

The world learns from SA

UN member states take many lessons from SA's experience of major human settlements projects since 1994

Analysis

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THE United Nations Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador from October 17-20, demonstrated that all UN member states recognise South Africa as a leader in human settlements policy and implementation.

This was evidenced by the high demand for information, questions from delegates and the unprecedented interest to attend sessions where the South African delegation was presenting.

Delegates also spoke highly of the progress South Africa made in providing citizens with water, sanitation, electricity and both social and economic infrastructure.

Having delivered more than 4.3 million houses and other housing opportunities that benefited more than 20 million citizens since 1994, South Africa is not only a world leader in the development and implementation of human settlements policy, but had lots of practical experience and lessons to share. More than 6 000 delegates from 200 countries gathered at the UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development which takes place every 20 years.

It's clear other countries have been monitoring SA's performance over the years and were ready to learn from us.

The conference confronted urbanisation, the upgrading of informal settlements and learned from experiences of different countries to shape the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development. The New Urban Agenda – the outcome document that was agreed upon at this UN Habitat III conference – provided guidelines on how countries can respond to rapid urbanisation and ensure that there is sharing of space between the poor and the rich.

The South African government hosted the Habitat III thematic conference on informal settlements in April, which adopted the Pretoria Declaration, a clarion call on governments across the world to prioritise human settlements and to put human settlements at the centre of economic development.

"We believe the New Urban Agenda coming out of this UN Habitat III conference must focus on skills development for young people so they may be able to participate in housing development. The resolutions we take must also understand rural dynamics to propose ways to accelerate inclusive growth, expand employment and put the poor at the centre of the delivery of decent and adequate human settlements," Minister of Human settlements Lindiwe Sisulu said.

South Africa shared its experiences with a presentation that focused on challenges and successes in the implementation of priority projects launched in 2004 after the approval of the comprehensive plan on development of human settlements policy by the Cabinet. Among the case studies were Cosmo City integrated human settlements project in Johannesburg, the N2 Gateway in Cape Town and the Marikana integrated human settlements



WORLD HUMAN SETTLEMENTS LEADER: The UN Habitat conference has earned South Africa accolades from the world body member states as a leading player in the area of human settlements, with practical experience to share among colleagues. PICTURE: GETTYIMAGES

project outside Rustenburg. At Habitat III we presented to the world what South Africa has achieved, how we developed the Breaking New Ground human settlements policy, how we tested it through 12 priority projects across all provinces and how we engaged with and involved different communities.

Delegates at the preparatory conference in Pretoria told us what SA had achieved was a miracle. Our country is number one in the world in implementing enviable human settlements programmes. We are the only country in the world that has built more than 4.3 million houses and given them to the poor free of charge; no one else can claim that. It is this service delivery miracle that the world wants to learn from us.

The SA pavilion and exhibition site was a hive of activity, with delegates from across the world collecting documents and interacting with officials.

"The SA pavilion is a South African story of service delivery told through human settlements. Through the pavilion the world is exposed to real delivery of human settlements and the journey we have travelled since 1994, coupled with challenges we encountered, but ultimately our success that made the journey and lessons worthwhile," Sisulu said.

The SA delegation led by Sisulu consisted of officials from the Department of Human Settlements, provincial human settlements

departments, the SA Local Government Association, NGOs and municipalities. Sisulu interacted with her counterparts from various countries on human settlements partnership and shared experiences.

"More than 20 million lives have been changed through the implementation of human settlements policies. We have achieved a lot as a nation and going forward we will focus on implementing catalytic projects, respond to the needs of young people moving to cities in search of better opportunities and most importantly, ensure that every cent spent on developing human settlements contributes to skills development and the creation of jobs.

"We will also put more focus on community involvement in the implementation of housing projects. Cooperatives led by women and young people must lead in manufacturing and producing building material and get involved in the actual building of houses. By involving communities in all steps of building houses we would be able to train unemployed youth, create jobs and create space for new entrants in the construction sector," she said.

The human settlements sector agreed that in order to respond efficiently to growing urbanisation, we must implement big catalytic projects. We believe catalytic projects will allow us to deliver on a large scale and respond to the growing need for affordable rental and gap housing. Projects like Marikana

and N2 Gateway are also catalytic because they are located close to growing economic hubs, bringing poor people close to economic opportunities. We have indicated that when we count the success, we will also count how many young people have been trained and employed and how many women and disabled people have been involved in the projects.

The Vulindlela rural enhanced people's housing process outside Pietermaritzburg is one such example where the people's involvement has ensured massive benefits for the local economy, skills development and job creation.

The great cost is building material. Through the implementation of catalytic projects implementation we also seek to introduce building material suppliers based in communities. We are investing billions of rands as the government into this process to boost the construction sector.

The Pretoria Declaration on Human Settlements also details our experiences and those of other countries on how we have responded to the growth of informal settlements and how we can plan better to prevent the further mushrooming of informal settlements and allocate well-located land for the development of human settlements for the poor. *Ndivhuwo Wa Ha Mabaya is head of communications and Department of Human Settlements spokesperson*