

Surviving on R4 a day

Homeless struggle in Durban

ZOHRA MOHAMED TEKE

DURBAN'S homeless migrants are forced to survive on R4 a day, with their plight getting worse each year, according to the latest survey conducted by the Organisation of Civic Rights (OCR).

The survey found among other things, that about 1 000 people sleep on the city's pavements each night, with the vast majority being foreign male economic refugees younger than 30 years old.

While more than 50 percent considered themselves self-employed, working as street vendors selling refreshments or other items, most earned an average of R4 a day – not even enough for a loaf of bread – while also having a family to support.

OCR chairman Iqbal Sayed has called the results of the survey a damning indictment on society, while laying the blame squarely at the doorstep of the eThekweni Municipality.

“The municipality has shifted the responsibility of the city's homeless on to other departments, but the president himself has proclaimed that local government is where delivery happens, and we believe that it is the council that needs to deal with the issue,” Sayed said.

“Billions of rands have been spent on World Cup infrastructure, yet we are unable to take care of the poor and those who seek shelter.”

Challenged on statements by city manager, Mike Sutcliffe, that the municipality had a “pro-poor policy”, Sayed said this did not go far enough in addressing the plight of the poor.

“The World Cup will not benefit the homeless either long or short term.

“We are lagging far behind other cities in addressing what is a growing problem, with little being done about it.”

Findings

The organisation's survey was a follow-up on its 2008 survey and the latest findings conclude that the plight of the homeless has deteriorated, rather than improved.

Tanzanians form the vast majority of migrants living on the streets, followed by those from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya and Burundi.

Most of those interviewed said they were often harassed by police at night, with many complaining of their personal belongings and refugee documents being confiscated.

Responding to the survey, Durban's Inner City Thekwini Regeneration and Urban Management Programme (iTrump) rejected accusations that the

municipality was responsible for the homeless.

“We endeavour to assist them, but it does not fall under our mandate,” said iTrump head Hoosen Moolla.

“It is the Department of Social Welfare, Human Settlements and so on that need to deal with these issues. Of course, we do not turn a blind eye as it concerns the city, which is why we conducted our own survey last year on the challenges, and we are in the process of implementing a number of our solutions.”

These include a homeless shelter linked with a job seekers centre, which followed the city's findings that many of the homeless had skills that could be turned into viable employment opportunities.

“We are creating a database of the homeless, together with their relevant skills, so their employment can also restore their self-respect and dignity.

“A proposal has also been made to turn the overnight facility in Mansell Road into a shelter and turn the derelict Table Tennis building into the job seekers centre. Obviously, we will need to partner with NGOs, business and other organisations to make this a success, and would welcome the idea of working with the OCR since the interest and goals are common,” Moolla said.