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Contestations surrounding the upgrading of informal settlements in East London in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The demand for adequate and affordable housing continues to grow unabated globally and South Africa is no exception. Currently, the global housing backlog is estimated to be at about 330 million households. The figure is forecasted to increase by more than 30% by 2025. This means than about 440 million households, or 1.6 billion people won't have access to decent housing. In South Africa, the mushrooming of informal settlements reflects on the inability of the state to respond to the complex issues surrounding access to housing. While the government has attempted to address this situation through policies, it was only until recent that it took a positive approach to dealing with informal settlements. Through the comprehensive plan on human settlements, attention is paid on improving the lives of informal settlement dwellers with an emphasis on in situ upgrading process. Ironically, despite the allocation of a grant to upgrade informal settlements in Duncan Village under the Urban Settlements Development Grant (USDG) for bulk services to the metropolitan municipality and Human Settlements Development Grant (HSDG) for top structures and social amenities, no remarkable improvements have been witnessed in this respect. The grant has since been returned to the Treasury while conditions on the ground do not reflect any positive change towards upgrading of informal settlements. This study therefore draws from these developments and investigated the underlying contestations surrounding the failure to upgrade informal settlements in Duncan Village. Information for this study was gathered through qualitative research methodology where both primary and secondary sources of data were employed. Unstructured face to face interviews shall were conducted with key informants (those with relevant information on the subject under study). Complementary information was gathered through observations and document analysis where documents such as housing policies and relevant literature were reviewed. The research unravelled that while the South African government seek to upgrade informal settlements through policies such as the ISUP, there is a mismatch between policy intentions and what transpires on the ground. One of the major themes coming out from this study is that officials who are tasked with foreseeing the upgrading of informal settlements are incompetent. The study further observed that failure to upgrade informal settlements in East London Duncan Village can mainly be attributed to power struggles that exist between the national and local governance. It is within these power dynamics that there is not enough engagement with local people when it comes to developing and implementing policies such as the ones on informal settlement upgrading. The study therefore recommends the need to align different government departments in order to tap in skills and expertise from relevant officials. There is also need to draw lessons from countries that successfully implemented projects on upgrading of informal settlements.