Participatory informal settlement upgrading in South Africa

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Executive summary

Informal settlement upgrading is a valuable strategy for addressing growing inequality and spatial segregation in South Africa. The upgrading approach recognises the functionality of informal settlements, and the potential of informal areas to contribute positively to the livelihoods of residents. Upgrading also emphasises community participation as a key aspect of sustainable development. Through methods such as community action planning, enumerations and savings groups, upgrading interventions respond to the pressing needs of residents in informal settlements.

Despite a progressive policy environment that makes provision for upgrading, popular discourse and practice in South Africa remains focused on the delivery of state subsidised housing. The state's ambiguity towards informality serves to bar the widespread implementation of informal settlement upgrading. The paper argues then that the formation of a community of practice, where development practitioners can share and reflect on their experiences, can strengthen upgrading initiatives in the country and encourage further uptake of
the approach.

Towards Participatory Upgrading

Public housing provision and the delivery of basic services has become one of the most prominent issues in South Africa today. With a service delivery protest believed to take place almost every two days (Municipal IQ 2014), the country's citizens are increasingly voicing their frustration and anger with the state's inability to deliver on its promises.

These protests often result in violent clashes between communities and law enforcement so that injury and loss of life have become commonplace. The brutal outcomes of protests over housing provision and service delivery illustrates the dire need for processes that engender **spatial justice** (Soja 2008) in South African cities, and allow for equitable housing opportunities. Although housing policy post-1994 has focused its attention on reversing spatial inequalities entrenched in South African cities through apartheid planning, the mainstream housing programme pursued by the state failed to realize some of its key objectives. Relocation and the provision of RDP housing have perpetuated processes of marginalisation, as the poor are pushed to the fringe of the urban metropolis. In 2004, a review of South African policy measures resulted in Breaking New Ground – a document that signalled a shift in attention towards in situ upgrading (DoH 2004). In recent years, a concerted effort has been made to bring informal settlement upgrading to the forefront of development thinking. This is evident in the creation of the National Upgrading Support Programme and the inclusion of upgrading targets in Outcome 8. Here, upgrading is understood as follows:

> *'Upgrading is a staged process of improvement of quality of life in informal settlements, based on incremental provision of services and tenure. It should seek to maximise in-situ development in appropriate areas and minimise relocation. An effective improvement process is built on close community participation and cooperation, aiming to strengthen livelihoods strategies of the poor. Housing is provided by a variety of methods, including selfbuild, People's Housing Process, social housing or affordable rental, individual subsidy or consolidation subsidy'*
> (OUTCOME 8, ANNEXURE A 2010: 42).

Despite an environment that encourages processes of participatory informal settlement upgrading, however, progressive policies have struggled to be translated into practice. While the discourse of participation, community involvement in planning and decision-making processes, **active citizenship** and just cities is present in public policy, local government officials face a number of challenges in implementing

SPATIAL JUSTICE

suggests that there is a link between justice and the use of space. If residents in a city do not have access to adequate land, shelter and basic services and to platforms for meaningful participation in the making of their living environments, then justice remains an abstract idea with no material effect.

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

describes citizens who are engaged in the everyday workings of their environments, and who are involved in making decisions about the ways in which their neighbourhoods are governed. Active citizens claim their rights from the state, and are in turn willing to perform certain responsibilities. Here citizenship is not limited to membership to a national community only, but extended to include all residents of the city.

participatory upgrading strategies. Furthermore, where upgrading projects have been implemented successfully, their scale remains too small to address severe housing demands. In light of these realities, we believe that it is necessary to critically reflect on and engage with both the policy and practice of informal settlement upgrading.

The document therefore draws on literature, international practice, and on the understandings of practitioners in the field of informal settlement upgrading in South Africa in order to provide a brief overview of upgrading as an approach to development. This overview serves not only to highlight the merits of upgrading, as well as key principles such as participation and incrementalism but also to draw out some of the potential limitations to the successful large-scale implementation of upgrading interventions in South Africa. The discussion then gives particular attention to the South African context – to the historical development of policy frameworks that aim to guide the creation of sustainable human settlements, and to the practice of organisations that have adopted an upgrading agenda in their development work. Here, emphasis is given to the disjuncture between policy and practice, a feature of development in South Africa that is exacerbated by the state's inability to deliver on the promises set out in policy. Although this disjuncture is fuelled by multiple factors, we focus specifically on the lack of collaboration and coordination between partners in development.

Finally, the document concludes by arguing for the establishment of **a community of practice** as a platform for practitioners in the field of informal settlement upgrading to strengthen practice by learning from one another, and for feeding into practice at national level through the documentation of strategies and methodologies that are shown to work. Through a community of practice then, organisations working on the ground in urban settlements can encourage development that is in line with progressive policies, and that works to realise substantive community participation as its key feature.

A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE is a group of people who work in a similar field and who can thus share experiences and lessons. Here the term refers to a group that is formed for the purpose of learning, and for creating a space where practitioners can reflect on their everyday practice. A community of practice interacts regularly to discuss common challenges, and to identify potential solutions.

Policy provisions for participatory informal settlement upgrading

Breaking New Ground (2004): This document was instrumental in putting informal settlement upgrading on the agenda in South African housing policy. It aimed to set out a comprehensive approach to human settlements that would result in the creation of liveable, sustainable and integrated living environments. Breaking New Ground moved the conversation beyond the provision of housing alone, and emphasised the need for in situ incremental upgrading. The document did however refer to upgrading as a strategy for eradicating informal settlements. The language has since shifted to recognise the value and functionality of informal settlements for the lives and livelihoods of the urban poor.

National Housing Code (2009): Part 3 of the National Housing Code set out the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP). The programme was created in accordance with the United Nation's goal of significantly bettering the lives of 100 million informal dwellers by 2020. It served as a tool to guide municipalities in the implementation of upgrading interventions. Part 3 made reference to the need for a holistic approach to informal settlements that would ensure minimum disturbance to networks and support structures of residents. The programme detailed the phases of in situ interventions, funding parameters for projects, as well as the responsibilities of municipalities in the upgrading process. Importantly, Part 3 emphasised the need for ongoing community participation in the making of sustainable human settlements.

Outcome 8 (2010): The agreement between the former Minister of Human Settlements, Tokyo Sexwale, and the Presidency made explicit reference to informal settlement upgrading. It promulgated the National Upgrading Support Programme (NUSP), an instrument designed to assist the National Department of Human Settlements, as well as local municipalities, in implementing the UISP set out in the National Housing Code in 2009. According to Outcome 8, the NUSP would offer technical assistance and capacity support to national and sub-national actors. The programme would also make provision for a national forum that would encourage communication between stakeholders. The NUSP was therefore essential to securing a place for informal settlement upgrading in South Africa's development agenda.

63% of South Africans live in cities and towns

There are approximately **2700 informal settlements** in South Africa

About **11%** of South Africans live in them

Number Of Households Living In Informal Settlements

Thousands	0	20	40	60	80	100	120	140	160
City of Cape Town									
Ekurhuleni									
City of Johannesburg									
City of Tshwane									
eThekwini									
Bojanala									
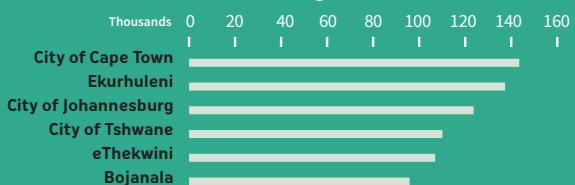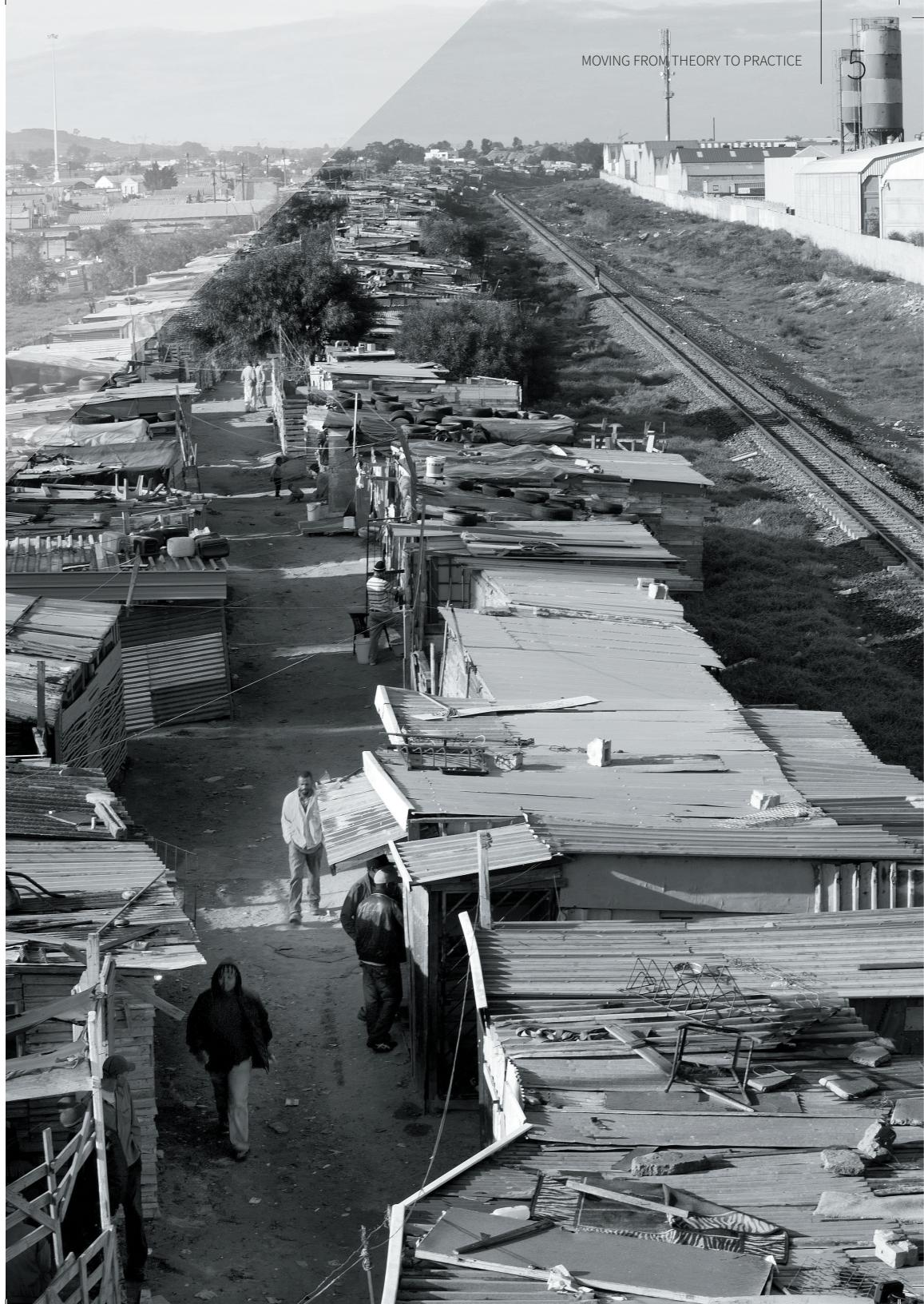
The comparative advantages of an upgrading approach to human settlements development

Informal settlement upgrading has emerged, locally and internationally, as a viable approach for addressing the needs of urban residents.

Across the globe the population of urban areas increase continuously. The resources and capacities of cities come under intense strain as a larger and larger amount of people must find not only spaces within which to live, but also ways of sustaining their livelihoods. In South Africa this influx, coupled with a history of exclusion realised through the control of space, has resulted in unequal access to housing and land. The urban poor are subjected to harsh living conditions where even basic services are out of reach. In adequately responding to the realities of a growing population then, cities have had to change their thinking about the role and function of informal settlements in the lives of the poor – turning to upgrading instead of criminalising informality and relying on strategies of eradication and erasure. Indeed, practitioners in Cape Town note that upgrading serves as an alternative to problematic strategies such as forced evictions and the demolition of informal housing.

LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES are those activities that allow people to gain access to the basic necessities of life such as food, water and shelter. These can include the generation of income through formal employment, or informal means such as trading goods, fishing or farming.

Informal settlement upgrading is therefore an approach that recognises that informal settlements are not only eyesores or problem areas diminishing the marketability of the city. Rather, they are spaces that allow low-income residents to access affordable housing as well as **livelihood opportunities** Given their close proximity to city centres, where part-time or permanent work is often found, informal settlements are crucial for ensuring access to livelihood opportunities for the urban poor. Furthermore, a host of income generating activities take place in these settlements. Because land-use is less formalized in these areas, live stock can be kept and sold on patches of free

A case study from India shows that some of the activities that generate income and sustain livelihoods for the poor can only be practiced in informal areas. The documentary entitled *The Way to End Slums* (ACHR/Uncommon Media 2012) shows a potter who is able to mould, bake and sell his goods in an informal settlement in Mumbai. Here, he is not restricted by pollution laws or zoning regulations. The fires that he uses to heat his ovens can burn throughout the day, and he can work in an open space where his vocation poses less of a threat to children and passersby. If he, along with millions of other residents, were to be moved to high-rise buildings his business would certainly go under. Interventions such as these often leave the poor destitute, as they take away their ability to pursue informal livelihood

land. Markets in informal settlements offer space for trade, and residents can operate businesses from their homes.

Furthermore, in her study of informal settlement functionality, Catherine Cross (2008) makes a distinction between 'core zone shacks' and 'peripheral zone shacks'. While the latter is predominantly thought to provide housing security, residents of the former seek access to jobs. Her argument illustrates not only the important linkages between the location of a settlement and its potential function, but also the varying roles that informal settlements can play in the lives of their residents. Here, social networks are established. These networks in turn give rise to social capital - a resource that the poor can draw on in a time of need. It comes as no surprise then that residents in informal settlements are often reluctant to move away from the areas within which they already have access to social support structures. Indeed, as Pieterse notes

> *As informal settlements are currently, they are teeming with life, social networks and economic linkages. It is often impossible to recreate these livelihood options and possibilities outside of highly fluid and malleable physical conditions that are best offered by informal areas. It is important to shed light on these aspects of life in informal settlements, without romanticising them, because policymakers are often baffled by the resistance that come from some slum dwellers to upgrade proposals. Furthermore, upgrading initiatives must, of course, work with an intimate understanding of the existing livelihood strategies of those affected, as the vast literature on livelihoods and assets-based poverty reminds us*
> **(PIETERSE, 2008: 57)**

Informal settlement upgrading is therefore an approach to development that can harness and bolster the existing positive aspects of informal areas. A key feature of this approach is its recognition of the crucial role that communities can play in bringing about sustainable improvements to their own quality of life. Community **participation,** collaboration and cross-sector partnerships [coproduction]are therefore central to informal settlement upgrading. Of course, there is a multitude of different strategies and methodologies that can be utilised in the implementation of an upgrading initiative. Abbott (2002) unpacks both practical and thematic approaches to upgrading that show that the understanding

PARTICIPATION means that communities take part in the process of development; they are included in formulation and implementation of projects and plans. Communities identify key issues in their settlements, as well as those strategies that can best address their needs. Through participatory upgrading residents in informal settlements are given a voice.

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and implementation of the term is by no means homogenous. In Cape Town, organisations employ various strategies including community mobilisation, participatory planning, enumeration and profiling, re-blocking and savings groups. While some of these strategies are concerned with the improvement of the physical environment, it is important to note that upgrading is also engendered through methods that strengthen community capacity, that draw on the agency of residents and that equip the urban poor with tools with which to negotiate their place in the city.

"... informal settlement upgrading is construed as a parallel process – one that improves the physical environment while also paying attention to the role of urban residents in determining their own lives and the shape of the spaces within which they move."

> **In Brazil upgrading projects aimed at constructing open public spaces in favelas (World Urban Forum 2010) suggest that there is a movement towards transforming the habitability of informal settlements. Upgrading is therefore not only concerned with providing basic services, but also with providing spaces within which the capacities of urban residents can be nurtured.**

Ideally then, informal settlement upgrading is construed as a parallel process – one that improves the physical environment while also paying attention to the role of urban residents in determining their own lives and the shape of the spaces within which they move. International practice again draws attention to the importance of substantive community participation for ensuring effective upgrading interventions. In Ahmedabad in India, the Slum Networking Project has been lauded as a successful upgrading initiative with potential for scaling up (Das and Takahashi 2008). The Slum Networking Project relied on decentralized governance throughout its implementation. Local government formed partnerships with NGOs and private firms in order to share costs as well as responsibilities for upgrading initiatives. Furthermore, the project was implemented through continuous community participation. Community-based organizations had an integral part to play in the working of the project and represented the needs of households to the implementing bodies.

Processes of informal settlement upgrading therefore have the potential to significantly improve the lives of the urban poor, as it intersects with a variety of important social aspects. These interventions contribute to improved livelihoods as they provide social services and economic opportunities that lead to better quality of life.

> **The Asian Coalition for Community Action Programme (ACCA), implemented by local organisations, channels fund directly to the urban poor who are then responsible for designing and implementing their own upgrading strategies**
> **(ASIA COALITION FOR HOUSING RIGHTS 2012).**

"During the reign of the apartheid government, space was used as a tool to segregate the population along racial lines."

The safety and security of urban residents in informal settlements is enhanced through upgrading projects. Crime rates can drop through the provision of streetlights, while processes that strengthen the capacity of communities to identify and deal with problematic areas in the settlement contribute to a safer environment.

Informal settlement upgrading also promotes community mobilization and can strengthen networks and partnerships within communities. Finally, upgrading initiatives contribute to heightened civic engagement and, as such, serve as a means through which the urban poor may enact their rights (and responsibilities) as citizens. Through participatory upgrading, local government becomes less of a service provider and more of a partner in community-driven processes.

The current state of informal settlement upgrading in South Africa

Any consideration of the policies and practice that deal with issues of housing and service delivery in South Africa must take note of the historical development of these issues in the country, and the spatial planning legacy that serves as a backdrop for all future interventions. During the reign of the apartheid government, space was used as a tool to segregate the population along racial lines. While a number of acts were implemented during the mid-1900s, the most infamous of these is the Group Areas Act which sought to designate land for occupation by one of four 'racial' groups (Goodlad 1996). Issues of housing and land in South Africa therefore come with a complex history of discrimination and the large-scale violation of human rights so that attempts to create sustainable human settlements are also geared towards securing social justice. As mentioned in the introduction, post-apartheid

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INCREMENTALISM describes small actions that build on one another and together create significant effects. In upgrading, incrementalism is about the progressive production of a settlement over time and through multiple stages

CO-PRODUCTION refers to the process through which knowledge should ideally be made. This means that multiple stakeholders, including citizens, development practitioners and the state, work together to create plans and interventions aimed at addressing pertinent issues.

housing policies were focused on addressing these spatial inequalities. While these policies were instrumental in bringing about change in South Africa, they were inefficient in securing large-scale transformations and, as such, in meeting the needs of a growing urban population. With the introduction of Breaking New Ground in 2004, policy measures therefore shifted towards a focus on upgrading as an approach that could bring about sustainable development at scale.

The process of mainstreaming participatory upgrading as an approach to informal settlements is however, a gradual process fraught with institutional challenges. While a progressive policy environment offers fertile ground for upgrading practices, these have struggled to a find firm footing. Organisations in Cape Town agree that there is a disjuncture between policy and practice in informal settlement upgrading in South Africa. Practitioners note that policy foregrounds processes of participation and **incrementalism**, but that these are not realised in the implementation of development interventions. The National Housing Code of 2009 (Upgrading Informal Settlements Programme – UISP) stipulates the policy provisions for informal settlement upgrading and specifies the various phases of incremental upgrading and associated steps and activities. The UISP also sets out objectives for participation and states that "[it] is of the utmost importance that the community is involved in all aspects of the settlement upgrading process" (National Housing Code 2009). The state's approach to informal settlements however continues to speak of ambiguity and hostility. Housing is still, in large part, the ultimate goal of development projects related to informal settlements so that participation and incrementalism easily fall by the wayside. In South Africa then, development practice has been tied to a language of relocation (Huchzermeyer 2006), eradication and top-down intervention (Millstein 2006).

'This is not to say, however, that informal settlement upgrading initiatives have not made significant headway. Across the country upgrading projects have been implemented by organizations (in partnership with local government) that have recognised not only the value of upgrading as an approach, but also the value of drawing affected communities into upgrading processes and of encouraging the **co-production** of alternative forms of development. Even before the uptake of participatory upgrading policies by the state, NGOs were implementing strategies that aimed to build community capacity along with improvements to the physical environment'

From the Khayalethu Initiative

Community Organisation Resources Centre (CORC) is affiliated with Shack Dwellers International and the Informal Settlements Network. The organisation primarily provides support for community networks that are mobilised around particular issues. These networks include residents in informal settlements and women's savings groups. CORC therefore works in close partnership with residents to effect change in their living environments. Through a number of participatory methods, the organisation works to produce data that communities can use to support grassroots initiatives, to lobby the state, and to claim rights. CORC therefore aims to empower the urban poor by strengthening their capacity to realise citizenship. The organisation also offers technical support that assists in implementing development projects.

Their work in Sheffield Road, Philippi illustrates the positive contribution that the organisation makes in Cape Town. The project, initiated in 2010, allowed community members to drive the intervention and to identify key issues to be addressed in their settlements. A portion of the settlement was re-blocked and as a result residents were able to gain access to adequate water and sanitation facilities and to public spaces.

Development Action Group (DAG) offers technical and professional advice to civil society organisations and community groups faces with forced removal. The organisation's vision is to see the creation of sustainable human settlements through development processes that enable human rights, dignity and equity. In line with this vision, DAG has launched a city-wide initiative in Cape Town aimed at re-imagining human settlements. The initiative draws on participatory models of intervention, and is grounded in participatory development processes. In its Affordable Housing Programme, the organisation worked with the National Upgrading Support

Programme to development best practice strategies for informal settlement upgrading in South Africa.

Since 2000 DAG has been involved in the upgrading of Freedom Park, a settlement in Mitchell's Plain. Here, the organisation assisted Freedom Park residents in exploring housing opportunities that would best address their needs. Despite resistance from the City of Cape Town, the community insisted on building their settlement through the People's Housing Programme (PHP). In 2007, construction began on a settlement that was designed in partnership with residents. DAG's work empowered residents to assert their place in the development process, and to navigate the technical and administrative aspects of upgrading.

Isandla Institute is a public interest think-tank focused on fostering just, equitable and democratic urban settlements. This is enhanced through innovative research and advocacy interventions. The organisation functions at the interface between development practitioners, built environment professionals, academics and policy makers. Isandla Institute therefore works to create spaces where multiple stakeholders can collaborate, share knowledge and form partnerships. Over the last few years, Isandla Institute has run projects that have aimed to embed a partnership-based approach to informal settlement upgrading, and to document practices and lessons related to informal settlement upgrading in South Africa.

In 2011, Isandla Institute, in partnership with CORC, implemented a project that sought to contextualise and concretise the notion of 'the

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right to the city' in the South African context. The project entailed a series of iterative dialogues between the urban poor and within the urban NGO sector, culminating in a national policy dialogue. In 2012 Isandla Institute also began to work with the African Centre for Cities on the compilation of a book that investigates informal settlement upgrading in South Africa.

Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) is an organisation that is concerned with the development of safe and sustainable living environments. VPUU use upgrading as a means to improve the quality of life of residents in informal settlements. Following a particular model of intervention, the organisation aims to bolster social, situational and institutional crime prevention. Their interventions are therefore targeted at multiple levels, including that of the household, the settlement, and the administrative environment within which crime and crime prevention occurs. Community participation is essential to the model used by VPUU, as residents collaborate with practitioners throughout its various stages.

In Harare, Khayelitsha VPUU undertook a crime mapping exercise that gave residents access to information about crime in their settlement. Since 2007, the organisation ascertained residents' perceptions of crime in the area through regular and extensive interviews with community members. The data was then used to draw up a map indicating those streets and spaces that were considered to be unsafe. Crime maps could be used by communities to educate their members, and to strengthen their prevention initiatives.

In 2010, with the adoption of Outcome 8 – which includes provision for the establishment of the National Upgrading Support Programme (NUSP) – the hostility towards informal settlements was addressed and upgrading was explicitly defined as a key delivery outcome. In response to this shift in South Africa's development discourse, more upgrading projects are coming to the fore. Of course, the adoption of Outcome 8 has not eliminated the challenges that come with planning and implementing upgrading projects. The discrepancies between the state's policies and practice are in part due to a lack of collaboration and coordination between branches of government. The national pilot project for municipal accreditation and housing delivery, the N2 Gateway project, serves as an example of the ways in which tensions between branches of government can work to the detriment of development interventions (DPLG 2008). The distinctive roles of municipal, provincial and national governments are not clearly defined and implementation strategies are, as such, poorly coordinated and inefficient. But a lack of collaboration between actors is not only a feature of the state's practice. Civil society actors also remain, in large part, isolated from one another so that there is often repeat spending in particular areas. In order to strengthen upgrading practice in South Africa then, it is necessary that these limitations be addressed.

The value of a community of practice

The preceding sections have, in part, described the South African context as one that poses severe challenges to the implementation of an upgrading approach to development and to the creation of sustainable human settlements. These sections have however also served to outline the immense potential for social transformation that exists here.

South Africa offers fertile ground for the design and implementation of interventions that are innovative, responsive, and that ultimately committed to community-driven development. The NGO sector has done considerable groundwork in establishing and sustaining an upgrading practice, and organisations such as those involved in the Khayalethu Initiative represent the skills and resources available in the country. It is necessary then for this potential to be harnessed in ways that contribute to the strengthening of a national upgrading practice, and for existing good practice to feed into and guide other interventions and practitioners.

We therefore argue for the recognition of the value of a community of practice as a tool for building partnerships and for encouraging collaboration and learning between multiple actors in the field of informal settlement upgrading. Wenger and Snyder define a community of practice as a group of people 'bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise' (2000: 139). Through collective deliberation, members of a community of practice generate creative solutions, and can put forward plans to address issues in new and exciting ways.

This knowledge in turn becomes a foundation for future practice and, as such, enriches and strengthens the outcomes of a particular undertaking. In the case of informal settlement upgrading in South Africa, a community of practice can serve as a platform for building on the lessons learnt from experience. The space can also be used as a means to draw practitioners with different skills together in a single forum which allows for collective learning and growth. Finally, a community of practice can allow for the positive work of organisations and practitioners to have an impact beyond the area, city, region or province that they work in. As mentioned above, participation and partnership are central to upgrading and is therefore crucial that actors involved in tahe implementation of upgrading interventions embody these principles not only in policy, but also in practice.

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