

THE NOT IN MY BACKYARD SYNDROME

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There is a growing voice of community activists in South Africa who support pro-poor development for as long as it is not happening close to where they live. These are people in much more established middle class neighbourhoods who do not want to co-exist with the poor. Their concerns are based on pre-conceived stereotypes such as that poor people are loafers, proponents of crime and unhygienic individuals who will mess up the aesthetic of their neighbourhoods. A term used to define this kind of activist is the “Not in My Back Yard” activist which is shortened as NIMBY activist. NIMBY is a word used to describe their attitude and behaviour. NIMBY is a perfectionist attitude that seeks to protect and preserve

middle class tendencies and comforts including affluent and well-serviced neighbourhoods. In most instances NIMBY activists understand the plight of the poor and support the struggles of the poor. The extent to which they advocate for interventions to address the development needs of the poor depends on how close or far these interventions are from where they reside.

While NIMBY activists support the struggles of the poor, they are quick to launch an attack whenever pro-poor development encroaches on what they view as their backyard or neighbourhood. Their tactics are strategic, informed and resourced. They use social networks and

media to their advantage. Such has been the case in many instances where court cases were launched for the eviction of residents of many informal settlements on the basis that these informal settlements would reduce the value of property owned by the middle class, that they were distorting the aesthetic of the neighbourhood and/or that their existence would lead to environmental degradation of one kind or another. Petitions have been submitted to municipalities across South Africa asking for the removal of informal settlements, for access to electricity to be cut off or for basic services to be halted in the hope that the residents in the informal settlements would be frustrated enough to pack up and leave.



Neighbourhood watches and rate payers' associations are examples of where NIMBY activists gather. These civic groups will be the first to launch attacks against informal settlement dwellers in their 'backyard'. In the relationship between NIMBY activists and the poor, access to money has often replaced race as the tool of exclusion. The NIMBY activist is driven by a strong belief that government support should be earned rather than given. By virtue of their ability to pay rates, NIMBY activists believe they have earned state support, so much so that they believe the state should stand with them in keeping the poor at arm's length. Through paying rates and taxes and by contributing to the local and national fiscus they believe that they have earned the privilege to receive public services of a quality much higher than that received by the poor.

It has not been surprising therefore that state efforts to save lives in the face of Covid-19, by intensifying service delivery in poorer communities, has been met with some resistance by NIMBY activists. Covid-19 demands that the state ensures that environments are far more hygienic and that residents, in particular those living in informal settlements, have access to clean and safe drinking water and decent sanitation amongst other things. This has often meant that, for example, refuse in affluent middle class neighbourhoods would not be collected as regularly as was done in the past as the existing refuse collection services now have to be shared between more settlements. NIMBY activists have been up in arms in many cities, demanding improved services for themselves. This could be interpreted to imply that they do not want their rates and taxes to fund basic service provision for those who cannot afford to pay for it themselves.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the South African state, led by the ANC government, had been looking at different ways of addressing the challenges of overcrowding in informal settlements. However it was moving slowly to implement its responses and plans. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced the state to respond quicker to matters of overcrowding and density in

informal settlements because diseases and infections such as Covid-19 tend to spread rapidly in more densely populated areas. As a result, the state is now prioritising de-densification and relocation from those informal settlements with the highest density. Part of this de-densification agenda has been the setting up of Temporary Relocation Areas, or TRAs as they have now come to be known, to house people from overcrowded informal settlements while the state explores more permanent accommodation solutions. These more permanent solutions include either dividing the land that the informal settlements were originally built on into decent sized plots, installing internal services, building houses and allowing people to move back onto this land, or finding additional new land where permanent houses can be built.

The few TRAs that have already been established have generally been accepted and welcomed by residents in informal settlements because the temporary houses are often bigger and built of material that is often better than the corrugated iron sheets that the original shacks are normally built out of. Furthermore the technology used in building the TRA housing structures is new and more innovative, and in TRAs there are enough basic services for the population size that is relocated and these services are designed to support high levels of hygiene.

Although the TRAs have generally been accepted by those who are being relocated to them as an acceptable short-term intervention, the turnaround time between the relocation to TRAs and the relocation into permanent housing structures has come into question. According to a growing number of NGOs, the extent to which the de-densification intervention via TRAs fits within the bigger scheme of informal settlement upgrading has not always been clear. The dominant view in the NGO sector is that unless de-densification via TRAs is part of a larger scheme of upgrading of informal settlements and not just a Covid-19 response, de-densification is just a drop in the ocean and not the best path to housing South Africa's urban poor. It must be noted that these NGOs have been advocating the upgrading of informal

settlements as part of a mixed bag of housing interventions for many years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The voice of NIMBY activists has also been very vocal in their fight against TRAs. NIMBY activists are against these TRAs not because they do not like the concept and model, but because of their location. They believe some TRAs are located too close to their neighbourhoods. This has brought the reality of poverty to the front door of the well-off and wealthy. The concerns of many NIMBY activists are also to a large degree driven by the fact that the word 'temporary' holds little value in the human settlements sphere when it comes to our recent experience. Temporary, in the housing delivery space, where the state is the driver, can be anything from a year to many years. There have been many temporary housing areas over the years that move from what was envisaged as a temporary relocation area to become a permanent squatter camp or an informal settlement after many years of people either being left there or having others move in as quickly as the original occupants take occupancy of their new state provided houses. The reality now is that TRAs could become a never ending conveyor belt of new people continually moving in and out. But it is not the poor who must take the blame for this. That there is a further long line of 'poor' people waiting at the end of the queue to take occupancy of the TRA structures, thereby continuing the conveyor belt process, is a function of the slow rate of housing provision against the high demand or need.

The reduction in property value concerns of NIMBY activists are in many instances well-founded. After all a house is an asset linked firmly to the financial security of many families. The aim of this article is not to discount the concerns and realities of many NIMBY activists but rather to advocate that we need to adopt a city wide approach to our understanding of what a neighbourhood is. The history of violent dispossession and forced removals as well as the socio-economic context of South Africa demands that we do so. Cities have to embrace a notion where every part of

the city (including the areas perceived as 'threats' by NIMBY activists) is part of one larger neighbourhood. By extending the concept of a neighbour to the city scale we inherently recognize our inter-connectedness and thus the connectedness of our struggles. Such thinking lies at the core of building social cohesion, something that the National Development Plan advocates.

A developing country like South Africa cannot afford to have a middle class that does not want to co-exist with the poor due to the kinds of baseless stereotypes that most NIMBY activists offer in many public debates. South Africans of all social classes ought to work with one another to ensure the improved socio-economic conditions of everyone, especially the poor and most vulnerable. We cannot allow money to replace race as a tool

of exclusion. Effective planning and resource allocation can go a long way towards meeting the needs of the poor if the NIMBY activists would also support such pro-poor budget allocations. We have an opportunity to use the Covid-19 moment as an important step towards embracing the redistribution of state resources towards the basic service needs of our poorer members of society.

