

NEWS



Urban design

Informal Settlement Upgrading in Durban

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With a large informal population whose house needs outpace the ability of the public sector to provide shelter, eThekweni shifted its upgrading focus to improving sanitation facilities in order to provide basic needs while residents can build and maintain their own homes.

eThekweni is a metropolitan municipal government that encompasses the port city of Durban and many surrounding towns into a single jurisdiction of both urban and rural land. Across eThekweni, some 226,000 households live in informal conditions - from underdeveloped rural areas lacking roads to urban areas consisting of shacks in slum-like conditions. The municipality is home to 550 informal settlements that suffer from higher rates of fires, natural disasters, and crime than formal parts of the city.

Since 1994, the Human Settlements Department has delivered 200,000 free houses to the poor without making a demonstrable improvement in the overall number of informal dwellers lacking basic services.

“This hasn’t really touched our housing backlog or the informal settlements due to the rapid pace of

urbanization,” said Human Settlements Officer Sarah Watson.

As a result, eThekwini adopted a more cost-effective upgrading programme with a focus on providing basic infrastructure like water, sanitation, and electricity rather than investing all of the departmental budget in housing units. In turn, residents are encouraged to build their houses incrementally and benefit from their newfound access to public services.

“With this initiative, we are changing the model of service delivery from one which offers a Rolls Royce of development to only a few people to a model which aims to address a range of health, safety, and living condition challenges, but that will reach far more people within the same budget,” Watson said. She estimates that for the cost of one house for a poor family, the department can provide the suite of public services to 10-15 families.

“Our project aims to integrate the rural and informal settlements areas into the urban form of the city and extend those basic services in a way that is appropriate and affordable for citizens of the city,” Watson said.

Thus far, eThekwini has built 1,500 ablution blocks with toilets, showers, and handwashing stations; provided electricity to 102,000 informal dwellings; and installed over 80,000 urine diversion toilets in rural households.

Such a change in priorities is a major innovation for cities tackling the challenge of informal settlements and one that runs counter to a traditional belief that government is responsible for housing informal dwellers. Instead, eThekwini has acknowledged that they cannot provide housing for all, but they can provide basic services to most.

“One of the challenges has been going beyond the mandate of the Human Settlements Department,” Watson said. “Traditionally we are providers of free housing for the poor.”

eThekwini’s programme contributes to SDG3 by improving the health outcomes of informal dwellers, SDG6 by better managing municipal sanitation, SDG7 by increasing access to electricity, and SDG11 by upgrading human settlements.