

# CULTIVATING COMMUNITY CAPABILITY

MAKING PARTICIPATION  
MEANINGFUL IN  
INFORMAL SETTLEMENT  
UPGRADING | 2015



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This document was produced by Isandla Institute as part of the Khayalethu Initiative, a project supported by Comic Relief.

The aim of the Khayalethu Initiative is to advance models for participatory informal settlement upgrading through knowledge sharing, collaboration and experimentation. Isandla Institute's role in the Khayalethu Initiative is to inspire and inform communities of practice through research and the facilitation of engagement between practitioners in the field of informal settlement upgrading. One of these engagements takes the shape of a Cape Town-based Community of Practice. This document distils the knowledge emerging from the local Community of Practice engagements, and offers lessons from both theory and practice.

Photographs by Shaun Swingler.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Meaningful community participation in processes of urban transformation is desperately needed in South African cities. For significant and lasting change to take place, it is necessary that urban residents take ownership of development interventions, and participate in these as active co-creators. While progressive public policy acknowledges the importance of participation, it does not yet find articulation in the everyday lives of urban residents. For many, participation remains an unattainable ideal because they are not equipped with the insights or techniques necessary for bringing about significant change. It is therefore necessary that communities' capability to participate be both recognised actively cultivated.

The document suggests that community capability is a complex concept that consists of multiple dimensions, including skills and competencies, information, assets and values and orientations. These dimensions are interdependent, and may be either constraining or enabling. We consider both the benefits and challenges of enhancing community capability for informal settlement upgrading. The document concludes with a consideration of what is needed to cultivate community capability, and of the tools and methodologies that may be utilised to do so

We acknowledge the contribution made by representatives from ARG Design, Community Organisation Resource Centre, Habitat for Humanity South Africa, People's Environmental Planning, Sustainability Institute and Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading during the local Community of Practice meeting held on the 21st of May 2015.

## INTRODUCTION

**Public policy in South Africa, particularly in relation to local governance and the development of human settlements, is explicit about the need for community participation. Here it is recognised that urban residents are active agents with a critical role to play in the making of their living environments. But these progressive policy provisions struggle to translate into progressive practice.**

**For many, participation remains an unattainable ideal because they are not equipped with the insights or techniques necessary for bringing about significant change.**

While this is in part due to a lack of willingness on the part of the state to engage with urban residents, it also comes as the result of an inability to see participation as a capability determined by numerous factors. For many, participation remains an unattainable ideal because they are not equipped with the insights or techniques necessary for bringing about significant change. Policy is therefore not enough to ensure meaningful participation, partnership and co-production. If these progressive provisions are to find articulation in the everyday lives of South African urban residents, it is necessary that communities' capability to participate be both recognised actively cultivated. An emphasis on capability enhancement highlights the importance of working towards the betterment of urban residents' quality of life by lessening the limitations on their ability to determine independent ways of being and doing.

We argue that community capability is a complex concept that consists of multiple dimensions, including skills and competencies, information, assets and values and orientations. Community capability is also influenced by constricting or enabling factors in the socio-economic and political environment in which urban residents operate. Some of the benefits of cultivating community capability, as well as challenges that may hinder significant capability enhancement in the context of informal settlement upgrading, are set out below. Drawing on the experiences of practitioners from civil society and the private sector, we consider what is needed in relation to each of the four constituent dimensions of capability so as to ensure that communities are enabled to meaningfully participate in the making of their living environments. We also set out practical strategies for cultivating community capability.

## CAPABILITY AS THE FREEDOM TO FUNCTION

To understand the concept of capability, it is first necessary to consider what we perceive the purpose of development to be. While many practitioners emphasise economic growth as an indicator of successful development, Sen suggests that this alone is not sufficient to ensure an increase in the quality of life of the urban poor (Sen 1990; Nussbaum 2003; Alkire 2005).

The author notes that a person's **well-being** is not only determined by their access to resources, but that it is contingent on their ability to be and do that which they believe to be valuable. Following Sen we may argue that, in order to live a quality life, a person must be free to choose who they want to be and what they want to do; free to perform whatever functionings (beings and doings) they deem worthwhile. It is this freedom to function that Sen refers to as capability (1990: 43). The purpose of development is thus to enhance capability and by doing so breaking down the barriers that keep people from functioning in ways that they see fit.

The concept of capability, defined as the freedom to function, also holds important implications for our thinking about rights. As Nussbaum suggests:

*'The right to political participation, the right to religious free exercise, the right to free speech – these and others are best secured to people only when the relevant capabilities to function are present. In other words, to secure a right to citizens in these areas is to put them in a position of capability to function in the area' (2003: 37).*

In the context of informal settlement upgrading in South Africa the capability approach challenges us to think beyond policy, and to consider the broader range of factors that impact on people's capability to access the benefits of their progressive provisions. If urban residents are to participate meaningfully in the making of their living environments, and in this way perform a function that contributes to their quality of life, then it is necessary that their capability to do so be at least acknowledged and, where necessary, enhanced.

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# POLICY PROVISIONS RELATED TO COMMUNITY CAPABILITY

## ***Municipal Systems Act (2000)***

The Municipal Systems Act addresses the need for building capacity, a dimension of capability, amongst urban residents. It states that it is a municipality's responsibility to cultivate a culture of community participation that complements and works in collaboration with local government. In order for this culture of participatory governance to be instilled however, the Act reasons that municipalities need to go beyond encouraging community participation but enhance communities' capacity to engage in the affairs of their local municipality. This illustrates that the state places great importance on capacitating communities and equipping them to effectively engage in governance processes at the municipal level. This section of the Act also implicitly acknowledges that without the necessary information (about relevant policies and processes), communities would not be able to engage in participatory governance.

## ***National Housing Code (2009)***

The National Housing Code deals specifically with housing in South Africa and explicitly refers to community participation and its importance in adequately addressing the needs of the urban poor. Like the Municipal Systems Act, the National Housing Code addresses a particular dimension of capability, namely capacity. It suggests that communities need to be motivated to participate in urban governance, but also, more importantly, supported to do so through relevant training. It argues that communities need to achieve a certain level of competency if they are to participate meaningfully in the development of their neighbourhoods. The document notes that failure to enable communities to engage in local governance has significant implications for the sustainability of communities and their settlements.

## ***National Development Plan (2012)***

The National Development Plan (NDP) acknowledges that current models of spatial planning do not effectively engage with urban residents. The NDP recognises that there are limitations on the extent to which urban residents are actually able to participate in local governance and spatial planning, and suggests that current structures for participation are largely compliance-driven so that the state struggles to engage in meaningful (and often messy) dialogue with urban residents. As a response to these shortcomings, the NDP proposes that the state focus its attention on enhancing community capability and in doing so ensuring that urban residents are equipped to actively participate in spatial planning processes. The document places the onus on the state to assist urban residents in accessing the necessary training and learning to enable them to participate in spatial development.



## MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MODEL

Defining capability as the freedom to function allows us to consider the different dimensions that make up such a freedom. In Model 1 we identify four key dimensions that constitute capability.

### Enumeration

is the process of counting assets, structures or people in a community. It is used as a strategy for identifying priority needs, and is conducted by urban residents themselves.

Because this document is geared towards informing the practice of participatory and incremental informal settlement upgrading, we use participation in the making of one's living environment as an example of a valuable functioning that contributes to the well-being of urban communities to unpack *Model 1*. The four dimensions identified in the model are also considered in relation to the environment in which they operate. We recognise that this environment can serve as both constraining and enabling in the context of capability enhancement. The constituent dimensions of capability include:

### Capacity

To realise spatial transformation, communities need to bring to bear particular skills and competencies. Practical or vocational skills such as construction, stone masonry or plumbing allow urban residents to participate directly in the upgrading of their homes and settlements. Planning competencies such as mapping, **enumeration**, and budgeting enable involvement in decision-making processes and empower communities to influence the development agenda.

### Information

Communities who are well informed are more likely to contribute significantly to the design, implementation, and monitoring of informal settlement upgrading initiatives. The information required to enhance communities' capability to participate will vary across settlements, and may include information about their social and political environment, about different upgrading methodologies, local events and about state-driven initiatives that have direct bearing on their settlements and neighbourhoods.

### Assets

To bring about change in their environments, communities living in informal settlements require resources. Assets need not only be understood as material resources, but can also take the shape of social capital generated through social interaction. Assets often already exist within communities, and must be carefully harnessed so as to enhance the capability to participate. Community assets can contribute to more effective upgrading interventions, and strategies for generating new assets can be designed in partnership with urban residents.

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## Values and orientation

The interests of residents living in informal settlements are varied, and not necessarily geared toward the greater good. While some residents in a community may be committed to democratic processes of decision-making, and to working in partnership with diverse stakeholders, others may be averse to these processes and instead favour those that offer greater individual or factional influence and power. For meaningful and inclusive participatory processes to find articulation in communities, it is necessary that urban residents commit to shared values and that their actions are orientated towards the achievement of collective outcomes.

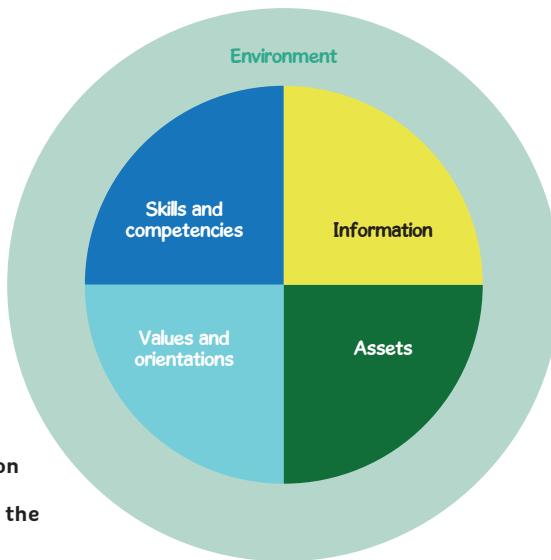
## Environment

To participate meaningfully in processes of informal settlement upgrading, it is critical that the environment within which participation occurs be conducive. With environment we refer to the social, economic, and political context within which communities living in informal settlements operate. Progressive public policy contributes to a more encouraging environment for participation, while political interests in housing provision can undermine residents' freedom to participate. These environmental realities greatly impact on efforts to cultivate community capability, and can severely hinder urban residents from enjoying the freedoms that are associated with a high quality of life. While environmental factors are beyond the control of stakeholders in the upgrading process, these may be altered through strategies such as advocacy and **litigation**.

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## Litigation

refers to an action taken to determine a legal matter. It is used as a strategy for ensuring accountability and adherence to legislation.



## WHY CAPABILITY MATTERS

The enhancement of community capability is critical for informal settlement upgrading for various reasons, four of which are particularly relevant here. Firstly, as mentioned above, capability enhancement allows for the betterment of the quality of life of the urban poor. Through participation in informal settlement upgrading the restrictions on communities' ability to determine their own beings-and-doings are lifted. As Sen suggests, freedom to function is the most useful measure of well-being (1990).

In 1998 an informal settlement known as Freedom Park was established in the township of Mitchell's Plain, South Africa. Due to the dire living circumstances in this settlement, residents sought assistance from civil society, state and private sector actors to upgrade their settlement. In the planning phase of this project, residents of the informal settlement were afforded the opportunity to select the consultants and technical team who were to be part of the upgrading process. Furthermore, the civil society actor facilitated housing design workshops with the community which were useful in developing a variety of housing options for the settlement. These workshops sought to aid the community not only in expressing their desires for their settlement, but also to educate them about the nuances of planning a settlement. This engagement facilitated the devolution of power from the technical team and state implementers to the community, as the community could participate rigorously in the planning process and make critical decisions about housing options that met the needs of their settlement. (Development Action Group 2009)

Secondly, the cultivation of community capability ensures greater ownership of informal settlement upgrading processes. Communities who are enabled to participate meaningfully in the design, implementation and monitoring of upgrading interventions become active co-creators (Department of Human Settlements 2009). Capable communities bring alternative, innovative and locally relevant solutions to the decision-making table, and can thus contribute to the creation of more effective and efficient upgrading interventions. The Freedom Park case study shows that communities, who are enabled to significantly influence the development agenda, can participate in informal settlement upgrading beyond merely voicing their needs and desires. Rather, they can take charge of planning processes and ensure the implementation of targeted and sustainable solutions.



Thirdly, a benefit of cultivating capability that is closely linked to community ownership is that of accessing local knowledge. This allows for the making of contextually relevant and appropriate interventions (Bolnick 2011). Communities who are capacitated, informed, who have access to resources, who are committed to democratic decision-making, and who are supported by a conducive environment can translate their experiences into concrete plans for the future, and can work in partnership with other stakeholders to bring these plans to fruition. By enhancing community capability then, stakeholders can ensure that local knowledge – related to local priorities and power dynamics – is drawn out, adequately communicated and used to guide all upgrading interventions.

Finally, capability enhancement matters because it contributes to the long-term sustainability of informal settlement upgrading interventions. Those interventions that neglect the need for capability enhancement may leave communities with safer, healthier and more inviting living environments. But they cannot, however, ensure that their positive outcomes are sustained over time. In communities where meaningful participation in the planning and making of living environments is encouraged, residents themselves can replicate positive outcomes (Abatena 1997). Furthermore, these communities can also adapt the methodologies implemented by development practitioners to meet their needs, and in doing so ensure that locally driven upgrading processes adapt to changing realities.

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## Prejudices

are the preconceived ideas that influence people's perceptions of one another. They form in the absence of real understanding of about the lives of others and are dangerous if left unchecked.

## CHALLENGES IN CAPABILITY ENHANCEMENT

Because community capability is inherently complex, the processes of enhancing community capability may be equally complex and challenging. Stakeholders who aim to cultivate capability through and for participatory informal settlement upgrading inevitably come up against local realities that severely restrict their ability to support communities' freedom to function.

One such a challenge comes with the need to navigate power dynamics within a community, which significantly influence the ways in which participatory development occurs (Wallace 2010; Lund and Saito-Jensen 2013). While strategies to enhance community capability may be designed to be inclusive, they can easily be co-opted and made to benefit only a few. Elites within communities may therefore capture exercises geared towards cultivating the collective capabilities of communities and use these initiatives to their own advantage (Lund and Saito-Jensen 2013). If these power dynamics are not recognised or addressed, upgrading interventions may fail to challenge existing inequalities within a community and inadvertently strengthen them (Botes 2000; Lund and Saito-Jensen 2013). Elite capture also results in gate keeping, as communities may be held hostage by local elites who position themselves as intermediaries between residents and other stakeholders (Botes 2000).

But local power dynamics do not only play out in the form of elite capture. They are also evident in commonplace **prejudices** held against marginalised residents. Women, foreign nationals, the elderly and people with disabilities may struggle to gain access to capability enhancing opportunities, as they



are barred by vested interests and powerful forces within the community from participating in development processes. The challenge for external stakeholders is therefore to facilitate processes that confront everyday forms of exclusion, and to emphasise the value of inclusivity for collective capability enhancements. As Cornwall (2003) suggests, the selection of individuals for participatory development processes needs to account for difference within communities by engaging with individuals who represent the multiple and varied interests of a community.

A final challenge that is worth noting here is the limited internal capability that stakeholders may have to enhance communities' freedom to function. External stakeholders from civil society, the state or the private sector may lack the necessary skills, information or orientations to facilitate significant capability enhancement processes.

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## CRITICAL COMMUNITY CAPABILITIES

**Practitioners from civil society and the private sector, participating in the Cape Town-based community of practice, agree that capability enhancement is imperative for participatory processes geared toward the production of inclusive, just and sustainable urban environments.**

Drawing on their experiences with communities living in informal settlements they suggest that there are particular requirements (associated with each of the four dimensions of capability identified in *Model 1* above) that, if in place, allow for substantive participation in upgrading processes. Some requirements are already being cultivated through their current practice, while others are in need of greater emphasis. These requirements are summarised in *Table 1*, which also sets out possible practical tools and methodologies for addressing each of the dimensions that constitute capability. *Table 1* does not present a comprehensive list of the skills and competencies, information, assets, and values and orientations that urban residents need to bring to bear to participate as active agents in the transformation of South African cities. It does, however, draw attention to the need for an upgrading approach that addresses not only deficiencies in the physical environment, but also aims to transform prevalent social realities.

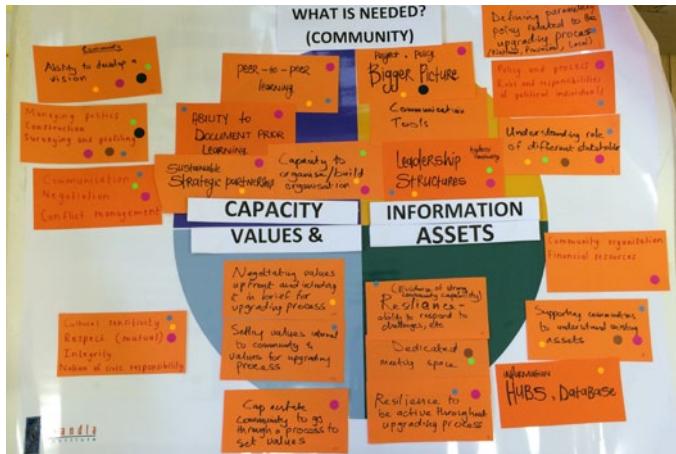
Practitioners recognise that there is a need for both technical and social **competencies** in the participatory upgrading of informal settlements. In addition to practical **skills** related to the physical creation of living environments, urban residents also need to bring to bear the competency to develop a vision for their community. Once translated into actionable plans, these visions may be realised through partnerships with relevant

stakeholders. Urban residents therefore also need to bring to bear networking competencies, as well as facilitation skills that allow for the careful negotiation of conflict and contestation among diverse partners. Importantly, community capability is enhanced through the cultivation of political savvy with which residents can navigate the influence of political factionalism and party politics over upgrading processes.

It is noted that **information** about the policy context is critical for community participation, as it offers a ‘bigger picture’ perspective. Information about existing, state-driven participatory processes is also valuable, and allows communities to connect their settlement plans into broader processes, or to position their processes as possible alternatives. To ensure active organisation among urban residents, information about

DIMENSION OF CAPABILITY	REQUIREMENTS FOR PARTICIPATORY INFORMAL SETTLEMENT UPGRADING	TOOLS AND METHODOLOGIES FOR ADDRESSING DIMENSION
<b>Capacity</b>	Construction Organisation Neighbourhood visioning Networking and partnership Negotiation and conflict management Political Savvy	Practical skills training Action learning: settlement mapping, enumeration, budgeting Peer to peer learning
<b>Information</b>	Relevant policy Existing participatory processes Roles and responsibilities of government spheres and officials Leadership structures Communication channels Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the upgrading process	Factsheets Popular media announcements (community radio, local newspaper) Information hubs and databases Flyers Loudspeaker Campaigns
<b>Assets</b>	Financial resources Meeting spaces Community networks Resilience	Appraisal of existing assets Strategies for harnessing each
<b>Values and orientations</b>	Cultural sensitivity Respect Integrity Civic responsibility	Facilitation Conflict mediation

**Table 1: Addressing dimensions of community capability for participatory informal settlement upgrading**



**Newsprint detailing some of the outcomes of the local Community of Practice meeting on the 21st of May 2015.**

existing and potential leadership structures is also required. Practitioners suggest that information about the roles and responsibilities of different actors in the upgrading process is necessary for negotiating meaningful partnerships. This allows communities to better understand the upgrading process, as well as the constraints that stakeholders from different sectors face, and to cultivate a willingness to negotiate trade-offs where necessary.

The **assets** required for participatory informal settlement upgrading are both material and social. In addition to financial or physical resources, urban residents also benefit from existing social structures that increase resilience. This dimension also highlights a concern that is relevant for each of the dimensions that make up community capability. When considering what assets are required to ensure successful upgrading, it is first necessary to take stock of existing assets. So too it is necessary for external stakeholders who aim to enhance community capability to consider what skills and competencies, information and values and orientations communities already possess. Through an initial appraisal process, stakeholders can hone in on priority dimensions.

While practitioners agree that **values and orientations** serve as the foundation of transformative interventions, this dimension of community capability is not always explicitly addressed in the upgrading process. If committed to at the outset, shared values can help to guide the actions of participating stakeholders, and thus the implementation of development interventions. These values are closely linked to urban residents' vision for their future, and can be identified through facilitated engagement with the community. In the South African context, where exclusionary sentiments often manifest as physical violence against perceived outsiders, the cultivation of inclusive values and orientations is crucial if spatial transformation is to be realised.

**When considering what assets are required to ensure successful upgrading, it is first necessary to take stock of existing assets.**



## CONCLUSION

**Stakeholders who aim to realise progressive policy provision through participatory informal settlement upgrading should therefore give emphasis not only to one dimension of capability, but instead consider the interrelation between each of the four dimension identified here.**

**For informal settlement upgrading to result in substantial and sustainable change, it is necessary that a variety of stakeholders be drawn into the process.**

Meaningful community participation in processes of urban transformation is desperately needed in South African cities. For significant and lasting change to take place, it is necessary that urban residents take ownership of development interventions, and participate in these as active co-creators. The mere promotion of participation in public policy is not, however, sufficient for giving life to truly democratic and developmental processes. For this policy to find articulation in practice, we suggest that it is necessary to affirm and, where needed, to cultivate community capability so as to ensure that urban residents enjoy the freedom to participate meaningfully in the making of their living environments. Of course, community capability is not straightforward. It consists of multiple, interdependent dimensions that can each constrain or enable urban residents in their efforts to bring about change. Stakeholders who aim to realise progressive policy provision through participatory informal settlement upgrading should therefore give emphasis not only to one dimension of capability, but instead consider the interrelation between each of the four dimension identified here. By cultivating community capability stakeholders ensure that upgrading interventions are geared toward the realisation of sustainable cities that can be made and remade by suitably skilled, informed residents who harness their assets in the interest of collective outcomes, and aim to bring about collectively defined ideals.

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**Isandla Institute**  
70 Rosmead Avenue  
Kenilworth, 7708  
Tel: +27 21 683 7903  
Fax: +27 21 683 7956  
Email: [admin@isandla.org.za](mailto:admin@isandla.org.za)  
[www.isandla.org.za](http://www.isandla.org.za)