



MANAGING TEMPORARY SANITATION IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS: LESSONS FROM ASIVIKELANE

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1. Introduction

“Temporary” toilets that last for years. Residents who don’t know if better sanitation is even coming. Billions of rands spent on solutions that cost more than permanent infrastructure.

This is the reality of sanitation in South Africa’s informal settlements – and municipalities can change this trajectory.

For the past six years, Asivikelane¹ has been documenting sanitation provision on the ground in informal settlements across the country. This data could assist municipal officials responsible for service delivery to identify trends and implement practical, evidence-based recommendations for change.

Urban municipalities face genuine challenges. Informal settlements grow rapidly, boundaries shift constantly, and the delivery of permanent infrastructure struggles to keep pace. In response, cities rely on temporary measures: chemical toilets, ventilated improved pit (VIP) latrines, and communal flush toilets. These are meant to be short-term solutions while permanent infrastructure is planned and installed.

Temporary has become permanent.

In March 2025, 74% of residents surveyed by Asivikelane had been using their temporary toilets for over three years. Only 6% were aware of any municipal plans to replace these with full flush toilets. This reveals a critical gap – the absence of funded, communicated permanent solutions plans for the majority of informal settlement residents.

These temporary solutions come with serious problems. Residents reject facilities that do not meet their needs. Maintenance is poor or non-existent. Fault reporting systems fail informal settlement residents. Costs spiral out of control. And residents often lack basic information on how to use and maintain the facilities provided to them.

The result? Public money wasted, service delivery goals unmet, and communities left without clear timelines for improvement.

Change is possible! Based on years of systematic evidence collection and community engagement, we’ve identified six practical, evidence-based recommendations that can transform how municipalities manage temporary sanitation.



An unusable communal waterborne flush toilet in the Slovo Park informal settlement in Buffalo City in 2024. The door is broken, and the toilet seat is missing – it is dirty and unusable. A lack of repairs and maintenance, and too many households using the same toilets has a massive impact on the useability of a communal flush toilet.

¹ Asivikelane is a coalition of eight grassroots organisations that monitors and documents basic service delivery in South Africa’s informal settlements. Since 2020, trained community facilitators have collected evidence on water, sanitation, and refuse removal, using this data to hold municipalities accountable and advocate for improved service delivery. Asivikelane is an initiative of the International Budget Partnership South Africa. Learn more at www.asivikelane.org

2. Recommendation:

Six Evidence-Based Recommendations:

1

Consult with communities

Engage residents meaningfully before installing temporary sanitation to ensure solutions are acceptable, dignified, and meet community needs. When residents are involved in designing solutions, acceptance and proper use improve dramatically.

2

Provide user education

Share clear, step-by-step usage instructions through multiple channels when installing new toilets. Don't assume residents know how to properly use VIPs or chemical toilets – many temporary sanitation types require specific behaviours that differ from flush toilets.

3

Undertake lifecycle budgeting

Compare total costs over time, not just upfront costs. Our evidence shows that when temporary solutions stay in place for multiple years, they often cost more than permanent infrastructure. That “affordable” chemical toilet becomes extremely expensive after three years of monthly servicing.

4

Plan and fund maintenance of both temporary and permanent solutions

Develop maintenance plans with dedicated, ring-fenced funding for repairing informal settlement sanitation infrastructure. Ensure regular monitoring and timely repairs. Broken toilets that remain broken for months leave residents without the basic sanitation they need.

5

Build functional fault reporting systems

Create systems specifically designed for informal settlements – systems that use geographical location rather than just formal addresses, allow photo sharing, offer simple fault categories, require minimal data, and provide reference numbers for follow-up. Current systems fail because they weren't designed with informal settlement realities in mind.

6

Plan the transition from day one

Communicate clearly how long temporary toilets will be in use. Develop and fund actionable plans to transition to permanent solutions. Define resident roles throughout the process. Temporary should mean temporary – not a decade-long placeholder with no exit strategy.

This paper shares the evidence behind these recommendations and provides practical guidance on implementing them in your municipality. The detailed lessons that follow draw on systematic monitoring, community feedback, and municipal case studies from across South Africa.

3. Communities know their needs and are willing to compromise if government engages them

One of the most significant lessons is that residents will accept interim toilet solutions if government involves them meaningfully in their design, but only if these solutions ensure their dignity and safety.

While all residents ideally want their own full flush toilet, they acknowledge the scale of the infrastructure backlogs and are willing to compromise and use alternative solutions, including communal facilities, provided these meet acceptable standards.

The lesson is clear: Municipalities must consult communities about what they need before installing any sanitation.

3.1 Evidence from Mangaung

In April 2024, Asivikelane² explicitly asked residents living in informal settlements in Bloemfontein, Mangaung, whether they were willing to use communal sanitation if it meant access to municipally provided toilets. At that time, no municipally provided sanitation facilities existed in Mangaung's informal settlements, forcing residents to dig their own pit toilets.

The responses³ revealed three critical lessons:

1. Residents expressed a willingness to clean and fix toilets if they had access to *their own* flush toilets, indicating **readiness to take ownership** of their infrastructure.
2. Residents were willing to *share* toilets if it meant having proper sanitation facilities, demonstrating a pragmatic **willingness to compromise** on the ideal individual solution, provided shared toilets are safe, healthy, and dignified.
3. Residents articulated clear standards for *communal toilets*, including facilities separated by gender, and municipal responsibility for cleaning, repairs and maintenance. **Residents know exactly what they need** from their sanitation services.

Recommendation:

Municipalities must consult meaningfully with communities before installing temporary sanitation. Residents should be involved in designing solutions that comply with national standards while ensuring dignity and safety. This consultation process should identify community-specific needs and preferences to maximise acceptance and proper use.



A Communal waterborne flush toilet in the Hani Park informal settlement in Buffalo City in 2024. The toilet has a wheelchair ramp and one of the toilets is suitable for use by persons with disabilities. The toilets can lock from the inside and is well-maintained. There is a basin with a tap, and an additional communal standpipe which is installed with the toilets.

² St James Apostolic Faith Mission is the Asivikelane partner organisation in Mangaung.

³ <https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-12-Mangaung-sanitation-summary.pdf>

4. Temporary sanitation requires comprehensive user education

There is a critical need for end-user education to ensure that residents in informal settlements understand how to properly use and care for their toilets. As many temporary solutions function differently to full flush toilets, residents require specific guidance on their use and, currently, this information is rarely provided.

4.1 The case of VIP Toilets in Johannesburg

The City of Johannesburg provides Ventilated Improved Pit (VIP) toilets as one of its main sanitation interventions in informal settlements

These dry toilets work differently from flush toilets: users shouldn't throw anything except toilet paper into the pit, and water needs to be added before desludging so contractors can empty them effectively. User-education is therefore needed to make sure the toilet functions properly.

The City of Johannesburg acknowledged the importance of user education in its own 2021 Sanitation Policy⁴, emphasising that education should go hand-in-hand with sanitation provision.

Yet, when Asivikelane mapped VIP toilets in early 2024, 63%⁵ of users reported receiving no user education whatsoever when their toilets were installed. That is a critical gap – especially when residents are expected to maintain these facilities themselves.



4.2. The impact of missing education

The consequences of inadequate user education are straightforward but severe:

- Residents don't know how to properly maintain their toilets, leading to faster deterioration.
- Toilets fall below acceptable standards, denying residents dignified sanitation.
- Municipalities face increased repair and maintenance costs, or must replace toilets entirely.
- Public health risks escalate when toilets are improperly maintained.

A Ventilated Improved Pit Toilet in the Meriteng informal settlement with a broken door. One of the key issues residents experience is not having easy access to replacement parts when something breaks with the VIP top structure.

4.3. Recommendation: Make user education mandatory from day one

When installing temporary toilets, municipalities must share step-by-step instructions on proper use: what to do and what to avoid, cleaning and maintenance responsibilities, and who to contact when things go wrong.

Use multiple channels: posters on or inside toilets, community meetings, SMS messages, and door-to-door visits. Provide information in local languages with visual demonstrations or graphics where possible.

⁴ The City of Johannesburg Sanitation Policy (2021)

⁵ <https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-12-Joburg-summary-of-VIPs.pdf>

5. Temporary sanitation becomes extremely expensive long-term

While temporary sanitation solutions are critical for ensuring residents have access to basic facilities when permanent infrastructure is not yet available, they are far from being an affordable option when extended over time. The upfront bulk infrastructure costs for permanent flush toilets may seem daunting, but the long-term cost of providing temporary sanitation, such as chemical toilets, is astronomically expensive and, ultimately, unsustainable.

5.1 The cost of chemical toilets in Gauteng

Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality provides a stark illustration. In 2024/25, the municipality budgeted R500 million⁶ for chemical toilets alone – 85% of its entire R590 million capital budget for water and sanitation infrastructure.⁷

When examining multi-year trends, the numbers add up. Between 2018 and 2023, five Gauteng municipalities collectively spent R3.36 billion on chemical toilets.⁸ Ekurhuleni accounted for R2.38 billion of this total – enough to have built permanent infrastructure for thousands of households.

Instead, that money bought temporary toilets that require at least bi-weekly servicing, indefinitely.

5.2 Permanent solutions are more cost-effective

Research commissioned by the International Budget Partnership South Africa and the Social Justice Coalition in 2016 proved what many suspected – household full flush toilets are the most cost-effective option over their full lifecycle.⁹

The key is shifting from only considering the upfront capital costs to looking at the total lifecycle costs of each proposed sanitation solution. Chemical toilets require minimal upfront investment, but their ongoing costs – collection, transport, treatment, disposal – accumulate rapidly. Flush toilets require significant upfront infrastructure investment but cost far less to operate over decades.

5.3 Recommendation: Calculate the real costs before deciding

Municipalities must undertake comprehensive lifecycle budgeting that accounts for acquisition, operation, maintenance, and eventual disposal or replacement. Compare total lifecycle costs of temporary solutions versus permanent solutions. Look beyond the upfront costs.

This analysis will reveal what the evidence already shows – short-term savings from temporary solutions result in dramatically higher long-term expenses. Develop multi-year capital plans that prioritise transitioning to permanent solutions and show elected officials and communities the financial case for permanent infrastructure.

⁶ Annexure 1 - Ekurhuleni City Wide SDBIP 2024/25 page 342; Annexure 1- City Wide SDBIP 2023/24, page 100.

⁷ Ekurhuleni medium Term Revenue and Expenditure Framework 2024/25 – 2026/27 Annexure C, Capital Budget per ward and authors' own calculations.

⁸ <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/over-r33-billion-spent-on-chemical-toilets--solly-> (accessed 6 December 2024)

⁹ Cornerstone Economic Research, Estimating the cost of sanitation infrastructure for selected sites in Khayelitsha in City of Cape Town (2016) (On file with IBPSA)

6. Maintenance must be planned and budgeted for

One of the most consistent trends Asivikelane has observed is that temporary sanitation fails when municipalities don't repair and maintain facilities. Across South Africa's metros, inadequate maintenance budgets lead to rapid deterioration, compromising the safety and dignity of residents who depend on these facilities.

6.1 Johannesburg: The VIP maintenance gap

Between May and June 2024, Asivikelane¹⁰ mapped more than 800 VIP toilets in Johannesburg's informal settlements. The findings¹¹ were alarming:

- Half of all toilets mapped had broken doors that could not lock, compromising user safety and dignity.
- One third of toilets were missing the backslab cover, a dangerous health and safety risk.
- One third of toilets did not have functioning ventilation pipes, resulting in unpleasant odours and potentially hazardous conditions.¹²

These statistics reveal toilets that are generally not up to standard and are unsafe for residents to use.

The root problem? Johannesburg Water only desludges VIP toilets. The city provides no maintenance or repairs for the structure or pit chamber.

It falls to residents to maintain these toilets, but they are ill-equipped to do so. Repair work is often technical, and they lack access to materials. Without training or spare parts, toilets quickly fall into disrepair.¹³ The result: Toilets deteriorate below the city's own standards, requiring complete replacement.

6.2 Knysna and Cape Town community plumbers do their own maintenance and repairs

Asivikelane pilots with community-based plumbers in the Knysna Local Municipality and the City of Cape Town illustrate the significant value of equipping community members to assist in maintaining their infrastructure.

Communities in which Asivikelane is present in both municipalities are dependent on communal flush toilets. These toilets often break, yet in both municipalities there are long lead times to implement repairs. Asivikelane undertook a physical inspection of the broken infrastructure and determined that most faults were minor and could be fixed by residents, if they received training in basic plumbing. Once trained, community members were able to repair minor faults to taps and toilets, and escalate bigger faults to the respective municipalities.¹⁴ While these examples apply to communal flush toilets, they do illustrate the importance community member involvement in repairs and maintenance. They have shifted from being end-users only to becoming part of the repair and maintenance solution.



An Asivikelane community plumber in Cape Town replaces a missing tap on a standpipe in their settlement during a site visit.

¹⁰ In Johannesburg, 1to1 Agency of Engagement, Planact and the International Budget Partnership SA represent the Asivikelane Initiative. The mapping was done by community members and community facilitators representing 1to1 Agency of Engagement and Planact.

¹¹ <https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-12-Joburg-summary-of-VIPs.pdf>

¹² <https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-12-Joburg-summary-of-VIPs.pdf>

¹³ https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2024-04-budget-submission_buffalo-city.pdf, page 6.

¹⁴ <https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/202511-RM-Convening-Scrapbook-digital.pdf>

6.3 Buffalo City: No ring-fenced maintenance budget

In Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, the primary sanitation intervention is communal flush toilets. Unlike Johannesburg, Buffalo City Metro is responsible for repairing and maintaining these toilets. Yet many remain broken, leaving residents without access to working sanitation.

When Asivikelane asked whether there was a ring-fenced budget for repairs and maintenance in informal settlements, the Metro indicated that this was not possible. They explained that ring-fencing is “impossible” because the services don’t generate revenue and the equitable share allocation is inadequate.¹⁵

However, the overall budget reveals a gap in repairs and maintenance funding. National Treasury requires that metros budget 8% of the total value of Property, Plant and Equipment (PPE) for repairs and maintenance. Buffalo City only budgeted 2.8% of the value of PPE in the 2024/25 draft budget. When asked to increase this, the Metro revealed their already inadequate budget runs out early each financial year – primarily due to infrastructure vandalism.¹⁶

Buffalo City is not unique. Many municipalities fall short of the 8% norm. The consequences are particularly acute in informal settlements – when broken toilets cannot be fixed due to budget constraints, residents go without sanitation for extended periods.

6.4 Recommendation: Plan and fund maintenance from the start

Municipalities must:

1. Consider and plan for repairs and maintenance when choosing which sanitation type to provide in a settlement. Include education for residents to prevent damage through incorrect use.
2. Set aside adequate repairs and maintenance budget allocations that meet or exceed National Treasury guidelines (8% of PPE value).
3. Ring-fence a portion of these funds specifically for informal settlement sanitation maintenance.
4. Adequate budgeting alone is not enough. Municipalities must ensure:
 - Regular monitoring to identify problems before they become critical.
 - Response time targets for different types of faults.
 - Trained, dedicated maintenance teams who understand the specific challenges of informal settlements.
 - Consideration of training for community members in minor fault repair in the settlements in which they live.

¹⁵ Annexure AC under 2024/25 Final IDP and MTREF Budget. Available for download from: <https://www.buffalocity.gov.za/folder.php?id=8CFB733>. Pages 12 and 13 of PDF document.

¹⁶ Annexure AC under 2024/25 Final IDP and MTREF Budget. Available for download from: <https://www.buffalocity.gov.za/folder.php?id=8CFB733>. Pages 12 and 13 of PDF document.

7. Fault reporting systems must work for informal settlement residents

An effective fault reporting system makes the difference between a toilet that is fixed promptly and one that remains broken for months – or permanently. However, many municipal fault reporting systems struggle to serve informal settlement residents effectively.

In September 2022¹⁷, Asivikelane asked residents whether they report faults when a tap or toilet breaks, and whether the municipality fixes them. The findings revealed significant challenges:

- 78% of residents said they report faults when infrastructure breaks
- 89% of those faults were not fixed within a week
- 72% of faults were still not fixed after a month of being reported



Communal flush toilets in the city of Cape Town.

7.1 Why fault reporting systems struggle in informal settlements

Asivikelane's research identified key barriers that prevent fault reporting systems from working effectively for informal settlement residents.

- **User requirements don't match reality:** Systems require formal addresses, account numbers, ID numbers, or ratepayer information – documentation many informal settlement residents do not have. Without these, municipalities can't locate the broken toilet.
- **Data costs:** Apps and web portals require significant mobile data that many residents cannot afford.
- **Complexity:** Systems are difficult to navigate or use complicated language.
- **No visual evidence:** Residents can't easily attach photos of the problem.
- **No tracking:** Residents can't check the status of their report.
- **Resource constraints:** Metros often lack sufficient staff to handle the volume of faults reported and follow up on contractors work.

¹⁷ https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/asivikelane-number-31_final.pdf

7.2 Buffalo City: Understanding alternative reporting patterns

Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality provides insight into what happens when official fault reporting systems don't align with informal settlement realities.

When Asivikelane community facilitators¹⁸ investigated how residents report broken taps and toilets in 2024, they found a significant gap between the use of the official fault reporting system and actual reporting patterns. While 98% of broken toilets, standpipes, and taps were reported by residents, only 15% went through official channels like the call centres.¹⁹

Where did they report the other 83% of faults? Directly to ward councillors, ward committee members, or municipal officials residents happened to know personally.

This reliance on informal channels creates unintended consequences. Faults are not logged, making it difficult to track response times or measure performance, and residents receive no reference numbers to follow up on their reports. Repairs occur on an ad hoc basis rather than systematically. Critically, areas with strong political connections may receive attention while other areas with equal or greater need wait. This pattern makes it challenging to ensure equitable service delivery based on need.

This is a widespread challenge. Across South Africa's metros, informal settlement residents often find that official fault reporting channels don't accommodate their needs and circumstances – so they develop alternative approaches. While understandable, these workarounds complicate systematic maintenance planning and contribute to uneven service delivery.

7.3 Recommendation: Develop inclusive fault reporting systems with residents

Municipalities have an opportunity to develop fault reporting systems specifically designed for informal settlement contexts by working collaboratively with residents. Well-designed systems make it easier to address faults equitably, ultimately improving service delivery.

These systems should:

- Use geographical location (GPS or description of the location of the fault), in addition to account numbers or formal addresses).
- Allow users to share photos of the problem directly.
- Offer specific fault categories to choose from (e.g., "door broken", "no water", "toilet blocked").
- Be zero-rated or require minimal cell phone data.
- Provide reference numbers and status updates via SMS or WhatsApp.
- Be available in multiple languages.
- Have clear escalation procedures when faults are not addressed within specified timeframes.

¹⁸ Community facilitators are residents of informal settlements trained by Asivikelane partner organisations to systematically monitor and document service delivery in their communities, as well as develop solutions and engage governments as part of the initiative. They collect evidence on water, sanitation, and refuse removal using standardised data collection tools.

¹⁹ <https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-12-BCM-sanitation-summary.pdf>

8. Temporary sanitation requires clear transition plans to permanent solutions

In South Africa's informal settlements, "temporary" sanitation often remains in place for years, becoming permanent by default. This creates health risks, safety hazards, and environmental damage while locking municipalities into expensive, unsustainable service delivery models.

The scale of the problem is clear: 74% of Asivikelane respondents in March 2025 reported using temporary toilets – chemical toilets, VIPs, or communal flush facilities – for over three years. Yet only 6% were aware of any municipal plans to replace these facilities with full flush toilets.²⁰

8.1 Johannesburg: VIP toilets "temporary" for 20+ years

In 2024, Asivikelane community facilitators²¹ from partner organisations Planact and 1to1 Agency of Engagement documented the age of VIP toilets in Johannesburg's informal settlements. The findings²² revealed just how permanent "temporary" has become:

- More than half (52%) of mapped toilets were older than 15 years
- 32% were older than 20 years
- Only 28% were under 5 years old

VIP toilets have an estimated lifespan of 5-7 years. Yet, Asivikelane's data shows they're routinely used for two or three times that long. The evidence reveals a gap: There is no plan for what happens when a toilet reaches the end of its functional life.



A demolished legacy VIP Toilet in Johannesburg where the pit was not fully decommissioned at the time the picture was taken in 2024. This poses significant health and safety risks.

The evidence collected highlighted the following risks associated with the continued use of VIP toilets beyond their intended lifespan:

User safety: Broken doors, missing locks, and deteriorating structures compromise dignity and physical safety. Half of Johannesburg's mapped VIPs had doors that couldn't lock, and one third were missing back covers.

- **Environmental damage:** Excreta seeps into the ground, potentially contaminating water sources. In areas with dolomitic soil – common around Johannesburg – this contributes to sinkhole formation.
- **Improper decommissioning:** When toilets are demolished, they're often not properly decommissioned. Pits remain in the ground, posing ongoing health and safety risks to communities.
- **Policy gap:** No clear policy exists for managing VIP toilets over their full lifecycle. This leaves residents and officials without clear guidance, making it difficult to ensure toilets remain safe or plan for replacement.

The same pattern exists with chemical toilets. Across the country, settlements have been using chemical toilets for years, despite these being marketed as short-term emergency solutions.

It is key for municipalities to plan for the transition to permanent sanitation solutions when providing temporary sanitation in informal settlements. Early planning will allow municipalities to address backlogs strategically with adequate time for proper planning, budgeting, and meaningful community consultation.

²⁰ <https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Learning-Paper-3-FINAL.pdf>

²¹ <https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-12-Joburg-summary-of-VIPs.pdf>

²² <https://asivikelane.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024-12-Joburg-summary-of-VIPs.pdf>

8.2 Recommendation: Plan for transitioning to permanent solutions

Municipalities should plan and communicate the pathway to permanent sanitation solutions from the outset of any temporary installation. Effective transition planning should include:

- **Develop funded, actionable plans** to replace temporary toilets with permanent infrastructure, including clear timelines and budget allocations.
- **Communicate clearly with residents** about how long temporary toilets will be in place and what how the transition to permanent sanitation will occur. Transparency builds trust and allows residents to plan accordingly.
- **Define roles and responsibilities** for residents in planning, service delivery, and maintenance during both temporary and permanent phases.
- **Establish full lifecycle plans** for temporary infrastructure, including proper decommissioning procedures when facilities reach end of life.

The goal: ensure “temporary” truly means temporary – not decades-long makeshift solutions.



New chemical toilets being delivered in an informal settlement in 2026.

Tips for officials to consider when planning sanitation in informal settlements

*These questions could guide municipal officials, planners, and community leaders when designing sanitation interventions. The most important principle: **Meaningful consultation with residents should happen at every stage.***

1. Starting point: Community Consultation

Ask residents what they need to feel safe, healthy, and dignified before making technical decisions.

- What do residents need from their sanitation?
- How do current arrangements fail them?
- Do they have gender-specific safety concerns?

2. Technical Assessment

Assess infrastructure, soil conditions, and space to determine feasible sanitation types.

- What infrastructure exists (water, sewer, electricity, roads)?
- What are the soil conditions and flood risks?
- Which sanitation types are technically feasible?

3. Service Design

Design toilets that match resident preferences for safety, accessibility, and dignity.

- Per household or communal? What do residents prefer?
- If communal, how many households per toilet?
- Where will toilets be placed for safe access?
- What features are needed (locks, lighting, accessibility)?

4. Maintenance & Operations

Plan and budget for maintenance with clear responsibilities and accessible fault reporting.

- Who is responsible for maintenance tasks?
- Is there a ring-fenced maintenance budget for informal settlement sanitation?
- How will residents report faults without formal addresses?

5. Budgeting & Costs

Calculate total lifecycle costs and compare to permanent solutions.

- What is the total lifecycle cost?
- How does this compare to permanent solutions?
- Is the budget adequate to erase the full sanitation backlog?
- How will permanent solutions be funded, and does the funding source restrict the choice of solution (e.g. There might be restrictions with grant funding on the type of solution which can be paid for)?

6. Transition to Permanent Solutions

Plan how long temporary toilets will be in place and plot the pathway to permanent sanitation.

- How long will temporary sanitation be in use?
- What is the transition plan and timeline?
- Have residents been informed about the plans and timelines?

7. User Education & Support

Provide clear, multilingual education on proper use through multiple channels.

- What must users know about proper use? What responsibilities do they have?
- How will education be delivered (meetings, posters, SMS)?
- What are the most spoken languages in the area in which education should be provided?
- Who can residents contact for support?

8. Verification & Accountability

Verify that solutions align with resident needs and establish accountability mechanisms.

- Do proposed solutions align with what residents need?
- Have residents been consulted at each stage?
- How will success be measured and monitored?

Remember: These questions represent an ongoing conversation between municipalities and residents. Quality sanitation depends on engagement, transparency, and mutual accountability.

Towards safer Ventilated Improved Pit toilets in Johannesburg

In 2025, the Asivikelane Initiative in Johannesburg reviewed the evidence gathered from years of working in the metro's informal settlements and **identified significant safety concerns** with the Ventilated Improved Pit (VIP) toilets provided by the city.

The toilets, intended to provide an improved level of service for informal settlements, are frequently dilapidated, broken, or long past their intended lifespan, creating serious safety and environmental risks.

Tragically, children have died after falling into the back of pit toilets.

A key issue documented by Asivikelane hub partners over many years is the frequent failure of backslabs (plates covering the pits of VIP toilets). Slabs are often broken or missing, damaged when contractors move them each month to access the pit for desludging. Although solid concrete, the slabs are not sufficiently reinforced, making them difficult to handle and prone to breaking.

Whilst residents are expected to maintain the toilet structure, they often lack the technical skills and materials to repair specialised components like backslabs. As a result, residents often create makeshift covers to safeguard their community, and prevent refuse from blocking the pit.

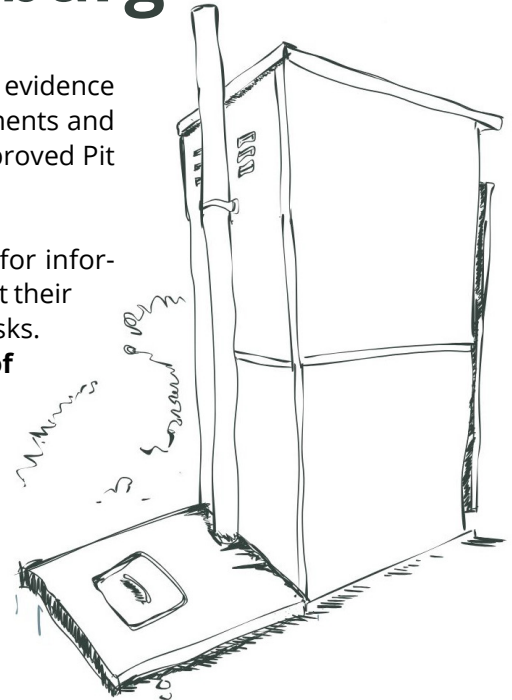
In consultation with community members, Asivikelane partners 1to1 Agency of Engagement and Planact identified the broken or missing backslabs as the most urgent safety issue requiring intervention.

Designing an improved backslab based on community observations



In response to these safety issues, Asivikelane's Bonginkosi Ndlovu redesigned the backslab to include a small manhole with a removable cover. This design improves safety and durability while simplifying the desludging process, as contractors no longer need to lift and move the entire concrete slab each month.. Explaining his design, Ndlovu noted that contractors must shift slabs "each and every month." "We decided to put a manhole that they can just [remove] the lid and just drain." The design reduces the time it takes to desludge and the risk of slab breakage."

As part of the Asivikelane pilot project, the team has cast and installed three reinforced concrete backslabs for three separate households in Lawley Station in Region G, Johannesburg. In addition, a private company created a prototype using alternative materials based on the Asivikelane design,



which was also installed in Lawley Station as part of the pilot. The initiative has generated community momentum: one household adapted the Asivikelane design to cast its own backslab, incorporating a bucket with a lid for an innovative, cost-effective manhole, while other households have requested assistance from the Asivikelane team to cast their own.



Community facilitators monitoring the installations reported positive feedback from contractors regarding improved access thanks to the manhole design. In December 2025, Asivikelane supported ten community members and community facilitators to receive basic construction training, enabling them to build improved backslabs for their communities. Since the training more backslabs have been cast and installed in Lawley Station, illustrating the need for safer and more accessible backslabs based on this innovation.



The new VIP backslab design co-created by residents.

The solution is community-driven, and Asivikelane believes the redesigned backslab could be incorporated into tender specifications for future VIP toilets in Johannesburg, making toilets safer and easier to maintain.

This project demonstrates a critical lesson: Community experience and observation are powerful tools when designing services. By engaging residents, listening to their insights, and incorporating their ideas, municipalities can deliver improved, more effective services that are safer and healthier for all.

9. Conclusion

Temporary sanitation plays a necessary role while municipalities address massive infrastructure backlogs. However, as Asivikelane's evidence shows, "temporary" too often becomes permanent – poorly planned, inadequately maintained, and excessively expensive.

The lessons from six years of monitoring are clear: Effective management of sanitation delivery requires municipalities to genuinely engage communities, provide comprehensive user education, understand true life-cycle costs, plan and fund adequate maintenance, establish accessible fault reporting systems, and – most importantly – plan the transition to permanent solutions from the outset.

The consequences of failing to do so are evident. In Johannesburg, "temporary" VIPs have been in use for over 20 years, with no publicly communicated transition plan. Ekurhuleni has spent billions of rands on chemical toilets – enough to have funded permanent infrastructure for thousands of households. In Buffalo City, residents bypass official fault reporting systems that do not accommodate their circumstances. **As a result**, many residents in informal settlements remain without access to the safe, health and dignified sanitation they need. **Yet, the path forward is clear.** Successful case studies from Mangaung and Johannesburg demonstrate that **when municipalities engage residents as partners, practical and workable solutions emerge.**

Improving sanitation delivery involves:

- Engage informal settlement residents as key stakeholders from planning through implementation.
- Allocate resources strategically to achieve long-term sustainability.
- Shift investment from ongoing temporary solutions towards permanent solutions.

Asivikelane's evidence-based recommendations provide municipalities with practical tools and insights to deliver safe, healthy, and dignified sanitation to all informal settlement residents.



World Sanitation Day 2025 showcasing the backslab pilot with Johannesburg Water, Human Settlements officials and residents.

For more information please contact: www.asivikelane.org

