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Environment and Urbanization 2005 17: 115
DOI: 10.1177/095624780501700102

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The Methodist Church's initiative to use its vacant land to support homeless people's housing and livelihoods in South Africa

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SUMMARY: This paper describes an initiative by the Methodist Church in South Africa to identify vacant land it owns that could be allocated to housing projects for homeless families and, in rural areas, to support their livelihoods. Working with the South African Homeless People's Federation, this initiative is reviewing Church records, checking them against other official records, and identifying and visiting potential land sites larger than one hectare. This will result in a list of land sites that can be developed by the Church and the Federation. The initiative is also important in encouraging more action from the government on land redistribution and tenure reform, and in setting an example that, hopefully, other Churches will follow.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN TERMS OF average per capita income, South Africa is an upper-middle-income country, but a high proportion of households are poor and there are millions of homeless and landless people. Colonial rule and apartheid resulted in very unequal and racially skewed land distribution, extensive land dispossession, and extreme land shortages and insecurity of tenure for much of the black population. With the transition to democracy, expectations were high that a government led by the African National Congress would effect a fundamental transformation of property rights that would address this history of dispossession. Sadly, land reform in South Africa has not progressed at the rate or scale anticipated. Over 13 million people remain crowded into the homelands, where land rights are often unclear. On private farms, millions of workers, former workers and their families face continued tenure insecurity. In the cities, shack settlements continue to grow rapidly, beset by poverty, crime and lack of basic services, with a resulting deepening social and economic crisis. The result is a highly diverse pattern of demand for land, and numerous hot-spots of acute land hunger in both urban and rural areas.

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), recognizing that government alone cannot address the acute shortage of land, has committed itself to using the land at its disposal to address the needs of some of the most impoverished communities. This paper describes an audit undertaken by the MCSA of all its land assets, with the support of the South African Homeless People's Federation (SAHPF) and its NGO allies, the Community Organization Urban Resource Centre (CO-URC), uTshani Fund and People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter.(1)

1. See, for instance, Bolnick, Joel (1993), "The People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter; community-driven networking in South Africa's informal settlements", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 5, No 1, October, pages 91–110; also Bolnick, Joel (1996), "uTshani Buyakhuluma (The grass speaks); People's Dialogue and the South African Homeless People's Federation, 1993–1996", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 8, No 2, October, pages 153–170; and People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter (1999), "Negotiating for land: the construction and demolition of Ruo Emoh's show house in Cape Town in August 1999", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 11, No 2, October, pages 31–40.

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II. THE BROADER CONTEXT

IN LINE WITH its 1996 Constitution, South Africa's land policy has three distinct components:

- a land redistribution programme, created to broaden access to land among the country's black majority while laying the ground for broad-based development;
- a land restitution programme, adopted to restore land or provide compensation to those dispossessed as a result of racially discriminatory laws and practices; and
- a tenure reform programme, designed to secure the rights of people living under insecure arrangements on land owned by others, including the state and private landowners.

a. Land redistribution

The state's land redistribution programme is taking place in the context of a neoliberal macroeconomic framework, which limits the role of the state and promotes service delivery through the market. There is some evidence that more land has moved from white to black ownership through private market transactions than through government land reforms. Even under the government's Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development programme, state assistance has been largely confined to the provision of grants for beneficiaries to acquire land for farming through "willing buyer-willing seller" transactions. A considerable gap is now emerging between the per capita amount of land transferred to wealthier beneficiaries and that transferred to poorer beneficiaries, and access of the very poor to the programme is increasingly in doubt. Overall, despite some successes, the redistribution programme has not lived up to its promise to transform land-holding, combat poverty and revitalize the rural economy. Government policies have left the structure of the rural economy largely intact. If land reform is to meet its wider objectives, new ways will have to be found to transfer land and to provide the necessary support services to a much wider range of beneficiaries.

b. Land restitution

As of 2003, the restitution programme had settled almost 37,000 claims of the 63,455 lodged by the 1998 deadline. The vast majority of these were urban claims, settled by financial compensation. Relatively little land has been earmarked for restoration through the restitution programme to date, but most of the large and complex rural claims remain unresolved. It is these claims that could potentially give rise to major conflict over land, but that also hold significant potential to contribute to the broader aims of land reform – namely the reduction of rural poverty and racially skewed control of land and rural resources.

While there have been notable successes in restitution, the contribution to land reform has been limited. Relatively few claims have been settled with land awards, and the restitution process has not been used as the basis for wider transformation of spatial apartheid in South Africa's cities or the countryside. Restitution remains a radical idea that challenges the fundamentals of national economic policy in that its success requires a degree of interference with property markets and the vested interests of landowners. While there has been political support for increasing budgets and the minis-

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ter's power to expropriate, the programme requires further support from across the state and civil society to acquire and, where necessary, to expropriate, land as well as to support the development aspects of restitution.

c. Tenure reform

Tenure reform is the least evolved area of land reform. The main achievements to date have been a number of laws enacted to create statutory rights. But overall, securing labour tenants' rights has proved to be more complex, costly and time-consuming than originally anticipated. Landowners remain hostile to attempts to reform tenure rights on farms, and government is preparing to confront landowners and invest substantially in enforcing the rights of occupiers. For now, uncertainty around rights continues to inhibit the development of viable livelihoods, access to credit, services and infrastructure, and investment.

III. PURPOSE OF THE AUDIT

IN THE 1998 Triennial Conference on Land Reform Resolution, concerns were expressed that "…*the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was involved in land dispossession in the past, and the ineffective use of the glebes*."(2) The MCSA, as a landowner of significant properties, responded by conducting an inventory of some of its properties to see if its land, as a resource, could be used in an effective and transforming manner. Such an audit was needed to see what MCSA land assets might be used for this, for the benefit of various stakeholders, especially the communities associated with the land. It was also hoped that this would stimulate other key landowners to follow a similar procedure, to form collaborative partnerships and positively influence current policy and land reform.

2. Glebes are Church lands.

To conduct this audit in a way that involved landless communities at a grassroots level, a partnership was formed with the South African Homeless People's Federation (SAHPF). This association was formalized in terms of a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the MCSA and the Federation, with its NGO allies, the Community Organization Urban Resource Centre (CO-URC), uTshani Fund and People's Dialogue on Land and Shelter. It was agreed that the following activities would be carried out:

- update existing MCSA records and database;
- conduct an incremental national audit of all MCSA-owned land by means of one audit per province;
- assess, in consultation, the provincial audit, and jointly develop an allocation strategy in terms of secure land tenure and sustainable use of MCSA properties for the benefit of various stakeholders;
- implement an approved strategy, on a pilot basis in one province, with the aim of replicating this in each of the other provinces;
- develop a collaborative Church land policy in order to impact positively on current government policy;
- initiate parallel processes with regard to land tenure, infrastructure and housing, and other related land issues with relevant stakeholders, as suitable land is identified and transferred;
- utilize the potential of land acquisition to strengthen and grow the SAHPF as a social movement; and
- empower through the transfer of skills and knowledge at a grassroots level.

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IV. A BRIEF BACKGROUND ON SIGNATORIES TO THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

THE SOUTH AFRICAN Homeless People's Federation (SAHPF) is a network of community-based savings schemes, with membership drawn from informal settlements, backyard shacks, hostels, or rented accommodation in township areas. About 85 per cent of members are women. The Federation, with its partners, helps members to negotiate for land, services, housing, and economic development. In the process, "shack" enumerations are used to build an information base about settlements, and exchanges between communities are used to spread skills and practices.

Given the serious inequity in the allocation of resources in South Africa, as reflected in the lack of access for poor communities to land with secure tenure, basic services and capital, the Federation's model has offered a creative alternative. This model is based on the view that poor, organized communities can make meaningful contributions to the vision, design and implementation of poverty eradication policies and projects. They can make these contributions if there are enough investments in developing the skills and capacity of communities. This is reflected in the fact that the Federation and its partners had successfully secured tenure and built more than 11,000 houses for low-income households.

uTshani Fund is the financial arm of the Federation. It helps to identify land and acquire development rights, helps access housing subsidies (to which all low-income households without a home are entitled), and helps manage or support project implementation and provide support around job creation.

The Federation is also supported by People's Dialogue, a national NGO, and the Community Organization Urban Resource Centre (CO-URC),[3] a local support organization modelled on the highly successful institution of the same name in Karachi, Pakistan.[4]

3. www.urc.courc.org.za

4. www.urckarachi.org

V. METHODOLOGY

THE LAND AUDIT involved a review of legislation, policy documents and secondary literature, while visits to provinces allowed for the collection and analysis of data for the land sites visited. This began with a review of the data on existing MCSA properties, reconciling the information with available archival records and inventories, and updating the existing databases. This allowed the identification of significant properties to be visited and assessed. Criteria used by the Federation for this identification were based on size and locality, with a focus on vacant land; land sites in excess of one hectare were identified so they could be visited and assessed. The audit was initiated in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, since all MCSA property records are archived in Durban and all data have to be verified there. In addition, the Federation's largest landless group is situated in this region. In order to fast-track the process, at the same time as identified sites in KZN province were being visited and assessed, Eastern Cape province data were being compiled in parallel.

Although the process seems basic, many logistical complexities were experienced against a backdrop of financial constraints. Much of the cadastral information needed for the evaluation was not available from provincial directorates, or could not be traced against archival data that had not been upgraded. The limitations with regard to available official data affects all areas of land reform. A variety of trial-and-error methods were employed

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to work around this problem, including greater liaison with communities, particularly the elder members. One of the objectives of this project was to strive towards empowering people at a grassroots level, through training in sourcing data, preparing land inventories and using data to identify and assess potentially viable land; in this, the initiative was successful.

VI. FINDINGS

EXISTING INVENTORY INFORMATION was compared and verified against records at the Methodist Connexional Office (MCO) in Durban and, where necessary, the records were amended. These records allowed the Federation to identify potentially viable sites for assessment.

In KwaZulu-Natal, the initial breakdown of data yielded a total of 521 properties, 224 of which were larger than one hectare. Further sourcing of archive data reduced the figure to 220 properties, 66 of them larger than one hectare. A random sample selection was used to check for consistency. Results indicated that it was possible to verify MCSA ownership for most of the core properties identified. For a very small proportion of properties, there were differences in actual and recorded property sizes (ascribed to miscalculations made during conversion to metric). But it was assumed to be safe to generalize the sample findings in terms of the compilations, from which potentially viable sites could be selected for assessment. The identity and ownership of some properties could not be confirmed, but most of these fell under the "less than 1 hectare" category, and hence did not warrant further investigation for the time being.

In the Eastern Cape, the analysis of land records yielded a total of 1,303 properties, of which 361 were larger than one hectare and thus could be considered for assessment. A random sample selection yielded similar results to those for KwaZulu-Natal.

a. Analysis of land use of MCSA properties in KwaZulu-Natal

Natal coastal district: Churches represent the largest land use in this district, followed by manses and then church halls. Cemeteries, mission and society buildings, and schools (including pre-schools) independent of churches make up smaller percentages of land use, and miscellaneous utilities such as flats and parking lots also account for part of the smaller property usage. Within this district, Church property is largely used for churches and ecumenical-related institutions; however, a significant percentage is made up of vacant land.

Natal West district: In this district, close to 40 per cent of MCSA property is used for church structures. Ecumenical centres, flats, homes for supernumeraries and the aged, youth centres, office blocks and shops account for smaller percentages of total land use, followed by church-hall complexes and schools. Vacant land constitutes the second-largest use of property (almost 14 per cent).

b. Analysis of land use in the Eastern Cape

In the compilation and analysis of the Eastern Cape properties, essential information for 118 properties was not available, and these could not be included in the analysis.

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Clarkebury district: Almost 20 per cent of the property in this district is used for church buildings, while property allocated to churches accounts for another 35 per cent. Land used for churches and schools together constitutes another 16 per cent. Vacant land makes up about 9 per cent.

Grahamstown district: Church and church-related functions account for around 23 per cent of land use, with more than 12 per cent being used for education and training purposes. This is indicative of the MCSA's heritage within the district. Vacant land accounts for about 19 per cent of property.

Queenstown district: Around half of all property is used for a mix of churches, manses, school buildings, halls, outbuildings and church complexes, together with churches as individual structures. Vacant land constitutes about 30 per cent of all property.

Umtata district: Although there is insufficient information for a thorough and accurate analysis of Umtata, available data suggest that, as in other districts, vacant land accounts for the largest percentage of MCSA property.

VII. SITES VISITED

ALTHOUGH DOCUMENTED INFORMATION indicated potentially viable sites, the actual assessment of properties, undertaken during visits by a Federation task group, found that some sites were not available or were not suitable.

a. KwaZulu-Natal sites

In KwaZulu-Natal, ten potentially viable sites were recommended for further use, four of them in rural areas. The intention was to use these to assist as many homeless people as possible, and recommendations therefore focused on utilization to the maximum potential within the limits of stipulated building and development regulations. Where land was not suitable for building – for instance because of strong opposition from local residents ("not in my backyard" concerns), it was recommended that land be sold at market value to establish funds for assisting homeless communities in land and housing projects.

Otherwise, recommendations focused on housing development, with some agricultural activity. Families currently living on the properties were given precedence. In the rural sites, MCSA is considering granting these properties for the mixed use of agriculture and housing, with the mobilization of the rural communities to institute sustainable agricultural and housing programmes.

b. Eastern Cape sites

Sites identified in the Eastern Cape held a wide range of potential uses.

- In some urban and peri-urban areas, there are properties that house church buildings and include vacant areas that are recommended for subdivision and housing development. In some of these areas, active Federation groups will be able to support more efficient use of the land, and have an impact on current government land reform.
- Some cases will also involve agricultural activities (especially where there is more need for livelihoods than housing); in a few cases, multi-skill centres are planned, to assist in long-term socioeconomic support for the surrounding areas.

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- At an unused youth camp with derelict buildings that is currently housing squatter families, there is a plan to revitalize and re-build a Church youth camp, while also addressing the needs of the squatters.
- One site, which contains the derelict buildings of a training institution, with a school, manse, church and various other buildings still in use, has some historical value, as Nelson Mandela completed school here. Further development is not realistic here, but donor funding has been obtained to upgrade and restore the site.
- One site, with a prime seaside setting, will be sold at market value, with the proceeds going to establish a revolving fund, and with attention being given to the medium- and long-term development of the site.

VIII. CONCLUSION

ALTHOUGH THIS INITIATIVE by the Methodist Church has not yielded a large number of land sites to be developed – within the context of the very acute shortage of land in South Africa – it is nonetheless an important undertaking. It sets an example that other Churches may well follow: it has built the capacity of Federation members at a grassroots level to source data, prepare land inventories and assess the viability of sites; and it will ideally encourage more action on the part of government on land redistribution and tenure reform.

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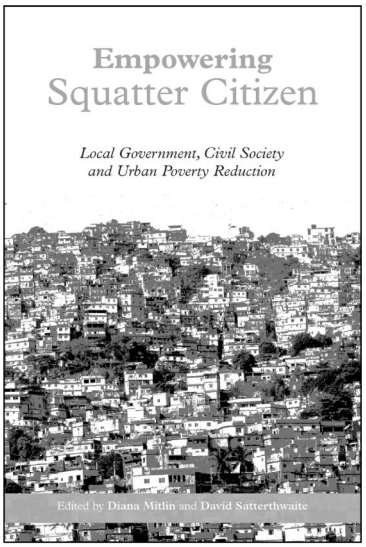

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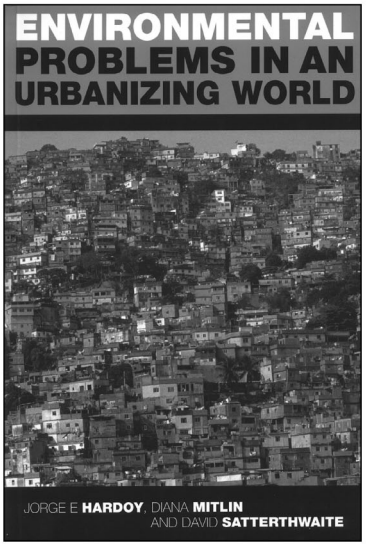

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