eThekwini Informal Settlement Incremental Upgrading Strategy

Submitted By: eThekwini Municipality



Organization Profile

Organization Name: eThekwini Municipality

Organization Type: Subnational government

Website: www.durban.gov.za

Practice Details

Country(ies): South Africa

City(ies): Durban

Start Year: 2022 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Housing & Informality
- Housing Rights & Social Inclusion
- Housing, Land & Spatial Planning
- Housing Policy, Legislation & Governance

Relevant SDGs:



UN-HABITAT

Problem & Context

Durban faces a complex and persistent challenge of informal settlement. These settlements are often located on topographically challenging land, lack basic services, and are outside formal planning frameworks. Conventional housing programmes have proven insufficient to address the backlog due to financial, land availability, and coordination constraints. Informal settlements have continued to grow despite significant investment in formal housing. This urbanization is a trend that is am moving target over the years as eThekwini has better economic hub which attracts people from other 10 districts of KwaZulu Natal and some from outside the boarders of South Africa for bettering their livelihood. Currently we have over 603 informal settlements within the City, occupied by 312 000 households. The impact of climate change on these families is enormous, as many settle on undevelopable areas prone to flooding. Almost every year we have a huge number of people displaced by disasters.

Solution Developed

In response, the eThekwini Municipality developed a city-wide Informal Settlement Incremental Upgrading Strategy, adopted in June 2022. It shifts focus from full formalisation to an incremental approach grounded in the national Upgrading Informal Settlements Programme policy. The Strategy emphasizes the role of the State in creating enabling conditions for people to improve their own structures. It categorises settlements by readiness for development and risk, prioritising essential services and functional tenure security for the majority. The strategy aims to upgrade all settlements over time through a programmatic, differentiated approach that is flexible, inclusive, and cost-effective. It leverages partnerships with civil society, NGOs, and other spheres of government to implement planning, servicing, and tenure innovations. An Anti-Land Invasion strategy has been devised and lessons learned through best practice with other Metropolitans cities in curbing this phenomenon through enhanced community engagement.

Implementation

The strategy was developed through extensive consultation with stakeholders including civil society and national partners. The Project Preparation Trust of KZN and the City Support Programme (an arm of National Treasury) were key partners in conceptualizing and drafting the Strategy. The Strategy aims to optimize the limited budgets and resources allocated to informal settlement upgrading. It is estimated that 12 families can be provided with access to improved sanitation, potable water, individual electricity connections, footpaths, access roads and basic stormwater controls for same cost as delivering 1 formal house. While basic services have been provided in informal settlements since the late 1990s, the Strategy aims to formalize the commitment of the City to informal residents and describe a theory of change which could lead to substantial improvements in living conditions, even where informality persists.
Implementation began with optimised pipeline planning using a strengthened settlement database. Settlements are categorised and prioritised according to vulnerability, location,

services deficit, and community readiness. Services such as communal ablutions, electricity, and solid waste management are rolled out depending on settlement type and risk. The strategy also pilots innovative planning mechanisms (IDA1/IDA2), tenure certificates, and alternative housing typologies like lightweight, double-story structures suitable for steep terrain.

Enablers & Obstacles

Key enablers include strong municipal commitment, Council resolutions, policy alignment with national frameworks, an updated database, and the establishment of the ISIUF. The partnership with NGOs and programmes like iQhaza Lethu has supported innovation. Major obstacles include fiscal constraints, rigid planning norms, topographical site constraints, land ownership complexity, and slow procurement processes. These are addressed through flexible standards, legal mechanisms for servicing private land, and a prioritised city-wide land acquisition strategy. Key policy gaps included the absence of a city-wide strategic framework, poor cross-departmental coordination, and lack of flexible, scalable solutions that prioritise essential services and tenure security. The City is also constrained by the funding and policy limitations as an agent of with Provincial and National authorities.

Results & Impact

Since 2010, over 113,000 households have received communal ablution facilities, 102,000 have been electrified, and 148,000 households have access to improved water supply. Settlements are progressively being included in planning frameworks. Bylaws to enable the City to deliver services on privately owned land and to recognize defacto land rights are to taken for public participation processes in the next months. The program shifts service delivery from siloed, reactive interventions to a structured, city-wide programme. It has improved livelihoods, public health, and safety, while supporting climate resilience. Although ongoing, early results demonstrate how an inclusive, incremental strategy can improve lives at scale. The majority of informal settlements now fall within an active, differentiated upgrading pipeline.

Replication & Scale Up

The Strategy provides an alternative Theory of Change for improving living conditions and addressing vulnerability, while acknowledging the existing policy and funding limitations of the South African housing framework. Sharing this realistic and programmatic approach in various learning platforms and between Metropolitan municipalities has influenced other cities to rethink their own approaches to informality.

The approach has inspired interest from other South African metros and is aligned with national guidelines. Its structured, city-wide model, grounded in practical categorisation and prioritisation, is replicable in other urban areas facing large-scale informal settlement challenges. The use of administrative tenure, flexible planning mechanisms, and scalable

services can be adapted to local contexts. Scaling within eThekwini involves expanding coverage, improving transversal coordination, and securing sustained funding.

Policy Uptake

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

The upgrading strategy has been formally adopted by the eThekwini Council and integrated into city planning. It informs budgeting, service delivery, and land management. Components such as settlement categorisation and ISIUF are embedded in policy and practice. Innovations like incremental planning zones and tenure certificates are being piloted for broader adoption. National departments and partners have acknowledged the model as a best practice for scaling up informal settlement upgrading.

Lessons & Takeaways

In hindsight, a stronger early focus on transversal coordination and regulatory flexibility would have accelerated impact. There is now a clear understanding that informal settlements require adaptive, not standardised, responses. Training and guidance materials are under development to support staff and community engagement. The phased, at-scale approach allows government to work with informality, not against it.