



Illegal Electricity Connections in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Can we Blame Communities? 21 August 2019

By Qhamani Neza Tshazi

Illegal electrical connections have been the cause of many a death in informal settlements and this was highlighted in the recent article published by the **Daily Dispatch on 21 August 2019 titled: Illegal connections a 'tragedy waiting to happen'**. Yet, municipal planning processes continue to limit informal settlement dwellers from accessing electricity legally. At the recent State of the City Address, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (the metro) Mayor XolaPakati stated that the metro had committed R18Million towards the electrification of informal settlements in the metro and that only informal settlements with finalized layout plans will be electrified. This is where the problem lies! Many of the metro's informal settlements do not have finalized layout plans.

An informal settlements study conducted by the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality in 2010 concluded there was a total of 154 informal settlements within the urban edge of the metro, a number that is likely to have increased in the time since then. The metro has been very slow in developing layout plans for these informal settlements in that time. In fact, for many years it has struggled to implement informal settlements upgrading plans that its Council had approved. In 2015 for example, the metro approved basic concept plans for the upgrading of 32 informal settlements across the city and to this day, there has been almost no action in

providing the basic services (including electricity) as provided for in these upgrading plans. Thus adding a pre-requisite of a layout plan for electrification seems like an excuse to exclude informal settlement dwellers from accessing this basic human right.

In his speech on Human Rights Day earlier this year, President Ramaphosa said that ***“things like energy, ... water and healthcare are human rights issues; our people have a basic human right when it comes to all these matters... [some of] it may not be mentioned in the Bill of Rights but it is fundamental... to the dignity, safety, health and well-being of our people.”*** Therefore the current stance of the municipality with regards to the provision of electricity in informal settlements leaves many in informal settlements out; it only allows a few informal settlement dwellers - those with approved layout plans - to get legal electrification. The rest are left with no other option but to electrify the best way they know how, which is illegally.

The argument of using layout plans as a basis for selecting who gets electrification is a noble one if it was wholly applied to every settlement, not only those in informal settlements. As an example, there has been major electrification projects in rural areas, in areas where there are no layout plans, the metro found ways to electrify these settlements. Why not do the same for informal settlements?

Another argument used by many officials is that electrifying settlements with no layout plans is a waste of scarce resources as chances are that some of these informal settlements may have to be relocated. This is a valid concern, however it is only valid if the metro was pro-active in upgrading informal settlements; currently, this is not the case. Many informal settlements in and around the metro have been around for many years, they are now occupied by second generation dwellers whose families moved there when they were young while some adults were born at these settlements. In 2016, Afesis-coplan profiled a family in Scenery Park who had worked for the owner of the farm that is now Scenery Park and by 2017 were still living in a shack awaiting a house.

A reality is that relocation of informal settlement dwellers is not as immediate and as quick a process as some officials believe; it is one that takes years to be negotiated and implemented. In the years leading up to this eminent relocation what should happen? Should informal settlement dwellers lie in wait for years for either relocation or a layout plan?

I believe we are all aware of the dangers associated with illegal electricity connections. In the three years between 2014 and 2017 alone the Daily Dispatch reported that 63 people died from electrocution while in 2018, 45 homes were destroyed in a fire in Nompumelelo informal settlement alone. There is a high chance that this number is but a fraction of the reality on the ground, there could be more. According to anecdotal stories from people in informal settlements, in many instances these deaths are of young people, children who are on their way to the shops, playing in the streets or who have just come back from school.

Winter is usually the most dangerous time in the year as people need electricity to heat up their shacks. The need during this time requires that they are creative in how they electrify their dwellings. These creative ways are obviously not regulated and thus are not safe. The financial impact on the municipality, whether by fault or choice is real and is huge. The municipality foots the bill for the illegal connections and is forced by law to respond when a disaster arises.

The reality of this is evident in Scenery Park, where some shacks are illegally connected to an electrical pole close to the community hall where the councilor's offices are located, an area a stone's throw away from the police station. Or one would need to drive past Orange Groove and see all the live wires that are dug onto the tarred road, thereby creating massive ditches on the road.

Who can blame them when the city says wait for a layout plan for the electricity? Electricity today has become

more than just a basic need. We need it for communication, cooking, cleaning and every other little thing. By not legally electrifying informal settlements is the metro not 'promoting' illegal electricity connections? Can the metro not be held liable for the deaths that are resultant from illegal connections? These are the type of questions we need to grapple with.

We cannot blame informal settlement communities for finding means to get electricity; they need it just as much as everyone else. Their socio-economic conditions cannot be used as a determinant for access of this basic need. By this I am not advocating for illegal electricity connections, but rather for the municipality to consider electrifying informal settlements legally. If it is layout plans the metro needs, put out clear plans for all to see of how and how long it will take to develop these plans for all informal settlements and therefore how long it will take to electrify all communities. We cannot criminalize people from finding creative ways of accessing a basic need from which they have been technically excluded.

NOTE: The original DD article this article responds to can be found at <https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/2019-08-21-illegal-connections-a-tragedy-waiting-to-happen/>

