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A provincial strategy to empower adult persons experiencing street homelessness from vulnerability: The case of Gauteng Province in South Africa

Emmison Muleya¹ and Mziwandile Sobantu²

¹ University of the Witwatersrand, Department of Social Work, Johannesburg, South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5931-1872>  Emmi.Muleya@wits.ac.za

² University of Johannesburg, Department of Social Work and Community Development, Johannesburg, South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8516-4623>  msobantu@uj.ac.za

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ABSTRACT

South Africa has had to deal with several uncertainties, with the COVID-19 pandemic accentuating the existing vulnerabilities, which include homeless people living on the street. Inadequate provision of housing and the resultant street homelessness undermine human dignity. In 2020, the Gauteng Provincial Government mandated its Department of Social Development to develop a multisectoral strategy to coordinate responses to homelessness. This commentary article explored the provincial government's intervention to address homelessness with the aim of highlighting lessons learnt that can inform policy and practice. The article is a product of a synthesis of provincial government reports and the authors' practice observations of homelessness in the Gauteng province supported by the literature on homelessness. Findings show that perceptible progress has been made in combating adult street homelessness and mitigating the challenges that the homeless have to contend with. For example, some of the practical steps taken by the government to empower the homeless are providing shelter and skills empowerment. Among other things, the article recommends improving stakeholder coordination and proactive social work role in generating reliable data for the homeless interventions.

Keywords: homelessness; homeless strategy; human rights; street homelessness; Sustainable Development Goal 11.1; vulnerability

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 are a global commitment to address poverty and inequalities. They stipulate that no one should be left behind on the margins of development. Governments also committed to taking positive steps to mitigate the living conditions of homeless people. To this end, through its Commission for Social Development, the United Nations (UN) passed various resolutions to address poverty and the inequalities that bedevil many vulnerable populations. Through Resolution 2019/4 (UN, 2019), the Economic and Social Council determined that priority should be given to providing affordable housing and social protection measures to address homelessness and ensuring access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services by 2030 (Goal 11.1). Despite South Africa's commitment to promote a better life for all through the National Development Plan (NDP) Vision 2030 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2012), there is no dedicated policy to mitigate the challenges faced by homeless people. Addressing the needs of the homeless in South Africa is the responsibility of local governments, but municipal resources are already overstretched because of the perpetual housing backlog (De Beer & Vally, 2021; Obioha, 2022) and uncoordinated civil society interventions (Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021).

Globally, homelessness is seen as either a housing issue or a social welfare problem that can be addressed by providing housing or social grants (Cross et al., 2010; Obioha, 2022; UN, 2023). Arguably, the multiple definitions of homelessness confound not only its comprehension by scholars and policymakers but also cast doubt on the efficacy of the interventions developed to address the phenomenon. According to the UN (2023), people who experience homelessness include those who sleep in public spaces, as well as those living in emergency and temporary housing, those living in severely unsafe and inadequate housing, and those who are involuntarily sharing accommodation with others because of a lack of housing alternatives. The UN further argued that narrow definitions of homelessness tend to make the experiences of women and children less visible, as they are less likely to be living on the street, often conceal their gender for safety reasons, and are also less likely to approach emergency shelters before all other options have been exhausted (UN, 2023).

After consulting stakeholders in 2010, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa adopted for its study a definition of homelessness that emphasises living 'on the street' (Cross et al., 2010). De Beer and Vally (2017) defined homelessness as the lack of a fixed address, lack of shelter, rooflessness, alienation, instability and vulnerability. The common image of homelessness is 'sleeping and living on the streets', but homelessness takes many forms and is not always obvious, as it may be 'chronic, episodic, transitional and hidden' in nature (Obioha, 2022). For scholars such as Mahlangu and Kgadima (2021), homelessness is not only about a lack of a place to live, as it can manifest in various forms, including marginalisation and denial of basic rights such as the right to adequate housing and healthcare. Addressing the needs of the vulnerable and the marginalised is a social work priority, since the profession is dedicated to promoting human rights and pursuing social justice (Healy, 2008; UN, 1994). In the same vein, the mandate of the Department of Social Development (DSD) is to protect citizens and create an enabling environment through the

provision of comprehensive, integrated and sustainable services. Hence, it is within the mandate of DSD to cater to the needs of the homeless, who were amongst the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, making this study necessary.

Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) (2023) categorised the homeless into two groupings, primary homelessness and secondary homelessness. It defines the primary homeless as people who are roofless, including persons living on the street or without shelter, and secondary homeless as those who lack a place of usual residence and move frequently between various types of accommodation such as dwellings, shelters or other living quarters. The secondary homeless also includes persons resident over the long-term in transitional shelters (Stats SA, 2023). Leaning towards the UN's (2023) definition of homelessness could create confusion in the South African context as the majority of persons in informal housing would be classified as persons experiencing homelessness. This article, therefore, leans on the definition from Stats SA (2023) as it aligns with the Gauteng government's response to homelessness through its Gauteng City region strategy to address street homelessness, which is discussed in detail in the sections below.

THE SCOPE OF HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is a worldwide phenomenon, with the estimated homeless population ranging from 100 million to 1 billion or more, depending on how it is defined (Roets et al., 2016). There are reports of rising numbers of homeless people in 'developed' countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the USA and Europe (Kriel, 2017). Henry et al. (2013) indicate that on a single day in January 2013, there were 610 042 people who experienced homelessness in the United States of America. In England alone, figures collected in the autumn of 2019 indicated that 4 266 people were 'sleeping rough' on any one night (Protts, et al., 2023).

Homelessness has also emerged as a major social and economic issue in the developing world (Kriel, 2017). In India, the real extent of homelessness is impossible to determine (Kumuda, 2014; Parulkar, 2014). In Latin America, hyperinflation, housing shortages, natural disasters, drug trafficking, violence and political instability have forced large numbers of people to live on the streets and it has become common for many households to occupy blocks of 'private' space on sidewalks and in parks (UN, 2023). In Brazil, 71 percent of people experiencing homelessness were employed in the informal sector, with 89 percent lacking social benefits and 25 percent lacking identification documents (Cortizo, 2019). It is difficult to determine the number of homeless people in Africa, but according to Kriel (2017), the continent is probably still most affected by the scourge and tragedy of forced displacement.

A concerted global effort to address homelessness came after the COVID-19 pandemic. The UN adopted resolution 76/133 in December 2021, which deals with ending homelessness and recognising homelessness as an affront to human dignity (UN, 2021). The UN Secretary-General gives an annual report to member states about progress made on addressing homelessness. The first report (number A/78/236) was presented during the General Assembly debates in September 2023 (UN, 2023). The report shows that, while knowledge of and policies on homelessness are improving, substantial efforts are still needed. The report

serves to highlight the contrasts around the globe in terms of homelessness, along with the convergence of issues and strategies. The report proposes possible indicators for social protection and access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing in the aftermath of COVID-19 (UN, 2023). In most cases, homelessness reflects deeper economic and social issues that perpetuate inadequate housing. The phenomenon undermines the principle of human dignity that is enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN) and in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN). These statutes stress that individuals experiencing homelessness, like all people, are entitled to their human rights.

The HSRC suggested that there may be between 100 000 and 200 000 persons experiencing homelessness and living in the streets in South Africa's urban and rural districts, including both adults and children (Cross et al., 2010; Rule-Groenewald et al., 2015). However, a recent survey conducted by Stats SA (2023) indicated that there are currently 55 719 homeless people: about 44 512 living on the streets or roofless, and 11 207 in shelters. Consistent with other research, such as that conducted by Kok et al. (2010) and Sonko-Najjemba et al. (2022), Stats SA's (2023) survey revealed that most homeless persons are males at 70.1 percent (39 052), while 29.9 percent (16 667) are females (Stats SA, 2023).

An earlier study done by Sonko-Najjemba et al. (2022) found that most homeless people were living in the Gauteng and Western Cape provinces. This was also later confirmed by Stats SA (2023), which reported that Gauteng had the biggest share of homeless persons at 45.6 percent (25 384); the Western Cape had 17.5 percent (9745) and KwaZulu-Natal had 13.9 percent (7 763). The Northern Cape and Mpumalanga recorded the lowest proportions of homeless persons (1.1 and 2.3 percent, respectively).

In South Africa, homelessness is concentrated in metropolitan municipalities (Stats SA, 2023). Interestingly, most of the persons experiencing homelessness and ended up living in the streets in the Western Cape were found in shelters at 29 percent, followed by Gauteng at 17.2 percent. It must be noted that the Western Cape government started working with the homeless through the Provincial Norms and Standards for Homeless Shelters approved in 2015. In 2015, the City of Cape Town had approximately 7 383 homeless people (4 862 were on the streets and the rest were in shelters) (Hendricks et al., 2015), whilst Durban had 4 000 living both on the streets and in formal shelters (Desmond et al, 2016).

In 2022, the Unit for Street Homelessness in Tshwane (2023) identified 4 177 homeless persons across the seven regions in the Tshwane homelessness count of 2022. A comparison of these statistics to the recent Stats SA (2023) census information shows that the City of Tshwane recorded the highest proportion of homeless persons (18.1 percent), followed by City of Johannesburg (15.6 percent). Nelson Mandela Bay metropolitan area recorded the lowest proportion of homeless persons, i.e. 2.7 percent. As of October 2023, the population of homeless people in government-funded shelters across Gauteng was about 2 700, with the City of Johannesburg and Tshwane accounting for the largest portions (Gauteng Department of Social Development [GDSD], 2023). In a survey conducted for the National Department of Social Development (DSD) by Sonko-Najjemba et al. (2022), 93 percent of the homeless persons were South African citizens, with 6 percent coming from other African countries,

while the remaining 1 percent were from European countries. The study also found that the majority of the homeless were youths (25-34 years old), followed by economically active adults in the 35-49 age group. This statistic is consistent with that of Stats SA (2023), which indicated that homeless persons were predominantly youths aged 20–34 and adults aged 35–44.

PROBLEM FORMULATION

In terms of the South African Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the state pledges to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights of all citizens by ensuring access to health care, food, water, social security and housing, yet most homeless people lack access to most of these rights (De Beer & Vally, 2021; Perrier, 2021). When the COVID-19 pandemic spread to South Africa in 2020, the government declared a national lockdown, which put a stop to all economic activities and everyone in the country was required to stay home, and that presented a challenge for persons experiencing homelessness and living in the streets in terms of livelihood, survival and shelter. In addition, the government's attempt to task the municipalities with housing persons experiencing homelessness and living in the streets presented challenges, more so in Gauteng province, which has been estimated to have most homeless persons (Cross et al., 2010; Rule-Groenewald et al., 2015; Stats SA, 2023).

It is on this basis that the Gauteng Provincial Government (GPG) Executive Council mandated its DSD to intervene in the plight of this vulnerable group. It must be stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic compelled government to re-evaluate its programmes to include homelessness as one of the major challenges that required urgent intervention. This is because at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis homeless persons who were used to living on the street had nowhere to go (Muleya & Mlilo, 2023). Prior to this, issues of homeless persons were dealt with by municipalities, religious and non-profit organisations (NPOs), which all have limited capacity (Naidoo, 2010) compared to the provincial governments. However, there is no national legislation or policy framework to address homelessness, despite other policies and guiding documents making reference to the national policy on homelessness, for example, the Prevention of Illegal Eviction Act (1998), the Social Housing Act (2008), the Special Needs Housing Policy, the White Paper on Families and the White Paper for Social Welfare (Obioha, 2022; RSA, 1997, 1998, 2008, 2013; Sonko-Najjemba et al., 2022). Therefore, therefore the Gauteng Department of Social Development GDSD, a department within the provincial government, had to develop a comprehensive intervention plan to address homelessness, and funding was made available to strengthen and enhance the capacity of existing municipal and NPO-run shelters, to hire social service professionals and support staff, and to provide meals and hygiene packs to homeless people in shelters across the Gauteng province

In sum, largely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, South African provinces were for the first time required to address street homelessness at provincial levels. This intervention, its outcomes and possible recommendations for future provincial-level initiatives remain unexplored and unexamined in the literature. Therefore, the goals of this commentary article are to 1- address a knowledge gap by describing how the Gauteng government responded to homelessness during COVID-19; 2- assess the progress made in addressing homelessness in

Gauteng Province between 2021 and 2023; and 3- make appropriate recommendations on how to further reduce homelessness in Gauteng province. This period coincided with the implementation of the Gauteng Provincial Homeless Strategy to address homelessness. So three years on, in order to draw lessons for policy and practice, the key question to be answered is: How effective were the interventions to address street homelessness during the pandemic and its aftermath?

THEORETICAL APPROACH

This paper is informed by the social development approach (Patel 2015). Patel (2015) argues that at the core of the social developmental approach are five pillars which direct its practice. This includes the rights-based approach, social investment, bridging the micro-macro divide, democracy and partnerships. This GDS approach therefore leans on various social development pillars, such as promoting the rights of the homeless by providing them with shelter, assisting them to reapply for lost identity documents and enhancing their access to health facilities, bridging the micro-macro divide in service rendering, social investment in empowering the homeless through skills development, and harmonisation of social and economic policies, in the pursuit of empowering homeless people through collaborative partnerships between government departments and civil society organisations. Research shows that economic and social distress are the major causes for many to slide into homelessness, such as job loss and family disintegration (Cross et al., 2010; Du Toit, 2010), as was witnessed during COVID-19 (Sonko-Najjemba et al., 2022). As will be seen in this article, the GPG took the initiative to address homelessness based on the underlying responsibility that the mandate of the GDS is to ensure protection against vulnerability by creating an enabling environment for the provision of a comprehensive, integrated and sustainable social development service. This must be done in line with the social development approach that is meant to guarantee that social ills are addressed in an empowering manner that brings about the social and economic upliftment of the poor (Patel, 2015).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES FOR THE ARTICLE

In this commentary article data were extracted from secondary sources, mainly the GDS monthly progress reports on government's interventions to address homelessness; they were analysed to generate useful information for this article. One of the authors worked for the Provincial government between February 2021 to November 2023 and had access and permission to use the reports for research dissemination. Data from government reports were complemented with readily available qualitative data from academic journals, the literature in the field and reliable internet sources being subjected to content analysis and synthesis (Kumar, 2014). This research approach leans towards an exploratory case study research design (Yin, 2014), because of its appropriateness for social work research that is geared towards arriving at a deeper understanding of persons experiencing homelessness within the South African context. Given the limited and context-specific knowledge in this area, especially concerning structural and systemic factors, this approach facilitates the generation of initial insights, the refinement of research questions and the development of future interventions. Rooted in the social development approach (Patel, 2015), the study recognises

homelessness not only as an individual experience, but also a consequence of broader socio-economic inequalities that could be mitigated through state-led interventions in partnership with civil society. The flexibility of an exploratory case study allows for a quicker understanding of the interventions meant to empower persons experiencing homelessness.

By integrating the principles of social development such as empowerment, participation and poverty reduction, this research aims to inform more holistic, inclusive and sustainable social work responses in line with South Africa's developmental social welfare model (Patel, 2015). Given the flexibility that exploratory case study research provides for facilitating the collection of evidence, this approach was chosen for this commentary article.

Available textbooks such as those by Patel (2015) were used to support the literature in the journal articles, thereby providing the basis for the analysis in the discussion section of the article. Secondary data offer researchers the most cost-effective means of studying the past, which becomes evident if the costs which are entailed in longitudinal surveys or field research are taken into account (Kumar, 2014). Despite the advantages which literature studies offers over field research, the methodological limitations of using data of this sort need to be borne in mind. In some instances, it may be very difficult to find or procure relevant information. Nevertheless, in view of the research and policy implications of these findings and their theoretical justification, the benefits of this article were considered to outweigh the limitations of the research approach taken.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to explore the provincial government's intervention to address homelessness in order to highlight lessons learnt that can inform policy and practice. After analysing and synthesising policy documents, the relevant academic literature and electronic and print media reports, the author categorised the findings into the following themes that helped to respond to the title and aim of the study: The case of the Gauteng province, pre-COVID-19 interventions, COVID-19 and the aftermath and Gauteng provincial strategy on homelessness. The findings are discussed in iteration with literature and theoretical framework.

THE CASE OF THE GAUTENG PROVINCE'S HOMELESS PROGRAMME

Various studies have been conducted on the nature, causes and conditions of homelessness in South Africa. Some of these were featured in special issues of the *Development Southern Africa* journal in 2010 and 2017 (Cross et al., 2010; De Beer & Vally, 2017; Roets et al., 2016; Rule-Groenewald et al., 2015). This study also relied on the GDSD and National DSD research (Sonko-Najjemba et al., 2021; 2022), which outlines the nature, causes and conditions of homeless people in Gauteng province and in the country. There is no need to report on these here, as this study focuses predominantly on the Gauteng province's response to homelessness after the COVID-19 pandemic. It should be borne in mind that, nationally, there have been debates on whether homelessness is in the domain of local government issues that should be addressed by municipalities' Departments of Human Settlements through the provision of housing (Obioha, 2022), or a social welfare problem that should be addressed through social grants (Cross et al., 2010).

There is no clear and dedicated legislation or policy framework yet that seeks to address homelessness, but rather government has relied on a variety of other national legislation and policy frameworks that indirectly dealt with housing and homeless challenges. While several documents recognised the importance of responding to aspects of housing, poverty and inequality in South Africa, very few mentioned ‘homelessness’ directly. Some of the legislation relevant for indirectly dealing with homelessness include, amongst others: the Housing Act 107 of 1997; the Rental Housing Amendment Act 35 of 2014; Social Housing Act 16 of 2008; National Health Act 61 of 2003; the Prevention of Illegal Eviction from Unlawful Occupation of Land Act of 1998; White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997; Prevention of and Treatment for Substance Abuse Act 70 of 2008. Two key periods in the state’s response to homelessness in South Africa can be identified, especially in Gauteng province, namely the pre- and post-COVID-19 periods. These are discussed below to give the reader a background understanding of provincial interventions prior to the pandemic and why the provincial intervention on homeless could provide key lessons towards a direct national homeless policy, which is necessary for guiding social work practice in this field of practice.

PRE-COVID-19 HOMELESSNESS INTERVENTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed several inadequacies particularly on how the South African government had previously responded to the challenges of homelessness, as municipalities, NPOs and religious organisations had assumed the responsibility for managing and addressing homelessness. Nationally, only three municipalities had policies to address homelessness before the COVID pandemic, i.e. City of Cape Town - approved by Council in 2013; City of Tshwane - 2015 (De Beer & Vally, 2021); City of Joburg - draft revised in 2022 (Muleya & Mlilo, 2023). At provincial level, only the Western Cape government had been providing financial support to civil society organisations that were striving to address homelessness through its 2015 Norms and Standards guidelines. According to Muleya and Mlilo (2023), prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Gauteng government was supporting four non-governmental permanent shelters with funding: three in Johannesburg and one in the Sedibeng region. In the 2015/16 financial year, a guideline on management of the homeless shelters was developed to ensure the provision of uniform guidance on services rendered. Most services afforded to the homeless were coordinated through local government and NPOs. The City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality owned three of the four shelters (Muleya & Mlilo, 2023). However, these operated as overnight shelters with a fee contribution requirement and without any social development programmes rendered.

In the City of Tshwane and Ekurhuleni most homeless services were provided by religious organisations and NPOs with regional forums. For instance, the Tshwane Homeless Forum and Ekurhuleni Stakeholders Forum play a coordination, fundraising and resource mobilisation role. In 2010, the City of Johannesburg approved a policy on assistance and management of people living and working on the street (Du Toit, 2010). The policy was reviewed after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The City of Tshwane adopted the Tshwane Street Homelessness Policy in 2019, following research and guidance from the Tshwane Homeless Forum (De Beer & Vally, 2021). The policy was used to guide all

interventions directed at the homeless in the city; however, there was no funding attached to it to implement homelessness services (Vally & De Beer, 2017).

No records could be found regarding the number of homeless beneficiaries reached through various government efforts to address homelessness prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the literature review (Du Toit, 2010) indicated that metropolitan responses, especially the City of Tshwane and Johannesburg, were well prepared on a policy level, but they were less prepared for implementation. In fact, the metros viewed homelessness primarily as a social dependency issue, and as a result their responses focused on coordinating civil society responses, developing a range of targeted interventions and responding to public complaints (Du Toit, 2010). Therefore, little progress was made with addressing homelessness as could be shown with rising numbers of the homeless at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant gaps in South Africa's governmental response to homelessness; in the pre-COVID context most interventions had been driven by municipalities, NPOs and religious organisations, while national and provincial policies remained limited in scope and funding. Although cities like Cape Town, Tshwane and Johannesburg had some policy frameworks in place, implementation was weak, lacking social development programmes and sustained government funding, resulting in inadequate support and rising homelessness rates during the pandemic.

COVID-19 AND THE AFTERMATH: GAUTENG PROVINCIAL STRATEGY ON HOMELESSNESS

In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic presented opportunities for addressing homelessness in the country as COVID-19 lockdowns made more visible the reality of persons experiencing homelessness and living in the streets, which was often made invisible through the absence of the phenomenon from policy and funding documents, institutional commitment and societal paradigms (De Beer, 2020). The mandate of the DSD is to ensure protection against vulnerability by creating an enabling environment for the provision of a comprehensive, integrated and sustainable social development service. The National DSD is making progress towards having a multisectoral national policy on homelessness. To this end a national diagnostic study on the needs of the homeless and possible policy recommendations was undertaken (Sonko-Najjemba et al., 2022) and a working group led by the HSRC was appointed to develop the Draft Green Paper on Homelessness (Human Sciences Research Council [HSRC], 2024).

Following extensive consultation and research into the causes, nature and needs of the homeless in Gauteng province (Sonko-Najjemba et al., 2021), this plan was developed into a full Gauteng City Strategy to deal with adult persons experiencing homelessness and living in the streets using a multisectoral and developmental approach. It was approved by the GPG's executive council in September 2021 (GDSD, 2021). There has been involvement of more municipalities on addressing homelessness since the pandemic with more metro municipalities having at least draft or finalised policies to address homeless, for instance, the City of Joburg Homelessness Policy (City of Johannesburg, 2024), amongst others.

Following the approval of the 2021 Gauteng City Region Strategy (GDSD, 2021), guidelines for service delivery to the homeless were developed and approved by the Head of the GDSD in September 2022. These are currently used as a frame of reference for delivering homeless services by NPOs. Annual funding is available to enable the provision of shelter, meals and hygiene. Funding is also used to procure critical accredited skills development and job placement services offered by centres of excellence from development NPOs in the province. Whether this funding has been put to good use needs further scrutiny, with impact evaluation needed to investigate the overall outcomes of the programme.

Importantly, there is political buy-in, which was evidenced by two actions. Firstly, the Premier of Gauteng, Panyaza Lesufi, elevated the homeless issue to priority status in October 2022 (GPG, 2023). Secondly, the Member of the Executive (MEC) for Social Development, Ms Mbali Hlophe, launched the provincial shelter forum in October 2022 as a coordination structure to deliberate best practices and the challenges faced by NPOs that deal with homelessness. GDSD also participated in the national dialogue on homelessness from a law enforcement perspective that was organised by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) in September 2023 (SAHRC, 2023). The key issues that emerged from the dialogue were that homelessness should be approached first from a social development perspective before criminalising it; and that a multisectoral, rights-based approach was needed. These focus areas have already been prioritised by the GDSD. The MEC and senior officials also participated in the National Homeless Network homelessness conversation in October 2022. Two indicators have since been added to the Department's Annual Performance Plan for FY2023/24, which shows government commitment to addressing homelessness in the short to medium term.

Based on internal GDSD reports, between April 2022 and October 2023, 1 101 homeless people were reunited with their families, 1 000 were placed in both temporary and permanent jobs, and 44 started an informal business (GDSD, 2023). Over the same period about 3 150 were placed in temporary shelters, although it has to be borne in mind that shelters admit and discharge homeless beneficiaries on a daily basis. The population of homeless persons in Gauteng province is estimated to be at 25 384 (Stats SA, 2023). Therefore, to have 3 150 in shelters represents only 13 percent, meaning the majority of the homeless were still living in the streets. However, reuniting 1 100 of the 3 150 in shelters is a milestone worth noting, representing about 35 percent of homeless people that go to shelters end up being reunited with their families. Key to attaining these results was adherence to five strategic pillars of the Gauteng City Region Strategy on adult street homelessness referred to in Table 1 (GDSD, 2021).

Table 1: Strategic Pillars of Gauteng City Region Strategy on adult street homelessness (Source: GDSD, 2021)

Pillars	Focus areas
1	Advocacy, prevention of crisis and early intervention
2	Provision of temporary shelter/ safe spaces and housing to prevent and support homeless people
3	Social inclusion through access to state social assistance and social security programmes such as grants, unemployment insurance funds Provide funding to NPOs servicing the homeless and for provision of family reunification services
4	Skills development and economic inclusion through provision of accredited trainings, skills auditing and provision of public employment programmes
5	Stakeholder coordination through provincial and regional forums

Pillar 1 focuses on advocacy, prevention and early intervention, with public education regarding homelessness and its causes being a key focus. The annual commemoration of world homeless day, concerted efforts to have conversations on homelessness, awareness and extensive outreach visits to homeless hotspots, the MEC's Winter Warmers project and a multistakeholder service delivery blitz reached about 11 800 beneficiaries between July and October 2023 (GDSD, 2023). This means about half of the estimated 23 455 street-living homeless persons in Gauteng province (Stats SA, 2023) were reached through outreach and awareness-raising events, a great initiative to make the homeless aware that temporary shelters were available where they could be housed and exercise their various human rights like shelter, access to health care and grants, and even arrange for identity documents.

The second pillar deals with the provision of housing, safe spaces, drop-in facilities and shelters to support homeless people and prevent homelessness. Government has expanded the existing shelter space by providing park homes, beds and other equipment necessary to accommodate homeless persons. Shelter, a basic human right (RSA, 1996), was provided to about 3 000 homeless persons by October 2023 with an average stay of one day to about six months, with some persons who experienced street homelessness staying in temporary shelters for almost a year (GDSD, 2023). Pillar 3 of the GCR Strategy relates to social inclusion through social security and social welfare/transfers to NPOs, an indigence programme and family reunification (GDSD, 2021). Once awareness has been created through outreach, homeless persons are linked with government-funded homeless shelters that are run by NPOs. In the 2023/24 financial year, about 2 700 to 3 000 homeless beneficiaries were in shelters receiving social work services and linked with other government services such health, home affairs, and employment and labour (GDSD, 2023). A key exit strategy for homeless persons is for social workers to trace their families and reunify them with their families.

The reality though is that not everyone can be reunited with their family; in such instances, pillar four of the GCR homeless strategy provides support (GDSD, 2021). It focuses on skills development and economic inclusion which includes financial support for self-employment/business startup, job placement, etc. In early 2023, 373 beneficiaries graduated

from accredited skills development programmes. The GDSD monthly reports for the period April 2021 to October 2023 indicate that a further 542 beneficiaries had gone through accredited skills development in agriculture, brick laying and computer skills training. Furthermore, 974 people were placed in temporary jobs, including through the public employment scheme called the Extended Public Works Programme. Interestingly, 43 people who went through the skills programme became self-employed (GDSD, 2023). Thus, once empowered with skills development, homeless persons are able to look for work or use their skills to start an informal business and so lead an independent life.

The fifth pillar focuses on coordination – an aspect that was missing prior to the pandemic. As a result, provincial and regional forums have been established to promote intersectoral collaboration and serve as a mechanism through which efforts and services to the homeless are monitored and coordinated (GDSD, 2023). These forums both at province and regional levels played a role in organising regional activities centred on the pillars of the strategy referred to in Table 1, including collating statistics for submission to GDSD on a monthly basis. Some regional forums, for instance, the Tshwane region homeless forum led to the first point-in-time homeless count in the country which has other lessons for the Province and other metros across the country (Kgosana, 2023).

LESSONS LEARNT FROM GDSD INTERVENTION ON HOMELESSNESS

Based on the above case study of GDSD, the discussion below presents some interesting insights. A starting point is to acknowledge that the pandemic was a catalyst that brought government, civil society and various stakeholders together to address homelessness. There was government apathy regarding homelessness for a long time, but the pandemic brought together provincial and local government entities, and civil society groupings in a short space of time to find resources to accommodate the homeless and fund homeless services. While the traditional approach to dealing with homelessness has been to pathologise it as a welfare and mental health issue (De Beer & Vally, 2021), or to criminalise homelessness (Cross et al., 2010), the GDSD programme leans towards a social development approach that addresses it holistically in a developmental and rights-based manner, through a multi-stakeholder understanding of homelessness as an expression of structural failures, which does not blame the individual for living on the streets. This approach ensures that welfare, health, housing, economic access, access to justice and protection of human dignity all feature together to break the cycle of exclusion and poverty and contribute to a self-reliant society.

An analysis of the lives of homeless people with reference to the Constitution suggests that homeless persons fully exercise only 4 of the 27 rights afforded to all citizens (Perrier, 2021). The analysis further showed that 13 of the 24 rights failures are associated with the economic and social situation of homeless people, while 12 rights failures are related to government inaction and 11 as a result of government actions (presumably unintentional) (Perrier, 2021). Henceforth, a social development approach which includes a rights-based pillar (Patel, 2015) chosen by GDSD is arguably a better approach to addressing the identified needs of the homeless in order to realise not only the rights failures as identified by Perrier (2021) that are the result of government inaction, but to also fulfil the SDGs commitments the government has made around housing and shelter. For instance, it can be argued that supporting homeless

persons to navigate pathways out of homelessness (Vally & De Beer, 2017) is closely tied to several of the SDGs. It is also undeniable that solutions for homelessness should seek to address poverty (SDG1) and hunger (SDG2), ensure access health and well-being (SDG3), facilitate access to decent work (SDG8) and ensure access to clean water and sanitation (SDG6). Addressing homelessness decisively will also reduce inequalities (SDG10) and contribute to more sustainable cities and communities (SDG11).

The GDS approach builds on the approved GCR Strategy on adult street homelessness, which is anchored on five pillars and all interventions are geared towards taking or removing homeless persons from the streets, giving them access to their constitutional rights such as access to shelter, providing them with identity documents, amongst other things, and then reuniting them with their families or, where reunification is not possible, reintegrating them back into society to lead independent lifestyles (GDS, 2021). The Revised White Paper on Families (RSA, 2021), argues that a rights-based approach fosters the promotion of social justice, a minimum standard of living, equitable access and equal opportunity to services and benefits, and a commitment to meeting the needs of all South Africans, with a special emphasis on the needs of the most disadvantaged in society. These fundamentals are essential for achieving the wellbeing of homeless persons and their families, and involve all government and civil society stakeholders. Family reunification is viewed by the government as a key service to family preservation (DSD, 2021).

These pillars seem coherent and build on each other, and would provide valuable lessons to other municipalities and provinces, including national government strategies on homelessness. For instance, the GCR strategy leans towards the social development approach to dealing with homelessness and is anchored in fulfilling people's human rights along with the social work values of social justice. It emphasises a collaborative and preventative approach that includes identifying, firstly, hotspots with homeless persons, then linking homeless persons with shelters, and then utilising shelters to provide both healthcare, identity documents, psychosocial services and family reunification. In line with the Bill of Rights as enshrined in Chapter 2 of the Constitution (RSA, 1996), this brings about the worth and dignity of homeless persons by allowing them access to shelter, health and the documentation which are vital aspects of human rights. Working with a variety of stakeholders, the aim is also to empower those who cannot be reunited with their families by providing them with skills development, job placements and employment opportunities. All the skills training offered is accredited (GDS, 2023) and as such would allow the homeless persons who participate in the skills programmes to actively participate in the formal labour market, or even start their own informal businesses, thereby enhancing their capabilities. This is in line with Noyoo's (2015) contention that public policy, which is in essence the expression of society's social goals, fosters human capabilities and substantive freedoms as well as the promotion of social development. Patel (2015) draws attention to Midgley's (2014) assertion that social investment in human capital development is necessary to facilitate participation in the productive economy and society for the realisation of social development. Therefore, skills development offered by GDS fits with the social investment pillar of the social development approach in that homeless people's abilities to meaningfully participate in economic, social and political activities are greatly enhanced.

Some challenges persist such as the increasing number of homeless people (Stats SA, 2023), some homeless people do not want to be admitted in shelters and other hop from one shelter to another, the criminalisation of homelessness by law enforcement officials, and limited commitment by all stakeholders to provide services to homeless people. To address the challenge of increasing numbers of individuals experiencing homelessness, GDSD could implement more outreach programmes and fund more shelters. Furthermore, safe sleeping zones, including mobile drop-in centre services, could be provided to cater for those that do not want to be admitted to shelters. This model has worked best in the Western Cape province, where the City of Cape Town has procured services from NPOs and the private sector to run safe spaces in the inner city (City of Cape Town, 2022).

Another key challenge is the lack of stakeholder involvement, an issue that has been identified before as hampering commitment to eradicating persons experiencing homelessness and living in the streets (Vally & De Beer, 2017). To mitigate lack of commitments by stakeholders, the GDSD could continue to strengthen the provincial and regional forums, so that all stakeholders understand their responsibilities in terms of addressing homelessness. In addition, there are no reliable statistics on the impact of homelessness intervention in the province. Despite internal reports indicating that the programme has mitigated challenges faced by homeless persons, an independent study to measure the impact of the programme from both a financial and societal perspective is desperately needed. The GCR Strategy plan indicated that an impact study would be done three years after implementing the programme (GDSD, 2021), but to date there is no evidence that such a study has been undertaken.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK POLICY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Against the observation on the present homelessness situation in South Africa, the following recommendations are made for social workers and policy makers:

- Develop and implement a national policy on homelessness to provide an integrated framework for addressing homelessness across all provinces and municipalities. Furthermore provide clear national guidance to provincial and municipal structures to avoid fragmented and inconsistent responses to homelessness.
- Encourage social work professionals and academics to actively engage in influencing and shaping national policy through research, advocacy, and policy dialogue.
- Ensure that homelessness policies and interventions protect the welfare, human rights, and dignity of vulnerable populations as articulated by Noyoo's (2010).
- Recognise homelessness as a social work concern that requires both practical and academic attention to mitigate vulnerability and abuse among persons experiencing homelessness.
- Use evidence-based research, such as the current study on the Gauteng homelessness strategy, to inform and guide the development of national legislation on homelessness.

- Align future homelessness legislation with the Department of Social Development's Framework on Social Welfare Services, incorporating prevention and early intervention strategies; statutory services, including access to temporary and transitional housing; family reunification, reintegration, and aftercare services to support long-term stability and inclusion.

Critically enough, as discussed in the preceding section, the responses of provincial departments and municipalities could create situations where the policy of one part of government undermines the policy of another; for instance, various law enforcement agencies especially at metropolitan levels have pursued a criminalising security strategy, whilst the South African Human Rights Commission and the Department of Social Development pursue a supportive intervention. For example, in the City of Cape Town homeless people who contravene by-laws can be arrested and fined (SAHRC, 2019). Therefore, a national policy that takes a non-criminalising approach could address this problem.

It should be noted that a starting point to address homelessness is collect adequate data, both for monitoring target 11.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals and for formulating effective policies; hence social work research should play a role both in the quantification of data, but also in measuring its impact. It has been three years since the approval of the Gauteng Homeless Strategy and it is therefore time that an impact study be conducted in order to inform future interventions. There are no reliable data on the impact of the homelessness programme, with a challenge that some of the homeless persons who would have benefited from the programme in one part of the province may have hopped into another shelter in another part of the province, resulting in duplication of data. Consequently, there is a need for a reliable, integrated and accessible database of those who have gone through programmes and exited either successfully or not. Perhaps the development of a national policy on homelessness (HSRC, 2024) would also address this research dilemma in Gauteng province. In the United States of America, there is a responsibility for Continuum of Care as part of a federal grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development that supports local communities' work to address homelessness (Joint Office on Homelessness, 2025). Social workers could also contribute to this emerging research area and play a role in participatory action research by linking adult persons experiencing homelessness and living in the streets to temporary shelters established by the Gauteng provincial government, such as the Wembley stadium homeless shelter in Johannesburg.

To mitigate the lack of commitment by stakeholders in practice, the GDSD's homelessness unit could continue to strengthen the provincial and regional forums so that all stakeholders know their responsibilities towards addressing homelessness. The social development approach (Patel, 2015) which the GCR Strategy claims to be aligned to, underscores partnerships as vital to any social welfare strategic interventions. For Patel (2015), partnership in social development is a state-led, multisectoral collaboration with various other partners, including the private sector and civil society, in the provision of social welfare services. It is designed to enhance the existing capabilities and assets of communities. Therefore, having this programme as part of the provincial priorities would help galvanise other government provincial government departments such as Human Settlement, Economic

Development, Employment and Labour, Health and Education, and Chapter 9 Institutions, including the Gauteng South African Human Rights Commission and the Gauteng Public Protector. This would enable them to work together with the GDSD and civil society in efforts to mitigate adult street homelessness in Gauteng Province.

Our conclusion is that the Gauteng homeless strategy (GDSD, 2021) has several other implications for social work, including identifying and addressing underlying issues such as poverty, mental illness, substance abuse and addiction, families' disunity, and insufficient and expensive housing for low-income earners as well as those with precarious livelihoods who depend on the informal economy.

Furthermore, social workers should play an active role in ensuring that the national policy terminology aligns with social work values and ethical principles. In particular, attention should be given to the language used to describe affected individuals. Terms such as "street homeless persons" may unintentionally label and stigmatise people by defining them through their condition. Instead, phrases like "persons experiencing homelessness" or "persons living on the streets" are more appropriate, as they emphasise that homelessness is a temporary circumstance rather than a fixed identity. Using person-first language for example, "people experiencing homelessness" rather than "homeless people" reflects respect, dignity, and the potential for change (Atlanta Mission, 2025). This approach aligns with the principle of recognising the individual first and their circumstance second. The City of Johannesburg's Department of Social Development seems to have considered this perspective by referring to persons experiencing homelessness as "displaced persons." However, this term is broader in scope and may encompass a wider range of individuals than those specifically targeted by the Gauteng City Region (GCR) Homelessness Strategy.

These observations clearly indicate that social work with its deep-rooted values in social justice, promotion of the worth and dignity of all persons, and the promotion of human rights has a role to playing addressing homelessness. To demonstrate this point, social workers could identify at-risk individuals and provide early intervention services as shown through pillar 1 discussed above. In addition, social workers could advocate for and prioritise permanent state housing for the homeless elderly who qualify for housing from the Department of Human Settlements, or for access to social housing, and provide culturally sensitive services to meet the diverse needs of homeless individuals, as social workers are experts in rendering culturally competent and trauma-informed care. Moreover, social workers can provide psychosocial services and empower homeless persons taking into account their right to self-determination. This case study of Gauteng homeless interventions can help other social workers across the country by developing the skills, resources and agencies to address homelessness effectively. However, we also recognise this is a provincial intervention and so contexts in the different provinces will determine the nature and success of the programme. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that this case study of Gauteng province's homelessness programme was able to clarify the challenges faced by adults experiencing street homelessness through addressing their vulnerability by improving service delivery, empowering clients, addressing systemic issues and promoting social justice.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion on progress in the Gauteng homelessness strategy, this study provides evidence that can influence national policy on addressing homelessness in South Africa. For a very long time, addressing the needs of the homeless in South Africa has been the responsibility of local governments; however, municipal resources are already stretched because of the perpetual housing backlog. Most civil society interventions across the country, except for the City of Cape Town and the Western Cape government, were uncoordinated. This case study of the Gauteng provincial government's homeless strategy intervention is undeniably crucial in building up evidence on the value of collaborative and multisectoral approaches towards addressing the needs of homeless persons and empowering them to make decisions and take control of their lives. However, we also recognise that there are challenges such as lack of reliable data on the homelessness intervention, a key gap that could be addressed through further social work research. Addressing the needs of the homeless who are a vulnerable group is a social work issue. The social work profession can, through research by academics and researchers, provide data and policy advice to policymakers and social work practitioners on what options to include on the national legislation for addressing homelessness. We conclude that social workers in South Africa can play a pivotal role in addressing homelessness by providing early intervention, advocating for access to permanent housing, delivering culturally competent and trauma-informed care, and promoting the rights and dignity of homeless individuals through psychosocial support and empowerment.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Emmison Muleya is a lecturer in social work at the University of Witwatersrand with research interests in social development, social policy, social protection and developmental social work. He coordinated the Homeless programme at the Gauteng Department of Social Department between February 2021 and November 2023 when the conception of the article was submitted for the ASASWEI conference held in September 2023.

Mziwandile Sobantu is an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work and Community Development at the University of Johannesburg. His research interests are on housing, social development, social policy, human rights and gender. He teaches undergraduate and postgraduate modules in addition to postgraduate supervision.