

Children play in streets of sewage

PETER LUHANGA

The fetid stench of faeces is omnipresent as contaminated greywater runs in rivulets through the informal settlement while residents carry on with their everyday activities.

On the beautiful sunny Tuesday morning of 20 August, women were washing dishes next to their homes, while metres away a stream of sewage-contaminated greywater flowed downstream. Across the stinking stream a communal standpipe stood situated next to a row of blocked flush toilets from which the smell of excrement wafted on the light breeze.

Not far from the row of blocked communal toilets, a young child was pushing a broken toy car while other children walked barefoot around the filth. One child eating chips from a packet dropped one into the contaminated water, then picked it up and put it into his mouth.

In an effort to prevent an outbreak of disease, some community leaders have on numerous occasions attempted to get hold of the City of Cape Town, to the extent of visiting the municipal offices in Parow and Bellville to raise their concerns. They were promised that Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) workers would be sourced from the City's database of job seekers and employed to clean up the area. But nothing has materialised in the last year and conditions are deteriorating.

As a last straw, the community leaders invited Isolabantu News to come witness the unsanitary conditions in the settlement.

Resident Sandiswa Dayimane asked why the city provided flush toilets but did not employ anyone to look after them.

Dayimane says their flush toilets haven't been cleaned for almost two years.

"Our toilets don't flush. We collect water in a bucket and pour it in the toilet to push the faeces down, but instead they overflow as the toilets are blocked," she says.

Without running water or waterborne sew-

erage in their homes, residents relieved themselves in a bucket at night, and then discarded the contents into stormwater drains before rinsing the containers out at the communal standpipes.

Just outside the entrance to Zukiswa Mazwe's shack is a blocked stormwater drain from which stormwater contaminated with faeces and urine from discarded nightsoil overflows.

Mazwe has no job to go to but cannot stay at home during the day due to the stench. He says he no longer prepares food at home but buys it from street vendors and eats it there, only going home to sleep.

"The stench is inescapable. Even though I buy food, in the end, I get back to sleep in the stench. I walk past the faeces to get inside my house... the faeces gets stuck on my shoes," he says.

Community leader Zukiswa Gidiminisana says residents used to club together and donate R5 per family to buy toilet cleaning detergents and they would clean the toilets themselves.

But Gidiminisana says dire poverty meant families struggled to come up with R5 a week and the initiative ground to a halt.

She says children in the settlement suffer from continual diarrhoea as a result of the unsanitary conditions.

Water and waste mayco member Xanthea Limberg said the appointment of a new set of janitors to work at Ethembeni informal settlement, was "slightly" delayed due to details such as addresses of applicants on the job-seekers database being inaccurate or out of date at the time of recruiting. One of the requirements of this programme is that janitors employed to work in specific areas are residents of that particular informal settlement.

Limberg said the problem has now been resolved and the new janitors will be on the ground, equipped with cleaning chemicals, tools and protective clothing provided by the



One of the blocked flush toilets catering for thousands of residents in the Ethembeni informal settlement, Dunoon. Photo. Peter Luhanga



Used condoms are discarded at communal standpipes. Children are reported to blow them up as balloons. Photo. Peter Luhanga

City as part of the EPWP.

She said the city remains committed to ensuring high levels of service delivery in informal settlements, while offering equitable job opportunities to their residents.

"The City would like to apologise for any inconvenience caused by this delay. It is important to note, however, that the janitorial service is a top-up cleaning service, and all residents have an important role to play in protecting the reticulation network from blockages by disposing of materials such as rags, condoms, rubble, etc. in bags and/or bins," said Limberg.

She also said that illegal informal settlements that have been formed in the area

pose many challenges as they have been built on top of the City's sewerage infrastructure, making it difficult to access and thoroughly clear blockages. This led to recurring blockages and overflows.

She said if an overflow should occur, the City offers multiple channels to residents to log complaints and report faults, and each resident may make use of one of the following platforms that is most convenient to them: via email: water@capetown.gov.za for water-related queries; SMS to 31373 (maximum 160 characters); visiting a walk-in centre; logging a service request by phoning the call centre on the telephone number 0860 103 089; sending a WhatsApp message to 063 407 3699.