

Formalising Informal Settlements: How Social Relations and Identity Influence Changes to the Tenure Security of the Urban Poor in Durban, South Africa

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In South Africa, state policies towards informal settlements are in keeping with a global trend that favours the *in situ* upgrade of informal settlements and the formalisation of residents' tenure status. The Metro Housing Unit of eThekweni municipality (which includes Durban) has the strongest *in situ* upgrade track record across the country, operating under intense time pressure and tight budgets. This contributes to a strong emphasis on 'community participation' and devolved responsibility for many aspects of the process to a local councillor and settlement-level Community Development Committee. The councillor and committee are responsible for both 'raising the voice' of informal dwellers ensuring resident participation in the upgrade process, and helping set the parameters of upgrade eligibility through housing lists and cut off dates for later settlers. In doing so, they strongly influence which individuals benefit from an upgrade project and which do not.

The upgrade process in eThekweni makes three major assumptions about 'community', 'participation' and the role of local elites: first, Community Development Committees, which are in principle elected, are founded and organised in accordance with just and democratic principles; second, councillors act in favour of informal dwellers in their constituency, sometimes over the interests of their formally housed voter base; and third, that informal dwellers share a communal identity and are incentivised to behave cohesively for the greater good.

This paper explores the implementation of the settlement upgrade process from the perspective of ordinary informal dwellers (i.e. non-committee members). It traces residents' engagement with the upgrade process from design to implementation stages and their ability to access resources (e.g. a house and title deed) resulting from formalisation. This perspective highlights the importance of certain social relations and individual identities - political, ethnic and gendered in particular - in first, gaining access to the actors responsible for implementing the upgrade; and secondly, in mediating any of its consequences e.g. managing the loss of former shack landlords' rental income. The paper also argues that contemporary discourses of 'community' and 'participation' prevalent in approaches to formalisation and upgrade ignore that informal dwellers who are not party to settlement governance are exposed to systems of nepotism and patronage, bribery, violence, and the ethnic and cultural preferences of local decision makers.

These arguments, which form part of a PhD thesis, are based on the findings of a nine month ethnographic study of residents in three settlements at varying stages of the formalisation process.