



## TRANSFORMING MINDS AND SETTING PRECEDENTS: BLOCKING-OUT AT RUIMSIG INFORMAL SETTLEMENT

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*The South African government, according to the human settlements minister, Tokyo Sexwale, has built 2.3 million houses (Sexwale 2009). While this is indeed a notable accomplishment, the government, by its own admission, has failed to keep up with the scale of need. In addition, in recent years, the state has acknowledged that its existing housing-subsidy scheme is unsustainable.*



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IN HIS 2009 budget speech, for example, Sexwale went on to express the concern that 'previous studies by the Department concluded that continuing with the current trend in the housing budget would lead to a funding shortfall of R102 billion in 2012 which could increase to R253 billion by 2016' (Sexwale 2009). However, in line with the South African Constitution, housing subsidies cannot be abandoned entirely even if, as the minister pointed

out, budget shortfalls are going to dramatically hinder the delivery of subsidised housing in the very near future.

Policy attempts had been made earlier in an attempt to shift state machinery towards a more incremental approach to informal settlement upgrading—that is, one that delinks land purchases, the provision of services and top structures from one another, thus allowing for a more flexible and

participative approach. The Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP) was introduced into the National Housing Code in 2004. In 2007, some small but important amendments were made, such as emphasising *in situ* development as central and permitting relocation only where unavoidable. The UISP's aim is to upgrade informal settlements by providing households with access to basic services and tenure security.<sup>1</sup>

Convincing state institutions to alter their course regarding 'conventional' housing delivery proved no easy task, however, and the upgrading programme was initially largely ignored. Indeed, instead of using the flexibility and space that this policy allows to identify innovative solutions for informal communities, several municipalities used UISP funding to fast-track subsidies for conventional housing projects (Misselhorn 2008).

It was only in 2010, when President Jacob Zuma committed the state to upgrading 400 000 households in well-located areas, that all levels of government started trying to come to grips with the UISP. It has since become clear that, if the poor do not set precedents for the involvement of all stakeholders (including, most crucially, the affected communities and the state) in delivering basic needs and rights, the space that UISP opens up for innovation and flexibility could be quickly closed off by officials and contractors who tend to favour the top-down approach that they are more familiar with.

It is against this backdrop that poor communities, linked to the Informal Settlement Network (ISN), are pioneering new and innovative approaches to informal settlement upgrading. One such approach is known as 'blocking-out'. The term refers to reconfiguring informal shack settlements to enable safer and less congested environments as well as easier access for emergency vehicles. In designing a new layout, informal settlements can make

provision for future infrastructural developments such as improved roads, pathways, drainage, water and sanitation.

The first ISN blocking-out project, spearheaded by Ikhayalami and the Joe Slovo community, took place in the Joe Slovo informal settlement in Cape Town's Langa township, following a shack fire in March 2009. In this informal settlement, the project led to a total of 125 upgraded shelters being rebuilt in a rationalised layout. As a result of this success, the City of Cape Town's Informal Settlement Department (ISM) met with Ikhayalami, COARC and the ISN in April 2009. This signalled the beginning of a productive partnership between the ISN and the ISM that focused on ways of improving service delivery in informal settlements across the Cape metropole. The second blocking-out pilot project took place in-situ in Sheffield Road, Cape Town, where 167 upgraded shacks were reconfigured into a better layout with clusters and courtyards that enable the provision of sanitation within communally managed spaces. A group of ISN and Sheffield Road community members (known as the pilot team) anchored the planning and implementation of the project and became the first tier of what has become known as ISN's pool of community architects.

This paper presents a brief case study of the third blocking-out project in Ruimsig informal settlement in Roodepoort, Johannesburg, where there are 369 shacks and 422 families. The paper attempts to show how the community, which is well organised (and linked to the ISN) is incrementally upgrading their homes and settlement, with support from local government and the ISN (including Ikhayalami, COARC, the University of Johannesburg and an architectural firm, 26'10 South).

The Ruimsig project intends to set a clear precedent for community-led and 'people centred' approaches, so that *in-situ* upgrading of informal

settlements (and, when unavoidable, community-led relocation solutions) become the bedrock of all future delivery at scale. Such a huge undertaking could never be achieved by any one grouping alone. Thus numerous stakeholders are involved in a multi-pronged approach in Ruimsig. The most important of these are the affected community and the relevant local government structures, supported by, among others, the South African Shack/Slum Dwellers International Alliance<sup>2</sup> and the National Upgrading Support Programme (NUSP),<sup>3</sup> academic and professional institutions (in particular, the University of Johannesburg's Architecture department and 26'10 South Architects). The concluding section of this paper advances some key lessons and recommendations for replication.

settlement is surrounded by mushrooming middle-class housing developments. It was imperative for the community to start improving their own lives in partnership with the state.

It took a year of preparation before the first shack came down and the first upgraded shelter was built in line with the agreed new layout. Initial preparations included: ongoing and intense engagements with City of Johannesburg officials, both at the metro level and with the local authorities from Region C; and conducting a community-led household survey supported by CORC which included counting the shacks and mapping the settlement. The simple shack count provided the community, its leadership and the local authorities with vital information that had hitherto been unknown. The information garnered from the enumeration<sup>4</sup> and mapping processes was used to inform the design for a new spatial arrangement for blocking-out. Another crucial aspect of preparing the community for the blocking-out process was the setting up of internal savings collectives in the settlement. These women-based collectives, provide the community with financial management skills and serve as dependable community institutions for external actors such as banks, building-materials suppliers and local authorities to engage with.

ISN gathered technical-planning support for the project from the pool of community architects from Sheffield Road, Cape Town, as well as from the staff of Ikhayalami, 26'10 South Architects and architects and students from the University of Johannesburg's architecture department. It was agreed that the university would set up an informal studio in Ruimsig from 18 July to 1 September 2011, and that 8 appointed community architects and 16 master's students from the university would work closely together on designing the new layout of the settlement.

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## THE RUIMSIG PROJECT

### BLOCKING-OUT BEGINS

The Ruimsig project was conceived in 2010 after ISN leaders from Johannesburg visited Cape Town, where they saw the positive results of the blocking-out projects that had been completed in Joe Slovo and were being implemented in Sheffield Road. Keen to implement a similar blocking-out project in Johannesburg, ISN identified the relatively small settlement of Ruimsig. For years, the Ruimsig community had been uncertain about its future, firstly, because its borders fall between two municipalities—Mohale City and the City of Johannesburg—and, secondly, because the

Initially the conceptual engagements were a little one sided in 'favour' of the students. However this was strategically counterbalanced when COORC facilitated a horizontal learning exchange to the blocking-out project in Sheffield Road, Cape Town, where four architecture students and five community architects from Ruimsig worked alongside experienced ISN community architects from Sheffield Road to design new cluster layouts in Sheffield Road. Witnessing the confidence and skill of the Cape Town community architects made a lasting impression on both the students and the Ruimsig community architects. The exchange cemented the realisation that the students are a fleeting reality passing through the shack dwellers lives, and that the shack dwellers themselves will have to implement the project and live with its consequences for years to come. Following this exchange, engagements were far more balanced and, if anything, conceptualising new design layouts tipped in favour of the community architects in line with the SA SDI Alliance's agenda. The work of the informal studio culminated in an exhibition at the Ruimsig stadium on 1 September 2011 where both students and community architects presented their work. City officials from Region C and the Johannesburg Metro attended the exhibition, as did a senior manager from the NUSP.

Between 3 September and mid October a level of urgency arose in relation to implementing the project. This came from the Ruimsig community and from the funders who were threatening to recall funding unless building began. This led to a number of productive meetings with Region C officials and the ward councillor where the community architects explained the processes of blocking-out. The City agreed to support the project, and on 25 September, a general meeting was held in the community with all tiers of local government endorsing the project. After this meeting, community savings scaled up

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considerably as people began to believe that 'blocking-out was really going to happen'. Now that there was official go-ahead, it became imperative that the community architects take the broad concepts that were designed together with the students and work out the detailed plans required for realigning the spatial layout of the settlement at cluster level. The community architects supported by ISN community architects from Cape Town undertook this with great dexterity—negotiating and realigning the spatial composition of the settlement.

Re-blocking and building began on 19 October and continued until 26 November 2011. In this first phase, 38 shacks were dismantled, upgraded and repositioned to decongest the densest area of the settlement. During this period, many challenges and contestations had to be faced, including:

- \* a handful of community members who had bigger 'stands' refused to downscale and comply with a more equitable framework
- \* a number of shack-lords tried to lobby against the blocking-out process
- \* some shebeen owners attempted to contest the validity of the community leadership structure and
- \* the traditionally conservative ratepayers association from the more affluent adjacent neighbourhood, expressed anger that the informal settlement was 'growing' at a rapid rate. This was dealt with through a meeting that was held in the settlement. After an explanation of the project, the ratepayers association supported the

upgrade and indicated their willingness to ‘be good neighbours’ to Ruimsig’s informal settlement community.

All of these challenges are being dealt with by the emergent partnership that consists of the Ruimsig community, the City of Johannesburg (Region C), the City of Johannesburg (head office), ISN, Ikhayalami and COARC. To facilitate the process, which is often fraught with difficulties and complexities, two ISN leaders, who were the backbone of the Sheffield Road upgrade, have visited Ruimsig numerous times to work with the community leaders and the community architects. Materials were procured and two Ikhayalami builders came to Ruimsig to support and provide training on how to build the upgraded shacks and adhere to principles of the improved layout that had been agreed upon.

### ANALYSIS OF IMPACT

The impact of the Ruimsig blocking-out process has been considerable. People no longer live as unwelcome guests, disassociated from fellow shack dwellers but, instead, they have forged a neighbourhood and a community. People have managed to transform their own lives and this is restoring dignity. The community leaders and ‘community architects’ have acquired spatial-planning and problem-solving skills. At a broader level, through the ISN and horizontal learning exchanges (through which communities visit one another and learn by doing), the concept of blocking-out and related knowledge has been transferred to many other informal settlements, which now want to embark on similar upgrading strategies. Furthermore, this precedent-setting project has alerted the City of Johannesburg to the work of the ISN and to the value of building a stronger partnership with the SA SDI Alliance and similar

such civil-society organisations. At national level, the blocking-out projects at Sheffield Road and Ruimsig have garnered the support of both the National Sanitation Task Team and the NUSP. The project has transformed people’s minds at the level of individuals, to community members, to the local authorities, broader social movements, as well as employees of provincial government and national agencies such as NUSP and the National Sanitation Task Team. It has been a transformative and precedent setting project at every level. With each and every transformation, it has become clear to all involved that this approach is powerful, accessible, transferable and replicable.

### KEY LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ruimsig project has demonstrated that informal-settlement upgrading at scale requires the collaboration of numerous stakeholders, most notably well-organised settlement communities, linked to broader networks and the state. In addition, partners such as NGOs and universities can also play an important role. The blocking-out project in Ruimsig has begun to transform the mindset of local authorities, provincial government and tiers of national government and, equally perhaps more importantly, the urban poor. Through exchange programmes and urban-poor networks, a success story in one community can become a centre of learning for hundreds of others.

Key lessons learned in Ruimsig include:

- \* People living in informal settlements, represented by legitimate leadership, linked to broader networks of the urban poor are best placed to decide on intricate spatial arrangements within their own settlements.
- \* A simple reconfiguration of space with upgraded shacks drastically improves people’s living

conditions and restores dignity and hope.

- \* While people wait endlessly for a subsidised house, they can live in dignity where they are currently located without disrupting social cohesion or negatively affecting their proximity to work.
- \* Blocking-out enables emergency services to access areas more easily; this reduces the risks from fires and floods and facilitates the provision of other basic services.
- \* Capacitated networks of the urban poor such as the ISN that are linked to grassroots women's savings collectives provide the necessary skills, depth and breadth to make it possible to replicate this model at scale.

- \* This model opens the space for the state and organised networks of the urban poor to work collectively to co-produce solutions for the upgrading of thousands of well-located households, improving service delivery and incremental tenure security options. The model also has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to Output 1 of the Outcome 8 Performance Agreement which has been put in place by the Minister of Human Settlements and President Zuma (see Department of Human Settlements 2010)—the upgrading of 400 000 well located households, as well as improving service delivery and tenure security by 2014.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Chapter 13 of the National Housing Code: Upgrading of Informal Settlements 2004.
- <sup>2</sup> SA SDI alliance is a conglomeration of organisations made up of the Informal Settlement Network (ISN), the Federation of the Urban Poor (FEDUP), together with their support organisations, CORC (which includes Ikhayalami) and the Utshani Fund.
- <sup>3</sup> The NUSP was established to support the National Department of Human Settlement in the implementation of the UISP.
- <sup>4</sup> Enumeration is the process whereby household-level information is generated by counting, numbering and measuring the shacks. This is done by collecting data through a community-drafted questionnaire that address socio-economic and demographic concerns. The result is a settlement profile, which becomes a powerful negotiation tool for tenure security, livelihood opportunities, and spatial planning.