

SOCIAL HOUSING: Bridging or reinforcing spatial inequality?

In South Africa, social housing has particular significance: in addition to providing affordable rental accommodation, it aims to undo the spatial legacy of apartheid and contribute to upward mobility. New HSRC research suggests that South Africa is falling short of this goal, as social housing drifts further from city centres. By *Andrea Teagle*

Run-down council flats in Lavender Hill, Cape Town. The social housing models brings together various stakeholders to overcome the limitations of government housing and provide decent, well-located accommodation to low-income households.

Photo: Ashraf Hendricks, GroundUp



In a [recent report](#) mapping social housing projects across South Africa's seven largest cities, HSRC researchers found that there has been a drift to the periphery, far from economic activity. This trend appears to contradict the government's ambition to encourage upward mobility and urban integration through social housing.

"In the 1990s and 2000s, more than 80% of all social housing investments were focused on the core city and inner suburbs. By 2011–2015, this percentage dropped to 21% in the core cities, and 16% in the inner suburbs," said co-author Dr Andreas Scheba. Scheba was speaking at a virtual launch of the report, where experts gathered to debate how best to realise housing's transformational goals.

The location of social housing projects depends on a confluence of factors, including the price and availability of land, private and public funding, and regulatory processes.

Speakers acknowledged that locations further away from inner-city areas are not necessarily incompatible with upward mobility. Some townships are close to other economic nodes, and social mobility depends on many factors, such as proximity to public transport and amenities.

However, the HSRC report suggests that the benefits of social housing projects do not seem to have resulted in better work or educational opportunities, or spatial reconfiguration of cities. "While social housing projects improved the living conditions of tenants, there was little sign of deeper transformation," said Scheba.

Parcels or mega cities?

In 2020, President Ramaphosa [announced the launch](#) of the Mooikloof Mega Residential project outside Tshwane, part of [30 mega cities](#) planned across the province. The developments include schools, hospitals and other amenities.

"The mega projects are becoming key in terms of integrating housing, education facilities, health facilities and social amenities," said Palesa Ryan of the Development Bank of Southern Africa.

However, the plans have met with mixed reactions. Prof Philip Harrison and colleagues from Wits University [argue](#) that the new cities swim against positive densification trends that have resulted in improvements in everyday life. "Demographically, our cities cannot support both increased compaction and "new cities" of the scale currently proposed,' they write.

The HSRC's Prof Ivan Turok has argued for more careful analysis before mega cities become the backbone

of government efforts to meet housing demand. International experience warns against the assumption that jobs will follow housing. In China, for example, Harrison and colleagues [write](#), such developments have become 'dormitory settlements' as tenants travel elsewhere to work each day. At the webinar, Ryan emphasised the role of the private sector in generating economic activity close to planned mega cities.

"It is vital to reconcile the urban expansion and compaction approaches in order to avoid duplication of effort and dissipation of scarce resources," Turok writes in a 2015 [paper](#).

The compacting or infill approach – securing smaller parcels of land for social housing closer to existing economic activity – comes with financial and regulatory challenges.

"There's a memorandum approved in 2019 that prescribes how land can be made available for human settlements," said Lizelle Coetzee, deputy director of precinct planning of the Department of Public Works. The department identified more than 10,000 potential sites for social housing (including vacant farmland and urban land) in the last financial year, to be reviewed by the Housing Development Agency and Department of Human Settlements.

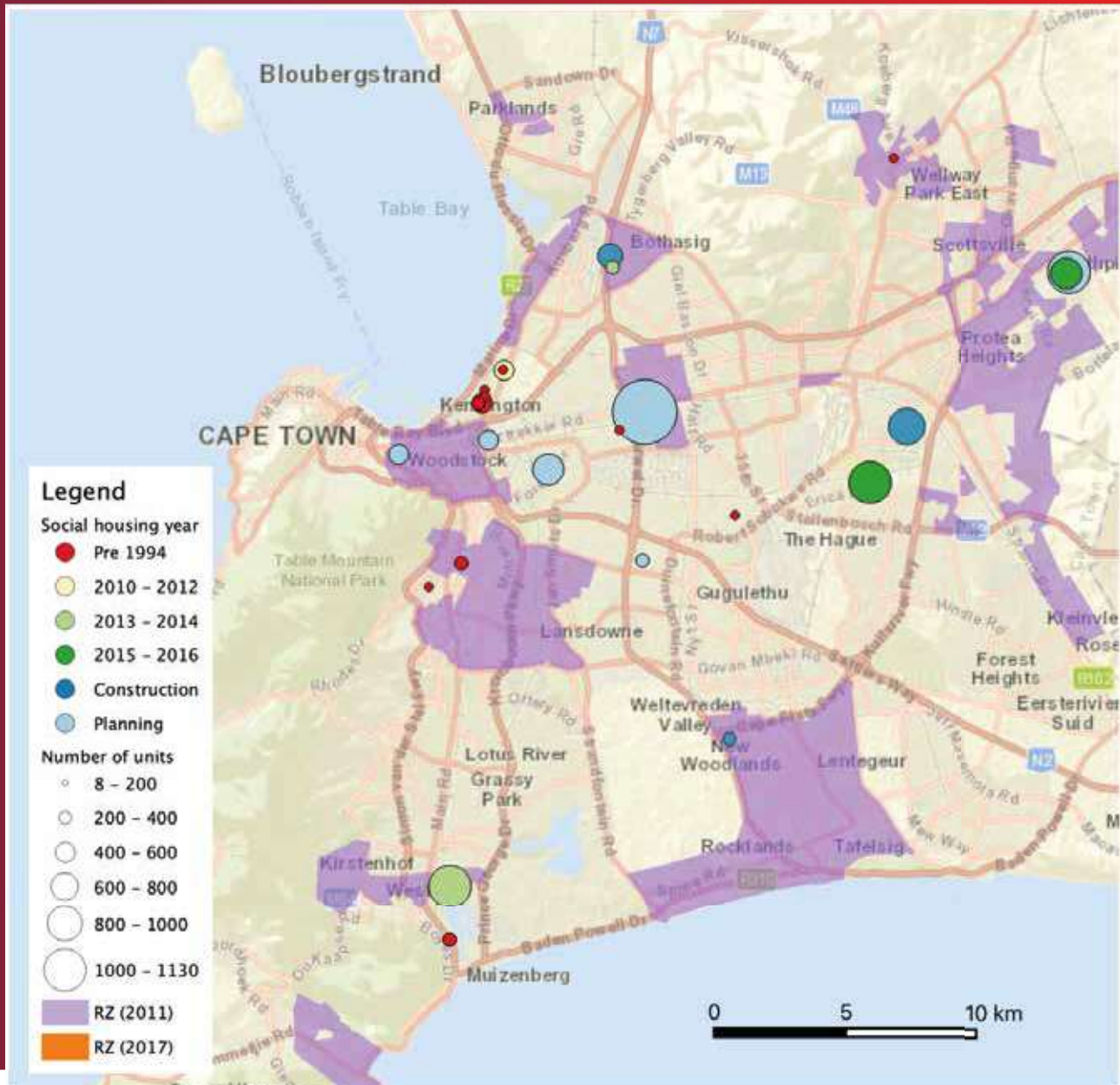
Tsholofelo Ramotsehoa of the National Housing Finance Corporation (NHFC) said that minimising operational costs and optimising design efficiency could help to minimise risks and make public sector housing projects feasible. She noted that in the experience of the NHFC, three-storey walk-ups tend to be cost efficient. Municipalities can assist in improving project viability by actively releasing land at below market rates, suggested Malcolm McCarthy of the National Association of Social Housing Organisations (NASHO).

Upgrading informal settlements

Another positive development trend is the boom in backyard rental housing. HSRC research suggests that working with communities and actively supporting this densification trend may nudge settlements towards sustainability. Zoé Ramondou of the Agence Française de Développement, which helps to fund social housing projects in South Africa, suggested the need for innovative financing solutions to bridge this trend with public amenities and infrastructure. Streamlining regulations could also help to draw the private sector and international funders into the space.

HSRC researchers have emphasised that upgrading townships and informal settlements should happen in conjunction with spatial transformation.

Social housing in Cape Town



Source: 'Social housing and upward mobility in South Africa', by Justin Visagie, Ivan Turok and Andreas Scheba

"We still believe that in Cape Town there is a need to have social housing in the inner city and in places like the Atlantic seaboard, not just for economic reasons but also for social integration," Scheba said.

McCarthy suggested distinguishing social housing projects that are driven by spatial restructuring from those that are responding to a shortage of rental housing.

Filling data gaps

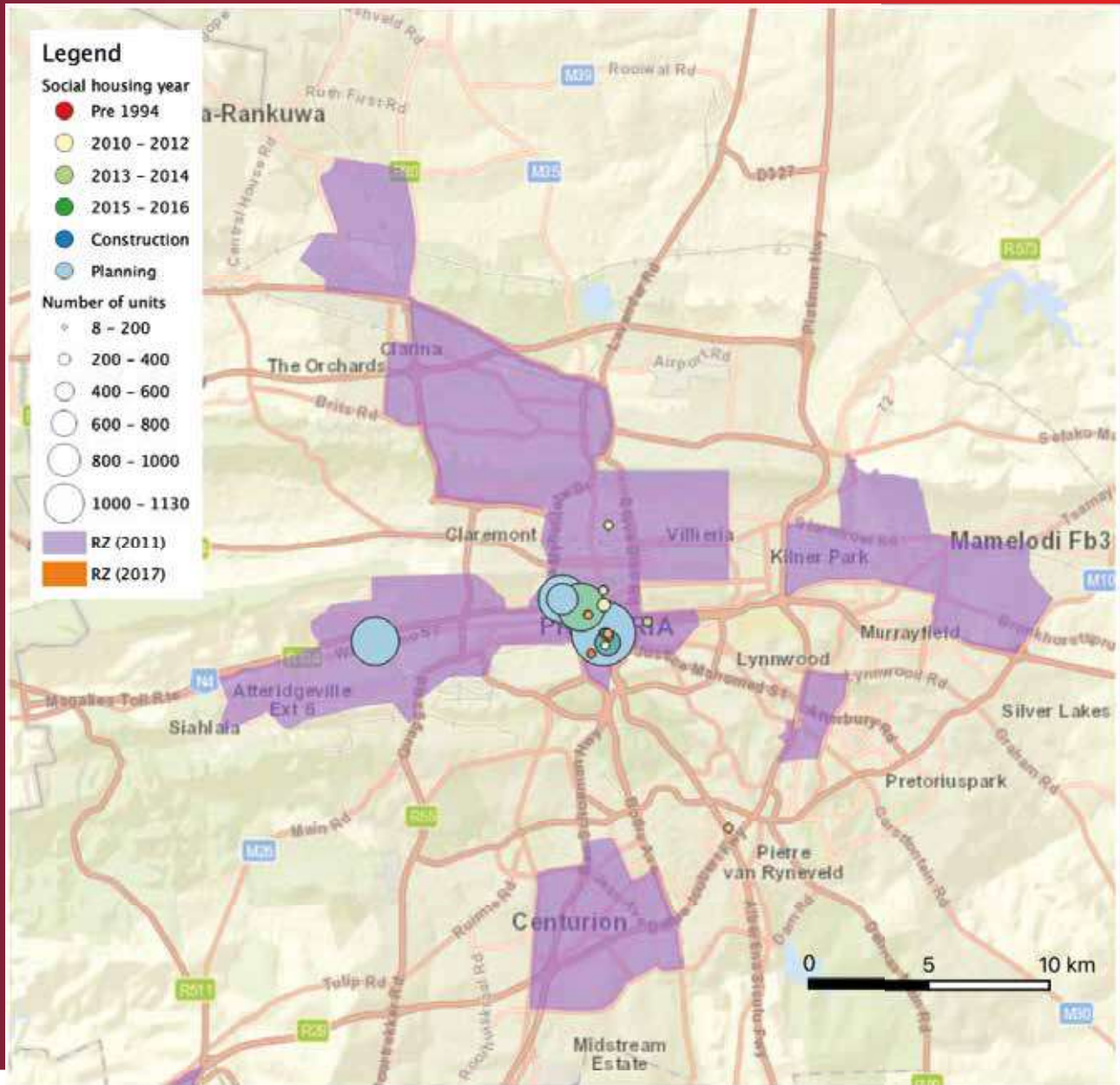
"You find implicit assumptions in the policy that social housing will promote upward mobility of tenants, but

there is ambiguity and no clear guidelines," Scheba added.

Ahmed Bokhari from the Social Housing Regulatory Authority (SHRA) acknowledged the importance of gauging impact at a household level, to get a better idea of the impacts of housing and location on tenants and the wider community. The SHRA has started a household audit, he said.

"Having the evidence to demonstrate that social housing improves people's well-being and life chances is vital to support the case for this kind of government investment," said Turok.

Social housing in Tshwane



Source: 'Social housing and upward mobility in South Africa' by Justin Visagie, Ivan Turok and Andreas Scheba.

Karabelo Collen Poe, the new general manager for NASHO, noted that having a range of household incomes in a given housing project allowed for social mobility. It is important that people can move to bigger homes when their incomes rise.

Does social mobility challenge the viability of projects? According to Poe, the surplus of demand for housing means that, while social mobility is not specifically encouraged, it is not discouraged out of fear that units might remain vacant. However, there is very little data on what happens to tenants who move out of housing projects.

Capturing the wider impacts of social housing, and how they differ by location, is critical if social housing is to play a meaningful role in reducing inequality and transforming our cities into integrated and productive spaces.

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