VICTIMS, VILLAINS, AND FIXERS: THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT AND JOHANNESBURG'S POOR

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Summary

Urban water supply, sanitation, and electricity have been identified as basic needs by the post-apartheid government and the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council (GJMC). This article explores the relationship of Johannesburg's poor to the urban environment and in particular these three key urban services. On the basis of survey data, case studies, textual analysis and in-depth interviews with policy makers and planners, it reviews how poorer citizens were for a long time seen as victims under apartheid urban planning. During the rent boycotts that characterized urban struggle politics during the era of late apartheid in Johannesburg, they were often represented as villains. This perception persisted well into the post-apartheid period, where refusing to pay for services was seen as tantamount to a lack of patriotism. Today, Johannesburg's poorer citizens are increasingly being seen as fixers. The GJMC in its policy document, iGoli 2002, is committed to establishing the commercial viability of service delivery. Cost recovery is seen as important to solving the tension that exists between maintaining established service levels (in historically white areas) and extending services to new and historically under-serviced (mainly black) areas. We conclude that

there are opportunities to address urban poverty, inequality, and environmental management in an integrated way. These are predicated, however, on the GJMC and its advisers understanding the ways in which pro-poor and social justice strategies interface with urban services and the urban environment.

1. Introduction

In their relationship with the urban environment, poor urban dwellers are variously characterized as victims, villains, or fixers. As victims they are seen as suffering from poor services and environmental conditions, a situation highlighted in the South African context by apartheid's spatial legacy and racial inequalities in the segregation of urban residential areas, and the provision of public goods and services. As villains, urban people in poverty are seen as perpetrators of environmental degradation through illegal, wasteful, and polluting practices. In Johannesburg their role as villains has been additionally underscored by past and on-going practices of boycotting of rents and service charges, and illegal tapping of municipal services.

As fixers, poor people are often called upon to participate in community-based responses to environmental management, cost sharing, or payment of user charges for service provision and maintenance. Two critical issues are being debated and explored in Johannesburg in the present context. The first is, which citizens are to participate in community-based responses to environmental management, given that in the past little participation was expected of better-off (predominantly white) residents, while poorer (predominantly African) urban dwellers often had to rely almost entirely on their own resources or initiatives? Second and equally crucial, is how service provision and maintenance is to be paid for in the longer term. Both issues constitute major social, economic political and environmental challenges for the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council (GJMC), the new metropolitan government structure for the city.

This article explores the relationship of Johannesburg's poor to the urban environment and more specifically to three key urban services—water supply, sanitation, and electricity. This focus is justified because these services are of central importance to environmental health, urban economic growth, and social relations. The provision of basic services and the construction of infrastructure to meet the basic needs of the poor are the widely accepted priority of both the post-apartheid government and of the GJMC, a priority that far outweighs any other urban environmental focus. The metropolitan council is equally determined to establish the commercial viability of service delivery, both to improve efficiency and in order to facilitate its commitment to a level of cross-subsidization across the city. While these issues have been politically and legislatively resolved, however, they have not yet stood the test of implementation.

2. Urban Poverty and the Urban Environment

The number of people in poverty, as measured by conventional income-based poverty lines, is rising in cities of the South. According to these measures, it was estimated in 2000 that more than half the world's absolute poor will be living in urban areas. For this reason, those concerned with international social policy and development are taking the issue of urban poverty increasingly seriously.

While conventional definitions and measurements of poverty have primarily focused on household income and expenditure, however, urban poverty specialists are keen to point out that well-being cannot be divorced from both the operation of urban labor markets and the physical and social environment. Security of tenure or occupation, access to adequate services and ensuring safe living environments can go a long way towards securing the life chances of low-income urban dwellers. Thus people's well-being and livelihood opportunities are as closely linked to *where* they are as to *what* they do.

If anything distinguishes the day-to-day life of poor urban dwellers from their rural counterparts, it is their relationship with the built environment. Poor living conditions related to contaminated water, inadequate or absent sanitation, lack of services such as electricity, and the constant threat of floods, landslides or industrial pollution, particularly in conditions of appalling overcrowding, all mean that the urban poor are exposed to severe environmental health risks. There is a substantial literature on the impact of poor environments on the health and well-being of low-income urban dwellers. Indeed, a case can be made that the combination of increasing poverty, deteriorating physical environments, inadequate shelter, and declining investment in urban infrastructure and services has meant that health conditions are deteriorating faster in cities of the South than in the surrounding rural areas. Simply put, the poorer you are in the city, the greater the risk.

Although Africa is a fast urbanizing continent, many African cities are blatantly ill-equipped to deal with the impact of urbanization. Resource deficiencies, poor urban management, and the absence of effective urban governance all combine to present enormous problems in maintaining functional cities, productive economies, and in ensuring employment, shelter, infrastructure, and services for all urban dwellers, particularly the growing ranks of the poorest. Clearly concern with the environment and sustainable urban development cannot be divorced from the problem of the millions of people globally who lack access to shelter, basic services, and livelihoods.

Nevertheless, internationally the campaign for environmental justice has been firmly directed at the "green agenda" (global warming, biodiversity, resource depletion, and deforestation) and global agreements on these issues. The report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (The Brundtland Report) which came out in 1987 dedicated only one chapter to the urban environment. UNCED or the Rio Summit in 1992 was guilty of similar neglect, even though two-thirds of recommended actions in *Agenda 21* have to be taken at the local level. The single chapter of *Agenda 21* on the urban environment points up as key concerns for cities and towns:

Overcrowding, inadequate housing, inadequate access to clean water and sanitation, growing amounts of uncollected waste, and deteriorating air quality are already serious problems in these cities and may worsen substantially if effective and timely action is not taken.

These issues together constitute what has become known as the "brown agenda", a central tenet of current urban environmental management. The brown agenda has been defined as the most immediate and critical environmental problem facing cities in the South and "closely linked to the poverty-environment nexus". In many ways, however,

the "brown agenda" appears to differ very little from the focus in the 1970s on addressing basic needs in development, in particular, the urban services approach. We should be cautious, therefore, in accepting the claim that the brown agenda signals a real shift from the provision of basic infrastructure and services, to a more integrated concern for environmentally sustainable development.

Since the birth of the international environmental movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, environmental activists have by and large seen themselves in opposition to urban development. In cities of the North they have regarded their task as protecting greenbelts from the inexorable encroachment of developers. In the South, when faced with the dilemmas of increasing urbanization and growing urban poverty, global environmental concerns have merged more readily with the preoccupations of rural development and natural resource specialists rather than with urban planners and activists. To the extent that cities are considered from an environmental perspective, it is usually in terms of the negative "ecological footprints" that they cast on their hinterlands.

Likewise, in South Africa the dominant environmental discourse places primary emphasis on preserving areas of outstanding natural beauty, a vantage point which does not resonate well with the urban industrial experience of metropolitan Johannesburg. Moreover, an overwhelming preoccupation with issues of social justice has meant a rather slow start to the campaign for environmental justice. In Johannesburg the questions of how to extend basic services to the historically disadvantaged populations and how to pay and charge for services across the city have most concentrated the minds of participants in urban governance in the post-apartheid period.

There are also widely held perceptions that many whites in South Africa, who identified with or participated in the struggle against apartheid, have retreated into green issues. It is felt in this regard that core establishment concerns such as maintaining lifestyles and local area-based standards or protecting private property are now pursued behind a mask of commitment to environmental issues such as conservation and the preservation of green spaces. Indeed, the argument can be made that institutional racism is increasingly disguised as an "environmental syndrome" akin to the infamous "sanitation syndrome".

There are additional problems in advancing environmentalist agendas in Johannesburg on the cusp of the millennium. One area for confusion is that environmental management is both a provincial and a local government competency. Additionally, different commitment, expertise, and perceptions exist in relation to environmental management and priorities across the four municipal sub-structures currently comprising the GJMC. In particular, different environmental issues present themselves in the north and south of the city. In the south, for instance, land issues are important in the context of growing demand for housing development. Pollution control is also a pressing issue, particularly in relation to air quality as a result of the mine dumps. In the north much of the concern is with resource management, protecting internal assets such as the ridges and koppies that are so characteristic of the Johannesburg landscape and which constitute the lungs of the city, as well as the rivers and open spaces.

Unlike Cape Town, which is the home of the nation's green movement, or Durban, which seems to be leading the way in implementing South African Agenda 21 programs, Johannesburg is seen as a non-starter in the realm of environmental politics. This is partly for the reasons cited immediately above, partly because it has got off to a slow start in terms of environmental action and partly because it is a comparatively ugly place. This reputation is unfair. In the 1980s Johannesburg, as the country's industrial heartland, nurtured the powerful South African trade union movement, which in turn politicized industrial health and safety concerns. By the same token, the 1980s saw the civic movement in Johannesburg spearhead the demand for affordable shelter and urban services in the context of the rent boycotts. Although not promoted or articulated in terms of an environmental agenda, the issues they raised are nevertheless crucial to mitigating urban environmental risk.

The South African Constitution states that citizens have rights to a safe and healthy environment but that equally they have a responsibility to participate in environmental management. The 1995 *Development Facilitation Act* (DFA) provided a national legislative framework for land development and stipulated that the Johannesburg metropolitan area, and each of the four municipal substructures, prepare policy guidelines known as *Land Development Objectives* (LDOs). The guiding principles for environmental management in Johannesburg are encapsulated in the *Composite Land Development Objectives*. Rights to environmental justice are addressed with particular reference to the "equitable distribution of resources".

While community members are expected to be involved in greening strategies, there are plans afoot to promote environmental education and to increase the capacity of local government to promote community participation in the environment. Outside of solid waste management, however, environmental management is not explicitly linked to other urban services. If the city can successfully make the links between environmental management and urban service delivery, it may well be that a city not especially well endowed with natural beauty can bridge the divide between the green and brown environmental agendas.

If adequate public services cannot be accessed, people make their own inadequate arrangements or pay excessively for informal private solutions. Apart from the overwhelming economic and social arguments, there are also powerful environmental reasons for improving water supply and sanitation. In the case of electricity supply, this has for a long time now had particular political significance in the context of Johannesburg's townships, given that electricity charges triggered the rent and services boycotts in Soweto and beyond during the mid-1980s.

3. Victims: Apartheid's Legacy

Under apartheid, South Africa was a country exhibiting levels of inequality in wealth and access to services among the highest in the world. A combination of policies and legislation dating from the early twentieth century consistently denied Africans vital components of well-being and a secure base in the cities where, in principle at least, they were not allowed to live permanently. This gave rise to racial imbalances in the

provision of housing, infrastructure, and services, which were inherited by post-apartheid local governments.

The legacy of apartheid impacted specifically on the provision of services in Johannesburg in two ways. First, the well-known policy of providing inferior quality services for Africans meant that standards of social and physical infrastructure were intentionally set lower than they were for whites. In public education, health, housing, and transport, racially defined standards of construction and service gave tangible expression to the political and economic hierarchy on which white supremacy was based. The second explanation relates to the decision taken by the apartheid government in 1968 to stop the development of African residential areas in cities outside the African 'homelands'. The metropolitan outcome of the policy of separate development, which insisted that African development be restricted to rural settlements or small towns in racially defined homelands, was the massive backlog of housing and infrastructure development in the old township areas of Johannesburg.

As the background paper on *Poverty, Housing, and Urban Development* prepared for the Poverty Hearings in South Africa put the urban case:

Poverty in South Africa is more than usually associated with the high cost of household expenditure. The irrationality of the segregation-driven location of the residential areas of the poor has increased costs such as transportation. Moreover, because of the system of financing townships, there is a legacy of the unfair cross subsidization of rates to rich white neighborhoods instead of poor African residential areas. In common with other third world cities, residents of informal settlements pay the highest per item costs on basic commodities such as water and fuel.

Clearly then, issues of poverty and environmental justice cannot usefully be tackled in isolation. In the context of urban South Africa most particularly, it is difficult to address either outside a consideration of inequality, not least for political reasons.

It is not just apartheid South Africa that has provided adequate and reliable services to only a minority of its urban citizens. Across many cities of the South, mains water, and sewerage connections are concentrated in better off areas, while new investment has tended to be in existing serviced areas. Thus it is common for local governments to subsidize elites heavily in terms of urban services and this is compounded by the fact that cost sharing or community participation increasingly and commonly characterizes new investment in low-income areas. Referring specifically to inequalities in access to urban water and sanitation facilities, Caroline Stephens in her article "Health Cities or Unhealthy Islands: The Health and Social Implications of Urban Inequality" in *Environment and Urbanization*, identifies the health inequalities that can arise:

…the urban poor often have least access to piped water and are forced to pay more than the wealthy for poor quality and limited quantities of water from vendors. This becomes a doubly regressive taxation in which one group is doubly un-benefited (in health and economic terms) while another doubly gains. Put bluntly, the poor pay more for their cholera.

What follows in this section is the presentation of some statistical data drawn from our own analysis of the 1995 October Household Survey on provision of water supply, sanitation, and electricity in Johannesburg. The data provide a picture of the conditions of some of apartheid's victims when a democratic government took office in 1994.

One thing that emerges from the tables below is that when access to such services is used as an indicator of poverty, then Johannesburg's poor are better off than many other urban dwellers across the continent. In Africa, 36% of the urban population is thought to be without an adequate water supply and 45% is not covered by sanitation. It should also be pointed out that the situation of Johannesburg's poor also compares well with national figures. For example, it has been estimated that for the country as a whole, in the immediate post-apartheid period, only 21% of households had access to piped water and only 28% had access to sanitation facilities. Over 80% of poor rural households did not have access to either. Nevertheless, intra-urban inequalities exist and this is undoubtedly the most startling picture that emerges within Johannesburg. Although almost all the residents of backyard shacks and informal settlements are African, there is nonetheless considerable differentiation within the African population. This is illustrated in Table 4, which shows the distribution of housing type by race. Whereas colored, Indian, and white households live almost exclusively in formal houses or flats, African households are distributed across a much wider range of informal and formal types of accommodation.

Source of Water	African	Coloured	Indian	White	All Races
Tap in house/flat	67	100	100	97	80
Tap on the stand	29	0	0	3	18
Public tap/kiosk/borehole	4	0	0	0	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Own analysis of the 1995 October Household Survey

Table 1. Main source of domestic water in Johannesburg by race (percentage distribution)

Type of Sanitation	African	Coloured	Indian	White	All Races
Flush toilet in dwelling	50	89	94	99	70
Flush toilet on site	38	11	6	1	23
Toilet off site (all types)	4	0	0	0	3
Other toilet on site (chemical & bucket)	5	0	0	0	3
Pit latrine on site	2	0	0	0	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 2. Type of sanitation provision in Johannesburg by race (percentage distribution)

Type of Energy	African	Coloured	Indian	White	All Races
Electricity	86	99	99	98	91
Gas	3	0	1	2	3
Paraffin	9	0	0	0	5
Wood	0	0	0	0	0
Coal or Charcoal	1	1	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 3. Main energy source for cooking in Johannesburg by race (percentage distribution)

Type of dwelling	African	Coloured	Indian	White	Total
Formal dwelling (house or flat)	62	97	100	95	77
Formal dwelling in backyard	20	2	0	4	13
Informal dwelling in backyard	3	0	0	0	2
Informal dwelling not in backyard	10	0	0	0	6
Hostel	4	1	0	1	3
Other	1	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 4. Type of dwelling by race in Johannesburg (percentage distribution)

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Biographical Sketches

Jo Beall is a reader in Development Studies at the Development Studies Institute (DESTIN) at the London School of Economics (LSE) where she directs the Development Management Programme. She is a specialist on urban social development, urban services and urban governance and has researched these issues in South Asia and South Africa. She is co-author of *Uniting a Divided City: Governance and Social Exclusion in Johannesburg,* published by Earthscan and editor of *A City for All: Valuing Difference and Working with Diversity*. She is currently actively involved in research with the Crisis States Programme based in the Development Research Centre at the LSE where she is investigating local and metropolitan government as a site of state stabilization in conflict situations, with a focus on KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

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Susan Parnell is an Associate Professor in the Environmental and Geographical Sciences Department at the University of Cape Town (UCT). She is a South African urban specialist who has published extensively on both historical and contemporary urban transformation. Her work focuses specifically on issues of race and gender, and more recently she has worked on poverty reduction and local government. She also writes on urban planning issues in Africa. Her academic appointments include positions at UCT, the University of London (SOAS), and the University of the Witwatersrand. In addition she has held Research Fellowships from the British Academy, CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) in France, the University of Oxford, and the London School of Economics. Professor Parnell has an active involvement in the urban NGO sector and serves on the Board of the Isandla Institute and the Gender Advocacy Program.