

OPINION

# Push to upgrade informal settlements

*Summit adopts threefold approach – ‘greenfields’ projects, interim services and high-rise experimentation*

RAPID, unplanned urbanisation is a global phenomenon. The UN Development Programme estimates that by 2050 more than two-thirds of the world's population will be living in urban areas.

It comes as no surprise that the sharpest increase will be mainly in Africa and Asia, whose urban populations are projected “to jump from 40% today to 56% by 2050, and Asia's from 48% to 64%”.

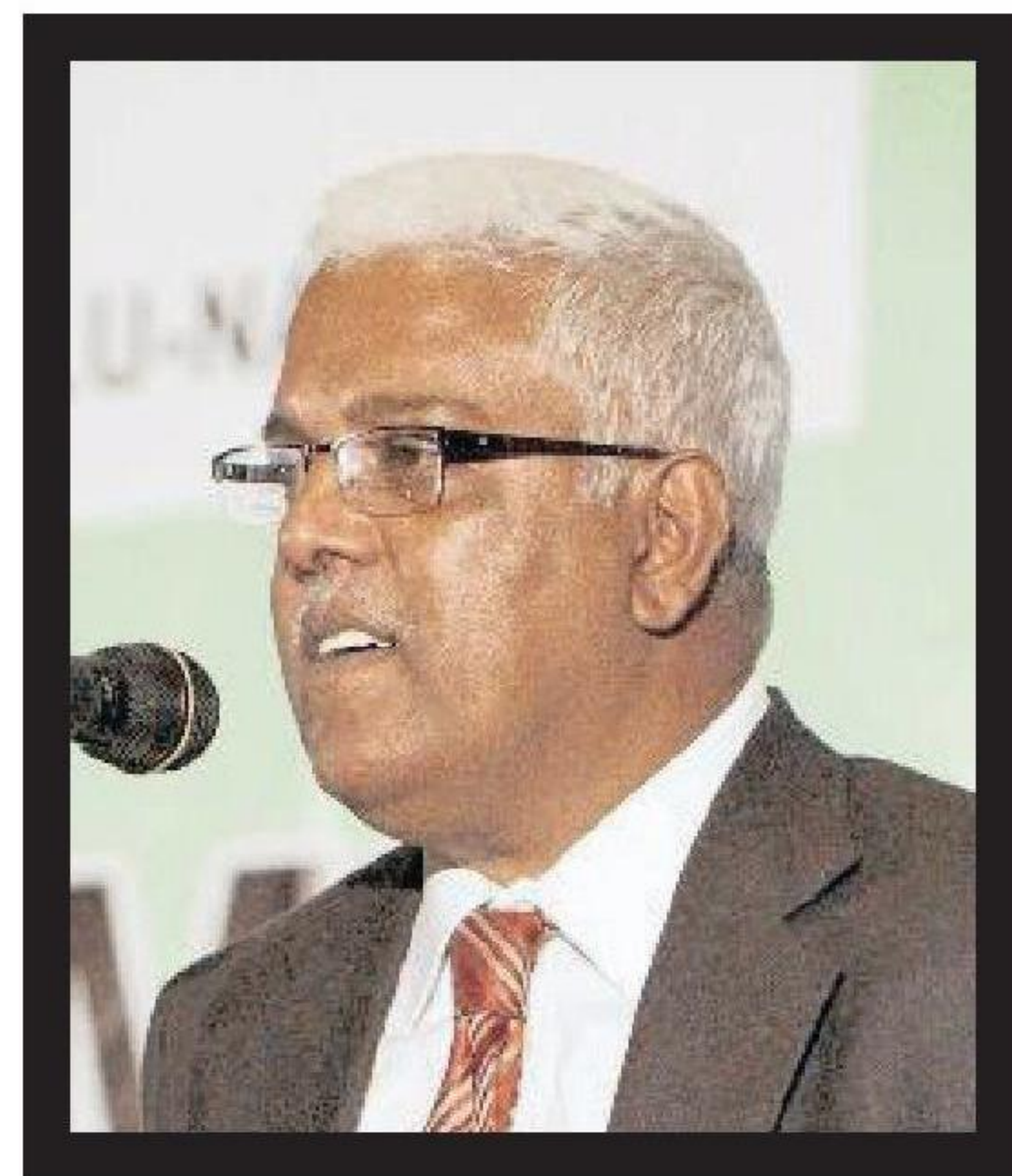
Drawing on expert estimates, the UNDP believes \$57 trillion in global infrastructure investment is required by 2030. If for a moment we thought our challenges were massive, UNDP research makes the case that “more than a billion people live in housing that is below minimum standards of comfort and sanitation, and new houses will have to be built for 3 billion people by 2030”.

In KwaZulu-Natal, eThekweni Municipality as an economic hub is a natural focal point with 237 000 households in informal settlements.

This week, the Department of Human Settlements and mayor Zan-

dile Gumede brought together all key stakeholders in an Informal Settlements Upgrade Summit.

We have adopted a systematic approach that is threefold. The first is massive investments in “greenfields” projects such as Cornubia, KwaMashu



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Bridge City, Hammarsdale and Kingsburgh West.

The second involves the upgrade of informal settlements with interim services like water, electricity and sanitation to make people's lives slightly better.

The third involves a few innovative solutions including an experimentation with high-rise structures.

Our deliberations were guided by the recognition that land hunger is real and that the government must respond with a credible and sustainable solution to that legitimate demand.

To this end, the mayor and I have been consistent that land invasions or illegal occupations will not be tolerated.

The Prevention of Illegal Eviction Act was designed to safeguard the land tenure rights of especially vulnerable citizens. Over time, this legislation has been liberally interpreted to address illegal invasions and occupations.

In recent cases related to eThekweni Municipality, Human Settlements unsuccessfully took the matter all the

way to the Constitutional Court. We accept that this is contested terrain and an area of developing jurisprudence.

Our responsibility is to hold the line against invasions with all the tools at our disposal. These include engagement with the parties concerned, access to the courts and the deployment of land invasion units. The latter is usually fraught with conflict as land invaders are prone to violent resistance.

Last year, a three-year conviction was handed down to a person who took funds from citizens on the pretext that he would obtain government houses for them.

We are similarly pursuing other cases of fraudulent land sales, the value of which runs into tens of millions of rand.

Informal settlements have increasingly become terrains of “landlords and estate agents”.

Research commissioned through the University of KwaZulu-Natal has shown that land invasions are not random acts by desperate people. Invasions are organised and co-ordinated by criminal

elements selling land they do not own or collect rent they are not entitled to.

The research points to the fact that more than 20% of people in informal settlements pay rent and more than 40% have paid for the site they occupy. Land sales are on average between R1 500 and R8 000 a site. This is obviously a lucrative source of income for those involved.

Rather than denying this reality, our approach is to recognise the entrepreneurial spirit that has developed in this informal property market and to find ways to incentivise them into the mainstream.

Another area that occupied our attention was social facilitation in informal settlements.

Social facilitation involves a variety of interventions, including engagement with community structures, public education about taking care of government facilities provided, advice on not building on areas like flood plains or close to busy road networks and, importantly, information sharing on the progress of housing developments and the available

rehousing opportunities.

Achieving our objectives required a carefully co-ordinated approach which, to use a military comparison, I have described as command control.

The task is critical. It is not sufficient to celebrate our track record as the leading province nationally in housing delivery for the past five years while not having a credible long-term game plan to eradicate informal settlements. The provincial government recently adopted a master plan to give us a picture of existing and future settlement patterns.

The robust engagement in the summit between government and social movements has left us with no illusions about the enormity of the task.

It is, however, a task that we are geared for, given the human, financial, planning and implementation resources we have been able to mobilise and energise through the summit.

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