

RURAL HOUSING CONTEXT

1. INTRODUCTION

There are divergent views on what constitutes “rural areas”, where rural “ends” and urban “begins”. There is no universally accepted definition and it may be useful to adopt the approach of UN Habitat in viewing urban and rural as a continuum of settlements and emphasise the linkages between urban areas and rural areas. Such linkages often take the form of flows of capital, labour and goods between urban and rural areas. E.g. urban areas are dependent on the import of food from rural areas which are in turn dependent on the urban manufacturing base for goods and high order services.

Rural areas are diverse in nature, location and circumstances, ranging from commercial farming areas to subsistence farming areas (with communal tenure) and often include small towns and settlements which are largely dependent on agriculture. In the context of the housing programme urban areas often reflect the flows and counter flows of rural to urban and seasonal urban to rural migration. This is most noticeable in the “urbanisation of poverty” as manifested in the growing informal settlements in and around the formal settlements / towns / cities.

From the perspective of housing policy it is useful to make a distinction on the basis of tenure. The deep rural areas, where communal tenure and traditional settlement patterns prevail, have very different housing needs from the populations settled in informal and formal settlements in rural towns.

The next section endeavours to provide more insight into the typical characteristics prevailing in rural areas which differentiate the settlement needs of residents in these areas from those of urban communities. It also briefly describes the housing development assistance programmes through which rural housing development can be facilitated.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF “RURAL AREAS”

Rural areas are often referred to as those areas outside of the city or urban boundary or periphery where populations are spatially dispersed. Agriculture is the main economic activity that provides job opportunities. In these areas opportunities for socio-economic development are often perceived as limited, leading to the migration of able bodied individuals to the “bright city lights” and leaving a residual

of generally vulnerable, under educated, aged and very young population. These households are often largely dependent on social grants and remittances from family members working in the cities.

It is significant to note that many individuals who migrate to cities in search of employment retain strong ties to rural areas, which they continue to view as “better places” to raise children and to eventually retire to. Research has shown that many new rural migrants living in informal urban settlements prefer not to access their “once-off” capital subsidy in the urban areas but would rather invest in housing in their rural area of origin.

The quality of housing in rural areas varies from very poor to very good in some areas where people have invested with a view to returning to their “home”. Many rural areas with communal tenure still have a high percentage of traditional dwellings, which in some quarters are preferred over “RDP” type housing which intrudes on the rural ambience.

People living in rural areas face very specific social and economic development challenges. Rural areas must compete for access to scarce resources with urban areas. The dispersed nature of rural populations increases development cost and limits the ability and/or capacity to undertake efficient and effective rural development.

Likewise, the rural tax base is limited and poses challenges to rural authorities to mobilise sufficient resources to finance their own development programmes. This leaves rural authorities and communities dependent on the provision of central and/or provincial government capital grants. Rural areas are sometimes also politically marginalised, leaving little opportunity for the rural poor to influence government policies and development priorities.

3. CHARACTERISTICS “RURAL” HOUSEHOLDS

Approximately 70% of South Africa’s poor live in rural areas, and about 70% of the rural residents are poor. 85% live in the former homelands, and the rest on commercial farms and in the small towns. Their income is constrained as the rural economy is not sufficiently vibrant to provide them with jobs or self-employment opportunities. Women form the majority of the rural population and female-headed households are particularly disadvantaged. Their cost of living is high because they spend relatively more on basic social services such as food and water, shelter, energy, health and education, and transport and communications services. The

poorest households also have low levels of literacy and education, difficult and time-consuming access to water, fuel and other services and limited opportunities of gainful employment. In the commercial farming environment poverty is also rife. Farm workers are among the poorest and most vulnerable households in the rural areas and generally suffer from lack of opportunities and access to some of the most basic services. Their vulnerability is increased by their dependence on their employers not only for employment and wages, but also for services such as housing, electricity, schooling, access to medical facilities, water and transport and in many instances food security.

4. GOVERNMENT'S RURAL HOUSING ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES

The Government's rural housing assistance programmes have been designed to compliment the realisation of the objectives of the Integrated and Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (ISRDS) from a residential development perspective. The ISRDS vision is to:

“Attain socially cohesive and stable rural communities with viable institutions, sustainable economies and universal access to social amenities, able to attract and retain skilled and knowledgeable people, equipped to contribute to growth and development”.

A key element recognised by the ISRDP is the role the households have to play in their own development. Participation in all aspects of their development is thus a fundamental principle of all the rural housing programmes.

The rural housing assistance interventions should be contextualised against the background of the other National Housing Programmes. The Incremental and Rental Housing Programmes provide subsidy funding for the development of housing opportunities in formalised townships, realising secure registered tenure options, such as individual registered ownership in the Deeds Office.

The rural housing interventions on the other hand focus on areas outside formalised townships where tenure options are not registered in the Deeds Office but rather protected in terms of land rights legislation. As opposed to registered individual ownership in formal towns, rural households enjoy protected informal tenure rights and/or rental or permission to occupy.

The rural housing assistance programme is needs or demand based and designed to provide housing and infrastructure assistance within the specific circumstances

that prevail in these areas. As such these programmes differ substantially from the other National Housing Programmes.

The three rural housing programmes are:

- a) A programme to assist persons who enjoy uncontested functional tenure rights to the land they occupy and where a normal township establishment process is not feasible and practicable. These areas are administered by traditional authorities or in terms of community arrangements, are by and large unsurveyed and existing housing development mainly comprises informal land allocations and demarcation, and traditional housing structures, linked to a subsistence farming economy. The housing assistance programme is very flexible and provides for projects that will satisfy a range of housing and service infrastructure needs;
- b) A programme to compliment the Government's land reform initiatives by providing housing and services to beneficiaries of the Labour Tenants Support Programme. This intervention is also project based and provides capital for the provision of residential engineering services and houses where the Labour Tenant Strategy has provided access to farms for beneficiaries in ownership; and
- c) A programme to facilitate housing development for farm residents. This consists of two models. Firstly, programme can provide capital to farm owners to develop rental housing on their farms for occupation by farm residents. A second option is that a farm owner may subdivide a part of his farm and transfer ownership to the farm residents. The programme is flexible to suit local needs and various development and tenure options are catered for. The State's investment on the farm is protected by the registration of a preferential claim against the title deed of the property equal to the depreciated replacement value of the project.

