

THE MANDELA INITIATIVE

Dialogue and action to overcome poverty and inequality



Theme: Urbanisation

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Urbanisation and double rootedness: Home-making in a migrant social economy

In his response to demands for the release of the Marikana report in parliament, Jacob Zuma departed from his prepared speech and tore in the opposition parties on the issue of Nkandla. He stated that opposition politicians could not even pronounce the name of his family house, which was not Nkaandla, but Nkandla! He also said that it was absurd that parliament should “spend a year discussing the house of one man”, when it was “just a house”, essentially a private cultural matter, not a public, political one.

We are obviously all well aware of the debate about the misuse of state funds in the building of that house, Nkandla, and the failure of the president to adequately account for the misappropriation of public funds for the private business of house building. This is well known. What is much less clearly understood is the growing power of the Nkandla version of rural house building as a “folk model” for development in South Africa, especially since the 2008 recession.

House building has been fundamental to the African National Congress’s vision of the modernisation of South Africa. In fact, it could be argued that national liberation was actually won on a single overarching promise -- not the promise of land, jobs or quality education – but on the promise of the massive delivery of suburban-style houses to the masses. The idea

About this brief

This brief was commissioned by the Mandela Initiative to help inform a synthesis report on its work since the 2012 national conference, *Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality*, organised by the University of Cape Town. The MI provides a multi-sectoral platform to investigate and develop strategies to overcome poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa. While the Nelson Mandela Foundation is a key partner, the Initiative has relied on collaborations between academics and researchers, government, business leaders, civil society, the church and unions.

The synthesis report serves as a framework for reporting on the work of the MI at a national gathering on 12 – 14 February 2018 at the University of Cape Town. The MI *Think Tank* has identified the objectives for the gathering as:

- to anchor the contributions of the MI within an analysis of the current South African political and economic context;
- to share the recommendations emanating from the MI-related work streams at a policy/strategic level to advance the goal of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality;
- to critically engage with the potential impact of the recommendations on eliminating structural poverty and inequality; and
- to discuss ways of promoting popular conversations and debate about what needs to be done to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality, beyond the MI.

The synthesis report aims to assist participants to prepare for the national gathering. The report drew on findings from the sectoral research projects of Think Tank members; the MI’s *Action Dialogues*; a report on an MI *Community of Practice workshop* with research chairs from different universities to identify cross-cutting themes emerging from the MI’s *research programme*; and the work programmes of others who have expressed an interest in contributing to the goals of the MI.

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was to give the international symbol of whiteness, the suburban home to blacks. This was the essential meaning of the ANC slogan, “a better life for all”.

As Jacob Dlamini brilliantly put it, ‘the township was the metaphorical home in whose living room the post-apartheid imaginary was largely conceived’. The struggle for democracy in South Africa, some argue, was largely fought in the townships where residents felt that liberation would require the creation of fully fledged suburbs. On the basis of this analysis, it is not difficult to understand the liberalism of the Constitution, the appetite for private consumption and the individualism of many “urban borners” in South Africa today.

In the 1990s, the ANC did not ignore these aspirations, it embraced them by developing a national Reconstruction and Development Programme housing scheme to address the desire for suburban house building even amongst the poorest of the poor. The suburban dream, the ANC figured, should never again be outside the reach of black South Africans. The mantra of basic services and the focus on state-assisted RDP house building in cities became the material expression of this imperative in ANC policy. The ideological expression of this was seen in the claim by Minister of Human Settlements in 2007 that the ANC would remove all shacks from South African cities by 2014.

So, if the promise of freedom was urban modernity and expanded consumption, it is a vision of liberation that has not materialised for the vast majority. Moeletsi Mbeki often makes this point, and there is no getting away from it, what the ANC offered as “freedom” was basically unattainable because it did not have the economic policies to back it up. So, as Mbeki notes, we have become a society trapped in the toxic mix of creating unreachable aspirations for consumption without any clear roadmap of how to get there.

The suburban dream for all largely evaporated nationally after 2008 when almost a million people jobs were lost in little more than a year due to the impact of the global recession. Economic recovery has been slow since then, but it has been associated with higher rates of rural investment and remittance. This is where I believe the Zuma Nkandla model has acquired new traction and recovered its ideological power.

To be honest, black South Africans have never been very satisfied with their new government’s housing policy. They always stated that the houses provided are inadequate, too far from jobs, too small for their families, too badly constructed and basically inadequate for their needs. Many said that they were worse than the old apartheid matchbox houses. How could the fruits of liberation be less than those dished out by the colonial oppressor? For the vast majority, with or without RDP houses, the suburban home-making dream and urban permanence models and policies of the state were built on shaky ground.

It is this context that keeping or rebuilding a homestead in the rural areas has acquired increased significance over the past decade in South Africa after declining in the mid-2000s (see Posel table and Visagie table based on NIDS data).

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HSRC
Human Sciences
Research Council

EPD
Economic Performance
and Development



Posel shows that the rates of circulation migration have been picking up since the 2008 recession, while Visagie demonstrates that very large numbers of people who were either in rural or urban areas in one wave of NIDS are in the other location when the next survey is administered. This clearly shows continuing and even increased circulation.

Indeed, given the shame and insult of shack living in the city, many have returned to a focus on rural areas as places where they can build dignified homes and where they can express their Africa identities with freedom and in places where they know and feel their ancestors are with them.

If African culture is a destination culture, marked by different life stages, rather than simply the linear progression of a “career”, or a move from poverty to wealth, then it is desired to construct a material adequate and culturally appropriate home to fulfil these life-cycle requirements. Thus, for all the lure and status that city living and consumption have offered, it can never quite satisfy the identity needs for African families.

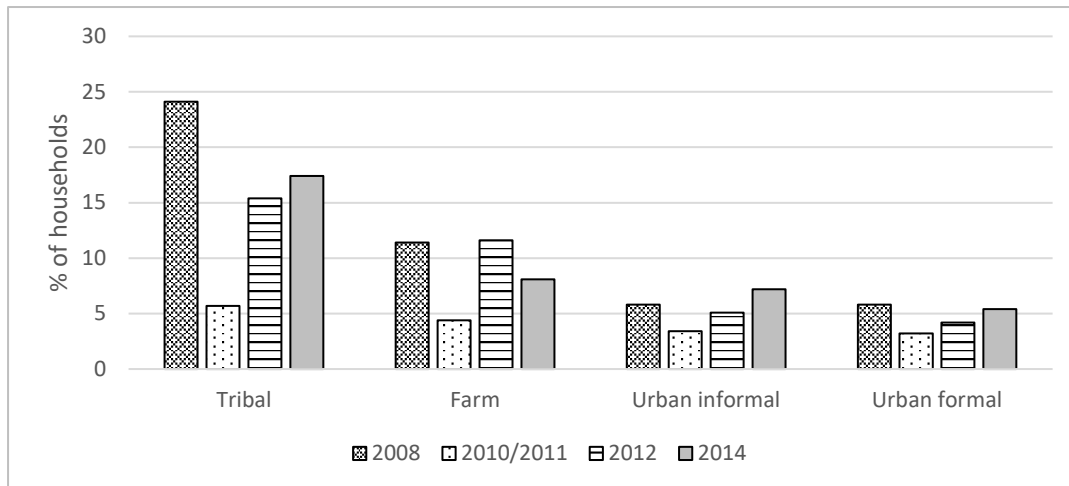
Indeed, going to the city for money has always been part of the African life project, but it has also generally been understood that this is not where African lives should end, or where significant life cycle events or landmarks should be acknowledged. It is a life project that needs to be marked by regular return visits to the spiritual and social spaces of home, especially in the rural areas which is the source of power and ultimate destination in a life course.

Some people forget to go home regularly, they are called *amatshipa* in Xhosa. This condition, while increasingly for common amongst the youth, is not respected. The right thing to do is build the *umzi* at home over a life cycle and then return there for relaxation, ritual and retirement. It is to live there from time to time during a working life to sustain and built the asset of home and then to retire there and finally be buried on the soil of the family homestead. It is a process that is necessary and can involve suffering, but is morally and culturally respected. It is what Madiba did, too.

These imperatives have been well-established through more than a century of migrant labour, which was underpinned by the apartheid “homeland” policy, which took African desires for rural home-making and converted it into a policy denationalisation and oppression. This is not to say that Nkandla home-making model is for everyone today nor that most household achieve the ideal. It is rather to suggest that rural “home-coming” is still a fundamental cultural construct in minds of the majority of South African.

The continuing strength and power of the rural home-making impulse in South Africa is also not unrelated to the unfolding tragedy of HIV and Aids during this period, which has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives in the country. To die with dignity and in peace, means being buried at home, close to one’s ancestors and kin. This is what Africans expect and their families can be shamed if they were not able to take their family home for burial.

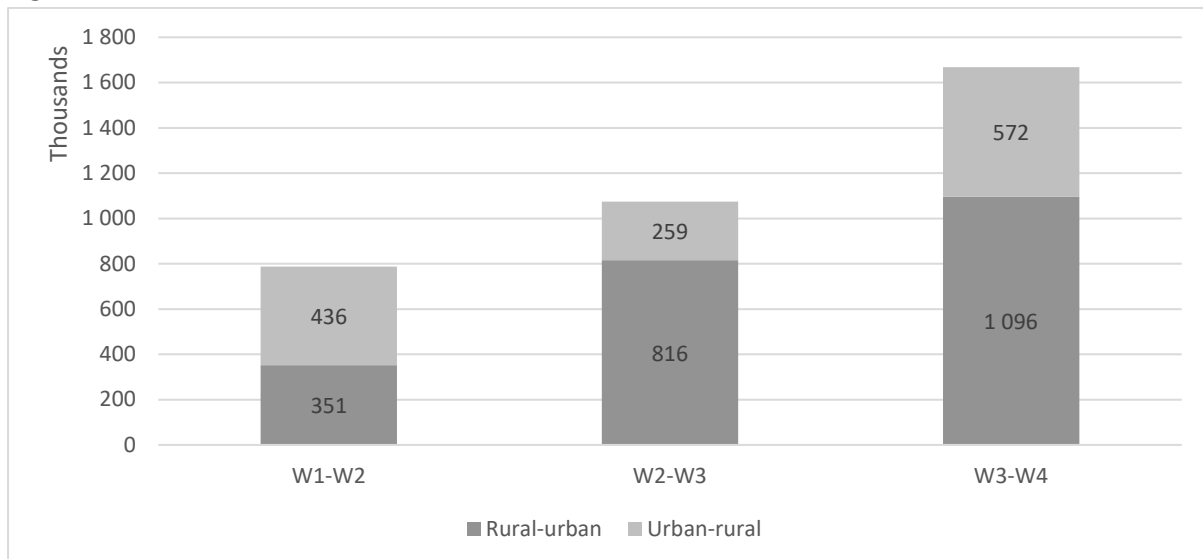
Figure 1. Percentage of African households with labour migrants as adult non-resident members (2008 – 2014), by geography type



Source: Posel, 2017 draft chapter, in: Migrant Labour after Apartheid book; NIDS 2008 - 2014.

Notes: Geography types are based on classifications from the 2001 Population Census. The data have been weighted to represent population estimates.

Figure 2: Location of urban and rural household members in 4 waves of NIDS data



Source: Justin Visagie 2017, calculations from NIDS waves 1-4; own estimates.

HIV and Aids has created a huge ritual, home-coming economy in South Africa which keeps taxi drivers and coffin makers in business. It also re-entrenches the commitment to the rural homestead, because in acknowledging the passing of family members, ordinary black South Africans is made to return home and are reminded of the spiritual and culture power of home.

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An investment in a ritual is an investment in the politics of home and every single black South Africa over the past 20 years has done that on numerous occasions. They have begged, borrowed and even stolen to go home to recognise the dead and their ancestors – no matter what Christian church they belong to, or other religious affiliation they have.

But most ordinary black South Africans have been doing much more than simply making the odd home visit for a ritual; they have been investing their extra cash and savings in rural home building and this is why so much of the new “home-building” enterprise of the nation is not happening in the cities, where the poor still live in shacks, but in the countryside.

In the cities ordinary people are happy to allow the state to build them “something” for work, that is better than a shack. In fact, they demand that from the state as a political entitlement, but for a large proportion of the urban population the proper home-building process is actually happening far away from the city, in the former homelands, where there is access to land, building regulations do not exist and where material for suburban home making are now readily available from any number of “Do It Yourself” mega-store in rural towns. One just has to drive through the Transkei or the former homeland areas north of Johannesburg today to understand how much momentum this process has received in the past 20 years.

But how has this happened when people are so poor and the state is not providing any housing subsidies in rural areas? The answer lies in several factors. Firstly, the social grant system in South Africa has become part of a hidden home-building program. Over 75% of rural families receive grants and some of this money has been used to build new structure on rural sites, especially when it can be supplemented with remittances. Brick and mortar six or eight cornered structures, as well as rectangular suburban houses are replacing the old-style wattle and daub *rondawels*. These investments have been so massive that they at least match, if not exceed, the investment in RDP housing in the cities.

Secondly, the decline in marriage in African communities has helped the process. Families are not splitting because of marriage and family members can now club together to build a family home in the countryside together rather than struggle to build and maintain several homes. Moreover, they are able to do this because they are not investing so much in agriculture, which was required when social grants did not meet a portion of rural subsistence.

In a consumerist society the measure of a decent rural home is not simply its location, it is now also about what it looks like. New rural homes have to look modern and express rural improvement. To be seen to be making these kinds of improvements is a mark of acquiring new forms of citizenship. It means that one is now part of the new African “suburban nation” – a nation that is finding it easier to realise its desire for suburbanisation in the homelands rather than the cities.

Nkandla is not “just a house”, it is a popular development model, which is also why people have such powerful views on the way in which Jacob Zuma has used state resources to build his house, while

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denying everyone else access to state resources to build their rural homes. Government housing subsidies are only available in urban areas.

Rural home-making is not unique to South Africa. In Britain people go to the countryside all the time, and live there and commute to escape the city. In Scandinavian cities virtually every family has a rural retreat on a fjord or river. In South Africa, whites have family homes on the coast, their place of connection to nature, relaxation and spiritual well-being. So, there is nothing uniquely African about the desire for the countryside.

Problems arise when a country's spatial and economic development policies have little appreciation of the cultural and economic imperatives that drive double rootedness and the popular strategies of home-making, settlement and life-cycle planning. Without rural land management and titling, the huge investment that migrants' household are making to rural house building have little long-term material value for these families (besides the cultural benefits), nor will they be recognised in the rural development frameworks of the state. In fact, no one is trying to connect the way people are actually investing in rural areas with the kinds of economic activities that might develop there outside of subsistence style, small-scale agrarianism.

In the cities there is clearly a huge need to facilitate and support urban settlement and encourage ownership and positive place-making in poor and working-class communities. The local appetite for greater urban permanence will not increase significantly, if the environments and opportunities for its realisation, are not transformed. One of the reasons why shack settlements have become even more entrenched in cities is that they are functionally supportive of double rootedness, especially if they are not rented in town.

Owning and maintaining a serviced shack in a well-located urban area which has electricity and other basic services is clearly ideal over the short to medium term, if the primary aim of your investment strategy is rural home building. Or, is the current desire for rural home building a product of the failure of the state and the city to offer adequate opportunities for settlement of home making and ownership in urban areas? The evidence seems to suggest that rural building and anchorage are often prioritised over investment in urban permanence, even where opportunities do exist for such investment.

And, if we assume that the urban economy of South Africa is unlikely to be able to absorb many of those who are currently unemployed, what is the best development strategy in the short to medium term for development in South Africa? Instead of the current policies of benign neglect and re-tribalisation under Zuma perhaps it is time to reconsider new and innovative models for rural and "homeland" development. While it is true that urban investment does yield better returns than rural investment in terms of employment and income, these returns are too low to end migrant lives and socially empty to break deeply embedded rhythms of circular migration.

For more information on the Mandela Initiative:   