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COMMUNITY-LED UPGRADING FOR SELF-RELIANCE IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Around the world, informal and low-income settlements (so-called "slums") have been a major issue in city management and environmental sustainability in developing countries. Overall, African cities have an agenda for slum management and response. For example, the South African government introduced the Upgrade of Informal Settlements Program (UISP), as a comprehensive plan for upgrading slum settlements. Nevertheless, upgrading informal settlements from the bottom-up is key to inform broad protocols and strategies for sustainable communities and `adaptive cities´. Community-scale schemes can drive sustainability from the bottom-up and offer opportunities to share lessons learnt at the local level. Key success factors in their roll-out are: systems thinking; empowered local authorities that support decentralised solutions and multidisciplinary collaboration between the involved actors, including the affected local population. This research lies under the umbrella of sustainable bottom-up urban regeneration. As part of a larger project of collaboration between UK and SA research institutions, this paper presents an overview of *in-situ* participatory upgrade as an incremental strategy for upgrading informal settlements in the context of sustainable and resilient city. The motivation for this research is rooted in identifying the underpinning barriers and enabling drivers for up-scaling community-led, participatory upgrading approaches in informal settlements in the metropolitan area. This review paper seeks to provide some preliminary guidelines and recommendations for an integrated collaborative environmental and construction management framework to enhance community self-reliance. A theoretical approach based on the review of previous studies was combined with a pilot study conducted in Durban (South Africa) to investigate the feasibility of community-led upgrading processes.

Keywords: Developing countries, urban regeneration, informal settlements, bottom-up upgrading, self-reliant communities.

INTRODUCTION

Informal settlements represent one of the biggest challenges worldwide, as a consequence of the accelerated process of urbanisation in developing countries. They are often characterised by the lack of basic services and infrastructure (e.g. safe sanitation, reliable electricity), poorly performing building materials (e.g., wood, cardboard, metal sheets, mud) without any building plans approved and often on illegally-accessed and hazardous land. The so-called *slums* can be interpreted as a response to ineffective governmental housing policies that failed to provide the urban poor with affordable and adequate shelter (El-Batran and Arandel, 1998). Despite all the efforts to reduce its growth, the number of informal settlements is still constantly increasing. Therefore, addressing the informal urbanisation challenge represents a key

strategy that benefits not only the urban poor, but the city as a whole, towards sustainable and self-reliant communities (Khalifa, 2015).
Top-down approaches have been used by international agencies (e.g. UN Habitat, World Bank) and city governments (London, Durban) but these have not examined explicitly the particularities of the local context. These processes have not engaged directly with low-income communities, and have not understood in depth the nature of their vulnerability due the impacts of the local context. In fact, top-down approaches are characterised by very limited inputs coming from the local population and, therefore, they do not reflect its actual needs.
On the other hand, community participation, also known as bottom-up approach (El-Masri & Kellett, 2001) is widely considered one of the most efficient strategies to face the informal urbanisation challenge. In fact, it is targeted at the grassroots development and, for that reason, is considered the key to promote self-reliance within the involved communities (Lizarralde and Massyn, 2008).
For the reasons above mentioned, participatory processes still receive a strong support from various sectors in South Africa. Nevertheless, a high number of limitations and uncertainties characterise community participation, such as heterogeneity and fragmentation of some communities, lack of social and material resources and community expectations in terms of personal return from their involvement in development projects. In other words, there are both conceptual and practical challenges in the implementation of bottom-up processes (Emmett, 2000).

The present research lies under the umbrella of sustainable participatory urban regeneration. As part of a larger project of collaboration between UK and SA research institutions, this paper seeks to investigate the feasibility of *in-situ* bottom-up upgrade as an incremental strategy for upgrading informal settlements in the context of a resilient city development. The motivation for this research is rooted in identifying the underpinning barriers and enabling drivers for up-scaling community-led, participatory upgrading approaches in informal settlements in the metropolitan area. This review paper seeks to provide some preliminary guidelines and recommendations for an integrated collaborative environmental and construction management framework to enhance community self-reliance. A theoretical approach based on an extensive overview of previous studies, at the national and international level, was combined with a pilot study conducted in Durban (South Africa) to investigate the feasibility of community-led upgrading processes.

CONTEXT

Different approaches in response to the informal urbanisation challenge have been applied through various national policies worldwide, mainly focused on regularisation of tenure, infrastructure improvement and supporting self-help housing. For example, the Egyptian government shifted from oppressive eviction policies, typical of the 1970s, to more progressive initiatives that advocate community participation, namely the Participatory Development Programme in Urban Areas (PDP), currently in its third implementation phase (Khalifa, 2015).
Similarly, the South African government introduced, in 2004, the Informal Settlements Upgrading Program entitled "*Breaking New Ground (BNG): a comprehensive plan for upgrading slum settlements*". That plan proposed a new approach aimed at poverty eradication, reduction of vulnerability and promotion of social inclusion through participatory layout planning (Huchzermeyer, 2006a). Moreover, the new directives included in the BNG promoted a new inclusive approach supporting mixed-income groups in new developments, to avoid the marginalization of the lowest-income

households experienced until the 2000s (Marais and Ntema, 2013). In fact, a new attention to the health of urban environment and the concept of sustainable human habitats is revealed, in 2004, by the "Sustainable Habitats Agenda" Report submitted from the SA Department of Housing to the UN-Habitat. Nevertheless, South African settlements have historically demonstrated a past, present and projected future of unsustainability (Goebel, 2007).

The eThekwini Municipality (Durban, SA) with a population of approximately 3.6 million people and high levels of poverty (about 41.8%) is facing significant socio-economic challenges (eThekwini Municipality, 2012a). As all cities in South Africa, Durban has to balance the more dominant neo-liberal pro-growth agenda with the pro-poor agenda, making urban transformation a complex problem. The spatial structure of the city, which is fragmented and reflects a pattern of sprawl, is a major obstacle to achieving sustainable, efficient and equitable development. Social segregation and compartmentalization of the cities are, in fact, some of the Post-Apartheid major consequences that are aggravated by the suburban-type low-density typical of South African cities. (Western, 2002; Williams, 2000). Inequality in housing in Durban has a clear spatial dimension with most sub-standard housing being found on the periphery of the city, or on marginalised sites where informal dwellers have occupied land in close proximity to urban opportunities. The *Informal Settlement programme* is the principal focus of eThekwini Housing Unit, promoting the upgrade of informal settlements as a better alternative to relocation and slum clearance. According to the eThekwini Spatial Development Framework, informal settlements must be integrated into the broader urban fabric to overcome spatial, social and economic exclusion (eThekwini, 2015). Since 2004, the Comprehensive Plan for the Development of Sustainable Human Settlements introduced detailed information on the programmes identified by the National Department of Human Settlements. In fact, the new "Human Settlements Plan" promotes the achievement of a non-racial, integrated society through the development of sustainable human settlements and quality housing at both local and regional scales.

Another important aspect connected to the informal urbanisation challenge is represented by the environmental impact, such as surface and groundwater contamination, due to the lack of proper sanitation services. In low-income settlements these kind of environmental issues affect the living conditions of the inhabitants, causing diseases and death, while the contribution to global environmental degradation is not significant (Irurah and Boshoff, 2003).

Interestingly enough is the counter-conduct phenomenon that occurs sometimes after the actual informal settlements upgrading. That includes informal markets, unplanned housing extensions, illegal pubs, the construction of backyard shacks and also illegal electrical and water connections. This phenomenon, which can be interpreted as a symptom of larger failing within the Housing sector, needs more attention since it is the expression of traditional, social and cultural governmentality, mainly of women inhabitants (Massey, 2014).In fact, informality has been defined as the bedrock of African cities (Mitullah, 2007), since over half of African Urban population lives in informal settlements and far more is part of the so-called *informal* economy. Therefore, the development of African cities should approach those issues holistically, accommodating the informal economy and considering it in the actual planning and management of municipalities.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN SLUMS UPGRADES

In South Africa, the Breaking New Ground Policy (BNG) promoted *in situ* upgrading programs that allow people to stay settled close to their existing job opportunities and established transportation routes. Social inclusion and community participation were

encouraged by the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP) launched with the BNG directives. The UISP programme promoted *in situ* upgrading over relocation, in order to prevent the marginalisation typical of the relocation into peri-urban areas. *In situ* upgrade was conceived as a measure to reinforce social ties and network, while avoiding relocation and resettlement (Massey, 2014). In fact, some unsuccessful attempts of "state-led in situ upgrades" in Cape Town, failed to spatially reintegrate the city, because of the lack of access to economic opportunities and social network (Turok, 2001).
Moreover, *in situ* upgrades can provide residents with training and education opportunities as well as skills development, namely self-build and other construction and environmental management skills. For example, the *in situ* upgrade of Msunduzi Municipality (SA), revealed some other positive impacts on the inhabitants, namely greater sense of satisfaction, cohesion and identity (Goebel, 2007).
Previous studies on *in-situ* upgrade of informal settlements in Durban have explored the positive impact of community participation on local inhabitants in terms of basic housing needs met, tenure security and wellbeing improvement (Patel, 2013). In particular, the role of the local Community Development Committee (CDC) and its relationship with the residents was assessed by Patel in the context of the upgrade process. The results envisaged sustainability of upgrades outcomes and related that success to informal continuities, specifically the consolidated power of the local CDC.

A PILOT STUDY IN DURBAN

A pilot study conducted by the authors in Durban, in June 2015, assessed current good practice in community-led upgrading of informal settlements. Etnographic data on low-income housing upgrade schemes was gathered by means of key informant interviews (community stakeholders and NGOs leaders) and observations, to map the differences between formal and informal settlements and, therefore, understand the clear benefits of adopting a bottom-up participatory approach. The pilot study included the visit of three settlements partnered with uTshani Fund, a local NGO operating in the human settlements upgrading space. The authors had the opportunity to interview some of the community leaders (interestingly all women) and the NGO's officers that have been involved in the three upgrade processes. Moreover, the pilot study included the participation to a collaborative event hosted by the Inanda community for the Youth Day, celebrated in Durban on the 16th of June. During that event, further interviews with other community members gave insights to better understand the willingness of the community to participate and collaborate for the upgrade of their own houses. Local people demonstrated a strong and trustful relationship with the NGO involved (SDI Alliance SA) together with a high level of commitment, both social and economic.

Figure 1 Havelock (Greenwood Park, Durban)

The first settlement visited, completely *informal*, is called Havelock and is situated in Greenwood Park (Durban). It hosts 300 households in 240 shacks of $15m^2$. Through the intervention of the local NGO, a bottom-up participatory upgrade is being currently implemented for a sanitation project. Interestingly enough is the waste separation and recycling of bottles carried out by the inhabitants, which represent a first spontaneous attempt of environmental management system. That community experienced some issues with local government, who halted the process of building a community centre. However, the residents seem to be willing to collaborate with the municipality.
The second settlement visited was located in KwaMathambo (Red Hill), and was instead a *formal* settlement for 240 residents, realized to be temporary as a resettlement for a larger formal settlement in Durban (Cornubia development). This settlement, with about 240 residents, is characterized by extremely poor quality of the shacks ($17m^2$), illegal connection to the grid and water main tap (*counter-conduct* practices) and a general distrust for the municipality. This settlement is a clear demonstration of some of the main negative consequences of the relocation process that is still implemented for some low-income housing projects. In fact, the preponderant aspect is the reluctance of the community to collaborate with Municipality and the actual desire to leave those houses that they do not recognise as their own. This issue can be related to the lack of participation of the inhabitants in the decision process in the big Housing Project of Cornubia.

Figure 2 Namibia Stop 8 (Inanda, Durban)

Finally, the last settlement visited is called Namibia Stop 8 and it is based in Inanda on the outskirts of Durban in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province. This project was initiated by the eThekwini Municipality to deliver a full upgrade of services and housing to the residents of two adjacent informal settlements, Namibia and Stop8.
While Phase 1 is currently at an operational stage (built from 2010 to 2013), Phase 2 is due to commence within the next few years. Phase 1 was a *greenfield* project entailing the rehousing of residents from two communities to municipal land prepared with roads, housing, water and sewer reticulation. In Phase 1, approximately 720 houses were built, 624 in the standard government developer-driven Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) housing approach and 96 according to the Peoples Housing Process (PHP), as implemented by uTshani Fund and FEDUP. This latter approach is predicated on community participation, women-led savings groups and where possible on community-led decision-making and support. Phase 2, which is planned to start with the installation of services in 2016 and proceed to housing construction in 2017, will be implemented *in situ* in the two communities of origin. There are over 350 FEDUP members in the two communities who have indicated an interest in being involved in community initiatives.

DISCUSSION

As part of a wider project, this paper seeks to provide insights to inform the choice of case studies, in which testing an integrated *Collaborative environmental and construction management framework* to enhance community self-reliance.

The pilot study conducted in Durban, suggested to use Namibia Stop 8 as a *best practice* case study, providing evidence of integrated environmental and construction management strategies (know-how) through engaging with community stakeholders. The local NGO involved, have documented that the innovative *self-built* approach implemented has resulted in 85% of people continuing to live in their houses after improvements to their homes, while the comparative figure for Government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses is 45%. This collaborative approach delivered substantially larger (56m^2), better-designed and sized houses than those constructed under the government-driven RDP model (40m^2). There is also some evidence of the lower quality of the RDP houses, which (for example) have restricted extension possibilities and have limited the growth of home-based enterprises (Adebayo, 2010).

It is interesting to note that for their involvement in Phase 1 of the Namibia Stop 8, the NGO uTshani Fund has twice received the prestigious Govan Mbeki Human Settlements Award - from the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) provincial authority in 2012 and from the national government in 2014. This has created a legacy for the community in terms of income generation, skills upgrade, and sense of ownership. Namibia Stop 8-Phase 1 constitutes good practice due to a set of *key success factors*, which were identified during the pilot study in June 2015 and correspond to the following two crucial steps:

1. Step 1 (Project Preparation) composed of:
    - detailed community profiling;
    - three women-led saving groups established an 'Urban Poor Fund' to finance land purchase, the delivery of housing and infrastructure development, including broader asset mobilisation, blending loans, savings and social capital;
    - participatory planning;
    - community-driven project management (including a Steering Committee of 8 – 10 community members who oversee a Community Construction Management Team (CCMT) whose role it is to manage the work, and those working, on site.
2. Step 2 (Project Implementation) consisting of:
    - beneficiaries contributing *'sweat equity'* (time and labour)
    - financial loans - in some cases their own savings - to further upgrade their structures.

The community leaders (women) interviewed demonstrated a great commitment, willingness to collaborate and to invest their own savings and resources to improve their homes. A general sense of proudness and a strong desire to learn new skills was remarked within the local community. The role of the local NGO was recognised as crucial for the good performance of the upgrade, particularly in terms of mediation between the constraints of the Municipality and the real needs of slum's dwellers.

Thus, a potential for collaboration and mutual learning has been envisaged for the authors that, together with the community researchers, will be involved in a wider project aimed at developing an integrated collaborative environmental and construction management framework to enhance community self-reliance of informal settlements. The present paper seeks to provide some preliminary insights and recommendations on the actual implementation of the Project. Barriers and limitations of the bottom-up *in*

situ upgrading have been investigated and one *best practice* was selected in order to develop and implement the above mentioned framework for self-reliant communities in informal settlements.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This review paper offers an overview of current strategies applied in South Africa to face the informal urbanisation challenge. The literature review suggested the bottom-up (grassroots) approach as the most viable solution to face that challenge; however, some significant limitations such as heterogeneity and fragmentation of some communities, lack of social and material resources and community expectations, have to be taken into account in planning those processes. In particular, this study focuses on participatory *in situ* upgrading and seeks to understand the feasibility of this approach in the upgrade of informal settlements in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province. An extensive literature review and a pilot study conducted by the authors in June 2015, provide some preliminary insights for the development of an integrated, collaborative, environmental and construction management framework to enhance community self-reliance of informal settlements. The positive response of the local stakeholders to participatory *in situ* interventions and their strong commitment demonstrated during interviews and observations, lay the foundation for an evidence base of self-reliant strategies to face the informal urbanization challenge. Further studies and action research methods to be taken in a second phase of the project will explore the underpinning barriers and enabling drivers for communities to upgrade their informal settlements in South Africa. Finally, this research is expected to reveal how grassroots approaches can be embedded in an environmental and construction management strategy to achieve self-reliance in informal settlements in Durban metropolitan area.

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