



City Approaches to the Upgrading of Informal Settlements

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Metropolitan authorities across the globe are facing population growth and in-migration which transcends their current planning and development capacities. As a result, projections predict a near doubling of the global slum population from 1990 to 2020 (Pieterse 2008). Slums and informal dwellings across the world do not represent a homogeneous phenomenon. They display varying levels of regularity and legality, and are therefore usually defined according to their access to improved water and sanitation, whether their inhabitants enjoy sufficient living area and, finally, their (lack of) security of tenure (Sutherland, Braathen et al. 2011). As formal housing projects alone have proved insufficient in dealing with this growth, global programmes and national policies alike have started championing in situ upgrading of informal settlements. According to Huchzermeyer (2011), this can be described as an incremental approach to informal settlement upgrading where the permanent securing of tenure and rehabilitation of unsuitable land is based on “meaningful community participation”. We stress the word ‘meaningful’ here because, as we will argue, there are many allegedly participatory interventions into slums and squatter settlements which are not experienced as meaningful to those living there. When authorities use the language of participation, this creates expectations which, if not met, can lead to dissatisfaction and unrest.

In situ approaches – based on participation and incremental upgrading on site – contrast with formalisation projects – prioritising the construction of new housing – where people are (often involuntarily) relocated to make space for formal housing developments (Huchzermeyer 2011). In the research project Chance2Sustain, we are exploring approaches to upgrading of sub-standard settlements across 10 metropolitan areas and 4 countries. Many of our settlement cases can be characterised as slums or informal settlements. City authorities as different as those of Rio de Janeiro, Delhi and Cape Town are starting to embrace in situ upgrading and participatory approaches, at least in their formal policy documents. Based on interviews with policy-makers, practitioners and the leadership and residents informal settlements in Cape Town, this Chance2Sustain Policy Brief attempts to problematise this notion of participation. We believe our recommendations hold relevance for any city administration or project management pursuing the upgrading of informal settlements.

Meaningful participation?

On their website, the City of Cape Town claim that their informal settlement upgrading is based on “active participation”, “dialogue” and “continual engagement” with communities.¹ Other cities across the world make similarly bold statements. The problem

¹ City of Cape Town: “Pilot in-situ upgrade of informal settlements reaps benefits”. Accessed from www.capetown.gov.za/ 1 January 2013.



with the language of participation, however, is that it is as easy to use as it is difficult to translate into practice. Arnstein (1969) and other social scientists have shown how participation is a gradual concept; it can range from substantial delegation of decision-making power to outright manipulation under the guise of participation. In post-apartheid South Africa the language of participation is regularly used by national government in speeches and policy documents, but in practice it often becomes too formal, legalised and politicised.

In an urban context, it is likely that project managers, city officials, community leadership and ordinary residents have quite different views of what 'participation' means. When such buzzwords are used uncritically, false expectations and a sense of disappointment is likely to develop among community members who thought their views would shape decision-making in the upgrading of their livelihoods. What is very often the case in an upgrading situation is that most of the options and plans are already meticulously defined by various "experts". What is left for residents is to be included in consultation at a late stage in the process. For example, the Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) programme in settlements around the Khayelitsha township in Cape Town has been widely touted as a democratic and participatory success by city authorities, but Piper (2012) argues that it is only in the implementation phase that VPUU has allowed for participation from ordinary residents.

One reason why politicians and project managers might be reluctant to embark on truly participatory processes is that they are time-consuming, messy and unpredictable. Like democracy in its essence. During the launch of a large national pilot project, the heavily contested N2 Gateway, for example, it was stated during its launch in 2004 that in order to increase speed and delivery the government had consciously decided to "limit the amount of consultation and participation" (COHRE 2009). At least, this was an honest statement. However, eight years down the lane the N2 Gateway project is still not completed, in part because of community protests and protracted legal disputes. This serves to show how fast-track alternatives to "meaningful participation" are not necessarily quicker options, at least not without the use of force and authoritarian state repression.

Who represents whom?

It is impossible to discuss community participation without simultaneously considering the concept of representation. This is because not even in the most democratic, participatory processes is everybody involved in every stage of decision-making. There is always somebody who speaks *on behalf of* somebody else. By inviting communities into a participatory process, there might be formally elected leaders, traditional leaders, informal authorities, political movements and a rich associational life that might claim to represent the community. Once some of these are entrusted responsibility for coordinating community responses, relaying messages and distributing information and resources, power dynamics in local communities are irrevocably changed. In Piper's (2012) study of the VPUU, he argues that this might be a good thing, as responsibility for upgrading is shifted from rent-seeking local politicians to community representatives that are trained through the project (he labels them "development trustees"). In other cases, however, people who had questionable legitimacy in the community in the first place might become even more illegitimate in the eyes of the local community as they are perceived to misuse the information and resources they have been entrusted.

In one of our case settlements, Joe Slovo in Langa (Cape Town), for example, almost all the task team members are men. Women who wanted to actively participate were deliberately excluded. Such biased exclusion serves to complicate service delivery and development, not least due to women's particular knowledge about service delivery requirements as they take a disproportionate responsibility for domestic duties. Similarly,

without direct participation from people with disabilities, the planning of livelihoods will easily disregard their specific needs relating to access to information, physical movement and use of services. Unfortunately, power dynamics within communities and between state officials and community leaders often interfere with inclusive decision-making and problem solving. In contrast to the example of exclusion above, the history of the mothers' unions in churches in urban townships is evidence of how organised women are very capable of collectively solving problems in poor communities.

Knowledge is power

It is important to stress that issues of participation and representation are not simply about the fair distribution of material resources. It is also about whose perspectives and experiences are seen as worthy of being included. And with whom necessary information is shared.

On the one hand, this is a question of *knowledge*. When community representatives engage with "expert communities" such as universities, NGOs and technical administrators, they become privileged knowledge bearers. These key individuals know what is possible and impossible from an engineering or planning point of view. They know who the powerful gatekeepers in government are. They know how to access information. They learn what language is understood by the decision-makers. With this knowledge comes power. These individuals also have the power to share knowledge with the community, or to selected individuals in the community. And they have the power to withhold knowledge from fellow community members.

An NGO like the Slum Dwellers International (SDI) has championed the importance of community knowledge. In their policy documents, they stress the importance of "communities own[ing] their own information"², for example through self-administered enumerations of the settlement. In practice however, even those settlements where the SDI model have been introduced struggle with *uneven ownership* of information. Key individuals or groups gain access to lists and plans for upgrading and relocation while community members might feel included or excluded from this information depending on their relationship to those specific actors. Unless this unevenness is recognised, the legitimacy of knowledge bearers with or without an elected mandate might wane. This might in turn encourage people who feel marginalised or excluded in the process to resist or sabotage the proposed upgrading.

Policy recommendations

Local authorities, NGOs and academic experts who are involved in upgrading initiatives must realise the pitfalls of using the language of "participation" in an unqualified and uncritical manner:

- **Be precise.** Instead of vague references to participation, rather be open from the start about the *forms* of participation (e.g. co-determination, negotiation or consultation) and at what stage in the process (e.g. planning, design or implementation).
- **Understand local power dynamics.** Also, programmes must be transparent about how they engage with representatives of the community, and justify their approach. How are community representatives chosen? What form of legitimacy do they hold in their community (elected mandate, traditional authority or other)? And how does their role in the upgrading process affect this legitimacy? By being clear and

² Citation from SDI website > "Community Planning".

Accessed from <http://www.sdinet.org/method-community-planning/> 18 December 2012.

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Chance2Sustain examines how governments and citizens in cities with differing patterns of economic growth and socio-spatial inequality make use of participatory (or integrated) spatial knowledge management to direct urban governance towards more sustainable development.

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communicating decision-making procedures to all community members, project managers and city authorities will reduce the sense of frustration and disappointment that tend to accompany upgrading initiatives.

- **Establish flows of shared knowledge.** The role of gatekeepers, technical jargon and technological obstacles such as limited internet access can all serve as barriers to shared knowledge. While community resistance often is the result of substantial disagreement, animosity also stems from a sense of not being included in the distribution of information. Shared knowledge can only be established when those responsible actively seek to distribute information and bring together the knowledge of the experts and the knowledge of the community.
- **Be participatory.** These cautionary points notwithstanding, participation is important for both normative and instrumental reasons. Without an active participation from informal dwellers, upgrading initiatives do not only violate the principles enshrined in the World Charter for the Right to the City³, but they are also likely to become submersed in political contestation and potentially entrenched legal battles.

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³ *The World Charter for the Right to the City* was elaborated at the Social Forum of the Americas (Quito July 2004), World Urban Forum (Barcelona October 2004), World Social Forum (Porto Alegre January 2005) and can be downloaded from Global Governance Watch at <http://www.globalgovernancewatch.org/resources/world-charter-on-the-right-to-the-city> (Accessed on 20 December 2012).