



## **Military land for homes not weapons!**

Weak intergovernmental collaboration and a lack of urgency are entrenching the housing crisis. The national government owns enough vacant and underutilised land in Cape Town to deliver hundreds of thousands of homes and materially reduce the housing backlog. For instance, a joint civil society submission to the presidency, building on decades of activism from a diverse range of groups, has demonstrated that 67,000 homes could be built on the Ysterplaat, Wingfield and Youngsfield Military Bases alone. Instead, what initially looked like encouraging progress on the release of underutilised public land for affordable housing over the last few years has seemingly been hamstrung by the failure of different government departments and entities to work together.

On 27 January 2023, a collective of CSOs met with former Minister of Public Works Patricia De Lille regarding the release of state-owned land for human settlements. During the briefing, Minister De Lille indicated that the DPWI identified 76 land parcels measuring 13 185 hectares that were available for release to the Housing Development Agency (HDA). A copy of Minister De Lille's brief to our organisations is annexed to this statement.

This was the first meaningful update since a 2022 DPWI parliamentary committee briefing. In June 2022, at a Select Committee Meeting, Minister De Lille explained that 2,257 hectares of public land have been released across South Africa by the Department of Public Works to the HDA. The HDA is a national public sector development agency that bears significant responsibility for acquiring and preparing land, as well as developing affordable homes. Unfortunately, there has been no meaningful update on when and how these 2,257 hectares (roughly 2,257 rugby fields) will be developed, and the minimal information which is publicly available suggests that progress has been limited.

Even more worrying is that despite a 2019 commitment from the Department of Public Works to release an additional 10,928 hectares of land for housing development, the HDA has failed to provide the supporting documents that are necessary for this land disposal process to move forward. It is hard to imagine that there is any other current work at the HDA that could have a greater impact on addressing the housing crisis in Cape Town, and it is appalling that this issue has not been resolved several years after it was initially raised. When viewed in combination with the fact that the HDA does not seem to have made progress on

land that has actually been released to it, questions need to be raised about the effectiveness and purpose of the institution.

Perhaps the most shocking failure of intergovernmental collaboration in this regard is that 668 hectares of high-potential land in Cape Town are sitting largely vacant and underutilised under the custodianship of the Department of Defence. If they were developed instead of sitting practically empty, these sites would have a major impact on Cape Town's housing and segregation crises. The Department of Defence argues that it still needs the entirety of Youngsfield Military Base, Wingfield Military Base and the Ysterplaat Airforce Base for its own operations. This is a bold claim, as anyone who has ever driven past or visited these sites will tell you. Much of the land on which these sites sit was granted to the military by the Graaf Trust around the second and first world wars during a period when almost no consideration was given to the housing needs of the majority. We now live in a democracy. Quite simply, having four military bases sprawled across desperately needed public land in the centre of Cape Town in the midst of a major housing crisis makes no sense at all. If there was genuine commitment and urgency that matched the scale and intensity of our housing crisis, different government departments would come together and develop a solution that puts the land to better use.

There has been some limited progress, and this should be welcomed. For instance, it seems that, following a request from the Department of Public Works, the Department of Defence has agreed to release 32 hectares of the 227 hectare Wingfield Military Base for housing development. This is encouraging, but again we are not particularly hopeful that the land will be developed any time soon because of the HDA's track record. Similarly, the Department of Defence committed to the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Land Reform and Agriculture that a portion of the incredibly well-located Tamboerskloof Magazine Site (alternatively known as ERF81) will be made available for human settlements development. There is already a long-established community living at ERF81, and any plans to develop the site will need to ensure that this community is accommodated.

We wrote to the Department of Human Settlements and the HDA asking them:

- How much of the land discussed above has actually been released to the HDA
- What the timeframes for feasibility studies and development plans are
- If there is any other information that would allow the public to meaningfully participate in the development plans for these sites

We did not even receive an acknowledgement of receipt, nevermind an actual reply. Given that we represent a broad group of civil society organisations with long track records in the housing sector in South Africa, the lack of response from

the HDA and Department of Human Settlements does not bode well for the President's much mooted new social contract.

We urgently call on the Department of Human Settlements to:

- Furnish the public with information about if, how and when the sites will be developed.
- Urgently make use of this exceptional opportunity to fundamentally reshape Cape Town and other South African cities into places that are more fair and more just.
- Actively and meaningfully involve communities in the development of these sites, building on the considerable work of civil society to offer concrete proposals for how these sites could be developed.

We also call on the new Minister of Public Works, Sihle Zikalala, to urgently pick up on the land release work initiated by his predecessor so that it can be seen through to completion.

If the government is serious about addressing our worsening housing crisis, it will take this chance to fundamentally reshape our cities and address apartheid's enduring spatial legacy.

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**Issued on behalf of Ndifuna Ukwazi, Development Action Group, Community Organising Resource Centre and the Legal Resources Centre.  
Late Prof Vanessa Watson was one of key partners and proponents for this campaign.**

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**Annexures:**

- Annexure 1: Civil society presidential submission on the release of well-located state land in Cape Town
- Annexure 2: Images of the development proposal for the Ysterplaat Airforce Base from the presidential submission
- Annexure 3: Meeting summary and report from a Select Committee Meeting on the release of public land
- Annexure 4: Letter from civil society coalition to the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure
- Annexure 5: Letter from former Minister of Public Works to civil society coalition
- Annexure 6: Letter from civil society coalition to the Department of Human Settlements and the Housing Development Agency