

# GOLD VI

***Case-Based Contribution  
to Chapter 9: Democratizing  
GOLD VI Report on Pathways  
to urban and territorial equality***

**Citizen Led Slum Upgrading:**

**The Mukuru Special Planning Area**

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# Citizen Led Slum Upgrading: The Mukuru Special Planning Area

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**CHAPTER**

9: Democratizing

## SUMMARY

The Mukuru Special Planning Area (SPA) project is a rare, precedent-setting opportunity for participatory upgrading partnerships at scale. It is a prime example of what Slum Dwellers International's theory of change looks like in reality, using community-driven data, identifying the challenges of slums and using a multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral approach to find solutions that in a new way creates settlement and city change. Together the community, the consortiums of over 37 organizations, and all of the county's departments mobilize resources and plan for greater impact. At the settlement level, the SPA has the potential to transform the lives of its residents by improving public health and safety and become an integrated and resilient neighbourhood. At the city level, it has the potential to create the critical institutional frameworks required to achieve inclusive slum upgrading at scale in Nairobi, through institutionalizing the collaboration between the urban poor and the government and showcase pro-poor data-driven development.

## The Mukuru Special Planning Area: An introduction

On Friday the 17th of March, 2017 the City County Government of Nairobi (NCCG) declared the informal settlements of Mukuru Kwa Njenga, Kwa Reuben and Viwandani a Special Planning Area (SPA). The Mukuru SPA declaration is the result of action-based research and engagements between the Nairobi County Government and a number of institutions that work with the Mukuru community, through support from the International Development Research Center (IDRC) and Slum Dwellers International (SDI). Specifically, the designation was based on evidence provided to the County from a consortium that included the Kenyan slum dwellers federation (Muungano wa Wanavijiji), their professional support NGO (SDI-Kenya), the affiliated finance facility (Akiba Mashinani Trust), Mukuru community members, and the Universities of Nairobi, Strathmore and the University of California, Berkeley.

Nairobi's Mukuru belt of slums forms one of the city's largest informal settlements, occupying a total of 292 hectares of land. A 2016 structure count by Muungano wa Wanavijiji established that the settlement's 100,561 units are comprised of residential households, businesses, institutions, and utilities.

Evidence showed that Mukuru's unique development challenges and opportunities warranted special consideration. **Through community driven data collection exercises, AMT and Muungano were able to gain the facts needed to make a case for the declaration of a Special Planning Area.** The legal declaration was based on the Fourth Schedule of the Constitution and Section 23 of the Physical Planning Act of 1996, which mandated that



A plastics recycling centre in Mukuru, an informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya  
Source: SDI

the County Government prepare a participatory physical development plan for the area and pause further development in the three settlements for a two year period.

Years prior to this, having faced numerous threats of eviction, Mukuru residents approached Akiba Mashinani Trust (AMT) requesting support in accessing finance to purchase the land they were living on. This initiated a process within AMT, through a partnership with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), to research and identify the status of land ownership in Mukuru. AMT found that, despite a previous transfer of land titles to private developers in the 1980s, the land in Mukuru remained undeveloped and was settled upon by migrant families and industrial workers drawn to jobs in the neighbouring industrial area and Nairobi's city centre.

As the settlements began to grow and densify, issues of land tenure and threats of eviction intensified the contestation of land ownership in Mukuru. **These land tenure**

**issues and controversies around land ownership contributed to the area being largely excluded from county and national planning initiatives as well as investments of formal governance systems and services.**

This lack of planning and investment contributed to the present-day conditions in Mukuru of rapid, haphazard, often unsafe development with a lack of basic services. The absence of services such as drainage, sanitation & waste management combine with Mukuru's proximity to industrial activities to pose cumulative environmental health risks for residents.

The federation's enumeration data reveals a debilitating poverty penalty that this project seeks to unlock. **Redirecting funds currently spent on exploitative, informally-managed housing, services, and land, and developing strategies for channelling these funds towards upgrading, will serve as a precedent for citywide resilience-building efforts.** These resources are not mere pocket change: Muungano and its partners uncovered that slum residents in Mukuru pay

some 45-142% more for electricity, 172% more per cubic meter of water, and more per square meter for a shack than middle class housing residents do for formal housing.

**Dismantling this poverty trap and improving lives and livelihoods is the objective of the Mukuru SPA consortium.**

**The landmark declaration of Mukuru as a Special Planning Area offers an opportunity to rethink the conventional city planning toolkit**

as it relates to large-scale inclusive informal settlement upgrading, particularly the formalised and central involvement of so many community-based and civil society stakeholders in the collaborative production of integrated development plans for government implementation. The SPA declaration also offers a welcome commitment to the tenure security of Mukuru's slum dwellers. Cognizant of the rare and urgent opportunity the SPA presents, the federation undertook intense organisation of the Mukuru settlements into women-led savings groups and neighbourhood associations.

## Community engagement and the creation of thematic consortia

From the outset, Muungano knew that community engagement would be key to the success of the SPA process, but they had previously struggled to organise the community in Mukuru. Because of this, the federation was adamant that the organising approach in Mukuru would have to take a different shape. Instead of relying on daily savings as the main tool for mobilising and organising, Muungano and the team from SDI Kenya mobilised the community around a numbering system that clustered the community into groups. This system evolved into the creation of women's savings groups and today Mukuru has more savings groups than perhaps any other

Mukuru informal settlement is the site of the ongoing Mukuru SPA, a precedent-setting planning process that puts slum residents at the centre  
Source: Muungano Know Your City TV



settlement in Nairobi. This helped to ensure robust community participation at every stage of the planning process and the incorporation of local businesses and enterprises in the upgrading and service delivery value chain. In addition, this organising methodology secured a sustainable exit strategy for Muungano, ensuring that when the project was over the community would be able to carry on with the structures and systems that had been established.

**To create an inclusive master plan for Mukuru, partnering organisations worked with the county government to establish thematic consortia assigned the role of contributing recommendations and proposals.** Each thematic consortium developed a solution that encompasses the community vision, financing, legal, and spatial dimensions. These include: 1. Education, Youth, and Culture; 2. Environment and Natural Resources; 3. Water, Sanitation, and Energy; 4. Health Services; 5. Housing, Infrastructure, and Commerce; 6. Legal and Land; and 7. Finance.

Accompanying all research were extensive community consultation and 'citizen science' activities, where Mukuru residents were active participants in documenting living conditions, surveying their neighbours and analysing, or making sense of the research findings for planning purposes. **Central to all recommendations is the concept of resident-centered solutions - that Mukuru residents are involved at all stages of imagination, design, implementation and management of physical upgrading, social programs, and on-going implementation and evaluation.**

In 2019, an Integrated Development Plan summary report was prepared, presenting the proposals and recommendations emerging from the work of the consortia groups. These were brought together and presented in six categories: social infrastructure, mobility and commerce, environment and natural resources, basic services, housing and land, and implementing strategies.

In 2020, failures in the Nairobi county government led to the President's intervention and establishment of a new agency. The Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS), a military-dominated agency established under executive authority of the President, extended the previously declared two year SPA period by another two years. Despite legitimate concerns about the potential threat to democracy and compromise to good governance practices, the Kenya SDI Alliance has been able to engage successfully with NMS and are, in many ways, pleased with their fast-tracking of development of major infrastructure and housing. The hope is that, during these two years, the Mukuru Alliance will be able to consolidate all proposals and prepare an integrated development plan that takes into consideration the 7 thematic plans that had been developed.

Conducting the survey in Mukuru Kwa Reuben Segment 1  
Source: Muungano Know Your City TV



## First results and challenges ahead

NMS, who took over the Mukuru SPA process just as Covid-19 hit Nairobi, has been quick to implement development and upgrading plans, declaring their commitment to the construction of 15,000 dwelling units benefiting residents of Mukuru kwa Reuben and initiating infrastructure upgrading, including roads, drainage and sewer connections for 1,000 households in Mukuru kwa Reuben, a section of Mukuru that has been identified as a pilot area for much of the upgrading work. The Alliance's hope was for a bare minimum commitment to improved infrastructure, so the commitment to housing was a welcome surprise, particularly as it fit well with Muungano's data and the areas they had prioritised.

While this has been welcomed by the Muungano Alliance, there is concern that the lack of emphasis on community consultation risks the participatory nature of the project – one of the project's strongest and most critical elements. NMS failed to ensure validation of the data, or the existence of a grievance mechanism before moving forward with implementation.

**While Mukuru still faces many challenges, it has strong community assets such as women-led**

**savings groups, youth leaders, a network of schools and community facilities, and a robust informal labour market that provide opportunities for growth and are already contributing immensely to the economy and social fabric of Nairobi.** The ongoing work in Mukuru has engaged these community stakeholders and utilised settlement profiling, a community-led action research process, to gather and compile information on land ownership, access to services, health, education, and nutrition status, and livelihood opportunities.



Mukuru Kwa Reuben residents and Muungano federation members from across Nairobi unblocking one of the neighbourhood's drains.  
Source: Muungano Know Your City TV

## Replicability of the project

**As a flagship project, Mukuru SPA has already gained attention and is at the centre of learning on community engagement, large scale integrated development projects, and influencing both government and multilateral stakeholders.**

A series of exchanges have begun between Mukuru and other large scale upgrading projects in Kenya and internationally, and have been supported by SDI's Indian Alliance who has vast experience in large scale housing projects.

The Nairobi County government and the National Ministry of Transport, Infrastructure and Urban Development, have expressed interest in applying the Special Planning Area approach to other large slum settlements in the Country. To this end, the Muungano Alliance has been involved in developing SPAs in Kibera (Estimated HH population of 100,000) and Mathare (Estimated HH Population of 30,000).

In Kibera, the Muungano Alliance has signed an MoU with Kounkey Design Initiative, (KDI), an NGO working on developing public spaces in Kibera, to support KDI in the development of a Kibera SPA. To this end, the Alliance has facilitated two community exchanges between community groups in Kibera and Mukuru, included KDI staff in Mukuru SPA meetings as observers, hosted a one-day reflection workshop for KDI staff on the strategy and methodology used in the Mukuru SPA, and facilitated discussions between KDI, Nairobi County government, and other organisations participating in the SPA.

In Mathare, another settlement in Nairobi, the Alliance initiated a process to have the Mathare slum designated as a Special Planning Area. This process included initiating and facilitating meetings with local community based organisations Ghetto Foundation and Mathare Justice Center to develop the strategy and approaches to achieving a SPA; developing a research consortium that brings together previous and current research efforts in Mathare; mobilising youth to undertake research on issues affecting Mathare. Through the youth profiling carried out by the federation and SDI Kenya,

major challenges were identified that relate to safety in communities, with unemployment, access to basic services, and insecurity of land tenure being top priorities.

The SPA project is a rare, precedent-setting opportunity for participatory upgrading partnerships at scale. It is a prime example of what SDI's theory of change looks like in reality, using community-driven data, identifying the challenges of slums and using a multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral approach to find solutions that in a new way creates settlement and city change. Together the community, the consortiums of over 37 organisations, and all of the county's departments mobilise resources and plan for greater impact. **At the settlement level, the SPA has the potential to transform the lives of its residents by improving public health and safety and become an integrated and resilient neighbourhood. At the city level, it has the potential to create the critical institutional frameworks required to achieve inclusive slum upgrading at scale in Nairobi, through institutionalizing the collaboration between the urban poor and the government and showcase pro-poor data-driven development.**



Mukuru Special Planning Area thematic consortiums (Kenya)  
Source: Muungano wa wanavijiji. "Mukuru Special Planning Area (Kenya)," 2019

This paper has been produced as a Case-Based Contribution to the sixth Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VI): the flagship publication of the organized constituency of local and regional governments represented in United Cities and Local Governments. The GOLD VI report has been produced in partnership with the Development Planning Unit (University College London), through the programme Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW). GOLD VI focuses on how local and regional governments can address the local manifestations of growing inequalities and contribute to create “Pathways to urban and territorial equality”. The GOLD VI report has been produced through a large-scale international co-production process, bringing together over a hundred representatives of local and regional governments, academics and civil society organizations. This paper is an outcome of this process and is part of the *Pathways to Equality Cases Repository*, which collects the over 60 Case-Based Contributions produced as part of the GOLD VI report.

In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 9 on “Democratizing”, which focuses on the challenges and opportunities for local and regional governments in implementing meaningful participatory processes, and democratizing decision-making, unpacking asymmetries of power and the underpinning trends affecting processes of democratization. The chapter explores how local and regional governments can promote more egalitarian, participatory and democratic processes, giving voice to marginalized groups of society, minorities and other groups, and thus contribute to urban and territorial equality.

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