



NUSP RESOURCE KIT

Part 1

Understanding your Informal Settlements



Part 1 - Understanding your Informal Settlements

An 'Informal Settlement' exists where housing has been created in an urban or peri-urban location without official approval.

Informal settlements may contain a few dwellings or thousands of them, and are generally characterised by inadequate infrastructure, poor access to basic services, unsuitable environments, uncontrolled and unhealthy population densities, inadequate dwellings, poor access to health and education facilities and lack of effective administration by the municipality. Informal settlements are not peculiar to South Africa – they are increasingly the norm in Africa and in many other developing countries where the need for urban housing for the poor cannot be matched with delivery of any kind of formal housing.

The management and improvement of informal settlements (see Part 2) is already the most necessary housing skill in our part of the world, and your commitment to this task is of great strategic value.

To be effective you need to develop a real understanding of your informal settlements. The first requirement is a list of every informal settlement in the municipality, their precise locations shown on a map and accurate details of who owns the land.

Then the history of each settlement must be understood – when and why it was created, by whom and why that site was chosen. There will also be a history of how the landowner and neighbours have responded to the occupation, how the municipality has responded to the needs and the nature of any agreements, commitments or controversies.

An understanding of the basis on which the residents are organised and represented is also essential so that you can learn how to most effectively engage with them. The most valuable asset in addressing the challenges will be the building of trusting relationships between representatives of the municipality and the residents (see Part 3).

Next you must get to grips with the detailed issues within each settlement. You will want to know how many dwellings there are in each settlement, how many households reside there and the names, ages and identity numbers of the residents – that is best done by a survey done jointly by community members and officials (See Part 4).

You must also establish what services are actually provided to each settlement by the municipality – which will require a joint inspection to establish the real facts about service delivery. Through such a shared process, a lot more can be learned about life in the settlement and, in particular, about the greatest needs of the residents and how they would prioritise them.

You will then be in a position to start thinking constructively about the overall challenges that you face. You probably have three kinds of informal settlements:

- Those which, realistically, can be replaced with formal townships within no more than five years, either in that same location or elsewhere, using the resources available to the municipality and to the satisfaction of the residents (They won't stay there if it doesn't work for them!).

- Those settlements which are likely to stay where they are for many years. The majority of your settlements may fall into this category. These will need incremental improvement, and that is the subject of NUSP, the UISP and this Resource Kit.
- Any settlements that must be urgently relocated because they are seriously dangerous or hazardous. These should probably be addressed using the Emergency Housing Programme of the Department of Human Settlements.

Examples of how these issues have been addressed in South Africa are shown [here](#) and [here](#).