

LEARNING BRIEF



#14 FROM RE-BLOCKING TO PRE-BLOCKING

JANUARY 2021

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There is growing interest within government and the country around the concept of re-blocking. Re-blocking is the process whereby communities who have occupied land work with government and others to shift shacks and plots around as part of the process of upgrading of informal settlements so as to make it easier to bring roads, paths and storm water drainage systems as well as toilets, taps, electricity, fire hydrants, refuse removal, ambulances and the like into these informal settlements. (<https://www.sasdialliance.org.za/tag/re-blocking/>).

Re-blocking is a reactive activity, happening in situations where people have already occupied the land and built their shacks. The roads, paths and shacks are not always located and built by the original land occupiers in a way that makes it easy for government to bring in basic services like water, toilets and electricity. This complicates the upgrading of informal settlement process which would be much easier for government to undertake if more consideration was given to the location of plots and paths before people started to occupy the land and build shacks. It would be much easier to upgrade an informal settlement if the plots, paths and roads were

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planned before people occupied the land – or in other words if pre-blocking occurred. Pre-blocking is where future occupants of land work with government and others to plan and create roadways and plots before anyone moves onto the land. Once people then settle on this pre-blocked land government can bring in municipal services as part of a settlement upgrading process. Pre-blocking builds on the ideas developed for the managed land settlement approach to incremental settlement development (<http://afesis.org.za/managed-land-settlement/>).

The following section starts to outline what such a pre-blocking process could look like from the perspective of a local municipality. The municipality needs to first find the people in need of land and housing and work with them to jointly agree on the broad pre-blocking process. The municipality can then work with the leadership of these people to identify land where pre-blocking can take place. The municipality then creates superblocks where larger portions of land are sub divided into smaller portions (or blocks) that can accommodate between say 50 and 200 households. Each superblock is then allocated to a group of people identified from the broader waiting list of people in need of land and housing. The municipality then undertakes a pre-blocking exercise with each group to plan the layout of plots and internal roads within each superblock. The municipality installs basic services (such as communal ablution facilities and electricity) as per the pre-blocked layout plan and allows the people allocated to the superblock to move onto the plots and start to build their own temporary structures using resources that they are able to obtain. Households are then also provided with some form of interim land tenure. The pre-blocking process up to this point can be compared to reaching the end of phase two (the project initiation phase) of the upgrading of informal settlements programme (UISP). Phase two focuses on the provision of interim or emergency basic services and some form of basic administrative tenure recognition. (<http://afesis.org.za/upgrading-informal-settlements/>)

The conventional upgrading process of moving to phase three and four of the UISP then proceeds from this point forwards with government providing improved water, sanitation and other services as well as improved tenure security (e.g. title deeds or lease agreements). Government housing top structure subsidies can also be provided for people who qualify and government can find ways to support those who don't qualify to arrange for the building of their own houses.

Pre-blocking may at first glance appear very similar to the site-and-service approach but there are important differences. In site-and-service, municipalities generally identify the land, produce the layout plans and install the services themselves with hardly any consultation with any community structures. The people who will live on the land are only identified after the land is planned. In the pre-blocking approach, by comparison, the people in need of land and housing are identified first and the municipality works with these people to identify and plan the land.

An advantage of the pre-blocking approach compared to the site-and-service approach is that when people move onto the land these people have already met during the process of pre-blocking and have started to develop social relationships with each other. This makes it much easier to build a sense of community on the new land. Also, when people participate in the planning of their own layout they are more likely to take 'ownership' and responsibility for looking after and improving their neighbourhood once they move onto the land. Another advantage of pre-blocking is that one does not immediately have to follow the full 'township'

establishment process and get general plan approval, open a township register and provide title deeds which is what normally happens with site-and-service.

The introduction of a pre-blocking approach to settlement development would require changes in how municipalities approach land and settlement development. For a start, municipalities will need to reconsider how they approach the allocation of land and housing for those in need. For example, if plots are provided without title deeds and without a housing top structure this means that one does not have to follow the criteria used to identify who is eligible to receive a housing top structure linked to title deeds. People who have received subsidies before, are non South African citizens, and earn more than the specified threshold to qualify for top structure subsidies are all able to access at least a basic serviced plot (without title deeds) and start to use their own resources to build their own top structure. Further, municipalities will have to allocate people from broader waiting lists to superblocs prior to any planning and construction happening on the land so that the people who will be living on the land in future are able to work with the municipality in planning and developing the land within each superbloc.

Municipalities will also have to modify their planning and building regulations making it possible for people to start to build temporary accommodation with corrugated iron, wood and other materials using what limited resources these people have access to in the pre-blocked areas. Those people that can afford to build more permanent housing structures need to be supported in this endeavour via training, provision of building plans, access to bulk buying schemes, and access to affordable loan finance schemes amongst others. Such housing support programmes of the municipality will not only be available to people that form part of pre-blocking projects but will also be available to households that are part of in-situ upgrading projects.

Municipalities will benefit from following such a pre-blocking approach in that with a given amount of funding and over a given period of time they will be able to provide planned and tenure secure land with access to basic services (initially without any top structures) to at least five times more people compared to how many could be accommodated following the conventional BNG (Breaking New Ground) approach to settlement and housing development. This will make it possible for municipalities to more rapidly make inroads into their housing waiting lists and start to get ahead of the growth in demand for land and housing. In this way there will be far less pressure for people to occupy land without authorisation and for the growth of informal settlements will be reversed.

The pre-blocking approach as described above or similar pre-blocking approaches have not been implemented by any municipality or community in South Africa. Municipalities need to take note of the advantages that a pre-blocking approach provides compared to both the re-blocking (associated with the upgrading of informal settlements) and the site-and-service approaches. Municipalities and communities need to work together and undertake pre-blocking pilot projects so that lessons can be learnt and if successful pre-blocking can become an important method for incremental settlement upgrading and development.