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Informal Settlement Upgrading Initiative through the Home Equals Campaign

Submitted By: Habitat for Humanity Malawi (HFHM)



Organization Profile

Organization Name: Habitat for Humanity Malawi (HFHM)

Organization Type: Civil society

Website: www.habitat.mw

Practice Details

Country(ies): Malawi

City(ies): Lilongwe

Start Year: 2023

Ongoing: No

End Year: 2025

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

Housing & Informality

Housing, Land & Spatial Planning

Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

Malawi is one of the fastest urbanizing countries in the world. The fast pace of urbanization has outstripped the capacity of local governments to provide adequate infrastructure and services, while most new housing emerges in informal settlements without secure tenure and access to basic services. An estimated 1.9 million people live in informal settlements, areas that are characterized by extreme hazard exposure and marginalization. In Lilongwe alone, 76% of the city's residents live in slums.

These challenges are exacerbated by policy and governance implementation gaps. City development plans are not monitored or enforced, and officials are rarely held responsible for this neglect. Although laws like the Local Government Act and National Land Use Policy empower citizens to engage with the state, this potential is unrealized due to misinformation, misapprehension of rights, and a limited capacity to advocate.

Solution Developed

As a key part of Habitat for Humanity's "Home Equals" campaign, Habitat Malawi initiated the community-driven slum upgrading pilot project in Area 27, Lilongwe. This initiative:

- Empowered resident networks to advocate for participatory land-use planning and securing official city approval for layout plan.
- Facilitated the production of Certificates of Lease formally granting them secure tenure rights and integrating their plots into the city's legal framework.
- Facilitated the establishment of housing savings groups to build capital to finance incremental housing improvements and foster resilience.
- Supported the new housing construction and improvements in the area.
- Implemented physical improvements like road grading, drainage, and water/sanitation access.

The model that has been formally adopted in the National Slum Upgrading and Prevention Strategy which is currently under development. The strategy once finalized will indirectly benefit about 1.9 million people currently living in informal settlements across Malawi.

Implementation

The solution involved a series of interconnected actions in "Area 27", an informal settlement in Lilongwe. This community driven process began by empowering resident networks to advocate for themselves, leading to participatory land-use planning. This effort culminated in the official approval of a formal layout plan by the Lilongwe City Council. The project then advanced to physical implementation, including road grading, drainage work, and improvements to water and sanitation access.

The key actors in this initiative were Habitat for Humanity Malawi (HFHM), which acted as the catalyst and facilitator; the Area 27 resident networks, who were the primary participants; and the Lilongwe City Council, the government body that provided crucial official approval. The implementation timeline progressed from community mobilization and planning to official plan approval, culminating in the infrastructure upgrades.

This successful pilot was supported by HFHM's resources and funding through the Home Equals campaign. Its most vital asset was the strategic partnership between an international NGO, organized community groups, and a formal government body. This tripartite model was essential for achieving both immediate community impact and broader policy change.

Enablers & Obstacles

The initiative was propelled by several key enablers: Profound community engagement-built trust and established a shared vision among residents. This momentum was leveraged to secure political buy-in from the Lilongwe City Council, culminating in approval of the layout plan.

Obstacles encountered: Within the community, resistance emerged to aspects of the planning process, including reluctance to cede land, concerns over demolition of structures and trees, and hesitancy to begin paying city rates. These were addressed through transparent dialogue, participatory planning, and fair relocation processes, securing community consensus.

Simultaneously, a major systemic obstacle was the absence of a national slum upgrading policy. This was overcome by using the pilot as proof of concept, catalyzed Malawi’s first National Slum Upgrading and Prevention Strategy.

Results & Impact

This initiative delivered significant tangible outcomes, directly providing 402 families (approximately 1,050 people) with formal security of land tenure through the approved layout plan. Qualitatively, this newfound security has reduced the constant threat of eviction, provided a critical asset for economic resilience and empowered some residents to confidently invest in improving and upgrading their own homes, demonstrating a powerful shift from temporary occupancy to permanent belonging.

In the longer term, this project seeds broader transformation. The community benefits from improved public health through new drainage and sanitation, reducing flood risk and waterborne diseases. Economically, stabilized households can build equity and productivity. Environmentally, planned infrastructure promotes safer waste and water management. Most significantly, the project’s success provided the proven, scalable model for Malawi’s first National Slum Upgrading and Prevention Strategy, promising to replicate this impact for millions of citizens nationwide.

Replication & Scale Up

The project's methodology is now poised for replication by other organizations and councils, as it has been formally adopted by the National Slum Upgrading and Prevention Strategy. This policy provides a supportive regulatory framework, making subgovernments more receptive to partnerships and enabling a strategic scale-up. The expansion will directly apply lessons from Area 27. Demonstrating this deliberate pathway from a pilot to a national approach, HFHM is scaling its interventions to two more informal settlements in the next two years.

This practice will be scaled up through the implementation of the model as a core part of Malawi's National Slum Upgrading Strategy. This will enable systematic replication by municipal governments across the country. This policy framework will allow for scaling the approach to other cities, significantly expanding its reach to millions of informal settlement dwellers.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has been fully adopted into formal policy frameworks and legislation, and is being implemented at scale with institutional support.

The practice directly informed and catalyzed Malawi's first National Slum Upgrading and Prevention Strategy. The community-driven model from Area 27 including participatory planning, tenure formalization, and infrastructure upgrading provided the evidence-based blueprint for the national policy. This successful pilot demonstrated a scalable approach, convincing policymakers to adopt and institutionalize these methods as the standard for slum upgrading initiatives.

Lessons & Takeaways

To ensure deeper community understanding and sustainable outcomes, we would revise allocation of more time and resources to land demarcation and surveying phase. The technical nature of plot alignment and tenure documentation required a more iterative and visual learning process; a quicker pace risked some residents signing agreements without fully understanding its implications. The community savings group model could have been strengthened by embedding more robust financial literacy training up front to better prepare members for managing construction loans and long-term maintenance costs.