

Louise Scholtz On The Lack Of Social Housing In South Africa

Urban land is of symbolic significance in South Africa because it is land that people of colour were historically denied access to. But the historically privileged still own, occupy and enjoy the best urban land.

The question is, why hasn't our government been able to unlock well-located land in urban areas to provide housing for the people who need it most?

The historically disadvantaged continue to live on marginal land on the peripheries of South Africa's cities and the apartheid city remains untransformed. Both The South African Civil Society Information Service (SAC SIS) and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung South Africa Office (FES) wish to promote discussion about the transformation of the apartheid landscape in an effort to foster social cohesion in South Africa's still largely racially and economically segregated society. The organisations co-hosted a panel discussion to interrogate the issue on 17 April 2014.

The event was opened by Renate Tenbusch, Resident Director of the FES South Africa office and the panellists who spoke at the event included, Mark Napier: Principal Researcher at the Built Environment Unit of the CSIR and co-author of the book, "Trading Places: accessing land in African cities"; Thembanani Jerome Ngongoma: Member of Executive Committee of Abahlali baseMjondolo (shack dwellers' movement); Louise Scholtz: Manager at World Wildlife Fund South Africa and leader on joint project with National Association of Social Housing Institutions; and Kate Tissington: Senior Researcher at the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa.

Overall, as a result of the contributions of this panel as well as questions and comments from the floor, it became clear that there is stasis, a lack of imagination and a lack of political will to house the poor and to transform South Africa's apartheid cities. Much of this is happening within a highly corporatized free market environment where municipalities would rather sell off their land for short-term profit than invest in the long-term sustainability of their cities for inhabitants and future generations. Rent collection and maintenance of rental housing stock are activities that South African municipalities simply do not want

to burden themselves with.

Talking about the availability of rental and social housing stock in South African cities, Louise Scholtz argued that there is a worldwide trend towards home ownership, which is affecting the availability of rental stock negatively.

In South Africa, municipalities have sold off much of their rental stock because they are unable to manage their housing stock. However, rental housing is important in South Africa because it provides flexible options to people, and in this country where people are employed in elementary occupations, they need that flexibility to move to where the jobs are.

Scholtz said that it was difficult to determine exactly what rental stock government owns because it is scattered across departments and nobody is accountable or takes ownership of the issue.

The creation of rental or social housing stock provides an opportunity to restructure and reconfigure the apartheid city and address historic inequalities, she concluded.