



MEDIA STATEMENT

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DAG condemns the divisive approach to criminalise the homeless

A recent online form circulated on social media by a group calling themselves "Save Cape Town" is encouraging residents, business owners and ratepayers to submit complaints about the rampant homelessness that is visible in Cape Town, with the intention of sharing these complaints with officials at the City of Cape Town. Part of the form reads "the City Council is inviting ratepayers, residents and business owners to add their voices to the legal arguments that will be made to uphold the relevant by-laws". The circulation of this form comes in the wake of a Western Cape High Court lawsuit filed by eleven homeless people against the City of Cape Town, calling to question the constitutionality of City by-laws that have the effect of criminalising homelessness.

The Development Action Group (DAG) condemns this approach from "Save Cape Town" and City that seeks to divide opinions and criminalise homelessness.

Firstly, these forms and the approach they represent are divisive between the 'haves' and 'have nots' and will incite animosity rather than building trust and empathy. The form solicits examples of behaviour worthy of reporting, inciting complainants to focus only on negatives, and to report behaviour which is inevitably part of the survival strategies of any homeless person. Importantly, the narrative employed by this approach obscures the realities faced by people living on the streets and seeks to criminalise their every-day activities rather than to address the structural reasons for their situation. People living on the street have few options for shelter or support, and these forms shift the focus from the need for alternative avenues for social services and housing to building animosity and fear. A 2020 study found that while there were around 14 000 homeless people in Cape Town, there were only about 2 500 beds available in shelters for this population. Many of the people sleeping on Cape Town's streets have simply no other option for shelter. This, paired with the state's inability to deliver sufficient transitional and social housing opportunities, paints a bleak picture of the lack of housing opportunities for Cape Town's urban poor.

The systemic causes of homelessness are complex, and responses to it must therefore be well-informed and comprehensive. Downtown Los Angeles has experienced significant homelessness to the degree that large square city blocks have been designated as 'Skid Row'. Research into the problem of homeless in this area indicated that this was not necessarily a legal or by-law matter- but rather a

manifestation of several social development issues, abuse, a lack of housing opportunities and mental health issues. One of the other contributing factors to the concentration of the homelessness in this particular area was the proximity to various social development services, support offices and shelters which the homeless needed access to. In response, the municipality in Downtown LA has worked in conjunction with various institutions to provide the necessary land and means to support the homeless, rather than criminalising their existence on the streets. Whilst the City of Los Angeles did not get everything right in the case of Skid Row, it completely differed in approach to the one exemplified by the City of Cape Town and these "Save Cape Town" forms. It provided the necessary infrastructure to support the homeless, rather than choosing to criminalise them.

Secondly, perhaps groupings like "Save Cape Town" and other concerned residents should be taking the same approach of filling out forms and running referendums for all other areas of performance of City of Cape Town- for instance, the current status on the delivery of inner-city social housing units since 2016? Perhaps we should we run similar forms calling the City to account on the service delivery and upgrading issues facing informal settlements? This idea was employed by the Strandfontein Homeless Action Committee, who have circulated a similar online form encouraging people living on the streets to complain about mistreatment and harassment they have faced at the hands of SAPS and City Law Enforcement Officials. If the City of Cape Town responds to these kinds of 'forms' as a tool for accountability, then maybe it is time for concerned citizens like those of "Save Cape Town" to use these methods to lobby for systemic change in our unequal and divided city, including housing and social support programmes aimed at addressing the underlying causes of homelessness.

DAG condemns the approach represented by these circulated online complaint forms, which at their core criminalise the homeless and the landless and ignore any opportunities to partner with civil society to proactively address the systemic reasons for homeless in our city. The City of Cape Town must remember its obligation to be both developmental and participatory. One should not take precedence over the other. If the City genuinely wants to activate its citizenry for accountability, it should try to foster stronger partnerships and relationships with all its citizens, including the homeless.

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Established in 1986, the Development Action Group (DAG) is a leading non-profit, non-governmental organisation. DAG's mission is to create, implement and support community-centred developments to address economic, social, and spatial inequalities. DAG has been at the forefront of urban development initiatives for more than 30 years.