

# How can Planners best contribute to Urban and Regional recovery?

## The role of the Planner in Local Government

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### DECLARATION

I declare that I, Elmari Marais, am eligible and willing to be a member of the CAP Young Planners Network for the following reasons:

- I am a Member of the South African Planning Institute
- I am a practicing Senior City Planner: City of Cape Town 2003 - current
- I achieved a BTech Degree: Town & Regional Planning (Cape Technikon, 2002)
- I achieved a Mphil: Urban Infrastructure Design & Management (UCT, 2011)

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It was a sunny winter's afternoon just after 2pm. We were in the midst of a pilot-project and the three of us, an architect, community representative and City planner, were standing on the staircase of a three-storey Council Rental Unit somewhere on the Cape Flats. Before us, the prologue to a disaster waiting to happen: a plethora of corrugated iron sheets; the amalgamation of the roofs of more than 40 temporary structures squashed in between two formal City Rental apartment blocks.



This area, as many other poverty stricken communities in the City of Cape Town, is home to a large percentage of backyard dwellers – sometimes also referred to as the *unseen citizens of the City*.



These city dwellers stay in make-shift structures; the majority consisting of corrugated iron sheets, wood, cardboard boxes and plastic sheets constructed in a friend or family member's backyard. Without access to their own basic services, they are fully dependent on that family member or friend for access to sanitation and water.



As we were discussing the glaring challenge, the community representative matter-of-factly voiced a workable solution to mitigate the threat of fires spreading from one shack to the next that neither of 'us professionals' thought of. A comfortable silence settled between us as we nodded in agreement. It was in that moment that planning and the role of planners became more real to me than ever before...

I suddenly understood my role better, but in the same instance had to acknowledge my shortcomings as a professional planner.



I could never pretend that I knew what it was like to get up on a winters morning and put my feet down in ankle-deep water because the roof of my ‘house’ leaked like a sieve. I did not know what it was like to share a space with eleven family members with only two beds at the family’s disposal, or how it felt to sleep in shifts, as the shack physically did not have enough floor space for additional bedding.

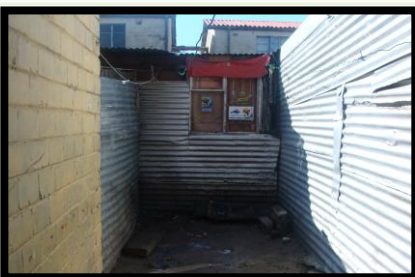


How could I understand the ever-present threat of a candle or gas stove potentially falling over in one shack and igniting and affecting all those living within meters of each other within their flammable homes? Or the shamefulness of having to dispose of night-soils down a stormwater drain because I don’t have access to my own toilet?

I couldn’t.



So what is the role of local government planners? Are we in the business of building sustainable and resilient communities or do we merely put out fires reactively? Are we ready to connect with communities? Really listen to them and their creative solutions borne out of limitation?



Perhaps planners need to become more than just planners. A couple of key role-describing phrases and questions came to my mind while looking down from those steps into that community’s reality:

**Facilitators:** Muller, Mbanga and Muvindi (2000: 1) say that ‘local authorities have a critical role to play in facilitating orderly urban life’. We are thus the interface between the community and the developer and/or the authorities. I get the feeling that communities see local authorities as the ‘untouchables’ and ‘a place where decisions are taken regardless of what they (the community) say’. Dale Carnegie, in his book *How to win friends and*

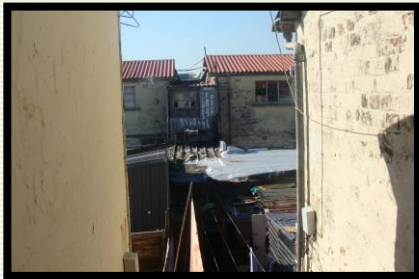


*Influence people*, says all people have a deep desire to be important. Generally, our legal processes make provisions for public participation. Many times this is however seemingly an administrative exercise to ensure that we, as an authority, have engaged with the public and hence have satisfied the legislative requirements. So are we, the planners really connecting? Or just satisfying law?

Participation in the truest sense should be a genuine exercise in facilitating discussion between professionals and community members. Those very community members are the ‘professionals’ in living their lives: in such unique circumstances. It should be our jobs as planners to ensure that such a discussion allows for all interested and affected parties to have the opportunity to voice concerns as well as brainstorm possible solutions. Our efforts should be geared towards moving communities from “...mere recipients of dispensed benefits...” to “...active agents for change...” (UN-Habitat, 2010).

**Sharing responsibilities:** As a government official, it is common to hear the question, ‘We have a problem, what are you as an authority going to do about it?’ All authorities work within the constraints of limited resources whether it relates to staff or monetary shortages. I guess one would like to see a paradigm shift from *Our City, Your Responsibility* to *Our City, Our Responsibility*. Muller, Mbanga and Muvindi (2000: 6) illustrated that “...if people take control, it is their process and their responsibility...” Such sharing of responsibility however presupposes that there is agreement between government and communities on who is responsible for what and the honouring of such a commitment to shared responsibilities.

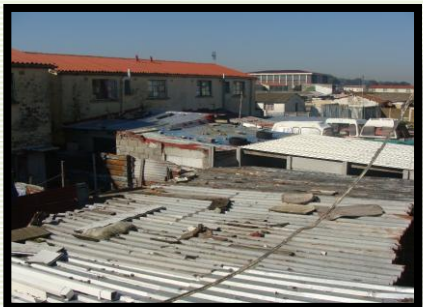
The provision of physical infrastructure is still in many instances viewed as more important than the softer issues



i.e. decision-making, organisational development, capacity building and participatory processes. Usually, with human settlement upgrading, there is a huge amount of pressure for immediate results whilst in reality, there should be a balance between discussions, planning and debate, and the actual implementation of these upgrades (Botes & Van Rensburg, 2000). It is of little use merely haphazardly putting down infrastructure (such as houses) for the sake of satisfying political promises, when its inhabitants had no say therein.

**Educators:** In many instances, our technical jargon is unpalatable to those outside the planning field. Our challenge lies in breaking down our expertise in order to make what we do more accessible to others. Writing an information brochure for people who cannot read presented an interesting challenge to our office. The simple answer was to create pictures and key words in all three local languages. Simple, yet the end-product was light years removed from the first draft which contained technical jargon, legislative quotes and stern instructions.

**Teachability:** Van Breda (2001) indicates that there has been a definite move away from focusing on the vulnerability of people towards a focus on human triumphs in the face of adversity. Hawley and De Haan (in Van Breda, 2001) indicates that such a move originates from the assumption that people possess resources (local knowledge of community politics, circumstances, cultural rituals, etc.) that allows them to resolve the difficulties they face. But have we, as Planners in local government been able to effectively tap into and synergise with this resource? Are we willing to admit that we need local knowledge to be able to come up with workable solutions? Are we teachable enough?



**Holistic thinking:** Platt (2007) is correct in saying that our main focus moving into the future is sustainable development. But the approach thereto needs to be holistic. Donella H. Meadows (1991:4), a systems dynamics expert, writes on the common assumptions that are the proverbial thorns in her side. One of these assumptions is that ‘One cause produces one effect’. We seem to think that there is only one cause to a problem. All we need to do is to discover a single solution and all will be well again. In the meantime, we are missing the interconnectedness of all things.

Backyard dwellers and the squalor in which most of them live have an impact on environmental systems due to untreated sewage landing up in stormwater systems and ultimately natural river systems. Living in such close proximity leads to the spread respiratory diseases such as Tuberculosis and impacts on people’s ability to work which in turn affects household income of an already poor segment of society. The question could also be posed: ‘What effect does the constant threat of disaster by fire or rain on a person’s shelter have on their mental resilience?’ We need to start joining the dots.

**Bureaucratic systems:** Authorities are known for their ability to create and work within red-tape; much to the frustration of all those waiting to receive some form of assistance from government. Hague (2000) indicates that professional planners ‘need to rethink the scope and nature of their practice’. Maybe there needs to be more of an emphasis on co-production in all spheres of planning that will allow communities to work with government and aid organisations in solving challenges. All the aforementioned parties are able to make a contribution to the planning, management and implementation of solutions. This strategy furthermore presents an opportunity to explore the

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implementation of solutions that bridge the chasm between formal regulations and informal practices (Environment & Urbanization, 2008).



**Conclusion:** Working as a City and Regional Planner in an area where natural disasters are thankfully not commonly experienced, our communities find themselves faced with disasters of a different magnitude: disasters that creep into the most fragile of communities squeezing their already strained circumstances with a slow-tightening python's grip until the day something snaps. It is then when their resilience is tested more than ever. The breakdown of urban areas to the detriment of its inhabitants requires paradigm shifts on all fronts. If we want resilient communities, we need to create urban areas that can recover from the effects of overpopulation; urban centres that can reduce its carbon footprint by sensible densification and a combined effort to improve all that is not well within our cities.



We, the professional planners, will need to become more teachable; rethinking the workings of our bureaucratic systems; facilitating the sharing of local knowledge and expertise; breaking down the barriers of distrust created by an infrastructure focussed approach to solving people-centred challenges. We need to listen and connect: moving from infrastructure builders to community developers.



In the end, it is about creating spaces where even the most marginalised can participate...where the emphasis is on unearthing the abilities of communities to help mould the decisions that affect their everyday life (Staheli in McEwan, 2003).



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