TRANSFORMING
excluded communities into inclusive cities

Across the country we face painful dilemmas of social transformation that threaten to draw communities into a downward spiral. The predicament is worsened in the current period of economic uncertainty and austerity. *Ivan Turok* reflects on recent events in an ordinary suburb of Msunduzi (Pietermaritzburg) to illustrate the need for stronger local cohesion and development in order to accommodate and manage urban growth more successfully.

Over the last few months, residents of Northdale, a suburb of Msunduzi, have been forced to endure increasing blackouts because their neighbours in the Nhlalakahle informal settlement have been hot-wiring the municipal electricity boxes for illegal connections. These extra connections overload the electricity network and cause it to fail. The informal settlers have also been stealing electricity cables to make their connections.

When the municipal engineers disconnect the illegal cables the lights go back on for the suburban ratepayers, but the informal settlement is thrown into darkness. This provokes an angry reaction and threats of revenge attacks against both the suburban residents for reporting them in the first place, and the municipal workers for cutting them off.

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Dilemmas of entitlement, financial shortfalls and hostility

The informal settlers protest that they are only stealing electricity because the municipality refuses to supply them with power. They believe they are fully entitled to electricity as voters and citizens. They know their makeshift illegal connections are dangerous because members of their community are electrocuted every so often. This reinforces their general sense of insecurity and vulnerability.

The municipality is cash-strapped and reluctant to electrify the settlement because it's on a slope and not ideal for formal housing. It is hard to justify the fixed investment unless the place has permanent, formal status.

Officials worry about the ability of the city's fragile electricity network to cope with the extra demand, after a decade when maintenance has been seriously neglected and sub-stations regularly fail.

They're also concerned that upgrading the settlement will attract more families from outlying rural areas and further intensify the pressure on all kinds of municipal services. This chimes with a deeper national ambivalence towards rural-urban migration and urban informality.

Balancing needs and resources crucial

Without financial support from national government to upgrade the area properly, the local authority ends up 'just managing' the problem and reacting to events as they unfold. The ongoing vandalism is squandering scarce municipal resources to replace the stolen cables, to remove the illegal connections and to hire special security to guard the infrastructure.

Over time different groups of local residents are becoming less tolerant and more suspicious of each other. This is eroding the goodwill required to create a more integrated and inclusive urban community. The municipality feels increasingly pressurised by the ratepayers to 'eradicate' shack areas and to relocate their occupants to leftover land on the periphery.

The obvious solution for the municipality is to electrify the settlement and thereby remove the immediate source of the problem. This fits squarely with the core service delivery function of local government. It should take the heat out of the situation and improve the living conditions of destitute communities.

Having a proper electricity supply will remove the health hazard and fire risk of using paraffin, wood and candles. Street lights will improve community safety and internal lighting will enable learners to study after dark. As conditions stabilise and prospects

improve, the settlement might expect to have fresh water and sanitation services installed within a year or two.

However, municipalities have legal obligations to operate prudently and are under financial duress in this period of austerity. This limits their ability to electrify new settlements and install services in situations where most residents are unemployed and can't afford to pay. They are reluctant to act in the knowledge that the scale of theft could escalate if the electricity poles are within easier reach of people's shacks.

Municipalities with a narrow economic base and burgeoning informal settlements will go bankrupt if they get the balance wrong between spending and revenue generation. Their capacity to spend also depends on the tacit support they receive from local ratepayers, without which the viability of local government would be jeopardised.

Breaking out of the vicious circle

Cities clearly need a way to break out of the current impasse and turn the vicious circle of frustration, dispute and conflict into a more positive atmosphere of mutual understanding,

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trust and optimism about the future. There are at least three approaches that would help.

Social contracts. First, some kind of social contract at the city level would give communities greater confidence about their long-term prospects and help to shift horizons beyond short-term grievances.

Informal settlements need stronger assurances that their services will improve within a specific timeframe. Suburban fears about municipal decay, collapsing infrastructure and wasteful spending also need to be allayed. City residents share a common destiny that goes beyond partisan politics and has not been effectively articulated by our civic leaders to date. Citizens from different communities need to be encouraged to be more respectful and work together within a shared vision of the future.

National policy to urbanise and upgrade. Second, an unambiguous national policy to support urbanisation and settlement upgrading would send a powerful signal of commitment and help to overcome municipal doubts. National cohesion is an abstract idea that to become

authentic needs to be built on a foundation of strong and cohesive local communities. There are exceptional costs incurred in accommodating and managing growing urban populations in decent, liveable environments. It is unreasonable to expect these up-front infrastructure costs to be borne by existing local ratepayers alone.

There are likely to be substantial payoffs from national investment in improved living conditions through enhanced workforce productivity and transformed life chances. Timely investment in community infrastructure will also save on the costs of rectifying failure and repairing damage to the social fabric later. Therefore there is a compelling case for the upgrading of informal settlements to feature prominently in the national infrastructure programme.

Boosting jobs and income in poor communities. Third, we urgently need to find more effective ways of boosting jobs and incomes in and around our poorest communities, townships and cities. Employment is the surest way of improving people's dignity and self-respect, and the only genuinely sustainable route out of poverty. Stronger local economies give

municipalities the resources to repair, upgrade and extend essential infrastructure, and enable people to afford higher quality services.

Closer dialogue with community leaders, NGOs and the private sector would improve the understanding of the economic obstacles and constraints they face and help to identify joint opportunities to promote enterprise, attract investment, and enable accelerated development and inclusive growth.

Municipalities have a role to play in redirecting their expenditure from current consumption and inessential functions towards investment to overcome bottlenecks and facilitate all kinds of productive activities. They cannot deliver prosperity on their own, and therefore need to develop meaningful partnerships and collaborative arrangements with other stakeholders.

Author: Professor Ivan Turok, deputy executive director, Economic Performance and Development research programme, HSRC. He has recently compiled a report for the SA Cities Network on service delivery and socio-economic transformation in South African cities.