

South Africans under 60 disqualified from state-funded housing

Thabo Seseane Jr.
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In a tacit admission of her department's failure to meet the demand for housing, Human Settlements Minister Lindiwe Sisulu said that South Africans must be at least 60 years old to qualify for state-funded housing.

At the Planning Africa Conference on development planning in Durban earlier in October, Sisulu originally said, "Anybody below the age of 40 will need to understand they are not our priority..."

The remarks drew criticism. In response, the minister claimed to have mentioned the figure of 40 years as everyone present on that occasion looked younger, but that policy officially excluded South Africans aged 40 from qualifying for subsidised housing for another 20 years.

Asked when the 60 years threshold had become policy, her office referred to a press release it recently issued. In the release, Sisulu mentions that the decision to make 60 years the minimum qualifying age dated back to 2009, when the minister and her provincial counterparts "resolved ... that priority must be given to the elderly."

Sisulu originally served in the housing portfolio in the cabinet of former President Thabo Mbeki from April 2004 to May 2009. She was returned to the department, now renamed Human Settlements, after the May general election.

South Africa's housing shortage amounts to an estimated 2.3 million homes. Human Settlements aims to meet demand for only 1.5 million of these units over the next five years.

Ironically, meeting this target will have the effect of perpetuating the 2,200 squatter camps that the African National Congress (ANC) government dignifies with the label of "informal settlements." That is because 20 percent of the stated figure of 1.5 million units will not comprise homes in the traditional sense, but merely "serviced sites" in squatter camps.

A serviced site is a piece of land with piped water. Only 10 percent of the planned 1.5 million units are earmarked for "social housing." This translates into entry-level rental accommodation subsidised by the government.

The Human Settlements plan inspires no confidence. Among others, the official opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) threw cold water on it. DA human settlements spokesman Makashule Gana said that if the department was to meet its targets, it would have to treble the number of houses it was able to complete last year. He added that it would "be a stretch" to think the present Human Settlements budget could cover construction of 1.5 million housing units.

Sisulu herself admitted that the government "could not make it alone." In other words, she is looking to the private sector to fund the bulk of housing delivery expenses, partly through home loans for those who qualify. Private companies should participate, in her phrase, "not because it makes business sense to do so, but because we are driven by our patriotic responsibility and because we are all aware the restoration of the dignity of our people begins with shelter."

Yet private contractors are responsible for the substandard housing that has been delivered to date. By its own reckoning, the government will spend an additional R58 billion (US\$5.34 billion) fixing subpar housing. Based on an annual allocation of R1.3 billion in the budget, the process will be completed in about 40 years.

Public Protector Thuli Madonsela in August 2012 heard testimony from poor residents of Klerksdorp, North West province. They spoke to her of their problems with state-funded or RDP houses (after the ANC Reconstruction and Development Plan).

"A contractor told me that someone else would sign my happy letter if I kept refusing to sign," said Margaret Nteu of Kanana township. So she eventually gave in.

A happy letter is a declaration by new residents that all is in order with their unit when they first move in. “My house is now falling apart,” Nteu added.

Corruption among private contractors is a complement to corruption among government officials. The Institute of Race Relations states that 40,000 government employees have been investigated for housing subsidy fraud by the auditor-general. Of these, 1,910 were arrested, 1,296 convicted and R44 million was recovered.

When the ANC won power in 1994, the housing backlog stood at 1.5 million units. Having failed in the 20 years since to reduce that figure even slightly, the government is now further shirking its responsibility by excluding younger South Africans from among those eligible for state-funded housing.

“What people under the age of 40 have is an enormous ability to do things for themselves,” Sisulu claimed in justification of their exclusion. “We want our young to grow up and be self-sufficient,” she added. “We don’t want them to be dependent.”

The figures show that government is failing at that objective too. Business Day reports that 5 million young South Africans not in employment, education or training depend on a sponsor’s wage or a state grant.

The majority of these youngsters are black. This makes nonsense of Sisulu’s contention that the victims of apartheid—a system of ongoing economic oppression—are only those above age 60.

Speaking to the audience of under-40s, the minister maintained: “Now if it is not clear, [I] say it in every language. None of you are ever going to get a free house from me while I live.”

To go by statistics, not many South Africans at all will get a free house from Sisulu. That is because average life expectancy for blacks is about 52 years, or eight years too young to qualify for government-funded housing.



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