

South Africa: 'There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort' : Freedom Charter declaration becomes a reality for farmworkers in Muldersdrift

By Rebecca Himlin, August 2008 (published on Habitat International Coalition (HIC) website)

On the 11th of October, a community organisation in Muldersdrift celebrated a victory that was over 10 years in the making—the right to establish a settlement with secure tenure, proper housing and community facilities to replace the insecure tenure they experienced as farmworkers, hotel workers and domestics in this peri-urban area designated as a World Heritage Site on the outskirts of Johannesburg. The Muldersdrift Home Trust Foundation (MHTF), representing 300 of the thousands of poor workers in the area, has waged an uphill battle against wealthy landowners, government bureaucracy, and planning frameworks that did not accommodate the community's vision of a decent place to live. And finally, they have won.

Planact, a non-profit community development organization based in Johannesburg, responded to a request to assist the fledgling community group as early as 1998. While the relationship was originally established to develop the organizational capacity of the MHTF and to assist them to develop a plan for their proposed project, the agenda moved quickly into an advocacy effort as the wider community quickly became polarized around racial and income lines. According to an independent study commissioned by Planact in 2001,

"It seems that different structures are aligned along the same racial lines as the two community organisations, the MHTF and the landowners associations and that racism and a NIMBY ['not in my back-yard'] attitude permeates much of the opposition against the proposed development. The approval of Featherbrook Estate, an upmarket housing estate not far from this site for instance was approved, despite being situated alongside the Botanical Gardens... Scrutiny of the impact and actions of external stakeholders pay sad testimony to a community divided along racial and income lines. The lack of direction and contradictory information from government stakeholders is seriously hampering the progress of this development."

Through their own savings, the MHTF had entered into an instalment-sale arrangement with a landowner in the area. As the community was nearing the end of the agreed payment arrangement, the landowner suddenly cancelled the sale due to pressure from a landowner association in the area, according to community leader Molefi Selibo. The community mounted a legal challenge that resulted in a settlement paid to the community, but efforts to purchase land in the area with the proceeds continued to be frustrated. Even after another piece of land was identified and purchased with the assistance of the provincial Department of Land Affairs, the new neighbours (the Gateway Landowners Association) began an extended effort to contest the proposed development. Complicating the matter was the World Heritage Site designation in a nearby area (the 'Cradle of Mankind') and the government's Spatial Planning Framework for the area which was intended to preserve its rural character.

The organised landowners exploited the legal and administrative processes to their fullest, mounting resources that the community could not hope to match. In addition to this, bureaucratic processes by various government departments involved with approving the Environmental Impact Assessment and the application for township proclamation resulted in a long, drawn-out series of hearings (Sunday Business Report, 15 July, 2007). However, the community also patiently cultivated allies within

government as well, notably the provincial Department of Housing, which put considerable support behind the project. The most recent and significant hurdle was cleared on the 25th of July, 2008, with a positive decision of the Gauteng Development Tribunal, approving the first 150 units. Further development, however, is stated in the decision to be 'subjected to a positive Record of Decision by GDACE [Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Conservation] where applicable.'

At the celebration, the Councillor I.S. Dube gave an impassioned account of the evictions facing many of the area's farmworkers as agricultural land continues to be converted for development purposes, and the need for government to assure that its development plans work in the interests of the poor. The Executive Mayor of Mogale City had much praise for the MHTF in finally realising its goals, and spoke of plans to ensure that the rural and peri-urban poor were catered for in various housing developments that were now planned.

Planact's address centred around the critical factors that had contributed to the MHTF success, such as having an informed, organised community, a leadership with commitment and vision, and the ability to form partnerships and alliances that can assist the organisation to reach its goals. The MHTF has helped to inspire various other communities through learning and networking events that Planact has organised over the last several years, and they join with us in congratulating the MHTF on their victory.

The community will now begin to implement its plans for an eco-village that Molefi Selibo describes as inclusive of agricultural activities, health and educational facilities, and decent housing with secure tenure. The continued determination of the MHTF is sure to result in the realisation their vision at long.