

Participatory Design Won't Fix Unequal Southern African Cities

But We Should Still Do It, Just Better

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19.1 Introduction

This chapter draws from more than a decade of South African urban field-based spatial development practice. This includes a series of practice-oriented reflections that have been carefully documented alongside project collaborators, organisation peers and project stakeholders in Johannesburg during this period. This knowledge base has been supplemented by a set of focused interviews for a Leverhulme-funded grant project – a partnership of universities, local and abroad, community-based organisations (CBOs), civic entities and grass-roots partners (GDI, 2018) – conducted remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The chapter seeks to engage these data sets through a discursive analysis around the contemporary understanding of participative practice of spatial development. It includes interviews with actors involved in informal settlement upgrading (ISU) in one of the most unequal cities in the world, Johannesburg, South Africa.

This chapter argues that there is a nuanced and interpersonal gap between the perceived nature of participatory spatial development processes, and the realities of implementing and managing such concepts alongside the complex socio-political dynamics that are evident in a systemically unequal society such as South Africa. To structure this, the chapter begins with a broad theoretical starting point from which to locate the concepts of inclusion, participation and community via the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the South African literature around spatial development in cities. This literary base is then used to introduce a suite of methods and data sets drawn from a series of nuanced, grounded and reflective observations of socio-technical practice across South Africa. The chapter culminates in a set of summative thoughts and reflections on these experiences and the reviewed literature, leading towards suggestions and critical questions for the reader, in support of

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their own re-imaginative and reflective processes around urban planning practices in Southern Africa and beyond.

This practice-oriented (Fox, 2003) study aims to articulate and share important on-the-ground knowledge for those working in the ISU sector, as well as scholars who work around this topic. It seeks to bring the realities of working in the field to contemporary academia, while supporting those who refer to such literature and who work in the field, as they reimagine urban practice around planning in Africa and beyond. It asks readers to consider a more self-critical set of interpersonal and inter-scalar practices through a nuanced reading of these processes and their value in ISU. A key message lies in an observation that inclusive approaches are important in making an inclusive city across multiple scales. However, they are not simple processes, will not guarantee a successful project outcome, and require complex interpersonal readings of the contextual process to be conducted effectively – but it should still be done, just *better*¹ than currently.

19.1.1 *Inclusive Development for Sustainable City-Making*

In 2015, the United Nations put forward a global mandate to make human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (UN-Habitat, 2016). This mandate emerged from the Sustainable Development Goals and put focus on a specific aim, in SDG 11: Inclusive Cities and Communities, which highlighted the important role of urban settlement development processes. The wide range that the SDGs cover in terms of development can often be difficult to conceptualise in practice spaces, as figures and elements affect systems and infrastructures beyond what spatial development practitioners typically engage with. In this regard, cities offer an ideal scale of implementation to manage transformative efforts that can mediate high-level, regional planning with local, grass-roots constituencies (Revi et al., 2014). Through a *city's focus*,² the growing consciousness of climate change and the global rethink of resource use, it is important to recognise that the world population has changed from a majority rural state to an urban majority (UN-Habitat, 2016). By 2030, it is predicted that there will more than 5 billion urban dwellers globally; two-thirds of this growth are projected to take place in sub-Saharan-Africa (UN-Habitat, 2016). This urban shift highlights the scale of the challenge faced by city-makers in resources distribution for human settlement and the required city infrastructures (De Souza, 2011). SDG 11's sub-point 3 makes it clear that inclusionary approaches are a key concept for sustainable city-making (United Nations, 2019). In particular, the inclusionary aspects of *participation* around the implementation of city policies (McCann et al., 2013) lie at the heart of making the SDGs possible. In this regard, governments across the world are often expected to work with *communities* according to their operation protocols, while universities teach and espouse the importance of participative processes with users in built environment courses, and

¹ 'Better' has been carefully chosen as a broadly interpretable concept to allow for contextual interpretation based on the reader's location, positionality and intent.

² A lens through which we expand and interrogate ideas of the city beyond 'northern' framing of simple densities and built infrastructure (Bhan, 2019; Parnell & Pieterse, 2014).

non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as grass-roots/civil entities (Horn et al., 2018) advocate strongly for such approaches as the status quo for more resilient city-making practices.

While cities allow people to come together, mobilise and share resources in sustainable, and sometimes equitable, ways (Singh, 2018), they often exacerbate our societal injustices, particularly in the way cities tend to spatially manifest inequality in areas such as informal settlements (Huchzermeyer, 2011; Roy, 2005). These often reinforce endemic patterns of bias and prejudice across constructed socio-cultural divisions. This can be seen specifically in post-apartheid South African cities (Murray, 2011; Tissington, 2012b), particularly within the major cities, which still see similar configurations of spatial inequality and economic disadvantage 25 years after the technical and legal end of the apartheid system. These patterns of prejudice in city-making take form clearly in the daily acts of policy implementation, by-law enforcement (De Souza, 2011) and the social upholding of the 'rules' (Yiftachel, 2015). The values behind these 'rules' have deep roots in South Africa's colonial and apartheid history of urban development, which were fundamentally built on principles of spatial separation, based on race and ethnicity (Harrison et al., 2014; Matsipa, 2014; Parnell & Oldfield, 2014) and continue to demonstrate how interpersonal/inter-political ideological identification can shape cities decades after social or political reform. This contestation for access to the urban (the city) has been in place since before the system of apartheid (Harvey, 2003; Isandla Institute, 2011), and continues today in post-apartheid city growth, compounding economic class with race and citizenship (Gotz et al., 2014). The challenges of unemployment, lack of access to resources and inadequate systems of transport can be clearly seen in the patterns of racialised urban development (Everatt, 2018), decades later,³ with the country's larger cities, such as Johannesburg or Cape Town, continuing to hold some of the highest urban Gini coefficients in the world (SACN, 2016). It is important to note that, while informal settlements provide a very tangible example of spatial injustice, they only reveal a part of South African society affected by spatial inequality (Lévy, 2014; Murray, 2011) and should be seen in light of various interrelated effects of spatial inequality that include both urban and rural township back-yarding,⁴ densely occupied inner-city buildings, as well as the growing problem of suburban sprawl and similarly affected peri-urban areas.⁵

In response, inclusive approaches are not only seen as best practice to address such endemic inequality, and move towards effective city-making (Young & Allen, 2011), but in the face of gross social injustice – as described – such practices carry other important principles that are typically pushed by civil and academic actors in order to contribute to the national need for social as well as spatial justice (Isandla Institute, 2011; Rankin, 2010).

³ While these actions are not uniquely South African, a clear example of similar spatial urban actions can be seen in the US urban practice of Red-Lining – a racially prejudiced loaning system practised by banks, based on ethnicity and area as well as similar spatial practices between Israel and Palestine (Petti et al., 2013; Yiftachel & Huxley, 2000).

⁴ The renting of small housing units on an existing property. This typically is not done in a 'formal' manner in terms of construction, legality or arrangement.

⁵ In contrast, there are strong arguments that informal settlement locations and the opportunities provided are in fact symbols of an insurgent form of spatial justice (Manjeya et al., 2020).

While the concept of inclusionary processes in regard to sustainable city-making is not a silver bullet to address the legacy of spatial inequality in South Africa, it is seen to be pushed by trans-governmental groups, national government and civil entities as an essential means of engagement. On this point, it is important to note that the principles of inclusionary processes are not a 'nice-to-have' but are enshrined in South Africa's constitution, 'in the spirit of breaking from a past of exclusion and suppression' (Ntsime, 2004, p. 12), and have been written into the various procedures and mechanisms of the state since political freedom was achieved in 1994 (Tissington, 2012b; Zondo & Royston, 2016).⁶ Even South African national governmental departments have a record of being reconceptualised (SACN, 2014) and reframed to include inclusionary principles through the use of terminology such as *human settlements* instead of *housing* in their department titles, as well as policy terms of reference. But such reframing actions have seen little change on the ground in the practice of delivering housing, infrastructure and other support services that are actioned by the state, the commissioned professional practitioners and grass-roots leaders (Gorgens, 2017; SACN, 2014).

Although many national policies make provision for inclusionary processes (NUSP, 2013a, 2013b) and require documents such as socio-economic studies, social audits and 'meaningful engagement through community meetings', from this author's experience there appears to be very little space or value for these inclusionary practices within the on-the-ground actions by professional built environment entities or the government officials who oversee these processes. Many private sector built environment entities and government officials quickly write off such processes as wasteful of resources, ineffective and expensive (Botes & Van Dingie, 2000; Combrinck, 2015; Fieuw, 2014; Johannes & Botes, 1999). Instead, they employ a performative version of 'inclusion', resulting in participatory processes that are tokenistic, patronising or sometimes co-opted by more powerful forces for agendas that are counter to the intended beneficiaries' goals (Gorgens, 2017; Van Donk & Gorgens, 2012). Otherwise, these processes are performed with strong, well-meaning intentions, but do little to support local leaders or grass-roots practitioners towards a just allocation of urban resources or even access to the city at large – a crucial aspect of SDG 11's intent and principles (Valencia et al., 2019).

The inadequate living conditions in many informal settlements in South Africa stand today as some of the most tangible symptoms of spatial inequality (Everatt, 2018; SACN, 2016).⁷ In response, the focus of this chapter will be specifically on urban neighbourhoods of informal settlement; it will employ a working stakeholder breakdown (see Figure 19.1) to guide the research that will be unpacked in the next section. These categorisations are for the purpose of examining informal settlement upgrading in Johannesburg; it is employed as a working framework to discuss the spatial dynamics of the processes in this study (Table 19.1).

⁶ This period has seen both national and local governmental institutions developing fairly progressive urban policies (Fieuw, 2014; Klug & Vawda, 2009) that include the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and Breaking New Ground (BNG) as well as the National Development Plan (NDP). However, they have struggled to effectively implement these mechanisms on the ground (Huchzermeyer, 2011; Pithouse, 2009).

⁷ It must be noted that income level and housing typology are not fixed indicators of socio-economic status (Tissington, 2012a).

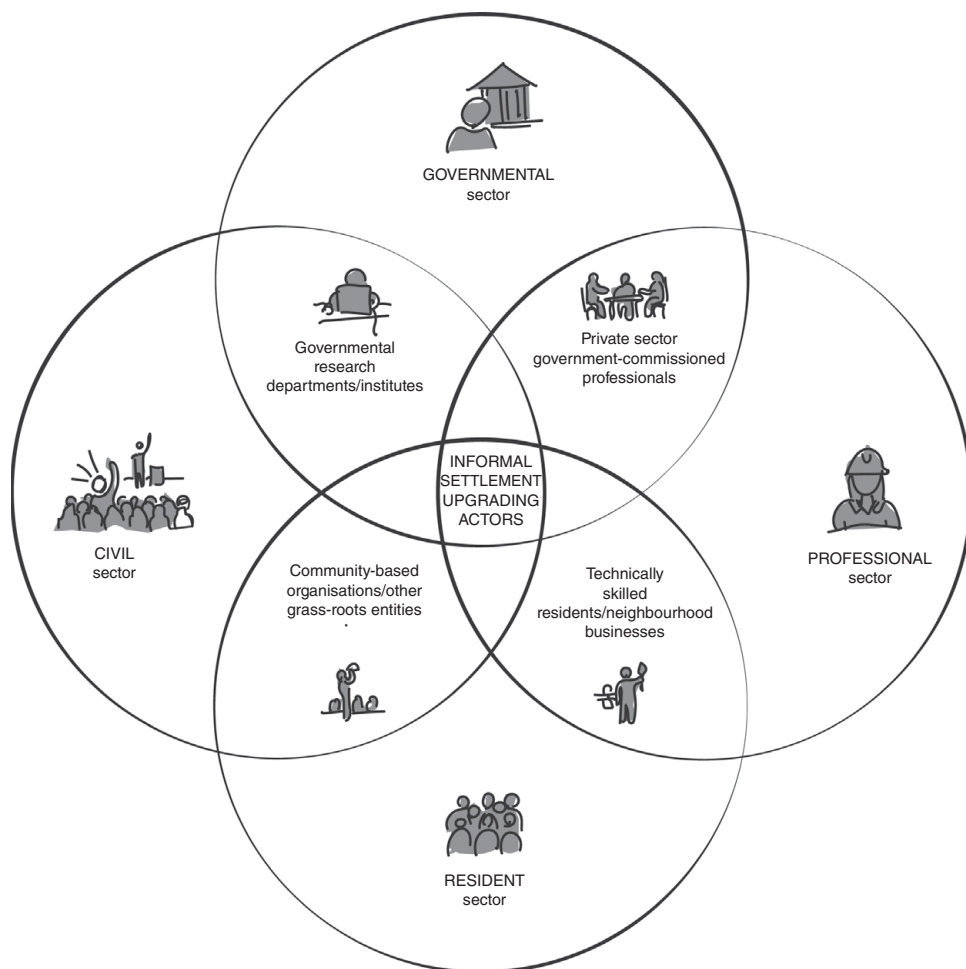


Figure 19.1 Working description of actors involved in ISU South Africa

Source: Author.

19.1.2 Within Participation

The use and practice of *participation*, a term employed in contemporary development practice since the 1970s (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), has seen much local critique with regard to informal settlement development in South Africa (Ballard, 2008; Brown-Luthango, 2013; Oldfield, 2008), and exploration among a global spectrum of scholars and practitioners (Dickinson et al., 1991; Hamdi & Goethert, 1997). While there are many definitions to draw from, participation in community development is defined by the World Bank as: 'A process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources which affect them. Participation can take different forms, ranging from information sharing and consultation methods, to mechanisms for collaboration and empowerment that give stakeholders more influence and control' (Rietbergen-McCracken & Naraya, 1998, p. 17).

Table 19.1 *Working typologies of ISU actor breakdown*

<p>Private sector groups E.g., professional planners, engineers, architects, research institutes etc.</p>	<p>These would be companies or individuals that are trained in the built environment disciplines that have been commissioned or hired by a group to provide a 'professional' service to an ISU project.</p>
<p>Government groups E.g., national, provincial, or city departments, infrastructure or housing focused entities, etc.</p>	<p>These would officials or representatives working for local, provincial or national government as either ward councillors, ministers or departmental representatives overseeing an ISU project.</p>
<p>Civil groups E.g., NGOs, academics/scholars, CBOs, rights collectives etc.</p>	<p>This would include CBOs and NGOs that work towards a civil aim through ISU projects. These groups would typically be funded outside of government lines and provide technical or social support to residents of informal settlement neighbourhoods.</p>
<p>Resident 'community' groups E.g., grass-roots leaders, block communities, policing/business forums, residents etc.</p>	<p>These would be those living in informal settlements and includes local businesses, social groups and other neighbourhood associations This group could be represented by a locally elected group.</p>

Source: Author.

The term is often used in an unhelpfully broad nature but covers the principles of inclusion, engagement, discussion and, most importantly, action. The benefits of participatory actions are well-documented and link closely to how the United Nations sees SDG 11 being achieved; they are said to work very well in times of either stability or crisis (Hamdi, 2014; Figure 19.2).

A definitive description of participatory processes in South Africa in terms of ISU in the built environment remains difficult to articulate (Ballard, 2008), as what encompasses participation in the field often seems to conflate consultation, discussion, capacitation, empowerment and other nuances of engagement – and these differ from what the term denotes when used in practice. Through this implementational murkiness, any engagement can qualify as participatory – as long as one can prove it happened in some form.⁸ But participation beyond these abstract concepts, and sometimes reductive images, carries important values of empathy, relational intimacy and grounded adaptability that allow not only technical processes to work more efficiently, in terms of human capital (Kaza, 2006), but also build capacities through the people worked with (Hamdi, 2010). This approach of humanising participation is understood as 'Responsibility with authority in partnership with other stakeholders' (Hamdi, 2014, p. 4). This is an important point, as with rights come responsibilities, a crucial aspect regarding the sustainability of the long-term benefits of participatory actions beyond a project timeline. Hamdi (2014) offers two critical

⁸ Often done through the use and publication of all too stereotypical imagery of people pointing at maps, gesturing at large crowds and looking contemplative over printed documentation.

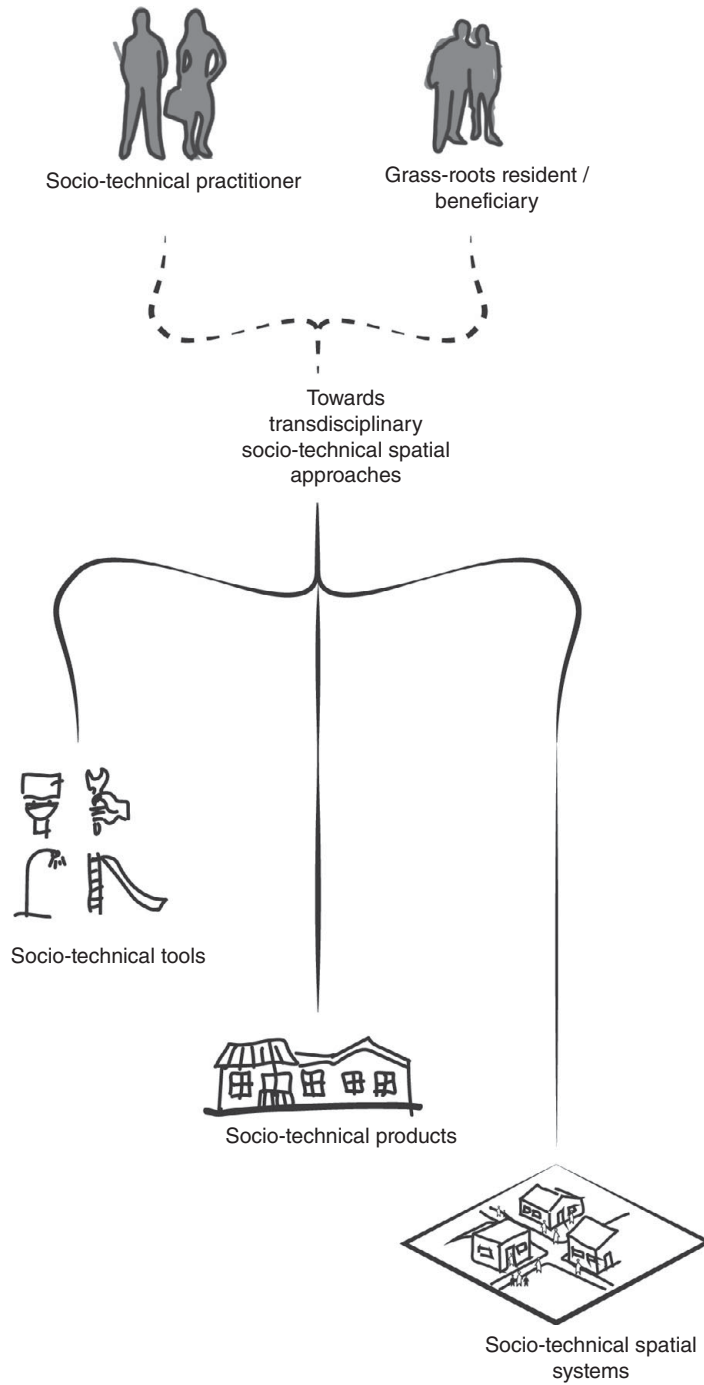


Figure 19.2 A model of scales of engagement for socio-technical participation
Source: Author.

Table 19.2 *Guiding question versus critical actions*

Guiding question	Related critical action
Who participates?	Conduct ground-level work to find out who the people are
How do they communicate and make decisions?	Do work to understand and develop communication methods
What is the connection between their conclusions and opinions, on one hand, and public policy and action, on the other?	Find out and share what the link between small-scale input and larger scale out will be

Source: Author based on Isandla Institute and Görgens (2013).

questions to be asked before acting in such circumstances: Who initiates, and who benefits from participatory actions? This provocation alludes to the often unspoken issues behind the power dynamics within systems of engagement that are often the most difficult to build and maintain in ISU projects, as discussed in depth by Rigon and Broto (2021). A working table has been developed in support of these questions (see Table 19.2).

These questions allude to the typically notable absence of ‘citizen power’⁹ across South African ISU projects, an observation publicly decried by local practice bodies such as Development Action Group (DAG), Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI) and Planact (Isandla Institute & Görgens, 2013, p. 41). From a more global perspective, this point can be expanded through Turner and Ward’s (1991) statement that: ‘Participation does not necessarily imply self-help home building by undernourished and over-worked people without credit, with inadequate tools and poor materials . . . The central issue is that of control and power to decide’ (Turner & Ward, 1991, p. 23). Local government entities across South Africa have struggled with these issues of power and control when implementing ISU programmes¹⁰ on the ground, as the complexity of these factors in each context play out in very different and dynamic ways, as has been seen in the City of Cape Town’s engagement with ISU processes (Amin & Cirolia, 2018). The South African organisation the Isandla Institute and Görgens (2013) offers three important framing questions on the various types of citizen power in the form of participation (see Table 19.2). In other words, participation means very little if there is no space for the actions to be implemented, if there are no meaningful feedback structures for those in power or if the actions have not been understood (Cirolia & Scheba, 2019). Yiftachel (2015) speaks on this condition, describing the difficulty of ‘practising a right’ if there is no capacity to exercise this claim. This point not only applies to upgrading processes but is evident in aspects of participatory research and the often missing link between action and understanding by scholars in the field (Miraftab, 2003).

⁹ A key concept outlined in Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation (Arnstein, 1969).

¹⁰ Local civil groups have suggested tools such as ‘Social Compacts’ (Fieuw, 2014; PlanAct, 2017) as a means of building more structured relationships and accountability across stakeholder groups, but this has yet to be meaningfully adopted.

The issue of control remains an underlying variable in ISU projects in South Africa, particularly in regard to infrastructure allocation, maintenance and decision-making in policy implementation (Huchzermeyer, 2009; Matlala & Bénit-Gbaffou, 2012), and when the policy structures allow for staged and meaningful participation (NUSP, 2013a) between residents, professionals and government officials. Local scholars (Ballard, 2012, 2015; Brown-Luthango, 2013; Huchzermeyer, 2010) describe how even though government tenders call for participation in the project structuring of the upgrading of informal neighbourhoods,¹¹ a significant amount of the recognition of inclusionary processes and broad-based emphasis on ensuring meaningful participation in the sector still remains fundamentally missing from built environment projects as a whole. Among these various underlying challenges in ideologies of participation, particularly in a context that remains so socially and spatially divided, a recurring issue discussed by field practitioners lies in how difficult it is to measure meaningful participation and, as a result, to scale up and reinforce these values across the sector.

19.1.3 Beyond Community

The definitions around the qualifications and use of the term 'community' are a difficult topic to broach in the ISU sector, as the term can be used by different stakeholders at various points in a development process for different ends, depending on the context. Hamdi (2014) describes multiple simultaneous ideas of community, such as communities of place, communities of interest, communities of practice and communities of culture. This introduces an important concept of nuance around the terms used in the upgrading of informal settlements, while planning scholars tend to default to the Eichler and Kaplan (1970, p. 67) definition of community as 'a group of people sharing a common interest, history, or place' Critics in the field challenge the broad, non-critical use of the term 'community' (Guijt & Shah, 1999), arguing that the simplistic understanding of 'community' as a homogenous, static and harmonious entity, where all involved share the same interests and values, is short-sighted and often hides important power relations and biases of developmental practitioners and civil groups involved in upgrading work (Rigon & Broto, 2021, p. 5). While it may seem a semantic argument, these hidden biases can be very dangerous when the line between life and death for more vulnerable groups involved with development is determined by these understandings and outcomes: 'When defining community in regards to informal settlement development, it is important to note that "the community" constitutes a wide range of interest groups, such as individuals, households, organised groups and leaders, all claiming to represent communal interests' (Johannes & Botes, 1999, p. 15). In the author's experience, who is framed as 'community' in ISU projects very often benefits the more powerful actors in the project and this seemingly inclusive term is used to practise often non-inclusive acts (see Figure 19.3).

¹¹ Even though the Upgrading Informal Settlement Programme (UISP) has a fiscal allocation of 3% (NUSP, 2013a) of project budget to this role.

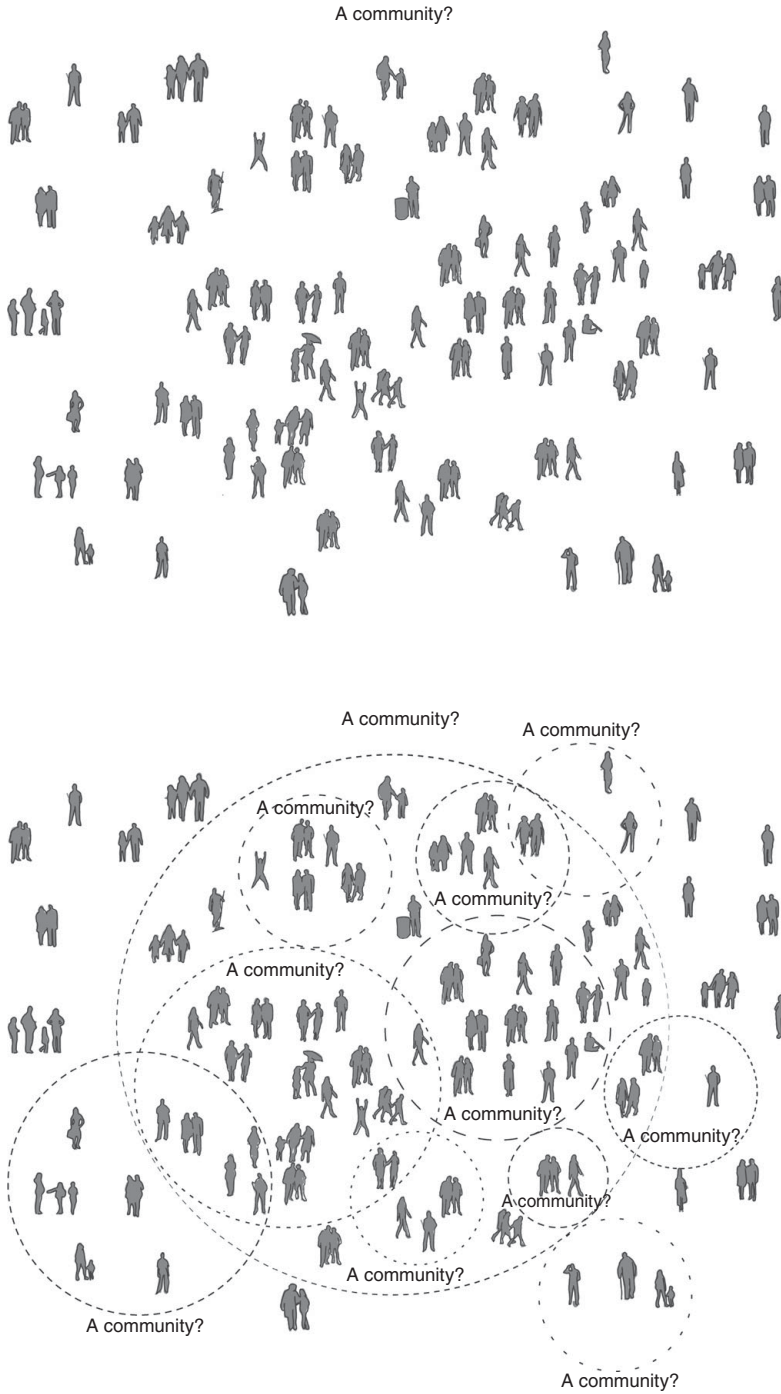


Figure 19.3 The community versus the communities

Source: Author.

Challenging the use of the term 'community' is echoed by many scholars across this sector (Chambers, 2017; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Hamdi, 2013); it remains a critical point often overlooked by private sector and governmental actors in upgrading projects in South Africa, as they often subscribe to the stereotypical view that informal settlement residents are 'simple, homogeneous, harmonious, durable and relatively autonomous' (Gaigher, 1992, p. 22). The danger in this point lies in *not* questioning other actors' framing of the term regarding spatial development in ISU work. These murky perspectives and misinformative practices around the term 'community' is particularly unhelpful to private sector professionals and government officials in the ISU sector, as it is often code for 'poor South Africans', used by politicians and more privileged actors in the field. In addition, it limits the scope of what development projects allow for, by essentialising the capability of those it aims to define. In some cases, the term implicitly excludes non-qualifiers¹² (Huchzermeyer, 2010, 2016) and ignores cultural, gender and nationality, as well as the religious dynamics of South African informal settlement neighbourhoods (see Figure 19.4).

The use of the term 'community' by the private sector, practitioners, politicians and government officials often results in myopic perspectives on the needs of complex groups of people. These stakeholders divide space into simplistic interventions such as 'community centres' or 'skills development centres' that offer generic and often reductive support – but which fulfil a political or corporate visual of support (Van Der Walt & De Treveau, 2022). The projects that are often forced upon informal settlement neighbourhood leaders or proposed by government entities or private sector professionals echo this shallow understanding (Miraftab, 2003), and, as a result, do not serve those they aim to assist as they respond to a 'lowest common denominator' solution, as pointed out by Hamdi (2010) in his reflection on site visits to similar centres: 'We have learnt that belonging is not just about location but about meaning and association – the kinds that offer multiplicity of opportunity for social exchange' (Hamdi, 2010, p. 32). This issue has also been witnessed by the author in his own teaching and practice in this sector (see Figure 19.4).

These reductive views on people and place by private sector professionals and government officials (and sometimes NGOs) have the unaccounted cost of limiting creativity and innovation for strategies of development and reducing the inherent agency that often exists at grass-roots level in South African informal settlement neighbourhoods (Pieterse & Van Donk, 2014; Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2010). This same reduced understanding of inter-resident complexity often disallows residents and CBOs their own agency in exercising their capacity to act and be involved in such processes. This is because they minimise the voices of locally elected leaders and social groups that are actively working, as described by Rigon and Broto (2021) through their concept of intersectionality. It is important to recognise how people on the ground, residents and other grass-roots actors, use the idea of community to mobilise and push back against the state and other dominant forces in the built environment, as often these stakeholders have the most to lose through the misappropriation of this term. This agency is often evident in the social support systems

¹² Typically non-South African citizens fit into this criteria, but this also includes South Africans who do not meet the income qualification (Klug & Vawda, 2009).

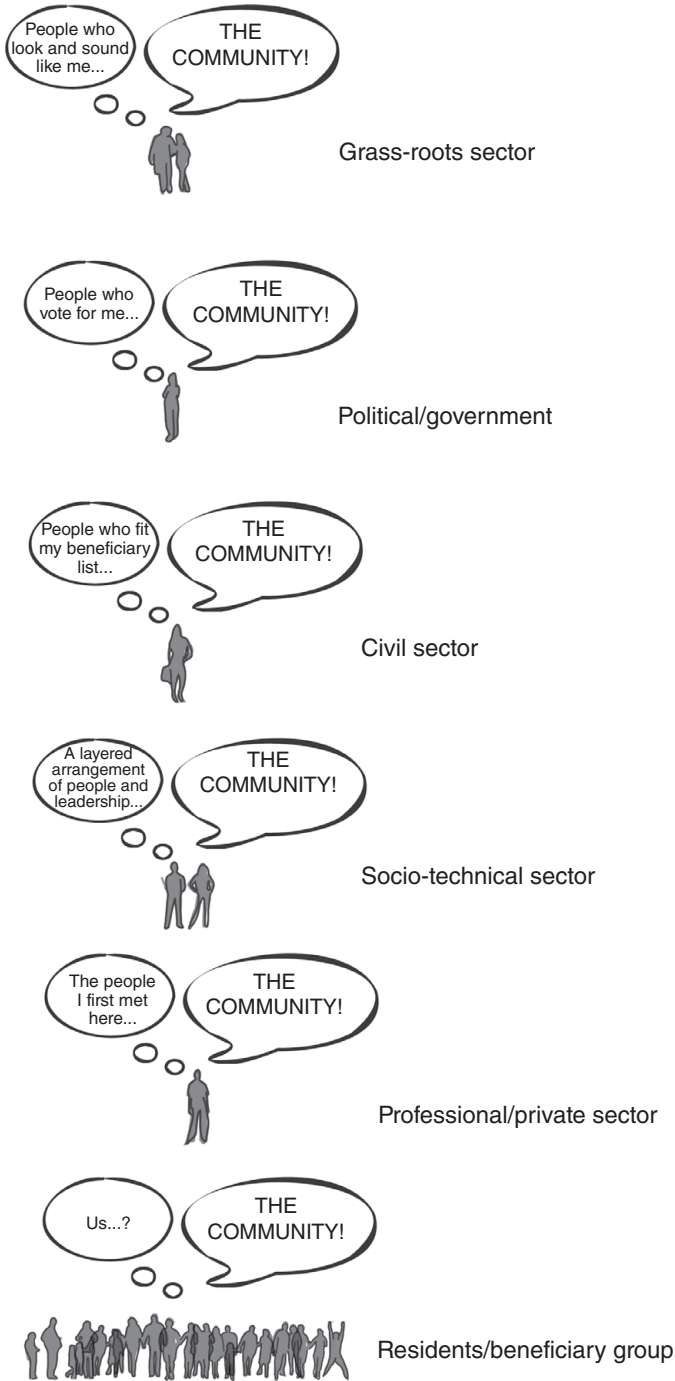


Figure 19.4 Benefit/exclusion of 'community' framing in ISU sector
Source: Author.

Table 19.3 *Benefit/exclusion of 'community' framing in ISU*

Action of defining term	Potential result
Residents and leaders of an informal settlement looking to build solidarity and cohesion	The residents could be excluding unwanted residents in their understanding.
Government officials looking to quantify a beneficiary list	Government officials could be excluding non-qualifiers.
Private sector professionals looking to quantify a user list	The private sector practitioner could be essentialising the complexity of a diverse group of people.
Politicians looking to build power in a voting district	The politician could be excluding non-party members in their definition.
Civil sector groups looking to build networks across disparate groups of residents	The civil sector groups could be reducing the hierarchy of needs to their own agenda.

Source: Author.

that exist within informal settlement neighbourhoods between various small-scale businesses, leadership structures, cultural collectives and other social groups that require a deeper inspection (i.e., meaningful participation and engagement). The difficulty that many support actors find is that these groups are often not politically or socially neutral, and supporting such systems places the supporting entity in an interpersonally 'biased' position. The perpetuation of a reductive and romantic view of what community should be is dangerous to the success of ISU projects, as these undeclared biases can undermine the existing structures and result in a decline in social cohesion or disrupt the power dynamics in ways that could make marginalised groups more vulnerable (Table 19.3).

This multiplicity of understanding and use does not make the term completely unhelpful, but rather calls into practice a more active and intersectional criticality when using the term in the field. International practitioners take on this multiplicity in their written work (Rigon & Broto 2021, pp. 5–9), describing how 'communities' are not necessarily always organised and cohesive and sometimes lack a visible, or Western-framed, 'sense of community' and 'social identity' that professional or government entities are trained to see (Hamdi & Goethert, 1997). They qualify this by explaining that for participatory processes to work, it is not a requirement to have an already well-organised community from the start of a project. But that a sense of community can be achieved during the course of the work, which 'can also be one of the objectives of including community participation in development projects' (Hamdi & Goethert, 1997, p. 67). This term is deeply value laden and typically carries multiple readings, which should be seen when engaging in such initiatives; but it should be proactively questioned by all involved regarding resource allocation and decision-making processes.¹³ Hamdi (2014) further suggests that when working with

¹³ The critique offered here does not deny that 'communities' exist in South African informal settlement neighbourhoods, but rather that the use of the term is often not questioned nor challenged – more often than not there are many 'communities' and systems that make up informal settlement neighbourhood structures.

‘communities’ we need to question ideas of place interest, practice and culture and look more into the culture of decision-making, the kinds of actors and the existing types of organisations and hierarchies, but importantly, among the stakeholder groups, there needs to be some form of ownership of the problems as well as the solutions – which in the context of South African ISU has been a difficult condition to foster and maintain.

19.2 Data and Methods

While the scope of this study cannot heed the missing voices of the grass-roots practitioners and residents (or the governmental sector), it will offer a set of perspectives based on the author’s experience in the academic, private sector and civil practitioner spaces with small moments of engagement with the above-mentioned groups. These breakdowns are drawn from Figure 19.1; they are used as a means of contextualising the interviewees, and not to offer a holistic definition of these complex sectors. The study also employs methods of reflective practice as a means of drawing from the field and connecting lived experience to contemporary knowledge production (Agee, 2009).

Since 2018, the author and colleagues at Ito1¹⁴ have been conducting such reflective exercises to understand the work that has been done by the organisation (Ito1, 2019; Alvesson & Sköldbeg, 2000). This moment of reflection comes after more than 10 years of field experience in Johannesburg’s ISU processes, while holding various academic and research positions at the Universities of Johannesburg and Pretoria in the departments of architecture. While the author has been trained as an architect, the nature of the work described in this chapter is aligned to a more transdisciplinary means in practice and better understood as socio-technical spatial design. Socio-technical spatial design speaks to the blended and trans-disciplinary practice of developmental support that engages simultaneously with both the social and technical dimensions of a group of people (Amin & Thrift, 2016; Luna & Bunge, 2000; Mumford, 1996).¹⁵ To this end, to draw from their experiences in the sector, a set of interview questions was shared with the network of practitioners involved in the Leverhulme Project (GDI, 2018). This led to a process of reflection, followed by reflection-in-action on selected quotes from the author’s experience in the field (Schön, 1983). A set of interview questions was developed for the study and sent via digital means¹⁶ to a sample group of practitioners who were involved in ISU across Johannesburg and who are linked to the Leverhulme Project.¹⁷ These groups were ‘broken down’ into contextual groupings (as indicated in Figure 19.1) and described in detail. The sample consisted of over 50 different individuals who were involved in various aspects of

¹⁴ A design-based social enterprise that has worked to address systemic spatial inequality in South Africa since 2010 (Ito1, 2019).

¹⁵ Socio-technical support in the built environment speaks to an approach that blends concepts and approaches of sociological disciplines with the technical expertise of built environment practitioners, in order to better understand and respond to the physical built environment, which is fundamentally interlinked with the people who regulate, design, construct and inhabit it. Although traditional design processes are inherently socio-technical, there is an endemic lack of focus or care in regard to the sociological side of contemporary design training and practice.

¹⁶ WhatsApp was used to elicit either a voice-note or written response, due to the limitations of the COVID-19 lockdown. Interviewees were encouraged not to prioritise this work, but rather to respond when commuting or between their tasks.

¹⁷ www.gdi.manchester.ac.uk/research/groups/global-urban-futures/scaling-up-participation-in-urban-planning

the project; this covered a range of roles that included government officials, civil practitioners, resident leaders of informal settlements as well as community-based organisation members. The digital technique was crucial due to the limited opportunities; practitioners had to respond to formal interviews between their work, plus lockdowns were imposed during COVID-19. These collections of interviews were analysed through further reflective exercises by the author and organisation colleagues to draw out pertinent observations and quotes to formulate a set of guidelines and principles that could support future practitioners in the field of ISU in South Africa, and possibly abroad. The summary statements include reflections from the author's work, conducted internally at Ito1 between 2012 and 2018 (Ito1, 2019). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, the methods for gathering information were applied digitally through a co-developed method that employed WhatsApp voice-notes.

19.2.1 Research: Reflection and Suggestions

In the field of ISU, there is a well-established academic discourse on *what* urban scholars discuss and publish, but in regard to practice-led studies, there is a distinct gap in the literature on *how* researchers and practitioners can apply these concepts in the field (Tuurnas, 2016; Winkler, 2013). There is even less access to perspectives and reflections from practitioners and civic leaders who have been working in ISU over the last 20 years, regarding actioning their experience in the academic sector.

19.2.2 Part 1: Working with Private Sector, Civil Society and Government Groups

[P]ersonally, I'm pretty militant about treating beneficiaries as clients and hope to achieve fully driven project from a 'beneficiary' level where decisions are not merely communicated or made in consultation but rather made as a collective where all stakeholders are privy to all and any information informing decisions.

*Civil sector practitioner*¹⁸

Beyond the fact that South Africa has 11 officially recognised languages (in addition to the multiple languages used in the cities), the language practice of development processes is a difficult path to walk. There is a constant and important adaptation of terms, words and concepts that are being introduced into the development sector and which require recognition in this work. Many terms currently in use reinforce unhelpful power dynamics and concepts of development practice. The challenges of externalising these lessons in the field become even more complex. Whether acknowledged or not, there is a multitude of value sets fighting for prioritisation in development processes through the actors in the field. This complexity requires recognition and patience.

¹⁸ Local social enterprise leader, WhatsApp interview.

[E]mbrace the process. Try to maximise the benefit of knowing what the community needs and communicate what the municipality has planned and is delivering.

*Governmental practitioner*¹⁹

It has been observed that ‘aesthetic engagement’²⁰ occurs in the South African context of ISU. Photos of public meetings, community halls, churches and creches filled with residents pointing at large maps, models or sticky notes portray strong visual imagery of participation and can easily project a false sense of inclusion. While in some cases the attempts may be genuine, they lack the rigour and follow-through required to be effective. The author has witnessed many projects where private sector and governmental entities use this ‘aesthetics of engagement’ to push forward solutions that benefit these actors. These processes require countless hours of hard-earned trust-building and shared language development between a mix of actors that is difficult to capture and easy to lose if not maintained responsibly – particularly when it is much easier to secure a ‘happy letter’²¹ from someone who appears to be a resident of such an area. Participatory processes should be conducted with a sense of responsibility and structured transparently to allow for rigorous external evaluation.

[T]ruly participative processes should start with huge participation energy and as ownership become stronger the effort should be relinquished as responsibility moves over – in theory. This does mean participation with financiers/government/donors might need more work to allow capacity and ownership to be let go.

*Civil sector practitioner*²²

The manner in which these values are recognised, but collectively prioritised, is seen, by the author, as one of the biggest difficulties in multi-stakeholder projects, as these underlying beliefs and value projections onto the process or product are often hidden below the surface of many disagreements. Unfortunately, the stakeholder with the strongest position often is the ‘value-victor’ in these confrontations and strong participation or inclusion of the weaker members, typically residents, is damaged as a result (Rankin, 2010). The author’s involvement as co-founder and co-director in Ito1 since 2010 has revealed the difficulty in balancing one’s own positionality in the dynamic field of post-apartheid spatial development practice. What has emerged as a valuable lesson in this study lies in the observation that the work required to develop an effective means of inclusion in the ISU process is never-ending and requires constant reflection, engagement with those involved, and the adoption of what appears to have been working. This type of work requires practitioners to act ‘responsibly’ and develop their own contextually appropriate ways of including multiple stakeholders and their values into their project processes.

¹⁹ Local ward councillor, WhatsApp interview – Denver, Johannesburg.

²⁰ A term used in the field to describe performative participant processes that are shallow and tokenistic.

²¹ A term used in Johannesburg to describe a letter signed by a ‘community member’ who states they are happy with the engagement process and the outcomes of the technical process.

²² Local NGO leader, WhatsApp interview.

[E]very communities' needs are important, yet budget is limited. Having the same issues raised each year and appealing to the patience of residents who live under some severe circumstances requires stamina to keep on pushing for budget.

*Government practitioner*²³

In ISU projects, participatory processes require substantial resources of time, energy and buy-in by actors. There is often an assumption that residents' involvement and investment in the resources for a development project is a given – with very little recognition for what these resources cost those already living in spatially or economically vulnerable positions. Many informal settlement residents and other grass-roots groups have been working for decades on their development goals and are often consumed by 'engagement fatigue' due to countless support entities. A recognition of this condition has been seen in ISU projects across South Africa, in many cases to the detriment and sometimes blame of the resident groups themselves for not being 'cooperative' or 'willing' to be engaged by government or private sector entities (Gorgens, 2017).

19.2.3 Part 2: Working with Residential and Grass-Roots Practitioners/CBOs

The nature of CBOs in this sector can be difficult to define but are considered to typically operate outside the mandate of NGOs, government entities and private sector professionals. They can be made up of different formations of leaders, social interest groups, block committees, small local businesses and residents. The forces that drive this aspect of ISU is seen to fit under the broad idea of grass-roots movements or practices, which are usually driven by efforts of social mobilisation around shared interests and needs (Brown-Luthango, 2013; Mitlin, 2008). This scale of operation can often be conducted by individuals or groups that carry multiple positions simultaneously (i.e., someone can simultaneously be a community leader, CBO leader, small-scale business owner and resident); thus, the idea of viewing a 'community' as a homogenous unit within a spatial or ethnic designation is dangerous and unhelpful in development processes (Rigon & Broto, 2021). The same concern of overlapping interests can be applied to the idea of community-based organisations operating in South Africa's ISU sector. While CBOs typically work to ensure residents' needs and rights, their presence in projects does not guarantee strong participation; however, their lack of presence is a strong sign that it is not taking place.

[B]y participating by doing the participation, by engagement, by doing the participated engagement, they – obviously, that programme becomes their programme and the understanding and everything it becomes theirs. Yeah, to them and they can even defend that to whatever programme that we they were participating in.

*Grass-roots practitioner*²⁴

²³ Local ward councillor, WhatsApp interview – Denver, Johannesburg.

²⁴ Informal settlement leader/grass-roots practitioner, WhatsApp interview.

Grass-roots entities occupy a crucial proximity to the challenges of ISU that governmental and private sector actors have traditionally struggled to meaningfully incorporate into the development process. The latent energy of the people these projects serve is a difficult force for these actors to engage with and can be seen in the powerful service-delivery protests that frequently emerge across South Africa. The aforementioned civil, private and governmental practitioner entities typically have a limited role in the social mobilisation of ISU processes. It is well-documented that when people on the ground are (truly) empowered, development projects are much more successful (Gaventa & Tandon, 2010; Mitlin, 2008). Building and sustaining grass-roots mobilisation requires skills, experience and positions that these entities are not able to perform – nor should they.

The advice that I can give anyone who wants to do these processes is that it must be grounded, he or she must be grounded. Make sure that the processes are done with the communities are for the communities and the communities must feel they own them.

*Grass-roots practitioner*²⁵

While participatory and developmental work can be done through various physical and digital platforms, in regard to ISU projects, the amount of time required can be difficult to justify and quantify in projects – particularly longer-term projects and when private sector professionals typically charge by the hour. The balance of physical presence on site versus closed meetings is an ongoing challenge in this sector. The embodied agency and experience of being in the field changes the nature of any project and cannot be replaced with only desktop studies, social media audits or the magnitude of reports produced by consultants in projects. The physical presence of practitioners in projects builds the accountability of processes and forces those wielding more power to face the reality of their decisions and project detailing. This cannot be a one-off; it needs structured introductions, a sustained presence and responsible departure from project and residents.

Building trust with the communities who have lost hope under the living conditions they find themselves in. Having a feeling that the judgements that were passed by the courts doesn't favour them or are being ignored or undermined by the authorities.

*Grass-roots practitioner*²⁶

The reiterative action of building, maintaining and rebuilding trust, when circumstances degrade it, is a vital principle in ISU projects. Particularly in a sector where faith in governmental support systems has been eroded by decades of false promises, let-downs and allegations of corruption, the consistent, iterative nature of participatory processes is crucial. The role which grass-roots entities play in ISU in South Africa is one of the most undervalued aspects of the sector. Such groups are often blamed for the 'failure' of projects and treated with disdain by private sector practitioners and government entities. But

²⁵ Local CBO leader, WhatsApp interview.

²⁶ Local CBO organisation leader, WhatsApp interview

projects that have successfully built trust, demonstrated commitment to inclusion and found ways of working with CBOs have seen much stronger output processes (Cirolia et al., 2017).

19.2.4 Part 3: Observation and Practice-Oriented Suggestions

Based on the interviews, reflections, observations and discussions conducted by 1to1 during this reflective period, the author identified four key areas that are recommended for observation and critical action in the South African ISU process (Table 19.4).

19.3 Participative Design Won't Fix Informal Settlements: But We Should Still Do It, Just *Better*

The systemic issues that perpetuate spatial inequality in our cities and the symptomatic results, such as informal settlements, are of course far more complex than simply a lack of inclusion with regard to urban planning. This chapter acknowledges that participation alone cannot solve the wicked and interrelated issues around spatial inequality, but inclusionary practices are one of the areas of implementation that can be improved in order *not* to make things any worse as we continue to reimagine urban development in our cities across the continent.

It is important to note that the author does not see or suggest that participative processes offer a panacea for the complex spatial conditions of post-apartheid South African ISU, but rather it is an approach that allows for maximum inclusion (Botes & Dingie, 2000). This is in alignment with SDG 11's recommendations, namely for as many stakeholder groups as possible to be involved in order to contribute towards building sustainable cities, while addressing important aspects of social injustice (Fainstein, 1997). The lack of inclusion often comes at the cost of important interpersonal nuance for informal settlement residents' aspirations and their vital contribution to development processes. Instead, private sector professionals (often supported by both political and government positions), drive forward a simplified and reductive approach to an incredibly human process of spatial development and, when they 'fail', even blame the very people they are supposed to be supporting (Fieuw, 2014) – in contrast, not celebrating the many small-scale 'victories' of self-governance and self-infrastructure provided by such groups. On this point, Miraftab (2009) notes that the often unfulfilled promises of participatory planning typically emerge from a system that only values variables such as time, money and product, and 'serves as an alibi for elitist, private-sector-driven decisions' (Miraftab, 2003, p. 277). This is evident in the actions surrounding the implementation of projects in the Johannesburg ISU sector that are mostly structured around the nature of governmental technical delivery (Huchzermeyer, 2009) and backed by the private sector construction industry. These include tendering process mechanisms (Klug & Vawda, 2009), national building regulations and the capacities of local government officials to manage and undertake such processes (Zondo & Royston, 2016). In addition, these same principles find their way into the disciplinary

Table 19.4 *Didactic summary for ISU practice*

<p>1. <i>Participative actions and 'community' framings should be recognised as 'complex', not in a way that they are not manageable or possible to work with, but in a manner that allows for nuance and particularity for each project.</i></p>	<p>a. This complexity should be recognised as a way of building transparency into the processes through a co-developed 'language' of participation for each project.</p> <p>b. The co-developed language can allow space for these processes to act as important multi-directional translators of stakeholder's needs throughout the whole process.</p>
<p>2. <i>Participative actions and 'community' framings should not be seen as one-off acts, but rather as a broader approach to all spatial development processes, with design and construction systems around them being built accordingly.</i></p>	<p>a. In order to humanise and scale up the effects of meaningful participative practice they require regular and iterative inspection and adaptation.</p>
	<p>b. The actions should allow for a robust and ongoing dialogue process that supports both social and technical aspects of the implementation.</p> <p>c. These systems should include the process of tendering, the means of valuing and 'signing off' process as well as post-occupancy engagement.</p>
<p>3. <i>Participative actions and 'community' framings should allow for the recognition of diverse value sets.</i></p>	<p>a. A multiplicity of values from different stakeholder groups should be declared and allowed for in projects.</p>
	<p>b. Such a revaluing process should be seen as a principled way of broadening the sector of practice to include the invaluable experience of those, often marginalised, who built, live in and maintain informal settlement neighbourhoods.</p> <p>c. A recognition of the value of process-driven work and to allow for time as an important factor in the planning and implementation.</p>
	<p>a. The reality that values that govern projects may change over time requires recognition and practitioners involved should find their own contextual approaches to allowing for this through iterative approaches to their work in regard to resident expectations.</p>
<p>4. <i>Participative actions and 'community' framings should be done responsibly.</i></p>	<p>b. This responsibility lies with those actors in stronger positions (government officials and private sector professionals) to support and grow; these practices should not simply be left to 'the community' to figure out and maintain as this is an irresponsible shifting of responsibility to a constituency (i.e., the development sector) that has responsibilities and insecurities beyond project measurables.</p>

Source: Author.

teaching and training spaces (Bennett, 2017; Manià et al., 2017), as the built environment curriculum and learning values are largely determined by what universities feel the private sector is looking for. More critically, we must bring into question 'Western' and 'Northern' readings of participation (Simone, 2016).

The study suggests that there is lack of recognition of the interpersonal and inter-scalar 'necessary complexity' concerning the current way ISU projects are understood in South Africa. This necessary complexity of the process is crucial in allowing for important nuance in a context that often demands simplification for the sake of efficiency (Klug & Vawda, 2009; Tuurnas, 2016). This is in the face of dire inequality and corruption (Pithouse, 2014), and requires a humanised approach in engaging, managing and nurturing such complexity in order to make participative work more meaningful and effective (Hamdi & Goethert, 1997). This need for complexity is not suggested as a means of complicating ISU work; rather it is seen as a call to recognise that these processes are contextually complex; the system should allow for more grounded processes that are valued intersectionally, sustainably and justly.

The recognition of this complexity is needed particularly from the governmental and private-professional sectors whose understanding of projects carries much weight regarding resource distribution and implementation of work towards inclusive city-making. Meaningful acknowledgement of this complexity would benefit more global implementation via the SDGs – in particular SDG 11, which carries similar broad framings of socio-technical spatial development. South African researchers and governmental entities currently play a significant and ongoing role in exploring the contextualisation of the SDGs (Valencia et al., 2019). But while the identification of local actors is a crucial aspect in ensuring the adoption of the SDGs, the employment of the goals acts as a strong mobiliser of divergent actor groups (Valencia et al., 2019). Without acknowledging the dominance of published literature over contexts similar to South Africa around such urban planning concepts (Pieterse, 2009), the ideas of inclusionary practice can only be valued through a very 'Northern' lens (Bhan, 2019). Such processes should be considered through a more localised and contextually attuned (Connell, 2014), de-colonialised framing of inclusion (Mbembe, 2021). Such an approach should critically question what values are true to form while developing a framework of action.

The call behind this study is to acknowledge the nuances and details around the gap between participatory practices and the daily reality of this work, in order to make space for a more critical and humanised approach to the implementation and actioning of participative efforts regarding ISU – such approaches that are considered *better* based on the contextualised interpersonal and inter-scalar issues described in this chapter. This concept of *betterment* is not intended to underscore any positivist ideologies but rather ties into ideas of iterative and reflective practices, by practitioners, to regularly question what 'being better' means across their own intersectional location, positionality and shared principles.

By drawing from the global mandate of SDG 11 towards Africa, and Southern Africa in particular, there is a cross-continental opportunity to recognise the many interpersonal biases all actors carry when conducting participatory practice and how these have an effect beyond project implementation. This includes a careful look at the language that

Table 19.5 *Reflection on navigating 'community'*

Guiding question	Critical action
How will participation take shape? What parts of the project are participatory, and which are not? Why is it divided?	Design participation structure robustly.
Who will take responsibility for meaningful participation? How will this be communicated? How can participation do more than just be consultative?	Decide who manages and drives participatory process.
For how long will participation take place before, during and after a project? What is the strategy behind the participation? What cultural and technical languages will be used?	Plan for participatory process to do more than collect options.
Which aspects of local practice are not being valued in the project I am doing? Whose practices are missing from this project? How are the grass-roots practices being valued in this project?	Engage with the people in the project to understand what practices exist. Engage with the people in the project to understand who is missing. Engage with the people in the project to understand how local practices are valued.
When <i>I</i> speak of community, who do <i>I</i> really mean? What parts of the community are we working with and leaving out? When <i>they</i> speak of community, who do <i>they</i> really mean?	Work in the field to find out, and question your own bias. Be clear on which parts of a group are being favoured and which parts of a group are being neglected. Work to think past your own understanding and find ways to understand how other actors are using this term.

Source: Author.

practitioners employ in development practice (across stakeholder groups), an introspective recognition of one's experiences of spatial inequality in how practitioners interpret themselves, as well as the groups they work with in ISU projects. In summary, it calls for a revaluing and recognition of the existing grass-roots processes and for practitioners in this field to examine their own approach, methods and action with regard to the projects they undertake and a call for regular interpersonal and inter-scalar reflections on *betterment*.

A final set of recommendations, or possibly a 'reflective tool' for such *betterment* practice,²⁷ is offered through a set of guiding questions and critical action for those involved in the ISU sector, and who would like to be more effective in this complex field (Table 19.5).

²⁷ A 'Critical practitioner thinking/acting framework'.

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