

# URBAN LAND OCCUPATIONS NEED PURPOSEFUL ACTION RATHER THAN OPPORTUNISM

The land question has been reduced to a debate between safeguarding property rights and expropriation. The preoccupation of both standpoints with the issue of ownership has diverted attention from the crucial matter of the use and development of land. *Prof. Ivan Turok* believes broadening the debate is vital, to make sense of the current predicament facing cities, which now accommodate two-thirds of South Africa's population.

A recent spike in urban land invasions has put considerable strain on city authorities and surrounding communities. Tens of thousands of people who were living in squalid and overcrowded conditions have lost faith in government housing policy and public consultation mechanisms. Opportunists have supported their actions by staking out empty parcels of land and renting out small plots for people to erect their own shacks.

The illegality of this should not obscure the underlying hardships and frustrations that have driven people to occupy land. The swelling urban population has been denied their basic constitutional rights by failures across the human settlements system, including the formal housing market and state policy. In addition, scant progress has been made with tackling the legacy of racial segregation, forced removals and dormitory townships.

## Hazards and disputes

The land occupations serve a purpose in releasing unused land for entry-level housing. Bypassing established procedures is the only way many poor households believe they can gain a stake in the city. Land invasions also force the issues of spatial transformation and redress onto the table.

However, seizing land in this way is disruptive and more likely to destroy value than to create it. Land grabs are no way to build a city that functions well. People end up living on hazardous sites, liable to flooding or subsidence, or occupying strategic land earmarked for industrial purposes, schools or other public facilities. Property owners are antagonised and municipal resources get diverted from delivering services to fending off invasions, demolishing structures and being embroiled in legal disputes.

## State-owned land

Several provinces and municipalities have decided to repurpose surplus state-owned land to provide serviced sites for people to construct their own homes. This could provide a useful safety valve to relieve pressure in cities where there is a reasonable

*The morning rush hour in the City of Cape Town where thousands of people who live in the more affordable outskirts need to travel for hours to get to and from work. Photo: Pixabay*

stock of such land, especially if the land is not remote from jobs and amenities. However, a lasting solution requires more to be done.

There will never be enough land in cities to accommodate everyone on their own plot. The supply of land is finite, while demand is rising relentlessly with urbanisation. Shifting the policy focus to the larger supply of greenfield land beyond the urban edge exacerbates the inefficient structure of cities, amplifies social inequalities and threatens water sources and other sensitive ecosystems.

The system for releasing and developing land needs to be revamped to provide a fairer and more sustainable answer to the urban land question. There is no need to reinvent the wheel, since much can be learnt from local experience and from other countries that are vigorously engaged in building productive and inclusive cities.

At least two overarching principles are important, in relation to the substance and process of land use and development.

### Raising density

Firstly, a concerted effort is required to make more efficient use of well-located land by raising building densities in central locations and along public-transport corridors. A more compact urban form with housing and jobs closer together will improve productivity, limit public infrastructure costs and reduce daily commutes.

In several cities a start has been made with transit-oriented development around new rapid bus systems. But a wider commitment across government and the property-development sector is required to make this viable.

Secondly, more transparency and public trust in the procedures governing urban planning and development are needed to reduce popular doubt, discourage land grabs

and increase confidence in the future. The current system is tilted towards the interests of privileged individuals rather than the public good. This constrains and delays efforts to meet the needs of the poor and create cities for all.

The system of governing land and human settlements needs to be invigorated and bolstered in ways that have been neglected in recent years. The legal powers, including expropriation, already exist in most cases. There remain bigger challenges of political will and institutional capacity.

### The need for an audit

Firstly, the apparatus of urban planning needs to focus more on making unused and under-utilised land and property available for the purpose of building integrated human settlements. Every city urgently needs a comprehensive audit to identify suitable land for its development pipeline, followed by deliberate acquisitions of strategic sites in anticipation of future growth. Better alignment of spatial plans with investments in public infrastructure can further speed up development.

### Simpler procedures and partnerships

Secondly, cities need to streamline and simplify their regulatory procedures and bylaws, to reduce unnecessary obstacles to property development and renewal. For example, rules insisting on off-street car parking and generous space standards are inappropriate for affordable housing. Cities have also been slow to put in place mechanisms to take advantage of the increase in land values that accompanies urban growth. This could generate some of the resources required to reinvest in infrastructure, land banking – the practice of investing in undeveloped land – and affordable housing.

Thirdly, cities need to create action-oriented partnerships with the private

sector, NGOs, community builders and other stakeholders to mobilise additional funding and expertise. Such initiatives can strengthen capabilities and reduce some of the risk and uncertainty that accompany urban development. Improving access to bank finance for housing producers and households is also vital, because this has deteriorated in recent years as banks have pulled back on their lending.

### Building upwards

Finally, serious consideration needs to be given to different ways of promoting more productive use of scarce urban land through densification and concentration. This will require innovative urban design and improved public awareness. Building upwards will release land for circulation and public amenities, and create more vibrant communities. This means encouraging the redevelopment of low-rise housing with three or four-storey buildings.

There are instances of good practice emerging in several cities, which need to be replicated on a large scale. For example, a project is currently underway on a hitherto neglected site in Dido Valley, near Simon's Town, involving the construction of 600 homes to accommodate a diverse group of beneficiaries.

These include the victims of forced removals to Ocean View and Gugulethu, who have been living in backyard shacks. Other beneficiaries include the residents of Red Hill informal settlement. The area is close to a railway station and will have its own clinic, two parks, a crèche and a business site. This is a good example of how purposeful planning can unlock valuable land and lift people out of poverty.

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