

Upgrading informal settlements in South Africa: A partnership-based approach

Edited by: Liza Rose Cirolia, Tristan Görgens, Mirjam van Donk, Warren Smit and Scott Drimie

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The upgrading of informal settlements has become one of the most comprehensive, complex, controversial, capital-intensive, and often emotive developmental interventions orchestrated and funded by the South African public sector. Many initiatives, however, happen without there being meaningful collaboration between the various role players. In this publication, some of the 'cutting-edge' initiatives and a revisit to proven practices and debates are discussed and generously supported by case studies, experience, evidence, and appropriate examples.

This is further enhanced by the collaborative effort of the diversity of authors who have managed to simplify and capture the essence of the subject matter in such a way that it can be applied in the formulation of policy.

While many books and publications on the topic are available, this publication draws from the contributions of no less than 41 authors and co-authors, including academic authorities, technical professionals, and human settlement *cum* informal settlement practitioners. The 'compendium' of writings, primarily facilitated by the Isandla Institute and African Centre for Cities, supported financially by, among others, the Ford Foundation, the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research (Mistra), and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) makes for a comprehensive read and introduction to the South African and, to a lesser extent, the sub-Saharan human and informal settlement context. The five editors are a mix of experienced researchers, policy analysts, and implementers.

A guiding structure, dividing the book into five sections, starting with the theoretical aspects of informal settlements and the upgrading thereof, evolves into an introduction of the role players, various implementation strategies, the identification of some 'tools, instruments and methodologies, and ultimately the application thereof in the incremental upgrading process. Finally, the entire content is contextualised in the implications for Urban Transformation in South Africa and makes a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on the topic.

Some content is of particular value:

- An overview of key international, traditional and current debates regarding global challenges of urbanisation and housing provision in the developing world, clearly contextualising the incremental upgrading of informal settlements such as the "Turner vs Burgess" debate, the product vs process discourse, and a number of international policy positions.
- The demystifying of the complexity of numerous concepts and approaches, associated with the upgrading of informal settlements, e.g. the difference between upgrading and formalisation, title deeds, and security of tenure, while simultaneously nuancing a greater intellectual and applied focus.
- Discussions on a wide spectrum of informality, inclusive of back yarding, inner city (vertical) slums, and peripheral shack-based settlements against the 'backdrop' of incrementalism and the dormant value thereof.
- Exposure of mass-produced housing, emphasising the product and 'numbers game' being preferred to the incremental process of

supporting upgrading, inevitably resulting in a negligence of the social dimension and the undesirable sprawl of green fields developments.

- The extensive use of African case studies and examples that enrich the validity and enable local readers to identify with the publication.

Some key contributions that would improve the content and may justify a further publication are, among others, the following:

- A more extensive exploration of informal rentals and how the South African policies on Social Rental Housing could either be applied or adjusted to be applicable, in support of this common and wide-ranging phenomenon.
- A discussion on the impact of foreign nationals being excluded from Government support and subsidies, the resulting informality and xenophobia, and the 'right of the poor to the city'.
- Eluding more on the power relationships and the 'unequal' partnerships between public funding agents and communities, resulting in an inordinate subordination by communities exacerbated by the limited housing product options provided.
- An exploration of the operational implications and challenges associated with the upgrading of informal settlements, it being a major stumbling block in the implementation of interventions.
- A human resources and financial constraints perspective, inclusive of the training and roles of the spectrum of professionals ordinarily involved in the execution of such initiatives, and the financial sourcing and structuring of the cash flow and capital expenditures.

In conclusion, the ingenious way in which practice, policy and theory are 'blended' in this publication makes it a worthy reading to a wide audience of scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and implementers of human settlement initiatives that has value beyond the sub-Saharan context and academic bookshelf.