THE UTTE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Building Resilience Before Crises

Empower's approach to safe and sustainable communities

Urban Think Tank Empower (UTTE) presents a proactive and community-driven solution to South Africa's housing crisis, addressing the vulnerabilities of millions living in unsafe conditions. Through its Empower Upgrade Model, UTTE integrates fire- and flood-resistant housing with access to essential services like water and sanitation, renewable energy, and public spaces. By focusing on building resilient communities, not just individual homes, Empower is transforming lives, ensuring safe and sustainable futures.

In South Africa, Section 26 of the Constitution guarantees the right to "access to adequate housing", yet the reality often falls short. As a response to insufficient provision of formal housing and rapid urbanisation, many families are forced to build informal homes in unsafe areas such as wetlands and floodplains. These precarious conditions leave many without access to basic services and vulnerable to natural disasters. UTTE offers a proactive humanitarian solution to address these challenges head-on, by providing safe and resilient housing and building secure communities for those most at risk.

UTTE's Empower Upgrade Model offers an innovative and holistic approach by addressing the broader needs of entire communities, rather than focusing solely on individual homes. It integrates essential urban infrastructure such as equitable sanitation through formal drainage and plumbed clean water access with social amenities, including public spaces, playgrounds, and urban farms. By incorporating forward-thinking climate solutions like rooftop solar panels, rainwater harvesting, and hydroponic urban farming, Empower ensures economic sustainability while helping communities mitigate the effects of climate change.

Improving water and sanitation = healthier communities with stronger resilience

A cornerstone of the Empower Model is its commitment to improving sanitation and water access, both of which are vital for community health and wellbeing. In areas where families previously shared limited sanitation facilities – such as BT Soweto, Khayelitsha, where 72 families had access to only 14 toilets – Empower has introduced significant improvements. Now, every household has its own internal bathroom with individual toilets, basins and showers - with the option for the introduction of hot water through environmentally sustainable solar hot water systems - dramatically reducing the risk of disease and enhancing the dignity of residents. Each

home is also equipped with running water in the kitchen for hygienic food preparation. These upgrades improve quality of life, reduce the spread of disease and contribute to the long-term health and stability of the community.

Flood and fire resistance protects vulnerable communities
One of the standout features of the Empower Upgrade Model is its attention to disaster resilience. Recognising the specific vulnerabilities of informal settlements, Empower homes are designed with robust fire and flood-resistant features.

In densely populated areas prone to rapid-spreading fires, Empower homes surpass safety standards. Homes are thermally comfortable so there is no need for residents to light fires inside for heat, which in the past has been a major risk factor. Additionally, wide, clear fire escape routes are designed into the layout, with physical barriers to ensure safe evacuation and sufficient road width for a firetruck to enter the development and quickly and easily access every unit. In 2023, these measures proved effective when a fire in one Empower unit was contained without spreading to neighbouring homes and without harming any community members.

Flood resilience is another critical component, especially in low-lying areas like Khayelitsha, where high water tables and heavy rains pose constant threats. Empower tackles this challenge through simple yet effective design principles: sloping surfaces to quickly direct water away from structures and replacing 10% of the site area with permeable pavers or planter beds allowing excess surface water to drain slowly on site, reducing the risks of flooding and creating a safer living environment.

A community-driven approach to development
At the core of the Empower Upgrade Model is a participatory process that engages communities in decision-making. UTTE believes that those who know their challenges best should be part of designing the solutions. Through consultations and workshops residents actively co-design housing units, commercial spaces, and communal amenities that meet their specific needs. This human-centred approach ensures developments are not only functional but deeply rooted in the realities and aspirations of the community.

"For me, the value of my dignity increased from the time that I got this house," shares Bongikhaya Qama, a beneficiary of an Empower house in 2022. Similarly, reflecting on her Empower home received in 2021, Bukiwe Mpondokulu says, "[It's] a beautiful place! You see these flats? Have you seen something like this before? Our houses are solid! When it's cold, it's warm inside. If it's warm outside, it's cool on the inside. Another thing is how they're built. You see they're 'bumper to bumper'. It encourages Ubuntu."

Empowering economies, enhancing sustainability

Beyond providing physical shelter, Empower's model builds holistic communities with a focus on safety, dignity, and opportunity. Safe public spaces, daycare facilities, and multipurpose community centres strengthen social ties, while commercial spaces within the development provide economic opportunities for residents. These spaces foster a sense of security and pride, creating a supportive environment where residents can thrive.

By involving local residents in the construction process, Empower also generates jobs and provides training, further contributing to economic sustainability. Residents become not just homeowners but custodians of their community assets, reinforcing a sense of ownership and accountability.

Contributing to global humanitarian goals
The Empower model directly contributes to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Eliminating Poverty (SDG1), Providing Clean Energy (SDG7), and Building Sustainable, Resilient Cities with a focus on disaster risk reduction (SDG11). Through the provision of clean water, sanitation services, and fire- and flood-resistant housing, Empower also contributes to Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG6) and Good Health and Well-being (SDG3), helping to prevent the spread of disease and protect the health of residents.

UTTE's ambitious plans for the next five years include building 1,000 homes, 10 community centres, 10 safe public open spaces, creating 7,000 jobs and impacting tens of thousands of lives by enhancing resilience against future crises. Partnering with the City of Cape Town has unlocked a further 14 sites for development, laying the foundation for stronger, self-reliant communities. These efforts aim to prevent almost guaranteed future humanitarian crises and create thriving, sustainable communities that can withstand future environmental and economic shocks.