

FINAL OUTPUT

# What we have learned from our Community of Practice

September 2022

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All materials and publications from the Community of Practice are available on our [website](#).

# 1. THE CHALLENGE OF HOMELESSNESS AND INSECURE SHELTER

Tackling homelessness and insecure shelter is a global issue, and vital to creating a just world free from poverty. While definitions of homelessness and housing insecurity vary significantly across the globe, the UN estimates that some 1.6 billion people, or 20 per cent of the world's population, live in inadequate housing, of which 1 billion live in slums or informal settlements.

Types of homelessness range across a spectrum that includes: people living on the streets, without any form of shelter; people living in severely inadequate housing that is vulnerable to climate change and where residents have no right of tenure; through to 'hidden homelessness' affecting people without a permanent accommodation that are staying with family or friends or living in unsuitable housing conditions.

**Over one quarter of a million people were homeless or threatened with homelessness in England during 2020/21**

The causes of homelessness and housing insecurity are complex, with systemic problems, such as dysfunctional housing markets, overlapping with individual issues, such as family breakdown. Typically, vulnerability to homelessness is created or made worse by poverty.

The impact of homelessness is pervasive and is a major factor shaping the wellbeing and life chances of adults and children. Safe and stable housing affects multiple aspects of everyday life including health, income, education and legal status within society. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that access to secure housing plays a critical public health role, keeping people safe and combatting the spread of the virus.

The complex causes of homelessness and housing insecurity mean that there are few straightforward solutions to the challenge of ensuring that everyone has access to a safe and secure home. Actions need to take place at a strategic level, to secure a right to housing that is delivered through targeted investment, policy and regulation. At a local level, tailored support and services are vital for individuals and families to obtain the housing they need. Intervention is required, at multiple levels, to effectively design and deliver change and this can only be achieved through collaboration involving government



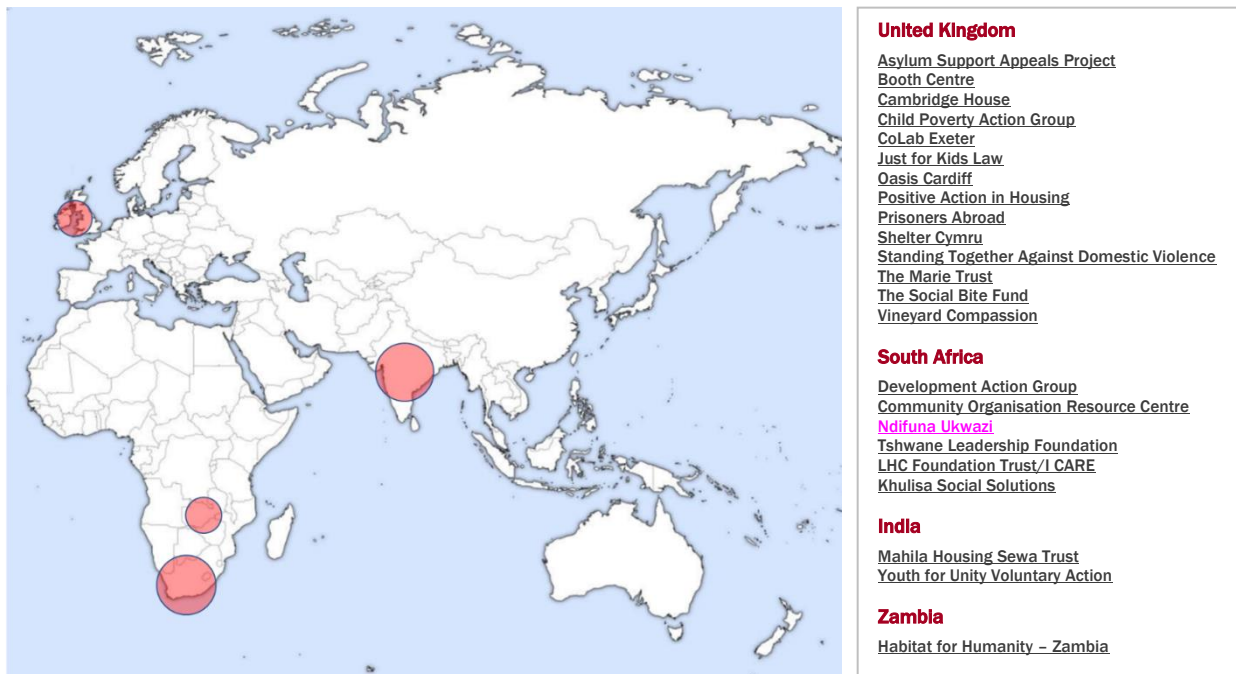
**Housing has become the frontline defence against the coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life-or-death situation ”**

UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing

and community-based organisations, along with the full participation of people that have experience of homelessness.

## 2. COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE (COP)

Comic Relief established the Community of Practice (CoP) as an integral part of the Safe Place to Be grant programme, which launched in 2019. It involved 23 funded partner organisations working in the UK, South Africa, India and Zambia that were all engaged in activity to tackle homelessness and insecure shelter, listed below.



Base map downloaded from [www.freeworldmaps.net](http://www.freeworldmaps.net)

The diversity of organisations supported under this programme provided an opportunity for funded partners to share experience and learning, and to inform the development of local and national interventions. The CoP provided a structure to explore differences and similarities in how groups addressed homelessness and insecure shelter in their own contexts, using principles that learning activity would:

- draw on the deep expertise of practitioner organisations;
- add value and avoid creating additional delivery burden for funded partners;
- respond to areas of interest and need, identified by funded partners;

- support leadership of learning activity by funded partners; and
- address wider issues in the sector that can lead to policy impact.

Sustaining city-wide partnerships through active dialogue and collective problem solving is difficult where political and policy contexts are constantly changing. Strengthening bonds of trust and clarifying the benefits of collaboration across sectors at a city-scale is key to partnership working.

The CoP held eight webinars on topics that included responding to Covid-19, co-production, housing rights and city-wide approaches to tackling homelessness. It produced five [briefing papers](#) that identified and shared learning across the webinar topics and established a [website](#) to publish [blogs](#), share information on the activities of members and encourage dialogue. The CoP also held a conference in July 2022, where members shared experiences and priorities for the future.

## 2.1 Webinars

The webinars varied in format, with thematic discussions, external speakers and presentations led by CoP members providing the core of activity. Each webinar lasted around 75 minutes and had approximately 35 participants from a cross-section of CoP members. All of the webinar sessions included breakout groups, to encourage discussion and information exchange among participants.

Topic	Date
Global Covid-19 Pandemic	13 May 2020
Building Back Better from Covid-19	15 July 2020
Co-production – Theory and Practice	15 October 2020
Co-production Futures	21 January 2021
Housing Rights	6 May 2021
Approaches to Addressing Homelessness	9 September 2021
Models of Working	20 January 2022
City-wide Approaches	21 April 2022

List of Community of Practice Webinars

## 2.2 Blogs

After each webinar a blog was posted to the CoP website, and members were encouraged to continue the conversation on-line or provide additional information on their activity or experience. While this facility was available throughout the project, it had a limited take up among members.

“ Being able to connect with the sector in places that otherwise I would not get a chance to connect with. Although lessons may be different, I have started a discussion with someone in the UK about using peer educators. Without the group I would not have been able to. However, I've had this conversation on old fashioned email! ”

Comment from a CoP member



## 2.3 Learning Briefs

“ It is a powerful showcase of how webinar findings can be made into a learning document

It is a brilliant compilation and 'snapshot' of what the community partners are achieving and learning. I think the difficulty me is the context that is so different in each area and country. By necessity the learnings become more general offering less insight ”

Comments from a CoP member

Five learning briefs were produced during the project and made available to CoP members via the website. The learning briefs provided further information and a point of reference on each of the webinar themes. They were structured to focus on the practical 'how to' aspects of the topic and to encourage CoP members to think about how the practice of other members, related to their own contexts. The briefs provided links to additional sources of information for readers, mini case studies and examples from the CoP and policy lessons.

## 2.4 Virtual Conference

A virtual conference was held on the 13 and 14 July 2022 as a final event for the CoP. The conference provided an opportunity to reflect on the key themes that had been developed through the webinars and briefing papers, provide a space for sharing of learning and good practice and to encourage further dialogue among the CoP members. In total 14 organisations and more than 30 participants took part in the conference over two half-day sessions.

“ I've learnt a lot and the discussions have given me food for thought. It's been as good (actually better) than a physical conference - because there's so much scope to discuss and share with one another ”

Comment from a CoP member

### 3. MAIN AREAS OF LEARNING

The CoP focused on four core themes: responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, using co-production, housing rights and city-wide approaches to tackling homelessness and housing insecurity. These themes provided a basis for discussion and shared learning among funded partners that had different specialisms, target groups, and that operated in both the global North and South.

#### 3.1 Responding to Covid-19 – Building Back Better



**I-Care provided a safe haven for homeless young people during the pandemic and continue to advocate for temporary shelters to remain open in Durban**

**Co-Lab Exeter worked with local partners to establish a multi-agency response to Covid-19 in the City, establishing a model of service co-production**

CoP member responses

The Covid-19 pandemic affected communities across the world, with the tragic loss of nearly 6.5 million lives recorded by August 2022. People experiencing homelessness and those living in informal and insecure shelter were at heightened risk due to their inability to isolate, their limited access to basic amenities, the density of urban settlements, and pre-existing health conditions related to poverty.

Internationally, governments put into place emergency public health measures that included additional funding and creating or re-purposing facilities to provide temporary shelter to reduce transmission of the virus. New relationships were forged between local government and community-based organisations to engage vulnerable individuals and more effectively target support services to people most impacted by the pandemic.

As outlined in Learning Brief 1, the closure of offices, drop-in centres and community venues, meant that CoP members had to quickly adapt their operations and services to continue to support people at risk. This placed enormous pressure on staff and finances to re-engineer how they worked, using social media, on-line information and telephones to maintain contact with vulnerable clients.



For CoP members the initial stages of the pandemic were fraught with difficulty, but also led to innovations that challenged existing ideas about how services can be delivered. Temporary legal protections that prevented evictions; the political priority and finance provided to getting people off the streets; and improved operation of services through joint planning and delivery by government and community-based organisations, all demonstrated the untapped potential to eradicate homelessness and insecurity. The CoP's priorities for public policy and funding after the pandemic were described in [Learning Brief 2](#).

Our conference reflected on some of the positive changes that groups have managed to retain when lockdown ended. The discussion included a presentation from the [Booth Centre in Manchester](#), who shared the aspects of their adapted services they kept to complement the in-person activity made available when their centre reopened.

**The use of digital technology, vital during the pandemic has been retained for employment, skills and housing support.**

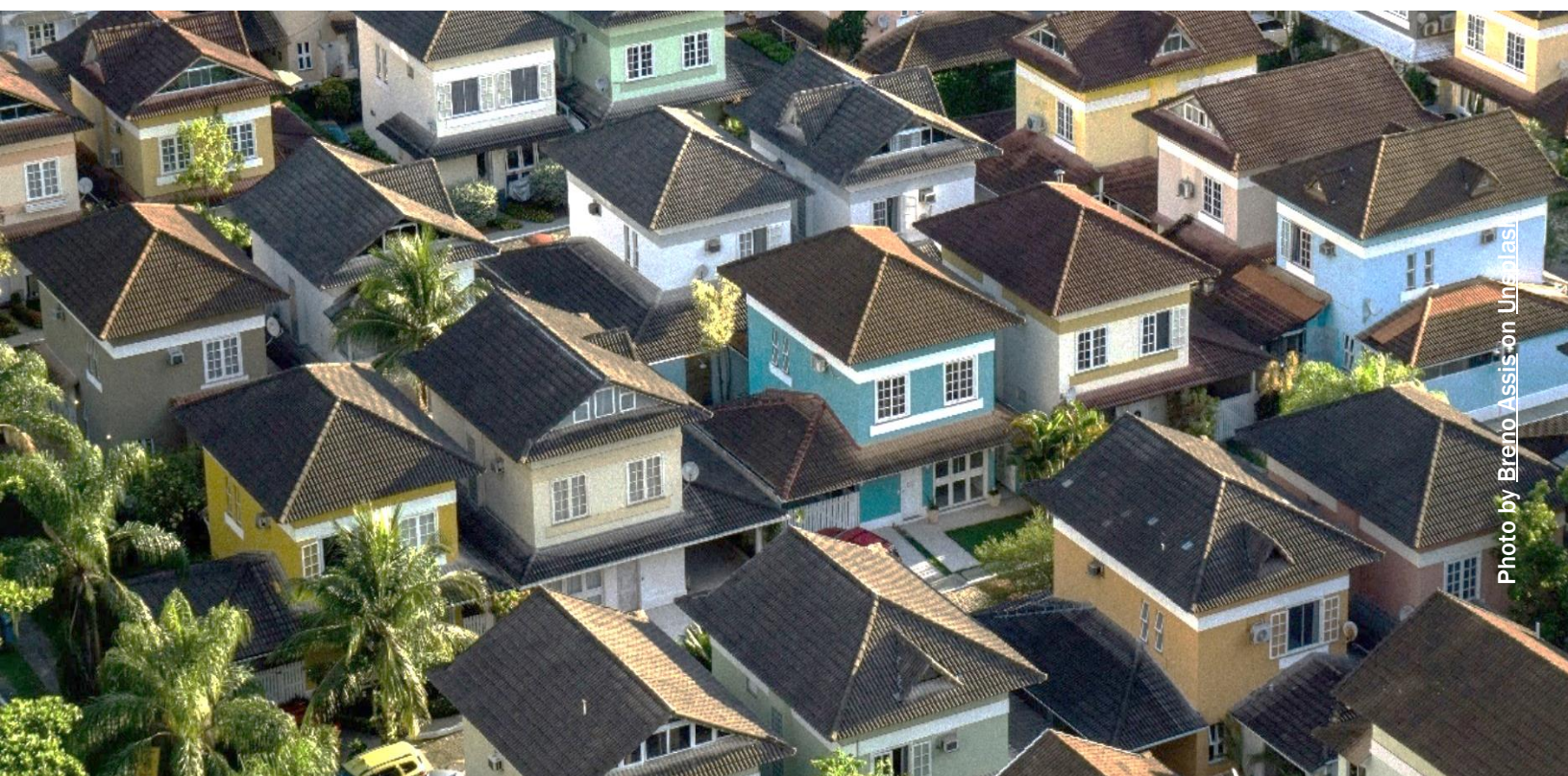
**\* Popular on-line activity packs have been retained, and complement in-person, centre-based sessions;**

**\* Continuing help for people that have moved into private sector housing, to ensure that they keep support networks in place; and**

**\* Partnership networks developed during the pandemic have continued and remain important for the Booth Centre.**



[Booth Centre](#)



# LESSONS

1

Change can happen anytime. We have become more resilient.

2

We have a new understanding of how issues such as health affect our clients.

3

We have implemented new ways of working that are more efficient.

4

We have better relationships with local government as equal partners. There is a new narrative.

5

Using virtual meeting spaces have reduced costs and increased inclusivity.

6

Our use of digital has changed the ways we communicate with clients and partners.

7

Stakeholder groups were created, and these continue, sharing resources and referrals.

8

There was a real moment of civil society organisations coming together and wanting to do something.

9

We can do anything from anywhere. It taught us we can adapt.

## 3.2 Co-production

Co-production is an umbrella term that is used to describe how organisations involve and empower the people their services are targeted at. It is also used where there is collaboration between practitioner groups and local government jointly delivering services. Co-production is not a fixed model, but a framework to equalise power relationships and draw on the full resources and capabilities of communities and organisations working together to solve complex problems.

As set out in [Learning Brief 3](#), CoP members highlighted the different forms of co-production used to address homelessness and insecure shelter in their local contexts, that included:

- involving clients in designing services and in decisions on delivery priorities;
- training services users to be peer advisers, where they can use their experience of homelessness to engage and guide others;
- using co-production to structure dialogue and joint working with local government on the delivery of homelessness, land and shelter services;
- working within the community to generate new knowledge and insights that help to inform policy design and find solutions for complex housing challenges; and
- align human and financial resources at a local level, to create the capacity to deliver sustainable settlement upgrading.

A resident of Makululu in Kabwe holds her Occupancy License that provides security of tenure for her home.



**Habitat for Humanity, Zambia**



Co-production is based on a commitment to inclusion: recognising the value of lived experience and local capacity for the design of effective policy and services. Addressing homelessness and insecure shelter is complex and needs a collaborative approach to clarify the challenges and design equitable solutions.

During the conference, Habitat for Humanity Zambia shared their experiences of delivering the Solid Ground project in Makululu and their use of community mobilisation for co-production. They highlighted how mobilisation is empowering and how it creates space for communities to define the land and housing problems they experience and the solutions that will work locally. Mobilisation as a foundation for co-production enables a partnership between the community, local government and other

stakeholders to build leadership and sustain development interventions over the long-term.

The model employed by Habitat for Humanity Zambia, also used in India and South Africa, which is focused on creating grassroots engagement and leadership in housing and settlement upgrading.



Watch the video 'Solid Ground: Access to Secure Land and Safe Homes Project' [here](#).

**Habitat for Humanity, Zambia**

The core elements included:

- building a collective voice by working within the community to engage residents, creating structures that enable collective decision making, accountability and the basis for a social movement;
- educating and informing to ensure that all residents are aware of their housing rights and local structures are used to cascade information through the community networks; and
- creating capacity for local action by using the full human and financial resources of local government, communities and other stakeholder working together.

# REFLECTIONS



Helps to open up dialogue on difficult issues.



A way to get consensus on big changes.



A means for people to understand their entitlements.



It is an invitation to 'come on the journey with us'.



Using the full resources of the community and government together.



Builds local leadership. People are the agents of change.



A way to manage complex local politics and relationships.



A basis for deep local ownership and decision-making.



Particularly good for empowering women.

### 3.3 Housing Rights

While adequate housing is a pre-condition for human development, few countries have included a clear right to housing in their constitution or in national statutory frameworks. Legal protections are often contained within a patchwork of legislation, as in the UK. Even where rights are in place, such as in South Africa, implementation can be limited and full rights for low-income populations need to be fought for.



Homeless people in Mumbai obtain official identity cards, allowing them to access public services.

**YUVA India**



As summarised in [Learning Brief 4](#), across the CoP members a rights-based approach to land and housing operates at a number of levels:

- at the individual level, where CoP members provide information, advice, advocacy to support people to challenge for their rights, including obtaining identification documents needed to access housing and welfare services;

- at a settlement level, to secure tenure, stop evictions, obtain better access to basic water and sanitation services and to support mobilisation and networking of community members;
- at a social level, challenging homelessness and insecure shelter through policy action, the courts, campaigning, public awareness raising and political debate.

A cornerstone of a rights-based approach is educating individuals on how laws work and the duties of public agencies. Being aware of rights improves the ability of individuals and collective groups to hold authorities to account.

Securing rights and legal protections to land and housing is a challenge shared by the CoP members. During the conference, CoP members discussed the various approaches they take within their local context and the key barriers and enablers to a rights-based approach on housing and insecure shelter.

- Barriers to a rights-based approach operate at a number of levels that include a lack of information available to individuals on their existing rights through to weak national policy and legal frameworks on land and housing. Changing laws and local regulations can be a long and difficult process that requires sustained engagement by communities and local groups.
- Enablers to a rights-based approach focused on how government can be made more accountable by collective lobbying and advocacy, with stronger networking of groups at a national level. Creating a broader movement for housing rights that is grounded in collective local action is vital to fundamentally improve access to housing and shelter.

### **Housing Rights in Action**

#### **Ndifuna Ukwazi**

##### ***South Africa***

Uses community organising, research, advocacy and the use of the law to challenge evictions and secure land, in Cape Town, for affordable housing development.

#### **Cambridge House**

##### ***United Kingdom***

Works to protect tenants and strengthen rights and access to justice for people exploited by criminal landlords.





What the CoP members said about a housing rights approach



## BARRIERS

Gender Inequality – women not recognised as legitimate property owners

Basic unaffordability of land in cities is a barrier to housing the urban poor.

A lack of internal capacity and expertise limits the challenge we can make.

Government is hard to engage if you do not know who is responsible.



## ENABLERS

National networking of campaign and advocacy groups to create a movement.

More equitable enforcement and community together to discuss problems.

Bringing government and community together to discuss problems.

Educate people they know their housing rights.

Hold government to account – are they implementing existing rights?

### 3.4 City-wide Approaches

The activity of the CoP has highlighted the similarities, across country contexts, in how members support individuals with complex needs and navigate relationships with government. While specific goals differ, the CoP members share the challenge of working at multiple levels: with people and communities impacted by homelessness and insecure shelter and at the same time with city government and the wider housing market.

Working at a city-level enables groups to influence housing market policy and enter into dialogue with local government on issues of homelessness and settlement upgrading. It also provides the scale to build a collective voice among people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. Creating a coherent message that tackles the misconceptions about homelessness for public and political audiences is vital to drive change in policy and regulation. In India, as shown in the video below, YUVA have used the *ComplexCity* urban festival to bring the experience of homelessness to the fore; providing street tours and arts events by local people to engage policy makers in a discussion about housing and land rights.



ComplexCity is an urban festival in Mumbai aiming to create a new narrative on the experience of housing inequality. Watch the video [here](#).

**YUVA India**



In [Learning Brief 5](#), CoP members provided insights into how to establish and maintain city-wide relationships to tackle homelessness and insecure shelter.

- Initiating city-wide approaches should start with an analysis of the relationships that are important to reduce homelessness and how these can be cultivated. Being clear on short term goals and identifying influential organisations and individuals is key to productive dialogue. For community-based organisations it is important to demonstrate the unique contribution that organised local action makes to effective local development.
- Maintaining city-wide partnerships can be a real challenge after initial project activity has finished. Partnerships need to be reinvigorated and given new goals and purpose to be productive. Regular communications among stakeholders, outside of formal meetings, and initiating new and collaborative activity that bring government and community together can all help to keep partnerships alive.



TLF shared a video of their city-wide actions to support homeless people during the Covid-19 pandemic.  
[Tshwane Leadership Foundation](#)



- Tracking impact of partnerships is vital to understanding the difference being made. Identifying short- and medium-term goals and establishing clear numerical and

qualitative indicators is key. Documenting change and bringing in the experience and perspectives of stakeholders can provide new insights to performance measures. The complexity of homelessness means that there is unlikely to be any shortcuts, so understanding how change happens is vitally important.

During our conference Tshwane Leadership Foundation shared their approaches to city-wide inclusive partnership working. Focused on reducing street homelessness in the city of Tshwane, TLF work through advocacy, litigation and tailored housing responses to support older people and individuals with psycho-social challenges. The city-wide partnership brings together a faith-based community organisation, a public law firm and an activist university research centre with the city government, to end homelessness. The benefits of this partnership were clear through the lockdown, where the partners established 27 shelters assisting 2,000 people and provided an advice helpline that prevented around 1,500 illegal evictions in Tshwane. Building knowledge and capacity at the grassroots, TLF has established a participatory city-wide method of addressing homelessness.

## LESSONS

1

Access to data is vital to engage city authorities.

2

Most useful where there are complex overlapping issues.

3

Be open to new / unexpected partnerships.

4

Be clear on what actions can be achieved best at city level.

5

Focus on practical solutions that can be supported by partners.

6

Formal structures, such as working committees, are useful to get stakeholders together.

## 4. FUTURE PLANS FOR COP MEMBERS

At the conclusion of the conference, CoP members were invited to comment on their priorities over the next 12 – 24 months. The priorities take account of changing contexts after the Covid-19 pandemic and continuing activity to strengthen connections to people experiencing homelessness and insecure shelter. While a partial picture, the priorities shared by CoP members attending the conference are summarised the boxes below.

A number of common themes emerged from the discussion on priorities for the next two years.

- Expanding methodologies for community engagement and co-production. Initiatives such as the *ComplexCity* festivals and the Participatory Approach for Safe Shelter Awareness (PASSA) developed by Habitat for Humanity Zambia put user voices at the centre of planning for settlement upgrading.
- Strengthening networks of community organisations, local government and city-stakeholders. Through partnership networks, build delivery capacity for city-wide actions.
- Identifying long-term strategic actions for securing tenure. Developing a mix of approaches that help to set precedent that can be influential in legal and public policy spaces.
- Attracting funding to support core activities is vitally important to continue work to tackle homelessness.

Across the contributors there is a commitment to continued learning as a way to refine actions and increase the momentum for change. The main channels are through identifying and applying good practice from other contexts; improved networking within cities to share experience and perspectives; and expanding participation of people with experience of homelessness.

## Habitat for Humanity Zambia

- Will continue to build local capacity to enable communities to have dialogue with local government on their needs.
- Plans to scale up advocacy activity to be more intentional about allowing community voices to be heard.
- Aim to support local residents to take ownership of the relationship with government to make actions more self-sustaining.

## I-CARE

- Plan to strengthen networks within the city to support interventions with children.
- Aim to secure local budgets to expand facilities and local service delivery in Durban.
- Continue to provide a safe space for young men, as a route off the streets.

## Tshwane Leadership Foundation

- Will be conducting a headcount of homeless, as a basis for dialogue with government.
- Are continuing on-line services to advise people resisting evictions.
- Plan to expand partnership networks in order to improve the city response to homelessness.

## Khulisa Social Solutions

- Will secure future funding to expand the numbers of people accessing services.
- Plan to fully integrate a peer support programme into their psycho-social services.
- Aim to deepen their footprints in the community through more effective marketing.

## Ndifuna Ukawzi

- Will bring together global examples of tenure security as a way to deepen a rights-based approach to housing.
- Aim to strengthen responses to safeguarding in a context of violence and inter-generational trauma.
- As an organisation, reflect on how best to accelerate changes to legal frameworks.

## YUVA India

- Aim to influence rental housing policy.
- Will continue mobilisation activity developed during the pandemic.
- Remain agile to respond to changing economic and public health conditions.



Photo by StreetMarketStore on Unsplash



## 5. LESSONS FROM THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Reflecting on the experience of developing and delivering the CoP, a number of points arise about the effectiveness of the model and the learning process that can inform future knowledge exchange activities.

- **The format of the CoP broadly worked** as it provided a safe and open environment for the exchange of information and ideas. Feedback from CoP members shows the combination of webinars and written material was appreciated and the facilitation encouraged inclusive participation. **We recommend** that future learning activity follows a similar format to encourage sharing and learning by participants.
- **Delivering the CoP virtually had positive and negative aspects.** As Covid-19 necessitated virtual meetings, the project was unable to deliver an 'in-person' gathering, as originally planned. While overall feedback has been positive, an 'in-person' event at the beginning of the project may have helped to strengthen the interaction between CoP groups. **We recommend**, where possible that an 'in-person' gathering of participants should be included for future projects, to strengthen relationships between participants.
- **Internet connections can affect engagement and participation.** The stability of internet connections and power load sharing occasionally limited the quality of participation. While this did not have a major negative impact on participation of global South members of the CoP, **we recommend** that this factor is planned for in the format and types of exercises used during webinars.
- **On balance the frequency of webinars worked.** Engagement of CoP members was geared to be sufficiently regular to encourage active participation, but not create an additional burden or distract from the core work of the funded partners. The requirement not to overburden funded partners limited direct contact between webinar events. **We recommend** that more time is built into future projects to encourage funded partners to have a greater engagement and leadership over learning activity.
- **The project website was a useful repository for information, but was less effective** as an active site for posting and disseminating information from the individual CoP

members. **We recommend** future projects use existing social media platforms familiar to participants, rather than create a bespoke web presence, to encourage dialogue between groups outside of organised activity.

- **Catering to diverse organisations across different contexts is challenging.** A majority of funded partners have participated in the project, with a core group of around 12 - 15 members appearing to have benefited the most from the discussions and activity. Engaging a diverse group of organisations on every topic can mean that the content becomes too generalised and reliant on participants 'connecting the dots' to their own specific areas of interest. **We recommend** that where there is a diverse group a more 'pick-and-mix' approach is encouraged, with context and topic specific material developed to encourage leadership by funded partners.

Overall, the idea of establishing a parallel learning activity alongside delivery and grant monitoring and evaluation is good, and particularly so where the problems are complex and contextual. Early engagement of participants to ensure they are clear on the purpose of the CoP is important. For issues of homelessness and insecure shelter there are few simple short-term solutions, so learning from own and others experience should be encouraged. The global character of the problems also reinforces the potential benefits of shared learning across the North and South.

For future projects, a greater emphasis could be placed on the contribution and leadership of funded partners. This would require a less structured format than was used in the CoP, to allow spaces for open conversation as well as feedback loops to test and revise learning topics as the CoP progressed. While mindful not to over-burden funded partners, making space for comments and suggestions may help tune activity to the specific challenges experienced by the participants. It may also help to surface particular examples or areas of expertise among members that could be shared more widely with the group.

Comic Relief could develop this model further, recognising that all groups working on urban poverty issues are essentially engaged in problem solving. Using learning tools and reflection can be useful to identify interventions and solutions that have not been tried and, as part of learning networks, test the validity of ideas. Based on this CoP, **we recommend** the following.

- **Experimentation and learning are made more central to project grant delivery.** All grant projects should be required to identify aspects of delivery that can lead to

innovation or improve outcomes for beneficiaries. Grant funding should allow for new approaches to be developed, documented and disseminated.

- **The expertise of funded partners should be shared within programme structures.** Where CoP are being established as part of delivery frameworks, topic leaders should be identified from within the cohort to share knowledge and good practice. This should form a core element of contract delivery requirements.
- **Experiential forms of learning should be incorporated into grant delivery.** Comic Relief should facilitate mentoring, exchange visits and 'sandbox' problem solving exercises to enable funded partners to view their challenges from different perspectives. Participation should be a mandatory part of project delivery.