The usefulness of the Planning for Informality webtool amid the recent shift in human settlements policy from a focus on greenfield development to informal settlement upgrading

The Planning for Informality webtool has recently been updated based on publicly available 2020/2021 municipal documentation. The webtool, launched in August 2017, tracks the progress of South African metropolitan municipalities in their response to informal settlements and backyard housing, based on reporting and policy commitments in core annual municipal documentation. A better understanding of informality in South African metros allows for better decision-making and analysis, and comprehensive informal upgrading strategies and plans are important elements in achieving upgrading targets. The webtool also opens up data on municipal upgrading plans and strategies to a wider audience to strengthen transparency and accountability.

The webtool currently focuses on the 2019 – 2024 Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) human settlements targets. In this 5-year cycle of MTSF targets, the National Department of Human Settlements has remained committed to the upgrading of informal settlements, in parallel with a renewed focus on the provision of serviced sites. By 2024, government plans to upgrade 1 500 settlements to Phase 3 of the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP) and deliver 43 077 serviced sites to achieve a target of 300 000 serviced sites in line with the National Development Plan (NDP).

A relatively recent shift in priority in human settlements development has occurred (driven by fiscal constraints and other factors), away from a primary focus on large-scale greenfield housing projects on urban peripheries, towards more focus on incremental improvement in services, public spaces, facilities and social and economic development in existing informal settlements. Overarching policies and strategies such as the National Development Plan (Vision 2030) and the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) also require municipalities to develop strategies for the upgrading of informal settlements and their integration with surrounding urban fabric.

The Planning for Informality webtool provides a useful measure of how well metros have integrated this stronger emphasis on informal settlements in human settlements development into their plans and strategies. The webtool indicators focusing on a metro's Informal Settlement Upgrading (ISU) strategy indicate whether the metro has an understanding of the nature and extent of its informal settlements, if it has adopted an ISU Strategy, whether it has set serviced site and upgrading targets, ISU alignment with municipal budgets, and whether rapid assessment and categorisation of informal settlements has been completed. Therefore, evidence of these elements in a metro's Informal Settlement Upgrading (ISU) strategy indicates the degree to which they have shifted from a focus on large-scale greenfield housing projects to more focus on informal settlement upgrading, and how fit-for-purpose this strategy may be.

In terms of the webtool indicators focussing on backyard housing support, these assess whether a metro has an understanding of the nature and extent of backyard housing within its jurisdiction, whether there is recognition of backyard housing as an important source of rental accommodation, and the nature (or existence) of a backyard housing support plan or strategy. As the housing policy conversation slowly recognises the importance of informal backyard rental accommodation as a vital housing solution, particularly in light of housing vulnerabilities exacerbated by the Covid pandemic over the past two years, the webtool indicators focussing on backyard housing support

gauge whether a metro recognises the importance of this sector and whether they plan for and support backyard housing, both in informal settlements and elsewhere in their metro areas.

Webtool indicators focusing on forward planning and land release give a picture of whether a metro has a land release strategy, particularly an informal settlement-focussed land strategy, and whether upgrading projects and other projects in marginalised areas focus on urban integration through focused investment and spatial targeting. Evidence of a land release strategy indicates that the metro is taking future growth trends into consideration and providing more land for social and affordable housing, incremental informal settlement upgrading, and relocations, if required. While there may still be some greenfield housing projects, evidence of forward planning, and a land release strategy with a focus on informal settlements, indicate the degree to which a metro has shifted towards the current informal settlement upgrading-focussed paradigm.

The webtool indicators focussing on progress towards Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) targets give an understanding of whether NUSP/HDA technical support has been integrated into a metro's ISU strategy, look at reporting on progress towards upgrading informal settlements to Phase 3, and perform a comparison of expenditure against the previous year's budget and delivery targets. These indicators are useful in establishing whether a metro is making use of available technical support, and whether upgrading budgets, delivery targets and expenditure are aligned. They effectively paint a picture of how effective a metro's shift towards a greater focus on informal settlement upgrading has been.

Lastly, the webtool's participation and empowerment indicators focus on whether the metro has a participatory upgrading strategy, and whether institutional capacity exists for this strategy to be truly participatory. The indicators help assess whether there is evidence of a metro's commitment to participatory upgrading to ensure meaningful community participation, engagement and local ownership, as mandated by the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP).

However, the Planning for Informality webtool is only as good as the data that its annual reviews are based on, and metros don't always include all relevant data in the publicly accessible municipal documentation used for this purpose. Notwithstanding its limitations, it is clear that the Planning for Informality webtool and its constituent indicators provide a useful yardstick for gauging whether metros have made a shift in priority in human settlements development, away from a primary focus on large-scale greenfield housing projects on urban peripheries, towards incremental upgrading and improvement in services, public spaces, facilities and social and economic development in existing informal settlements.