



# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE MUKURU SPA PLANNING PROCESS

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Muungano Alliance

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## Introduction

On 11th August 2017, via Kenya Gazette Notice No. 7654, the County Government of Nairobi declared sections of the Mukuru informal settlements belt a Special Planning Area (SPA). This declaration marked the culmination of years of work by Muungano Alliance alongside various County Government Departments, like-minded civil society organizations, academic institutions, and grassroots organizations. The Gazette Notice secured a legal mandate for upgrading sections of Kwa Njenga, Kwa Ruben, and Viwandani, all three being part of Mukuru- the largest cluster of informal settlements in Nairobi.

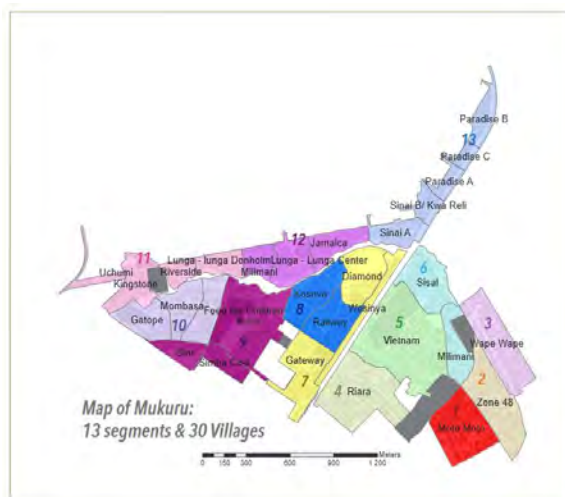


Figure 1: A Map of the Mukuru Informal Settlements Belt

As Kenya's seat of government and a socio-economic hub in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa, Nairobi is a dynamic city. It is home to some of the largest global institutions,

including the United Nations Environmental Program and several multinationals and institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, Nairobi hosts several manufacturing factories and generates a fifth of the country's Gross Domestic Product.<sup>1</sup>

Given this vibrant backdrop, Nairobi has attracted many rural-urban immigrants for decades, making it one of the fastest-growing cities in Africa, with an average annual growth rate of 4%. During the first three decades following independence in 1963, its population quadrupled from 360,798 to 1.5 million. In the past twenty years alone, Nairobi's population has expanded by more than 2 million and currently stands at just under 5 million.<sup>2</sup>

Rapid population growth far outpaces the rate of planned urban development in Nairobi. For four decades, therefore, Nairobi did not have any well-executed, structured governmental approach to house, move, school, entertain, treat and feed its bulging population. Before the one drawn in 2014, the last city master plan was done in 1973 and was never fully implemented.<sup>3</sup> Amidst this, illegal land allocation to wealthy, politically connected individuals was taking place within and around the city.

The lack of integrated planning in Nairobi was a recipe for disaster. Most of the population found themselves in underserved informal settlements in Nairobi's Eastlands, including Kibra, Dandora, Mathare, and Mukuru. In the early 1990s, there was growing political tension in Nairobi following the re-introduction of

<sup>1</sup> Makina Juma Sylvia "No Nairobi does not generate over 50% of Kenya's GDP- President Kenyatta repeats wrong stat" Published by Africa Check (14th July 2021) <https://bit.ly/3FNqsF2>

<sup>2</sup> World Population Review "Nairobi population 2022" Published by the World Population Review (2022) <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/Nairobi-population>

<sup>3</sup> Muungano Alliance, University of California Berkeley, University of Nairobi, Strathmore University "Inclusive upgrading frameworks for Nairobi" Published by Muungano wa Wanavijiji (1st August 2014) <https://www.muungano.net/publicationslibrary/2017/4/6/mukuru-studio-report-inclusive-upgrading-frameworks-for-Nairobi>

multiparty politics in Kenya. It is amidst this backdrop that the precarious nature of living in the informal settlements revealed itself, with residents of the Mukuru Informal Settlements Belt enduring some of the worst treatments.

## Anatomy of a problem

"Your family will have a better life there" is the only assurance Kasyoki needed to leave for the beautiful city about which he had heard so many good things. It was January 1968. The 20-year-old did not know what the city had in store for him as he accompanied his uncle to Nairobi. It was not easy leaving his wife Lydia and their newborn baby behind, but what else could an uneducated young man with no roots in the city do? "Once I settle in Nairobi, I will come back for you," he told her before leaving their ancestral home of Kitui.

Kasyoki's uncle fulfilled his promise of getting him a job at the paint factory where he worked. It did not pay much, but it was better than what he made, making and selling sisal ropes back home. "I'll work hard," he said to himself, "I will save and bring my family here. "Within a year, he had generated enough money to rent a shack of his own next to his uncle's. Finally, Lydia and the baby joined him in Nairobi. He truly believed that they would have a better life in the city and enjoy the much-touted fruits of independence.

There was a construction boom in newly independent Kenya's capital. The demand for paint was at an all-time high, keeping laborers at the factory extremely busy. One by one, they started a construction boom as well. They began building shacks as close as possible to the factory but close enough to Ngong' River from which they fetched drinking water. That is the setting Kasyoki found himself in when he

stepped into the area that would later come to be known as Viwandani.

"The nearer you live to the factories, the better," Uncle told him. "In this way, you will always get firsthand information on new job opportunities when they arise. Also, you don't have to walk a long distance to work." So he followed Uncle's example and rented a mud-walled shack at Viwandani. Many other laborers and their families did the same. Settled, Lydia even set up a small vegetable kiosk. Life was good.

Aside from the occasional demands from the area chief and police, which were quickly quenched by a small bribe, no one cared much about how or where the landlords built their houses. Many preferred to build as close as possible to the river, whose water quality diminished with every other additional home. By the late 1980s, the river had turned into an open sewer. Instead of its tributaries exchanging fish they once did, all they traded was fecal matter.

Although drinking water was no longer readily accessible, the Kasyokis stuck on to this place they had come to know as home. Their family had grown both in size and age within it. They had formed tight bonds in the community. Mukuru Viwandani was home, despite its many deficiencies. Beyond the lack of piped water or sewerage, Viwandani was not connected to the grid or tarmacked road network. Public schools and hospitals were few and too scattered to serve all people adequately.

Living in Mukuru was not the best life Kasyoki and his family hoped for, but it was home. One evening in 1996, a battalion of heavily armed police officers descended on Mukuru. "You have no right to live here!" they shouted. Hundreds of homes were demolished, including the Kasyoki's. While running away from the police on that dark, rainy night, Kasyoki met death.

His bloated body was found a few days later floating on the river's putrid waters, which had once, long ago, as a young man, quenched his thirst. Lydia and her four children survived the onslaught but were now bereft of a husband and father. All that was left of their houses was a chaotic field of flattened walls, wailing children, and broken dreams.<sup>4</sup>

Such was the fate of the Kasyokis and many other families. Their homes had been crushed by the mighty foot of the same government forces which denied them critical services. Lydia and other disenfranchised residents of Mukuru wanted to fight for their rights. And seek to enjoy the good lives the likes of her late husband, Kasyoki, always dreamt of but never quite grasped. For there is strength in numbers, they joined hands with other slum dwellers around Nairobi to form Muungano Alliance.<sup>5</sup>

## A description of the Muungano Alliance

Muungano Alliance is a grassroots humanitarian organization that works in Nairobi's informal settlements. It was established in the 1990s as a reaction to the forceful evictions of people living in slums such as Mukuru, Mathare, Dandora, Kawangware, and Kibra. While these informal settlements occupy only 5% of Nairobi's landmass, they house more than 50% of its population in deplorable conditions.

Muungano Alliance mobilizes residents to pursue better living conditions collectively. One of the Alliance's most significant efforts has been laying the groundwork that led the Nairobi County Government to declare parts of

the Mukuru Informal Settlement Belt as a Special Planning Area (SPA). The SPA creates space to explore innovative and inclusive upgrading solutions for up to 400,000 residents.

Contained in the Kenyan Physical Planning Act of 2012, the SPA is a legal instrument that empowers regional governments to identify and upgrade areas with unique development challenges and opportunities. Following the August 2017 declaration, Muungano Alliance and 40+ other institutions drawn from the private sector, academia, and civil society came together. They then kick-started a 2-year SPA planning process to formulate an integrated development plan for the county government's implementation.

Muungano Alliance was responsible for overall project management during the SPA Planning Process through its constituents, Muungano wa Wanavijiji and Akiba Mashinani Trust. It undertook this project management duty alongside Slum Dwellers International Kenya and Franciscan International Kenya. These organisations formed the Communication, Coordination, and Community Mobilization Consortium. As its name implies, this consortium streamlined communication between various project stakeholders, coordinated all activities, and mobilized the community during the SPA Planning Process.

## The SPA planning process

The SPA Planning process sought to formulate an integrated development plan which addresses the challenges faced by residents of Mukuru. These include: Securing land tenure,

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<sup>4</sup> A fictionalized account of real-life experiences

<sup>5</sup> Muungano wa wanavijiji "Muungano's history in our own words" Published by Muungano (2016) <https://www.muungano.net/history>

providing access to essential services, and enhancing access to justice. By developing a plan that addresses these issues and presenting it to the County Government of Nairobi for execution, Muungano Alliance and the 40+ other stakeholders (collectively Mukuru SPA Planners) provided the basis for an inclusive slum upgrading project.

The 689-acre Mukuru Informal Settlements Belt consists of up to 30 villages congregated into 13 segments spread across seven locations including Mukuru Kwa Njenga, Mukuru Kwa Ruben, Pipeline, and Viwandani. Collectively, these locations comprise up to 100,000 households. The County Government identified Viwandani, Mukuru Ruben, and Mukuru kwa Njenga as the SPA in its declaration. The area declared as SPA has a total of 30 villages.

Within Mukuru kwa Njenga, the villages are Riara, Vietnam, Milimani, Sisal, Zone 48, Wape Wape, and Moto Moto. Villages in Mukuru kwa Ruben are: Gatope, Mombasa, Feed the Children, Bins, Simba Cool, Rubie, Railway, Kosovo, Gateway, Diamond, and Wesinya. On the other hand, Viwandani consists of Uchumi, Kingstone, Riverside, Donholm, Milimani, Lunga Lunga, Jamaica, Sinai, Sinai Reli, Paradise A, Paradise B, and Paradise C.

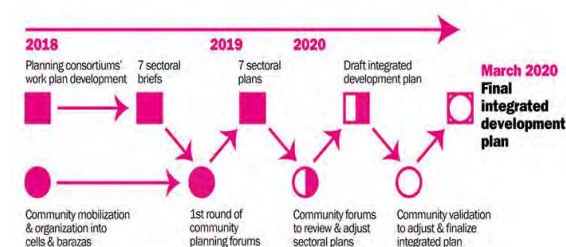


Figure 2: The Mukuru SPA Planning Process

Planning for an area with a large, diverse population brings up various challenges that would not exist in greenfield conditions.<sup>6</sup> Beyond the known problems experienced by the residents, such as evictions and inadequate access to services, some issues could only be fully understood through well-structured planning and effectively consulting with the community. Therefore, the SPA Planning Process was built around three core principles to ensure that all needs are identified and considered:

- **Participatory approach:** To ensure the Mukuru community and other stakeholders are at the center of the planning process and are actively engaged in the development of the plans
- **Conservative surgery:** Ensure the plans developed are cognizant of Mukuru space reality and have minimal displacements, and
- **Multi-Sectoral:** The approach recognizes the importance of drawing specialized expertise from relevant fields into the planning process. It also recognizes the importance of working across different sectors: government, civil society, and academia.

The project's multidisciplinary nature is what led to the onboarding of more than 40 organizations that participated in diverse planning activities. These included the County Government of Nairobi, civil society, academia, and private organizations. The planning process was bolstered by an action research partnership supported by IDRC involving the Muungano Alliance, Katiba Institute,

<sup>6</sup> Muungano wa wanavijiji {Mukuru SPA: The planner “In a brownfield the community in the client and also the designer”} Published by Muungano wa wanavijiji (1st October 2018)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnFWVaW793o&feature=emb\\_imp\\_woyt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnFWVaW793o&feature=emb_imp_woyt)



Strathmore University, and the University of Nairobi.

The first step in the planning process involved undertaking the literature review of the Mukuru SPA for the different sectors, followed by data collection to fill the gaps and community awareness about the Mukuru SPA and its organisation. Afterward, the planners launched Community Consultative Forums in all other locations apart from four villages on a 95.2-acre piece of contested land within Mukuru kwa Njenga.

The consultative process gave residents a platform to express their needs and expectations. These meetings helped urban planning experts collect community views and proposals to guide them in developing draft plans.

To streamline the data collection exercise, Muungano Alliance and the other SPA Planners organized villages within the zoned area into 13 segments of roughly 8,000 households each. Furthermore, they subdivided the segments into approximately 80 sub-clusters comprising 10 cells each, with every cell comprising ten household representatives. Using this neighborhood association model to organize the forums, Muungano Alliance ensured that voices from each household were heard and considered when developing solutions.

The County Government led the SPA Planning Process in close collaboration with the 40+ associations. They organised the Community Consultative Forums around eight thematic areas that mirror the departments of the County Government. These planning consortia were: Housing, Infrastructure & Commerce; Education, Youth Affairs & Culture; Health Services; Land & Institutional Frameworks; Water, Sanitation & Energy; Finance; Environment & Natural Resources; and finally,

Coordination, Community Organization & Communication.



Figure 3: The Mukuru SPA Planning Consortia

At the expert level, the seven sectoral consortia developed work plans, culminating in 7 sectoral briefs by the end of January 2018. They formulated work plans parallel to community mobilization conducted by 250 mobilizers trained and equipped by the Coordination, Community Organization & Communication Consortium. Each of the 80 sub-clusters elected one representative per thematic area. These 5000 community representatives attended planning meetings with the seven thematic planning teams, bringing forth their electorates' needs, desires, challenges, and aspirations.

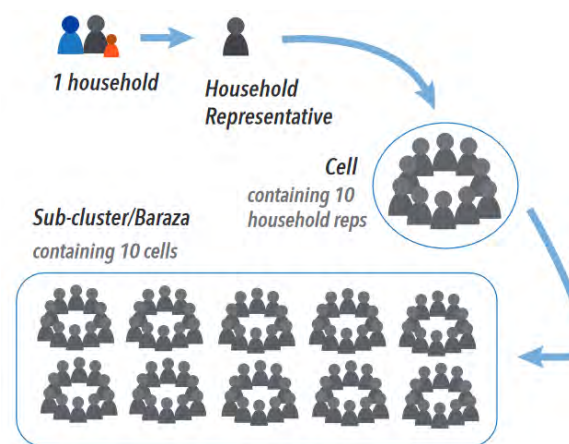


Figure 4: Community organisation structure

Community planning and validation forums involved up to 117 meetings led to the formulation of draft sectoral plans by mid-

2019. Although not all validation meetings were held following the covid-19 pandemic, the

plans were substantial enough for presentation to the County Government of Nairobi in March 2020. Each consortium contributed to the inclusive, integrated development plan by:

1. Reviewing existing literature and identifying gaps
2. Collecting and analyzing situational data and preparing a situation analysis report
3. Consulting the community and developing draft proposals
4. Developing solutions that integrated community knowledge and aspirations with due consideration to the financial, legal, and spatial realities of Mukuru.

## Successes of the SPA planning process

One of the most significant achievements is not physically tangible, yet is of great value. Nairobi County Government's declaration of a SPA has set an important precedent. It is a recognition by the local government that conventional planning processes can't adequately address slums' complex challenges; and that communities' input is critical to improving their settlements. It presents an institutional framework that can be used as a template in

other parts of Kenya and beyond for large-scale participatory upgrading of informal settlements.

Among the main concerns for Mukuru residents is the issue of land tenure. 94% of all residents within the SPA are tenants renting out shacks on private land. They have no security of tenure, and the threat of eviction, mostly illegally, is always present. This stark reality manifested itself when on 17th November 2021, over 50,000 residents were violently and abruptly rendered homeless.<sup>7</sup>

Another major win was a KES 15 billion (Approx. 132m USD) budgetary allocation for the planned development of the SPA. In June 2020, the National Treasury disbursed 10% of the allocated amount to the Nairobi County Government to kick-start the Mukuru Renewal Project.<sup>8</sup> Henceforth, the national and county governments will prioritize the Mukuru SPA during the budgeting process. Therefore, funds will be ring-fenced to address the issues identified in the integrated development plan, with a significant portion meant for constructing 13,000 new housing units.<sup>9</sup>

Implementation of the Mukuru Renewal Project, as the government terms it, has already begun. As of November 2021, the project has laid down more than 25 Km of new tarmac, easing movement around Mukuru- especially

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<sup>7</sup> Muungano Alliance "PRESS STATEMENT: The Muungano Alliance condemns recent forced evictions in Mukuru Kwa Njenga" Published by Muungano wa Wanavijiji (18<sup>th</sup> November 2021) <https://www.muungano.net/browseblogs/2021/11/18/press-statement-the-muongano-alliance-condemns-the-recent-forced-eviction-of-residents-in-mukuru-kwa-njenga>

<sup>8</sup> The National Treasury and Planning "Budget Statement: FY 2020/21; Theme "Stimulating theeconomy to safeguard livelihoods, jobs, businesses and industrial recovery" Published by the Government of Kenya Press (11th June 2020) <https://www.treasury.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Budget-Speech-2020-2021.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Collins Omulo "Cabinet approves KES15Billion for city slum housing project" Published by Nairobi News (14th September 2020) <https://nairobi.news.nation.co.ke/cabinet-approves-sh15billion-for-city-slum-housing-project/>



during the rainy season.<sup>10</sup> The government has also sunk several boreholes around the slum, thereby enhancing access to water. Around 1,000 households now have access to newly-constructed flushing toilets connected to 1.44 Km simplified sewer systems (SSS), thereby improving sanitation levels. Furthermore, three new Level 3 Hospitals have been developed, providing residents with 24-hour medical services. These and other ongoing projects, including the planned development of 13 public schools, yield immediate and long-term socio-economic benefits to residents of the Mukuru SPA.

A huge burden has been lifted off the shoulders of many residents through a significant reduction in their poverty penalty. The poverty penalty is a phenomenon where, due to cartels, it costs slum dwellers much more than those living in formal estates to access essential services such as water, electricity, and sanitation. Previously, they paid up to 172% of the standard rate for water. Today, the government is in the process of enhancing water access through pre-paid water dispensers. This will ensure households save money and time accessing. In addition, residents are assured of clean water. The government has also laid trunk sewer, and lateral infrastructure to ensure that each plot has a flush toilet connected to the sewer. Such interventions make a massive difference in residents' lives within the Mukuru Special Planning Area.

## What can be done better

Despite its merits, one of the things that the SPA Planning Process can do better is by articulating the issue of solid waste management more comprehensively. Although the inception report identified loose soil and rubbish dumps as limitations for future development, solid waste management needs to be more urgently addressed. Like in any other 21st-century urban area, the quantity, frequency, and variability of the waste generated within Mukuru are growing at an alarming rate. In addition to diapers, plastic and electronic waste are especially of increasing concern. Therefore, there is a need to set the infrastructure for environmentally friendly collection, transportation, and disposal of waste generated within the SPA.

Finally, another area that could be done better is food-sensitive planning. At the height of lockdown measures, the Covid-19 pandemic revealed how fragile informal settlements food systems are. There is silent, extreme food poverty in Mukuru, as with all other urban slums in Kenya. With tens of thousands of people who live hand to mouth having lost their jobs, they had no solid fallback plans to guarantee their food security.<sup>11</sup> This Covid-induced disruption led to massive distress in areas with socio-economic demography similar to Mukuru's.<sup>12</sup> This showed the need to mitigate

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<sup>10</sup> Muiruri Peter "Community-led upgrade to a Nairobi slum could be a model for Africa" Published by The Guardian Weekly (12th November 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/nov/12/mukuru-Kenya-community-led-upgrade-Nairobi-slum-could-be-model-for-africa>

<sup>11</sup> Cheboi Sharon J. "COVID-19: A stress test of Kenya's resilience to food-system disruptions" Published in Enabling Sustainability (22nd May 2020) <https://medium.com/enabling-sustainability/covid-19-a-stress-test-of-kenyas-resilience-to-food-system-disruptions-98c8abf6db6b>

<sup>12</sup> Owade Atula "Kenya's latest social innovation: Mobile 'Bonga points' help families access food amid COVID 19" Published in Enabling Sustainability (4th May 2020) <https://medium.com/enabling-sustainability/kenyas-latest-social-innovation-mobile-bonga-points-help-families-access-food-amid-covid-19-6f51e84b5200>

against similar food stresses in the future as the Kenyan population becomes more urbanized.<sup>13</sup>

Understandably, the SPA Planning Process was conducted before the pandemic. Save for somewhat predictable political upheavals, residents of Mukuru had never experienced food system disruptions at the scale brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, there was no historical precedence showing just how vulnerable the food system in the slum is. This is potentially why the SPA Planning Process did not include a consortium solely dedicated to food systems. That's despite the county government of Nairobi having a Department of Food, Agriculture, and Forestry.

Now that historical precedence shows the vulnerability of urban food systems, future integrated development plans must place building resilience at the heart of planning. However, Nairobi's Food, Agriculture, and Forestry sector is one of the least funded areas.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, more substantial budgetary allocations by the local government are necessary to adequately provide the department with the resources to engage urban food questions. Doing so will ensure that future integrated development plans such as the Mukuru SPA enhance food security amongst poor people in informal urban settlements.

## What Muungano Alliance will do differently in future

The Mukuru SPA Planning Process was the first of its kind in Kenya. There was no localized point of reference that could have eased the

process. Muungano Alliance and other stakeholders were, therefore, learning on the job. According to Patrick Njoroge, a Programme Manager at the Alliance, the entire process gave them insights that they would use to enhance the efficiency of future planning processes.

One of these items is documentation. Although they documented the entire process, it was not as comprehensive as they wished. Due to several moving parts and a lack of a robust tracking system, some essential items that needed to be documented were not adequately captured. Muungano intends to set up better ways of recording activities in future projects.

Likewise, Muungano Alliance would like to shorten the community consultation process. Despite its importance, taking a whole year to do community consultations was too long. Muungano sees the potential to reduce that duration by several months without watering down the quality of responses. There is a need for a better-structured community mobilization system to raise efficiency.

The Alliance also recognizes that Youth Affairs were barely articulated during the SPA Planning Process. This is worrisome, considering that most of the Mukuru population is youthful. Therefore, Muungano Alliance seeks to address youth affairs in the future better. By articulating issues faced by young people, the Alliance can develop ways of solving them and hence boost community ownership.

Food systems and climate change are two related items that were not captured sufficiently in the integrated development plan.

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<sup>13</sup> Haysom, G., Battersby, J. & Park-Ross, R., "A Food Charter for the Western Cape? A Critical Inquiry and Scoping Study" (October 2020). Food Security SA Working Paper Series. Working Paper 007

<sup>14</sup> The Nairobi City County Government "The Nairobi City County Government itemized budget FY 2019/20" Published by the Nairobi City County Press (2019) <https://bit.ly/3r9HuZG>

Muungano Alliance states that although there was a need to address these items, its framework was lacking. Therefore, future planning processes must include thematic areas dedicated to combating climate change and securing food systems, including promoting urban farming.

To make all the changes mentioned above possible, financial and human resources support is required. In addition, government partnership will be essential in ensuring additional plans developed are incorporated in Mukuru IDP and can draw down government allocations.

## Conclusion

To the average resident, a Kasyoki or Lydia somewhere, the Mukuru Special Planning Area is a godsend. It takes them one step closer to living the good lives they have always aspired for their families. The SPA is the first time the government has shown genuine interest in improving living conditions in their locality. It is

a significant effort toward transforming the slum into a healthy and functional neighborhood in the city. In that respect, Nairobi City County Government, Nairobi Metropolitan Services, and the 40+ institutions involved in the SPA Planning Process have done a commendable job in transforming the lives of hundreds of thousands of residents.

The Mukuru SPA Planning process presents several lessons that can be embraced by those involved in slum improvement projects in other parts of the world. The community consultative forums' three guiding principles and organization are replicable in different settings. It is a good sign that institutions in other African countries, including Sierra Leone, Malawi, and Ghana, have already expressed interest in embracing the approach. However, much work still needs to be done. As the implementation of the integrated development plan is just in its infancy, it is not yet clear what the final outlook will be. How the execution is done will provide insights into the dos and don'ts in future projects of a similar nature.

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