

*Native Housing*

THE NATIVE HOUSING PROBLEM IN SOUTH  
AFRICAN URBAN AREAS.

148.8.4

A Statement which outlines the views of  
The Catholic Federation of the Johannesburg Diocese.

Due mainly to the neglect of a grave social responsibility by South Africa's European community, the task of providing adequate sub-economic housing for the country's large and increasing urban native population has developed over the years into a major economic and social problem. Competent authorities estimate, for example, that on the Reef alone at least 50,000 African families are in dire need of decent housing; indeed, the majority of these families are dependent entirely upon the pitifully inadequate shelter which is all that can be offered to them by their own people. The evils which are resulting from this state of affairs are becoming manifest not only on the Reef but throughout the country.

We appreciate that many very praiseworthy attempts are being made to eliminate this grave reflection on our social conditions. But it must be emphasised that success can only follow these endeavours when certain fundamental moral sociological principles provide the sure foundation on which an enduring plan can be built. As will be seen, it is the view of this Federation that the only permanent solution to the problem is to enable the urban African to provide his own housing, by paying him a wage fully in keeping with his needs.

MAN'S NATURAL RIGHT TO A LIVING WAGE.

The earth was granted to mankind in general, not in the sense that all without distinction might deal with it as they pleased, but rather that the limits of private possession be fixed by man's own industry. In our day the earth is apportioned to a considerable extent among private owners - a condition which applies particularly to South Africa. Nevertheless, the earth does not cease thereby to minister to the needs of all, for those who do not possess the soil contribute their labour to the pool of common effort. Hence, we can say that by his work man satisfies his natural right to the fruits of the earth even though he may not possess any specific portion of it.

It follows, however, that when a man performs useful work for others, he translates his right of access to the earth into a right to a livelihood from those who control it. To bring the subject close to home, this means that..



that those who control the resources of our country are bound in justice to exercise their dominion in such a way that the labourer will be able to live a life in conformity with his rights and dignity as a human being. The normal way in which society fulfils that obligation is by encouraging the worker to develop his talents and by paying him a 'living wage'.

What is a living wage? Obviously, one cannot generalise for conditions vary from town to town and from Province to Province. A fundamental principle, however, is that by virtue of his humanity no man may be regarded as a beast of burden or a mere economic tool of production. In other words, human dignity requires that a man's wage be sufficient to enable him to live his life in decent, reasonable and frugal comfort, bearing in mind his status in society. Furthermore, this wage must permit the members of his family to develop their human personalities and powers according to the Natural Law, which in this case is simply the guide or rule of human conduct imposed by God on man and written, as it were, in his very nature. It follows that in order to do this the family must also be able to obtain suitable housing comforts where its health and moral well-being will not be subjected to great dangers. Indeed, the force and gravity of this claim are obvious when we remember that the family is the basic unit and moral foundation of society. How can the members of any family develop fully as human beings without the security provided by a home? The very fact that the sub-economic urban housing problem exists on such a large scale in South Africa is evidence enough that in the majority of cases the wages paid to the African are totally inadequate to fulfil the minimum conditions outlined above.

It is a sad commentary on our moral standards that in general we accept the principle of a living wage for our fellow Europeans, yet deny it to the African - to whom it applies with equal force. South Africa is, in fact, a classic example of a society acting openly as the enemy of its members: a society which must eventually collapse unless its outlook is changed, for it is feeding on its own body. An absolute condition of our life with others is justice for all, and it is useless to talk of "improving race relations" until this very fundamental condition has been satisfied to the best of our ability. It cannot be stressed too strongly that the African's claim to a

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living wage is not based on charity: it is based on justice as strict as that which forbids one man to steal from another.

THE OBSTACLES TO A LIVING WAGE.

In many other countries the claims we have outlined are satisfied to a very large extent by the employers of labour, who pay the requisite 'living wage' to their workers and thus enable them to provide in great measure for their own housing. In South Africa, however, with our multi-racial society and the consequences which arise therefrom, the payment of a wage fully in keeping with the needs of the African presents certain problems. For example, we have to accept the fact that the average African has a very low standard of skill and economic usefulness when expressed in terms of industrial productivity and output per man hour. In the economic sense, he may not be worth a higher wage. But in the majority of cases this is because the African is prevented by public opinion and by the policies of the Trade Unions from developing his skill and natural talents in order to make himself more useful economically to the community at large, and thus justify a wage more in keeping with his true needs.

RESPONSIBILITY.

If we ponder these facts it will be apparent that the inability of the majority of urban Africans to provide adequately for their own housing and other needs stems principally from the entire socio-economic structure which has been erected - and is being closely guarded - by the European community as a whole in South Africa, and which finds its embodiment in the State. The European community desires this particular structure because it fears that anything else would result in the destruction of White civilisation in South Africa. But if we want matters this way, then in justice we cannot escape the communal responsibility to fulfil a grave moral obligation towards the African in a great many other ways - including the matter of housing and all which that implies.

While it is true, however, that the entire European community must bear the main responsibility for the present state of affairs, nevertheless the employer is concerned in a special way, for he is the direct beneficiary of the fruits of African labour and, in the absence of circumstances such as a mutual agreement to the contrary, is under a strict moral obligation to pay his

workers...



workers a living wage. The fact that the employer may be prevented, by circumstances largely beyond his control, from using African labour to better economic advantage does not exonerate him from his moral obligation.

SOLUTION.

The sub-economic urban housing problem is, of course, a double problem: how to eliminate the existing housing backlog, and how to prevent its recurrence. The present arrangement is that the backlog should be financed very largely by local authorities, employing loans where necessary from the Central Government. It is the opinion of this Federation that any arrangement whereby a relatively small number of people have to shoulder the main responsibility - when it should be borne by the entire European community of South Africa - is both illogical and morally unjust, and therefore not in accord with the application of true Christian principles. This matter is not a purely "local affair"; it is a grave national problem of some magnitude which must be solved on a national level.

From the purely economic aspect, if the present arrangement continues indefinitely and other factors remain equal, the annual natural growth rate of the urban native population and the high influx **rate of Africans into** the towns may well develop a financial burden which will eventually become quite intolerable for local ratepayers.

The only sound course, from a moral as well as from an economic point of view, is for the African to be permitted and encouraged in every way to develop his skills and talents and thus place himself in a position where he can command a wage which, among other things, will enable him to provide in large measure for his own housing, whether by purchase or by rental on a long lease basis. This development will necessarily take time, however, and in the interim period employers must be required to provide the African worker with housing consistent with his nature as a human being and his status in society. Statutory minimum wage standards must be laid down wherever possible and revised from time to time by the competent authorities to enable the African and his family to live as human beings, and not merely as economic tools of production. If employers do not provide accommodation, however, the Central Government should finance it and the housing should be provided in suitable areas in collaboration with the local authorities. In this event, the defaulting employers must accept the burden of a housing levy to assist

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the State in its task. Obviously, this form of taxation should not be imposed on employers who are paying a living wage to their workers or who provide adequate accommodation for them.

The existing backlog in sub-economic housing must be eliminated as rapidly as possible by the Central Government, acting through a Ministry of Housing and in collaboration with the local authorities. There are numerous practical difficulties in this regard, but the need is so great and the problem so urgent that ways and means must be found to overcome any obstacles involved. The heavy financial burden and any subsequent losses which may accrue from, for example, the sub-economic rentals charged, must be borne by the Central Government. This arrangement appears to be entirely equitable since the European community as a whole must, and to a large extent would in this way, share the responsibility for the neglect which has allowed such a grave problem to develop.

If established townships have to be transferred to more suitable areas, the Africans concerned must not suffer as a result, for this would cause unjust hardship to a people who are not responsible for the appalling conditions under which so many of them now live.

#### CONCLUSION.

The Catholic Federation is convinced that along the lines indicated is to be found the only lasting solution to the problem of housing the urban African. The cost will be heavy, but not as great as the price the whole of South Africa will pay eventually if the solution of this problem is delayed much longer.

It must be remembered that the State is the servant of all the people. The purpose of the State's entire activity, therefore, must be the permanent realisation of the common good, and not only the good of a particular section of the community. It must be the aim of the State in this case to remove any hindrance, whether legislative, political or economic, to the natural development of the African and to the provision in suitable areas of adequate housing facilities for him and for his family.

Responsible citizens of South Africa have a serious obligation in justice to do their utmost to remedy the existing state of affairs. They have votes and therefore they have also a say in the government of the country;

they...



they must use those votes, and also their voices in the form of Public Opinion, to ensure that the African is treated as his Creator intended that he should be treated: in full accord with his rights and dignity as a human being.

South Africa is a land of great promise, but "the test of our progress will be not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it will be whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

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