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Co-designing resilient urban communities:
The power of human capital in inclusive public engagement

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Flexible city



Resourceful city



Robust city



Inclusive city

Co-designing resilient urban communities: The power of human capital in inclusive public engagement

The new normal that cities face in the 21st century includes the effects of climate change, growing populations, and deepening inequity. In addition to chronic stresses, cities must confront acute shocks. At the heart of addressing these complex challenges is urban resilience - ensuring that all stakeholders in a city can not only survive these shocks and stresses, but adapt and thrive in response to them.

One of the foundational aspects of effective urban resilience is public engagement in civic decision-making. This moves beyond engagement for the sake of engagement, and pushes to create meaningful involvement in building and institutionalizing resilience.

MAIN INSIGHT

It is of paramount importance that the people responsible for engaging, facilitating and managing a community engagement or participatory co-design process are adequately prepared. Education, general and professional knowledge, professional skills and training, language skills, and other positive personal traits and core values are fundamental to meaningful involvement in building and institutionalizing resilience through co-design.

Purpose

In the context of community level resilience, participatory co-design is an inherently organic approach to urban development that actively involves all affected stakeholders to design workable solutions to complex challenges. In a social context, with significant language and education gaps, this process is made even more difficult. The success and ultimate impact of this approach is determined by the project drivers – the people that are engaging, facilitating and managing the participatory community co-design process.

This brief aims to answer one fundamental question: **What are the human capabilities needed to facilitate efficient participatory co-design projects?**

This brief discusses:

- The concepts of community engagement and successful facilitation of asset-based community participation and co-design.
- The role of project drivers in effective community engagement.
- A case study of the Alternative Service Delivery Unit (ASDU) and participatory co-design in action in two informal settlements in Cape Town.
- Human Capital - Core values, capabilities, strengths and weaknesses in project drivers in creating meaningful community involvement in building and institutionalizing resilience.

This brief is written for:

A diverse set of stakeholders, each playing a vital role in understanding and addressing the challenge of creating meaningful community involvement in building and institutionalizing resilience. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Cities focused on building resilience through innovation and partnership.
- Cities exploring asset-based urban development as a mechanism towards resilience.
- Entities exploring the establishment of participatory co-design interventions.
- Communities seeking to nurture community cohesion.

Asset-based development – modern community participation

Asset-based community development unlocks the possibility of building and institutionalizing local resilience by empowering communities to identify their own problems and be part of their own development through the local assets available to them. This is not a new approach to building local resilience – communities all around the world have, over the millennia, come together and built on their strengths.

This approach has been built and adapted from the concepts like citizen-led and endogenous development, strengths-based community work, community planning and place-making approaches. Each of these, have at their core, the idea that every community, however underdeveloped, isolated, or poor, has resources within it. When those resources, or 'assets', are invested to create new resources, they become capital that can form the foundation for resilient local development. In most cases, these assets are grouped under the umbrella of human or intangible 'assets'.

Essentially, communities know their own contexts better than anyone else. Engaging communities creatively helps them appreciate their own strength (assets) as a unit and empowers them to help design their own solutions; encouraging community buy-in and support for the process.

This approach helps stakeholders with gaining inherent knowledge on current systems that are in place and what would work for a community. An informed and well-functioning group, built on this foundational understanding, has the potential to build trust and a shared understanding – both fundamental ingredients for collective action and local resilience.

Participation is not a silver bullet. If not undertaken thoughtfully it may create more challenges than solutions. Some of the common pit falls include:

- underestimating the resources required to carry out successful participation (financial, temporal and human);
- insufficient training in communication and facilitation skills;
- lack of clarity of the roles or rules of participation; and
- stakeholders becoming involved too late in the process.

The role of community engagement in building resilience:

Just and resilient cities rely on empowered communities. Participation through active engagement of all relevant stakeholders is considered fundamental to building social-ecological resilience. It helps build the trust and relationships needed to improve legitimacy of knowledge and authority during decision making processes.

This is clearly articulated in the vision for a resilient Cape Town which translates to a city that is: "...compassionate, connected, and capable city, where Capetonians collaborate across households, communities and institutions, to build collective responses to the current and future social, environmental and economic challenges."¹

CASE STUDY:

GreenCape's Alternative Service Delivery Unit

According to conservative estimates in 2011, between 1.1 and 1.4 million households, or between 2.9 and 3.6 million people lived in informal settlements in South Africa. In the city of Cape Town, there are at least 204 informal settlements. Using a resilience lens, nowhere in the city are systemic chronic stresses¹ and acute shocks² more profoundly felt, than in these communities. Informal settlements are characterised by a lack of formal tenure, insufficient public space and facilities, inadequate access to municipal services and poor access ways. The location of these communities often leave them more susceptible to natural and other disasters, and overlap with high social vulnerability such as poverty, unemployment and high crime rates.

Freedom Farm and Malawi Camp

Freedom Farm and Malawi Camp are located on Robert Sobukwe Road in Cape Town, on land belonging to the Airports Company of South Africa (ACSA) and the Cape Town metropolitan municipality. These communities, along with neighbouring Blikkiesdorp, have been prioritised for relocation to a formal housing development on Symphony Way starting in 2023.

Freedom Farm is home to close to 2000 people. Residents have been living in the area for as long as 30 years (average 12 years). There is no formal access to electricity in this settlement and limited communal water points. The unemployment rate in the area is close to 65% and more than 50% of children (0-18 years) are not in school. The leadership of this community is newly formed, but has been stable since their formation.

Malawi Camp's community is a bit smaller, with just over 1000 residents. Its average resident has been living there for 13 years. Like in Freedom Farm, the community is almost 30 years old. Similarly, Malawi Camp also struggles with no formal electricity and limited communal water points. The unemployment rate in the area is slightly less than that of Freedom Farm at 55%, but just as many children (0-18 years) are not in school. There has been a recent spike in violent gang-related crime in this community.

The Alternative Service Delivery Unit

In order to aid the government (and in some cases private land owners) and to empower citizens, a data-driven and community-led alternative service delivery project has been created by GreenCape. This project was established to promote unserved¹ and unserviceable¹ areas as spaces for innovation through the provision of basic services, empower communities through co-design and social choice and support local municipalities and landowners to explore new approaches to providing innovative and inclusive service delivery models that promote economic growth.

In this context, there are few examples of successful and replicable models in South Africa. One of the main reasons for this is that projects do not incorporate a holistic and equitably balanced approach to address the problem of community lead service delivery. There are three vital lenses to holistic community lead service delivery:

1. Social inclusion and mobilisation of the affected community.
2. Customised technical design (right technology for the context and the need).
3. Financial sustainability and affordability of the interventions.

Critical to incorporating these lenses successfully is the undertaking of in-depth community mobilisation. Mobilisation is the process of engaging communities to identify their priorities, resources, needs and solutions in such a way as to promote representative participation, good governance, accountability and peaceful change. At the core of this process of mobilisation is participatory co-design. Communities know their own contexts better than anyone else.

GreenCape's Alternative Service Delivery Unit (ASDU) has been working in these two areas since 2019. This foundational work focused on creating a strong social foundation for service delivery, building an inclusive platform for local community members to express infrastructure preferences, and understanding the communities' propensity to pay for infrastructure services while also mapping existing infrastructure assets.

¹ A chronic stress is a challenge that continually affects the community on a more regular basis, for example, violent crime; substance abuse; unemployment.

² An acute shock is usually a sudden sharp event that threatens the community, for example, natural disasters like droughts or fire; disease outbreaks and infrastructure failure.



Figure 1: Freedom Farm site visit with potential service providers

Asset-based development in Malawi Camp and Freedom Farm

As stated previously, there is no silver bullet solution. Each community is different and an approach to participation must be an adaptable multi-step process of participation, mobilisation³ and enumeration⁴. This helps to ensure the best, most context appropriate, outcome is reached. However, the ASDU process is built on four foundational engagement steps.

Community mapping and "snowball" engagements.

Relevant stakeholders in any given community are identified. This can include the community leaders; the locally elected ward councillors; community based organisations, NGOs and public institutions already operating in the area. These community stakeholders are interviewed about the community – the local need, current programmes and other existing assets. Each of these stakeholders generally direct us to others (snowball effect).

Engaging with these stakeholders is essential to assess the appetite of the community for the project offering. This is critical to the success of the projects: the community must need, but also want, what is offered. It also forms the early foundation for trust and community "buy-in". This can be a delicate

position to manoeuvre, particularly when trying to make it clear that the project is apolitical. Factors like *who* is forging the relationship, *with whom* and *how* are also important to consider. It is very easy for these engagements to deteriorate if sufficient respect is not given, and if one does not remain humble but firm throughout. At the same time, preconceived cultural, racial and gender biases need to be actively managed (i.e. a female facilitator engaging an older male stakeholder may be met with less respect). Perseverance, trust and sincerity are key to navigating these difficult engagements.

1. Direct community leadership engagements.

The community mapping and "snowball" engagements help to identify a local core leadership team⁵. Introductory meetings with this leadership team should be held on site if possible (creates a sense of trust and commitment). A formal request is made to engage the wider community, either directly or through them as the leadership.

2. Mobilisation and enumeration - Once the leadership has allowed community access (respect and trust), mobilisation and enumeration teams engage with the community leaders and members to identify volunteers from the community (already giving them autonomy).

³ Mobilisation is the process of engaging communities to identify community priorities, resources, needs and solutions in such a way as to promote representative participation, good governance, accountability and peaceful change

⁴ Enumeration is the process of collecting residents' socio-economic and demographic information at a community or household level

⁵ If no elected leadership is present, then the mapping exercise should highlight stakeholders with local relevance and influence in the community.



Figure 2: Co-design workshops with participants from Freedom Farm and Malawi Camp

An in-depth enumeration exercise is then carried out by these volunteer members of the community to understand the data, demographics and dynamics of the communities. This information is used to glean various details of the communities' characteristics, but especially to determine what kind of intervention would be best suited to each community in terms of their prioritised needs, affordability, and general diagnostics.

3. Community led co-design – Once data has been collected, a co-design process is undertaken with the community to ensure that they 1) agree with the information about their community; 2) understand what kind of interventions are available and which could be suitable; and 3) determine their greatest challenges and needs in order to help the team to design a customised intervention covering the appropriate technical mix, social diffusion and financial model.

These four steps create the early foundations for trust, commitment and community buy-in and also allow for a co-design process that is informed by real-world data. This database co-design approach protects the process from getting pulled off course by participants (all decisions should be backed up by the data) while still allowing impact of participatory co-design.

Through this process, the communities of Malawi Camp and Freedom Farm prioritised, home level lighting and connectivity (TV, radio etc.). They also highlighted that cooking and food storage was a high priority in the local area. Through the process, a home-solar system was selected which is paid for on a monthly basis by individual households.

The capital for the infrastructure was donated by the land owner but the monthly fees are sufficient to create and maintain a local company employing community members to install and maintain the systems.

Manoeuvring through difficult community engagements, dealing with diverse stakeholders and supporting communities that have been without services for 30 years is an extremely daunting task. The outcomes in these two areas have been greatly supported by the project drivers that led the engagement, facilitation and management of the process.

Core values, characteristics and skills in project drivers for the successful replication of participatory co-design for community development

Specific personality traits and inherent qualities are attributed to project drivers who can successfully execute a community mobilisation and participatory co-design process to achieve its intended impact for the community. Many aspects of this process can be replicated by anyone following robust protocols and with practice.

However, there are a few traits and skills guided by recurrent values that present within the current ASDU team. The diagram below is a word cloud generated by ASDU team members and their stakeholders of the qualities, strengths and capabilities they deem a strong project driver should possess. These are further broken down into core values; characteristics and skills – and examples of how these are useful in the process are made on pages 6 & 7.



Figure 3: The nature of a good project driver

Human capital requirements for meaningful engagement: facilitator core values

People’s (core) values are the fundamental beliefs that guide how we think, speak and act, and that guide the decisions we make. They influence how we live and work, as well as how we behave and interact with

others. These core values are an integral foundation to the human capital needed to deliver meaningful community engagement with the aim of building and institutionalizing resilience in Cape Town. The relevant core values are detailed below in Table 1. These core values are contextualised and linked to the relevant required facilitator characterises and skills.

Table 1: Facilitator / Project Drivers core values

1. Trust

Context	Authentic trust building is paramount to the success of any community project. Trust becomes a more tangible concept when it is associated with your social licence to operate. Accountability, competence, predictability, reliability, honesty and transparency are the tenets of building trust in the context of participatory community development. Trust builds the social capital required to carry you through challenges in the process. Trust-building is a particularly important exercise with communities that have been abandoned in the past after similar processes were conducted.
Linked characteristics	Consistent; Empathetic; Patient; Responsible; Genuine; Humble; Respectful; Deliberate; Intuitive; Accessible; Compassionate; Responsive
Linked skills	Active listening; Interpersonal skills and relationship building

2. Collaboration

Context	Collaboration is the practice of listening, supporting and working together for the sake of collective goals and to solve complex community problems. The promise behind this value is that of deeper learnings, stronger relationships and more intuitive problem solving. For projects like these, communities usually understand their own needs better than anyone else, so collaboration empowers them to gain control over their own lives, building their capacities, broadening their networks and increasing their community assets.
Linked characteristics	Empathetic; Tactful; Sensitive; Resourceful; Detail-orientated; Creative; Enthusiastic; Respectful; Flexible; Intuitive; Open-minded; Accessible; Sense of humour; Compassionate; Responsive
Linked skills	Active listening; Interpersonal skills and relationship building

3. Resilience

Context	Resilience is the ability to spring back and persevere in the face of setbacks, challenges and barriers. Community development and service delivery are difficult territories to navigate because of a myriad of stakeholders and systemic difficulties in place.
Linked characteristics	Consistent; Resourceful; Adaptable; Patient; Responsible; Creative; Genuine; Flexible; Deliberate; Intuitive; Open-minded; Perseverance; Responsive
Linked skills	Active facilitation; Active listening; Interpersonal skills and relationship building; Creative thinking, problem-solving and communication

Table 1: Facilitator / Project Drivers core values continued

4. Hope

Context	Hope allows people to dream and enables them to look forward to a positive and fulfilling future, giving them the strength to persevere irrespective of challenges and how long it takes. This is so important to hold on to because there are so many complex and ever-evolving challenges that communities and stakeholders must face during these projects.
Linked characteristics	Resourceful; Adaptable; Calm; Patient; Creative; Enthusiastic; Flexible; Intuitive; Open-minded; Perseverance; Sense of humour; Compassionate; Responsive
Linked skills	Active listening; Interpersonal skills and relationship building; Creative thinking, problem-solving and communication

5. Diversity and inclusion

Context	Communities are not homogenous. They consist of people of different cultures, races, genders, ages and sometimes who speak different languages. To help promote the informed participation of these communities, we need to take this into consideration when sharing information and trying to get everyone’s voice into the room. It helps if the project drivers themselves are of different backgrounds so that there is never complacency in terms of ensuring cultural appropriateness. This value must remain foremost when trying to help these communities and their diverse residents to meaningfully participate and gain a genuine understanding of the project and its intended outcomes. It requires project drivers to be creative and relentless in their pursuit of engaging and including people, and hearing what is not being said.
Linked characteristics	Empathetic; Tactful; Sensitive; Adaptable; Calm; Patient; Creative; Genuine; Humble; Enthusiastic; Respectful; Intuitive; Open-minded; Accessible; Sense of humour; Compassionate
Linked skills	Active facilitation; Active listening; Interpersonal skills and relationship building; Creative thinking, problem-solving and communication

Human capital requirements for meaningful engagement: characteristics

Our characteristics are our attributes, features and qualities that make us uniquely individual. These can

be good or bad traits, and strengths or weaknesses. In this case, we refer to the positive characteristics as project drivers, which to a large extent speak to high emotional intelligence for the purposes of authentic relationship building.

Table 2: Project Drivers characteristics

Positive characteristics of resilient project drivers			
Consistent	Empathetic	Tactful	Sensitive
Resourceful	Detail-orientated	Adaptable	Calm
Patient	Responsible	Creative	Genuine
Humble	Enthusiastic	Respectful	Flexible
Deliberate	Intuitive	Open-minded	Accessible
Perseverance	Sense of humour	Compassionate	Responsive

Human capital requirements for meaningful engagement: skills

Our skills refer to our capabilities, both inherent and learned. Almost all of these skills are learned on the job, and are refined with practice – but are best executed when complemented by certain inherent characteristics.



Figure 4: Site visit with community leaders to see potential alternative infrastructure that already exists in Siqalo informal settlement

Table 3: Project Driver skills



1. Active facilitation

Context

Facilitation is a way of encouraging and guiding stakeholders to directly participate in a process or discussion. Active facilitation requires the facilitator to intuitively and proactively respond to a group’s dynamic, taking into consideration the diversity of stakeholders and using different and inclusive techniques to encourage quieter stakeholders to participate meaningfully. These may include women, people who struggle with the facilitator or majority’s language of choice, or just people who are inherently shy by nature. Active facilitation also requires the facilitator to be sensitive to existing individual feelings and group dynamics and how to navigate this in an unbiased, open and respectful manner.



2. Active listening

Context

Listening to understand, through the act of repeating, summarising or even responding directly during engagements, helps both the facilitator to grasp both the explicit messages but also the implicit meanings. This skill also helps the rest of the group hear and understand what their colleagues are saying.



3. Interpersonal skills/relationship building

Context

Interpersonal skills help project drivers to recognise non-verbal communication, which is sometimes more important than what is actually said. These same skills inspire strong relationships because they foster trust, empathy, and respect through being aware of how people are responding to matters, even if they are not actually speaking or articulating their negative emotions. Sensing these feelings and knowing how to respond in these situations is critical to conflict resolution, mediation and even negotiation for the purpose of continuing towards achieving the goals of the engagement.

The communities we engage with have a multitude of challenges and distracts they are dealing with aside from our project. It is impossible to ask them to leave that behind when they enter our room – it is their lived experience. However, it is difficult to engage constructively with pent-up negative emotions hanging overhead, so mediation, paired with increased empathy is an incredibly powerful tool to avoid the situation becoming toxic and remaining productive.

Particularly in communities that have been promised services and then been let down, it is important to remain diplomatic and firm in not making any promises at any point in the process.

The ability to observe and interpret are important components strong interpersonal skills. Oftentimes, the real insights are in answers to questions you did not ask.



4. Creative thinking, problem-solving and communication

Context

Working with people from different or no educational backgrounds, or communicating with those who speak a different language to you, requires creativity to ensure that they can still meaningfully participate in the content. Good project drivers will be able to utilise different tools and techniques to ensure that all issues and concerns are consistently understood and collectively solved or at least considered. Adapting to the different problems and finding new ways/bringing different perspectives to solve old issues encourages hope. Problem solving can be fun, if everyone is included. This is a particular relevant skill in the developing South, where it is important to Africanise your methodology to suit the context.

Written, visual and oral story-telling can all be utilised to try get messages across.

Resilience Building Summary

Inherent to this dynamic process is building resilience within these communities. The ASDU process assists communities which are otherwise vulnerable owing to a lack of many basic services (such as education, electricity, and safe space), to understand their demographics, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and risks in order to leverage their resources and networks. The process also builds resilience against their challenges, be they acute shocks or chronic stresses.

The vision for a resilient Cape Town translates to a city that is:

*"...compassionate, connected, and capable city, where Capetonians collaborate across households, communities and institutions, to build collective responses to the current and future social, environmental and economic challenges."*⁶

The ASDU contributes to building a resilient Cape Town through its commitment to building a model for alternative service delivery that takes into consideration the voices of the various stakeholders, while investigating and understanding how shocks and stresses create specific risks to the relevant informal settlements within the city and then undertaking action to respond to these analyses. Referencing Cape Town's Resilience Strategy, the ASDU can be framed in the following way.

Table 4: City resilience metrics

City resilience metrics	
Resilience pillars	Pillar 2: Connected, climate-adaptive city Pillar 4: Collectively, shock-ready city
Action type	Demonstrable
Resilience values	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meets basic needs 2. Supports livelihoods and employment 3. Promotes cohesion and engaged communities 4. Fosters economic prosperity 5. Provides and enhances natural and manmade assets 6. Ensures continuity of critical services 7. Empowers a broad range of stakeholders
Qualities of resilience	Inclusive; Resourceful; Flexible; Robust
Shocks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Infrastructure failure 2. Civil unrest 3. Financial/economic crises 4. Power outage 5. Fire
Stresses	All
Sustainable Development Goals	SDG 7 - Affordable and clean energy SDG 8 - Decent work and economic growth SDG 11 - Sustainable cities and communities

⁶ City of Cape Town (2019), 'Cape Town Resilience Strategy'. City of Cape Town. Available (online): https://resource.capetown.gov.za/documentcentre/Documents/City%20strategies%2C%20plans%20and%20frameworks/Resilience_Strategy.pdf [Accessed 15 March 2020]

Conclusion

Cape Town is plagued by various chronic stresses such as high inequality, poverty and a lack of social cohesion. These attack the fabric of the city, making it ever-vulnerable to the impacts of future shocks. Residents of informal settlements and other low income communities are often deemed the most at risk to the impacts of these shock events. To build their resilience, and the resilience of the city, it is imperative that we work together to collaboratively

design alternative solutions that are sustainable, resilient and desired, and supported by inclusive data that is verified by the community. This requires the management, engagement and facilitation of a replicable participatory co-design approach by efficient and capable project drivers who are guided by core values, embody certain key characteristics and have a particular skillset, either inherent or learned.



Figure 5: Solar lighting and wifi hotspot lights at Witsand

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