

# Forced removals in South Africa: a thing of the past?

by Maano Ramutsindela

*Under apartheid, South Africa witnessed massive politically-motivated displacements, condemned by the UN as crimes against humanity.*

In recent years, the forced removal of people from their homes in black townships has resumed. This time round it is justified by a desire to improve living conditions for those affected. Could displacement of people to areas which offer a better quality of life contribute to environmental justice? Or do the rationales for removals in a democratic South Africa fail to stand up to scrutiny?

Unlike officially defined IDPs, the victims of apartheid-era removals to black 'homelands' were not eligible for any assistance, despite the heavy losses they incurred. In urban areas, policies regarding non-whites as temporary residents resulted in the mushrooming of informal settlements that today pose a serious challenge to ideals of a healthy environment.

The question of compensation to victims of apartheid-era removals has come to the fore. The post-apartheid constitution provides a right to land restitution. If the primary aim of restoring land rights is not achievable, consideration is given to providing alternative land, payment of compensation and priority access to government housing and land development programmes. However, the process is bogged down as most Africans were not registered at the time of removal. With only a handful

able to return to original land, the problem of how to improve the environmental conditions of victims of forced removals remains unresolved.

Virtually every government initiative in South Africa is presented as necessary for addressing the legacy of apartheid. When it forcibly relocated people from the Johannesburg township of Alexandra in 2001, the Gauteng provincial government argued that their removal was a means of helping those neglected by successive white minority governments and creating a healthy environment in which residents would be spared risks from cholera and flooding. The fact that many were simply dumped on the veldt without facilities led critics - including the South African Human Rights Commission - to cite comparisons with apartheid-era removals. Subsequent research shows that one group of those removed feels they are now living in a healthier and preferable environment, while another resents their displacement. Such findings are typical of such cases of development-induced displacement.

South Africa is failing to sufficiently address the plight of those living in 'areas beyond repair'. As South Africa grapples with the vexed question of how to work towards improving the



quality of people and their environment, we need to ask whether removing people is a viable option and to consider the implications. Progressive researchers must assist the search for policies to secure the improvement of the quality of life of those removed. The unfulfilled aspirations for justice and a better quality of life of the estimated 3.5 million people forcibly removed by the apartheid regime remind us that we need mechanisms to address the needs of IDPs long after their displacement has occurred.

**Maano Ramutsindela is a Lecturer at the Department of Environmental and Geographical Science, University of Cape Town.**  
**Web: [www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)**  
**Email: [maano@science.uct.ac.za](mailto:maano@science.uct.ac.za)**

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