

# Closing the COVID Accountability Gap:

Civil Society–Government Collaboration  
in South Africa

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In 2021, the International Budget Partnership published an assessment of 120 countries' management of COVID relief, which found that too many governments were using the excuse of urgency to avoid being as transparent, accountable or inclusive as they could be. These shortcuts and limitations, however, are neither necessary nor inevitable. IBP's report showcased notable instances in which governments acted swiftly to put in place adequate transparency around their policy responses, where accountability institutions — such as legislatures and supreme audit institutions (SAIs) — stepped up to provide effective oversight, and civil society organizations contributed information on the needs of the most vulnerable. In a series of briefs, we have taken a more in-depth look at these good practices — delving into government objectives in implementing the practices, the impacts achieved, and lessons that can be drawn from these practices for their replication in other countries. The main goal of these briefs is to provide governments with information on good practices in fiscal openness and accountability that they can incorporate into their own policies, to be implemented during periods of crisis and beyond.

This brief looks at South Africa's emergent civil society-government collaboration to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on South Africa's vulnerable citizens.<sup>1</sup> Since 2020, the Asivikelane campaign ("Let us protect each other" in Zulu) has highlighted severe public service shortages in South Africa's informal settlements across eight metropolitan municipalities ("metros"), and 21 smaller municipalities, reaching 3 million residents living in informal settlements.<sup>2</sup> Using a simple but effective survey, implemented via WhatsApp and telephone, the campaign used service-delivery information to engage government.

Access to basic services for the majority of urban working and poor residents living in informal settlements is both a local and global concern. Since 2004, South Africa has experienced a growing number of local service-delivery protests. Several civil society groups working in informal settlements across South Africa have used a variety of strategies to hold local governments accountable and ensure access to basic services. IBP South Africa has used both social audits and budget research and analysis to improve basic services in informal settlements by understanding the weaknesses in public-finance management systems that cause the poor quality and amount of services in informal settlements. (Social audits are a community-led process of engaging government in regard to services for the poor by monitoring service delivery on the basis of government commitments contained in budgets and other official documents [IBP South Africa, 2019].) The pandemic provided an unusual opportunity to reenergize these efforts and has yielded some unprecedented, incremental progress toward civil society-government collaboration aimed at improving services in informal settlements.

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<sup>1</sup>The other briefs that are published by IBP as part of this series of briefs on good practices focus on government-led processes. This brief focuses on an innovative and effective participation mechanism that is led by civil society groups in South Africa. However, the mechanism can be used by governments as well, especially in partnerships with civil society.  
<sup>2</sup>The metros covered include City of Cape Town, City of Joburg, Tshwane, Nelson Mandela Bay, eThekweni, Buffalo City and Ekurhuleni and a few smaller towns, Emalahleni, Kraysna, Mossel Bay, Msunduzi and Witzenberg.

## How does Asivikelane work?

Asivikelane is a joint initiative of several South African civil society organizations.<sup>3</sup> The campaign was initiated when the country entered a national lockdown in March 2020, to “mobilize settlement residents to monitor failures in delivery of critical hygiene services and report the problems” (van Zyl, 2020).

As a national and local government level coalition of mostly community-based organizations and residents from informal settlements, the “main goal” of the campaign was to “engage governments” in responding to basic service shortages in informal settlements.<sup>4</sup> IBP South Africa manages and coordinates service-delivery data generated through Asivikelane. It works through its civil society partners to engage residents who collect data using an electronic data collection system. This system works offline, making it easy for residents to monitor services since they often don’t have access to stable internet or surplus mobile data. Through Asivikelane, partners have trained 3,400 residents (of which 2,250 are women) as community facilitators to directly engage with governments; they represent 540 informal settlements across the 8 metro municipalities as well as 13 smaller municipalities. Community facilitators are a key component of maintaining the growing network of residents of informal settlements in Asivikelane. IBP South Africa

contracts with partners to manage these networks and to pay for stipends, mobile airtime and transport as required for implementation.<sup>5</sup> Partners such as Planact and SASDI who work on multiple sites have also added “super community facilitators.” These super community facilitators manage the community facilitators and support partners in their advocacy with metros.<sup>6</sup>

During the early stages of the pandemic, Asivikelane’s focus was on engaging the water, sanitation, solid waste and energy departments. To bring problems to the attention of the relevant city agencies, the campaign disseminated its service-delivery information results through weekly press releases as well as via social media, using red, orange and green traffic lights to rank municipalities (there have been 22 national press releases since the start of the campaign). By asking residents to answer three questions about access to water, clean toilets, and waste removal, the Asivikelane campaign offered local governments insight into the daily experiences of residents and demanded that the governments improve access to these services.<sup>7</sup> A year later Asivikelane is exploring a range of other strategies, such as citizen engagement with budget processes and formal partnerships with provincial and municipal governments, as ways of addressing the gaps in service delivery in informal settlements.

<sup>3</sup>IBP South Africa, Abahlali baseMjondolo, Afesis-corporan, Dennis Goldberg House of Hope, Development Action Group, Luthando OVC Care Centre, 1to1, People’s Environment Planning, Planact, Positive Action Campaign, SASDI Alliance, Small Projects Foundation, Social Justice Coalition and Tshwane Leadership Foundation.

<sup>4</sup>Albert van Zyl, IBP-South Africa. Personal correspondence with author, October 5.

<sup>5</sup>Tracy Jooste, IBP-South Africa, interview with author, October 14, 2021.

<sup>6</sup>Albert van Zyl, IBP-South Africa. Personal correspondence with author, October 15, 2021.

<sup>7</sup>Residents answered the following questions weekly: 1) Is there clean water available in your settlement? 2) Were the toilets cleaned in the last seven days? 3) Was waste collected in your settlement in the last seven days?

# Government response to Asivikelane

Asivikelane achieved large-scale service-delivery improvement: access to water improved in 72 settlements, sanitation services improved in 58 settlements, and waste removal services were introduced or increased in 71 settlements. The Asivikelane [website](#) includes impact case studies from various municipalities.

Within the first week, two city governments took steps to fix the problems that were identified through Asivikelane (new taps and water tanks in some settlements, regular cleaning of toilets and protective gear for janitors) (van Zyl, 2020). For example, in Cape Town between March and December 2020, settlements like UT Sobambisana and Azania-Khayelitsha and BM-Khayelitsha received water tanks, and in another settlement a blocked drain was fixed within days. In the ninth week of the campaign, new taps were installed and new standpipes were received in Ezikrebheni. A year later, these positive responses continued. In July 2021, Buffalo City Metro Municipality employed people to clean streets, improved cleaning toilets and was quick in responding to complaints from residents. In the city of Joburg, residents of Ivory Park tweeted that roads were tarred, frequency of toilet cleaning improved, and new chemical toilets were delivered. Similar improvements were reported from Ekurhuleni.

In eThekweni, Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni, municipal officials use Asivikelane reports as part of their fault reporting system. In eThekweni, for example, the fault reporting system had been lacking. Asivikelane data helped fill a gap, and partners approached the municipal government to engage. Officials acknowledged that they did not have a fault reporting system. Other non-metro municipalities (Emalahleni and Msunduzi) also reached out to Asivikelane partner Planact, expressing interest in working with Asivikelane. Before these official requests, Asivikelane's work was limited to metro municipalities.

The national government also responded positively. The national Department of Human Settlements (DHS) requested a briefing, asking Asivikelane partners to bring them service-delivery problems on a weekly basis (van Zyl, 2020). This briefing is now a regular agenda item in the department's management meeting.<sup>8</sup> The DHS also created the Informal Settlements Upgrading Partnership Grant that earmarks funding for informal settlement upgrading, which had not existed previously. The DHS uses Asivikelane reports to monitor metro implementation of the Urban Settlement Development Grant and the Informal Settlement Upgrading Partnership Grant. The National Treasury also uses Asivikelane reports to monitor metro service delivery in their monthly meetings.

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<sup>8</sup>Tracy Jooste, IBP South Africa, interview with author, October 11, 2021.

However, some municipalities did not respond favorably. Asivikelane received pushback from some cities that the campaign’s informational releases were based on unrepresentative samples of populations and thus were not an accurate assessment of the conditions or experiences of residents.<sup>9</sup> In some settlements, partners made multiple attempts to engage municipalities, without success. For example, in municipalities like Nelson Mandela Bay and Emfuleni, the situation did not change even as residents faced recurring threats from COVID-19. Service delivery data collected by Asivikelane partner Planact (from June 2020 to May 2021) revealed significantly low rates of responsiveness for toilet cleaning and drainage and waste collection in informal settlements. However, with ongoing community–local government engagement, the situation in some of these areas is improving. For example, residents from Area 11 Gunguluza and Westville in Nelson Mandela Bay reported that eight water tanks were installed for the disabled and that residents received refuse bags (Asivikelane 2021c).

According to a recent Asivikelane national report, the provision of basic services in informal settlements has stagnated, and in many metros service provision has “deteriorated” during the lead-up to local government elections (Asivikelane 2021a). For example, sanitation has worsened in Buffalo City and Cape Town, access to water has declined in Johannesburg, and refuse removal and water access has worsened in Tshwane. Nationally, 40% of informal settlement residents lack access to taps and decent sanitation, 48% report leaking pipes for communal taps, and 45% reported their municipalities have never fixed toilets or taps in their communities (Asivikelane 2021a).

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<sup>9</sup>Tracy Jooste, IBP South Africa, interview with author, October 11, 2021.



# What changed as a result of the campaign?

The service-delivery problems in South Africa’s urban informal settlements preceded the pandemic and the Asivikelane campaign. However, the simultaneous and regular reporting of common problems across municipalities, facilitated by Asivikelane, provided timely information to municipal government, and some of the municipalities responded positively to meet residents’ service-delivery needs during the pandemic.

Within the first few weeks, the National Treasury “found more than R5bn to allocate to informal settlement services” (Makwela and van Zyl, 2020). The service-delivery information from various informal settlements was also used by the national Department of Human Settlements and the auditor general to monitor municipalities’ service delivery. Asivikelane information was perceived as actionable and could be integrated into government processes, assisting national agencies in allocating funds as well as in performing their oversight role. After more than a year of producing service-delivery

information, Asivikelane convenors are using new strategies to foster long-term partnerships with local governments to improve service delivery for informal settlement residents.

A year after Asivikelane was launched, IBP South Africa is leveraging its existing core strategy on budget analysis and research work. This preexisting capacity for budget research and analysis aims to further strengthen the dialogue channels Asivikelane reports opened up for Asivikelane convenors, in local, provincial and national government (albeit with varying degrees of access). The aim of this complimentary strategy is to look at the budgetary reasons for poor service delivery and then to encourage and facilitate direct engagement between citizens and government officials by improving relevant budget allocations and budget implementation. According to IBP South Africa, it is a push for “budget reform from below” aimed at achieving better services for South Africa’s marginalized population.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Albert van Zyl, IBP-South Africa. Personal correspondence with author, October 15, 2021.



In 2021, IBP South Africa, together with convenors and residents of informal settlements, completed eight budget analyses in six metros and two local municipalities. The analysis was followed by written submissions and presentations at in-person hearings on draft municipal budgets. Based on the analysis, Asivikelane published a budget synthesis highlighting lack of transparency in metro budgets, which makes it difficult to identify planned spending for services. This synthesis also points to an imbalance among budget allocations and recommends shifting resources from upgrading long-term projects (a process prone to delays and reallocations) to incremental services such as taps and toilets. The synthesis also highlights declining budget allocation for sanitation and water maintenance in eThekweni and Johannesburg (Asivikelane 2021b). Several municipalities (including Nelson Mandela Bay, Buffalo City and Msunduzi) responded positively to citizens' input on municipal budgets and made new allocations for informal settlement upgrading in their 2021-22 budgets. In some cases, like that of Msunduzi, the submissions themselves did not have

an impact, but they did lead to conversations with the local municipality resulting in maintenance of several taps and toilets.

The challenge is ensuring that these incremental gains from Asivikelane inform more sustainable solutions to better prepare municipalities for future crises. In addition to budget submissions, Asivikelane convenors in various municipalities are also exploring formal partnerships with governments. Provincial treasuries and Departments of Human Settlements have various legal oversight responsibilities over non-metro municipalities in their provinces (metros are overseen by the National Treasuries). Asivikelane is engaging these agencies to bolster their oversight roles. In November 2020, the Western Cape province Provincial Treasury and Department of Human Settlement approached Asivikelane convenors to expand Asivikelane from 4 to 18 local governments in that province. These formal partnerships seem to hold promise for ensuring more equitable service delivery in informal settlements, although their exact nature is still evolving.





# Lessons from South Africa

Several lessons can be learned from the emergent civil society–government collaboration in South Africa that aims to improve access and quality of basic services in informal settlements during crises.

## Lessons for governments

First, receptive governments and mobilized communities can enhance each other’s development efforts. Creative experiments by civil society can produce results and provoke a different kind of thinking about the nature of the problem that governments are trying to address. Support for civil society partners who have their ear to the ground could mean more inclusive and accountable government programs and services.

Asivikelane shows that partnering with civil society can help governments better understand local needs and find better solutions to problems. Asivikelane provided local and national government with critical information that catalyzed a fruitful response (in some municipalities), aimed at mitigating the effects of the pandemic. This partnership should not be viewed as in conflict with strengthening local government.

Finally, government can support processes in which civil society groups strive to influence state policies. Government can also invite civil society into a process to co-develop emergency responses that initiate multilevel (local-provincial-national), cross-sectoral (municipal services-provincial treasury-national finance department) cooperation, and provide partners with necessary resources.

## Lessons for civil society

First, Asivikelane’s weekly releases have a user-centered focus on actionable information, which serves to mobilize residents and engage government. This exercise of collecting and sharing data, accompanied by the analysis of other influencing actors and considerations, should be conducted regularly depending on the context and human capacity and resources of civil society groups or their corresponding national and state coalitions.

Another lesson is that civil society groups must recognize that meaningful engagement — which fosters ongoing collaborative dialogue and yields positive changes in service delivery decision-making and practices — occurs over a period of time. In some metro and non-metro areas, Asivikelane partners were putting out service-delivery information releases for a year before getting traction with government.

Finally, civil society groups should consider having multiple access points into governments. For example, in some South African municipalities, Asivikelane relied on 5 or 10 channels at various levels of the bureaucracy to engage with government. Working at various levels of government — in many cases national government, which tends to have the necessary power for financial and administrative decision-making — has helped Asivikelane achieve its goals.

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