Community Engagement
Key for Upgrading Informal Settlements

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Several African countries are tackling the issue of slums and informal settlements by building completely new housing developments. However, many residents view these new areas as less habitable because of poor social conditions. Drawing on three case studies, this policy note argues that community engagement is crucial when planning to replace informal settlements with modern housing in African cities.

Community Engagement Key for Upgrading Informal Settlements

Up to half of the urban population in sub-Saharan Africa live in areas categorised as slums and informal settlements. These areas are characterised by inadequate basic services, lack of infrastructure, uncontrolled and unhealthy population densities, flimsy dwellings, poor access to amenities and insecure tenure. They represent an intertwining of the socio-economic and environmental problems of urbanisation.

Social and environmental disadvantages

These slums and informal settlements are largely the physical manifestations of social and economic inequality in cities. A macro-economic environment that
excludes certain groups – especially the poor – from the formal urban economy is one of the predictors of the prevalence of informal settlements and residential ghettoisation. A 1 percent rise in a country’s Gini coefficient has been associated with an increase in slum and informal settlement prevalence by between 0.39 and 0.47 percent.

People living in informal settlements are generally deprived of the environment’s positive externalities and unduly exposed to negative fallouts. Access to amenities such as green spaces is poor. Due to inadequate resources, vulnerability to the impacts of extreme weather events associated with climate change is higher. Waste collection is poor, so pollution levels are high. Informal settlements have a negative impact on natural ecosystems. Their presence can cause environmental degradation and deplete natural resources.

Some environmental benefits
The socio-political changes accompanying the democratic dispensation in post-colonial, post-apartheid Africa have increased attention on conditions in informal settlements. There has been a discursive groundswell, locally and internationally, around inequalities and increasing awareness of their everyday manifestations in informal settlements. To tackle these inherent problems, African countries have been trying to provide housing and services for low-income households in informal settlements.

In Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia, around 80 percent of the population are estimated to live in informal dwellings – mostly self-built single-storey houses made from mud, wood and straw, with no permanent foundations and inadequate services. Through the Grand Housing Program introduced by the Ethiopian government in 2004, people are relocated from these informal dwellings in underserved neighbourhoods (picture previous page) to apartments in multi-storey blocks of apartments, also called condominiums (picture below). By 2012, over 150,000 housing units had been built, with more under construction.

A study by Zafu Teferi and Peter Newman, published in 2017, examined the social, economic and environmental aspects of the Ethiopian government’s plan to clear informal settlements and replace them with blocks of apartments. The study focused on Arat Kilo and Ginifle, two areas less than a kilometre apart in central Addis Ababa. Households in informal dwellings in Arat Kilo had been relocated to flats in Ginifle (picture below).

The study found that the relocation had some environmental benefits. It marginally reduced the amount of resources households consumed, particularly water and energy (apart from gasoline). There was also a small reduction in the quantity of waste generated (see Table 1).
Declining trust among neighbours

Notwithstanding these improvements, the new housing environment is strikingly less habitable. Social capital existing in the informal settlement has been greatly reduced (see Table 2). The study found that while 80 percent of people felt happy living in the settlement, only 50 percent were happy in the flats. Some 95 percent felt secure in the settlement, but only 7 percent felt secure in the flats. Trust also declined: 97 percent trusted their neighbours in the settlement, but only 34 percent trusted their neighbours in the apartments.

Kenya’s government takes a similar approach to Ethiopia’s. About 2.5 million people were estimated to live in over 100 areas regarded as informal settlements in the capital Nairobi. Kibera, Nairobi’s largest informal settlement, contains over 180,000 inhabitants. The Kenya Slum Upgrading Programme (KENSUP), launched in 2004, has notably been involved in the construction of high-rise blocks of flats in Kibera. In 2011, around 1,200 households from Soweto-East in Kibera were relocated (supposedly temporarily) to blocks of apartments located in the Langata area of the settlement (see picture next page).

Units given away, sold or rented out

The Langata project was meant to serve as a pilot for KENSUP’s long-term plan to redevelop the whole of Kibera with multi-storey blocks of flats. More recently, 822 housing units in 21 blocks of four-storey buildings with 245 market stalls, costing Ksh 2.9 billion (approximately 28 million USD), have also been completed and allocated in the settlement. There are plans to develop over 3,000 housing units on cleared parts of Kibera in the coming years.

Investigations have shown that up to half the households that received housing units no longer reside in them. Such units have either been given away, sold or rented out. Some of the beneficiaries have moved back to live in the informal settlement.

There are various related reasons why beneficiaries do not stay in their allocated units. For instance, a septuagenarian male beneficiary returned to the informal settlement due to illness (swollen feet) and financial difficulty. He was more comfortable in a single-storey (bungalow) shack and could not afford the monthly mortgage on the flat.

Some beneficiaries do not themselves stay in the flats but rent them out – at times making up to a fourfold profit from rent. In another example, a female beneficiary, even after relocation, usually bought groceries in the settlement because they were cheaper there. She spent her weekends in the settlement, visiting her friends and former neighbours. Even after living in the new apart-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material inputs</th>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>Apartment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Water (litre/household/day)</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy (MJ/household/day)</td>
<td>70.58</td>
<td>66.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>2.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kerosene</td>
<td>58.00</td>
<td>54.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charcoal</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gasoline</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>7.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>2.45</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waste outputs</th>
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<th>Apartment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solid waste (kg/household/day)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.6 (90% collected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liquid waste (litre/household/day)</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air waste (CO₂)</td>
<td>5,593</td>
<td>4,986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>402</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kerosene</td>
<td>4321</td>
<td>3902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charcoal</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gasoline</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Resource flows in informal settlements versus multi-storey apartments in Addis Ababa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>Apartment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>67% primary school and below</td>
<td>30% primary school and below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>High level of community</td>
<td>Low level of community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80% are happy to live there</td>
<td>50% are happy to live there</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95% feel secure</td>
<td>7% feel secure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93% enjoy access to at least one informal borrowing or lending network</td>
<td>42% enjoy access to at least one informal borrowing or lending network</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97% trust their neighbours</td>
<td>34% trust their neighbours</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–</td>
<td>60% have social ties to previous informal communities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Social aspects of relocation from informal settlements to new housing in Addis Ababa.
ments for several years, she claims not to know any of her neighbours.

The housing projects did not include greening initiatives such as gardens, solar panels or waste recycling. There is no evidence that such opportunities were explored or actively encouraged. Sadly, the new apartments do not meet many standards of sustainable design.

Promoting environmental lifestyles

In South Africa, where I recently conducted a study, qualifying households within informal settlements are relocated to subsidised houses on serviced plots in newly established areas. This product-driven approach emerged in 1994 as part of country’s post-apartheid housing policy. Report from South African government’s 2013 General Household Survey showed that up to 2.7 million households, mostly from informal settlements, have received subsidised houses.

Beginning in 2005, over 2,890 households were relocated from Zevenfontein informal settlement to a new housing development called Cosmo City. The two areas are about 11 km apart and Cosmo City is located 35 km northwest of Johannesburg’s central business district.

Several initiatives seeking to entrench pro-environmental lifestyles and greening in Cosmo City took place before and after the beneficiaries occupied the houses. To promote renewable energy, solar water heaters were installed in 700 houses. The municipality developed 10 parks out of 44 areas earmarked, while a 250-ha green belt was demarcated. In addition, the developer planted over 22,000 trees and NGOs distributed over 10,000 fruit trees to households. Residents were taught how to grow plants and encouraged to have at least two or three trees at home.

A view of Kibera with the Langata housing project in the background.
Disliking the new neighbourhood

My study found that the residents strongly disliked some aspects of the new neighbourhood. One woman, whose concerns were echoed by others, told me:

*Zevenfontein was better than Cosmo City because here money speaks... There, I can fetch wood from the bush and come to cook. Here, being unemployed is a challenge because you use electricity... Some people will say that Cosmo City is better because there is electricity here but the crime is too high. One is not free.*

The cases presented illuminate the transformation from informal under-serviced neighbourhoods to multi-storey apartments taking place across African cities. No doubt, relocation from informal settlements to modern housing amounts to an improvement in living conditions. People now live in durable houses, have secure tenure, permanent services and better infrastructure. This is an improvement in their immediate physical environment. In terms of environmental sustainability, while the Addis Ababa case indicates a reduction in resources consumed and waste produced, the Johannesburg case includes pro-environmental initiatives.

Opportunities for sustainability

All three cases show that social conditions in the respective communities have not necessarily been altered in significantly beneficial ways. Key aspects such as trust, safety and solidarity that make communities habitable have been lost, while insecurity, vulnerability, malaise and so on have emerged. These examples clearly highlight the intangible value of community in informal settlements and significant gaps in terms of social capital in new housing.

Economic factors improved in the Addis Ababa case, but there is no such evidence in Johannesburg or Nairobi where the struggle to meet increased costs associated with new and higher standards of living came to the fore. This shows that without significant improvement in the economic situation of beneficiaries, quality of life will decline with relocation.

Upgrading provides an opportunity to satisfy the increasing need to simultaneously reduce poverty, provide adequate and affordable housing, create jobs, preserve cultures, increase energy access for the poor, and reduce resource consumption and carbon emissions. It shows the need for interventions that collectively address social, economic and environmental problems. Thinking about and approaching these issues in isolation is insufficient.

Although desirable, holistic approaches may also not be easy to implement. In this situation, decision makers must balance benefits and downsides between opposing sides without necessarily compromising either. Juggling between the competing interests of ‘green’ and ‘brown’ agendas to achieve a win-win situation demands making trade-offs and developing synergies. It requires deeply understanding inherent complexities and engaging in difficult conversations. It must be worked at both with hindsight and foresight.

Policy implications

- A central issue emanating from these cases is that clearing informal settlements and replacing them with modern housing, as has often been done in cities across Africa cities, is not often the best solution socially, and probably not economically and environmentally either. Productive community engagements are crucial to making things better.

- Where informal settlement residents have been relocated, housing stock should be socially (re)engineered to ensure that it becomes community oriented and fosters economic upliftment. It is necessary to empower the residents through poverty alleviation programmes as well as those which harness social capital in new – and existing – communities.

- An important takeaway is that thinking and action on housing provision in informal settlement upgrading must be directed towards quality of life – in its entirety – and environmental quality. Every upgrading project should be tested against key principles ingrained in the social, economic and environmental dimensions.
About the author

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