

PRESS RELEASE
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South African Non-Profit Showcases Transformative Approach to Global Housing Crisis at the Clinton Global Initiative 2024

Urban Think Tank Empower (UTTE), a South African non-profit dedicated to addressing the country's affordable housing challenges, made a groundbreaking presentation at the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) 2024, held in New York City on 23 and 24 September. UTTE's inclusion at this prestigious global event highlights the international recognition of its innovative Empower Upgrade Model, which takes a holistic approach to housing by integrating infrastructure, energy access, food security, social amenities, and economic opportunities into the communities it serves.

The CGI, an annual gathering of global leaders, is renowned for catalysing actionable solutions to the world's most pressing problems. UTTE's invitation to present their Empower Upgrade Model on such a stage represents a significant milestone not just for the organisation, but for the broader conversation around housing as a human right. South Africa's housing crisis, marked by a backlog of over 1.5 million homes, leaves millions living in informal settlements with limited access to essential services. The Empower Upgrade Model directly tackles these challenges by transforming land within informal settlements into sustainable, and empowering community-led developments.

"Our participation at the Clinton Global Initiative was not just an opportunity to showcase our work but a reminder of the global nature of housing insecurity," says Delana Finlayson, Managing Director of UTTE, reflecting on the significance of UTTE's presentation. "Hearing from leaders in cities like Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and New York about their struggles with housing reminded me that this is a shared crisis across borders. If countries with vast resources like the US face these same issues, it's a testament to how vital community-driven, sustainable solutions like ours are in addressing housing challenges worldwide." Knowledge sharing and community building play a crucial role in this process – UTTE's goal at CGI was not only to present their solution but to gather international feedback, learn from other innovative approaches, and explore how these could be adapted and utilised in our local context.

A global platform, a local solution

Finlayson was particularly moved by the words of Suyen Barahona, a fellow CGI participant, who stated that governments must stop implementing poor solutions for poor people. This resonated

deeply with UTTE's mission, especially in light of South Africa's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which Finlayson described as an example of how housing solutions can sometimes fall short. "We cannot and must not ever provide poor solutions for poor people," she emphasised. "Our model is built on dignity and empowerment, not just housing."

Throughout the event, UTTE's interactive display, which demonstrated its community-driven design approach, garnered significant interest. High-profile attendees, including US Secretary of Housing Adrienne Todman, engaged deeply with UTTE's vision. "Secretary Todman and her team were incredibly encouraging," noted Finlayson. "They were impressed with our model and expressed that they could learn a lot from our approach. That validation, especially from such a prominent figure in global housing policy, was a huge affirmation for us."

Expanding horizons and building partnerships

UTTE's work attracted the attention of numerous international delegations, including representatives from Haiti, who expressed keen interest in adapting the Empower Upgrade Model to address their own housing needs. "The potential for future partnerships across Africa and beyond is immense," Finlayson shared. "We had several conversations about funding support and collaborations, which could amplify the impact of our work on a much larger scale."

As UTTE continues to scale its Empower Upgrade Model in South Africa, with plans to build 1 000 homes and create 7 000 jobs over the next five years, their experience at CGI 2024 has only strengthened their resolve. The presentation underscored the importance of global collaboration in tackling the housing crisis and the potential for locally-developed solutions like theirs to offer hope far beyond South Africa's borders.

About Urban Think Tank Empower (UTTE)

Urban Think Tank Empower (UTTE) is the African subsidiary of Urban-Think Tank, based in Cape Town, South Africa. To date, UTTE has built 77 homes, housing 449 residents, alongside four commercial facilities, a community centre, an urban farm, and a public playground in Khayelitsha. Through these initiatives, approximately 350 jobs have been created, positively impacting over 1 400 individuals in the greater community. Over the next five years, UTTE aims to scale their Empower Upgrade Model, bringing dignity, opportunity, and community cohesion to South Africa's most vulnerable.