

A Big Devil in the Jondolos: The Politics of Shack Fires

Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement SA





A Big Devil in the Jondolos:



What is this report?

This report was prepared at the request of Abahlali baseMjondolo over July and August 2008. It looks at the problem of fire for people living in shacks. It uses information from discussions with shack dwellers, and others, to explore the causes and effects of fires as well as municipal responses to fires. It closes with demands for action.

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1. Summary

Shack fires are not acts of God. They are the result of political choices, often at municipal level. There is not enough affordable housing for everyone and low cost housing is rarely built close to the city centre. For this reason transport costs make even low-cost housing unaffordable for many people. Growing shack settlements are the result. Local government policy appears to be designed to force shack dwellers to live in 'camps' and to prevent the inclusion of shacks in the city. Refusal to allow shack settlements access to electricity leads to the use of dangerous sources of light and heat, such as paraffin stoves and candles. Unwillingness to provide security of tenure stops shack dwellers from informally upgrading their homes with less flammable building materials. Very minimal water supply makes it impossible for shack dwellers to effectively fight fires themselves. Because of these policies, fires are increasingly frequent in shack settlements and shack dwellers face the continual threat of death, injury, homelessness, and loss of livelihood. If fires are acknowledged at all by local government, they may be blamed on their victims, treated as natural disasters, or used as an opportunity to replace shacks with more vulnerable government structures such as tents or tin-shacks. Last month the Municipality provided materials for rebuilding after a fire for the first time. On average in South Africa over the last five years, there are ten shack fires a day, with someone dying in a shack fire every other day. In eThekweni, on average, there is a fire almost every day¹. It is the duty of government to make sure that cities are safe for their citizens. Abahlali baseMjondolo demands that municipalities and government face their responsibility for this crisis and takes action on the root causes of these tragedies.

2. Shack settlements

Shack settlements are a poor people's solution to a lack of affordable housing, especially in cities. Shack settlements are close-knit communities of people who are trying to make a better life for themselves despite years of neglect and hostility from politicians. In eThekweni, a third of the municipal population, and around half of the African population live in shacks. This is around 920,000 people². 16.4 per cent or about one in six of all South African households live in shacks³.

People move to the cities from rural areas in search of work, tertiary education, and health care. People also leave formal housing to live in shacks when they can no longer afford that housing after a breadwinner dies or loses a job. They may also come to live in the shacks because they wish to escape family violence or to have their own home independently of their parents⁴. Some people came to avoid political violence in the 1980s.

Shack settlements are an accommodation option close to employment opportunities, as well as schools, college, hospitals, libraries, churches and other infrastructure that may be lacking in townships and rural areas. When people find work, they often don't get paid enough to afford rent in a formal house or flat and stay in shacks instead. 60.7% of people in eThekweni live on less than R427 a month⁵.

Before people used to come while looking for a job but they find a job and they can't pay rent. It might be R500 a month plus bills. With just a matric it's hard to find a job. For domestic work you could earn R120 per week.⁶

The number of households living in shacks increased from 1.45 million in 1996 to 1.84 million in 2001. This is an increase of 26%, more than double the 11% population increase over the same period⁷. The national strategy for informal settlements, *Breaking New Ground*, recommends that they be upgraded where they are whenever possible. However, implementation is still uneven, and the policy has not yet been used in eThekweni.

In many places shack 'eradication' is still undertaken through provision of new housing on the rural edges of city borders. If the government is going to meet its goal of 'eradicating shacks' by 2014 through this method it will need to provide a large number of formal houses. This is not impossible given that since 1996 the Department of Housing has provided over 1.6 million houses for 7 million people⁸.

However, if new housing projects do not have community participation throughout the planning process, then recipients will be unwilling to move, or may 'just rent out our houses and run back to the jondolos'⁹. If housing is understood as units to be delivered and does not take into account the effect of social and economic infrastructure on people's livelihoods new schemes will fail. Without community involvement and control over planning, shack settlements will not go away.





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3. Causes of shack fires

a) Land

Shack settlements occupy previously unused land. Often this land is owned by the municipality or big corporations. If someone owns a lot of land they are able to control the price of the land. If land is expensive then rent is expensive. Because rent in the city is too high for ordinary people to afford they live in shacks. Because the land is not legally theirs, people who live there are denied the right to live there and live in fear of eviction. They are also denied the right to build with bricks. If they manage to stay on the land, the settlement is still not allowed to expand and shacks are not allowed to be formalised.

If myself I can say the shacks must be built apart from the other, because if it build closer it will burn easily. If one shack is burning 10 to 20 shacks will burn.¹⁰

When fires happen in the shacks they are bad because the shacks are so close together. Municipalities refuse to allow shack settlements to expand and so people build houses where they can. Often people build very close together so that new shacks will not be noticed by the Land Invasions Unit. Shack settlements are, on average, around six times more dense than the average for housing in eThekweni as a whole. Crowded settlements may be up to 31 times the average density¹¹. In some communities the only space that is not for housing is the paths between the houses. When people are forced to build houses so close together fires will always be a problem.

b) Housing

Fires happen a lot in the shacks and not in rich areas because shacks burn easily. If a paraffin stove is knocked over in a shack, people inside have less than a minute before the fire will kill anyone inside¹². Shacks burn easily because they are made of wood and plastic and cardboard. People are not allowed to formalise their shacks themselves. If someone replaces a plastic wall with a brick wall the Land Invasions Unit can destroy the whole shack. If people living in the jondolos were living in houses made of bricks then shack fires would not be such a serious problem.

I think the materials, the planks, makes the fires bigger. If there is a blocks or the room for cement, I think the fires they don't burn like this. It's the material the people are building, if the candle burn the room, the fire will burn easily, even to all the shacks.¹³

We need electricity. We need house. They not give us. They just go away and keep on talking lies about us. So many years they not done. [...] If they don't want to do Mr Kothari [UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing] must put them inside [- in jail].¹⁴

c) Electricity

We do not need electricity, but electricity is needed by our lives.¹⁵

Ask anyone from a shack settlement the causes of fires and they will tell you: candles and paraffin stoves. Open flames were the biggest single determined cause of fires in informal dwellings in 2006, and nearly half of the known causes¹⁶. People use candles and paraffin because eThekweni

municipality will not allow electricity in shacks. This is despite the fact that paraffin is more expensive than electricity, and hard to afford for many people¹⁷. Paraffin is also a danger to health. Many shack dwellers note that paraffin fumes cause chest problems¹⁸. Children in the shacks are sometimes poisoned after drinking it by accident¹⁹.

The causes of fires are paraffin stoves and candles. Before 2001 people were allowed electricity, after 2001 Councillors decided they mustn't electrify and it's costing them. According to their explanation the funding from the government they are getting it once, for them it's a waste to electrify shacks when they also need to electrify the RDP houses.²⁰

In 1990 the Durban City Council announced and began to implement an 'Electricity for All' policy. The aim was to electrify 168,000 dwellings. In 2000 the Municipality believed that it had accomplished 90 per cent of this²¹. In 2001, when the *Slums Clearance Programme* was announced, the policy changed and shack settlements were no longer electrified as they were now considered 'temporary'. The 2001 policy states:

In the past (1990s) electrification was rolled out to all and sundry. Because of the lack of funding and the huge costs required to relocate services when these settlements are upgraded or developed, electrification of the informal settlements has been discontinued.²²

If settlements are upgraded *in situ* there will not be huge costs to relocate services. Although the Municipality has said that there is a lack of funding, it has continued to spend money on non-essential projects like the theme-park and casino. How long will shack dwellers have to remain at the risk of fires while waiting for their settlements to be upgraded or developed?

Lots of children grow up without electricity. How do you feel? Around you there is electricity and life. What message the government send to them? If we got electricity it's gonna be nice. The municipality said "it's not us, it's the Electricity Department". In 2006 we went to ask. [...] The municipality said it's not our problem. The Electricity Department said they're not allowed anymore to provide electricity to shack dwellers. The ANC government wants to get rid of shacks.²³

Instead of electricity, the Municipality pays for Disaster Management to provide blankets and food after settlements have been burned and people have lost their homes and possessions. Sometimes they pay to put shack dwellers in tents or transit camps after a fire. Sometimes they even pay for funerals.

It is the duty of authorities and government to make cities safe through the provision of basic services, such as electricity. We would like to ask for a review of the decision to suspend electrification of informal settlements. If the issue is saving money; does disaster response and burials use the same money? We would like to balance the money used to respond to fires. We would like to hear them say "we are saving ten per cent at least when you die, when your shack gets burnt". If it's not that, we will see what it is.²⁴

Shack communities are often referred to as 'informal', as 'temporary' and as 'camps', but a survey in 2001 found that "over half of the household heads with informal dwellings have lived in their homes for between five and ten years and a quarter have lived in them for over eleven years"²⁵. Shack communities are not temporary. But because they are not in places that city officials call 'suitable', they are refused basic services and prevented from taking their proper place in the city.

The municipality is in charge for making people burn with fires. Many times we ask Eskom to put electricity for us they give us so many words. They not worried about the black





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*people. They separate us; we not look like the other people here. We like visitors here. They always going talking lies - even today they never start even one thing. This is not our fault. Each fire using paraffin. The candle is making these fires. If they put electricity I don't think the fires will come to us. We are not stupid.*²⁶

The refusal to electrify shacks cannot be justified by the Municipality using the technocratic language of available resources and service delivery. The fact that electricity is no longer provided for shacks is a choice that they have made and it is a choice that hurts the poor.

*It is well known that the electricity shortage is a national concern. Why must the poor be blamed and forced to pay the price while the big corporations are running their businesses day and night, making profit while the shack dwellers use it just to light and to cook?*²⁷

d) Water

Water provision in informal settlements is communal and inadequate. At Kennedy Road there are 8,000 people sharing five communal standpipes. At Foreman Road there are a similar number of people sharing an ablution block with one standpipe and five sinks for washing.

As shack settlements do not have piped water, when there is a fire, unless it is close to the taps, it is hard for people to put it out. People do not have to rely on the Fire Department. Before the Fire Department started to come to put out fires in shack settlements, shack dwellers had to rely on themselves. People can fill buckets and form chains to water to where their homes are burning. But it is hard to fight a fire when there is one tap at low pressure far from the flames. The real disaster is that the Municipality has decided that five taps are enough for 8,000 people²⁸.

*Two houses [at the bottom of the settlement] get burnt with a candle. Then we found it and just put water. There are two taps at the bottom. I think the Municipality, what they can do, they can try to put fire hose pipes next to toilet.*²⁹

e) Emergency services

The Fire Department now comes to shack settlements. Before, shack dwellers would have to ask their neighbours (in formal housing) to phone the Fire Department for them³⁰. They seem to come quicker to settlements that are known for the struggle, and in some places, places that are not so well known for the struggle, they are still much too slow.

*They took one and a half hours to arrive. By that time the house is already down. It's always the case that they take long. Sometimes the fire is burning the forest and they turn up, sometimes it's in the jondolos and they too lazy.*³¹

Shack fires are a big problem for the Fire Service. Nationally, shack fires are the biggest single type of fire, after bush fires. Excluding bush fires, shack fires make up over a quarter of all fires (25.7%)³². In eThekweni, around fifty per cent of the fires responded to happen in shack settlements. The Fire Service has a special procedure for shack settlements. The problem in many areas is that the Fire Service, and other services like the ambulances, is understaffed. They are not given the budget to have enough people working. The lack of access roads to shack settlements is

another problem. There are also fewer fire hydrants in poor areas, and the water that should be in the hydrants is not always there³³.

*The Fire Brigade came but while they came many houses were burnt down. When they arrived they said there was no water in their tanks so the fire proceeded while they were still here.*³⁴

Other emergency services also arrive too slowly.

*The Fire Department comes after the disaster has happened, four hours or so. Once they know we in squatter camp, I have to wait for the ambulance for two to three hours. One time I was with a lady she was looking like she was dying. I call and call, from eight to eleven. At eleven the police arrive, and ambulance arrive at eleven fifteen. She was already dead.*³⁵

f) Other services

As noted above, the severity and frequency of shack fires are made worse by the denial of services and infrastructure to shack communities. In addition to services such as electricity, water, and emergency response, the failure to provide other elements of urban infrastructure such as refuse collection and access roads also contribute to problem of fires in the shacks.

Refuse collection in shack settlements is frequently poor or non-existent. This leads to unsanitary conditions that are often blamed on the residents. On 26 January this year a four month old baby Nkosi Cwaka died after being bitten by a rat at Kennedy Road. In July a three month old baby was also bitten. Because uncollected refuse that leads to vermin is often burnt³⁶, these problems are related, and shack dwellers 'cannot divorce the fire and the rats'³⁷. Fires, and rats, are a result of the policy of local government to refuse life saving basic services to shack settlements.

4. Effects of shack fires

On average in South Africa over the last five years, there have been ten shack fires a day, with someone dying in a shack fire every other day³⁸. In eThekweni in 2007 there were 299 shack fires, an average of 25 a month³⁹. Since 2001 in eThekweni there have been on average, 343 shack fires a year, almost one a day⁴⁰. The number of shack fires is increasing, both in eThekweni and nationally.

a) Injury and death

ⁱ This is excluding the data for 2006 which appears to be incomplete.





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In 2006, 141 people died in shack fires, nearly 60% of all deaths in fires and more than deaths in all other types of fires combined. This is three times as much as in formal dwellings (45), the next highest area⁴¹. In 2005 the deaths were even higher. In eThekweni in 2007, 30 of the 62 people that died in fires were in shacks⁴². Data from the Medical Research Council suggests that the number of deaths might be even higher⁴³. Between 2001 and 2005, a total of 1003 people died in shack fires in South Africa's five largest cities. This is an average of 200 deaths a year in these cities alone.

The Kennedy Road settlement is badly affected by fires, causing a number of deaths. Mhlengi Khumalo, who was one year old, died in a fire in October 2005. It was the third fire in a month. In August 2006 Zithulele Dhlomo died in a fire, killed when the plastic sheeting that was the roof of his shack melted. In April 2007 three people, Ephraime Phulungula, Nobuhle's sister Ntombi and Ben Mhlakwana, a mother of two, died in a fire that left 100 families homeless. In October 2007 Mamukhuzwayo died in a fire that destroyed the shack where she lived with 12 other people. There have been seven fires so far at Kennedy Road in 2008, the latest on 31 August. The tragic fire at Cato Crest on August 2 killed eight people, five of them children from the same family.

As well as causing death, fires in shacks also cause severe injuries due to exploding paraffin stoves, melting plastic, and the speed with which shacks burn.

I manage to escape fire. I was burnt severely, treated for almost six months in hospital. I was cooking with gas stove. The stove just burst and flames came to me and encountered the bed linen. I managed to escape from the house while my mother trying to put out the fire. I started going to hospital in Addington, they operated me for one day and I came back. After two months I went to private hospital for skin surgery. I was severely burned on arms and legs and on face.⁴⁴

b) Homelessness and destitution

I was seriously affected because I only prospered to come out with an ID, a coat, two trousers and a blanket. I suffered a lot by that time. It's better now because they provide tents but during that time the people suffered a lot. It takes time to rebuild and to gather materials. I used to sleep by the crèche at that time. If I am not sleeping in the crèche, then pastor Gatsheni Ndlovu let me sleep in the church.⁴⁵

Thousands of people are made homeless every year after shack fires. For many of them it will not be the first time. While this can place extra stresses on the community people will often stay with friends or family in the area, or in other nearby areas. They may also stay at their work places⁴⁶. If people can stay in the area they will be in a better position to rebuild and will not become dependent on the Municipality⁴⁷. Those who have to leave may be badly affected.

After a fire, those residents who have been lucky enough to save some things will be left with only the possessions they could carry out in time. If a fire happens at night when people are sleeping, or they are not present, many people are left with only the clothes they are wearing⁴⁸.

A lot of people lose houses they need to rebuild again. They lose everything; food, clothes, money. Lots of people keep money in the jondolos - they don't use banks. [...] I was not here, I was in Ladysmith. My shack burnt too. When I came back I started to build it again. I lost a lot because my shack, my things got burnt. No-one was arriving; the door was locked.⁴⁹

When people store money in jondolos, years of savings may be wiped out by a fire. A recent fire in Motala Heights destroyed one woman's savings of over R15,000⁵⁰. However, fires take more than money. Shacks are not simply temporary accommodation. People's lives are made in these spaces, and when they burn, personal things are lost that can never be replaced by second-hand clothes, blankets and tinned food.

I lost whole album of family photos, whole family, only one left in family with child. Photos are only way to remember, child won't have clear vision of relations, they are lost never to be returned.⁵¹

c) Loss of livelihood

I'm not working. I was started a small business here – a Cell-C public phone, my friend lent me. It was burnt in the fire. It's more harder than before. I haven't got a house now and I haven't got a job.⁵²

Shack dwellers' livelihoods are often precarious. When fires burn peoples' homes and belongings they are less able to earn a living. Tools or stock are destroyed. Informal businesses are lost. Time at work will be lost. Matric certificates, diplomas and training certificates, as well as ID books (needed to access state healthcare and grants) are also burnt, requiring a lengthy and expensive process of replacement.

I lost my pension card in the fire. It took two weeks to replace. If you have no card, you can't get any pension. If you lose your ID it takes a long time. You must replace your ID before you can get a new pension card.⁵³

Some times you lose your ID documents, your papers, your security grades, but I re-apply and get another one, every year when we get burnt in the fire we lose all the things. When you going to look another job you can't get those papers to satisfy the owner of the company to employ you, you start fresh and apply new.⁵⁴

Student's books and uniforms have also been destroyed – affecting their attendance and their grades.

Another girl I know [affected by the fire] she's in grade 12. I don't think she got her books and uniform and all that. I think she's writing tomorrow. It's the trial exam for her matric.⁵⁵

d) Trauma

Fires terrorise communities in the shacks. Shack dwellers go to sleep every night knowing that they may be woken by shouting and need to flee for their lives. People may leave their houses everyday wondering whether their home will still be there when they come back.

What is happening is shocking, all the people are shocked. Especially if you are asleep, you will hear someone shouting "it's burning, it's burning" and people are shouting. You





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*feel worried, you feel scared, you lose a little bit of memory and brain. You don't know what is happening or what you are doing.*⁵⁶

*I'm afraid if the fire burns my neighbors or my next-door because I think the fire will come to my room and burn my room. I am afraid to leave my children at home because if I am here working I am afraid a fire will come to my home and burn my children. I'm thinking about the fire every time.*⁵⁷

5. Municipal responses to fires

a) De-electrification

*We ask them who told them to come here and disconnect the lights and so. They told us they can't talk, they working. They never tell us where they came from or full information. The security had guns and they stop us from asking. If we ask them they doing or who told them to come they say they going to shoot us or going to kick us.*⁵⁸

Since 2001, electrification has not only been discontinued – the municipality has pursued a dangerous campaign of armed de-electrification against shack settlements. Many settlements have been disconnected from electricity by the Municipality at gun point. This is often accompanied by police violence and theft. In some cases this tactic seems to be a response to mobilisation by Abahlali.

The day after Abahlali baseMjondolo announced that we would be challenging the legality of the notorious Slums Act in court the Kennedy Road settlement was attacked by the Municipality. They arrived with the South African Police Services, including the dog unit, and the Municipal Security. They were very heavily armed. It was clear that they were prepared for a war.

*They began at one side of the settlement and started to disconnect everyone from electricity. They have disconnected the people who have connected themselves and they disconnected the people who have prepaid meters in their shacks. They didn't just disconnect the meters but they dug up the cables and destroyed them. It is clear that they have decided that our disconnection will be permanent. No warning was given and people's homes were entered without their permission. We estimate that there were more than 300 hundred disconnections.*⁵⁹

In November 2007 when Abahlali marched on Mayor Mlaba demanding electrification to stop fires peaceful protestors were attacked and beaten by police and 14 people arrested⁶⁰. Activists and communities associated with electrification struggles have been targeted by the police. Pemary Ridge faces 'continual great tension with police in the area'⁶¹. Philani Zungu, an Abahlali activist who lives at Pemary Ridge has been arrested and charged for unlawful connections. He has not denied the charges. He points out that Pemary Ridge has not burnt and demands to be judged on that fact. An Abahlali activist living at the settlement, interviewed anonymously, expressed it like this:

*We will suffer the consequences; it's what we want, especially when talking about safety. We have experienced fire shacks, we rather have other problems...it's dangerous to connect but not as compared to fire. We can get electrical shock, arrest, but not worse than shack fire. I always prefer electrical consequences. If I had a fire, my family would have no clothing, facility to cook, no change to go to school because it would all be burnt. A fire is worse.*⁶²

At the eMagwaveni settlement in Tongaat, electricity connections have also led to 'violent police interactions', including 'a police shooting at a meeting held by residents to address the issue of electricity'.⁶³

*[At eMagwaveni] people are routinely arrested and beaten and robbed by the police as they try to remove the unlawful connections. But the arrests and the fines and the beatings and the thieving does not stop people from connection themselves. As bad as all that is it is better than the fires.*⁶⁴

*About twice a month, the police will enter the settlement and raid houses. They steal all electrical supplies, appliances as well as arresting the residents. [...] Once in jail, the individual will pay bail, around R500, buy back their supplies and go home to reconnect again. In a few weeks time, police will return, ready to seize possessions and residents.*⁶⁵

When access to electricity is criminalised, the very poor have to break the law to keep their communities safe. People that take these risks on behalf of their communities are considered heroes in their communities. It is the eThekweni Municipality's policy to deny electricity to people living in shacks that is considered criminal.

*As a community we know it's not right to put illegal electricity. It's to make them know that we need electricity. We must put illegal connection. If we just talking and just apply they just ignore that. If we connect to street light they can know that we need electricity.*⁶⁶

There has also been armed de-electrification in Sea Cow Lake, where ongoing struggles against evictions, organised by the Siyathuthuka Development Committee, have resulted in two major road blockades and many arrests. In August 2008 the local electricity sub-station was sabotaged. This cut power to the whole area. The people who cut the electricity to the whole area left a note saying: "If you remove our cables, you had better move all the power from the area. No-one can have it if we are not allowed to (have electricity)"⁶⁷.

b) Neglect

*Many of us believe that by leaving us to be killed by diarrhea and fire and rats while they waste millions on casinos, the themepark, stadium and the A1 Grand Prix the Municipality is trying to force us to leave our homes and accept 'relocation' (which is really 'ruralisation')*⁶⁸

When a shack burns down in some areas, nothing happens. In other areas the Fire Department has started coming to shack fires, but they have not always come to these settlements, and in some places they still take too long. In 2005 when Abahlali started shack fires were not news. As a result of Abahlali's struggle, media have started taking an interest in fires⁶⁹. The 14 July fire at Kennedy Road had good local and national coverage. The fire at Cato Crest on 2 August, in which eight





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people died, also attracted good coverage and the municipality responded promptly. However, in many areas, people in shacks frequently complained that their councillors are not interested in them, and only come to the settlements at election time.

The municipality is always promising, every every year to prepare people about the houses, about the water, the toilets or the lights. They didn't do it again. You see now its 2008, when the election is coming they say they gonna bring houses and toilets. When you vote, the councillor never come to see us, how is the life here.⁷⁰

If a municipality is actively trying to evict people, or if the police are harassing them, neglect by the councillors is perceived as another element of hostility from the state.

It makes me to feel that they don't care about the people staying in shacks or their shacks get burnt. If I can say that maybe they are happy that the shacks get burnt. What makes me to think like this – this happen but not even one person came from the municipality or disaster management.⁷¹

Many shack dwellers feel betrayed and discriminated against by local government and politicians who have exploited their votes and naturalised their poverty.

They promise so many times to build the houses, but they failed to do that. I don't trust the municipality or Department of Housing. I think they don't care about the people in shacks. They think if you staying in shacks you not same like others. They think we are short-minded because we are staying in this place. They think it our right to stay here, we think it's our right to stay in rooms like others, like whites, like coloureds, like Indians, but the municipality don't think like us. They think we deserve to stay like this. They think we deserve to die like this.⁷²

What's the use of voting for someone who doesn't help you? It's like you putting them on top but they not pushing you up. [...] If you rely on government you gonna be in hell.⁷³

c) Blame / Education

We would appreciate it if Zikode did something to educate his community on fire safety instead of talking the whole time.⁷⁴

Without electricity there are shack fires. Who is to be blamed for the fact that we still live without these life saving services other than those who are meant to save the public in governments? We have seen the authorities shifting blame to the poor themselves with childish claims that the poor are dirty or lazy or that we do not want to move from filthy conditions. They say in the newspaper that "Zikode must educate his people", as if people living in shacks are stupid and as if they all belong to one ordinary man like Zikode. I want to make it very clear that we have built a democratic politics and that our settlements are far too well organized to be controlled or thought by one man like Zikode. Zikode has his own kids to educate like any other responsible parent who cares about the future of their children. But Zikode does not educate the people who elected him to speak with them and then for them. In fact every day Zikode is educated by the suffering and the courage and the intelligence of the people that elected him. Therefore it is very disrespectful to say that elderly people must be educated to light paraffin stoves or light candles. The solution to

*fires is not education. The solution to fires is that electricity must be provided in all settlements. Electricity is not a luxury. It is needed to save lives. We cannot compromise on this point.*⁷⁵

When there is a fire the victims of that fire are frequently blamed for the fire. Alcohol is often also mentioned as a contributory factor⁷⁶. However, people who live in middle class houses also drink alcohol, also knock things over and also have accidents. eThekweni Municipality's refusal to electrify shacks, or provide adequate housing, is the reason why a small accident in a house just a small accident, while a small accident in a shack leaves hundreds of people homeless⁷⁷.

*If they can live in a shack for one week, they will make the same mistakes that people make. [...] The Municipality, they don't just tackle the problem as it is. They don't just come to the point. They use strategies which do not solve the problem; like saying people need to be workshopped on how to avoid fire and be serious. They won't work because the thing which causes fire is no electricity and no houses.*⁷⁸

Shack dwellers are strongly critical of the municipality for forcing people to live without electricity, and then blaming them for fires by assuming that fires are caused by ignorance.

*The shack dwellers themselves often get blamed for childrens who die in the shacks through fires and rat bites for failing to keep the settlements clean. These dirty accusation do not make any sense when there are dirty policies like the KZN Slums Act and the policy that prohibit all informal settlement to access electricity in Durban Metropolitan area. These policies are a killer, these policies must be scrapped by all means possible.*⁷⁹

d) Disaster Management

*Disaster Management knew there are three [homeless] families. They brought one blanket and soup – which had no taste!*⁸⁰

Shack fires are usually treated as 'natural disasters'. The eThekweni's Disaster Management team coordinates responses from other agencies, and this varies by area and settlement. The municipal direction is to provide short-term relief; basic blankets and food. Disaster Management legislation (emphasising mitigation and risk management) is not known or adhered to, and Disaster Management is given a reactive welfare role for which it is ill equipped and lacks capacity. Essentially, support will be lacking if the political will is lacking⁸¹. Many shack dwellers are very critical of the municipality responding to shack fires as disasters but not taking any steps to mitigate the problem and prevent it from happening again.

*That time the municipality build some tents down there, and put all the people in tents, organise some food, some blankets. They did like that when they fix up their shacks. I can't say anything about municipality because after the fire I can't see anything, nothing. I can talk about Department of Housing, they just came and keep on promising they gonna make houses for the people. After fire they just come and count how many houses were burnt and how many people can afford to build another shack. That's all, I can't say anything else.*⁸²

At Ash Road, Pietermaritzburg, after a fire on 9 June, where 20 shacks were burnt, the municipality has refused to let those left homeless rebuild their shacks. They are still sleeping in cold, wet,





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overcrowded tents. One person has already died of pneumonia⁸³. They are forced to remain in the tents while emergency accommodation is being built. In this situation, the provision of supplies from Disaster Management is regarded as an insult.

*They just provided tent, 10kg rice, no stove – how can you cook it with no stove? Rice without stove is useless! Tents, mattress, food, no stove. They are just decorating material.*⁸⁴

e) Tents and Transit Camps

Since the *Slums Clearance Programme* was adopted in 2001 the municipality has prohibited the rebuilding of shacks after fires. Although residents at Kennedy Road started clearing the debris and rebuilding before the ground had cooled, it was only to watch as their partially rebuilt houses were bulldozed, by the Land Invasions Unit under armed police protection, two days later.

But now city officials do say that the preferred option is for those made homeless by fires to rebuild where they are, however this depends on future plans for the settlement⁸⁵. Settlements which are earmarked for relocation soon may be assigned emergency accommodation until relocation becomes possible⁸⁶. There is now special funding available so that emergency accommodation can be provided as soon as possible⁸⁷. The municipality is now looking at identifying localities in the north, south and west of the city to function as dedicated sites to use for emergency accommodation after fires and other disasters. They say that this would mean that less housing subsidies would be spent on creating emergency accommodation in different areas. They say that the problem is that the more housing subsidy money is spent on provision for settlements waiting for upgrade or relocation, the less is available to build with⁸⁸.

Currently Msunduzi municipality is spending R4.3m building temporary accommodation for residents of Ash Road settlement displaced by fire and floods⁸⁹. 200 people were made homeless by flooding at the beginning of the year. They were refused permission to rebuild their shacks and were forced to stay in tents for six months while the municipality arranged tin shacks. The concern is that the municipality is using disasters to remove people, now or later, by forcing them into purpose built temporary accommodation⁹⁰. The municipality's response to residents expressing their concerns over this accommodation has been removal of the community's amenities.

*When we make noises they take the toilets away. It happened about two weeks ago. They also took the taps in response to protest. A man died in the tents due to the cold, it was pneumonia. People have been there six months, the municipality said it would only be two months. We wrote a story to the papers, the municipality stopped it to be printed.*⁹¹

At Jadhu Place on April 20 2008, 300 shacks burnt down, leaving 1,500 people homeless. The municipality refused to allow people to rebuild and instead provided tents. People in the settlement were forced to stay in tents, or with friends or family in the area (or elsewhere)⁹² for weeks while the municipality began building standardised tin shacks, known by residents as a 'transit camp'⁹³. The municipality is still building the transit camp at Jadhu, although it has now built around 300 units and has reportedly said that they are going to place all the people at Jadhu Place in tin shacks⁹⁴. At Kennedy Road, people decided to refuse the transit camp and to rebuild themselves. After a while the City supported them with building materials and the rebuild has been fully completed in around a week.

Residents at Jadhu Place are now unhappy because the lack of communication from the municipality leads them to fear that there are no plans to move them out of their new (inadequate) temporary accommodation.

I can't specify on how the MEC responds other than that this is the only thing that we've got [tin shacks]. They are not so bad – the problem is they are too small. We don't all fit. [...] We are not happy with tin houses. We want decent houses. We don't understand how temporary it is because the mayor said three months but the people in Mayville stayed for a long time but were also told that they were temporary. It's about two years in Mayville.⁹⁵

A number of residents at Jadhu Place also complain that the ANC-affiliated committee is corrupt, allocating the new tin shacks to people who don't live in the area⁹⁶, leaving tin shacks empty while many people are still homeless⁹⁷, and appropriating goods donated in response to the fire. People from other areas have said similar things⁹⁸.

The people are affected by fire; they losing many things –furniture, clothes. Depends on the leader at that time. The other leaders they think themselves first. The other leaders they don't care. Like the latest fire –the leaders collected the donation from different department before they looking the people they take to themselves something.

Here there are two different leaders – the committee for the people and the committee we call the leaders, the ANC. Those ANC leaders don't want to work with the committee with AbM. [...] They putting the people in the transit camp themselves. They calling people from outside to get houses. People who were staying here before are still waiting to get houses. Because the leaders are friendly with the ANC I reported to the councillor but he don't care.⁹⁹

f) Rebuilding Materials

After the fire at Kennedy Road on July 14 2008 the municipality provided materials for those affected to rebuild their shacks (although there was a delay in the provision). Shack dwellers often mention the time and cost of finding building materials as the reason for delays in being rehoused after a fire.

It took quite a long time to rebuild. I bought corrugated iron for myself, the doorframe and the door, all that by myself with no support from anywhere else.¹⁰⁰

At the time of writing, the Municipal Department of Housing has delivered 600 sheets of metal, 600 poles, 600 lengths of wood for roof support, 100 sheets of masonite, 100 bags of cement, and nails to Kennedy Road. This is a positive initiative from the Municipality, and something that has never previously happened. However there have been problems due to lack of communication from the municipality about the quantity of materials that are being delivered.

Because the Kennedy Road Development Committee has not known what materials are arriving they have divided what they have received equally (using a system to log what has been provided for each person). The amount the Municipality Department of Housing has sent so far is 5 poles, 5 sheets of metal and 5 lengths of wood per person. Although this is 'highly appreciated, it is not enough'¹⁰¹. People trying to rebuild are angry about the insufficient amount of materials and are having to go to the dump site to look for more things that they can use.





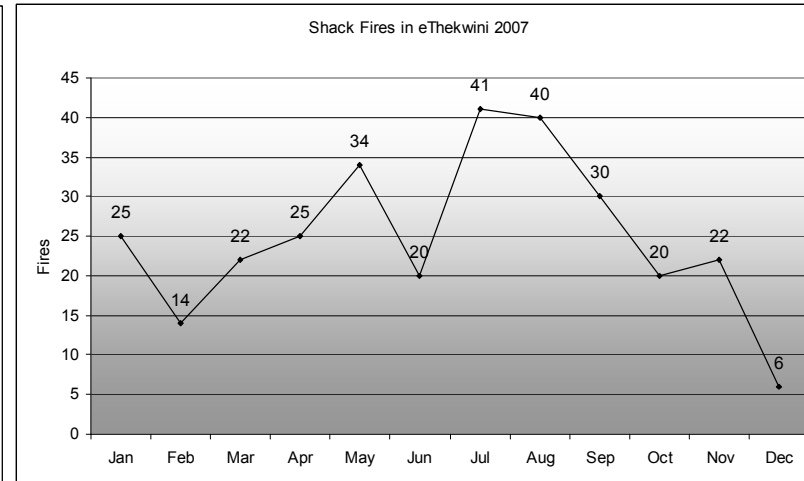
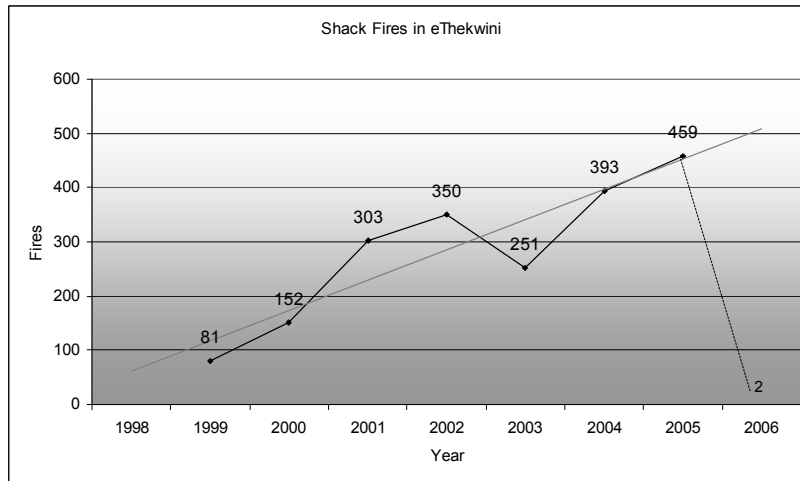
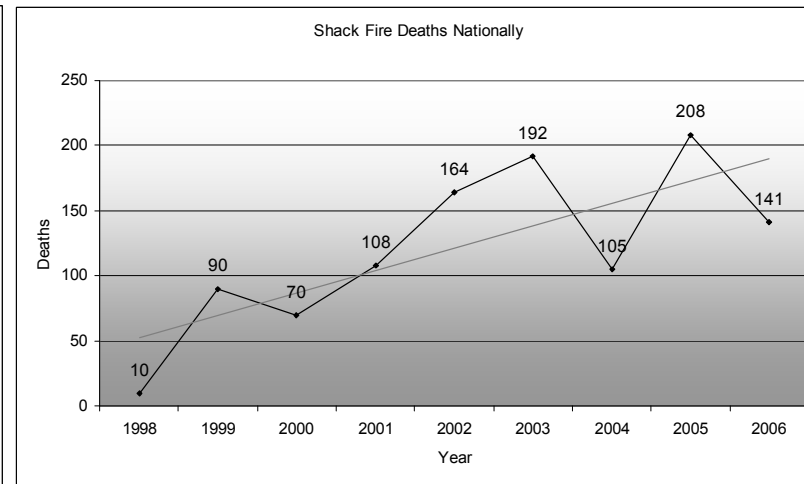
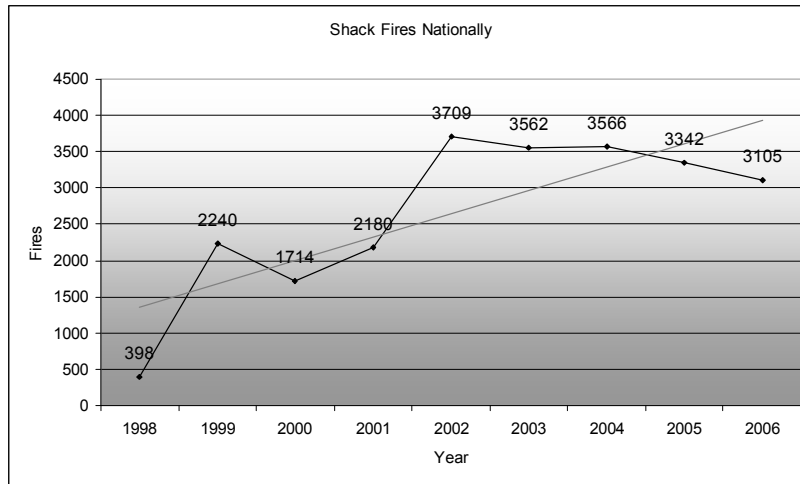
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The provision of materials may be a response to Abahlali's mobilisation from Kennedy Road¹⁰², but as noted previously, rebuilding on site is now identified by municipal officials as the preferred option after a shack fire. Indeed, there may also be a move towards provision of materials for settlements after fires¹⁰³. However, this kind of support for settlements still depends on external factors such as community mobilisation and future plans for the area. Provision of materials for rebuilding is something that the Municipality should now replicate for all communities after fires. The gains won by Kennedy Road should be extended to all settlements.

6. Abahlali Demands

- 1. Every settlement needs taps spread through out the settlement as well as hoses and fire extinguishers and every settlement needs these immediately.*
- 2. The City must immediately reverse its 2001 decision to stop electrifying shacks.*
- 3. People who have not been connected to electricity by the City must be supported to connect themselves.*
- 4. All settlements must, wherever possible, be upgraded where they are with proper houses and this must be done with democratic and not top down planning methods.*
- 5. While people are being connected to electricity the City must ensure that everyone gets good service from the fire brigade and that all settlements get good building materials after fires.*
- 6. Because the fires are the result of the failure of the City to continue to electrify shacks after 2001 they should pay compensation to all the people that have suffered in the fires from 2001 till now.¹⁰⁴*

Appendix: Shack Fire Data



Source: SA National Fire Statistics, published in Fire Protection (April/May 2008:8-27, Oct/Nov 2006:17-36, Winter 2005:13-27, Winter 2004:13-25, Autumn 2003:13-27, Winter 2002:11-17, June 2001:9-15, June 2000:15-21, March/June 1999:13-21) & eThekwi Fire Service



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Qina mhlali, qina!

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