

#10 MANAGED LAND SETTLEMENT: INCREASING DENSITIES

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The South African Government is sending strong signals that we are about to see a significant policy shift when it comes to how government plans to address its constitutional mandate (section 26) to progressively, within available resources, ensure everyone has access to adequate housing. Already in November 2015, in government's pre-draft Human Settlements White Paper it is proposed that

households between the ages of 18 – 59, with a total income of ≤ R3 500 shall be provided with a self-help subsidy that includes: a serviced site and raft foundation in a well-located settlement; and provision of professional assistance, if a household chooses to enrol to participate in a self-help project.¹

According to this pre-draft Human Settlement policy document, only the aged and destitute will receive top structure funding support from government. More recently, in Minister Sisulu's Human Settlement departmental budget vote speech on 18 May 2017 she stated that

¹ See page 41 in "Towards a Policy Foundation for the Development of Human Settlements Legislation" <http://www.gov.za/documents/towards-policy-foundation-development-human-settlements-legislation-9-may-2016-0000>

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[w]e are now concentrating on serviced sites. ... [The land] will be partitioned and people would be able to move to their own stand and build their own houses, through a monitored PHP [Peoples Housing Process] programme, managed by the Deputy Minister. These are now our urgent interventions for massive roll-out².

The advantages of such a serviced sites approach to housing development is that it allows more people to gain access to land and services within a given time period compared to if the same amount of money was used to provide people with both serviced sites AND houses.³ Afesis-corporation has been supporting and advocating for a number of years for such a serviced site approach (or what we call Managed Land Settlement – MLS⁴).

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However, if a MLS approach is not managed carefully it also comes with its own challenges. One of the main criticisms of a MLS type approach is that it contributes to urban sprawl - where sites are spread out at low densities across the landscape. The reason why serviced sites tend to encourage sprawl is that it is much easier and cheaper for government and developers to find large tracks of land on the periphery to develop these areas. MLS plots can also not be too small as there needs to be enough land on each site for allocated households to be able to build their own structures.

Urban sprawl is seen as negative in the sense that it takes up valuable land that may better be conserved, or used for agricultural production or some other purpose. Low density sprawl also makes public transport difficult to provide as there are not enough people within walking distances of the public transport nodes or routes to make public transport viable.

In order to address these negative features associated with sprawling MLS the densities of MLS areas need to be increased. In this way less land will be needed for MLS and public transport will be more viable. However, careful attention needs to be given to not increase densities to such an extent that this causes overcrowding within these areas. Many households who will be living in higher density MLS areas will be coming from high density informal settlements and backyard shacks where overcrowding is a problem – with its associated lack of privacy and pollution caused by the build up of wastes that are not adequately managed.

Any attempt to increase the densities of MLS areas must therefore be done in a way that does not exacerbate the negative features of overcrowding. The following list provides examples of what government can do to support higher density MLS development while at the same time being mindful of the negative features of overcrowding.

- Make plots smaller while still leaving space for self build construction.
- Consider the provision of a high density settlement development allowance, where for example, additional funds are provided – in higher density contexts - for an ‘elemental house’, where government provides housing elements such as fire-walls, facade-houses, column-and-first-floor-slab, etc. on each plot. Households then use their own resources to add to and build on this initial element. Fire-walls, for example, make it easier for people to build their own houses using their own materials, in a way that minimises the threat of ‘shack’ fires spreading through the settlement. Facade-houses help ensure that the public space is well defined by the housing facades, with households able to use their own initiative to develop behind these facades.

² See <http://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-lindiwe-sisulu-human-settlements-dept-budget-vote-201718-18-may-2017-0000>

³ See learning brief on Land Acquisition available at <http://afesis.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Learning-Brief-Land-Acquisition-and-development-for-human-settlement-development.pdf>

⁴ For more information on MLS see: <http://afesis.org.za/managed-land-settlement/>

Column-and-first-floor-slab's make it possible for people to use their own funds to build a first floor structure and fill out the walls on the ground level.

- Identify smaller (and larger) infill portions of land within the existing urban footprint and accommodate higher density MLS in these areas. This ensures that new MLS areas contribute towards increasing the overall density of the existing urban fabric in that the amount of open and underutilised space is reduced in the broader neighbourhood.
- Combine MLS with other housing types that are by nature higher density such as Social Housing and Community Residential Unit housing. In this way, the average densities for an area that includes MLS increases due to the inclusion of these higher density housing forms in the neighbourhood.
- Design and size internal water and sanitation infrastructure from the start so that 'entrepreneurial' rental arrangements can be accommodated. Entrepreneurial rental is where government provides small business loans to residents of MLS plots who want to built and rent out backyard rental accommodation on their plots. Part of the rental income can be used to repay the loans.
- Provide appropriate engineering infrastructure such as narrower pedestrian walkways as opposed to wider streets for cars; and in settlements on steeper slopes build terraces with reinforced embankments so that households do not have to dig their own terraces on which to built their homes.
- Redefine what type of basic facilities government provides in higher density MLS areas. In the past, low density low income housing neighbourhoods have been lucky if they got a primary school and community hall. In future look to providing play grounds, libraries and resource centres where people have access to free WiFi that children and others can use to study. If peoples' private homes are too cramped at higher densities, they will be able to make use of these community facilities. Provide lockable and rentable storage facilities so people can store and protect valuable goods. With more people in these areas able to access these facilities on foot its more likely they will be used.
- Focus on the provision of good quality public spaces with paved surfaces, street furniture, trees and maintained planted areas. Make these spaces places where people want to stay and linger. This includes parks, child play areas, sporting facilities, etc. If people have less private space, this needs to be compensated by good public space.



Photo: unhabitat.org

- Improve pedestrian walkability through, for example, traffic calming measures, and improve the public transport system so that the residents living in higher density areas can capitalise on and benefit from the availability of a quality pedestrian and public transport system.
- Accommodate mixed use developments with business adjacent to (and under) residential areas so that people living in higher density areas can benefit from having more activities closer to where they live and not just have more people in close proximity to each other.
- Identify future growth corridors of the city along major transport routes, and locate MLS projects in these areas (even if at lower densities now). Over time these corridors will develop and become more sought after areas, with densities likely to naturally increase (especially if entrepreneurial rental and sub division of plots is encouraged).
- Establish higher density transit oriented development (TOD) nodes along existing and future growth corridors, with higher density Social Housing, and higher density middle income housing and apartments located around these nodes. Locate small plot MLS sites on the edge of these nodes but still within reasonable walking distance of these TOD nodes. If one is able to create a 'necklace' of TOD nodes along a public transport route, one would be able to spread out a large number of MLS sites adjacent to these higher density nodes.



Photo: Finance-commerce.com

Over and above the interventions suggested above, government needs to also establish a new dedicated housing and development support service so that people are not left to fend for themselves in higher density MLS areas without any additional government support to assist people to improve their own houses and the broader neighbourhood environment⁵.

Many of the interventions associated with increasing density in MLS areas that are listed above may also be applicable to the upgrading of informal settlements. People who live in higher density informal settlements are already used to living at these higher densities. These areas are often relatively well located and government does not have to find new land if they are able to use the land people already occupy.

⁵ for more information on housing and development support see: <http://afesis.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Learning-Brief-Motivation-for-a-housing-development-support-programme.pdf>

It is unclear at the moment as to which of the above mentioned densification interventions (and other interventions that we have not even thought of yet) will be more appropriate and successful in different contexts. It is therefore suggested that municipalities and communities should be encouraged to 'experiment' and test out various options for increasing densities in new MLS (and Upgrading of Informal Settlement) projects. Those solutions that prove popular will then be replicated and other less popular solution will not be replicated.

National government should establish a 'densification innovation fund' and invite municipalities, communities, NGO's and developers to make project submissions to this fund so as to test alternative densification strategies in MLS areas and informal settlements. Participation of communities in such 'experimental' projects needs to be voluntary. It needs to be recognised that not all densification experiments will be successful so government may also need to set aside a contingency fund, that can be drawn on after strong motivations, to be able to retrospectively return and help deal with any negative problems associated with 'failed' densification experiments.

By introducing such a densification innovation fund, we will – as a country – be able to continue to support more MLS and upgrading of informal settlement approaches to settlement development while at the same time responding to criticisms associated with urban sprawl.