

HOUSING REPORT TO BLACK SASH CONFERENCE  
CAPE TOWN 12 - 15 th MARCH 1979

MBEKWENI

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INTRODUCTION

Mbekweni is an African township outside Paarl about 60Km from Cape Town. The people work in the industrial areas in and around Paarl.

In July 1977 about 30 residents of Mbekweni visited the Advice Office. They had recently moved into new housing and felt they were paying rents that were too high for what they were receiving. Various groups and individuals have been approached by the very active Residents' Association (as distinct from the Bantu Advisory Board) including the Board of Social Responsibility, lawyers and MP's.

What follows is a summary of action written by a member of the Residents' Association.

The new scheme (1976) built at Mbekweni, Paarl consists of 140 units in communal blocks.

There are some problems with:

1. DAMPNESS as it is a low lying area
2. ROOFING- there are no ceilings and tenants have to make provision out of their own pockets.
3. WALLS - the walls are built of cement blocks which crack continually. The condition is such that at times the wind whistles through the cracks.

These three roomed houses were first occupied in November and December 1976.

The trick played by the secretary in charge of the new scheme was "you don't pay a cent now, you just take a key from this office, as the houses are locked and fetch your things wherever they are. Happy Christmas. I shall send an account after New Year 1977 for R24,35"

This was, of course accepted wholeheartedly as a form of kindness. On or about March and February 1977 the officers of the BAAB came to our doorsteps and instructed us that they were under orders from.....to remove our things from our houses into the street in order to lock the houses as we were in arrears in rent. This they did,

A delegation was sent a week later to see the man who had given the orders in order to plead and rectify this problem of our eviction from our homes. He told us to refer any complaints to someone else at the same address. This man told us there was nothing we could do as we had already taken the houses.

In the location where we live there are men called Bantu Advisory Board. After their pleading our case to the local authority, they advised us to seek help elsewhere as they could not reach the authorities concerned with rentals at the 1976 scheme.

In July 1977 we visited the Institute of Race Relations to plead our case. Here Mrs Barbara Versveld (and the Chairman of the Housing Commission Dr Erica Theron) told us that there was not a chance of our rents being reduced as our houses were

...../2 sub-economic (?)

sub-economic (?). We asked then if a plan was not available - this we got. It turned out to be the houses in the Coloured Area of Paarl between the Oshkosh Factory and Paarl Passenger Transport.

In August 1977 we asked the Weekend Argus to visit our location and told them the purpose. This they did after delays and they took photos of our blocks and cracks inside the houses. (It was never published. - LP)

We then got a letter from the Dept. of Community Development from Dr Erica Theron who told us that she is a member of the White, Coloured and Asian Housing Commission and has no relation with the BAAB S.W.Cape.

We want to stress that at no stage was there a meeting to see that the houses are now completed and that they would cost R24,35. The Bantu Advisory Board was advised on this matter but we heard nothing.

The rent is too much for us.

The majority of tenants do not earn more than R100 per month.

Travelling expenditure to and from work everyday is a lot.

Here at the three black schools where our children learn, we pay books, school fees and uniforms.

There is no hospital from at least 7Km from the location. The taxis charge R4,00 during the daytime and R10,00 at night to escort a sick one to the Coloured Hospital, Paarl East.

The factories we work for are sometimes slack and we have to stay at home because the season is bad.

Two Paarl doctors (named) are concerned about the food situation at the new scheme. Many cases of Pulmonary Tuberculosis, Acute Bronchitis and others have gone through them. They say that if something could be done they would be pleased.

140 houses X R24,35 pm  
 150 " X R10,32 pm  
 32 " X R12,50 pm  
 250 X 12 beds X R3,00 pm for single quarters  
 302 houses X R10,50 pm  
 Beerhall X R12,000 per week  
 plus R96,000 allocated by government to BAAB for Moekweni  
 (told to us at a meeting)  
 Must mean a net profit to BAAB.

This is the situation as described by the people themselves. A number of cases of real deprivation could be given but a few recent ones were found on a visit to the township in December 1978.

CASES: Mrs A.G. is a widow with four children. She earns R14,75 net per week (payslip examined) as a machinist. She pays R24,35 per month rent, plus R5,03 for water (for month Nov-Dec). She had plastered her own walls, put in a ceiling and built her own stoep herself. She pays nearly 47% of her income in rent. This vastly exceeds the accepted 25% which is too much for anyone earning so low.

Mr T works in a jam factory earning R22,50 per week in the good season. For 10 months of the year he may work only two or three days a week. He is in arrears with rent.

Mrs A.N. is a pensioner who is in arrears for R40. She made her last payment in Nov (this was at the end of Dec) and she had received an eviction order giving her 7 days to leave her house.

All documents were checked and in some cases have been retained.

### COLOURED LABOUR PREFERENCE AREA

Some residents complained that this policy impedes their progress. Apparently there are no jobs earning more than R28,00 per week which can be allocated to Africans. Average wages in the good season are R20 per week. Paarl industry is mainly based on agriculture - canning or the wine industry, as well as textiles.

### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

A petition was sent by the residents to the National Housing Commission and the Minister of Finance pleading for reductions in rent. A reply was received early in 1978 saying that cracks were fixed when they were reported (this has been denied by the residents) and that the Dept of Community Development had referred the contents of the petition to the local BA&B and suggested that they apply for a rationalisation of rentals for the scheme.

In October 1978 the residents received a circular letter from the Chief Director of the Administration Board S.W.Cape to say that they had had to raise rentals due to increased costs and that the new tariffs would be: (old in brackets)

Hostels	R4,86	(R3,17)
3 roomed 332	R12,05	(R8,50)
3 roomed 140	R14,30	(R10,21)
5 roomed	R18,68	(R13,10)
4 roomed	R16,49	(R12,17)
3 roomed new	R20,31	(R24,35)

and that this would be gazetted. It was expected to come into effect from October 1978 but has not been gazetted yet. It is the last the people have heard of the reduced rent.

Meanwhile water has been increased in price. The average payment is now R7 per month, with payments up to R11 fairly common.

The people have requested an interview with the Minister of Plural Relations.

### CONCLUSION

From visiting the place and talking with the people and comparing their plight with Cape Town Africans, it is obvious that these people cannot afford the housing that has been built for them. They earn less than urban workers, they are paying higher rentals than many in Cape Town townships. Unemployment and underemployment are big problems. The people are determined to go to the top; they are a well-organised and resourceful group. The Advice Office and others have helped, but being physically far removed there has not been enough contact and support. It is time the people saw the Minister and made representation to him directly.

Laurine Platzky  
March 1979