

Our government fails to engage us on our fate as communities identified for the Covid -19 response of reblocking

Dear Minister Sisulu, Premier Winde, Western Cape Minister Simmers, Mayor Plato and Mayco Member Boo

We are the community leaders for DuNoon, and we are writing this letter to raise some concerns we have regarding the reblocking process you pronounced in March.

The Coronavirus outbreak has exposed just how deeply entrenched inequality in South Africa is. President Cyril Ramaphosa in his address on 15 March 2020, advised the nation to take certain precautions to curb the spread of COVID-19. Yet, it is unfortunate that those actions presupposed a level of privilege and access to adequate housing and basic amenities that many in our communities do not have.

For instance, we were advised to practice social distancing in order to prevent contracting and spreading Covid-19. However, due to our country's history of past economic, racial and social segregation, residents of dense informal settlements, such as ourselves, are unable to practice good hygiene let alone social and or physical distancing because of limited resources shared by large numbers of people.

Following the declaration of a nationwide Lockdown entered into on 26 March 2020, Minister you announced that, in order to counter the effects of the lockdown on South Africa's roughly 1.4 million informal households, a process of 'de-densification' would be initiated. We understand that the process is now called re-blocking.

Minister, as you know, Kosovo and Du Noon were identified for the re-blocking process in the Western Cape. We are told that a contractor has been appointed to deliver 1 500 multi-storey Temporary Residential Areas (TRAs) in Du Noon and that 2 000 units will be constructed in Kosovo whilst the Department, Province and the City of Cape Town intend to build 3000 units at Ithemba. We also learnt through media reports that families would be moved to the newly built Temporary Relocation Areas by July 2020. Is this true, if so why is it that we have learnt about these developments through the media?

While we acknowledge the government's initiative to curb the spread of Covid-19 amongst the most vulnerable populations in informal settlements, we are concerned that there has been no real engagement or clarity around the process of resettlement, the state of these units and the future of these TRAs post the Covid-19 response.

Minister, we would like to remind you that the Western Cape, in particular, has a controversial history with TRAs and Incremental Development Areas (IDAs) such as Blikkiesdorp, Wolwerivier and closer to home, New Rest (a TRA in DuNoon). The history of New Rest is particularly painful. New Rest was a de-densification or re-blocking project initiated 12 years ago that has completely failed our people. Residents of DuNoon were moved under the guise of electricity installation and were promised a number of improved living conditions at the TRA. What was meant to be a temporary solution became a permanent dumping ground.

During consultation, the government promised water and sanitation, more space and electricity. Yet, since taking occupation at the TRA our people realised that they had been misled. There is no space, no access to water and sanitation and the site is next to a dam which tends to be a crime scene and dumping site. There's an exposed sewage line that runs across the TRA site, endangering the health of young and old alike. The conditions remain deplorable despite constant requests for assistance from the community to the City of Cape Town.

The experience of New Rest now begs the question of what 'temporary' means and what conditions are considered adequate for the relocation of our people.

We as the affected communities are highly disappointed by the government's approach thus far. At this stage, we have been receiving updates primarily from the media and not through the consultative process promised by the government. Where there has been consultation, it has not been substantial and many questions remain that go to the heart of the re-blocking process:

There is little indication of what the process will actually look like. We as community leaders cannot answer community members' questions around identification and selection of 'beneficiaries' and for how long they are to remain in the temporary accommodation. Due to the lack of information and engagement with community leadership, we have seen a number of concerned community members raising suspicion around this process, potentially causing unrest and distrust.

We are also concerned that political campaigning is done using this process. Those belonging to the ruling party in the City have the privilege of receiving proper engagement, to the exclusion of ward councillors and community leaders. On the ground, our community members feel like their ward councillors and community leaders are not consulting with them. How then, can this important consultative process take place when all spheres of government are failing to relay important information about their futures to affected communities?

Minister, given the lack of substantial consultation from the Government, we raise our concerns here with you:

- When will we be moved to TRAs and who qualifies?
- How long will these TRAs be in existence?
- Which sites have been identified for TRAs and what facilities will be provided?

- Should elderly and physically challenged people be relocated to two-storey units what support will they receive as it may be challenging for them to go up and down different floors?
- Is this going to be another New Rest situation (a TRA dumping ground by the City of Cape Town)?

This is a very concerning matter and we do not accept the unilateral decision making on the part of Government that we have witnessed thus far.

We demand that;

1. All spheres of Government to **fully** consult with ward councillors and community leaders.
2. We demand a clear outline and timeline of the reblocking project and how long are we going to live in the TRAs
3. We demand that the Government prepare pamphlets with adequate information regarding this matter in three languages, isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans.
4. We also demand to know whether the funding for this de-densification project comes from the same funds for the Annandale project?

Throughout these uncertain times, the need for dignified, adequate housing remains and is all the more pronounced. The home is the first line of defence against Covid-19 but beyond that, it is the mark of a dignity for our people who have been forgotten for far too long.

The urgency of the current pandemic has not blinded us to the fact that housing solutions for informal settlements like ours have not been a priority for this government. Instead, our poverty continues to be criminalised and our humanity trampled on. We hope this global pandemic reminds you Minister and your government of your promise. Our lives are worth more than temporary units, our families deserve a home.

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