

GroundUP

Johannesburg has spent ten years hiring consultants while Slovo Park families wait

The Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme has failed

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The Parliamentary Portfolio Committee for Human Settlements conducting an oversight visit at Slovo Park on 10 November 2025. Photo supplied

Since Slovo Park's establishment south of Eldorado Park in the last years of apartheid, the residents of this informal settlement hoped for dignified development under the new democratic state. Having received no such thing, they eventually resorted to court action. It has now been more than a decade since the High Court, in the [Melani judgment](#), ruled that the settlement must benefit from the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP). Yet Slovo Park only has minimal temporary services.

This exemplifies high level lip service to the UISP, a policy to which the state has allocated generous funds. Yet there is no evidence of serious intentions to transform informal settlement conditions beyond interim services.

Instead, there has been ongoing expenditure of public funds on misguided planning and development consultancies that have had no effect on the ground.

At its first hearing into Slovo Park in February 2025, the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Human Settlements requested a full account from the City of Johannesburg of all expenditure on the settlement since 2016. This has still not been produced.

The Slovo Park Task Team is the vehicle for implementing the 2016 Melani judgment. The Slovo Park Community Development Forum (SPCDF), which has a wide range of portfolios representing different blocks of the settlement as well as interests (youth, women, business, pastors, etc) attends the task team meetings in numbers.

Since March 2025, following a deadlock in the task team, mayco member for human settlements Mlungisi Mabaso has chaired its meetings and, with his team of officials, reports progress to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Human Settlements.

The task team began its work late in 2016. It has held over 40 meetings.

Trying to educate consultants

In 2017, the City appointed a prominent consulting firm to guide the establishment of Slovo Park as a township. This firm understood its brief as a conventional housing development and showed no understanding of the inclusive, incremental and participatory upgrading required by the UISP.

The task team spent countless meetings educating the firm and officials on in situ upgrading and explaining why a conventional housing project is unimplementable at Slovo Park.

But the consulting planners pressed ahead, achieved municipal planning approval for their housing plan and were paid their professional fees.

In 2019, the SPCDF, its legal representatives, the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI), its technical advisors in the NGO 1to1, and ourselves at Wits University, succeeded in motivating the City to shelve this plan and start afresh.

SERI, with the support of one of its donors, offered to cover the cost of re-planning. But the City set out to appoint and pay a planning consultancy. They, too, understood their brief as planning for a housing development.

Meanwhile, the consultant-driven, erstwhile National Upgrading Support Programme commissioned yet another planning consultant to draw up a layout plan for Slovo Park's UISP, ignoring layout agreements already made in the task team.

By early 2021, the City had disbanded its tender adjudication panel and was unable to procure consultants. The provincial Department of Human Settlements stepped in and procured the services of yet another town planning firm, with the Gauteng Partnership Fund, as the implementing agent.

Once again, the task team devoted numerous meetings to explaining the kind of planning required under the UISP.

In 2022, the task team, through several workshops, painstakingly developed a tailored social compact for UISP implementation at Slovo Park and a memo that set out intergovernmental roles and responsibilities. Both documents met political resistance at the time and took more than a year to be signed.

Undermined

Amid much jubilation, an in situ upgrading plan was officially approved and signed in the Slovo Park hall in May 2023. However, two months later, an official on the task team revealed that Slovo Park was not included in the City's business plan for UISP implementation.

This caused a breakdown in trust. The SPCDF decided to seek other means to be heard, ultimately appealing to the parliamentary portfolio committee.

By 2025, task team meetings resumed under the oversight of the portfolio committee. The province now handed the task of procuring the remaining planning work back to the City.

The City confronted the task team once again with a *fait accompli*. It had proceeded to appoint yet another consultant — an architecture firm that would sub-contract planning expertise — all overseen by yet another consultant.

In his presentation to the task team, the sub-contracted planner's statements on upgrading Slovo Park so offended the SPCDF that the task team chair requested his removal from the job.

The repeated hiring of consultants with inappropriate briefs reveals the lack of transparency and wasteful workings of local and provincial government in relation to its informal settlements.

In this ten-year period, we have seen politicians undermining willing officials and unwilling officials undermining a willing politician.

What is needed

Drawing on the Slovo Park task team experience, from 2023 to 2025 we made submissions on the draft White Paper on Human Settlements and the City's draft informal settlement policy: We highlighted the need to invest in in-house expertise and build officials' experience in championing and implementing in situ upgrading of informal settlements at scale, and end the over-reliance on consultants.

We submitted that dedicated institutional structures for settlement upgrading, tailored social compacts and town planning procedures be established in line with the UISP and Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act.

The City of Johannesburg in its 2025 draft informal settlement policy set out to assign one of its officials the dedicated role of Manager: Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme. However, a consulting firm with a multi-year contract now manages and oversees Johannesburg's UISP projects and their consultants.

At the most recent task team meeting on 27 April, we found ourselves back to square one. The consulting firm presented a planning sub-consultant's work towards what is evidently, again, a housing project. It intends applying beneficiary qualification criteria, showing that the current team of consultants has no understanding of the basic, inclusionary principles of the UISP.

Furthermore, the consulting firm reports that all milestones of the planning sub-consult are 70% met, including preparation of a social compact, social facilitation and meetings of a project steering committee. Neither the task team nor the Slovo Park community are aware of this work.

With no one able to explain the mismatch and duplication, the task team chair is as outraged as the SPCDF, its technical advisors and SERI.

A consulting firm with a multi-year contract to manage the City's UISP consultants now seems empowered to steer the project against the directive of the high court, the oversight of Parliament, and the will of an elected political head and the affected community.

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Views expressed are not necessarily GroundUp's.