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**Hidden in Plain Sight:
The Plight of the Population of
Nthabaseng Village, South Africa**

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Abstract

A large proportion of the Sub-Saharan population lives in housing units in urban and rural areas that do not provide for the basic needs of the inhabitants. In South Africa the government has tried to address the housing issue by building Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses for the homeless. Unfortunately, the recipients of these housing units are of the opinion that these developments do not provide for their basic needs. Furthermore, their dissatisfaction with these developments has resulted in civil unrest in a number of urban settlements. The concept reflecting the level of satisfaction experienced in terms of housing is very complex; generally it is defined as the level of satisfaction that a person experience in terms of housing unit, which he/she occupies, as well as in terms of the neighbourhood and environment in which he/she lives. This case study investigates the quality of the provided housing units and services in Nthabaseng Village, Limpopo Province in the northern region of South Africa. Facts that came to light were firstly, that the RDP houses were constructed in an area where the employment opportunities for the inhabitants are limited. Hence, it was found that the most of the interviewees are unemployed. Secondly, the interviewees are dissatisfied with the quality of the structure and the size of the housing units, as well as services provided. Although the RDP houses in this development have bathrooms, these are not connected to a main water supply system. Of the three reservoirs that were installed in 2007, only one was still operational by 2011, when the data collecting process was being carried out, only one communal tap served the entire community.

Keywords:

Corresponding Author:

Introduction

Historically, in terms of the Apartheid laws in South Africa, the movements of the majority of the country's population have been restricted and continue to have an impact on the housing affordability and availability of housing, and whether it is accessible or not, especially in the case of the poor (Moolla, Kotze & Block, 2011). Furthermore, inadequate planning for the provision of low-cost housing for the large impoverished black population and developments in this respect have generally led to a large backlog in housing in South Africa (Snowman & Urquhart, 1998). With the removal in the 1980s of the influx-control laws, which restricted the movement of people of colour, the housing problem has become even more acute (Snowman & Urquhart, 1998). According to a report in 2008, the housing backlog stood at 2,3 million housing units in the country (Bhengu, 2008). Furthermore, the urbanisation process in South Africa has exceeded the investment by local authorities in infrastructure development and services delivery, especially in the poorer urban areas (Westaway 2006; Kotze & Mathola, 2012).

This situation has been intensified through the legacy of Apartheid, with large pockets of poverty in the townships, which are often dominated by informal shacks, bringing with them overcrowded conditions (Rosental, 2008). While, the traditional white residential areas during apartheid era, generally had an increase in property prices after the repealing of the Group Areas Act (Act 45 of 1986) in 1994, as the result of the influx of middle class black people (see Donaldson & Kotze, 2006; Kotze, 1999), the township became more rundown due to the overcrowded conditions. However, the upgrading of informal settlements in South Africa is often shrouded in controversy, due to the 'legacy of apartheid', where populations were often moved, sometimes to other unfavourable locations during the so-called renewal programmes (Zack, 2002). A good case in point is the movement of people from District Six to Mitchell's Plain in Cape Town and from Sophiatown to Soweto in Johannesburg. In both cases, the initial neighbourhoods were located in close proximity to the CBD of each city, the new residential location on the periphery of each the city.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the development and quality of Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses and of services to the population in Nthabaseng Village in the Limpopo Province as well as to establish the quality of life as perceived by the interviewees living in this rural setting. This paper is divided into four sections: the first is a review of RDP houses and quality of life; the second, a description of the study area and the methodology used in this case study; the third section deals with demographic attributes, as well as the satisfaction levels of the interviewees in terms of housing within Nthabaseng Village; and the final section presents concluding remarks.

Quality of life and RDP houses in South Africa

When the African National Congress (ANC) government came into power in South Africa in 1994, it promised to increase the share of the national budget for the construction of subsidised housing for the poor from two percent to five percent. The government's vision was to build one million new housing units during the subsequent five years (Fitchett, 2001). The mechanism used by the new government to rid the country of the legacy of Apartheid and to redress the inequalities in society, proved to be detrimental to the marginalised, disadvantaged and disempowered sectors of the population. The Reconstruction and Development Programme, also known as RDP focuses on all facets of transformation, including the building of houses for the homeless (Fitchett, 2001; Donaldson & Marais, 2002).

The statistics on the number of RDP houses built during the first five years subsequent to the advent of the ANC as governing party in the country differ from those envisaged in the initial objectives as stipulated in the RDP documents. "It is estimated that between 500 000 and 750 000 housing units were constructed between 1994 and 1999" (Marais *et al.*, 2002:381). However, owing to rising unemployment and a shortage of affordable housing, the number of people without proper housing is still increasing (O'Leary, 2003). The backlog in housing, together with the slow rate of building low-cost housing, has further widened the gap between homeowners and shack-dwellers. Because of these deteriorating conditions, the South African government decided in 2008 that it would set out to improve the delivery of housing units from 270 000 to 500 000 units on an annual basis until 2014, in the hope of eliminating the squatter camps and slum areas in the country (Department of Housing, 2005, 2006; Bhengo, 2008).

A typical RDP housing unit built under the Reconstruction and Development Plan in South Africa has a proposed floor area of 36m² on a 250m² plot (Thale, 2001; Cox, 2008). However, only 30% of all the houses constructed under this plan were larger than 30m², and very few of these units constructed up to 1999 complied with the standard building regulations of the country (Pottie, 2003). A unit usually consists of an open-plan bedroom, lounge and kitchen, and with a separate toilet. However, some adaptations to this basic plan were introduced (as seen in the case of Nthabaseng Village). The building materials used included bricks and mortar, with a galvanised iron roof, metal doors and usually two or three small windows (Pollack, 2003). On the other hand, though, it must be noted that local municipalities and provincial governments have different specifications for RDP housing units, resulting in inconsistencies in developments involving such houses (Pottie, 2003). Essentially, all of the housing units were supposed to have access to clean running water and to be connected to a sewerage system (Thale, 2001; Cox, 2008). In 2006, a typical RDP house cost about ZAR 45 000 to 50 000 to construct (USD 1.00 = ZAR 8.45 at present) (Cross *et al.*, 2006). Currently these prices could be much higher owing to inflation.

Building standards and the quality of the RDP housing units are at the forefront of the housing debates in South Africa since the ANC government has not yet set the levels of acceptable standards required for contractors and developers for these units (Bond & Khosa, 2002). What is more, a number of rural and urban communities have lodged complaints levelled at the quality and safety of these RDP houses (Rosenberger, 2003) and some such cases have led to civil unrest (Moolla, Kotze & Block, 2011). This dissatisfaction with the provision of RDP housing units in South Africa must be seen against the backdrop of the perceived quality of life (QOL) of the recipients of these housing units. However, QOL is a very elusive concept, because it has to be seen against the backdrop of people's perceptions of their position in life against the milieu of the individual's prevailing cultural and social value systems within the area in which they live (Pacione, 2003; Zhou *et al.*, 2011). However, in general, QOL tends to refer to a wide range of applications, such as the environmental conditions in which the person lives (the housing unit set in the natural environment) and/or the attributes of the members of the population themselves (Pacione, 2003; Zhang *et al.*, 2012).

Diaz-Serrano's (2009) contention is that the most effective way of determining an individual's subjective happiness or wellbeing is to look at domains such as work conditions, financial status, quality of housing and environment as well as health. This case study looks at the first four of these domains in Nthabaseng Village. The level of contentment within each of these spheres is determined not only by the individual's tangible circumstances, but also by the interviewee's individual aspirations and desires in each of these domains (Zhang *et al.*, 2012; Easterlin, 2006). However, universally, the most acknowledged dominant domain identified by scholars, appears to be housing and residential satisfaction. Interviewees and individuals seem to regard this domain as the most important element, being representative of a good overall quality of life (Dunn, 2002; Diaz-Serrano, 2009, Baiden *et al.*, 2011). Møller (2001) as cited by Zhang *et al.*, (2012: 94) "has even gone so far as to say that housing is the most important predictor of life satisfaction."

The study area and the methodology

Nthabiseng is a rural village near Morebeng (formerly known as Soekmekaar) and forms part of the Molemole Local Municipality in Limpopo Province (see Figure 1). The village is located in a vegetable (potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage) and fruit- (mangos, peaches, oranges) producing area. Nthabiseng was developed in 1995 after the first democratic elections in South Africa to accommodate the former farm-workers of the area (Molemole Local Municipality, 2008).

The data concerning the socio-economic attributed of the interviewees (the age, gender, income, qualification and employment status of heads' of the households), their housing and perceptions of quality of life (the number of rooms per house, their level of satisfaction with regard to the RDP houses and

extensions to the housing units as well as the level of satisfaction with service delivery within the village) were collected using a systematic sample. The first house in every street was chosen by chance with the aid of gambling dice. Every fifth house following the first unit selected was included in the case study, the sample size being 120.

Demographic attributes and levels of satisfaction concerning housing and services in Nthabaseng Village

In this section, the attributes of the interviewees in the case study were determined. Most of the household heads were female (55%). The largest number of interviewees was from the 31- to 40-years age category (30%). The percentages were found to decrease with an increase in the age categories, with persons over 60 years of age representing only six percent of the sample (see Table 1). With the educational levels of the interviewees in the sample are scrutinized, it was clear that the largest group (36%) of the interviewees fall into the category with only a primary school education. This seems to be in line with the rural population of South Africa of the past where children tend to leave school at an early age. However, what is of concern is the large number of interviewees who claimed that they have a tertiary qualification, especially against the backdrop of the very high unemployment rate.

The unemployment rate of the interviewees in Nthabiseng is at the 72% mark (the national average for unemployment in South Africa recorded during the 2011 census was found to be almost 25%). This means that the developments involving RDP houses have been established in an area where the chances of finding employment are very limited. This is also evident in the income level of the interviewees with 54% claiming an income of less than ZAR 1500 per month (see Table 1). This points to the fact that their sole means of a livelihood lies in grants from the government.

Research revealed the largest percentage (44%) of the interviewees had lived in the housing unit for more than 10 years (see Table 2). Only eight percent of the people included in the case study had stayed in units for less than one year. Scrutiny of their previous accommodation showed that not one of the interviewees lived in a formal house before moving into an RDP housing unit. Forty percent lived with family and friends or sharing accommodation with someone (see Table 2). Thirty six percent rented a room, most probably a corrugated iron structure – without the basic services – in the backyard of someone else's house. The remaining 24% of the respondents lived in an informal house that would have been constructed from whatever building material was available in the area.

An examination of the satisfaction levels concerning the RDP housing units revealed that most of the interviewees are dissatisfied with the provided houses. As opposed to other RDP houses, these units consist of three rooms, a living-cum-bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom, with larger windows in the first two rooms and a very small window in the latter (see Figure 2). The least

dissatisfaction was registered in terms of with the size of the housing units, which is surprising, in the light of the fact that the size of these houses amounts to only 27 square metres on a 100 square- metre plot (well below what is recommended by the Reconstruction and Development Plan). The highest levels of dissatisfaction (88%) registered were in terms of the bathrooms of the units. Although bathrooms were developed as part of the houses, they have not been connected to the water supply and the sewerage system. This point of discontent was closely followed by dissatisfaction levels of 80% for the roofs and windows of the houses. Another issue was the pitch of the roofs which could result in leaks during heavy rain storms. Problems associated with the structures are that evidently no concrete beams (lintels) were used above the windows and doors. Such poor workmanship could result in windows that are not easily opened, apparently the main grievance indicated by the interviewees. The doors and walls of the houses and the kitchens evoked dissatisfaction levels of 60%, 68% and 62% respectively. Finally, an umbrella statement of discontent was that 70% of the interviewees indicated that they are dissatisfied with the houses built under the RDP housing provision scheme in Nthabiseng village.

The highest level of dissatisfaction registered by the interviewees was in terms of health care (90%), because there is no such service in the village. The closest medical clinic is located 12.5km away from Nthabiseng and the nearest hospital is Botlokwa Hospital, 32.5km away. Although the constitution guarantees access to clean water to the citizens of the country (Knight, 2001), 78% of the interviewees indicated that they were dissatisfied with the water supply for the village (see Table 4). During 2007, four water reservoirs were installed in the village. During the data-collecting process, only one of these reservoirs carried water, while the total population of Nthabiseng village was reliant on only one communal tap. The delivery of sanitation and electricity services in Ntabiseng recorded dissatisfaction levels of 64% and 62% respectively. Although the RDP houses were developed with bathrooms with flush toilets, these were not connected to a sewerage system. The dissatisfaction with the supply of electricity could relate to the increase in the cost of this service – as also found in other areas in the country (e.g. Kotze & Mathola, 2012; Moolla et al., 2011). From this study, it seems that the interviewees were not as dissatisfied with the education and recreational facilities within the village as with other criteria.

Concluding remarks

The people living in this village who previously worked on commercial farms in the area lost their work and with it, were deprived of their homes. The government tried to address the plight of the homeless by developing the RDP houses in the rural setting of Nthabiseng village. From this case study, it is clear that the residents of the village are not satisfied with the quality of the housing units and service delivery. The houses are small and poorly planned.

In some cases, the recipients of these houses, have built on an outside kitchen to provide for their needs.

The problem with the development at Nthabaseng Village is it was carried out in an area with no work opportunities, as is evident from the high unemployment rate in the study area. From the income of the interviewees, it is clear that they depend exclusively on government grants to provide for their basic needs. The people living in the RDP houses in this area can be easily recognised as poverty-stricken. They have been confined to an area without any opportunities for improving their living conditions and life style on account of the lack of employment and opportunity. As such, they rely on government grants to provide for their basic needs.

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Table 1. *Demographic attributes of interviewed household head*

Gender of interviewees:	Male	45%
	Female	55%
Age of interviewees:	≤ 30 years	18%
	31 – 40 years	30%
	41 – 50 years	26%
	51 – 60 years	20%
	> 60 years	6%
Educational level of interviewees:	≤ Grade 7	36%
	Grade 8 – 11	32%
	Grade 12	18%
	Tertiary qualification	14%
Employment level of interviewees:	Employed	28%
	Unemployed	72%
Income of interviewees:	≤ ZAR 1500	54%
	ZAR 1501 – 2500	20%
	ZAR 2501 – 3500	18%
	> ZAR 3501	8%

Table 2. *Length of stay in an RDP house and previous accommodation*

Length of stay in house:	< 1 year	8%
	1 – 5 years	20%
	6 – 10 years	28%
	> 10 years	44%
Previous accommodation:	Informal house (shack)	24%
	With friends and family	40%
	Rented flat or room	36%

Table 3. *Satisfaction level concerning housing units*

	Satisfied	Uncertain	Dissatisfied
Size of house	36%	8%	56%
Roof of house	18%	2%	80%
Windows of the house	20%	0%	80%
Doors of the house	34%	6%	60%
Walls of the house	28%	4%	68%
Kitchen	32%	6%	62%
Bathroom	10%	2%	88%
Total house	20%	10%	70%

Table 4. *Levels of satisfaction levels concerning services*

	Satisfied	Uncertain	Dissatisfied
Sanitation	10%	24%	64%
Water supply	22%	0%	78%
Electricity	38%	0%	62%
Health care	10%	0%	90%
Education	36%	14%	50%
Recreation	25%	30%	45%

Figure 1. *The location of Nthabiseng Village in Limpopo*

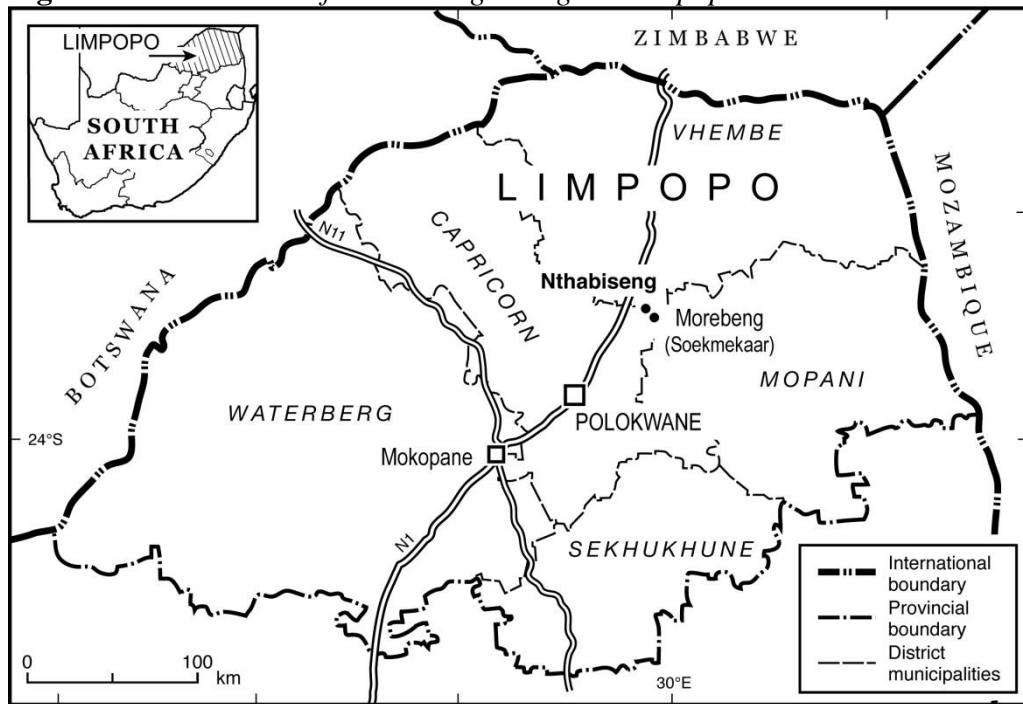


Figure 2. *The design of an RDP house in Nthabiseng Village*

