

More to our future than bricks and mortar

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The United Nations has set aside the first Monday in October every year as the World Habitat Day. The global observance of world habitat day will be in Jakarta, Indonesia with the theme being "Millennium Development Goals and the City". Monday October 3 2005 will be a reminder to the world- and especially world leaders- to honour their commitment made at the world leaders' meeting at the dawn of the new millennium to fight poverty, urban and environmental degradation- and a host of other issues affecting the world.

Durban and Johannesburg are two cities that have demonstrated delivery in respect of housing and urban regeneration- but much needs to be done to achieve the targets. South Africa as part of the global village contributes to poor living conditions- and poverty has increased in tandem with privatisation, greed and corruption.

The global slum population increased by 75 million since the Millennium Declaration and approximately one billion people live in slums. In 2001, 72% of the Sub-Saharan urban population were living in slums with Asia, as a whole having the largest slum population of 554 million compared to developed countries that have about 6% of the world's slum population. Greed through privatisation, corruption and the culture of entitlement are some of the most significant factors that divide people. Mahatma Gandhi encapsulated this when he said that there is enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed.

All stakeholders must come together like never before, put all gerrymandering aside to speed up delivery and improve the socioeconomic conditions of South Africans. We spent too much energy fighting one another rather than tackling poverty and other social problems. We are good at scoring points but pathetic losers when it comes to making our country better and safer.

"The future of our human settlements - from hamlet to megacity - will not be determined by 'bricks and mortar' alone. More housing is needed and rebuilding decaying infrastructure is essential - the litany is a long and familiar one. But for all we do about it, the malaise that now eats at the heart of our cities will not disappear unless we also pay attention to the urban soul, unless we advance the human solidarities that transform the built environment into human - and humane - settlements: the livable neighbourhoods of our interdependent world.

"History, geography and social change create the context for human solidarity; rational processes build cities, but faith, loyalty, honour and trust among its members create communal life. Beyond 'bricks and mortar', therefore, our cities, towns and villages need the social capital provided by a human solidarity of tolerance, mutual respect and shared values - social and spiritual - that generate close community bonds and trust, the bedrock of healthy human settlements." Wally N'Dow