining the scale at which infrastructure and amenities are delivered. Essential facilities such as community halls, playgrounds, and sports fields must be included. Unfortunately, budget constraints are hindering the immediate availability of numerous local facilities. Effective integrated development requires adherence to coordinated budgeting across all departments. It is unacceptable to plan a development that consists solely of residential properties for the next five years without incorporating essential services such as schools and clinics. Participants have clearly articulated the urgent need for increased availability of vital services like childcare facilities, community centers, schools, and clinics. It is imperative that, when planning integrated development, all departments commit to ensuring these services are promptly delivered alongside the housing developments. The Department of Health must allocate funds to support emerging developments with the necessary clinics; this scenario should be the standard practice. However, it is evident that actual implementation often falls short of this ideal.

Infrastructure is the backbone that guarantees easy access and mobility for beneficiaries relocating to new areas. Based on the findings, the city must proactively prepare for infrastructure development, accepting that it will incur additional costs. To enact a cohesive plan for human settlements, the budgets of various departments must be meticulously aligned. The recommendations presented to the City Council for approval must not only prioritize housing for underserved populations but also strategically address the conflicting priorities facing the city. Municipalities must take responsibility for planning infrastructure growth effectively, managing both aging infrastructure and the creation of new facilities as housing developments increase over time. Historically, municipalities have struggled with funding infrastructure initiatives; inadequate infrastructure directly correlates with diminished service delivery.

Given that various functions fall under different spheres of government, collaboration among all three spheres is essential for successful infrastructure development. The importance of robust bulk infrastructure in fostering integrated human communities cannot be overstated. Planners must rigorously ensure that community layouts conform to comprehensive plans, establishing clear guidelines and

meeting the necessary physical infrastructure and service requirements. This is further supported by Ilesanmi (2012), who emphasizes that physical infrastructure such as communication networks, transport, and energy is vital for the long-term sustainability of a market economy and the promotion of good governance. Industries like agriculture, mining, and manufacturing, which are key to employment in developing nations, can only thrive with a continuous and adequate supply of electricity.

6.3. Provision of physical and human infrastructure for beneficiaries

Housing complexes must unequivocally provide both physical and human infrastructure to enhance the quality of life for beneficiaries. Participants unanimously highlighted that the absence of essential facilities severely impacts living conditions in new areas. To effectively integrate services within these new settlements, the municipality has decisively implemented bulk infrastructure across all housing developments. Both participants and officials acknowledge that the improvements in bulk infrastructure have significantly benefited the residents of informal settlements. However, the absence of bulk infrastructure—specifically in areas such as electricity, roads, clean water, and sewage—continues to hinder the improvement of quality of life. Instances of water shortages due to insufficient infrastructure are still prevalent.

Timely access to infrastructure is not just preferable; it is imperative. It fosters a sense of belonging within communities and boosts their integration into the broader nation. Beneficiaries are vigilant in monitoring the care and services that are extended to the underprivileged. The influx of residents into new housing estates increases pressure on administrative systems, making it clear that real transformation hinges on the inclusion of infrastructure in the planning of land and housing developments. Strategies aimed at advancing sustainable housing and human settlements will gain momentum only when adequate infrastructure is assured in these new areas. The focus of any proactive state government should be to empower communities, fostering liveable and inclusive cities and towns through robust household infrastructure and services. The integrated settlement policy explicitly aims to elevate living standards by ensuring all essential amenities are accessible nearby.

Access to all necessary facilities—such as clinics, schools, and recreational centers—is non-negotiable for our community.

The findings clearly demonstrate the necessity for all departments to engage in meticulous planning to guarantee simultaneous service delivery. Officials have recognized this critical point. The RDP asserts that adequate housing serves as a viable pathway to integrating communities and providing access to essential health, education, and social services, along with economic opportunities. The Housing Act of 1997 reinforces the imperative that housing developments be strategically situated to provide easy access to economic opportunities, health, educational, and social facilities. Prioritizing the provision of these facilities is essential in the quest for viable sites for housing development. The South African government is constitutionally mandated to ensure that communities resettled in new regions receive essential services, infrastructure, and facilities, aligning with the standards set forth in the Bill of Rights. Consequently, the Cornubia project addresses the issues associated with informal settlements from a holistic and comprehensive perspective.

7. Recommendations

7.1. Meaningful community engagement

While community engagement is essential in urban planning, achieving equity can be challenging even with thorough analysis to prevent unexpected outcomes. Rethinking strict concepts of urban density, centrality, and mixed-use development is necessary, as the interplay of these factors alongside land use and transit options can create diverse urban structures with varying equity impacts. The process of urbanization should be flexible enough to allow for growth beyond previous boundaries, potentially creating beneficial economic links with surrounding areas (McFarlen, 2020). Prioritizing Indigenous self-determination ensures that community needs are truly met. Housing policies must actively involve communities in enhancing quality of life while addressing the requirements of the private sector. Recognizing the right to self-determination means enabling Indigenous communities to make informed decisions on the challenges they face.

7.2. Commitment to women empowerment

A coordinated government response is crucial in tackling poverty, unemployment, and inequality, especially among South African women. It is important to acknowledge that municipal planning often operates within market-driven frameworks, leading to disparities in housing accessibility tied to household resources, which raises intergenerational equity concerns. To achieve social sustainability goals through urban densification, it is vital that women's voices and needs are prioritized alongside increased housing access. Acknowledging the reality of single parenting, predominantly among women, highlights the necessity for secure shelter as they support their families. Municipalities should cultivate opportunities for women's involvement in housing-related discussions to ensure their perspectives are included. Civil society organizations representing women have a critical role in strengthening the relationship with municipalities and advocating for women's empowerment. Working toward Sustainable Development Goal 5 requires a collective commitment to advancing gender equality, which remains a fundamental right. Women still encounter significant challenges, including income disparity, limited educational opportunities, and societal pressures. Empowering women is essential for the holistic development of communities and societies; therefore, it must remain a priority for all governments as part of their commitments.

7.3. Integrated service delivery

Urban planning and development face considerable challenges, particularly in balancing densification with land use outcomes. While increasing population density is pursued to enhance efficiency and sustainability in urban areas, it can lead to heightened competition for limited space, resulting in exclusionary housing markets. As urban areas become more populated, the demand for residential, commercial, and recreational spaces intensifies, often driving up property prices and making housing less affordable for vulnerable groups—including renters, first-time buyers, and marginalized communities such as youth, low-income families, and immigrants

(Cavicchia and Cucca, 2022). This trend may lead to the displacement of these communities from well-located and sustainable urban spaces, exacerbating social inequalities and fragmenting neighborhoods. To address these challenges, a comprehensive approach to urban planning is essential. This should involve considering the needs of diverse populations, promoting inclusive development strategies, and implementing policies that ensure equitable access to housing and amenities. Collaborative efforts among government agencies, developers, community organizations, and residents are crucial in creating cities that are both densely populated and inclusive, fostering environments that support all community members.

8. Conclusion

Monitoring systems are essential in determining the success or failure of the district development model. The post-apartheid South African government has proactively created and developed numerous local development policy programs, exploring various models across towns throughout the country. Frameworks such as global city regions, smart city models, and the promotion of the township economy exemplify these innovative approaches. However, it is evident that minimal internal monitoring and evaluation procedures have been implemented in these local development plans. Scholars like Sausi (2022) argue that the current form of the DDM seems to be a top-down strategy imposed on districts. While this approach could potentially make local government more responsive to public demands, it risks disrupting the existing service delivery framework. There is a crucial need for relevant authorities and stakeholders to engage in the decision-making process actively.

The study acknowledges its limitations, particularly in addressing the impact of COVID-19 on individuals living in informal settlements, as municipalities have lacked strategies to address future pandemics. Further research should highlight the urgent need for collaborative efforts among government entities, non-profit organizations, and communities to provide necessary economic support and protection for those in informal settlements. Establishing a robust collaborative framework for disaster management across all government levels is imperative. Such a framework will ensure alignment and coordination among various government spheres and stakeholders involved. These long-term improvements are vital for facilitating rapid service delivery to marginalized groups.

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