



OVERCROWDED: The informal settlement in Olivenhoutbosch near Pretoria.

PHOTO: ANTONIO MUCHAVE

ERADICATING THE SLUMS

Patrick Magebhula

MINISTER of Human Settlements Tokyo Sexwale demonstrated a promising tone of seriousness and innovation regarding the challenge of human settlements in his budget speech to Parliament last month.

He warmed the hearts of the poor when he said the challenge of slums must receive at least the same political attention as that currently being given to the World Cup.

The energy the minister hopes to unleash towards a "human settlements 2030" is on his doorstep. The poor communities are best placed to work with government to develop and implement such policy.

The press has a fascination with what are often referred to as "service delivery protests". The fires and looting make good copy for editors desperate for any kind of violence or scandal.

But there is a much bigger story developing across our biggest cities. The poor are organising, informal settlement by informal settlement, to work with all levels of government and other stakeholders to

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address their most pressing needs.

We can recall the street and issue-based people's development committees so effective in the civics movement that organised communities to improve their own lives and bring down apartheid. The Informal Settlement Network (ISN) is the first major attempt in the post-apartheid era to bring South Africa's settlement-level and national-level organisations of the urban poor under one umbrella, this time to work with government in finding solutions to

IN SERVICE: People can learn about basic services such as water, sanitation and waste.

slum poverty.

In just one and a half years, groups in over 600 informal settlements have come together in the ISN in the country's five biggest metropolitan municipalities: Joburg, eThekwin (Durban), Cape Town, Ekurhuleni, and Nelson Mandela Bay (Port Elizabeth), as well as in the smaller

Sol Plaatje municipality (Kimberly).

The ISN includes settlements linked to the largest poor people's organisations in the country: Abahlali baseMjondolo,

the Federation of the Urban Poor, and Sanco.

Groups in informal settlements in these cities are working together to fully understand and address the problems facing residents of each informal settlement. We call these activities city-wide "informal settlement profiling".

Armed with this knowledge the poor now have the capacity to inform and work with the government.

For example, poor people from Slovo Park in Johannesburg are visiting Joe Slovo on the Cape Flats to learn how they can conceive and implement projects in partnership with local authorities around basic services such as water, sanitation, waste removal, and energy. They are bringing these lessons home with them.

I am so pleased that the mini-

ster has called for a shift in policy towards incremental upgrading strategies. This has always been our strategy.

We know, as the minister said last month, that the poor cannot just wait years for a house, without doing anything themselves to improve their living conditions.

We also know that the greatest obstacle to incremental strategies for upgrading informal settlements is the lack of security of tenure.

Let us seize on the minister's call for innovation by thinking creatively about land tenure issues as they relate to informal settlements.

President Jacob Zuma's promise to provide land to poor urban dwellers can be coupled with the minister's strategy to develop new ideas on tenure arrangements.

Sexwale lived much of his life in a shack. Informal settlement life is no mystery to him.

Organised communities of the poor are ready to work with him to make a better life for all.

● The writer is national chairperson of the ISN and president of the Federation of the Urban Poor

