

South Africa's informal backyard rental sector through the lens of urban resilience and sustainability

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Abstract

South Africa's informal backyard rental sector contributes significantly to the country's housing needs by presenting affordable informal rental options within serviced areas. This paper relates the informal backyard rental sector not only to urban sustainability, but also urban resilience against internal urbanisation pressures, specifically related to an ever-increasing low-cost housing demand. This paper reflects the need to establish flexible and sustainable planning practices which capitalise on an existing informal development culture in order to improve living conditions and urban functions by celebrating informality's innately flexible nature. Thus, this research aims to provide evidence for the value of the informal backyard rental sector in the context of socio-economic, environmental and spatial viability, for sustainable and resilient urban environments which deliver settlements in which all tenure options and housing needs are equally met. Research navigates through existing theories on the informal city and incorporates new theoretical and empirical work on SA's informal backyard rental sector. Oudtshoorn in the Western Cape Province is used as a case study to answer the question: How do informal backyard rentals contribute to urban resilience and sustainability and how can this contribution be amplified? This paper finds that the informal backyard rental sector, through its instinctive ability to adapt, increase residential densities and support life sustaining practices may significantly contribute to urban resilience and sustainability, if recognised and supported by those who wield the power to influence South Africa's urban (r)evolution.

Keywords: informal rentals, resilience, sustainable development.



1 Introduction: the Republic of South Africa and its resilient informal backyard spaces

South Africa's post-Apartheid government struggles with a legacy of shortfalls in the education, health, basic infrastructure and housing sectors [1]. Today, South African settlements are personified by their inefficiency, promoted by horizontal sprawl, low population densities, segregation and spatial and racial fragmentation [2, 3]. This fragmented state has been proven inefficient, inequitable and unsustainable [4].

But what is a sustainable settlement? A sustainable settlement may allow for empowerment, enablement and participation: a settlement that promotes equity and growth. Here everyone, regardless of their economic standing, gender, race, ethnicity or religion, is enabled and empowered to fully participate in the social, economic and political opportunities that cities have to offer [5]. The Brundtland Commission's definition refers to: 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' [6]. Furthermore, sustainability and resilience are interrelated concepts. Resilience as a concept refers to 'robustness, persistence and sustainability'. Thus resilience encompasses the aptitude of a system to 'absorb shocks and stresses without collapsing'. The characteristics of a resilient individual or system include extreme adaptation and flexibility, self-organisation, diversity, recovery and learning [7]. Subsequently, a resilient and sustainable settlement would meet the needs of current and future generations by continuously adapting to the needs and challenges endured by residents at any point in time. Sustainability, and by extension resilience, are key concepts in South Africa's human settlement agenda in the democratic age. However, where informality is concerned, most policies regard formalisation or the eradication of informal settlements as key principles in establishing sustainable human settlements [8, 9].

References to the informal often include the term 'slum', denoting illegality and urban nuisance, which recalls earlier colonial discourses of urban informality as a visual, social and spatial contaminant, particularly in the far-off 'undeveloped' branches of liberated Western colonies [10]. Western modernist standards have shaped our understanding of urban normalcy and 'proper' living arrangements, which often conflict with the socio-spatial dynamics of urban life in the global south [11]. As an expression of this conflict the South African agenda is caught between traditional western concepts of the modern and progressive city and the need to accommodate destitute citizens in need of shelter. Subsequently, informal settlement occupies contested spaces in South Africa's physical, legal and public realms [12]. This is expressed in the toleration and upgrade of informality on the one hand and policy directives which advocate informal slum eradication on the other. The state's preoccupation with the removal or relocation of informal dwellings undermines the livelihoods of South Africa's most vulnerable residents and their responses to meet challenges as best they can [13].

Settlements would be more responsive and flexible if they were allowed some sense of organic development, as produced by the informal sector. Informality is metamorphic, allowing it to conform to sometimes unexpected needs at ground



level. It is therefore not a concept which fits within the pigeonholes of legislation, urban planning and administration, which relies on the predictable and standard. Informality is 'organised and designed' to react to the continuum of needs presented by the marginalised and vulnerable [14]. Modern planning's impractical obsession with the formally ordered and regulated city results in despair for those in condemned informality [15]. Throughout the global south attempts at relegating the vulnerable through urban planning have not led to the withdrawal of their informal practices [16]. South Africa's formal housing policies have inadvertently encouraged informality, including backyard housing, promoting informality in SA's cities [17]. These housing policies delivered 2.8 million homes by 2011, but continue to face a staggering housing backlog [18]. As a manifestation of the backlog and inability of formal housing to meet the spectrum of needs presented by vulnerable or destitute South Africans, informal settlement has continued to increase dramatically [13]. In essence, informality fills the void left by the bureaucracy and limitations of an agenda focused on formal housing development and ownership. Consequently, countless beneficiaries may leave their new homes in order to live in informal settlements which may be more affordable to maintain and can be better located [19]. As an outcome of market system dictates, poor households cannot afford to purchase or even rent properties in improved locations to shanty towns or subsidised housing projects, except through informal means [20]. It appears as if the development of rental accommodation by South African municipalities has dwindled substantially, leaving the poor who are not housed in low-income housing projects, or are better suited to rental accommodation, to settle for more informal options [17]. The sustained neglect of the South African rental housing sector reinforces a legacy of deficiencies in rental stock which is today filled by the backyard sector [21]. The informal backyard rental sector is defined by informal one or two-roomed dwellings constructed from salvaged wood, corrugated iron and cardboard that share surplus space with formally developed dwellings within serviced suburbs. These rooms are shared by both sexes and all ages of one or more families, for all daily living activities [17]. As definitions vary and underreporting is common it is hard to estimate the exact size of the informal rental sector in South Africa [22]. By 2009 the proportion of households residing in backyard rentals was growing faster than the proportion of households in informal settlements [17]. The popularity of the sector may be attributed to various socio-economic benefits enjoyed by tenants. The most notable perhaps being access to services.

Informal backyard dwellings may resemble the structures found in South Africa's informal townships, however backyarders may enjoy partial or complete access to the services provided to their landlords in formal dwellings. In general, backyard tenants enjoy improved access to services when compared to settlers in shanty towns [23]. The informal backyard rental sector reflects the intricate relationship between service delivery and self-build initiatives which follow. Infrastructure delivery is generally a response to self-build, but the reverse is also possible, where self-build may be prompted by services already made available in a specific location [24]. African urbanism has responded to evolving and intersecting urban settings, with initiatives which seem out of control to the most

observers [25]. The informal backyard rental sector presents a response that seeks to distribute the benefits of more formalised development to those who have not yet, or do not wish to, benefit from formal housing and ownership. The law often regards informality as irrational and disordered. In actuality informal networks may present their own unconventional forms of organisation within the broader urban network [14]. Despite the distinction made between the formal and informal citizens may engage in both sectors during the course of their daily lives, as displayed by the interactions that form part of backyard tenancy [10]. Accordingly, the formal informal interchange can be both mutually enhancing and corrupting. In some cases informal practices complement the formal and may even allow the formal to thrive. Thus the informal may play a complimentary or supportive role, especially where it delivers on what the state is unable to provide [26].

As of yet there has been no official policy which addresses informal backyard renting directly. Consequently, the benefits delivered by the sector have continued to exist in the shadows of illegality and confusion. The effects of this negligence became very apparent in the case study of Oudtshoorn.

2 Oudtshoorn as a case study

Research is focused on the case study of Oudtshoorn in South Africa's Western Cape Province. Here the township of Bridgeton and a stretch of informally invaded land, known as the Rose Valley Settlement are areas of focus. A survey conducted on one hundred households in 2013 in Bridgeton, as well as a 100 sample size survey in 2012 distributed in Rose Valley are used to provide substantiation. A 100% return rate was secured in both instances and results processed by the Statistical Consultancy Services offered by the North-West University.

The focus area in Bridgeton presents a combination of formal dwellings provided during and after Apartheid with accompanying informal backyard structures. Most of the Rose Valley settlers moved to the area from backyard structures in the Oudtshoorn area. These settlers were either asked to leave by landlords or chose to move to an area which offered some hope for future home ownership [27]. In 2012 61% of Rose Valley respondents relocated from informal backyard structures elsewhere in town, where they increased densities and benefitted from exiting services, to the barren landscape of Rose Valley on Oudtshoorn's outskirts, which contributed to urban sprawl and the effects of low residential densities [28].

3 Increased density through backyard tenancy

The detrimental effects of low-density development on the sustainability of settlements have been widely recognised [29]. Brummer [30] argues for the adoption of more sustainable development patterns which are not self-destructive. The spatial arrangements introduced by the informal backyard rental sector denote infill development which may be defined as the development of underutilised parcels or land areas within an already developed urban area. Where residential densities are increased as a result of the informal occupation of vacant or



underutilised portions of land, the opportunity for speedy densification is provided [31], which may meet needs at a faster rate than government could provide for. In Bridgeton, the survey sample presented 71 backyard structures with 224 occupants, or a mean of 3.14 tenants per backyard structure. In conjunction with the residents found in the 100 formal dwellings totaling 510 occupants, this amounts to 7.34 residents per property. Thus backyard dwellings increased residential density by almost 42%. In survey sheet 136 a total occupancy of 26 persons, 14 of whom resided in backyard structures were found. In Oudtshoorn, as in most of South Africa, no additional service provisions are made for backyard tenants [32].

Informal backyard rentals may increase residential densities and through suitably matched infrastructure capacity, provide a more sustainable number of users for services and amenities such as public transport [24]. Conversely, a drastic increase in densities may place pressure on existing infrastructure networks. As an example of proactive action to address infrastructure pressures and improve living conditions, the City of Cape Town launched a pilot programme aimed at extending services to backyarders [33]. These upgrades would allow improved access to services whilst preserving flexibility and affordability. For some upgrading the informal by introducing infrastructure upgrades is seen as a form of re-colonisation [34]. A set of standards, specifically related to infrastructure, may appear counterproductive given the association of severe rigidity connected with standards of any sort. This may infer a hankering back to the forced order of colonialism [35]. However, dire living conditions and severe socio-economic inequality impair the potential of South African settlements to become more sustainable and resilient. Adequate service capacity and connections enable the urban network to function cohesively and effectively by meeting present needs and future changes. An urban settlement may be regarded as resilient if the sum of its components function effectively, inhabitants and organisations are able to cope with unanticipated instabilities and adapt to change [7]. Service upgrades may serve as an example of adaptation and planning for future demands. In addition resilience is very closely associated with economic, social and ecological sustainability.

4 Sustainability

4.1 Economic flexibility and sustained livelihoods

Affordable rental accommodation in South Africa is undermined by the state's focus on serviced detached homes under freehold tenure as the first rung on a property ladder which is intended to facilitate upward mobility in the formal property market [24]. However, for Schirmer [36] formalised property rights are only of value when they enable participation in the broader economic system and become assets. For Rust [37] homes may become assets when dwellings provide owners with shelter and the flexibility to use property for income generation and its contribution through this potential to promote more sustainable livelihoods. The informal backyard rental sector provides a measure of economic flexibility.



In this regard, home owners may become small-scale landlords or the proprietors of small home-based enterprises operated from informal backyard structures. Where backyard dwellings are used for income generating purposes moneys earned may be used to cover household expenses, maintenance and extensions. When the need is no longer felt to supplement income or accommodate additional family members, backyard structures can be removed and re-erected as needed. Accordingly, informality allows for organic and natural growth, offering the community a manner of natural resilience. 'Informality is highly resilient', in that it unceasingly meets formerly unanticipated needs and reacts to the shocks of the future [14].

In Oudtshoorn a major motivation for landlords who provide rentals to non-family members is the financial gain this offers as a life sustaining enterprise [38]. Oudtshoorn's backyard renters are commonly charged between \$5 and \$40 (USD) for the spaces they occupy [38]. These seemingly insignificant rents provide crucial financial assistance, especially where all members of the household are unemployed. The Rose Valley survey presented that 40% of participants admitted that backyard renting would constitute a significant part of monthly income once they received subsidised homes. Demand for informal rentals is sustained in spite of substandard living conditions when compared to formal accommodation, because of the free or minimal rents charged, access to services and the proximity to employment nodes which informal rentals often offer. This saves on commuting times and costs and strengthens the local labour force to the benefit of local economic development and resilience.

The contribution to increased residential densities made by the informal backyard rental sector through infill development have been discussed in the previous section. Low-density development and the sprawl often associated therewith may infer increased costs at a settlement scale. Low-density housing on or outside the urban edge may infer substantial annual public costs to provide any level of public service, when compared to housing located in mixed-use clusters within urban neighbourhoods [40]. In essence, the delivery of basic services is more expensive the less dense the area [41].

Economic sustainability remains paramount; however the part played by the social dimension of urban life cannot be downplayed.

4.2 Social life and informal rentals

Low-income households often regard the asset value of homes in social and cultural terms and not according to financial value [42, 43]. Socio-cultural significance is especially relevant in South Africa, given the history of most subsidised home owners as informal dwellers, who may sympathise with the desperate circumstances faced by those still living informally [17]. Many of those in the informal sector have not remained content with lives in informal settlements. Instead they utilise existing provisions and relationships to improve their accommodation circumstances, most notably through informal backyard tenancy. As such, informal populations do not remain submissive victims, but develop a sense of their own identity and mobilise their struggles [44]. Urbanites often transcend the confines of inclusion and exclusion and collaborate by utilising each



other as forms of infrastructure. These ‘unstable, tentative and temporary’ networks provide socio-economic security and a sense of community. Social ties are especially significant in the South African township, personified by the concept of Ubuntu, which refers to a particular African worldview in which people can only find fulfilment through interacting with other people. Most low-density housing projects neglect the importance of social and familial connections and are designed to house nuclear families, ignoring many other arrangements, especially those linked to the African social network [29]. The emphasis on detached, single-family units is often defended as ‘suited the African way of life’. However, this argument maintains Apartheid ideologies which labelled the African population as non-urban citizens who long for the countryside [45].

Social sustainability is underpinned by accessible, inclusive and compact settlement development [36, 41, 47]. Where development takes place on or outside the urban edge, racial segregation and inequality may be promoted [28, 47]. South African cities display a Gini-coefficient of 0.76 [20], making them the most unequal settlements in the world. Promoting social cohesion in support of social sustainability is vital. Social cohesion is encouraged by the reduced levels of automobile travel associated with increased densities and subsequent interactions made possible by increasing walking and cycling opportunities. Residents of more walkable neighbourhoods are more likely to know their neighbours, be politically and physically active and socially engaged [40]. The South African township is not characterised by a passive street life or a lack of interaction between neighbours, but delivering walkable and compact neighbourhoods extends interaction beyond immediate neighbours and street blocks resulting in an interconnected and cohesive community [28]. Interconnected and tightknit communities provide essential support in times of crisis, which underpin resilience and strengthen community self-organisation, as presented by Revell [14] as characteristic of a resilient system.

However, not all communities are as tightknit and accepting. In Oudtshoorn, backyarders are often not regarded as legitimate community members, because they do not own property. As an extreme example of discrimination and action against backyard renters, intentional fires are set to remove backyard tenants who are regarded as unemployed delinquents and trouble makers [38]. According to Nortje [48] in Oudtshoorn, an increase in crime levels can be observed in areas with a high concentration of backyard tenants, especially connected to substance abuse. Consequently, crime, violence and child abuse are common, given the small spaces shared with family and unrelated neighbours who are constantly under the influence [28]. Conflict and backyard tenancy are also often connected. Landlords and their tenants are commonly in disagreement, to the detriment of social sustainability. The 61% of Rose Valley settlers who moved to the area as a result of tainted landlord-tenant relationships, attests to this fact. As a result of this tension, 60% of Rose Valley respondents stated that they would not admit backyard tenants once they received formal homes. The majority of Oudtshoorn’s backyard tenants rent without formal lease agreements according to oral contracts, leaving room for subjective interpretation. As a result, disputes are often initiated on the grounds of rights to access services. Where service access is limited and



controlled by landlords, consequences may be severe, especially for tenant health and wellbeing. Kavanagh [47] states that health is an important facet to consider when probing social sustainability. The health issues related to backyard habitation are widely recognised. Service access restrictions, the lack of cross-ventilation and insulation and the cold and wet conditions often related to backyard living in the winter induce contagious respiratory ailments such as tuberculosis [49]. Spatially, backyard rentals increase occupation densities dramatically, resulting in congested living arrangements [24]. Should infectious diseases break out, the proximity in which backyarders and landlords live may have epidemic consequences [59].

Prejudices against increased density development are prevalent in many South African communities [50]. Barriers to urban densification and compaction have included inherent cultural preferences and attitudes which favour large land parcels and detached homes [2] and extend to fears that an increase in residents will infer overcrowding and reduced quality of life. In addition, South African dwellers are notoriously set in their ways. In Rose Valley a mere 51% of respondents would consider moving to apartment buildings and many did so on the condition that alternatives provide increased living space and improved finishes when compared to detached subsidised homes as a trade-off. Different densities provide different opportunities and challenges. Accordingly, trade-offs have to be accepted between the contradictory demands of residents to optimise private space and conversely to reduce infrastructure expenditure and maintenance costs by increasing densities. It is only possible to identify an optimal density where these compromises are pragmatically balanced and accepted [29]. As an example only 51% of Bridgeton respondents claimed that the presence of backyard structures limited their private outside space. Most seemed to accept the trade-offs needed to facilitate the benefits backyard tenancy offers.

Today rental housing options constitute an integral component of effective urban areas, by providing essential flexibility and a range of options to households according to life cycle and need [51]. The informal backyard rental sector capitalises on an existing culture which accepts increased residential densities as a people-led and bottom-up approach to residential densification. Density should not be viewed as the ultimate instrument of sustainable development, but should be promoted in conjunction with principles such as diversity, choice and flexibility. Diversity would allow for a choice of housing opportunities to a diverse range of groups and individuals, thereby promoting opportunities for all income levels and preferences [2]. This diversity also implies a level of flexibility which allows a broader range of South Africans to benefit from subsidised housing development.

The following section examines the effects of informal backyard rentals on environmental sustainability and resilience.

4.3 Environmental sustainability

The environmental impacts inferred by urban sprawl are numerous and may include hydrological pollution, increased traffic congestion and reduced green space [52]. Where residential densities are increased and total development area



subsequently reduced, more productive and valuable uses such as agricultural portions and natural habitats can be established, grown and preserved [40]. These spaces render irreplaceable services which sustain urban life for present and future generations. Once green spaces are lost, most cannot be recovered [53].

Trough reduced urban sprawl and vehicle ownership, air pollution decreases because emissions increase per kilometre travelled [54]. Survey results showed that only 20% of Bridgeton participants owned motor vehicles, others were subsequently dependent either on expensive public transport or pedestrian movement, which is innately more environmentally friendly. However, increased densities and informal backyard rentals may also infer some negative environmental outcomes.

Increased household densities increase pressure on public green space and lower per capita provisions. Backyard dwellings not only exert increased pressure on existing facilities, but also place restrictions on the backyard spaces intended to accommodate private gardens. [55]. Bridgeton's backyard structures are primarily constructed from tarred wood salvaged from local timber yards and insulated with recycled scraps of cardboard. The use of recycled materials such as discarded wood may bode well from an environmental perspective, but also infers certain risks. Wood structures are often not watertight and more importantly are fire hazards. When fires are deliberately set or structures are lit with candles or informal electrical connections, house fires are a common occurrence [28]. These fires spread rapidly from yard to yard and cause fatalities and air pollution [55]. In addition low-income areas are prone to excessive littering, which is seemingly increased in the informal backyard rental sector. 57% of Bridgeton survey respondents rated littering as a daily problem. This is often exacerbated because informal residents are forced to dispose of waste without municipal aid.

5 Conclusion

The formal informal divide established under western conditions of the acceptable have come to influence the South African state's relationship with informality. In this regard South Africa is caught in limbo between tolerating and condemning the informal sector and is still a long way off from celebrating and enhancing its potential to promote urban sustainability and resilience. The informal backyard rental sector is no exception. Informal backyard rentals may present various spatial, economic, social and environmental supports to sustainable development and resilience through its increased residential densities, its life sustaining practices and the flexibility it provides to landlords, tenants and urban planning. The organic and bottom-up nature of informal backyard tenancy infers a level of diversity and flexibility which make the urban system as a whole less vulnerable to unexpected socio-economic and environmental fluctuations. In order to fully capitalise on the promise of the informal backyard rental sector a more tolerate and equitable environment must be fostered along with infrastructure upgrades, social and health interventions and supported conflict mediation for landlords and tenants, in the hopes of furthering the sector's contribution to a sustainable and resilient South Africa.



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