

# Thought Leader Convenor Knowledge Partner

Isandla Institute's origins lie in the design of the democratic system of local government in South Africa, taking place in the mid- to late 1990s. Keenly aware of the critical importance of a local government sphere that is democratic, well-functioning and developmental in orientation, Isandla Institute was established to support the design of evidence-informed programmes and systems for pro-poor, equitable urban development.



**Throughout its history, Isandla Institute has sought to promote and contribute to systems and practices of urban governance that advance spatial justice, urban inclusion, active citizenship and equitable development.**

Through research and knowledge production, the facilitation of communities of practice and other spaces for learning, policy and technical advocacy, sector coordination and partnerships, Isandla Institute has become a critical urban sector role player, often uniquely positioned to infuse new thinking and build coalitions for change.

Our work is about systemic change, to overcome historical, recurring and new patterns of urban exclusion, marginalisation and injustice. We have developed significant expertise and profile on:

- Informal urban land markets, informal settlement upgrading and backyard housing
- Neighbourhood development focused on safety, inclusion and resilience
- Active citizenship, civic agency and deliberative local democracy
- Urban poverty reduction and inclusive urban economic development
- Gender and social inclusion in urban planning and governance
- Climate resilience and a just urban transition

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Cities are places of abundance, opportunity and hope and places of unmet aspirations, despair, precariousness, vulnerability and marginalisation.

In South Africa, democratic patterns of development have largely served to entrench inequality, reproduce socio-spatial injustice and advance unsustainable development, while systems of urban governance have not been sufficiently effective in overcoming these realities.

## SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

City practitioners, urban policy makers and built environment professionals in public, private, academic and non-profit sectors.

Thought leader with convening power, with sound expertise in facilitating processes of learning for impact and capable of assembling coalitions for change

**Distinctive Contribution**

## STRATEGIES

We create and hold spaces for reflection, learning and joint problem-solving.

We generate, reinterpret and package ideas, concepts and practices for policy and practice.

We continually expand our knowledge, methodologies and networks to maximise our relevance and impact.

We pursue partnerships that complement our expertise and deepen our relevance and understanding.

We approach change holistically – personal, organisational, institutional, societal.

We use creative thinking and innovation to come up with strategic pathways and compelling products.

We invest in coalitions for change and relationships with change agents in government and civil society.

## ANTICIPATED CHANGES

**More democratic, inclusive, equitable, accountable and resilient systems and practices of urban governance.**

**Well-informed, engaged and connected cohort of urban sector leaders/change agents.**

**Enabling and progressive policy, planning frameworks and programmes.**

**Strategic partnerships and coalitions for change.**

## FOUNDATIONAL VALUES

### EQUITY

We pursue a just distribution of opportunities and resources

### SPATIAL JUSTICE

We work towards the fair distribution of resources, benefits and opportunities across urban locations, as well as access to and use of space in the interest of social justice

### VOICE & AGENCY

We promote the rights of urban citizens to participate in urban governance, and to be recognized as vital partners in development

### PARTNERSHIP & COLLABORATION

We believe that systems change requires us to network and work together with other actors and stakeholders; their expertise complements ours and keeps us humble about our abilities and achievements

### INTEGRITY

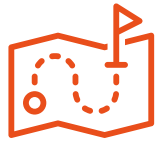
We hold ourselves accountable to our values and principles, and are consistent in our actions

### LEARNING

We experiment, reflect and adapt to improve our practice

### HUMOUR

We laugh together to build connections, help buffer stress, and increase well-being and optimism



# Isandla Institute Strategy Map

Our strategy map outlines how we seek to achieve our intended impact across the different practice areas.

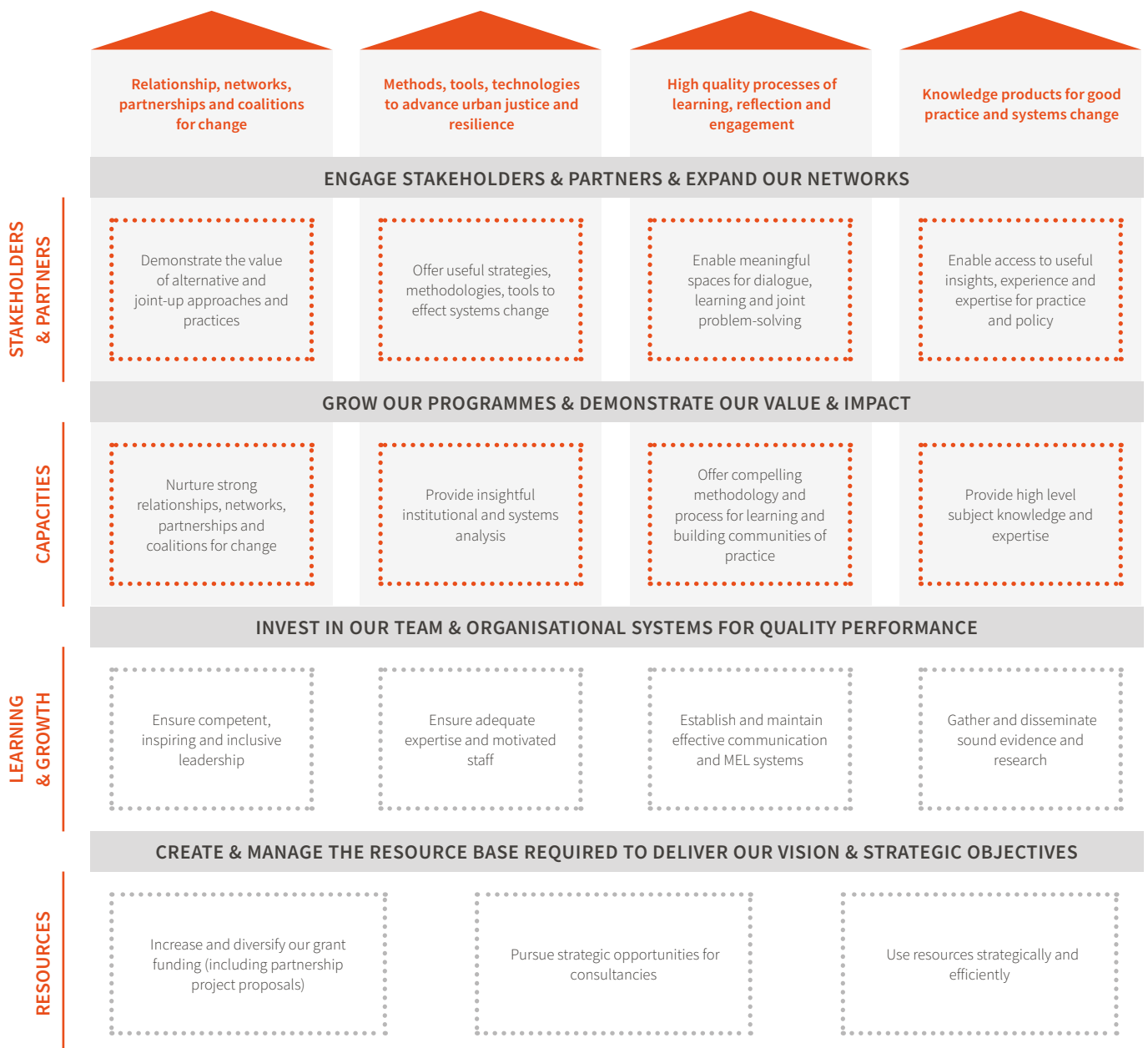
It summarises the value we seek to bring to our stakeholders and partners, the underlying capacities and capabilities we seek to bring to bear (and therefore need to invest in), how we give expression to our commitment to learning and growth for quality performance, and the importance of financial sustainability and stewardship to enable us to implement our strategies.

## OUR VISION:

Just, dignified, sustainable and well-functioning urban habitats

## OUR CHANGE GOAL:

To help bring about systems and practices of urban governance that are democratic, inclusive, equitable, accountable and that build resilience.



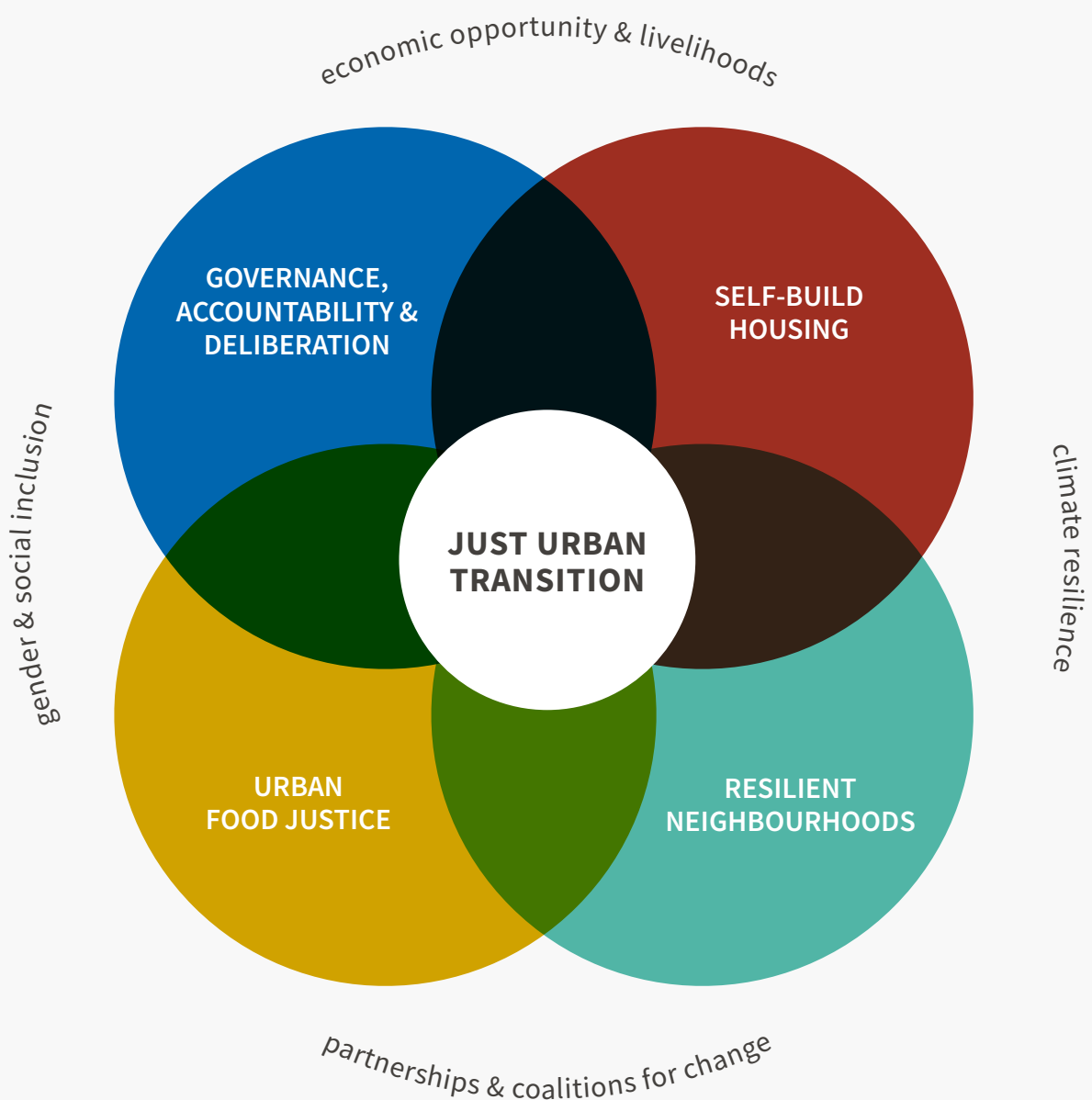
# OUR STRATEGY 2025 - 2029

## Advancing a Just Urban Transition

At the heart of our work in the next phase is the notion of a just urban transition: i.e. a transition to a low-carbon and environmentally sustainable urban economy, informed by inclusive practices and a 'do-no-harm' approach, and resulting in equitable outcomes.

Each of our programmatic thrusts (self-build housing, urban food systems, resilient neighbourhoods and governance, accountability and deliberation) will be interpreted through the lens of a just urban transition.

Several cross-cutting issues characterise a just urban transition, and therefore our work in the next phase. In addition to **climate resilience**, this includes an explicit focus on **gender and social inclusion**. Furthermore, a just urban transition is concerned with **economic opportunity and sustainable livelihoods**, especially for poor and low-income urban households and marginalised social groups. Lastly, a just urban transition requires **partnerships and coalitions for change** to negotiate and enable the required transition.





## GOVERNANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY & DELIBERATION

GOAL

To contribute to urban systems and practices (particularly related to local/ neighbourhood planning and development) that are inclusive, democratic, deliberative, accountable and empowering whilst building resilience.

South Africa has very low – and declining – levels of trust between communities and (local) government, which also hinders service provision and active community engagement. Often, community engagement is formulaic, rather than substantive and deliberative: i.e. about choices, pathways, trade-offs, resource allocation and accountability. The capabilities of municipalities and civic actors to participate in deliberative engagement need to be strengthened. In recent years, corruption and criminal activity have become endemic in place-based economic activity and infrastructure/service provision, with poor and low-income communities suffering the brunt. This reality needs to be better understood and responded to in the interest of inclusive, equitable development.

### ENVISAGED OUTCOMES:

- Resources for good practice, available to practitioners and policy makers
- Tested concept of the Civic Academy for further uptake/ institutionalisation
- Models for community-managed resilient urban infrastructure and service provision
- Well-organised civil society sector advocating for, and profiling, deliberative local democracy

### KEY STRATEGIES:

- Develop tools, processes and capabilities for deliberative engagement
- Pilot the Civic Academy aimed at empowering community activists to catalyse the conditions required to achieve spatial transformation in poor urban areas
- Profile, develop and promote community-managed models of governance and service provision
- Advocate for robust local government systems and practices that address corruption and criminality that undermine local governance and service delivery
- Coordinate a national CSO platform for improved local governance systems and practices



## URBAN FOOD JUSTICE

GOAL

To contribute to reduced urban hunger and improved access to nutritious food for the urban poor through well-functioning, pro-poor and gender-inclusive urban food systems.

Although the right to food is a fundamental right in South Africa, hunger and malnutrition are persistent and widespread, with an estimated one in four South Africans living below the national food poverty line. Hunger and malnutrition tend to be concentrated in poor and low-income communities in urban municipalities, especially metros, with long-term developmental and (mental) health implications. In these neighbourhoods, the informal trading sector plays a particularly crucial role in enabling access to food: in one of the metros, it has been estimated that up to 70% of residents rely on the informal trading sector to access food. As women traders tend to dominate in this sector, addressing urban food justice can also play a key role in advancing women's economic empowerment.

### ENVISAGED OUTCOMES:

- Active and influential national urban food justice network
- Scenarios for resilient, just and urban food systems, with a particular focus on the informal sector, livelihoods and job creation
- Tool /methodology for the development of city food strategies / plans
- Women informal traders empowered and enabled to provide affordable, nutritious food

### KEY STRATEGIES:

- Mapping the urban food system and its linkages/interdependencies with other systems (through research and stakeholder dialogues)
- Co-create scenarios for a future urban food system that is resilient, sustainable, equitable and pro-poor
- Advocate for/support the development of city food strategies
- Build linkages between women informal traders, government and business for improved access to affordable, nutritious food



## SELF-BUILD HOUSING

GOAL

To contribute to improved provision of affordable, dignified and resilient self-build housing built and improved incrementally by residents and communities with requisite support from public, private and non-profit sectors.

Historically, self-build has been a critical housing provision modality for South Africa's urban population, more often than not resulting in poor quality, unsafe and undignified shelter. Following the significant roll-out of public housing since 1994, government has come to realise that it cannot build low-cost housing at the scale required, especially given the current fiscal environment. The 2024 White Paper on Human Settlements recognises not only that self-build housing construction is a key strategy to address the urban housing crisis, but also that self-build needs to be enabled and supported to result in dignified, safe, sustainable housing solutions.

### ENVISAGED OUTCOMES:

- National programme on self-build housing (including the institutionalisation of local housing support centres)
- Informed, capacitated communities that access and/or co-create dignified, resilient self-build housing opportunities
- Tested durable, climate-resilient affordable housing solutions
- Strategies to enable livelihoods and 'meaningful work' for poor and low-income households
- Multi-stakeholder and multi-scalar communities of practice for learning and improved practice

### KEY STRATEGIES:

- Advocate for/contribute to a national programme on self-build housing
- Test, replicate and advocate for the institutionalisation of housing support centres
- Explore, co-create and test climate-resilient housing solutions using sustainable building materials, methods and technologies
- Research and advocacy on job creation and skills development in the affordable housing value chain, particularly in the sustainable building technologies sector
- Establish and facilitate communities of practice informed by an impactful methodology



## FROM INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS TO RESILIENT NEIGHBOURHOODS

GOAL

To contribute to the transformation of informal settlements into dignified, resilient, well-functioning and inclusive neighbourhoods through greater investment, strong partnerships and clarity of purpose.

Despite policy rhetoric suggesting greater prioritisation, informal settlements remain politically, economically, financially and spatially marginalised. Already harsh and often unbearable living conditions are made worse due to changing weather patterns, with climate change impacts most acutely felt in vulnerable, resource-poor and underdeveloped areas. This reality not only undermines people's rights, health and dignity; it also means that informal settlements cannot be expected to be at the forefront of climate justice efforts, unless greater coordination and investment is directed at transforming informal settlements into resilient neighbourhoods. In many respects, the human settlements sector in South Africa has to play catch-up with other countries in the global South in this regard.

### ENVISAGED OUTCOMES:

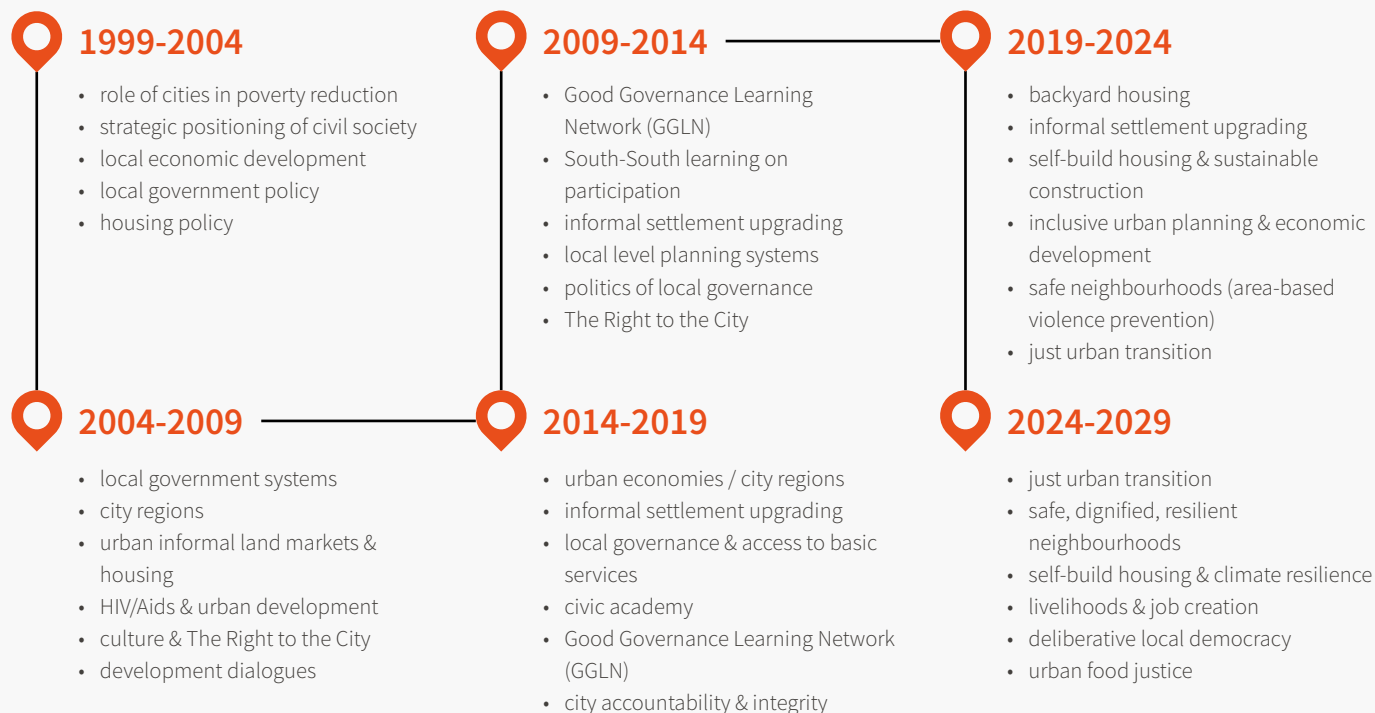
- Greater recognition of, and (coordinated) investment in, informal settlements (as per the Just Urban Transition Framework)
- Progressive policy, programme and instruments for informal settlement upgrading
- Scenario tool to guide settlement-specific deliberation, action and investment
- Progressive network of practitioners and policy makers

### KEY STRATEGIES:

- Raise awareness / advocate for a just urban transition approach to informal settlements
- Convene and facilitate practice-based and policy-focused dialogues on key aspects of a just urban transition approach to informal settlement upgrading (e.g. adaptation, resilience, economy)
- Research and knowledge production on relevant themes
- Develop a scenario-based tool for identification and sequencing of settlement-level interventions
- Develop an economic argument/model for place-based economic development, meaningful work and sustainable livelihoods

# 25 Years of Thought Leadership & Excellence

In 2024, Isandla Institute celebrated its 25th anniversary. The key thematic areas of focus that the organisation has worked on are summarised below. The practice areas for the next phase (2024-2029) build on and broaden Isandla Institute's expertise.



**Isandla Institute is ambitious about the change we want to contribute to, and meticulous about the quality of our work and the relationships that we nurture.**

We are purposeful in our strategies and actions: we seek to promote and contribute to a just urban transition in South Africa, where historical, social, spatial and climate justice determine pathways of urban development, which arise out of truly deliberative and inclusive processes of engagement. Our organisational intent requires us to understand and seek to influence complex, and often exclusionary, systems.

We believe that Isandla Institute can make a distinctive contribution, leveraging its proven capability as a thought leader with convening power, with sound expertise in facilitating processes of learning for impact, and capable of assembling coalitions for change. We also know where our sphere of influence is – with a cross-section of urban practitioners and policy makers, at a personal, organisational and institutional level – and what strategies we will pursue to add value and achieve results.

Organisational resources, both human and financial, are vital for the effective realisation of our strategic objectives and goals. Without financial sustainability, our capacity to ensure high quality performance will be impeded, as will be our capacity for learning. Our intention is to demonstrate that we are a partner of choice for donors and other stakeholders, so that ultimately, we can make meaningful and lasting contributions to the vision of just, dignified, sustainable and well-functioning urban habitats.