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Title: Informal settlement upgrading in South Africa: lived experiences of
beneficiaries over nearly thirty (30) years

Presentation: outline

- The aim of presentation
- Part One: The significance of longstanding research journey (longitudinal research) with Thabong (Welkom) and Freedom Square (Bloemfontein) upgraded communities
- Part Two: A thirty (30) years review of informal settlement upgrading projects in South Africa- literature perspectives
- Part Three: Informal settlement upgrading and lived experiences of beneficiaries in Thabong, Welkom
- Concluding Remarks
- **The aim is twofold:** first, to demonstrate the significance of longitudinal studies in housing and settlement upgrading studies. Second, to demonstrate how informal settlement upgrading could possibly drive changes in the lives of beneficiaries

Part One: The significance of longstanding research journey with upgraded communities in Thabong, Welkom and Freedom Square, Bloemfontein

- Today's inaugural lecture is a culmination of an almost thirty (30) years research journey with these two upgraded communities
- Over this period, five (5) different household surveys (1992, 1998, 2008, 2014 and 2021) were successfully completed with the same households in these communities- although it is important to indicate that the 1992 study applies only to Freedom Square
- Worth noting- this research journey was started by a research team led by Prof Lochner Marais when I was still doing my secondary school education (grade 10, to be precise)
- This makes it appropriate to make the following statements:
 - (i) Our longstanding relationship with these two communities is very rare (given disgruntlement amongst communities with the government's shoddy workmanship in housing provision) and, thus, indicative of successful engaged scholarship (community engagement)
 - (ii) These are most probably the only upgraded communities in the country which saw about five (5) NRF-funded research studies in the past 30 years
 - (iii) These are most probably the only upgraded communities with more than 20 peer-reviewed journal articles and 4 book chapters focusing on different aspects of settlement upgrading and/or housing provision

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(iv) These five (5) studies make these communities the most researched and profiled upgrading projects in housing studies globally

(v) Ours is the longest ever (almost 30 years) longitudinal research study in the housing and settlement upgrading studies globally

- The statements above should be understood within a fourfold context-
 - (a) Research on informal settlement upgrading is mostly in the form of once-off case studies- long-term evaluations (longitudinal studies) are rare/unusual and the research often stops at the stage when communities receive services and basic infrastructure
 - (b) This research (once off case studies) often ignores the fact that the residents change as a settlement ages- which is what today's paper seeks to demonstrate
 - (c) Research on informal settlement upgrading tends to stop at the point where houses and services are delivered (focus on the upgrading process)- it thus, fails to explore the long-term outcomes of the upgrading
 - (d) In South Africa, "the effects of housing delivery on community structures and patterns of governance" after upgrading has not received as much attention as they received before upgrading
- It is in the context of this unique and rare longitudinal research study (of almost 30 years), and the research gap created by this that I will be seeking to answer critical research questions on "How do people's experience change in the long run? and "What are the factors that drive these changes"?
- To answer these research questions, the presentation would focus exclusively on Thabong upgraded community

Part Two: What happened in upgraded communities since the dawn of democracy in South Africa- literature perspectives

- One of the mechanisms through which poor households could access low-income public housing and basic services is government's programme on informal settlement upgrading
- Literature and research on settlement upgrading show some interesting findings on how the implementation of these projects influenced the lives of beneficiaries
- The following are some of the key literature findings worth noting:
 - (a) Positive relationship between the provision of sanitation infrastructure and a decrease in mortality associated with poor sanitation
 - (b) Positive role of informal settlement upgrading in reducing the incidence of diarrhoea
 - (c) Improvements to the lives of former informal settlers in the form of better housing and general living conditions
 - (d) Physical infrastructure in upgraded informal settlements is commonly perceived to free up time for income-generating activities and for accumulating assets like education
 - (e) Also perceived for reducing the financial burden of acquiring services such as water
 - (f) Small increases in female literacy have been seen to be resulting from informal settlement upgrading
 - (g) Access to electricity and, consequently, to television, which helps upgraded communities to connect with the outside world

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- Despite the positive impact above, there are some shortcomings faced by communities in these projects
- The following are some of the main literature findings worth noting:
 - (a) Problems with deteriorating physical infrastructure have often been noted in post-upgrading evaluations
 - (b) Informal settlement upgrading is associated with increased individualisation, with social interaction amongst people, particularly women, decreasing
 - (c) Associated with loss of social cohesion and defamiliarization
 - (d) Informal settlement upgrading has often been criticised for, amongst other things, failing to keep up with the cost of maintaining physical infrastructure and, consequently, compromising health standards and poverty alleviation initiatives
 - (e) The original community leadership that was instrumental in getting the settlement upgraded usually disappears in the course of time
 - (f) Community spirit declines, partly it seems, because of the loss of what first brought people together
 - (g) Inheritance has increased mobility amongst people in upgraded settlements
 - (h) Weakened community cohesion due to houses or stands being sold and people moving on

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- (i) There is a lack of community participation
- (j) There is an overemphasis on ownership as opposed to other forms of tenure
- (k) There is a peripheral location of most upgrading projects, which reinforces apartheid spatial planning and segregation of income and race
- (l) There is the dominance of greenfield developments rather than in-situ upgrading

Part Three: Informal settlement upgrading and lived experiences of beneficiaries in Thabong, Welkom

Case study area and housing process:

- Despite the fact that the focus of this lecture would be exclusively on Thabong community, I thought is important (given the historical similarities in the two areas), to include Freedom Square in this part of the presentation
- Freedom Square is in Mangaung (a non mining area around Bloemfontein) while Thabong is in Matjhabeng (a mining area around Welkom)
- Both settlements originated from land invasions in 1990 and were upgraded with funds from the Independent Development Trust (IDT) between 1992 and 1994
- The housing investment in both areas was the same and both areas received homeownership and basic services (on-site water, sanitation, and electricity)
- Apart from the mining difference, a further difference is that Thabong households were resettled (greenfield development) on to new stands and given building materials to construct their own housing or appoint builders (self-help), while Freedom Square households had their houses upgraded through *in-situ* by state's appointed contractor

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Research methodology: sampling and data collection:

- A mixed-research method comprising households surveys and in-depth interviews were conducted in 1992 (only in Freedom Square), 1998, 2008, 2014 and 2021
- For 1998 we sampled 200 households using systematic random sampling in the two case study areas
- In 2008 we drew a new systematic randomised sample of 199 households
- In 2014 we changed our survey to a panel survey and found 180 of the 199 households we interviewed in 2008
- Nineteen (19) of the 199 households were not originally from the 2008 survey
- In 2021, we completed interviews with 181 of the 199 households
- Of this number, 67% were people we had interviewed in 2008
- Interviews were face-to-face

Changing experiences of the living environment in an upgraded Thabong community

Socio-economic attributes of respondents in Thabong	Period			
	1998	2008	2014	2021
Av. age of respondents	48.1	51.6	50.9	46.2
Av. Size of households	4.5	3.9	3.7	3.4
Employment rate	53.0	33.5	24.1	22.0
Av. household real income (2021 ZAR)	2969	3077	1953	2538
Number of rooms in the house	n/a	3.4	3.6	3.8
% of households who added a room in the past 6 to 10 years	n/a	9.5	14.3	11.7
% of households with a toilet in the house	n/a	10.2	25.1	30.3
% of households with water in the house	n/a	10.2	26.7	29.2

Interpretation

- Over time, the heads of households (respondents) are becoming more younger- this correspondent with growing number of housing inherited
- The size of households are also becoming smaller over time- another evidence showing generational gap between old and young generation
- There is a significant drop in employment rate- this could be attributed to mine closure and decline that started in late 1990s in and around Goldfields region. Hence, a decline in households' real income should not come as a surprise
- Despite economic decline and high unemployment rate, this community experienced a sustained housing improvement- with increases in the number of rooms in the house, households with water and toilet in the house
- Hence, an increase in the "satisfaction level" from just under 50% in 1998 to just under 70% in 2021 with the number of rooms in the house
- The larger houses could be attributed to self-help housing mechanism
- Apart from convenience, one of the main reasons for redirecting water and toilet in the house is for security and personal safety.
- One of common remarks has been: *"crime is at another level here.....the reason for installing another toilet in the house is to protect myself and daughters from possible rape at night"*
- With the high rate of unemployment, growing number of households with access to more rooms, electricity, toilets and water in their housing, it did not come as a surprise to observe a shift in top priorities and developmental needs from "service infrastructure" and "bigger housing" in 1998 to "job opportunities" and "crime prevention" in 2021

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Scale: % of respondents for self-assessment of poverty level in Thabong	Period			
	1998	2008	2014	2021
1	36.8	18.7	13.7	5.1
2	26.8	55.6	50.5	29.7
3	25.3	14.4	23.7	56.9
4	6.3	5.3	5.8	7.7
5	2.1	4.3	5.3	0
6	2.6	1.6	1.1	0.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Average rating	2.18	2.26	2.42	2.69

Interpretation

- Step 1 represent the *'poorest'* person in the country and step 6 the *'richest'* person.
- Evidence shows a decline in the number of respondents who perceived themselves as *"poorest"* in 2021 than in 1998, 2008 and 2014.
- This could be attributed mainly to their access to housing units and security of tenure
- This argument should also be understood in the context where lack of housing assets, rather than income, is today increasingly being used as an indicator of poverty.
- One respondent reflected on this as follows: ***"The only comfort for ourselves and probably for the future of our unemployed children is that we, at least, have a subsidy house"***
- To some extent, this finding confirms policy assumption on *"housing provision as a mechanism for poverty alleviation"*
- There is also an increase in the average number of household assets from 1.3 in 1998 to 2.4 in 2021
- Another decline worth noting is for respondents who perceived themselves to be amongst the *"richest"* from 2.6% in 1998 to 0.5% in 2021

Place attachment, mobility and changing homeownership

- There is low mobility in an upgraded Thabong area (or more “lock-ins”)
- This could be attributed to, amongst others:
 - (a) Mine closure and decline (deprived economic context)
 - (b) Less active secondary housing market
 - (c) Strong sense of place attachment amongst respondents
- The argument for low mobility could be supported by a growing number of respondents who inherited their housing from a family member (27% in 2021)
- It is further supported by high number (65%) of respondents who indicated strong preference to stay in 2021- although this marked a decline from 90% in 2014 and 97% in 2008.
- It is worth noting that a decline in strong preference to stay has not, however, resulted in a rapid increase in a strong preference to leave- only 6% of respondents chose this option in 2021

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There is evidence for changing homeownership patterns

- Some properties are being acquired by their current occupants mostly through abandonment by the original owners (a new phenomenon in 2021)
- According to the database shown to us by a municipal official, in Thabong only, there were more than a hundred (100) state-subsidised properties that were without title deeds and abandoned by their original owners
- Abandonment of properties was confirmed by ordinary residents, municipal officials and estate agents:

A resident said: *“There are many people whom I know who abandon their housing and decided to leave, even my next-door neighbour did the same.....she has gone back to Transkei”*

Expressing frustration caused by abandonment of properties, a municipal official said that: *“For abandoned houses where title deeds were yet to be issued and the original homeowner is untraceable due to abscondment or not forthcoming, we are unable to do anything including reallocation to qualifying poor households.....”*

- The abandonment of properties in Thabong is partly found to be synonymous with the notion of ‘hijacked buildings’ or properties, mostly by faceless and untraceable hijackers masquerading as legitimate owners. Highlighting this challenge, a municipal official said: *“.....the biggest challenge with abandoned properties in Thabong is the eviction of current illegal occupants and reallocation of these properties to qualifying poor households”*.

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- Other than abandonment, behind changing homeownership patterns is the growing practice of extra-legal land transfers in this upgraded community (27% inherited their housing; 17% not own their housing; 4% bought)
- As confirmed both by our 2021 study findings and previous studies in 2008 and 2014, a significant number of these heirs/new owners belong mainly to second and third generation.
- Yet, unique and worth noting about the 2021 empirical findings is evidence for the emerging fourth generation of heirs or homeowners in the Thabong area.
- One of the great-grandchildren to the original homeowner made the following remarks: *“This house means a lot to me as it was inherited first by father to my late father, then my late father himself and now is under my ownership as a great-grandchild”*
- The emerging fourth generation of homeowners in Thabong does not only confirm the significance of both social meaning usually attached to housing through intergenerational transfers and longitudinal studies (1998, 2001, 2008, 2014, 2021), but also a long history that spans nearly three decades of the existence of this upgraded informal settlement area
- The emergence of the fourth generation of homeowners in this study not only shows some limitations in the existing literature and research but also negate the long-standing theoretical view that has, for the longest time, associated intergenerational transfers of housing with second and third-generation

Concluding remarks

- The upgrading project in Thabong is the most researched area/community in housing studies globally
- Over time, the area has seen a steady and sustained improvement in housing consolidation
- This finding confirms the theoretical argument that higher levels of satisfaction and bigger and better housing outcomes are more common in housing processes that are people-driven (self-help) than those driven by the state and/or state's agencies (contractors)
- Respondents expressed more resolute intentions to remain in the area- which may result from having a housing asset, despite the uncertain economic future.
- Evidence supports the argument that the houses (and ownership) in Thabong tend to inhibit mobility
- Evidence further suggests larger place attachment, which prevents mobility in this upgraded community- although restricted mobility could also be attributed to fewer housing bought in the secondary market.
- Behind increases in place attachment and inheritance could possibly be economic decline and high unemployment rate
- A degree of informality and illegality persists- this is ascribable to the fact that some residents do not record land transfers while some hijack and occupy abandoned properties
- Although this runs counter to the initial policy intent, it probably remains a reality that elements of both formality and informality coexist in upgraded settlements.
- More thinking is needed regarding how this coexistence should be reflected in future policy responses
- The emergence of the fourth generation of homeowners in the 2021 study is significant and worth noting as it shows the role of informal land transfers in extending intergenerational transfer of housing beyond much talked about second and third generation in existing literature and research studies including findings in our previous studies particularly 2008 & 2014

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- This is a community that has over time, experienced changing priorities and developmental needs
- There is a significant decline in the number of residents who initially perceived themselves as amongst the “*poorest*” in the country- a confirmation that provision of housing and services has, to some extent ‘alleviated households poverty’ in this upgraded community

Thank you!!!! Baie Dankie!!!! Ke ya leboha!!!!