

Ecosensitive Homesteading in South Africa

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18 October 2008*

Introduction

My aim is to present a long term vision of housing development in South Africa which can serve as a guide for coordinated advocacy, instruction, and social action on the part of Civil Society.

The political and economic inspiration of this vision is the South African Freedom Charter; and the vision developed here is the concept of ***Ecosensitive Homesteading***.

. . . relevant excerpts from The South African Freedom Charter

There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort!

All people shall have the right to be decently housed, and to bring up their families in comfort and security;

Rent and prices shall be lowered, food plentiful and no-one shall go hungry;

Slums shall be demolished, and new suburbs built where all have transport, roads, lighting, playing fields, creches and social centres;

Rest, leisure and recreation shall be the right of all:

Fenced locations and ghettos shall be abolished, and laws which break up families shall be repealed.

The vision of Ecosensitive Homesteading is one means to actualize the housing goals of the South African Freedom Charter.

Informal Settlements are a significant expression of The Freedom Charter because they are based on a people's human living right to land, shelter, and sustenance.

If neither the State nor Business can provide a living for most people because they tie income for ordinary people to job creation, people must still live. And they will.

Rather than seeing Informal Settlements as an affront to our sensibilities or some sort of blight on our urban niceties, we should see them for what they truly are: the seeds of our ecosensitive future and a challenge to society to be honest about its depredations.

This vision of Ecosensitive Homesteading is built in honour and admiration and celebration and full support for Informal Settlements. They are guides to our future.

Ecosensitive Homesteading

Ecosensitive Homesteading is founded on four elements:

- Ecosensitive Housing
- Ecosensitive Settlements
- Ecosensitive Delivery
- Ecosensitive Financing

Ecosensitive Homesteading is about Ecosensitive Housing in Ecosensitive Settlements with Ecosensitive Delivery using Ecosensitive Financing.

Ecosensitive Homesteading is based on a delivery system founded on communities, civil society, and micro-business.

Ecosensitive Financing is derived from non-interest bearing non-debt based exchange systems: new types of financing systems for communitarian developments in South Africa.

Ecosensitive Homesteading on a mass scale cannot be financed through the currently conventional interest-bearing debt-based monetary system. This is because debt-based financing requires a profitable financial return through a mechanism which cannot deliver suitable housing to poor and historically disadvantaged citizens in a way which stimulates sustainable socio-economic development led “bottom-up” from the grassroots level.

Moreover, the increasing need for suitable housing in the context of the long-run global financial breakdown can create a foundation for new monetary and exchange systems in South Africa in a manner replicable across Africa.

Sustainability

Any social system or social process is sustainable if it can be continued indefinitely in both its theoretical and practical aspects.

Economically, a sustainable social process is one whose rate of resource consumption does not exceed the natural renewal rate of natural production. By “natural production,” I mean such things as eco-system vitality and replenishment, etc.

It is evident that humanity as a whole is now living beyond its natural means.

Most of this unsustainable living is taking place in Europe and North America and has been historically enabled by the material exploitation of Africa and other continents.

The larger question is whether or not Africa should follow this development model. My perspective assumes that the right answer to that larger question is most definitely: NO!

Africa, and South Africa, must develop its own path based on its own cultural ideas and indigenous spiritual principles and aspirations.

Africa's future lies in the discarded wisdom of its pre-European past.

Motivation

It has become apparent that the current big-Business and big-State led financial and economic system in South Africa, by its intrinsic nature, cannot deliver the promises of the South African Freedom Charter, the South African Constitution, and the democratic transformation which ended political apartheid.

One symptom of this failure is inadequate housing, both in minimally acceptable quality and minimally required quantity, for a majority of citizens and residents in this country.

Informal Settlements are the clearest manifestation of this big failure. But in that failure lies the opportunity for big-State and big-Business to learn their true place: servants, not masters of the people.

The policies of RDP and GEAR have proved inadequate to the task. RDP has demonstrated the inadequacy of the public sector to deliver and GEAR has demonstrated the inadequacy of the private sector to deliver. The nexus connecting both is the interest-bearing debt-based financial system manifested as taxes to redistribute in the former case and loans to distribute in the latter case.

What is needed is both a new sector to organize delivery and a new medium of financing.

Ecosensitive Housing

The unit of a human settlement is a household. Thus, it makes sense to begin with a vision of an ecosensitive house and then build the larger elements of the ecosensitive homesteading vision from that base.

Let me define a house as a building with living support services which serves as a home.

In the current general architecture of normative affluence, one has a building, which is usually not geo-locally appropriate, attached to a set of externally derived services which are centrally generated from a remote location.

This general architecture creates systemic dependencies in the public to centralized power structures in return for certain conveniences.

These conveniences are then most reliably provided to affluent areas on an "ability to pay" principle. Those with the least means are then most left to fend for themselves.

Imagine a rectilinear building, usually of a euro-culturally derived design, with services such as electricity, water, and sewage, etc., derived from remote locations and supplied by large and centralized service providers. This is called “living on the grid.” It reflects the “middle class” euro-cultural normalized ideal.

This system is not ecosensitive and it is not sustainable. Moreover, it is socio-economically inappropriate in a context of mass poverty with stated social goals toward mass upliftment.

Worse, the system is not consistent with genuine freedom and mass empowerment in a situation of systemically induced poverty affecting a majority of residents in which social pressures are building toward broad-based change.

Such a system requires a massive and expensive resource-intensive infrastructure, large-scale government to palliate social imbalances, big business to provide services, monolithic finance as the prime mover, and high employment to generate the effective demand which keeps moving the wheels of large commerce necessary to lubricate the drives of the financial system.

Such a system does not fit the needs, the social reality, and the probable future of a country such as South Africa.

South Africa needs more of a decentralized and broadly distributed economic empowerment architecture.

South Africa needs more “people power.”

South Africa, above most other needs, needs low cost housing for the majority of its residents, its true human potential, which is suitable for the elevation of the human and cultural spirit of its long-suffering majority people and which provides the living support services which make life comfortable and pleasant and motivating, but in a readily affordable and sustainable way: both personally affordable and sustainable and socially affordable and sustainable.

Is this possible? Yes.

But it requires a different delivery system architecture oriented toward a different vision of the organisation and direction of national development.

What is needed is a conception of a geo-locally appropriate building with internally generated living support services within the context of a decentralized infrastructural design as the household unit of more humanly appropriate human settlements for the rapidly urbanizing majority of energized but economically frustrated people.

A geo-locally appropriate building is a building which is appropriate to the highly specific geological and climactic conditions of the space on which it is built.

It is built with locally available materials, even material wastes such as old tires and other discarded artifacts, local earth and stones, local labour, and by the community in which it resides. In other words, the building is materially appropriate to its particular place on earth.

But the building must be geo-locally appropriate in other ways too. It must be built with other local conditions in mind, such as the arc of the sun, the customary motion of the winds, the location of springs and wells, etc., for these are all natural resources for heating, cooling, water, and energy provision, etc.

In other words, the building should have catchments: catchments for sunlight, catchments for windpower, catchments for rainwater, and catchments for the morning dews, etc.

The ideal of the principle is that as many living support services as possible should be internally generated within the building as self-providently as possible.

Even food can be grown within the building while providing a pleasant and uplifting internal contact with nature; and other foodstuffs can be grown on the building, its roof and walls, and in its surrounding yard even if that is just a small patch.

Sewage can serve as composting, etc., so generated wastes are reusable as a resource.

This is called “living off the grid” and it is what a country like South Africa needs in the regions beyond examples of conventional definitions of affluence.

The dwelling designs should not be based on rectilinear forms -- for curves and irregular uniquenesses are sweeter to the human soul than straight lines and other geometric uniformities which tend to channel rather than free the human spirit.

Straight lines are outer manifestations of inner mental rigidities more suitable when one is conditioning masses to be wage slaves or debt slaves working under rigid work regimentations and debt repayment schedules.

Rather, one should design home dwellings to uplift the spirit of a country where most will not find work, will not have the collateral to become debt slaves, and will have therefore to become self-provident in a decentralized infrastructure which empowers them.

The poverty in South Africa is a foundation for its freedom.

Ecosensitive Settlements

Households do not normally exist in isolation.

Households form communities, and one material manifestation of community is a settlement.

It matters to the soul what sort of settlement in which one lives and who are one's neighbours whether or not one interacts with them directly.

In a country such as South Africa, settlements should self-organise themselves in ways which do not make themselves dependent on large-scale industrial or large-scale centralized systems for production, distribution, coordination, or provision.

Settlements should self-design themselves to be as self-providing, self-coordinating, and self-sufficient as possible.

Settlements should self-evolve themselves to be natural, convivial, and ecological.

While we humans are social, we are limited in interactive capacity. This is why bigness can become alienating. Paradoxically, the larger the network of interactions in which one becomes embedded, the more isolated one becomes. This is why there are more lonely people in cities than in villages.

Thus, settlements, especially large ones, should be conceived as a network of fully featured human-scale convivial neighbourhoods. And these neighbourhoods should also be as self-providing, self-coordinating, and self-sufficient as possible. And they are best as small units of convivial sociality within a larger enveloping settlement. This is very African.

Such an approach to human habitat provision probably best fits the informal urbanization patterns of South Africa and is consistent with the latent characteristics of indigenous cultures which in any case are more feasible models for solving the current crisis of humanity than the path the country as a whole seems currently to be on, which is a path that is symptomatic of a pervasive mental and cultural colonisation.

Ecosensitive Delivery

Government is not the answer.

Business is not the answer.

Community in partnership with Civil Society is the answer.

Government and Business have become two sides of the same coin and suffer the same corrupting dependency on the fictitious capital of debt used as money.

It is a hallucination to believe that one can borrow oneself, or a nation, out of poverty.

Communities must act as such and become their own change agents and delivery providers and this begins at the neighbourhood level.

The houses should be designed and built by the community. The neighbourhoods fashioned by themselves, and the settlements should evolve their own organic delivery and self-organising governance and other operating systems.

These things would happen in any case if there were not large-scale impeding forces; but these forces will soon be in retreat and people in communities will have to fend for themselves in any case. And this is already happening.

What is missing is the coordination of vision, expertise, and self-empowering training.

Civil Society can provide this necessary loose coordination as a knowledge, awareness, and interlinkage provider to communities.

But first, Civil Society has itself to free itself of its rapidly growing dependency on the corrupting influences of fictitious capital.

Ecosensitive Financing

South Africa will never be able to grow itself out of poverty or borrow itself out of poverty and it will most certainly never be able to tax enough to redistribute adequately.

We have to ask ourselves how we can finance ecosensitive houses and ecosensitive settlements and fund the delivery of their development and operation.

The right approach is community-generated financing with State facilitation.

It is imperative, a non-negotiable requirement, that neither debt nor taxation be used to finance ecosensitive homesteading. All strategies based on loans and taxes should be rigorously avoided.

Loans and taxes will yield two endemic problems:

1. There will never be enough money to do the job since the tax base in South Africa is too small and all onerous increases in taxes will be resisted.
2. And what money as there is from such sources will tend to leak out of the community in the usual wealth extracting flow of usurious money from the periphery to the core and from the bottom to the top.

The main challenges are to make sure there is adequate money provided for the task and to ensure that this money stays and circulates in the community to create thriving micro-economies bursting with vibrant micro-enterprises adequate enough to afford a qualitatively good life to settlement dwellers.

Government does not have the capacity to deliver, and should not aim to do so.

Government's role should be to facilitate and not to deliver.

Delivery is the people's job.

The aim of Government should be to facilitate delivery on the protective policy and large-scale infrastructure level and to provide a nationally recognized and accepted medium of social financing. This is its proper role in informal settlement and rural development.

It is my belief that the State should issue interest-free non-debt special notes as grants to stimulate the development of Ecosensitive Homesteading. Call them "Special Rands" if you will. I'd much rather call them "Ubuntus."

The aim of the Ubuntu is to stimulate the self-organisation of self-provident communities all across South Africa.

The aim of the Ubuntu is to finance Ecosensitive Homesteading in an Ecosensitive way.

And if the State will not do this, then Communities and Civil Society should explore ways for themselves to partner in cooperation to create the ***Ubuntu General Exchange Facility***, in the form of a money-less exchange recording and accounting system, as an expression of their freedom rights as encouraged by the South African Freedom Charter.

We can together create an ***Ubuntu Finance System*** to make real the promise of the Freedom Charter.

Let's first explore, though, how the State can facilitate this system on a path to claiming its own sovereignty.

The Government, if it issues them as grants, can stipulate that it will accept Ubuntu notes in payment of services from and taxes to the State. This will tend to make these notes a more or less generally acceptable means of payment throughout the Republic.

This grant money will be used to finance the development of Ecosensitive Homesteading throughout South Africa. The money will be granted, not lent, to Communities, Civil Society Organisations, and special neighbourhood and settlement Micro-Businesses. In other words, the money will be granted straightly and directly to the grass-roots.

By, at least initially, not being readily acceptable in the remote abroad in foreign exchanges, these grants will generate a reliance on local production. This will stimulate the South African economy at the grass-roots level and create a thriving organic network of micro-businesses.

New economic motion will start at the “bottom” and not at the “top.” The rest will follow from that.

Supplementing and expanding such a national-scale financing scheme, there must be local exchange systems of a money-less accounting or local currency trading type. And these formalized local exchange systems should exist to augment, facilitate, and expand even more informal and broader non-measured exchange modes which are the real lifeblood of community based mutual aid interactions.

Such schemes will eventually spread across Africa.

The advantage of State agency is the rapid facilitation of legitimacy.

But since the aim of the Ubuntu Finance System is to prevent, or even reverse, the leakage of wealth from the periphery to the core, the legitimation function of the State presents significant disadvantages unless Ubuntu issuance comes with comprehensive protective legislation to ameliorate the structural scalability disadvantages of community-based micro-businesses. This is because big-Business will see advantage in overtly or covertly bidding for work in Ubuntu as part of a tax management or government relations strategy. Rapid leakage of Ubuntu from the community would then occur before they have had a chance to at least cycle several times within and through the community before leaving to remote hands. The reason for this is that micro-businesses will simply not have the scalability, strength, or logistics to compete effectively with mega-businesses.

If the big supermarket chains readily accept Ubuntu, for example, it may be difficult to keep the neighbourhood baker in business even though her bread is better and more flavourful. And if these supermarkets can pay their taxes in Ubuntu, and buy services from the government in Ubuntu, there may well be business advantages for them in accepting Ubuntu readily, even as loss leaders.

The Ubuntu Finance System, if it is State initiated, must be protected by a comprehensive legislative package to ensure that its economic liberation goals are met.

The Ubuntu Finance System will have to be a parallel system to the Rand system, especially since it is in existence to achieve entirely different social ends and effects.

In such a multiple currency national economy, the Rand system will then find its natural home mostly in large cities, bigger business, and in international transactions with the conventional global monetary order which is failing in any case.

The Ubuntu Finance System will thrive where Rands are scarce and will lubricate the activities of settlements, communities, and interacting networks of collaborating micro-enterprises in a thriving informal economy which, of course, will not be taxed. This will be the economy that will make real important aspects of the Freedom Charter.

But what if the State, under the compulsion of the usual elites, or due to its own conservative or counter-instinctive habituations, or out of fear of displeasing global capital powers and markets, refuses to initiate the Ubuntu Finance System?

The best approach then, a State-less approach, which is also the most radical approach, is based on a principle of the complete devolution of purchasing power. This would yield economic democracy in its purest and most socially advanced form.

Devolve the monetary issuing power to the lowest possible level, the level of transacting entities in a particular exchange event.

In such an approach, the Ubuntu General Exchange Facility, which would then be a money-less transaction recording and accounting service, would be at the level of the neighbourhood with a network of them forming a settlement exchange for the recording and clearing of negotiated transactions between freely consenting parties. Exchanges between exchanges would be encouraged so transactions could flow regionally.

Records from known and trusted Ubuntu General Exchange Facilities could then circulate as money in anonymous and even unrecorded transactions for several cycles of exchange.

The important thing is that no debt or interest is generated and monetary issuance is linked to real transactions initially originating in some sort of community-based dwelling or settlement development effort or operation.

In such an informal network economy, micro-businesses could achieve scale as organisms of informal and fluid network ecosystems of dynamically self-organised collaborating enterprises.

Financing the concept of Ecosensitive Homesteading in these Freedom Charter compliant ways in order to make Ecosensitive Homesteading real and actual as a long term, unifying, and galvanizing national project would present a deep, genuine, and self-sustainable revolution in economic relations in South Africa: with the same peacefulness, gracefulness, and elegance of the political transformation of the Republic.

Without such a great economic revolution, the great political revolution which brought hope and happiness to so many all over the world is rendered meaningless, toothless, and full of ashes for the masses; with the visionary housing provisions of the great South African Freedom Charter becoming mere nice words devoid of any hope of actuality.

That would be the failure of a generation: ours.

Let me end by altering an old saying: *Liberty begins at Home!*

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