

# JOHN ABBOTT, SOUTH AFRICA'S CITY STITCHER

**Squatter settlements are 'home' to around a billion people in and around Third World cities. The authorities usually want to bulldoze them. South African urban engineer John Abbott thinks they should be upgraded and woven into the urban fabric**

**Shantytowns, squatters' communities, slums—these are some of the names used to describe informal settlements. How many people in the world call them home?**

Between 40 per cent and 50 per cent of the population in the cities of the South are living in these settlements—that's roughly one billion people. The rate at which the settlements are growing varies from region to region. In most of Latin America, the growth rate has peaked, but it's still increasing in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In my own city, Cape Town, informal settlements are growing at about 10 per cent per year—but you must remember that South Africa's starting point is relatively low. Informal settlements were rarely allowed to develop under apartheid.

**What are the main characteristics of informal settlements?**

First, the people don't generally have any legal tenure to the land they occupy. Second, the settlements lie outside the formal planning process. As a result, they usually lack or have very low levels of basic services like water and sanitation. And, of course, the dwellings are informal in the sense that they are built by the people themselves out of basic materials in a very simple manner.

**Why are these settlements growing?**

**Is it because formal housing projects are too expensive?**

The problem encompasses financing and the availability of land. Land is a commodity available to the rich and the middle class but not to the poor. On the one hand, you have private landowners who want to get the highest return from their land—and dealing with very poor people is generally not perceived as bringing good financial returns. On the other, many cities still have a lot of public land. But city authorities in the South have neither resources nor

strategy to cope with the number of people moving in from the countryside. These people are looking to improve their economic opportunities but they can't afford formal housing.

**Doesn't the solution lie in building and subsidizing more public housing?**

The public service is a bureaucracy which cannot cope with this type of problem. In every city, the authorities' first approach is the same: try building more formal housing

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**If you want to go out and sell food informally at the market, who is going to look after your children?  
If you don't get paid on a regular basis, how do you live from month to month?  
If you get sick, who is going to help you?**

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to replace informal settlements. But they never succeed because they will only develop areas that conform to certain standards of infrastructure, planning and housing construction. Instead of considering the alternatives, these bureaucracies plod along, building too few houses too slowly—houses which are too expensive for the people they were intended for. These standards actually divert government from the real problem, which is assisting the urban poor. Look at what happened in Brazil. Despite all the good intentions, public housing was taken over by the middle class and never reached the poor.

**Most city authorities find informal settlements in such deplorable states that they feel they**

**must start from scratch, destroy the old shacks and rebuild new homes. Why are so you adamantly opposed to this?**

First, because it destroys a physical asset. You're not building new shelter; you're simply replacing existing shelter. So you aren't adding to the overall stock of housing. Instead of a financial benefit, there is a major financial loss. You're also creating an immense social cost by destroying all the social networks and mechanisms which people have built to survive in these informal settlements. Third, you never end up relocating every family. Some are bound to be uprooted and left with no place to go except another informal settlement. That's been proven over and over again.

**But isn't it better to offer people a proper house than leave them in a slum?**

Let's turn the question round. Is it better to house 10 per cent of the population and leave the rest in slum conditions or is it better to work with 100 per cent of the population so that they slowly improve their own condition?

**You often refer to the social networks of informal settlements as "social capital". What do you mean by this?**

It's something of a paradox. On the one hand, these settlements can be very dangerous places. In Rio de Janeiro, for example, it is felt that drug dealers use the informal settlements as a base because the police cannot access or monitor them easily. It is also true that people in informal settlements suffer more from serious crime than people in higher income areas. But this tends to draw them closer together. You cannot put a dollar figure on these social networks, but this social capital is extremely valuable. Survival is based on interdependence. You don't have the resources in an informal settlement to operate as an individual. If you want to go out and sell food informally at the market,



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John Abbott (left) and two colleagues engaged on a Cape Town project to upgrade an informal settlement (see also photos on pages 48 and 49).

who is going to look after your children? If you don't get paid on a regular basis, how do you live from month to month? If you get sick, who is going to help you?

**But don't people take this capital from one settlement to another?**

When an informal settlement is destroyed, people are generally moved in a random fashion. They lose the linkages that exist not just between individuals but between groups. Very often, people from certain rural areas move to particular informal settlements in the cities. So when they arrive, they have a lot of things in common. They operate collectively. When they get moved, they lose those communal ties. To make things worse, the local authorities in the new settlements treat families as individual units—e.g., by the design of the physical dwelling they live in and the taxes they pay. The whole framework of their life forces them to behave as individuals, not collective units.

**You've described the major faults of the top-down approach cities usually take in dealing with informal settlements. What are the alternatives?**

That depends to some extent on the

culture and the income level of the city. There are two major approaches: the first is people-based and exists in countries like India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan where there is great poverty. The most famous example is the Orangi settlement in Karachi. There,

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the people decided that their first priority lay in building a sanitation system because the municipal authority wouldn't do anything about it. So they raised the money and the manpower to lay their own sewer pipes, with technical assistance from an NGO. The pipes ran from the shacks to open ditches

on the outskirts of the settlements. This forced the local authority to connect their sanitation system to a treatment facility.

The second approach is found in Brazil where there is a more structured partnership between community organizations, professionals and NGOs. This kind of partnership makes it possible to look beyond immediate issues and develop a longer-term, wide-range vision for the community. Instead of focusing on one aspect like sanitation, you can also look at others such as housing and access to public transportation. You begin by developing plans as to where you want your settlement to be and how you want it to grow and develop. This generally requires external funding, especially for infrastructure. The two different approaches basically reflect the different levels of wealth in cities like Rio and Karachi.

**How have you gone about things in Cape Town?**

We have developed the Brazilian model and are working at a people-driven level to reinforce the economic base of informal settlements. But we want to do more than just improve the physical infrastructure of the settlements as dormitory suburbs—▶

## AT HOME IN THE SLUMS

**I** was born in a very poor area in England, which is probably why I feel very comfortable in informal settlements," says John Abbott. Co-ordinator of the University of Cape Town's urban management programme, he is an urban engineer who has won an international reputation for improving conditions in South Africa's informal settlements. "People come together because they need each other," he says, "especially in situations where 60 or 70 per cent of the population is very poor. I'm not saying it's only poverty [that creates this solidarity] but if you don't have individual transport, TV and all those luxuries that draw you more into your private world, you tend to rely on collective action or entertainment for a social life as well as for social need."

Abbott first landed in Africa at the age of 12 when his parents moved to Uganda and Kenya. He went back to England for his university studies, but soon returned to the continent, working in South Africa as a civil engineer before switching to urban engineering.

Increasingly aware of the brutalities of apartheid while living in Johannesburg and then Cape Town, in 1985 he started Planact, an NGO which brought together civic organizations and trade unions in the struggle for urban equality in South Africa and became famous throughout the country.

This struggle came to a head for Abbott in 1986, when he began working with an informal settlement near the coastal city of Port Elizabeth. Parts of the sprawling settlement "could be seen by white residents and there was a move to get rid of it," says Abbott. Instead of destroying the settlement, Abbott and Planact tried to upgrade it with the help of civic movements and with financial support from several big companies. But just as the upgrading plan was taking shape, the government decreed a state of emergency across the country, which provided "a blanket of secrecy for the army to move in and totally destroy the community," says Abbott. "Every family was bulldozed out. They moved to a temporary camp, but quite a lot of people died from malnourishment and disease."

Very few people knew about the destruction, he says, because the newspapers were banned from reporting on what was considered a "military secret". "It was one of the transforming events of my life," he says. From then on, he kept one foot in the academic world of urban management at the University of Cape Town, but, he says, "I shifted my work increasingly towards informal settlements." ■

places where people sleep but do not work. I don't think physical restructuring alone is going to promote economic development. You have to go to the roots of the problem. Our ultimate aim is to integrate these settlements into the fabric of the city.

At the University of Cape Town, we have a pilot project involving over 2,500 families or about 10,000 people. We began by using satellite images of the settlement to develop a computer-based map which offers everyone a clear vision of the settlement—each family can see its place in the community. We are starting to collect demographic and economic information about their households. For example, there turns out to be a fair number of people in the house-building trade. So we've introduced support schemes to build a corps of trained workers to upgrade the settlement.

We've also found that about 60 per cent of the people are in formal employment but about 20 per cent work in the informal sector and 20 per cent had no visible means of financial support. We highlighted all the informal businesses on the map and are trying to find ways of supporting them. For example, the community is now linked with a number of tour operators who are bringing overseas tourists into the area to spur business. We're also fund-raising overseas to construct a market to sustain tourism.

**Are you suggesting that there's no point in upgrading a settlement without an overall development strategy?**

That depends on the city. In cities in India, for example, it's hard to imagine a time on the horizon when you will have formal settlements because there are just so

many people and so little space. In Cape Town, we still have the time to transform informal settlements into formal areas. In African cities in general, it is possible to combine long-term planning and vision with more immediate needs.

**What does it mean to transform an informal settlement into a formal settlement?**

There has to be some sort of land security. Land titles are the common but not the only form of tenure. The issues of access, social services and health care also have to be dealt with. Cape Town, for example, probably has the highest incidence of tuberculosis in the world because of flooding in winter. Informal settlements are particularly hard hit by water-borne diseases. The high infant mortality is also caused by living in dark, dank, confined spaces reeking of paraffin.

**So far, we've talked about upgrading conditions for people already living in informal settlements. But how do you plan for and manage the flow of newcomers?**

You *don't* begin by worrying about foolishly high standards for roads, large building plots and big open "public spaces". Instead you work on planning a basic minimum which can be developed very cheaply and quickly. Local authorities can begin by marking out building plots that use space as economically as possible. In Brazil, they opt for multi-storied buildings, but here in Africa people prefer single-story dwellings. You can still plan for a density of up to 100 dwellings per hectare. Large public open spaces aren't necessary at this point. Instead of high-quality roads, you design access

Computerized mapping technology is used to help plan an access road to the settlement.





► We responded by first of all showing that all attempts to focus on formal housing would not solve the informal housing problem and that this problem would continue to grow no matter how much was spent on formal housing. It took a few years, but this has finally been accepted. The next step lies in showing that upgrading is a viable, replicable methodology.

**You've described how to upgrade the informal settlements in Cape Town. But how are you trying to integrate them into the rest of the city?**

To begin with, we are putting the informal settlements on the map. We know where they are so we can now create access routes and other services to link them to the rest of the city. Just putting these places on the map is a major step forward. The Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte, which is in some ways our model, has three million people, 40 per cent of whom live in informal settlements. If you look at a map of the city dating from around 1980, a time when the military junta was leaving power, you won't see a single sign of the informal settlements. At that time maps simply showed as blank spaces settlements where thousands of people lived without any physical linkages to the rest of the city.

You cannot just work locally, inside informal settlements. You must also tackle the problem at the metropolitan level. You must know where the settlements are and how they are likely to grow. Then you can create physical linkages so that they aren't islands of exclusion, cut off from the city. Once you have done that, you can go to the planning level and work with people



A slum in Guatemala City.

and ask questions. How do you want this area to look? How is it going to integrate into commercial life? These people want access to shops and work opportunities. How do we create those linkages?

**Why is it so important to integrate a city?**

A city is a complex link between individuals and groups. Its fabric is built on mutual dependency, although we tend not to notice that very much these days. Insecurity and crime in one area are bound to affect other areas. We drain the city's resources by failing to support people who

are poor. By dividing a city between rich and poor—or informal and formal areas—you reinforce the fortress mentality and actually limit the city's capacity to grow and develop.

It's not enough to focus on people's short-term needs. You need a long-term vision and plan so that everyone can contribute in some way to the city's development. ■

**Interview by René Lefort and Amy Otchet, respectively Director and journalist with the UNESCO Courier**

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