Words matter: they shape how we understand each other and the world we inhabit. This, in turn, influences the actions we take and the policies we advocate. Realising the importance of words, we wanted to explain our lexicon for the IRIS Fire, which was forged through research and discussion with informal settlement residents. We recognise that this lexicon might not have universal resonance: our understandings of words is shaped by our own trajectories and experiences. Nonetheless, we hope that by sharing our lexicon and the thinking behind it, we can contribute to research that recognises the dignity and voice of informal settlement residents.

**Informal settlement:** We use the term ‘informal settlement’ to refer to informal dwellings in collective form. This term recognises that settlements did not have formal state permission when they were constructed. This does not mean that they are illegitimate or temporary. Moreover, just because they were not planned or permitted by the state does not mean they are unplanned: informal settlements are often planned and shaped by residents in a variety of ways.

**Informal housing or dwelling:** We use this term to refer to individual residences. These structures may be found within informal or formal settlements. As above, recognising that these settlements do not have formal state permission at the time of their construction does not mean that they are inherently illegitimate or temporary. Nor do we assume that these settlements were unplanned just because they were not planned or permitted by the state.

**Informal settlement residents:** We have chosen to use the term ‘residents’ as it does not assume that people are South African citizens, although many may be.

**Point of ignition:** We think that it is important to be specific when we are talking about the causes of informal settlement fires. The immediate trigger of a fire may, for example, be a candle or paraffin stove. However, to refer to this as the ‘cause’ of a fire ignores the broader factors that lead a person to using that candle or paraffin stove. For example, a lack of electricity. In this project, we use the phrase ‘point of ignition’ to talk about the immediate trigger of a fire. When we discuss the ‘causes’ of fire, we put this trigger into its broader political, social and economic contexts.

**Terms we do not use:**

**Slum:** This is seen by some informal settlement residents as a derogatory term, with negative connotations. It is also associated with the ‘Elimination and Prevention of Re-emergence of Slums’ (2007) which was created by KwaZulu Natal Provincial Government and later declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court.

**Shack:** Whilst this is widely accepted (for example, it is used by Abahlali baseMjondolo), for some of the people involved in this project, it retains the same negative associations that are attached to the word ‘slum’. Therefore, whilst we recognise its widespread use, we have chosen not to use it in this context.

**Stakeholder:** For some communities and organisations in South Africa, and beyond, the term ‘stakeholder’ has become problematic. First, it often makes assumptions about who counts in a particular context. Secondly, it is often associated with pre-defined spaces, structures and opportunities for input that constrain when and how people’s voices will be heard. As such, stakeholder involvement reflects the world as it is, not as it should be: it includes and excludes people on the basis of power relations that already exist, instead of challenging those power dynamics. Therefore, we avoid using the term and try and reflect on ways to make the participation of informal settlement residents meaningful in this project.