

Leaving a Legacy

The Backyard Matters Project (2019-2025)





Acknowledgements

Backyard Matters is a partnership initiative between the Development Action Group (DAG) and Isandla Institute.

The project recognises that backyard housing is a community-driven response to housing shortages for many who fall through the cracks of state programming and unaffordable private rentals. Backyard housing, however, remains a neglected and sometimes invisible sector. The project is aimed at strengthening the backyard rental market and contributing towards well-managed, quality rental stock that provides affordable, dignified and safe housing solutions in thriving neighbourhoods. The project thus advocates for inclusive policy and programming that embraces the voice, needs and agency of backyard residents and landlords as an integral part of the municipal community. Backyard Matters is funded by Comic Relief.

2025

Cover image: Isandla Institute / Anotherlove Productions

I. Introduction

For decades a neglected, largely invisible, and even vilified sector, backyard housing has finally started gaining recognition as a significant community-led means of addressing South Africa's affordable housing crisis.

This acknowledgement is not unrelated to the considerable efforts of the Backyard Matters (BYM) project. Launched in 2019 by the Development Action Group (DAG)¹ and Isandla Institute² (with VPUU³ in the first year), this five-year partnership initiative has been funded by Comic Relief with broad aims to:

- Improve understanding and recognition of backyard rental housing as an affordable, dignified urban housing option, and leverage that knowledge to inform appropriate responses within the sector and the human settlements space more broadly.
- Capacitate stakeholders (backyard landlords and tenants) to better understand government processes as well as their own rights and responsibilities.

- Contribute towards the improvement of well-managed, quality backyard rental stock through linkages with DAG's Contractor and Developer Academy (CDA),⁴ as well as financial actors/investors.

Through research and knowledge production, community engagement and leadership building, stakeholder engagement/dialogue, advocacy, and technical support, Backyard Matters (referred to as 'the project') has both produced an extensive body of knowledge products and built meaningful and highly productive relationships with stakeholders—from communities and civil society, to municipalities and national departments. The project also has continuously advocated for inclusive policy and programming that recognise and support the backyard housing sector—and its landlords and tenants—as integral to the municipal community.

Structured through the themes of Research, Relationships, and Advocacy, the following narrative endeavours to capture the tremendous legacy of the Backyard Matters project. Informed by interviews with stakeholders and partners from national government

¹ A leader in people-led housing solutions, the Development Action Group works towards inclusive and sustainable neighbourhoods and cities.

² Known for its rigorous research, policy advocacy and dialogue facilitation, Isandla Institute is a thought leader and convenor on spatial justice, urban inclusion and accountable urban governance.

³ VPUU (Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading) is a Cape Town-based programme aiming to reduce violence and improve quality of life in marginalised communities through integrated urban development. Originally a co-implementer of BYM, VPUU stepped back from the project at the end of the first year (late 2020).

⁴ The CDA aims to capacitate and provide socio-technical support to small-scale developers and emerging contractors that seek to provide affordable, well-managed housing.

Backyard housing: Supplying a demand

Backyard housing has existed as part of South Africa's housing landscape for decades: pre-apartheid as a response to restrictive laws; post-apartheid, increasingly filling a gap in the ever-decreasing quantum of affordable housing available in the face of rapid urbanisation via state programmes and the private rental market. Associated with informality in both cases, state policymakers and academic researchers alike largely overlooked its significance.

In contrast to the headline-making health and safety risks drawing attention to South Africa's informal settlements, the realities of backyarding—assumed to be a transitional option that would disappear with the introduction of state-provisioned low-cost housing—remained poorly understood, even among backyard dwellers themselves. Thus, even as backyarding's growth outpaced that of informal settlements, its nature, functioning, and role within the low-cost housing market remained opaque.

departments and municipal officials to civil-society and community-based organisations, it examines and highlights the project's successes, challenges, and lessons learned.

In short, the learnings are numerous and clear. Start where you are—even when knowledge is limited. Let research evolve in response to findings, rather

than hewing rigidly to pre-set outputs. Remember that facilitation requires both flexibility and boundaries—especially when navigating expectations on the ground. Share widely: influence is amplified when knowledge circulates. And finally, recognise that people change policies, meaning relationship-building is not peripheral to policy change, but at its very heart.

II. The research: influencing policy & practice

For decades, backyarding’s positioning—literally behind a ‘main house’—obscured the realities of the practice, both in census tallies and the public imagination.⁵ Despite its rapid expansion (it was the fastest-growing housing sector in the decade leading up to Covid) and evolution, attempts to get the topic onto national agendas remained a political non-starter. As recently as 2015, it was still seen by many political principals as an evil to be eradicated—a fact not unrelated to a dearth of understanding.

When the Backyard Matters project began in 2019, the lack of general knowledge on the sector pre-empted the possibility of developing appropriate state policy, much less supportive practice. As such, the project started by taking a step back: consolidating the research that did exist and engaging in the enumeration work required to build a much-needed evidence base.

This would become the foundation of the project’s “exploratory journey”, as Mirjam van Donk, Isandla Institute’s Director, describes it. That is, assembling the basics of what backyarding was about, how it operated, and who its players were.⁶ A logic of adaptability guided the project’s research and knowledge production from there; that is, letting questions evolve organically in response to internal learnings, rather than remaining tied to the outputs as first conceived.

This flexibility both allowed and pushed the team to

dig deeper into topics never previously associated with backyarding: questions of waste infrastructure and the legalities around municipal mandates related to basic service provision on privately owned land; landlord-tenant rights and responsibilities; issues related to neighbourhood safety; finance mechanisms and value chains; alternative building technologies for affordable housing; and backyard housing as a sub-set of small-scale affordable rental housing.⁷ This pragmatic, detailed approach—and the rigour with which evidence was collected on the ground—made Backyard Matters’ findings incredibly valuable and even paradigm-shifting for external stakeholders.

“[The BYM] programme assisted us to define what we are dealing with,” said Nonhlanhla Buthelezi, Chief Director of Policy Development at the National Department of Human Settlements (NDHS) of Backyard Matters’ research.

Seth Maqetuka from National Treasury’s City Support Programme agreed, adding: “It was a very complex sub-sector, so even municipalities that recognised it weren’t sure exactly what they were supposed to provide, much less how other spheres of government could support them.”

Referring to “the detailed portfolio of empirical evidence” underpinning BYM’s publications and presentations, Buthelezi emphasised how understanding the “lived experience” of backyarders brought clarity to officials crafting policy for this highly complex and diverse sector, allowing the department to “fully understand what is it that needs to be done in terms of interventions by government; to say, it’s not about us constructing it, but it’s about a backyard support programme”.

‘Backyard Matters assisted us to define what we are dealing with and to fully understand what it is that needs to be done in terms of interventions by government.’

- Nonhlanhla Buthelezi, NDHS

⁵ The sector’s first acknowledgement in census data was in the South African National Census of 2011 (StatsSA’s third iteration).

⁶ The first major piece of research published was BYM’s *Enumeration in 8 Cape Town Neighbourhoods* (2019-2020).

⁷ See *Knowledge Products* at the end for key publications.

‘We noted backyarding is a critical area that needed to be addressed effectively, and benefitted from the rich work that the project had done.’

- Seana Nkhahle,
SALGA

What *is* backyarding?

“It’s very clear that it’s in an ecosystem,” said development consultant David Gardner. Currently serving as Programme Manager for the City of Cape Town’s Small-Scale Rental Units Mayoral Priority Programme, Gardner refers to the way BYM made the sector’s dynamic complexity legible, an understanding that enriched practitioners’ grasp of the affordable housing sector as a whole.

While on the one hand backyarding can be seen as sitting on a continuum of housing insecurity (the classic view of it as an informal, transitional stop-gap for those lacking ‘better’ options), on the other, it is also simply private, affordable rental housing. In other words, people started to understand it could be both of these (and a range of things in between). With this understanding, its potential to harness a diversity of interests and generate numerous multiplier effects started coming into focus.

This pragmatic understanding of backyarding as a complex rental sector was articulated in *Small-scale rental housing: Moving from the low to the high road* (2022),⁸ a BYM publication that Gardner credits with changing the thinking from “we need to accept this” to “here’s a way of thinking and engaging with it”.

Proposing ways that planning and land-use management instruments could better support the sector, and unpacking how regulations and finance were throttling it, the wider implications of backyarding—its potential scope and benefit—were not only visible, but for the first time appeared approachable.

And people were paying attention.

“We noted [backyarding] is a critical area that needed to be addressed effectively, and benefitted from the rich work that the project had done,” said Seana Nkhahle, Portfolio Head for the Built Environment at SALGA national. With a formalised partnership in effect from 2024, SALGA requested BYM use its “rich work” as the basis for drafting SALGA’s position paper on backyard housing.⁹

“That paper then informed SALGA in its lobbying and advocacy for matters that include but are not limited to reviews of policy and legislation,” said Nkhahle, adding that the paper also guides SALGA’s members in municipalities.

“That understanding of the dynamics in the sector, and the implications for how cities might develop new approaches to housing development policy and regulations... became fertile ground for a grouping of interests,” recalled Gardner of the influence the project was suddenly bringing to bear.

“It became: how could this be implemented and what would need to change and who do we need to talk to, and oh my gosh, this is a huge issue and needs a multifaceted response!” Gardner recalled of the excitement as various players across different municipalities started coalescing.

Small-scale rental: a game changing perspective shift

Seizing momentum, BYM didn’t wait for permission to continue unpacking the practicalities of the sector it had reconceptualised as private, affordable rental accommodation.

⁸ <https://www.dag.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Small-Scale-Rental-Housing-Moving-From-the-Low-Road-to-the-High-Road.pdf>

⁹ The partnership is detailed in an MOU, running from 2024-2029.

Applying a practice-oriented lens, the project asked what was needed to enable the safe and dignified expansion of the sector—which was being rebranded in government corridors as “small scale affordable rental” (SSAR)—while also ensuring continued affordability.¹⁰

Critically, this affordable rental stock was appearing with or without government support. That is, while meeting the needs of people eligible for social housing,¹¹ this housing stock was being developed by people—ordinary and entrepreneurial—responding to a gap in the market, and creating jobs in the process.

“This is a private-led sector industry... [meaning] the municipality plays a different role... that was one of the biggest departures for me,” said Clinton Petersen, Acting Deputy Director of Human Settlements Directorate in George Municipality, adding that this framing—seeing backyarding as an industry versus housing issue—offered inroads to address the associated complexities.

“[BYM] not only sustained and catapulted the conversation, but also deepened it,” affirmed Alison Tshangana. A human settlements specialist formerly with the Centre for Affordable Housing Finance Africa (CAHF), Tshangana refers to how BYM catalysed efforts to manage the backlog of title deeds, train township building contractors, develop appropriate financial tools, etc. In other words, lighting the way as the journey continued, step by step.

“Because of all the research already done, we were able to get a lot of buy-in from all our departments,” said Petersen of how officials in George Municipality used BYM knowledge products to formulate their own backyard housing strategy—a first of its kind in a B-municipality.¹²

Meanwhile, as part of its partnership with SALGA, BYM also developed a “Municipal Learning Programme”. Largely based on SALGA’s BYM-drafted position paper, the programme supports municipal policymakers grappling with the sector’s importance and management.

“We are trying to help people understand how big this sector is, and how it can be used for the city’s economic growth,” said Petal Thring, who described the Municipal Learning Programme (MLP) as “a wake-up call”. The Divisional Head of Human Settlements Administration in the City of Tshwane, Thring left the MLP fired up to “get things started” and share with her departmental colleagues the many opportunities to capitalise on the value chains attached to the sector. That is, how backyarding could animate the sustainable building sector and thus become a key driver in catalysing broader township economies.

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- Clinton Petersen,
George Municipality

¹⁰ It is important to note that government’s enthusiasm for SSAR still often excludes the more ‘informal’ and lower-income segment of this market.

¹¹ South Africa’s Social Housing programme has faced numerous challenges, including funding shortfalls, bureaucratic delays, land access issues, and insufficient delivery to meet growing demand. <https://groundup.org.za/article/social-housing-in-south-africa-is-in-trouble-heres-why/>

¹² Approved by the Mayoral Committee in February 2025, the George Municipality strategy consists of about 20 interventions, some of which have already been implemented. Examples: embedding backyard housing as a legitimate form of housing in the zoning scheme; embedding small-scale rental in the zoning scheme; implementing overlay zones to enable faster submission of building plans; and engaging with provincial government to assist in developing model building plans (Clinton Petersen, personal communication, April 2025).

III. The relationships: the centre must hold

Developing dignified affordable housing and stimulating township economies are two of South Africa's great challenges. As much as the backyarding sector's huge potential to positively assist in both of these areas was emerging, enabling its growth was going to require deliberate cross-sectoral partnerships, the cultivation of change agents, and a collaborative, whole-of-society approach.

"The project provided leadership. That wasn't there before. We had various pieces, but no voice," said Tshangana of the critical role BYM would play in creating platforms for meaningful collaboration.

'BYM enabled very constructive dialogue within the sector. We now know what the gaps are, and what to do to address them.'
- Seth Maqetuka,
National Treasury

"BYM enabled very constructive dialogue within the sector," agreed CSP's Maqetuka. "We now know what the gaps are, and what to do to address them. So we are progressing."

The project's collaborative orientation was firstly expressed in the co-implementing partnership between DAG and Isandla Institute. With highly respected and long-standing track records in the urban land, housing, and governance space, the organisations' complementary strengths—Isandla Institute renowned for rigorous research and convening, and DAG for its deeply embedded community-based approach—gave the union a unique credibility.

"Without the centre holding, it's difficult for all of us to convene," observed Mike Makwela, of Isandla Institute and DAG's complementary co-leadership.

A Senior Programme Coordinator at the Johannesburg NGO, PlanAct, and participant at the BYM-hosted "Winter School" on backyarding for civil society organisations,¹³ Makwela attributed the success of that workshop (and subsequent BYM-collaborations) to the trust built between PlanAct, DAG, and Isandla Institute over a long working history.

While many Winter School participants already knew one another, the opportunity to meet in person and strengthen those relationships over a few days was invaluable. "That opportunity to really learn from each other and come out with an action¹⁴—I wish there would be another one!" Makwela said, emphasising the richness of "meeting colleagues coming from different angles, and sharing the frustrations, but also the joy and excitement and prospect of seeing our efforts being achieved".

¹³ Taking place in June 2024, the CSO Winter School was attended by 15 representatives from urban sector/housing & human settlements CSOs. The Winter School's core objectives were: to deepen knowledge of the (diverse) backyard housing sector and its importance in providing affordable housing, and facilitating/contributing to local economic and neighbourhood development; to increase understanding of the challenges the sector faces, and how CSOs could potentially enable/strengthen it; and, to explore how CSOs can apply the insights gained in their own practice and/or advocacy on housing, human settlements, and access to services.

¹⁴ At the Winter School, PlanAct started planning a roundtable summit to share learnings and coordinate efforts around small-scale rental, with partners to join from Joburg, Cape Town, Tshwane, and Buffalo City. (Mike Makwela, personal communication, April 2025).

DAG and Isandla Institute attribute the team's ability to navigate towards an uncertain horizon, especially in the early days, to a baseline of mutual respect—a quality woven through all the project's engagements.

“Procedurally how Isandla Institute and DAG do things is very important and unusual: they created space for people to start thinking about [the issues] throughout the process, not only when it launched, and always taking the audience with them,” noted Gardner of the project's consistent inclusivity.

While BYM engagements often started with the strength of the project's research and knowledge products, it was the ethos of respect and flexibility imbuing its peer learning platforms that made them so successful. From the CSO Winter School to SALGA's Municipal Learning Programme to national multi-stakeholder events and local engagements, sessions were fuelled by an appetite to receive and share expertise between peers.

Zama Mgwatyu, Programme Manager at DAG, recalled how stakeholders would sometimes come to engagements with their own agendas or boxes needing ticking, but how the project's willingness to engage those agendas—even when seemingly off-topic—nurtured recognition for BYM's programme.

As Isandla Institute's van Donk noted, “It is not a one-way street, where we inform and direct them; rather we draw on them to tell their story—it's about recognition.”

BYM peer events thus not only surfaced shared interests and exposed participants to ideas that they may not have encountered in their own institutions, but also built relationships and grew networks.

“That ability to bring everyone to the table to discuss these issues was very critical,” said Petal Thring of Tshwane about the peer-learning aspect of the MLP, which she attended with stakeholders from other municipalities, SALGA, and National Treasury.

Thring also commended BYM's follow-through: “Isandla Institute and DAG are always there—helping peers come together, understand where others are, and share experiences. They never let the ball drop; they are always trying to take the conversation forward.”

The broad scope of that conversation, and its openness to different voices around the table,¹⁵ ultimately generated a sense that this topic of “backyarding” truly might yield something larger than the sum of its parts.

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- David Gardner, CoCT

¹⁵ Several organisations that were not the ‘usual suspects’ in terms of classic “backyard” concerns nonetheless consistently participated in BYM forums and coalitions.

IV. The advocacy: from the ground up

“Last week I was in a workshop where senior officials publicly declared that over 50% of housing in Cape Town will be delivered through SSR processes. I didn’t think in my 35-years of pushing this sector that I would hear a senior official make such a statement,” said David Gardner, adding that the achievement is all the more phenomenal if one is aware of the behind-the-scenes-complexity of the work. “Ultimately, Backyard Matters was one of the most important voices in pushing many of those buttons,” Gardner noted.

While such high-level shifts are breathtaking, the question remained: how was the work received on-the-ground?

Coming out from the main house

The project first engaged with backyarder communities through the foundational enumerations conducted in eight neighbourhoods across Cape Town in the wake of the first national Covid-19 lockdown. Following on the enumerations, workshops with Neighbourhood and Residents Associations and civil society organisations in those neighbourhoods and beyond were ongoing. Additionally, the project has provided technical support trainings through DAG’s CDA and Active Citizens Training Course,¹⁶ hosted information sessions with the Rental Housing Tribunal, and piloted housing support services

¹⁶ ACTC is an action-oriented learning course with a specific focus on building alliances and strengthening the capacity and confidence of community leaders and activists at a neighbourhood and city-wide level. Training includes a combination of leadership, advocacy, and technical skills development.

in Eersterivier and Langa.¹⁷

Using the same approach characterising its ‘higher level’ state engagements, the project’s community-based work also focused on information-sharing and peer learning through consistent engagements grounded in respect, openness, and recognition.

“First and foremost, they are specific: this is the steps, the procedures, the framework. Matters arise, they sort it out immediately. They keep you up to date as to where you as a community stand. Are we still on same page? Is the objective still the same? They don’t start something and leave you be to figure things out. They literally advise and educate, it’s a beautiful journey,” said Charlene Saal. Secretary at Belleville South Residents Association¹⁸ (BSRA), Saal describes her experience with BYM as “joining forces to work to the goal that backyard dwellers have pride in themselves; to feel ‘this is our safe space’”.

“Our minds were blown away with the information that we have received,” said Lesley Ruiters, a member of BSRA’s housing subcommittee. “We realised the huge gap [we had] in terms of knowing backyarders’ rights. Talking about tenure, on which door to knock for basic services—water, sanitation, sewerage—we were capacitated as an executive

¹⁷ In 2024 BYM partnered with the City of Cape Town to pilot housing support centres in Langa and Eersterivier, targeted primarily at homeowners wanting to invest in/improve existing additional dwellings on their property and adhere to city regulations in this regard. Backyard tenants were also supported with information about their rights and responsibilities and with relevant referrals. The pilot, called ‘The Right to Build Initiative’, was written up as a case study (see Knowledge Products at end).

¹⁸ BSRA is a community-based organisation recipient of DAG socio-technical support; it has been involved in both the BYM and DAG’s Inclusive Neighbourhood Programme.

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- Charlene Saal, Belleville South Residents Association

group,” Ruiters said of BSRA’s leadership team, which then hosted community meetings, sharing their learnings with the backyarders themselves.

While so much of the historic focus on backyarding has been around its physical realities (Formal or Informal? Eradicate or Improve?), only recently have the needs of the people animating the sector—whether landlord or tenant—been recognised.

Through BYM’s numerous activities and workshops, backyarders flagged their concerns: issues like access to their own electricity box (so as not to rely on the main house for basic services), or the need for formal lease agreements to protect their rights (whether as tenants or landlords). These in turn informed the direction and scope of the project’s knowledge products, ultimately exposing the finer-detail of backyard realities to a larger audience.

One key lesson the project has learned from its community-level work is the importance of managing expectations. “Walking into a workshop and having to start by clarifying the objectives of the Backyard Matters project especially in a context where people expect to receive a house from government and view backyard housing as a temporary solution is not always easy,” acknowledged Kamogelo Shika, Project Coordinator at DAG.

As with workshops attended by ministers and senior department heads, a lot of BYM’s community meetings were about listening. “We speak of how this is an invisible sector. Communities would use [our meetings] as a way to share frustrations—we had to [be prepared to] navigate the broadness of the topic and people’s concerns,” said Shika.

“The ability to adapt while sticking to project objectives is key,” agreed DAG’s Mgwatyu. “If you’re not a good facilitator,

you’ll do things outside the project because you want to be loved. But you can’t be bread to everyone,” he said of the need to listen to people’s challenges, but also stay the course.

The facilitation team managed this by always being ready to share information. That is, providing contacts to social service organisations, links to online or other resources, and/or suggestions of municipal assistance, such as to the Right to Build Initiative (RtBI). The RtBI, co-implemented with the City of Cape Town in 2024, offered advice on topics from land-use, building, and planning, to lease agreements and tenure issues. BYM hopes the pilot will provide a template for the Housing Support Centres that it has been advocating for to better support the next step of SSR development across South African cities.

Building bridges: the White Paper brings it home

The value and impact of BYM’s research, partnerships, and collaborations came together in late 2022, when the project entered a submission to the NDHS for the planned new Human Settlements Policy and Bill, its first major revision since the 1994 White Paper on Housing.¹⁹

Calling on the networks BYM had built over the previous three years, Isandla Institute led a co-creation process to articulate the issues raised through BYM’s extensive research and numerous engagements. While this

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-Feroza Suleman, BESG

¹⁹ The White Paper’s focus on the progressive realisation of adequate housing for all would over time become conflated with political slogans promising “free houses for all”—a popular belief arguably contributing to the housing limbo many South Africans still find themselves in, and a continued view of backyarding as a transitional state.

opportunity for a formal submission was undeniably game-changing, BYM's true influence was already long in play.

Through its knowledge products and layered relationships, BYM acted as "an invisible hand in the process", building policy consensus, gaining buy-in from the different stakeholders, and shifting understanding and recognition of how the sector can and should be supported going forward.

"Policy moments can be once in lifetime," Isandla Institute's van Donk observed, "but it's the interplay between [those moments and prior conversations] that create openings."

Between its first submission in 2022, and its last in February 2024, BYM created and worked with a coalition of civil society organisations to develop a unified message around backyarding and informal settlements. While far from easy, the existing relationships and trust built in other forums like the Winter School greatly facilitated this process.

"Isandla Institute and CAHF played the most central role in rallying the sector and pushing for a change in approach, and they both deserve massive credit for getting the government to shift course in very pressurised timelines," said Nick Budlender, a researcher at Ndifuna Ukwazi²⁰ about the process.

²⁰ Ndifuna Ukwazi is an activist organisation and law centre that advocates for access to well-located land and affordable housing for poor and working class families, communities and social movements.

"BYM's coordination around critical moments such as the joint CSO submission to the White Paper demonstrated strategic agility and commitment to inclusive policy engagement, and ensured that grassroots perspectives are included in national housing discussions," agreed Feroza Suleman, Director of BESG.²¹

While not everything from the joint submission made it into the final White Paper,²² the NDHS was heavily reliant on Isandla Institute and BYM for research and policy recommendations on informality and backyarding when developing that section of the document, as CAHF's Tshangana noted, adding: "[Isandla Institute and BYM] are recognised by national as the ones to go to on the issue."

Again, this result comes back to BYM's core principles: the quality of the research and openness to the subject's evolution, the deeply collaborative partnerships, and the recognition given to all stakeholders.

"The most critical layer is the quality and nature of partnerships," said Vuyisani Moss, Senior Manager for Rental and Affordable Housing Policy at NDHS, of BYM's convening influence. "Here are the significant players wishing to collaborate with government, wishing to influence the policy space, wishing to influence a legislative space, wishing also to contribute towards programme design. Your work can speak volumes. But over and above that, on top of your work, it is your posture. It is your willingness to engage and to influence. So that builds the partnership."

²¹ The Built Environment Support Group supports vulnerable sectors of our society in accessing and developing land, basic services, shelter, and livelihood security.

²² <https://www.dhs.gov.za/sites/default/files/documents/APPROVED%20WHITE%20PAPER%20FOR%20PUBLICATION%20DEC%202024.pdf>

'The most critical layer is the quality and nature of partnerships. Your work can speak volumes. But over and above that, it is your posture. It is your willingness to engage and to influence.'

- Vuyisani Moss, NDHS

V. Lessons, insights & next steps

Lessons & Insights

THE RESEARCH: The project bedrock and launchpad for so many of its robust engagements, the value of the research and knowledge products multiplied as the project progressed. Some key lessons/insights:

- **Build momentum:** At the project's beginning, so little was known about the sector, but the project's experience of forging ahead to build a concrete evidence-base provided the foundation to explore specific themes/issues as they emerged.
- **Adaptability** (let the research evolve): The openness to examining topics/issues as logic dictated, rather than hewing to originally conceived outputs was invaluable.
 - Also underscores the importance of having funders and partners that understand this.
- **Implementation is experimentation:** As the research progressed, it unpacked questions of implementation in an organic iterative fashion; as with questions of momentum, conundrums of implementation are often the product of a vacuum.
 - The insight here is around the importance of experimenting and not being afraid to fail.
 - Also, multiple partners (especially from government) cited the enhanced value of the work's groundedness in community-experience.
- **Sharing is caring:** The project's influence was seeded by its efforts to share findings as broadly as possible.

THE RELATIONSHIPS: The value of the project's partnerships and collaborative orientation is inestimable: coalition-building and collaboration were core to its DNA. Strategic lessons around partnering for impact:

- **Reputation:** There is no substitute for credibility built over many years.
- **Respect:** Co-leadership doesn't always come easily, but mutual respect was the basis of the leadership team's success. This ethos extended throughout the project, to all partners, and permeated all engagements.
- **Recognition:** Related to respect, sincere recognition for every partner's contribution—even (especially) when it is perhaps not 100% “on point”—is critical to how engagements will proceed.
 - Not only is this a case of “we all want to be heard”, it also allows for unexpected insights, which are where innovation happens.
 - This attitude also means conveners don't “do everything”: give and take are vital for real and productive interaction (and creating change agents)
- **Boundaried Flexibility:** Being adaptable is important, but also critical to good facilitation is knowing when to say no.
 - Saying no, especially in community-based meetings, can be difficult. Having other resources to share or following up with a resource to assist make a big difference.

THE ADVOCACY: Building of effective partnerships and coalitions for advocacy, inclusive of the full range of stakeholders.

- **Community understanding:** In many communities where backyard housing is most prevalent, residents of backyard units can still find themselves sidelined by perceptions that they are ‘temporary visitors’ rather than full-fledged members of the community, even sometimes resulting in their exclusion from leadership structures. This needs to change.
 - Changes that should follow the new White Paper and subsequent shifts in state support will be critical here, as more dignified dwellings (those more typically thought of as SSARs) become the norm.
 - Continued capacitation by CSOs and CBOs on backyard dweller rights (landlords and tenants) is also vital.
- **Packaging:** The high quality and varied nature of publications by the BYM project (including animation and graphic novel-styled information) helps the content to land with broader audiences.
- **New era of human settlements advocacy:** The sense of change that accompanied the 2024 White Paper infused advocates and activists in the human settlements space with a sense that a new, less-combative and more process-driven approach to change could be possible. There was great appetite for:
 - More training on active citizenship and how to access one’s rights from government; and

- More workshops like the Winter School, bringing together younger and older colleagues, for greater intergenerational learning.

Next Steps

- **Funding / don’t lose the momentum:** With the achievement of the White Paper contribution and the coalition of partners primed and eager to implement its suggestions, the evolving political dynamics and current global funding crisis threaten to stymie progress and shed CSO involvement over time.
 - Appropriate and, given the diversity of the SSAR sector, appropriately targeted, finance mechanisms may be the largest barrier to the sector’s safe and rapid expansion.
 - Funding for continued research and support like that provided by BYM could make the difference in terms of how fully (and quickly) the sector’s potential for inclusive and sustainable development can be realised and thus also used as a model across the rapidly urbanising global South.
- **Are all the voices in the room?** While the project attempted to include as many voices as possible (including to partners that did not take up the invitation), it also should be recognised that its principals come from a certain angle, and thus it is important to ask how well the full spectrum of backyarders was reached by the work? Questions remain around:

- **Who is the sector and how do we know we have reached the majority?** The micro-developers working with CDA may not be representative: how much does that matter, and how can it be amended?
- **The formal/informal divide:** In municipalities' enthusiasm for SSRA, how to ensure that the historical/conventional backyard housing sector, catering for a poorer segment of society, is not left behind?
- **Township economies:** How can sustainable building development be leveraged to catalyse township economies more broadly, in an inclusive manner?
 - What would an economic development policy that could support this growth look like?
- **A platform for broader advocacy:** The diverse nature of the issues attached to backyarding have revealed its richness as an animating topic and a catalysing force for civil society engagement on multiple issues.
 - How to focus that energy?
 - How to apply the work to a broader, solutions-driven approach to whole neighbourhoods? What are the pressure points that need to be examined first (safety, transport, waste management, etc.)?
 - What lessons, strategies, and interventions can inform backyarding dynamics in other parts of the continent/global South?

Conclusion

Over five years, Backyard Matters has contributed not only to a growing recognition of backyard housing as a critical part of South Africa's urban fabric, but also to a shift in how the sector is understood, engaged, and supported. What began as an exploratory effort in a largely invisible space evolved into a layered programme of research, capacitation, advocacy, and coalition-building.

At each step, the project demonstrated that meaningful progress is possible when research is grounded in lived realities, when partnerships are built on mutual respect, and when communities are treated not as beneficiaries, but as actors in their own right.

As Isandla Institute's Annette May pointed out, in the context of the housing crisis and deepening inequality,

the work and focus of civil society actors can at times be issue-focused or even insular in driving a particular agenda or advocacy objective. The Backyard Matters project created an engagement platform that encouraged diverse players to coalesce around the diversity of issues confronting the backyard sector, and ultimately advocate for inclusive human settlement approaches that embrace informality and the agency of communities.

Backyard Matters did not offer quick fixes. Its value lies in having built a foundation: of insight, relationships, and process. Today, the backyard sector is no longer at the periphery of housing discourse, but at the centre of the next phase of solutions to creating human settlements that are affordable, dignified, and economically energised. While the work continues, BYM's legacy endures: not as a blueprint, but as an approach rooted in listening, rigour, and respect.

Knowledge products of the Backyard Matters Project

Backyard housing as an essential part of the solution to South Africa's housing crisis:

- **Backyarding: Understanding rental markets better: A synthesis of research findings in eight neighbourhoods in Cape Town** (2021): The BYM foundational enumeration study.
- **Backyard Housing: An Essential Part of the Solution to South Africa's Housing Crisis** (September 2022): Addresses four key areas of intervention to challenges facing the backyard housing market. Submitted into the White Paper process and the forthcoming Human Settlements Code and Act, it was also accompanied by an **animation** and **comic book**.
- **Small-scale rental housing: Moving from the low to the high road** (2022): The “game changing” publication that started proposing ways that planning and land-use management instruments could better support the sector,
- **Mapping the small-scale affordable rental housing sector in South Africa** (2025): Highlights the sector's tremendous diversity, providing guidance to municipalities in relation to the specific sub-sectors of this housing market in an effort to ensure that government does not only focus on the potential of micro-developers.

Extension of services to backyard residents:

- **Obligations and powers of municipal governments to provide basic services for backyard dwellers on private land: a legal opinion** (2021): From Senior Counsel Geoff Budlender on the power, authority, and obligations of municipalities to provide services to backyard residents living on private land.
- **Extending water and sanitation services to backyard tenants: towards an evidence-based infrastructure strategy** (2022): Based on the legal opinion, this paper further informed the debate around the limits of municipality responsibility by examining the impact of backyard housing on water and sanitation infrastructure.

The importance of urban safety in neighbourhood development:

- **Backyarding: Making urban safety matter in neighbourhood development (Practice brief 3)** (2023): Crime and violence particularly affect under-resourced neighbourhoods. Drawing on a successful project to gain important lessons for replicability, this brief examines key factors that make area-based violence prevention interventions (ABVPI) sustainable.

Enabling and supporting self-build housing construction:

- **Enabling the Right to Build through Housing Support Centres** (2022): Proposes municipal-led support across different housing/settlement typologies, in partnership with provinces, NGOs, the private sector and academic institutions. The main arguments from this research paper were also distilled into a **proposition paper** and accompanying **animation** and **comic book**.
- **Institutionalising a Housing Support Centre to enable self-build** (2023): Reflects a shift in focus to institutionalising Housing Support Centres (HSCs); a move that informed further advocacy around the uptake of HSCs in local, provincial, and national policy and programmes.
- **Investigating the value and feasibility of using public finance for self-build housing processes in South Africa** (2023): In parallel with the above, this research on financing for self-build emphasised the need for and legality of increased government subsidies for self-build.

- **Supporting the foundations of self-build: Lessons from the Right to Build Initiative** (2025): Presents lessons and recommendations emanating from the 2024 HSC pilot (“Right to Build”) conducted in a partnership between BYM and the CoCT

The role of alternative building technologies (ABTs) for low-carbon affordable housing construction:

- **Sustainable homes: alternative building technologies for low-carbon affordable housing construction** (2024): Looked at how alternative building technologies (ABTs) can be a game changer for affordable housing that is safe, dignified, climate-resilient, and potentially low-carbon, and their great potential for job creation.

Individuals consulted for this narrative

- Buhle Booi, Head of Political Organising & Campaigns, Ndifuna Ukwazi
- Nick Budlender*, Researcher, formerly with Ndifuna Ukwazi
- Nonhlanhla Buthelezi, Chief Director of Policy Development, National Department of Human Settlements
- Community-based organisations (BYM participants also interviewed for this narrative):
 - Bellville South Residents Association representatives
 - Eerste River Backyarders Association representatives
 - Maitland Garden Village Housing Forum representatives
 - Tafelsig People's Association representatives
- Ronald Eglin, Programme Manager Urban Planning, Afesis
- David Gardner, Programme Manager Small-Scale Rental Units Mayoral Priority Programme, City of Cape Town
- Jens Horber, Project Officer, Isandla Institute
- Tamzin Hudson*, Programme Manager, PlanAct
- Asemahle Jamba*, Case Officer, Rental Housing Tribunal Directorate: Public Information and Stakeholder Relations, Department of Infrastructure, Western Cape
- Fezeka Ludidi*, Senior Project Facilitator, BESG
- Mike Makwela, Senior Programme Coordinator, PlanAct
- Seth Maqetuka, Human Settlements Specialist, City Support Programme, National Treasury
- Annette May, Policy Researcher, Isandla Institute
- Zodidi Meyiswa, Senior Advisor, Human Settlements, SALGA
- Zama Mgwaytyu, Programme Manager, DAG
- Vuyisani Moss, Senior Manager, Rental and Affordable Housing Policy, National Department of Human Settlements
- Erika Naude, Director Urban Planning and Design, Right to Build pilot, City of Cape Town
- Nosive Ngcawe, Project Officer, DAG
- Seana Nkhahle, Portfolio Head for the Built Environment, SALGA
- Mduduzi Ntongana, Programme Officer, Basic Services, Afesis
- Clinton Petersen, Acting Deputy Director of Human Settlements Directorate, George Municipality
- Kamogelo Shika, Project Coordinator, DAG
- Feroza Suleman*, Executive Director, BESG
- Petal Thring, Divisional Head of Human Settlements Administration, City of Tshwane
- Alison Tshangana, Human Settlements specialist, formerly with Centre for Affordable Housing Finance Africa (CAHF)
- Anneline Turpin*, Attorney, Legal Resources Centre
- Mirjam van Donk, Executive Director, Isandla Institute

*Individuals all directly participated in live interviews (in-person or online). Those marked with an * responded to a questionnaire. All feedback occurred in April 2025.*

