

Moving from slum survivor to urban planner

PATRICK MAGEBHULA: POVERTY Mar 04 2011 09:36

There was a time when *uskoteni* (hobo) was a word that police and government officials used to demean slum-dwellers like me.

We did not belong; we were to be removed or harassed. But we have changed the meaning of the word. Throughout South Africa we now refer to ourselves as *uskoteni* with pride.

Now it means we are survivors. This ability of the poor to survive and innovate in the face of harsh conditions is central to the changing approach of the ministry of human settlements to slum upgrading.

Although the government has built about two million matchbox houses since 1994, the housing backlog is larger than it was in 1994. Now, the ministry has agreed to upgrade incrementally the informal settlements where people already live.

In December the minister, Tokyo Sexwale, in one of the major outcomes of his performance agreement with President Jacob Zuma, undertook to upgrade 400 000 informal settlement households on well-located land by 2014. The new approach recalls how we have changed the meaning of *uskoteni*.

The RDP housing programme has created false expectations among millions of people who will probably never get free houses. And those who receive them have to live further from job opportunities than they did when they were shack-dwellers. Also, the government has evicted shack-dwellers in every major city. Under the RDP, the poor are dependent, dispensable and defenceless.

The Informal Settlement Network (ISN), which I chair, is a broad network of informal settlement organisations which brings together poor communities, city-wide and nationally, to share concerns and develop solutions.

In every municipality where the ISN operates -- Cape Town, Ekurhuleni, Ethekwini, Johannesburg, Nelson Mandela Bay and Stellenbosch -- it has sought to build partnerships with municipal government.

Community-led upgrading

These are key to pioneering community-led informal settlement upgrading that can help manage the growth of our cities. The ISN is working on 55 pilot projects for the

upgrading informal settlements in these cities, all in partnership with municipalities and at least two in collaboration with universities.

On January 21 the community organisations that work with the ISN, and with the Community Organisation Resource Centre, uTshani Fund and uDondolo Trust -- NGOs linked to Shack Dwellers International -- made a watershed decision in Cape Town.

We recommitted ourselves to a broad agenda of working with local communities in planning their own development. This involves communities collecting information about themselves by means of household surveys, planning their settlement using this information, and networking at city level so that the poor are central to city planning.

It also means building partnerships with city governments. We clasped hands with representatives of the housing departments of Cape Town and Stellenbosch. Many delegates to that conference struggled for years to enable the poor to live decent, empowered lives in cities.

In the 1980s and 1990s we invaded land to create settlements that now house formal communities with services, legal tenure and housing development. We have worked with all levels of the government to give the urban poor a voice. Working with communities we have driven home the need to save money, collect information and upgrade.

As the government shifts to an incremental approach to upgrading informal settlements, communities are preparing the ground for this historic possibility. Upgrading can take place only with the communities as partners.

Uskoteni, in partnership with the cities, are now ready to upgrade their lives and build the nation that has long been their dream.

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