Empower Upgrade Model

Submitted By: Urban Think Tank Empower



Organization Profile

Organization Name: Urban Think Tank Empower

Organization Type: Civil society

Website: www.utte.co.za

Practice Details

Country(ies): South Africa

City(ies): Cape Town

Start Year: 2016 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Social Housing
- Housing & Informality
- Housing Rights & Social Inclusion
- Housing & Climate Adaptation

Relevant SDGs:



UN-HABITAT

Problem & Context

South Africa currently faces a desperate housing crisis: CAHF estimates 30M people live informally. This is the legacy of apartheid spatial planning, now compounded by class inequality in the world's most unequal country (GINI). The national BNG subsidy program cannot keep up: waiting lists grow faster than delivery, and budgets are shrinking with reduced offerings despite millions dependent. Current systems were inherited from a past where finance was cheap, labour undervalued, energy seen as infinite, and resources unlimited - resulting in an extractive housing market that ignores dignity, equity, and sustainability. Our context is one of deep urgency and also opportunity for change.

Solution Developed

The Empower Upgrade Model transforms informal settlements from within — working with, not over, the communities who live there. We upgrade existing homes and develop higher-density, dignified housing that builds on social capital, minimises displacement, and unlocks broader neighbourhood impact. Our approach is both bottom-up and top-down: we engage residents, partner with city officials, and align with funders and professionals to co-create real solutions.

We integrate low-tech but high-impact practices that are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable — from solar power and green infrastructure to shared public spaces, community centres and income-generating opportunities. The model addresses root causes of vulnerability (unsafe, inadequate housing) rather than reacting to the symptoms (fires, floods, poverty, crime).

We align with SDGs 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13 and 16 — creating a holistic ecosystem for resilient housing that embeds dignity, climate action, economic inclusion and long-term sustainability into the very fabric of how we build.

Implementation

Implementation starts with months of on-site listening, trust-building and co-design. we map households, risks and social networks, then agree the upgrade brief with residents and the city. A single framework aligns multilevel actors - community organisations, city departments (planning, land, services), state subsidy funders, the professional team and private partners - around one plan and governance structure (homeowners association and community-centre management).

Design is participatory: unit sizes and layouts are matched to family needs; shared public space, shops and a community centre are positioned to catalyse livelihoods; green infrastructure and PV systems are engineered for net-positive energy. Construction is phased to avoid displacement; when moves are unavoidable, they happen within the site and are temporary.

Community members are formally trained and employed throughout, creating skills and income that outlast the build.

A typical project runs about 4 years with overlapping stages: engagement and legal processes; detailed design; 24–30 months of build; and activation/operations. Resources come from a blend of state subsidies, concessional and donor finance (solar, green infrastructure, carbon credits), and patient private investment. Revenues from shops and surplus energy fund operations. Post-occupancy evaluations and continuous learning close the loop, informing the next site and strengthening the resilience of both homes and community.

Enablers & Obstacles

Trust — from both community members and the City — is the most critical enabler and the hardest to earn. Convincing residents to let go of their informal homes (however precarious) and believe in a vision they can't yet see takes time. Simultaneously, we need buy-in from officials to trial alternative methods and to grant exceptions. We overcome this by building prototypes that work — demonstrating success from both top-down and bottom-up. Education, transparency, and ongoing communication underpin every phase. As one resident builds trust, others follow. As one City department sees results, others come on board. This is the slow, intentional work of transformation.

Results & Impact

To date, UTTE has built 76 homes (housing 412 individuals), creating 532 jobs and benefiting over 1800 wider community members through infrastructure and services. These include 4 shops and a community centre (feat. a sports academy, food gardens, ECD and shared co-working spaces). Solar systems now generate twice the site's electricity needs, feeding surplus into the grid and generating community revenue. This is just the start — 5769 homes are planned (housing 30,597 people), across 279,000m² of residential space.

We conduct post-occupancy evaluations annually, and are currently undertaking a full-scale impact research project to triangulate quantitative and qualitative data. Already, we see gains across health, education, safety, and economic inclusion — outcomes that formal housing and dignified neighbourhoods can unlock. We've embedded long-term resilience into the model: renewable energy, food security, public space, local employment and ownership models. This is housing as a continually evolving system — not just a product.

Replication & Scale Up

Each project takes up to 4 years, but we start a new site every 9 months, enabling overlap and exponential growth. From 1 to 4 to 72 homes, our model scales through trust, phasing and process alignment. But we know we can't do it alone - we share all learnings openly, support other developers entering this space, and run dedicated courses through UCT University and

SEA School to equip the next generation of designers and developers to build equitably, sustainably, and at scale.

We're actively scaling the Empower Upgrade Model across township sites, with 19 new locations identified and phased to begin every 9 months. Each iteration builds community trust, government buy-in, and operational momentum - accelerating rollout. While this remains our core focus, we're also investing in R&D for a complementary model: upgrading hijacked inner-city buildings through co-design with current residents. This parallel stream will expand our reach without compromising depth.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has informed or been partially integrated into policy discussions, strategies, or pilot-level policy instruments.

The model is shaping policy and strategy for multiple municipalities across SA. The model is now used as precedent in City of Cape Town land release programme. We are currently co-developing (with the City) a new Master Plan for Imizamo Yethu township - despite only developing 2 of the 9 sites ourselves. Many other Cities are watching closely - especially as we prove that occupied land can be upgraded without displacement. Prototyping encourages policy agility and is shifting mindsets on how equitable development is done.

Lessons & Takeaways

We need more diverse finance for greater impact (int. grants, carbon credits, impact investment, etc.) and faster local authority processes (site packaging, admin support, etc.). Every iteration must push further: greener construction, longer lifespans, deeper socio-economic sustainability post-build. Above all, the model proves that patient co-design creates dignity and resilience, but scaling impact requires systemic support and greater collaboration across the industry.