



CITY OF EKURHULENI



A committee-based governance model to informal settlement reblocking

To address a growing housing backlog in line with its pro-poor agenda, in 2015 the City of Ekurhuleni launched its Reblocking Programme. The programme represents a multi-layered approach to the decongestion of informal settlements through the rearrangement of dwellings and the installation of basic infrastructures, in order to create a safe, serviceable and habitable environment. Central to the programme is the use of a committee-based governance model, through which the city and communities have become partners in reblocking. This story illustrates the benefits of such a model for the management of informal settlements, and how it has evolved from an interim short-term solution to a systemic solution for solving the challenges arising from urban informality.



THERE ARE

119 INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS:
67 ON MUNICIPAL LAND AND THE
REST ON PRIVATE LAND.



BY 2020,

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THE CITY OF EKURHULENI'S
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PER YEAR.



OVERVIEW

Like many other South Africa metropolitan municipalities, the City of Ekurhuleni faces a growing housing backlog. Insufficient affordable, formal housing options have resulted in low-intensity land invasions and the mushrooming of informal settlements. These settlements are often located on unsuitable sites, are congested and lack basic infrastructure and access to services, resulting in health, fire, security and socioeconomic risks. The City's long-term Growth and Development Strategy 2055 (GDS 2055) highlights its pro-poor agenda, which includes "the provision of liveable spaces where people have dignity" as one priority catalytic project. In line with this agenda, in October 2015, the City launched its Reblocking Programme, which involves the decongestion of informal settlements

through rearranging dwellings and installing basic infrastructures. The programme covers all of the city's wards, which contain a total of 119 informal settlements, of which 67 are located on municipal land and the rest on private land. By 2020, 35 informal settlements located on municipal land had undergone reblocking. The city's target is to upgrade 15 informal settlements per year.

A committee-based governance model

Reblocking activities cut across departmental boundaries and affect external stakeholders. Therefore, a prerequisite for successful reblocking is a multi-layered decision-making process that can gather and assimilate disparate information from many sources. The City of Ekurhuleni chose a committee-based governance model as the primary mechanism for distributing information, communication and decision-making for the project. This model consists of three core committee types, which are cascading structures through which information flows top-down and then bottom-up, from departments to executive functions to communities. The three committee types include:

- Technical-delivery committees (e.g., the Informal Settlement Task Team) are multidisciplinary teams whose focus is ensuring interdepartmental integrated and coordinated implementation.
- Executive-oversight committees (e.g., Infrastructure Services Technical Cluster Committee, Human Settlements Portfolio Committee, Special Mayoral Project Meeting) focus on oversight and unblocking bottlenecks.
- Grassroots committees (e.g., Ward Committee, Local Area Committee and community-based committees) ensure community participation and gather insight into on-the-ground conditions.

Reblocking in practice

In practice, reblocking is a four-stage process, involving pre-planning, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Although each reblocking project has the same structures and processes, the scale and complexity of the reblocking exercise and the level of stakeholder participation across the four different stages are determined by the characteristics of each informal settlement. This means that a universal, standard governance narrative for reblocking at the programmatic level does not exist. However, the committee model represents an important tool for galvanising community participation around a shared goal, where the City and communities become partners through co-creation and co-ownership of reblocking. Key benefits of reblocking through a committee-based approach include:

- The generation of baseline data from which to move households up the service delivery ladder, allowing the City to manage urban growth more proactively and strategically.
- The provision of access to resources (such as water, electricity and transport), representing a catalyst for more vibrant communities.
- The stabilisation of the City's funding because it reduces illegal connections, increases the demand for services and improves the City's ability to bill for services.

Post-implementation, the City's motivation for reblocking evolved from an interim short-term solution to a systemic solution for solving the challenges arising from urban informality. Currently, reblocking enjoys a high level of political support in the City, with the Mayor and Member of the Mayoral Committee (MMC) for Human Settlements regularly engaging with communities on substantive issues. In addition, the profile of reblocking was raised across departments by the leadership of Strategy and Planning and the creation of a monthly multi-disciplinary task team. As a result, the City is unified around making reblocking work and driving its implementation going forward. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic further added impetus for accelerating reblocking, especially de-densification and the delivery of better-quality, more accessible water and sanitation services.





Communities can enhance state capacity for service delivery

A key characteristic of the reblocking process is the high degree of community involvement at all stages. Communities are, for example, involved in all major design aspects, such as infrastructure, social services, and employment-generation programmes. In doing so, communities become active role players within local government, exerting their power while providing important on-the-ground information about their requirements. This contributes to bringing the City closer to the community and enhancing the City's capacity to provide informed and needs-based services and to plan based on more accurate data. Central to fostering this capacity going forward will be to continue to facilitate active community involvement, buy-in, co-ownership, agency and leadership; create a space for communities to be educated, consulted, empowered; and leverage community-based resources including existing social networks.

Importance of mutual trust and understanding for collaboration

The City has earned respect from stakeholders for its hard work and genuine intention to deliver on its pro-poor agenda by tackling a complex and challenging problem, so people can live in a more human and dignified manner. The city's participatory approach (treating communities as partners) has also helped to build trust with communities because it empowers communities to have a voice and play an active role in improving the quality of their lives. Taken together, the approach and delivery have strengthened the social compact between the city and communities, by creating a greater sense of accountability and credibility, because communities can see that the city's pro-poor agenda is not just words but rather action, and they can see the benefits. As the demand for reblocking increases, it will be important for the City to maintain these relationships and, by ensuring transparency and accountability and guaranteeing that informal settlement selection criteria is applied consistently and transparently, to avoid selection being politicised and protect reblocking from any partisan interests.



Importance of an effective political-administrative interface

The political-administrative interface is important, not only to ensure that the reblocking programme enjoys the priority it deserves in planning and budgeting processes, but for the city's political and administrative elements to work together to achieve the programme's objectives. Political role players have an important role in connecting with communities, to better understand the needs of communities through engaging with ward committees, to share information with communities regarding the objectives of reblocking and to determine how they will be involved in programme planning and implementation. Hence, working arrangements for reblocking depend on strong interdepartmental collaboration and political-administrative interface. In this regard, the MMC plays an important role in mobilising support from affected communities as well as through their councillors, so that the oversight and roll-out of the project is directed properly, while the ward councillor is central to bringing together different communities and resolving possible tensions among different neighbourhoods.



LEARNINGS

Working with the reality of informality requires ‘good enough’ and incremental processes

When reblocking was first implemented, formalised project management practices were not yet in place, making interdepartmental coordination difficult. However, the City moved ahead by incrementally implementing a ‘good enough’ planning and process, with a focus on a known end point rather than finalised micro-level planning procedures. This is a productive approach, as in practice working with urban informality is not a linear process but requires managing ambiguity and building partnerships with communities. Central to the success of this approach is good communication, coordination and systemisation processes that support working in an agile manner, together with an openness to ongoing reflection, learning and experimentation.

The potential of reblocking for facilitating wider socioeconomic development

The reblocking process assists the City in collecting data for informing service delivery; breaking down illegal practices associated with informal settlements (e.g., illegal electricity connections); and communicating the higher-level objectives associated with reblocking (e.g., social justice). Reblocking focuses on providing a basic service but could, for example, be used as a tool to improve socioeconomic options for communities by promoting informal markets. For instance, there is an opportunity to link reblocking and township economy interventions (e.g., roll-out of Wi-Fi) and to involve communities in areas with greater potential for skills transfer.

Fast-tracking local progress through stronger intergovernmental coordination

While reblocking focuses strongly on local cooperation it also includes elements of intergovernmental collaboration (local, provincial and national government), with all three government spheres working together to achieve their different objectives. Given the importance of spatial justice, together with reblocking’s shorter term gains, of more liveable conditions and enhanced dignity, calls have been made for stronger intergovernmental coordination around the practice of reblocking. Such coordination would support the fast-tracking of local progress on reblocking and associated benefits and learnings. It could also facilitate the application of this approach in other cities that are in need of short-term interventions to facilitate safer and more liveable neighbourhoods.

