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## Batlharos, a small urban centre

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### INTRODUCTION

In May 1990, Rosmarin and Associates Inc. were appointed by a group of consulting engineers to conduct a socio-economic study to assess the affordability and feasibility of providing a water system for what was termed the "rural" settlement of Batlharos. However, while involved in the study it became apparent to the author that the settlement was a stable, urban community with few linkages to a rural economy. Prior to the study, there were certain expectations as to the probable findings of the research, such as a high percentage of aged people and a strong dependence on pension remittance. These were largely based on commonly held assumptions about the character of places like Batlharos and their role within the local and regional context, both implied and expressed in policy and in theoretical work on urbanisation and development in South Africa. However, personal observations about life in Batlharos, borne out by the research findings, began to challenge and expose what appeared to be possible misconceptions and to suggest a re-evaluation of such places and their place in the planning agenda.

### URBANISATION PERSPECTIVES

It is well documented that past urbanisation policy and legislation has severely retarded and distorted urbanisation in South Africa, with the resulting spatial pattern being one of displaced urbanisation. This is taken to mean urbanisation that would naturally have taken place in the major metropolises in South Africa has rather occurred some distance away, often in remote, inaccessible areas, with distorted linkages and relationships to major centres. These settlements are often referred to as peri-urban, semi-urban, quazi-urban areas and/or "rural slums". In general, they remain under-researched and victims of broad generalisations.

To date, analyses of the evolution of settlements such as Batlharos have also tended to stress the role of South African legislation in the establishment and development of such centres. However,

this preoccupation with political determinism has tended to overshadow the equally important role played by material factors and has resulted in the complexity and individuality of places like Batlharos being overlooked. Further, this paper suggests that historical factors have created an economic and social reality which is now well entrenched and that notwithstanding political change in South Africa, certain material conditions of people's lives will continue to circumscribe their location and other choices.

An incomplete understanding arises out of not only an over-emphasis on political factors in the structuring of urbanisation in South Africa, but also a poor body of detailed empirical research of individual settlements.

Within the current urbanisation debate, Batlharos would be seen as a "peri-urban" settlement and a place in transition. It would be ascribed a predominantly "rural" or "underdeveloped" character. In the light of the study findings, however, it will be argued that Batlharos is more appropriately described as a small urban centre, where the process of transition is virtually complete, and where material realities appear to dominate peoples' lives.

### SMALL URBAN CENTRES

Given the limited documentation and recognition of small urban centres in South Africa, international literature on the topic proved more useful. It was apparent that strong parallels exist between the international and local experiences regarding such centres. Studies of small urban centres elsewhere highlight common trends and characteristics, and raise some fundamental issues that should be explored.

In general, it would appear that small urban centres are poorly researched and tend to be misconceptualised. In this regard, Hardoy and Satterthwaite (1986) note that "...detailed studies of Third World nations' or regions' urban systems, of their evolution and development over

time and of their complete interactions with social, economic and political forces both within and from outside this system, are very rare". (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1986:4)(ref. 2).

The same authors in their comprehensive analysis on small and intermediate centres point out that there are some characteristics common to such centres. These are as follows:

- a considerable proportion of the working population are engaged in activities which are not related to agricultural production;
- there is often a limited role played by administration, with a concentration of lower level services such as clinics and education facilities;
- centres have a limited role in regional or national production but do serve as important places for the surrounding areas by increasing peoples' access to goods and services;
- they are centres with which most of the rural and agricultural production have their strongest links.

In particular, they view as common to small urban centres, the "vulnerability of their economic and employment base since they are so often largely dependant on just one good or service..." and "...a lack of power and resources in the hands of the local government based there to play a much larger role in encouraging a larger and more diverse economic base" (Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1986:328)(ref. 2).

Having said the above, it must be stressed that one cannot generalise about small urban centres and that there can be diversity with regard to origin, role, linkages and definitions, depending on locally specific conditions. What is evident from the literature is the need to look at local conditions, needs and resources and to formulate policy accordingly.

#### CASE STUDY OF BATLHAROS

Batlharos, found in the Kudumane district in Bophuthatswana, is referred to as a "tribal village". The layout of the centre is quite typical of many such places, that is, a grid iron pattern which in Batlharos spreads along the road in a linear fashion for approximately 6kms. The original settlements occurred in the "sub-villages" of Gamonare and Lothlakeng, with the development of Mathlobolo and Takeng being more recent. The average plot size is 50m

x 50m or 2500m<sup>2</sup>. The internal roads have not been scraped and the only road which is in adequate condition is the main road which is tarred for the stretch that runs through the village. Water is mainly collected from private boreholes and the Kuruman River. Both sources are polluted and pose a considerable health threat. The majority of households have pit latrines, with some families having to rely on open fields. Only a limited number of households have electricity. It will be shown later in the paper that despite the apparent lack of development in Batlharos, residents actively choose to live in the village as opposed to major metropolitan areas.

Currently Batlharos is growing at approximately 3,1% per annum and has an existing population of approximately 17500 people. In a detailed analysis of the growth rate for Batlharos and the length of time people have remained in the area, it was indicated that during the eight year period 1981-1989, in-migration was higher than that of natural growth. This would suggest that urbanisation is still taking place in Batlharos.

There are a number of social facilities which already exist in the centre. Batlharos has a total of six schools, of which the technical school and high school certainly serve a sub-regional need. An old mission hospital, the Tshwarancano hospital, which also serves a regional need, is centrally located in Batlharos itself.

With the assistance of the locally appointed Water Steering Committee, local interviewers were used to survey 203 households. These results, along with a literature search and a limited number of oral histories were used to complete the study.

The household size of 7,0 was comparable to other areas in Southern Africa. It was found that there was a low number of households per stand, the average being 1.1. It is quite possible that this is linked to the ready availability of land for residential development and expansion. It became apparent from the results that one could not generalise for the settlement as a whole, as there were differentiations between the subvillages for factors such as income level, level of employment, household size, age structure. This differentiation has implications for upgrading of the centre as it means that there is a stratification in affordability levels and long

term sustainability of systems provided.

It was evident from the residents' responses to the questions that an overwhelming majority (97%) intended remaining in Batlharos for a long time. As further evidence of permanency, there were signs of investment in the area, such as the shift from mud to brick and block housing, the number of private boreholes which were constructed to improve their water source, and the number of households who were prepared to pay additional costs to install individual yard water connections.

Given the fact that residents do not have security of tenure, the abovementioned issues certainly display a commitment to remaining in the centre.

While people were predominantly employed in semi-skilled or unskilled positions, there was a percentage who were employed in jobs which required skills. Approximately 32% of the employed population were employed in Batlharos itself, mainly at the social institutions such as schools and hospital. The local employment levels demonstrate that social services can be an important employment source in the local context.

When examining the employment structure and linkages in Batlharos, it was apparent that people's links with agriculture had declined, and that they were now linked to urban-based employment opportunities. Further, the employment profile of the community indicated that none of the household heads or household members perceived themselves as farmers or as deriving income from agriculture. This is not to say that there are no households who engage in agricultural practices, but if they do, it remains hidden. It could be argued, then, that with the limited or hidden level of agricultural practice, juxtaposed with a dependency on the formal wage economy, Batlharos is dependant upon, and linked to an urban system.

From observations made and the survey results, it was apparent that there is a lack of a productive base in Batlharos itself, and that residents are dependant upon employment elsewhere. It is clear that Batlharos' primary role is a reproductive one as opposed to a productive one. This is highlighted by the fact that many people moved to Batlharos to take advantage of goods necessary for reproduction, such as facilities and services. While a small percentage did move to the centre to be close to work opportunities, this was overshadowed by the need for

services and facilities. Further, when residents were asked in an open-ended question to voice their dislikes about Batlharos, the majority cited problems relating to services and facilities. That is, there was an emphasis on reproductive aspects as opposed to those dealing with production.

The oral histories were useful in gaining an in-depth understanding of how residents themselves viewed the centre. Some of the most essential perceptions are that people see themselves as being a permanent urban community. Further, they indicated that they liked living there as it is a peaceful, tranquil and secure environment.

It was also voiced by residents that they saw more opportunities existing in a place like Batlharos than would be available to them if they were living in a major urban centre such as Johannesburg. This was supported by statements such as "my child will get an education here but not in Johannesburg" or "it is harder to get a job in Johannesburg".

What is apparent from the results is that people chose to live in Bathlaros both because the cost of living was generally lower than in proclaimed urban areas, and because the centre gave them a sense of place and identity. It is this material reality more than political constraints which appears to keep people in Batlharos.

In summary then, Batlharos demonstrates many of the characteristics of small and intermediate centres occurring elsewhere (Refer : Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1986)-(ref. 2). It is apparent from the results of the study that the centre is dependant upon and strongly linked to an urban economy with no overt links to agricultural practice. The centre acts as a reproductive space where essential services have been provided which are not only used by the local community, but also serve a greater regional need. The fact that there is a very weak, virtually non-existent productive base within Batlharos should not undermine its important reproductive role.

#### PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

From the outset it should be stressed that there is an evident need for detailed empirical research, in order to facilitate the development of specific theories relating to small and intermediate urban centres in South Africa.

It is only once their potential for development has been recognised that they can be adequately incorporated into regional policy and practice. Some planning implications can nonetheless be drawn from the Batlharos experience, and possible interventions suggested.

Firstly, in the specific case of Batlharos, it has been argued that the centre is essentially a dormitory or reproductive space which is largely dependant on productive bases in other urban centres. However, in population size Batlharos outnumbers many of these other "urban" centres, and has been shown to be serving not only its own important reproductive needs, but also those of the surrounding areas in respect of the provision of social facilities. Secondly, the research indicated that Batlharos is a stable and growing urban community whose permanence is assured. Any changes in political structures are unlikely to substantially affect Batlharos. These factors need to be recognised in the formulation of planning policy and strategies for the region.

A regional plan would need to incorporate and accommodate the interplay between the regional and the locally specific. Recognising the limited productive potential of centres such as Batlharos it is essentially within a regional context that the overall development of small urban centres can best be promoted. Intervention at a local level is nevertheless necessary. Given its important role as a reproductive and service centre, it is important to reinforce and improve its ability to serve local needs. The obvious starting point, and one which would meet the specific needs of the community in Batlharos would be the improvement of basic services and infrastructure. It is argued that any attempt to stimulate a local productive base would be largely ineffective and inappropriate.

What is required is a rethinking of regional policy, where an eclectic approach is adopted, including a variety of development strategies. Such strategies could incorporate both top-down and bottom-up approaches. Overriding all of the above, it is a need to effectively incorporate the local community to ensure that their real needs are adequately addressed.

The role of the planner in this process should be a facilitating one, mediating

and negotiating between the interests of both the local community and government or financing bodies.

The strategies proposed above will be limited by the extent to which large urban centres are given preference and priority in terms of input, funding and development projects. The research has hopefully demonstrated, however, that some resources should be redirected towards smaller centres in order to upgrade living standards and to reinforce their ability to function as a reproductive space.

As a final point, it must be emphasised that no one policy will be appropriate for all small centres. Local conditions, resources, levels of politicisation and stability should all be considered when developing planning proposals, which should attempt to address the specific needs of individual communities.

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