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TRAC

Transvaal Rural Action Committee

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THE OLD BRITS LOCATION ('OUKASIE'): a clear indication that forced removals have not stopped

In February 1985 the Minister of Co-operation and Development, Dr Viljoen, announced that all forced removals were to be stopped. The case of the old Brits location illustrates very clearly that the South African government has not renounced its policy of forced removals but is merely pursuing its policy in a more sophisticated guise. It is apparent that the government is determined to move the people of the old Brits location to Lethlabile, a resettlement area bordering Bophuthatswana.

A SKETCH OF THE OLD BRITS LOCATION

The government has not built a 'house' in the location since the 1930's. The few tin shacks built by the government and that masquerade as state housing are rented and serviced for R24 a month. The only services are refuse removal and removal of night-soil. The location has a bucket latrine system. It has no drainage system, no tarred roads, no electricity and no street lighting.

The large majority of 'Oukasie' residents live in privately built houses. The plot-holders have built houses not only to accommodate their own families but also to accommodate the many location residents who do not have their own homes. The stands are generally very crowded and in some cases there are up to 30 families occupying one stand. On average there are 3 families per stand.

This over-crowding is due to the government's refusal to build any more houses or allow people to occupy land outside of the very small area proclaimed for African occupation. Despite the availability of adjoining farm land, the government has refused to allocate more land for expansion. The landlords own the houses but there is no freehold. There are approximately 1 000 landlords in the location.

The condition of the location clearly reveals that there has been a deliberate policy of government neglect. It is apparent that through the years the government has severely limited the amount of money allocated to the old Brits location and in this way has deliberately allowed the location to decline.

However, despite the deliberate withholding of state funds this 55 year old location with a population of 15 000 people (now down to approximately 10 000) has the vitality characteristic of a small, densely populated village.

Most people living in 'Oukasie' were born there and there is clearly a feeling of belonging. The location is also very different to the government built locations. There is a great deal of variation in housing design and street layout. There are a number of solidly built and attractive houses. An unusual feature of the location is the abundance of trees. Lately several parks have been built by the community adding to the setting of the location.

Most of the people are employed in one of the large factories in the area. Examples are Firestone, Alfa Romeo (recently closed), Afrox, Lumex, Cliff's Engineering, ATC, Bosch and Steelbrite (B&S). Many of these companies are multi-nationals or have strong financial and technical ties with multi-nationals. There is a history of strong trade union organisation and struggle in Brits. The Brits Action Committee, formed to fight the removals, is mostly made up of members who are actively involved in or have had experience of trade union organisation.

A big advantage of the location is that it is only 4 kilometres from the industrial area of Brits. Many of the residents are thus within walking distance of their workplace.

Unemployment in the old Brits location is very high. The recession (or the desire of some employers to escape from an organised working class) has led to the closure of one of the two Steelbrite factories in the area with the loss of 850 jobs; the Alfa Romeo factory with the loss of approximately 1 200 jobs, and the Putco bus building section with the loss of 400 jobs. If people are moved to Lethlabile, a further 20 kilometres away from the industrial area, unemployed workers are going to find it even more difficult to find jobs. The transport costs of employed workers will increase considerably.

LETHLABILE

The government has stated that Lethlabile has been designed as a model township. This is highly questionable. Besides the 175 built houses, for sale at R4 000, Lethlabile looks like any other resettlement camp. Most people live in the most appalling conditions. Those families that have not been able to purchase one of the 175 brick houses are allocated a tin structure measuring approximately nine square metres. They are then expected to build a house on the allocated site within two years.

It is predictable that due to the excessively high rate of unemployment in the area most of these families will never be able to afford to build a proper house and Lethlabile will become a worse slum than the Brits location. The only advantage of Lethlabile is that each plot is supplied with a tap and a flush toilet. The crucial question is why in 55 years the government has not built similar facilities in the old location.

Possibly the most negative aspect of Lethlabile is its geographical location. It is situated 24 kilometres from Brits and borders Bophuthatswana. Although the government has promised not to incorporate Lethlabile into Bophuthatswana, its geographical location makes the likelihood of incorporation strong. The residents of Lethlabile would then have to endure the intensely repressive, union bashing administration of Bophuthatswana. They would also face the possibility of losing their South African citizenship.

The government has, in the past, broken its word on the issue of incorporation, the latest example being the cases of the townships, Ekangala and Vleifontein. The residents of Ekangala and Vleifontein were told they would not be incorporated into any bantustan. Subsequently, Vleifontein has been incorporated into Venda and Ekangala is to become part of Kwandebele.

A very strange feature of Lethlabile is the cemetery. It must be one of the few cemeteries where the graves have been dug prior to actual deaths. There are approximately 500 open graves most of which are waterlogged.

THE PROCESS OF REMOVAL

No consultation

The decision to remove the location has been brewing for some time. When the MP for Brits, Dr J P Grobler, was asked to comment on the removal he stated that he had been working on the removal since 1977. He went on to say that the community had been consulted and that they are moving voluntarily.

Dr Grobler's statement that the residents of the old Brits location were adequately consulted is untrue. The community was not consulted and was given no opportunity to discuss the issue. The residents were first told about the impending removal of the old Brits location to Lethlabile at the beginning of December 1985 at a meeting called by the community council. The community councillors, all of whom presently live in Lethlabile, were elected by a small proportion of the residents. There had been no public announcement of the removal prior to that meeting.

Parliament was informed of the government's intention definitely to remove the Brits location to Lethlabile in February, 1986.

Since the announcement that the Brits location was to be moved was made, things have moved very swiftly. All the 175 houses already built in Lethlabile have been sold and approximately 800 sites have been allocated. A total of about 4 000 people have moved to Lethlabile.

This sizeable and rapid movement does not mean that Dr Grobler's statement that the majority of the residents of the old Brits location want to move to Lethlabile, or that those who have moved have done so voluntarily, is correct.

Freezing of empty stands for occupation

The process by which people have moved to Lethlabile needs to be scrutinised. Up until the beginning of April an important factor pressurising people to move was that once a landlord had agreed to move, generally after being offered a large lump sum in compensation, all the dwellings on his plot were demolished regardless of the condition they were in, and all the tenants had to move out. The site was then frozen for any future development or occupation. Thus many of the people who moved were ex-tenants of landlords who moved to Lethlabile. These ex-tenants were forced to move from the old Brits location because they had no alternative accommodation.

Since January residents who have requested empty Development Board houses or stands have had their applications refused. Instead the Development Board's policy was to tear down houses as soon as they became vacant. When a Brits Action Committee member went to apply for a vacant stand or house he was told to tell his lawyer to shove the application he had drafted up his a.... In early April the Development Board's policy was challenged in court. The judge ruled that there was no legal basis for this process of dis-establishing the location by the back door and ordered that the first house that became vacant was to be allocated to the resident who took the Board to court.

The government's deliberate neglect of the location

As indicated earlier the government by deliberately neglecting the location and building superior services in Lethlabile has certainly strongly encouraged people to move. There is no doubt that many people in the old location live in very poor conditions due to the government's refusal to upgrade or extend the location. For some people Lethlabile offers a possible escape from these conditions.

The government also supplies free buses for people to go and view Lethlabile and pays for all removal costs.

Repression and violence

A very important factor which hastened the movement of people from 'Oukasië' was the action of the police and the emergence of vigilantes. Petrol bombings, a grenade attack and a murderous bomb attack on the leaders of the anti-removal struggle combined with an almost constant police presence in what was previously a very peaceful location severely dampened the determination of a sizeable part of the population to stay. Details of these actions are covered later in the newsletter.



Senzeni Park, Brits old location

Forcing 'Oukasie' residents to bury their dead in Lethlabile

In the last 6 years the residents of the old Brits location have been forced by the government to bury their dead in Lethlabile. This is despite the fact that there is land available for extending the old Brits location cemetery. After a great deal of pressure the Development Board recently gave permission for a person to be buried in the old Brits location.

Employers' silence

Employers, by initially remaining silent on the issue and by offering loans to their workers to build in Lethlabile, have played a major role in encouraging the movement to Lethlabile. The question that must be asked is why have they never offered loans to workers to improve their homes in the old Brits location.

WHY IS THE GOVERNMENT SO KEEN TO MOVE THE OLD BRITS LOCATION?

The official reasons for the removal are (1) due to a supposed land shortage, expansion of the old location is impossible and (2) that the old Brits location is a slum.

As has been stated the location adjoins extensive farm lands and there is little doubt that if the government was willing it could buy up the land required.

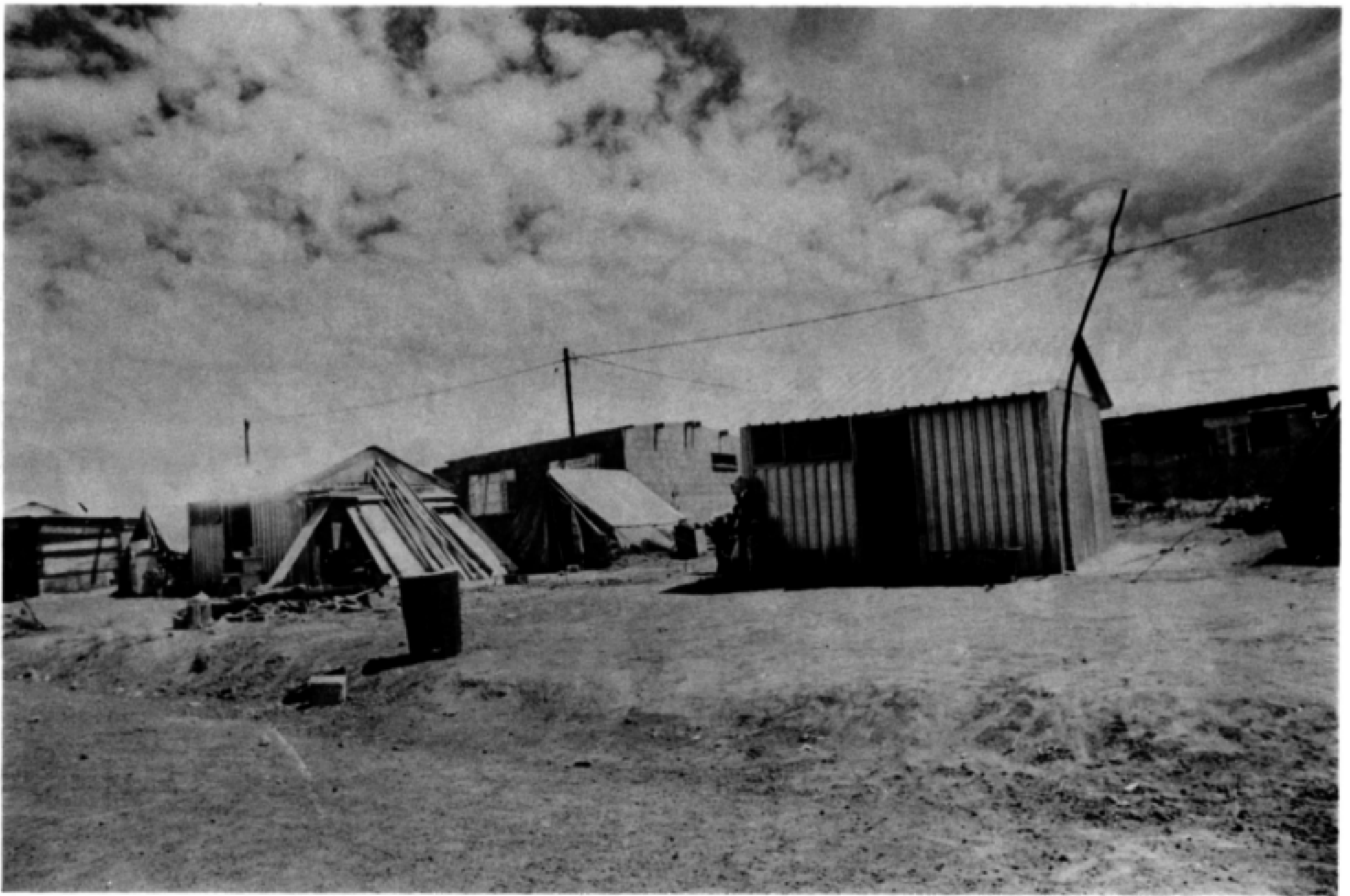
The argument that the Brits location is a slum requires more serious attention. On the one hand there are many solid and attractive houses in the location and the old location has some appealing features. However,

there is no doubt that there is some truth in the official view that the old location is a slum, though, as has been said, the main reason for this is the government's deliberate neglect. Why does the government not allocate the money used to build Lethlabile to upgrade the Brits location? It can only be concluded that the government does not want to retain the old Brits location. It is determined to move 'Oukasie' under the pretence that it is an irredeemable slum.

Although not officially stated, a central factor motivating the government's desire to move the 'Oukasie' seems to be its proximity to the white group area of the town, especially the recently built white suburb of Elandsrand. There is little doubt that many white residents of Brits have put pressure on the local MP and would be delighted to see the location moved 20 kilometres away.

The conservative nature of the white residents of Brits is illustrated by the fact that in Brits in the 1981 election the ultra-right wing HNP obtained 3517 votes and the Nationalist party obtained 5362 votes, a majority of only 1845. At a recent Nationalist Party meeting, the deputy minister of Foreign Affairs, Louis Nel, was not able to deliver his address due to the strong presence of ultra-rightwingers.

Another possible reason for the removal could be the government's and the employers' determination to smash the strong trade union movement that has emerged in the Brits area. Incorporating Lethlabile into Bophuthatswana would help to weaken the very strong trade union movement that has developed



Lethlabile: The new 'model township'

in the area. The Bophuthatswana administration's record makes it very likely that active trade unionists living in Lethlabile will be severely harassed if Lethlabile is incorporated.

HOW IS THE STRUGGLE BEING WAGED?

Community mobilisation

The community has been mobilised against the removal. By the end of the first week in March approximately 4000 people had signed a petition against the removal. From early December regular and well-attended public meetings have been called by the Brits Action Committee. These meetings have resolved to fight the removals to the bitter end.

The actions of the trade unions

The Action Committee, through the trade unions, is putting pressure on the large employers in the area to challenge the removal. Firestone has already been challenged as to why it donated \$15 000 for the building of a creche in Lethlabile. Firestone has promised to reconsider the decision. Firestone has also been challenged on its granting of loans to people wanting to move to Lethlabile. This issue is still under discussion.

Towards the end of march, the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), the National and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU), the Brits Action Committee and TRAC met with management of organised factories in the area and with the Federated Chamber of Industries (FCI) and the Steel, Engineering, Iron Federa-

tion of South Africa (SEIFSA). The employer organisations and management were asked to put pressure on the government to drop the decision to relocate the old location. The FCI and SEIFSA have subsequently been in contact with the government on the removal issue. A further meeting with employers was held at the end of April. At this meeting employers were called upon to make a public statement voicing their objection to any forced removal of old Brits location residents and to any intention to deproclaim the location. The FCI and SEIFSA agreed to this and also committed themselves to help finance the upgrading of the location.

The second meeting with the employers had some results. Dr Grobler, the local Nationalist MP, agreed to meet with the Action Committee. At this historic meeting Grobler agreed that nobody would be forced to move from the old Brits location. However, he refused to give any guarantee that the location would not be deproclaimed as an African area.

International worker organisations have also been drawn into the struggle. The International Metalworkers Federation sent a telex to P W Botha strongly condemning the government's attempts to remove the old Brits location.

Upgrading report

Another important aspect of the struggle is the plan to present a report to the community, government and employers illustrating that upgrading the old Brits location is certainly possible both physically and financially. A team of professionals has been assembled and is working closely with the community in the drawing up of the report.

The legal strategy

The decision by the Development Board not to allocate vacant stands and/or board houses to Brits residents was challenged in the Supreme Court. The judge ruled on the side of the Brits resident who applied for the first available house or stand and ordered that the Development Board allocate the first available house to the applicant. This favourable judgement means that the Development Board will have to consider every application for a house or vacant site and will be challenged in court if they do not accede to a reasonable request. The board has agreed, under threat of a further Supreme Court application to stop the demolition of all further homes. At the time of going to press a further 6 houses have been allocated by the Development Board.

HARASSMENT OF ACTIVISTS AND THE COMMUNITY

Since February 1986, the peacefulness of the old Brits location has been shattered. The Brits Action Committee has been under intense police surveillance.

For two nights after a public meeting held towards the end of February, police virtually occupied the township. None of the Brits Action Committee could sleep at home for fear of arrest or attack. The house of the public relations officer of the Action Committee was invaded by approximately 60 police and soldiers. After a meeting between the Action Committee, its lawyer and the police, the police presence in the location decreased.

In the early morning of 7 March, the houses of the chairperson of the Action Committee, Marshall Buys, and the president of the Young Christian Workers, Jacob Mohatshe were petrol-bombed. Shots were fired at residents when they tried to pursue the attackers. Nobody was hurt in these two attacks, though two rooms in Mr Buys' house were badly burnt.

A public meeting held at the Roman Catholic church

hall that evening to discuss the petrol-bombing was teargassed. Many people were badly cut by glass as they desperately tried to escape from the packed hall. The tear-gassing occurred immediately after a speaker requested that the soldiers crawling towards the hall go home as they were not protecting the people.

On Saturday morning, 8 March, the chairperson of the Brits Action Committee was arrested and initially charged with arson. The charges were subsequently withdrawn. He was released on Tuesday, 11 March.

In the early hours of Tuesday morning, 11 March, the house of the secretary of the Action Committee, Mr Sello Ramakobye, was petrol-bombed. Immediately thereafter the home of the parents of a leading activist, Mr Leonard Brown, was hand-grenaded. At this stage nobody has been arrested in connection with the incidents. Mr Brown was detained on 15 April, 1986 and has subsequently been charged with attempted murder and intimidation.

Tuesday, 27 May, was a tragic day in the history of the Brits struggle. A lethal home-made bomb was thrown into the house of MAWU organiser, Mr David Modimoeng. Mr Modimoeng's wife was killed as the house was ripped apart. Miraculously, Mr Modimoeng and his children were not badly hurt.

A FINAL NOTE

At this stage the government has refused to publicly announce that the old Brits location is no longer under threat of removal to Lethlabile. If the government goes ahead with this removal it will once again illustrate not only that the policy of forced removal is still on the agenda but that official promises cannot be trusted. The remaining residents of the old Brits location are adamant that they are not going to move. Moving to Lethlabile is non-negotiable. The common saying in the old Brits location is 'Ga go mo re yang, re dula go na mo': We are not going anywhere, we are here to stay.

STOP PRESS:

Many members of the Brits Action Committee have been detained under the state of emergency.

APPENDIX

A copy of the statement on the Brits removal issued by the Brits Action Committee follows.

Brits Action Committee **P O Box 2324, Brits, 0250**

Brits old location is a sprawling shanty township situated three kilometres from Brits town, four kilometres from the industrial area (where most of its people are working) and a stone's throw from a new white suburb. It has a population of not less than 15 000 inhabitants.

On December 7, 1985, the local Community Council announced that the township would be resettled at Lethlabile, 'The model township of the future', some 20 kilometres away from the town. The township is separated by a street from Moboloka which is in Bophuthatswana. Families would be provided with a shack (12 feet by 14 feet) and a tent on a site and be expected to build proper houses in two years' time. They further stated that the removal was voluntary.

On December 8, 1985, the inhabitants called a general meeting where they pledged opposition to the removal because:

1. They felt there was pressure from the neighbouring white suburb to have them removed.
2. There was no sense in moving from a shanty town to another shanty town, i.e. shacks and lodgers in Lethlabile.
3. This was an attempt to break the solidarity of the workers in the strong trade union movement which started in approximately 1980, and is growing stronger.
4. This is a forced removal because they are not allowing people to occupy evacuated stands.
5. The new township is eventually going to be incorporated into the Bophuthatswana homeland, as has been done with Mothohtlung.
6. The graveyard is water-logged.
7. Even under such an economic climate, the government is not providing housing for the people.

To this effect, the people elected a Brits Action Committee, consisting of 8 members.

The people's demands

1. The main road to be tarred in the old location.
2. A proper sewerage and drainage system be built.
3. Proper befitting schools be built and money people have donated towards extending of the present school be paid back.
4. Land on the surrounding area be purchased and freehold rights as promised be extended.
5. The township be sold to residents.
6. A graveyard be made and corpses be exhumed from the new one (Lethlabile).

Projects of the committee

1. Help people who need open stands to occupy them.
2. Help business people applying for licences.
3. Embark on self-help projects:
 - 3.1 build proper brick toilets for all the stands.
 - 3.2 build parks.
 - 3.3 provide lodgers and 'rebellious family members' left homeless due to the landlord moving, with financial assistance for temporary housing.
4. Acquire surveyors to assess the actual values of the houses in the old township, even the Lethlabile.
5. Establish if Lethlabile is habitable.

The Chairman

The Secretary

The Treasurer