

## INCLUSIVE CITIES

A new data tool aims to revolutionise the public's access to social housing information



*Colonial and apartheid spatial planning are largely to blame for entrenched urban divisions in South Africa, but a flawed housing programme and unrestrained property markets have exacerbated the situation, say the authors. (Photo: Leila Dougan)*

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02 Jul 2024

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The Presidency's recent 30-year review admitted scant progress in undoing spatial apartheid. Segregated cities continue to hamper efforts to create an inclusive and prosperous society.

While people from different backgrounds encounter each other in shopping malls, workplaces and voting stations, they inhabit very different realities back home and in their neighbourhoods. Physical separation inhibits meaningful interactions, deep connections and the social ties necessary to heal historic divisions and build a shared agenda to tackle pressing development challenges.

Colonial and apartheid spatial planning are largely to blame for the entrenched urban divisions, but a flawed housing programme and unrestrained property markets have exacerbated the situation.

Investments in exclusionary property schemes – often driven by semigration, short-term rentals and financial speculation – have pushed up prices in desirable areas, contributing to gentrification and the displacement of low-income earners.

While some parts of our cities have seen substantial investments in affordable housing, making neighbourhoods more diverse and accessible, these efforts typically do not reach far enough to cater for poor and working-class families. Achieving truly inclusive and integrated neighbourhoods requires state support and careful intervention in the housing market.

The social housing programme has the potential to transform towns and cities. By providing subsidised rental accommodation to households earning between R1,850 and R22,000 per month, the programme has a built-in mechanism for socioeconomic integration and cross-subsidisation. It targets well-located areas in cities, enabling poor and working-class families to live closer to jobs and social amenities.

It also supports higher-density buildings situated within larger, mixed-income residential and mixed-use precincts. Professional not-for-profit social housing institutions or private-sector “Other Delivery Agents” are responsible for the maintenance and management of the rental stock, thereby ensuring financial sustainability and creating opportunities for generations of tenants to benefit from subsidised accommodation and supplementary social support services.

### **Social Housing Portal: Open access information platform**

Although social rental housing has existed for nearly two decades in South Africa, public awareness and understanding remain limited. Media reports are

sporadic and tend to focus on rent boycotts or other incidents in specific projects, without offering a broader, sector-wide assessment.

As a result, debates about the progress and challenges of social housing delivery don't move forward. While the national government, through the Social Housing Regulatory Authority (SHRA), provides extensive information on their website ([shra.org.za](http://shra.org.za)), these resources are not well known to the public. Crucial "state of the sector" reports are outdated and prevent residents and stakeholders from accessing up-to-date information.

To improve public understanding and analysis of social housing, we have developed the [Social Housing Portal](#). This is a collaborative initiative between the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the University of the Free State (UFS), the Social Housing Regulatory Authority (SHRA) and key civil society organisations (National Association of Social Housing Organisations, Development Action Group, Ndifuna Ukwazi).

Developed in collaboration with the company VeRAM, the portal revolutionises access to social housing information in the country. Anyone with internet access can now easily inform themselves about the sector, track and monitor progress with project delivery, and investigate patterns and trends in the sector.

We hope this will foster more robust debates, generate new insights and empower stakeholders to improve policy and practice.

SHRA is a key partner in this initiative. As the formal regulator of the sector, SHRA holds and manages data on all registered social housing projects in the country, ensuring that the portal is a reliable and quality-checked data platform. With its dynamic interface and filters, the portal offers users the flexibility to generate the specific information they need.

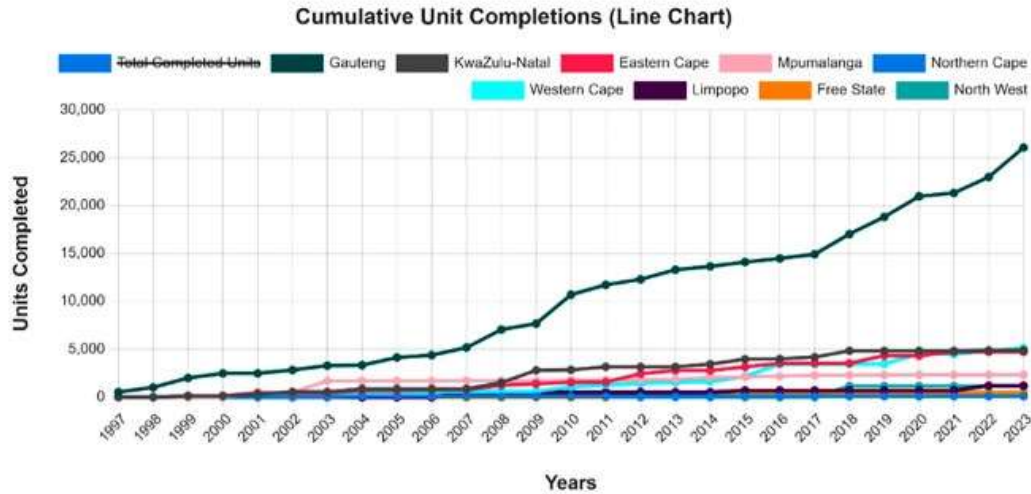
Here are two examples to illustrate its capabilities.

### **Key trends**

Between 1997 and 2023, a total of 46,044 social housing units were formally completed in the country, with Gauteng accounting for more than half (26,069 units). Far below are the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape, with each accounting for approximately 5,000 units.

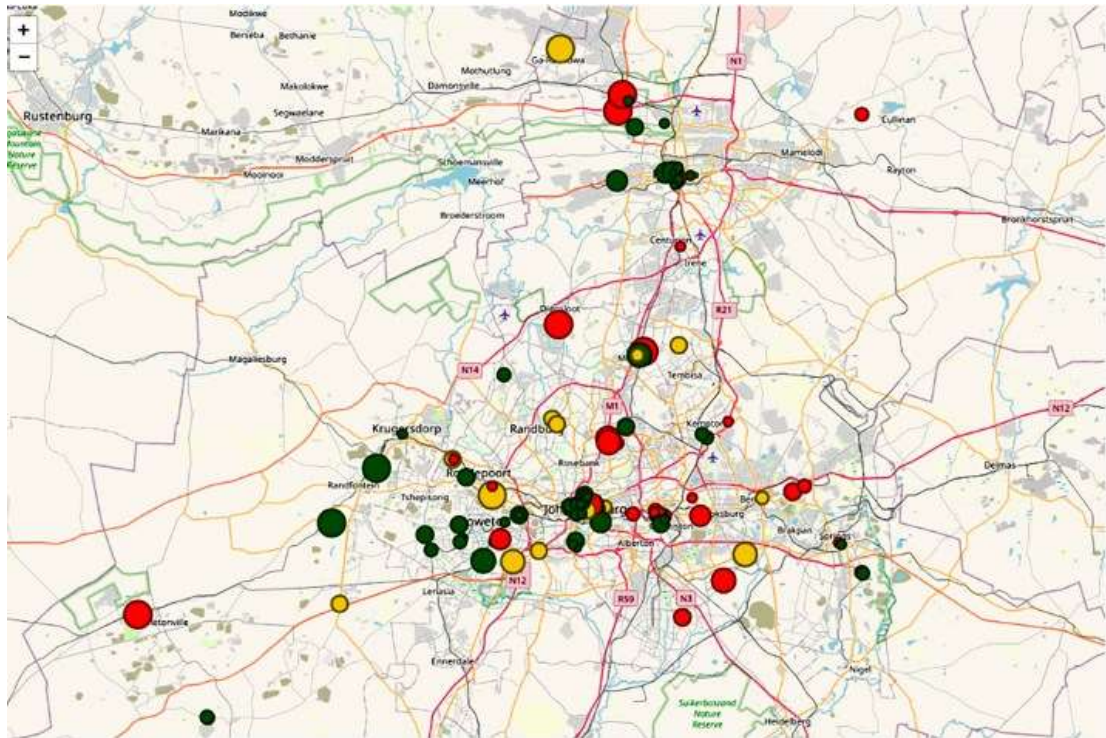
While Gauteng's metros (City of Johannesburg, City of Tshwane and Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality) have benefited from the availability of cheap buildings, capable delivery agents and supportive local authorities, the

fact that more than half of all projects are concentrated in only one province calls for greater efforts by other provincial and local governments to boost their numbers.



Total number of completed social housing units per province. Source: [socialhousingportal.org.za](http://socialhousingportal.org.za)

The presence of social housing projects in the Gauteng region is illustrated in the image below (green), which also shows projects currently in progress (yellow) and those that are in the pipeline (red). The size of each bubble corresponds to the number of units in the project. It is promising to see so many projects in the pipeline or under construction, but continuous monitoring and oversight are needed from the government and sector stakeholders to ensure they are all completed and tenanted within the envisaged time frames.



Map of all registered social housing projects in Gauteng province. Source: [socialhousingportal.org.za](http://socialhousingportal.org.za)

The wide geographical spread of the projects, including an increasing number in peripheral locations, demands more systematic research on their impacts on households. A better understanding of how projects in different locations contribute to social mobility, socioeconomic integration and sustainable human settlements is crucial for assessing whether the policy delivers spatial transformation.

While the portal does not yet offer answers to all these important questions, it is a useful tool that can form the basis for analysis and provide direction to interested researchers, journalists, residents and other stakeholders.

### **Empowerment through open data**

The Social Housing Portal is in its first phase and was developed within a tight budget. Nonetheless, it has already revolutionised access to social housing information in the country.

Many more opportunities exist to expand and improve the data platform in future – integrating additional information about the sector and offering more details about each project. As a coalition of invested stakeholders, spanning the public, private and civil society sectors, we are committed to further developing the open-access portal in the public interest.

At the same time, the potential of open data should not be restricted to the social housing sector. Many public debates about housing and its impact on urban development are hindered by limited and outdated information.

More effort to open up housing and planning data would enhance public understanding, foster more evidence-based discussions and encourage better policy actions. **DM**

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