

**“Upgrading Lives,
Building The Nation”**

*A pledge of renewal for the
South African SDI Alliance*

The Mission: *Building stronger communities to upgrade informal settlements*

There was a time when the word “uskoteni” was a word that police and government officials used to demean slum dwellers in South Africa. They were squatters. They did not belong. They were to be removed or, barring that, continuously harassed. But the word has undergone a change. Throughout South Africa, the shack dwelling urban poor now refer to themselves as “uskoteni” with a feeling of pride. For the word means that they are survivors.

Vuku'zenzele. Wake up and do it for yourself. Such is the way of the South African Alliance. It has been a long path. In the late 1980s and 1990s, affiliated slum dwellers invaded land to create many settlements. These are now home to formal communities with services, legal tenure, and housing developments. The Alliance has worked with all levels of government to build a voice for the urban poor in the institutions of South Africa's developmental state. The Alliance has worked with communities to learn to save their money, collect their own information, and upgrade their settlements.

The capacity of the poor to survive and innovate in the face of harsh conditions comprises underpins a shift in the South African government's approach to changing the living conditions of the poor in cities throughout the country. The Ministry of Human Settlements is changing its approach to slum upgrading. Since 1994, the housing program has produced matchbox houses for a few on the periphery of cities. Though the government has built approximately 2.1 million houses, the backlog of those without housing is actually larger than it was in 1994. Now the Ministry has agreed on a new program of action: incremental upgrading of informal settlements that benefits whole communities where people already live. In December 2010, Minister Tokyo Sexwale made a commitment to upgrade 400,000 informal settlement households on well-located land by 2014. This is one of three major outcomes of his performance agreement with President Jacob Zuma.

For slum dwellers, this change in approach is similar to the way that they have changed the meaning of the word “uskoteni.” The RDP housing program has created false illusions for the millions who live in hope of a free house that will likely never come. Those who do receive RDP houses often end up living further away from economic opportunity than when they lived in informal shack settlements. More still have faced the cruel hand of a State that evicts shack dwellers from settlements in every major city in the country. Under the various iterations of the RDP program, the poor are dependent, dispensable, and defenseless.

After a half century of racial and economic oppression at the hands of the Apartheid regime, and another 16 years of degradation due to the dysfunctional welfare state of the democratic era, the urban poor are finding innovative ways to respond to their condition: In this context, the South African Alliance of community organizations and NGO professional organizations linked to Shack Dwellers International (SDI), met for three days at the Kolping House in Cape Town on 19-21 January 2011, in order to plot a common way forward to meet the challenges of the plight of its constituency of urban informal settlement dwellers.

Just as government has a lot of will, a little capacity, and no experience, the same applies to most communities. The Alliance took a major step towards preparing communities for an engagement with government, especially local government. Such partnership addresses the make-or-break need to transform community participation in informal settlement upgrading from an afterthought to the central plank of such work.

The strategy and associated implementation plan contained within this document are the outcomes of the deliberations held over these three days in Cape Town. The motivation for this work is rooted deep in the grassroots. By this we mean the issues that emerge most profoundly from the daily experience of poverty, landlessness, and homelessness. Our strategy is a version of that old rallying cry: *“Nothing for us without us.”* For the kind of upgrading we speak of is not about land and services alone. This is about realizing real citizenship and equality in our cities.

As government shifts to an incremental approach to informal settlement upgrading, it is finding that communities are preparing the ground for a historic possibility. For settlement-wide upgrading can only be done with communities as central partners in the process. With such a strategy in hand, the new policy environment is paving the way to real change on the ground.

What is the Alliance?

This is a unique moment of renewal for the group of community-based social movements, and NGOs that make up the South African SDI Alliance. There are numbers. The Alliance has built over 15,000 houses, secured tenure for close to 20,000 households, and opened thousands of saving schemes. But beyond the numbers, the power of the Alliance comes from the clarity of its purpose: (1) break the chains of dependency; (2) unleash the strength of people’s vision for human settlements; (3) engage formal stakeholders to strike deals that empower the poor to be integral partners in the growth of cities.

There are five major partners in the Alliance.

(1) The **Federation of the Urban Poor (FEDUP)**, a nationwide federation of slum dwellers who practice the rituals of all federations affiliated to SDI throughout the world. The core activities are women-led daily savings, enumeration, pragmatic partnerships with the State, and practical community-led housing development / land acquisition / incremental informal settlement upgrading.

(2) The **Informal Settlement Network (ISN)**, a bottom-up agglomeration of settlement-level and national-level organizations of the poor at the city-wide scale in the municipalities of Cape Town, Ekurhuleni, eThekweni (Durban), Johannesburg, Nelson Mandela Bay (Port Elizabeth), and Stellenbosch.

(3) The **Community Organization Resource Center (CORC)**, an NGO that supports the social processes of community-based organizations that want to work for themselves, by facilitating engagements with formal actors like the State. It also supports the development of “social technologies,” especially the

SDI rituals of savings, enumeration, and community-led development strategies.

(4) The **uTshani Fund**, a formal bridging finance institution, which provides loans for community-led initiations regarding house construction, land acquisition, and incremental informal settlement upgrading.

(5) The **uDondolo Trust**, a formal treasury of FEDUP.

We refer to this time as a moment of renewal for the Alliance. We do so because the status quo has marginalized the poor in the course of urban change over the past 16 years. We do so because the Alliance is in a position to bring its lengthy experience, unique sense of scale, and popular spirit to bear on (a) the physical and social development of cities and (b) the policies, institutions, and financial relationships that determine urban change. This is a movement of people: People in communities dedicated to making formal systems understand and incorporate their informal approaches; professionals who do not accept as inevitable the existing formal context in which laws, institutions, and financial flows are determined. For this Alliance, it is a time of renewal of the efforts of the past, and a time of beginnings to respond to the new challenges of our time.

Strategy

Building communities

The architecture of the Alliance is a decidedly open one. The motivation for this work is not about preserving institutional imperatives or narrow individual interest. Rather, the strategy that emerges is broad-based, focusing on the concrete developmental issues of informal settlement communities.

The Informal Settlement Network (ISN) is designed for this express purpose. It includes national organizations of the poor like the Federation of the Urban Poor, a network of autonomous, women-led savings schemes and the Poor People's Movement. But the majority of ISN participants come from organizations constituted at the individual settlement level. These include residents' committees linked to the South African National Civics Organization (SANCO), crisis committees, development committees, and settlement task teams. The goal of this network is to bring together poor communities at the city-wide and nation-wide scale to share concerns, talk about problems, and develop solutions.

When the ISN mobilizes in communities, it supports the local leadership to organize around developmental issues. Informal settlement community leadership can run a wide gamut from narrow interests of power and patronage to a coherent vision of issue-based development. When we speak of "issues," we refer to the fundamental and immediate issues of development that communities face such as basic services (eg. water, sanitation, electricity, waste removal, etc.), child care, security, and education. Therefore, ISN mobilization around informal settlement upgrading is to first support local leadership in each community to understand what changes are needed to the leadership structure and the associated vision. In practice, this means the establishment of development committees around specific issues that meet regularly.

Once a community has formed its committees, it proceeds to an in-depth process of gathering its own information to serve as the basis for development. This includes compiling a history of the settlement, household enumeration, developing a profile of the residents and existing social and political organizations, determining current land ownership status, articulating the current community plan for development, understanding any municipal plans for developing the development, and rooting the strategy for future planning within the community. Further, mobilization for community savings begins. There is no one-size-fits-all method for savings. The only rule is an understanding of the importance of community capacity for financial resource generation and management, as a basis for sustainable and scalable plans for informal settlement upgrading.

Building partnerships with local government

At the same time that the ISN undertakes this deepening of community leadership in a given settlement, the settlements also mobilize to network at the city-wide scale. Just as individual communities strive to understand the issues that emerge from their particular context within a settlement, communities network in order to develop a common understanding of the issues that emerge at the city level.

Such a method for building capacity within and between communities therefore requires an understanding of the necessity of engagement with local authorities in order to enact change. The steps for building such a partnership are not exclusive from work at the intra / inter – community level, and often take place in tandem, given the pre-existing experience of the Alliance. We identify the relevant role players who have the political will and bureaucratic position within municipal government to make a difference regarding informal settlement upgrading. As relationships coalesce with these actors, we create a formal partnership with the municipality. This means agreeing on programs and budgets for both hard and soft aspects of the partnership. The first activity in a partnership is almost always city-wide informal settlement profiling, settlement-level enumeration and mapping associated with both activities. A common information base, collected by communities and certified by the municipality, is a necessary tool for joint planning. It also allows for the relationship between communities and the municipality to become more substantive. Again, like the strategy for mobilization within communities, the strategy for mobilizing the relationship with the municipality is about the “issues” that emerge from the lived experience of poverty. The information collected through profiling and enumeration allows the for the relationship to be built around a commonly accepted documentation of these issues.

When the rubber hits the road: implementing the partnership

Information in hand, the city-wide network and municipal officials can set about developing a common criteria for choosing informal settlements to upgrade. These can include: (a) desperate need of certain communities, (b) the extent to which community leadership is already organized to implement an upgrading project, and, (c) in particular, the extent to which communities are prepared to manage and contribute to the finances that are necessary for upgrading (eg. transparent and accountable savings schemes). This criteria can also be understood within the context of the municipalities own existing needs and skills (eg. priority settlements, scale, type of project). Together, communities and the municipality can

articulate and understand their own agendas, and find common ground to work together to begin implementing practical projects.

As the process to understand the discrepancies and commonalities between the agendas of communities and the municipality gets underway, work must begin. Communities and the municipality develop, in partnership, a mix of “quick wins” that can build trust and show real change for communities. At the same time, the Alliance is also geared towards challenging many of the assumptions that lie behind planning for the urban poor throughout cities in South Africa. Other projects that get chosen for implementation are difficult cases designed to influence the way the municipality operates so that its methods come closer to the planning priorities of communities. All the project types also influence communities. As projects move to implementation, all stakeholders in the partnership will face difficulties that they did not anticipate. Just as communities challenge the planning assumptions of municipalities, projects help build the capacity of communities to be leading participants in both settlement-level and city-level planning.

Keeping a record: learning, monitoring and evaluation

The effort to scale up a partnership-based, community-centered approach to informal settlement upgrading is impossible without transparency, accountability and learning. The Alliance is therefore dedicated to a consistent effort to document, monitor, and evaluate what happens at the project level, as well as at the city-wide level of partnerships and planning. The effort to scale up means identifying lessons learned, amplifying successes, and holding the agreements of partnership to account. Similarly the community-based processes are accountable. The Alliance is dedicated to drafting a code of conduct for community leaders, as well as other stakeholders, in order to ensure the transparency and strength of its work. At the same time, we are all too aware of the need for flexibility and innovation as the primary tool of scale. Systems that come without practical learning and experience are not implementable, nor capable of handling the scale that informal settlement communities are demanding, and that government at all levels is hoping to reach.

Implementation

What has been described above is the strategy that has been agreed among all the actors within the Alliance for making informal settlement upgrading the core emphasis of our work. What follows is a detailed set of internal institutional commitments to facilitate the implementation of this strategy. There are four basic categories of commitments made: (1) the budgeting processes, (2) the institutional / organizational unity of the Alliance, (3) an internal communication plan, and (4) types of documentation requires for both mobilization and monitoring work on informal settlement upgrading.

1. The budget

The Alliance has agreed that resources of the three primary NGOs (CORC, uTshani, and uDondolo) will be collapsed into one national budget. There will be one person responsible for overall oversight of regional programs. Concurrently, regional offices are to be established to ensure that Alliance partners meet regularly and determine a single budget and program for their

respective region. This office need not be a physical space. However it is imperative that all regions unite all Alliance partners under a single budget. Different parts of regional programs will receive funds through the specific budget lines of the respective NGOs. Still, the programs of each region must be unitary in terms of the way that they are developed, and the way that they are considered by the overall budget facilitator. Further, community-based Alliance partners will form their own unified financial management team to facilitate the alignment of budgets and programs.

It was agreed that a committee of actors within the Alliance will develop a draft Alliance Financial Policy to further elucidate this plan. It is due to be circulated by 28 February.

2. *Uniting the Alliance*

The Alliance partners resolved to formal steps to cement the unity of the Alliance. This is a unique family of community-based organizations and professional support. Hence, there is to be an established Terms of Reference and / or Memorandum of Understanding that explains the relationship between the community organizations, between the NGOs, and between the community organizations. This document should provide clarity as to how the Alliance makes an impact in changing the nature of community organization on the ground, while at the same time reacting to issues that emerge from the ground. The document herein is designed to serve as a blueprint, or even first draft of this MoU.

As opposed to separate regional structures of the various community-based partners of the Alliance, each regional will establish “regional coordinating committees” that represent all the partners. This is not meant to dissolve existing structures, such as ISN “executive committees,” but to add other Alliance partners and alter their function.

In order to facilitate consistent vision and strategy among all actors in the Alliance, an “Alliance Strategic Planning Committee” must be established. Similar bodies have existed in the past, but they have not met regularly. Once this body is constructed, meetings are to happen every 6 weeks. Facilitation of the meeting will rotate among the members of the committee in order to ensure active participation and ownership of this process.

The Alliance recognizes a need to build a wider base of leaders, especially at the community level, who are capable of developing and implementing such a vision. The community-based partners in the Alliance have therefore agreed to establish a “leadership support committee.” Through exchanges and exposure to Alliance programs, this committee will serve as an incubator for sustainable, critical, and mandated leadership.

3. *Communication and dialogue*

A consistent communication strategy is paramount for (a) ensuring a wide base of responsive and informed leadership and (b) ensuring focused action on the ground throughout the Alliance. Therefore, 2 people in each region are to be nominated as coordinators for communication for all Alliance partners. They will facilitate communication within the region, as well as between regions. There will also be regular meetings (eg. every 3-6 months) inclusive of all Alliance partners that go beyond the core “Alliance Strategic Planning Committee” discussed under point #2. These meetings

will ensure consistency of vision and action among a wide base of actors within the Alliance.

Finally, as a key element of the open architecture of the Alliance, regular open stakeholder forums are to be held in each region about challenges and ongoing action around informal settlement upgrading. The forums should be held on a regular basis, and can include community groups, academics, government officials, NGOs, and other interested parties. The goal is to spread learning with regards to existing projects, amplify challenges of projects, and maintain a dialogue around (a) conditions new and old in the development of cities and (b) the place of informal dwellers within such cities. This set of criteria can also be seen as the basic framework for learning, monitoring, and evaluation within the Alliance.

4. *Documentation*

Documentation of the Alliance's work is to take place at two levels. Professional work will be geared towards documenting every project so as to build a wider consensus around the community-led, partnership-based approach to upgrading at scale. This will be available on the Alliance website, and will form the basis of print and video publications to be distributed to a professional, political, academic, and lay audience. Further academic documentation of the political strategies and practical work of the Alliance will continue.

Community-based documentation is important to ensuring the active participation of community actors in the narrative of the Alliance's work. Professionals will work with community members to produce newspapers, videos, and audio programs under the soft brand of "uTshani Buyakhuluma" (*the grassroots are talking*). The Alliance will work to build links with community and corporate media to distribute and build the profile of the Alliance's work in community organization and informal settlement upgrading. Communities are encouraged to pursue documentation in their vernacular languages. They are subsequently encouraged to work on English translation at the regional level, potentially in partnership with the appointed regional communication coordinators.

Conclusion: *Campaigning in prose*

An old saying of formal politics is that candidates campaign in poetry during election time. Once in power they govern in prose. The Alliance, rooted in the informal grassroots, understands both sides of this coin. And then turns it on its head. The campaign described in this document is prosaic by design. Practical action on the ground, rather than soaring rhetoric, is what will awaken the nation.

Building communities, building partnerships with government, and upgrading settlements is a long, difficult process. But it is those who live with the current conditions of informal settlements today that are most prepared to lead the way to a different tomorrow. "Uskoteni," in partnership with our city governments, are now ready to upgrade lives, and build the nation that has long been our hope and dream.