Informal settlements in Johannesburg: How much do we know?

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The following is an extract from a draft chapter titled ‘Informal Settlements’ for a forthcoming book on spatial change in Johannesburg edited by Phil Harrison, Alison Todes, Graeme Gotz and Chris Wray. It was presented at the South African Informal City Seminar, 15 November 2011.

Informal settlements have formed an essential part of Johannesburg since its inception, to some extent shaping its development, to a large extent repeatedly displaced by formal development but re-emerging elsewhere. This research focuses on the current informal settlement situation within the municipal boundaries of the City of Johannesburg. It compares the informal settlement database of the City of Johannesburg with informal settlements as per the definition adopted by the National Upgrading Support Program (NUSP) (attributed to the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme UISP). Central to NUSP’s definition is that an ‘informal settlement’ exists where housing has been created in an urban or peri-urban location without official approval.

The official and political position on informal settlements in Johannesburg is that this form of residence has been ‘mushrooming’ or ‘ballooning’ over the past decade, that there are over 180 and more recently 189 such settlements in the city and that they are largely unsuited for in situ upgrading, therefore requiring relocation. Using NUSP’s definition of informal settlement, which technically excludes municipal transit areas and formal housing developments, we separated actual informal settlements from other inadequate forms of residence which City of Johannesburg includes in its informal settlement database (see Figure 1). As a result, the number of informal settlements drops from 189 to 135. The majority of these 135 settlements were formed pre-2000 and no new informal settlements formed after 2003. In this analysis, the percentage of Johannesburg’s households living in informal settlements is currently below 7.5%.

Informal settlements in Johannesburg remain concentrated in an arc along the city’s western periphery, from Ivory Park in the north east past Diepsloot in the northwest, down to Orange Farm in the far south. This pattern must be understood from a view beyond the City of Johannesburg’s boundary line. On the one hand, the continuation of Johannesburg’s up-market suburban core of northern suburbs into the neighbouring Ekurhuleni Municipality to the east means that no informal settlements established themselves on the City of Johannesburg’s eastern boundary. On the other hand, in three large concentrations, City of Johannesburg’s low income housing areas, all with pockets of informal settlement, form part of a much larger agglomeration of such low income development. Orange Farm’s development continues across the Johannesburg border...
seamlessly into Evaton, Ivory Park into Thembisa, and Ebumandini (to the west) into Kagiso (see Figure 2). A further large low income housing concentration just outside the City boundary is Olievenoutbosch, directly to the north. Only one informal settlement itself crosses the municipal boundary, this is Chris Hani Extension 4 settlement, in an area spanning Ivory Park and Thembisa.

This research shows that growth in informal settlements is mostly punctual (restricted to specific areas) and spatially follows the strongest trends in formal up-market residential expansion with its domestic employment demands. Our finding is also that the majority the informal settlements in Johannesburg are characterized by low density and an orderliness in their layouts. This usually mirrors formal layouts in the surrounding. Low density and orderly layouts make these settlements more amiable to in-situ upgrading. Some, however, are on private land. The City and the Province consider this an obstacle to in situ upgrading.

One of the main findings is that Johannesburg’s informal settlement situation is less dramatic than generally assumed, but also more complex. The analysis challenges political rhetoric, official data and the City’s intervention programs for informal settlements. We call, instead, for a more differentiated understanding of the situation, which, in our analysis, may pave the way for actual in situ upgrading.

The research raises concern less with informal settlement growth than with large concentrations of informal settlement, often dating back to the transition from apartheid to ANC-led government, that have seen little if any improvement over the past decade. This calls into question, not only the suitability of the City’s informal settlement intervention program, but also the rationale behind the City’s spatial investment planning over this period, a theme that is carried through several chapters in this book.

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