

Forced removals in democratic South Africa?

N2 Gateway Project

Many people are wondering why the N2 Gateway Housing Project in Cape Town has become embroiled in controversy. **Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie** looks at how the Joe Slovo and Delft settlements are connected and why they are deeply unhappy with government's plans.

When Doreen Benting, a 56 year old, received a house in Kewtown, Athlone after years of being on a housing waiting list she said in the *Cape Argus*, "It made me feel like I am worth something". Maria Davids is 61 years old and she lives on a pavement on Symphony Way in Delft. She asked "How can I be expected to live like a dog in a hokkie (shack) for the rest of my life?"

These two voices say a lot about the meaning of having a proper roof over your head. The housing crisis in Cape Town is of major proportions. Each year the need outstrips the houses built and there is a backlog which the city simply cannot catch up with.

A total of 360 000 homes are needed but only 10 000 houses are built yearly. In the meantime, people live in shacks on vacant public and private land and as renters in the backyards of others. There is frustration and pent up feelings. This is Cape Town's powder keg ready to explode.

JOE SLOVO AND DELFT

If you drive along the N2, a major national highway that flows outward from the city to outlying areas, there lies a major informal settlement between Langa township and Vanguard Drive, called Joe

Slovo. It is estimated that about 20 000 people live here (between 4 500 and 6 000 families).

Joe Slovo is as young as our democracy. The bush here was first cleared by the homeless in the early 1990s and it grew over the years. There were even more families here but fire tore through the settlement in 2005 and 4 500 families were relocated to Delft, an area that is close to Cape Town's northern suburbs, such as Belville and Belhar.

Delft was established in the dying days of apartheid and has a population of well over 30 000. The people here, coloured and African, are poor and unemployment is well over 44%.

Billboards along the N2 proclaim in bold print: "From Shackland to Dignity" and they reveal pictures of happy families who have attained a home. This is an advertisement for the Department of National Housing's N2 Gateway Project. The Department explains that this major 'pilot project' will result in 'better-quality houses for poorer South Africans'. It plans a non-racial and mixed income groups settlement.

Marianne Merton, spokesperson for the Housing Ministry, argued in the *Sunday Times* that "shacks and informal settlements are no places to live in dignity, to raise families". The Department issued a half-page advertisement in August 2008

explaining the N2 Gateway Project. There were three happy steps: families would be removed from the informal settlement, resettled in Temporary Relocation Areas (TRAs) and, finally, they would receive Breaking New Ground (BNG) homes.

Phase one of the N2 Gateway project at Joe Slovo was completed in 2006 when 705 flats for rental were constructed on land vacated by those whose shacks were destroyed in the 2005 fire. These flats were open to backyard dwellers from former coloured and African townships: Langa, Gugulethu, Bonteheuwel, Bokmakierie and Nyanga. Rents vary from between R500 and R1 050 per month and applicants need monthly incomes of R5 000.

Housing Minister Lindiwe Sisulu proclaimed happily that "the N2 Gateway Project is a success on a scale that has never been attempted in the history of housing construction in this country". This was a very premature statement.

The second phase, which is running currently, requires the relocation of the existing families at Joe Slovo to temporary 'homes' in Delft. This process is managed by Thubelisha Homes. The plan is to move 100 families a week over a two-year period. Thubelisha has promised to assist those relocated to Delft with transport for children who

Martin Legassick



Forced evictions in Delft from BNG homes, in February 2008

attend schools in Langa and elsewhere and to make arrangements for collection of pensions.

When the land is cleared, Thubelisha plans to build about 1 500 BNG homes. These are 40 sq metre two bedroom homes with bathrooms and living areas and will be given free to those who have a monthly income of less than R1 500. Those with incomes between R1 500 and R3 500 will have to purchase these homes at a once-off fee of R2 500. In addition, there are about 35 show homes (the original idea was to have 300 of these) available to the upper income earners who could secure bonds from First National Bank.

The flats have been rented out but since 2007 there has been conflict between tenants and Trafalgar Property Management over high rents and poor construction. Also Joe Slovo families living in shacks face a mass forced removal to Delft so that

building can proceed. Flat dwellers and Joe Slovo dwellers have united to protest against the unfolding N2 Gateway Project and their slogans says it all: Phansi (down with) Forced Removal! Phansi High Rent! Phansi Privatisation!

WHY THE OPPOSITION?

The reasons why Joe Slovo residents are opposed to the N2 Gateway Project are many.

Once people are moved to Delft, not many are guaranteed a return once construction is completed. The houses built will take up considerably more space than the shacks and all the removed people simply cannot be accommodated.

In addition, the homes may be beyond their financial means and backyard dwellers from neighbouring townships will be allocated 30% of homes. Joe Slovo residents are doomed to be accommodated elsewhere and Delft might become a

permanent place. Few Joe Slovo residents were accommodated in the flats. There are also strong feelings that instead of building affordable houses, the site will cater for those with higher incomes as part of government's integrated race and class housing plan.

Then there is considerable dissatisfaction at the TRA homes provided in Delft. Those Joe Slovo families whose homes were destroyed in the fire of 2005 were living here for some time before they were given BNG homes in Delft at the end of 2007. The TRA homes are bare with minimum facilities. Martin Legassick, a retired professor of History and social activist, describes the place as "a concentration camp".

For Joe Slovo residents removal to Delft means a disconnection with the city that they know well to an area which is poor and has many problems. The unemployed from Joe Slovo have easy access to the city centre. Nombini Mbeqe also explained in the *Sowetan*, "We are not going to Delft because here we can walk to Epping Market. I work there in exchange for fruit and vegetables."

TAKING ACTION

Joe Slovo residents have been frustrated. Their views and feelings were not taken into consideration and they feel that the plan is simply being imposed on them. The government's advertisement does not resemble reality. They attempted to meet Minister Sisulu when they marched to parliament in August 2007 but she has not had direct contact with them. Thubelisha Homes is left to be the manager and

Martin Legassick



Joe Slovo residents outside the Cape Town High Court in September 2007



Delft pavement 'hokkies', 2008

people have developed hostile feelings towards this private developer.

A Joe Slovo task team headed by Mzwanele Zulu was constituted to fight the evictions. In one of the boldest protest actions the city has ever witnessed in recent years, thousands of Joe Slovo residents mounted a blockade of the N2 in the early hours of 10 September 2007. Police broke up the protest by firing rubber bullets into the crowd injuring several people.

Following this, the developers and the national housing ministry moved to the High Court to secure eviction orders. Residents responded by lodging individual objections to the evictions. When Justice Hlophe of the High Court ruled in favour of the developers, residents lodged an appeal with the Constitutional Court in August 2008. Initial statements by the judges of this court indicate sympathy with the residents but judgement has yet to be given.

In Delft itself another scene played out. In early December 2007, Minister Sisulu, in a '1 000 Handover Ceremony', handed over BNG homes to the Joe Slovo fire victims of 2005. Backyard dwellers in Delft, frustrated at being on waiting lists for years and doubting the fairness of the allocation process, occupied over a thousand homes meant for others just before Christmas. Frank Martin, the Democratic Alliance councillor, was reported to have been a key instigator of this move. Delft residents painted their names on the walls of the Joe Slovo incomplete

homes and refused to move.

In February 2008 they were forcibly evicted. There was considerable chaos as police fired rubber bullets and injured several people. Many of the evictees were accommodated in a temporary camp while about 80 families refused this accommodation and set up homes on the pavements on Symphony Way in full view of the BNG homes.

The Symphony Way pavement living is a sorry plight but they are determined not to move. In October, children portrayed their lives in a street exhibition. Lee-Andre Johnson a grade one child wrote: "I don't think it is fair for people to be on the road. Grannies and grandpas are getting sick on the road. Two grannies have already died, while waiting for houses and one of them is mine ... My first day in Symphony Way was like living in a camp."

The situation had the potential to be racially charged as the pavement dwellers are mainly coloured and the BNG homes were meant for former Joe Slovo residents who are African. Yet these dwellers, the tenants of the N2 Gateway flats and the thousands of Joe Slovo shack dwellers have made common cause. The Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign founded in 2000 has been a crucial link and in July 2008 all parties marched into the city to hand over a memorandum to the provincial MEC for housing, Richard Dyanti.

DIGNITY AND A HEARING

The apartheid era saw millions of black people forcibly removed from

city spaces to make way for people of other races. From history we know how painful relocations have been as people struggle to make meaningful connections in new areas. Democratic South Africa now faces a forced removal of a significant magnitude if the constitutional court does not supply a remedy.

The pilot project of the Department of Housing has been far from rosy and that people feel their voices have not been heard is shameful.

Delft bears all the hallmarks of an apartheid era relocation camp. It will be the site where shack dwellers from many parts of the city will be dumped. BNG homes may be built but the socio-economic circumstances of Delft will bring people down.

The N2 Gateway Project has linked the histories of the Joe Slovo settlement and Delft in ways that could not have been imagined. Government's integrated housing plan is being tested here and found wanting. The poor find it hard to accept that they will have to move to make way for homes for those with better incomes. The rich in Constantia will also resist poorer housing planned as restitution for victims of apartheid forced removals in this upper end of real estate.

The key word that underlines the N2 Gateway Project is *dignity* and people and government have different understandings of how this will be attained. LB

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