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To empower or to disempower - Klaus Schade

The world has just celebrated International Women's Day with calls for additional efforts to empower women. Similarly, empowering currently disadvantaged persons is high on our national agenda. However, it appears empowerment is limited to the formal side of society and the economy.

Vendors (often women) trying to make ends meet and cater not only for themselves, but for their children and families are chased away from places where they can earn some income instead of relying on handouts or food parcels from the foodbank. While there might be valid safety and health concerns about some of these activities these can in most cases certainly be resolved through advice regarding basic hygiene standards and through the provision of infrastructure such as waste skips, pit latrines, water points etc. Such measures would empower vendors and could create an environment where they can grow and some even migrate to the formal sector.

Migrants to urban areas are faced with a complete lack of serviced areas where they could settle and start building their and their children's future. They are left with no other choice than to take a piece of land and spend the little money they have on basic structures. Instead of demolishing the only assets the migrants have, local authorities have to develop the land, demarcate plots and provide basic services – water and sewerage. Between the plots space is left for roads that can be upgraded at a later stage. Likewise, access to the electricity grid can be provided at a later stage or residents invest in solar panels. Occupants receive title deeds, which will enable them to invest in the plot and improve it over time. They will be empowered to take their future into their own hands and leave assets for the next generation.

Not to be misunderstood – we cannot allow lawlessness to rule our country. However, much more efforts are needed to empower those in the informal sector and informal settlements to contribute to the social and economic development of the country rather than destroy and or confiscate the few assets they have and prolong their destitution. Overall, we need urban development policies and plans that are supportive of inclusive development, create vibrant, creative, innovative communities and reap the fruits of this creativity. The old adage still holds true today: The law is made for the men and women and not the men and women for the law.

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