

Rains lead to billboard theft

By [Tatenda Chiweshe](#)

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Heavy rains in Gauteng have exacerbated the theft of Soweto's billboards - they're durable and waterproof.

Billboards are being stolen. Flex material has incredible durability and water resistance properties and is particularly useful for roofing informal housing, vendor stands and other applications that most of us might never even dream of.



Informal housing in Soweto... Billboard materials are a popular choice for dwellings. (Image: Kevin James, via [wikimedia Commons](#))

While auditing billboards in Soweto today, I noticed a peculiar trend on the rise. Flex billboards are being cut out and the material is being removed and sold openly at various markets. We actually saw the material covering some roofs in the informal settlements while at the Dube Metro Rail station, an informal vendor had laid the material out and was selling it per square metre. He obviously had no shortage of buyers as another vendor close by was using the material to cover his wares.

It's not new, but...

This phenomenon is by no means new. The remarkable difference this time around was the sheer number of boards that had clearly been cut out. Undoubtedly, the heavy rains have brought in a new level of demand for the material. Even more concerning is the fact that once illicit traders find profit in any commodity, they are more likely to increase their activities even after the initial problem they are solving has been averted.

A quick-fix solution, while the industry figures out long-term, could be sustainable actions that would lead to educating the Metro Police on the issue. The one policeman I spoke to admitted that he had never thought to look out for people on billboard structures to see if they had the authority to change or remove the material. In fact, he went on to say that when they are dealing with illegal traders or informal settlements, they do not consider anyone with branded flex billboard material as potentially being in possession of stolen goods.

Not policed, but no easy task

This gave me the impression that this issue is not being actively policed. No easy feat as they would have to take into account the fact that many brands and media owners do the good work of providing their used material to these communities in possible recycling or community service efforts.

All industry stakeholders stand to lose out on this one. I, however, do not think the issue should not be approached with a 'blame-game' mentality, but rather with a collective effort to know where the problem areas are and address them together as vested stakeholders, including media owners, brand managers and agencies.

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