

Squalor and its cohorts

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CONRAD Buthelet was one of those forcibly removed from Cato Manor in the early 1960s. He has now returned and painstakingly constructed his own place, brick by brick.

His room is spartan and the additional rooms he's marked out wait to be built with money made from yet another temporary job.

Conrad is pleased to have returned, but he is vocal in asserting that the Cato Crest slum residents are the last in line to see progress in their town.

As the leader of the local Communist Party he canvassed for the new ANC councillor, Gloria Borman, who has taken on her responsibilities by setting up her office in Cato Crest Community Centre, rather than on the Bertha. The community is living in post-election days of hope, expectant of fulfilled promises.

Some progress is being made: the collection of shacks is now separated by covered roads and drains, and the Cato Crest Primary School functions well, despite class sizes of up to 57 and no playing fields.

The school has support from various organisations, including the Salvation Army who provide sandwiches twice a day. This school, however, lacks sufficient books for pupils from Grades 1 to 7.

Recently children gathered in a makeshift library to participate in an event organised by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) during Water Week and told of their problems related to health and the provi-

sion of water. They welcomed improved water supplies, but all the children from Cato Crest complained of the complete absence of toilets. They use the push or plastic bags which are then dumped at the side of the road. More than 85% raised their hands when asked if they had worms, but only 20% had sought help at the clinic.

Despite the evidence of progress, health conditions in Cato Crest are, in the words of the councillor, "horrendous". A walk through the community confirms that toilets are non-



Rats are just rats. They need food too. They're trying everything to survive, just like us

Elderly Cato Crest resident

existent, mountains of rubbish lie adjacent to water points, and children are playing near stinking, stagnant water.

The fifth is appendicitis and disease hangs in the air.

In Cato Crest, as in other slums around the world, zoonotic diseases are re-emerging, due to a combination of climate change, increased connectivity with globalisation, urbanisation and poor sanitation.

Rodent invasions into human settlements are increasing everywhere, and with it are increasing fears for controlling

outbreaks of diseases such as hantavirus plague, which is still found in several countries in Africa.

In late 2004, a consortium of European and South African research institutions undertook a project to evaluate the risks that rodent-borne diseases such as leptospirosis, toxoplasmosis and plague posed to the residents of Cato Manor.

Focusing specifically on Cato Crest as a particularly densely populated and degraded section of the settlement, the project, called Ratsomen, undertook a seroprevalence survey of householders along with capturing rats for blood tests.

What emerged in the study was that the people of Cato Crest had simply learned to live with rats.

While a local clinic's records revealed a high prevalence of a variety of illnesses, including HIV/AIDS-related ailments (53%), tuberculosis (30%), diarrhoea (15%) and skin sores, common colds and influenza, it was only when rats bit the residents or their children at night that they sought help from the clinic.

Rats carry from their traditional disease. Bites from these fleas are scratched and dismissed much like ordinary mosquito bites. There is no understanding yet that these bites can make you ill.

Getting people to think about rats as carriers of disease is difficult when people are more concerned with other illnesses and unhealthy aspects of their environment, such as high rates of violence, rape, child abuse, and everyday crime.

For the most part, the struggle to manage rats is part of the general struggle to create a clean domestic space for oneself



MTHEMBENI Mthabela, Miss Mthabela, Councillor Gloria Borman and Bongani Ngcobo watch as dirty water spreads across the road

Picture: DAVID HEMSON

inside an outer environment that is perceived as dirty chaotic and deadly. Rats are localized primarily because they compete with people for scarce resources, not because they bring disease.

People describe rats much like they describe thieves - as scoundrels who enter dwellings

quietly at night - or when they are not at home and eat or destroy one's few possessions.

What the study showed was that, while people tried their best to create a little space of cleanliness and order in their shack homes, they also adapted to their larger environment by accepting the inevitability of

rats in their midst. As one old man put it, "Rats are just rats. They need food too. They're trying everything to survive, just like us."

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4448