KEY FINDINGS

**THE CHALLENGE**

Across Africa, informal settlements struggle with poor housing, limited services and environmental hazards. But despite an increasing emphasis on participatory upgrading, communities are often constrained by lack of resources or technical knowledge to lead these processes, particularly when urban policies are designed and implemented without a clear understanding of local conditions. Access to adequate housing has been a major topic in post-apartheid South Africa and since 1994 both the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) and the Constitution of South Africa made assurances to reduce the housing crisis. Migration and poverty are major causes of informal settlements, as dwellers cannot afford to build or buy their own houses or access formal housing schemes. The City of Durban (eThekwini municipality) is one of the poorest metropolitan areas in South Africa with pressures from rapid urbanisation, limited resources and unstable political, social and economic constraints.

**THE ISULABANTU APPROACH**

ISULabaNtu sought to shift from the dependency syndrome on municipalities as providers of subsidised housing and to support communities by strengthening their capacity to guide urban development themselves. With a focus on Durban Metropolitan Area, the project has undertaken data collection, capacity building and community mapping, in collaboration with residents, to feed into the creation of an integrated toolkit- a set of guidelines and recommendations drawn from lessons learnt over the course of the project. These activities not only build capacity of residents on community-led approaches to construction management and service provision, but also promote the creation of partnerships with other stakeholders such as local businesses, policy makers and academics. Furthermore, the knowledge generated through the research has a wider relevance for cities in South Africa and other countries with similar challenges. Each informal settlement is unique with its own needs, requirements and self-organisation practices. Community-led upgrading is about full ownership of the upgrading, social cohesion, livelihood development and tenure security (ultimately by obtaining the title deeds). This means that upgrading is not just housing or service delivery but development of social fabric, including access to job opportunities, health facilities, schools, and public transport. It is therefore essential to build capacity and invest in further training in both communities and local authorities by understanding the minimum preconditions that unlock community participation in an upgrading project.

THE CASE STUDIES SITES

Three case study sites were selected among the Durban Metropolitan area: **Havelock, Piesang River and Namibia Stop 8**. In order to select the most appropriate case studies, interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders of the upgrading projects implemented in Durban were carried out and a set of criteria and related indicators were developed. A systematic analysis according to the criteria led to the final selection of three most suitable study sites.

**Namibia Stop 8**

Namibia Stop 8: Located on Haffajee’s land in the Ethekwini northern region, Inanda, on the outskirts of Durban in the South African province KwaZuluNatal, Namibia Stop 8 was recently built (2010 to 2014) by community contractors on a greenfield site, with the support of members of FEDUP and the uTshani fund. The residents were largely moved from two neighbouring areas (Namibia and Stop 8) as part of a reblocking exercise to make way for services in those neighbourhoods, and rehoused. The housing that was built was a mixture of government-provided (RDP) housing which was approx. 40sqm and unplastered; and a small number of houses built with the assistance of FEDUP members, which were larger (56sqm) and plastered. The site has piped water, electricity grid, access roads (although these do not reach all properties), and a sewage system. The site sits on a series of slight gradients, which cause issues with water run-off. The site suffers from water and electricity supply intermittency.

Piesang River: Piesang River (PR) is located near the townships of Inanda and KwaMashu, 25km to the north-west of Durban City Centre. IT was established through the purchase of land and its subdivision, followed by the gradual settling of adjacent land in the 1970s-80s. Civic structures were formed in late 1980s by the United Democratic Front, leading to land regularisation and the extension of infrastructure into the settlement. Since early 1990s, PR has undergone a gradual process of formal development. In the early 1990s, the civic organisation in PR was supported by the Built Environment Support Group, acting as project manager for the development of infrastructure and site allocation. The Homeless People’s Federation (and its supporting NGO- People’s Dialogue) later rose to prominence in PR, prioritising the construction of individual houses for its members. Around the same time the NGO Habitat for Humanity established itself in the settlement, offering loan funding for housing construction. The local authority eventually organised election of a representative committee to resolve tensions and differences between the priorities of these organisations, and to resolve questions about which households would have to be relocated.

Havelock: Havelock informal settlement is located 8km outside Durban central, close to the northern suburb of Greenwood Park. It is a relatively enclosed space, surrounded by formal housing located on a steep hillside made up of a mixture of municipality and privately-owned land. It suffers from a lack of social spaces and services (roads, accessibility, speed bumps). It faces several environmental hazards, including an illegal connection to electricity, flooding, naked electric wires around the settlement, a polluted stream with a sewage pipe at the lower end of the settlement. It has a mobilised community actively campaigning for an improvement to their housing. In 2012, the settlement conducted an in-depth enumeration of the informal structures on site. With the assistance of the Informal Settlements Network (ISN), workshops were hosted to train community-based enumerators. Outputs from the enumeration were tested with the community to validate them, and the dataset was spatially referenced via Geographical Information System (GIS).

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY**

The main aim was to meaningfully engage with communities on the basis of mutual benefit, in such a way that minimises risk for the community, and projects are sustainable within the community after our engagement is ended. The advantages of the involvement of community are more than cost savings; they result in improved prospects of project’s sustainability, sense of ownership and long-term satisfaction that all participants of housing upgrading deserve.

**ACTION RESEARCH AND CO-PRODUCTION**

Participatory action research endeavours to bring new forms of knowledge – rooted within the everyday experiences of ordinary people – to bear on issues, such as: health, migration, race and ethnicity, community development and sustainability. It emphasises the importance of *research with* as opposed to *research on*. It typically has the objectives of prompting learning among the project participants and promoting direct change within chosen case studies.

ISULabaNtu utilised this method and approached ‘co-production of knowledge’ as the process through which both residents in our case study areas, as well as community organisations, South African policy makers and practitioners, have had an active role in the research. Community members were trained to be co-investigators in the project and were instrumental in co-developing the tools, data collection, knowledge base and local dissemination, as well as community mobilisation. A series of data collection tools was co-created and customised for the context, including transect walks, focus group discussions, collaborative mapping and household interviews.

Community members benefited from access to the finalised toolkit and training to improve technical, management and communication skills which further enabled residents in Havelock to advocate for environmental improvements.

As part of this effort, a range of community events have been organised, such as in-field training sessions, called *critical conversations* to get feedback from the community and discuss important issues, participatory workshops, and also awareness raising events just before the beginning of fieldwork in a specific area.

**PROJECT PHASES**

The project consists of 5 interrelated phases:

1. Barriers and drivers of in-situ participatory approaches for informal and low-income settlement upgrading.

2. Mapping urban transitions through community participation.

3. Integrated closed-loop environmental management systems.

4. Project management and skills enhancement in construction.

5. Collaborative integrated toolkit for settlement upgrading.

6. Communication & dissemination.

Phase 1 and 2 Findings:

ISULabaNtu advocates that the establishment of a trustful relationship between communities (informal settlements dwellers and community leaders) with other stakeholders involved in the upgrading process, such as municipality officials, ward councillors, project managers, NGOs and Community Development Organisations, is critical. At the start of the project, the team developed a *Community Engagement Strategy*, which included specific guidelines on how to engage with community groups, municipality officers, NGO officials, academic staff and students.

*“Before [ISULabaNtu] there was no partnership with the municipality but now we signed an agreement with them- everything will be easy and success is in our hands, if we are united. I also thank you for the pictures and maps as they made a huge contribution to us because we usually have sub-regional meetings in this area and we invite other communities, so they will see that ISULabantu have made positive contributions to informal settlements.”*

(Community Researcher, Havelock)

The developed strategy consisted of six interrelated components:

1. Mapping key stakeholders’ roles and responsibilities in order to clarify the common goal;
2. Co-designing strategies and solutions for informal settlement upgrading by merging scientific and indigeneous knowledge to co-produce solutions which are appropriate and successful (i.e. address the actual needs) for their end-users; this has been achieved by applying a set of action research tools ( Figure 1);
3. Establishing new partnerships beneficial for the project, e.g. partnership with Ethekwini Water and Sanitation, the Human Settlements Unit and with NGOs (such as uTshani Fund, Slum/Shack-dwellers International (SDI), etc.);
4. Assessing various stakeholders’ (e.g. students, community members, policy makers, local administration representatives, NGOs, etc.) expectations so that strategies and solutions are well aligned;
5. Developing communication and dissemination strategies not only within the academic environment but also, and most importantly, within the involved communities by organising community participatory events to feed the findings back into the communities and providing owenrship over the findings;
6. Following an ethics protocol at every stage of the process.

One important aspect of ISULabaNtu’s approach was the training of Community Researchers (CRs) to equip them with the tools to collect data and engage with other community members themselves. CRs were not only co-investigators on the project, but were also responsible for liaising with the local leadership and mobilising community members. The project has identified a number of factors which can enhance community engagement, including effective communication, particularly translation to local languages; organisation of formal and informal social gatherings; an active involvement of youth and women.

The ISULabaNtu approach is influenced by a range of literature on co-production – a term first used by Ostrom (1996) which has been interpreted as ‘the joint production of public services between citizen and state, with any one or more element of the production process being shared’ (Mitlin, 2008). Our case study approach has sought to promote co-production between individual residents, community organisations, NGOs and civil servants in South Africa, while our key strategies included:

* *Reframing* and enhancing understanding of urban transformations from the perspective of the communities themselves, by articulating and mapping positive drivers in their practice, the room for improvement, and the barriers they faced in the process;
* Mapping *synergies* between community-led approaches and the responses and inputs from local actors, institutions, experts and industries;
* Facilitating *integration* throughout the project between non-expert knowledge (or co-produced knowledge) and technical and expert knowledge on finance, planning, environmental and construction management across the project phases.
* Facilitating the *continuous engagement* of *residents* as co-producers of knowledge throughout the research by creating an action-research approach to be utilised within each project phase.

ISULabaNtu supports the incremental upgrading model which entails basic service provision and in-situ upgrade of the settlement. Under this model, local authorities provide municipal basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, roads, footpaths etc. and some essential social services, e.g. access to education, healthcare and recreational spaces. On the other hand, local communities drive their own housing improvements, making it a comprehensive and inclusive approach to informal settlements ugrading. This model differs significantly from the state-subsidised housing provision and is an important step on communities’ path to self-reliance which is one of ISULabaNtu’s overarching goals.

**BARRIERS AND DRIVERS OF COMMUNITY-LED UPGRADING**

By engaging with the case study communities, the project team have identified the following:

**DRIVERS**

* Leadership/membership-based representative structures (e.g. FEDUP) and the establishment of community-based structures (e.g. community committees) are key in organised and strategic responses to community issues;
* Accessing representational/decision-making structures at ward and city level allows communities access to political and non-political relationships for accessing services and negotiation and advocacy in the upgrading process;
* Adaptability to new needs and circumstances, e.g. community structures which are built around  
  self-organised practices according to specific needs; if needs change- structures adapt to ensure sustainability;
* An integrated approach to in-situ upgrading: building on the capabilities of communities and interests (i.e. mobilisation, sweat equity, need for housing and land) and integrating them to technical and financial strategies (e.g. saving schemes), allows for the implementation of community-led strategies promoting ownership and control of the project, and skills development among community members.

**BARRIERS**

* Lack of continuity in self-organisation strategies causing loss of valuable skills, knowledge, social capital, and loss of interest and credibility among residents and potential new members;
* Lack of tangible/explicit benefits (material, monetary) for residents as an obstacle for community mobilisation;
* Lack of capacity/motivation of residents to engage with decision-making or issues that might be confrontational;
* Community organisation practices highly vulnerable to politicised interventions (community and external actors);
* Heavy reliance on the committee, ward councillor or civil society organisations to lead initiatives;
* A conflictive relationship with surrounding neighbourhoods in inner-city settlements (e.g. Havelock).

Informal settlements are complex and diverse entities with their own unique issues and set of characteristics. Theoretically, this paper has revealed that the challenge of informal settlement upgrading in South Africa should not be conceived simply as a housing problem but rather as a community-led, participatory process of social change, seeking to realise multi-sector partnerships, long-term commitment, and political support to gain formalisation. This process should take place from the early planning of the upgrade, as the early project phases are the most crucial for community participation. Active community participation is also endorsed by the New Urban Agenda under Habitat III, which calls for not just partnerships but inclusive participatory models through community empowerment and planning activism.

At a practical level, however, the study argues that there is a gap in effective community-led participatory upgrading projects in South Africa. There is also little understanding of the unique, context-specific factors that underpin the establishment of an informal settlement. Currently these local particularities are lost in the ‘one-size-fits-all’ government-led upgrading models adopted by the South African municipalities, thus leading to delays in: planning; service delivery and supply change; installation of services; and tendering with building contractors. Future research should explore the co-production of local knowledge with the local communities, support organisations and policymakers to inform the development or refinement of government-led upgrading models adopted by the South African municipalities and national departments.

Preliminary findings from Phase 1:

Participation should not refer to a voluntary contribution to government programmes but rather to active involvement in shaping the upgrading process throughout the project lifecycle. Communities have the local knowledge and experience of what works and why in their own settlements. Empowering local people in participatory bottom-up models offers:

• community leadership and independence;

• commitment in the upgrading process due to ownership and sense of belonging;

• skills upgrade through training; and

• leveraging additional subsidies and resources available from the municipalities.

Phase 1 preliminary fieldwork activities demonstrated that the concept of ‘community’ is interpreted as a place where “people come to live together, work together, settle in”; “people live with similar needs and views; "people coming together as “one”, and “a place where people coexist together with one goal”. The interpretation of “successful upgrading” varies significantly between the community (improvement of living conditions), NGOs (community mobilisation and group savings); and the municipality (provision of services).

The main barriers and challenges to community-led upgrading involve:

• lack of trustful relationship with Municipality;

• unresolved land tenure (households waiting for title deeds) after the upgrade;

• technological issues with plumbing systems, sanitation, wastewater management;

• stealing materials and utilities;

• dependence on the Municipality also for the provision of services; and

• conflicts/tensions within the communities;

The key drivers for participatory, community-led upgrading involve:

• negotiations with the Municipality

• community organisation and social cohesion;

• developing a culture of group savings;

• creation of job opportunities;

• skills enhancement (e.g. technical, management, and soft skills, such as communication, negotiation, leadership); and

• skills transfer through a collaborative learning environment (e.g. communities of practice).

Previous studies on in-situ upgrading of informal settlements in Durban metropolitan area have explored the positive impact of community participation on local inhabitants in terms of having basic housing needs met, tenure security and wellbeing improvement (Patel, 2013). However, it is important to distinguish between aspects of participation and active community empowerment through planning activism, as shown in Namibia Stop 8. From the review of the background literature the following recommendations can be drawn:

• There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ model in informal settlements upgrading. Policy makers and practitioners need to understand the local context and uncover the barriers and drivers for inclusive community-led upgrading from an early planning stage. It is essential to understand the historical development and the dynamics of the informal settlement in order to adapt or refine the upgrading model according to complexities, strengths and weaknesses of individual cases.

• Future policy-making in the field should go beyond provision of information and basic consultation activities with the community. There is a need for policy instruments and upgrading models that build on community leadership and planning activism, facilitating co-production of knowledge with the local population, whilst simultaneously leading to empowered communities and participatory models of urbanisation. Scholars argue the co-production can provide critical understanding of community-led processes and how these can be integrated into institutional formalisation, government policy, technological and managerial innovations that can enhance self-reliance, skills and quality of life (Boyle and Harris, 2009; Petcou and Petrescu, 2015).

• The role of the support organisation and the researcher in community-led upgrading projects is to first help local people visualise and understand the change that will effectively take place in their own environment; and, second, to provide space for community members to negotiate and therefore take informed decisions resolving issues and potential conflicts.

Preliminary findings from Phase 2: For each of the lessons identified below, an implication is specified, as well as some ideas for ways forward. These are meant as provocations for further discussion (at this stage) rather than 'implementable recommendations' ('Year 3' of research).

1) Finding: There is lack of continuity in activities, personnel and skills, and information/data have caused problems in all three communities, and are very likely elsewhere. Implication/ way forward: Community-led upgrading efforts should have plans embedded for the sustainability of all three areas. Examples might include:

● Activities: Staggered and overlapping stages of activities so that there are no drop-offs in activity.

● Personnel and skills: Outside provision of skills and personnel that could be provided by the community should be a last resort. Where there are not acute health and livelihood issues in a settlement, it is preferable for communities to fail (and learn) themselves in upgrading efforts in collaboration with others, rather than have others 'succeed' for them in a top-down manner.

● Information/data: SDI and 100RC have ongoing efforts to digitise information on settlements and explore new ways of collecting, storing and using data. These explorations should specifically include work streams dedicated to the storage, management, and sharing of records and other data related to self-organisation activities.

2) Finding: Lack of incentives / immediate material benefits was reported to impact motivation for self-organisation activities. Implication/ way forward: Upgrading efforts should have in place plans for dealing with drop-off in engagement when housing has been delivered, or chronic issues have been mitigated. These could include specific efforts to convince people of the wider benefits (building capacity, learning, mobilisation, use of savings for wider community benefit) to self-organised upgrading efforts, using real examples from other communities. For example, in Piesang River FEDUP members introduced a loan system that provided residents with access to finance and a safety net for emergencies, both in terms of financial help and social support.

3) Finding: Existing cultures around decision-making and conflict resolution are not conducive to widespread engagement, and effective/mandated decision-making. Implication/ way forward: While debate and conflict within communities is to some extent inevitable during upgrading processes, groups encouraging upgrading efforts must consider how the voices of vulnerable and marginalised groups can be heard, and how decisions can be supported by whole communities, rather than be divisive and lead to factions or rival groups. Latent resentment and lack of support must be addressed rather than left ignored.

4) Finding: Decisions and activities are vulnerable to politicised interventions. Implication/ way forward: Community-led upgrading efforts could address political divisions head on, explicitly stating when they will utilise political channels and when they will use non-political channels. They should also have plans in place should political actors affect their self-organisation efforts - for example, communication plans. They may also wish to speak to political actors before/during upgrading efforts to ensure they do not feel bypassed.

5) Finding: Communities are often over-reliant on local and city leadership to lead initiatives. Implication/ way forward: Leadership and self-organisation efforts should be encouraged at every opportunity, with specific support for NGOs and community-based organisations that support local leadership. Examples from elsewhere should be used to inspire activity. Young people should also be specifically targeted for communications to encourage self-organisation.

6) Finding: Tensions with formal residents are high and can undermine upgrading efforts at any time. Implication/ way forward: Formal residents should be engaged with self-organised upgrading efforts where possible, and be made aware of plans to avoid misunderstandings. Safe spaces for discussions and exchanges of ideas between formal and informal residents must be nurtured, to explore trade-offs and negotiated solutions. For example, new communal spaces could be specifically used by both informal and formal residents as well as informal.

7) Finding: Effective and settled leadership and the use of representative structures facilitate upgrading and connections to other stakeholders

Implication/ way forward: The use of representative, elected committees backed by enumeration and site-specific data has been shown to be effective in initiating negotiations with key policymakers. These should be encouraged by NGOs like the ISN (as happened in Havelock) and policymakers (as eventually happened in Piesang River). This leadership will need to be supported and periodically refreshed to ensure it reflects the ongoing concerns and make-up of the residents in the neighbourhood.

8) Finding: Access to structures and networks at ward and city level is vital to empowering communities and encouraging activities beyond those with immediate material benefit. Implication/ way forward: Sharing descriptions of the informal networks that residents use to interact with local and city leaders and committees/portfolios, should be used as a template for similar activities elsewhere. Efforts should be made to ensure networks are not totally reliant on individual relationships, and can be sustained in the face of sudden changes and migration.

9) Finding: Adaptability to new needs and circumstances: Community self-organised structures and activities were built around specific needs. If needs would change, structures would be adapted to ensure sustainability. Implication/ way forward: Individuals who engage in these informal and often unseen connections should be encouraged to share their practice. As above, descriptions and sharing of the informal networks residents use to interact with local and city leaders and committees/portfolios, should be used to inspire similar activities elsewhere.

10) Finding: Building on the capabilities of communities and interests (i.e. mobilisation, sweat equity, need for housing and land) and integrating them to technical and financial strategies (e.g. saving schemes), allowed for the implementation of community-led strategies that promote ownership. Implication/ way forward: Mobilisation of the community, enumeration and implementation of savings have proven effective in providing the basis for effective lobbying for upgrading. Connections to technical services (but not those that can be provided by the community) should be sought out and encouraged.