

PRESS RELEASE

EMBARGOED UNTIL 2 PM, FRIDAY 21 APRIL 2006

This Friday afternoon about 100 delegates from 30 countries walked through the streets of Durban's Warwick Junction in the run up to crucial discussions about the future of informal workers.

Durban will host the fourth general meeting of the global research and policy network called WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising) on April 22 and 23. This will be followed by a colloquium entitled "'World Class Cities and the Urban Informal Economy: Inclusive Planning for the Urban Poor' on April 24 and 25.

They will bring together city managers, officials from the economic development departments of local, provincial and national governments, academics, activists from organisations of informal workers and formal trade unions, civil society leaders and representatives from international agencies. The colloquium will begin with an overview of the key trends in the informal economy worldwide before investigating just how the informal economy features in the future strategies and visions for major cities in developing countries.

For its part, Durban has been the site of a number of bold pilot initiatives that aim to find a proactive means of reconciling the interests of many poor traders who are battling to eke out living on city streets and those looking to further the interests of a well-managed, bustling and vibrant city centre.

Richard Dobson, currently the head of Durban's iTrump initiative and the driving force behind the Warwick Junction Renewal Project, told delegates about this important pilot project which is now internationally recognised as the way forward for urban planning.

It was launched in 1997 to negotiate a solution in Warwick Junction, the city's key commuter spot which is also home to between 6 000 and 8 000 informal traders. Within the ambit of a newly created democracy, this was a move towards area based management of a zone that was out of control. The iThekwini municipality has invested substantial amounts in upgrading traders' sites as well as renovating a building in the area to be used as a multi-purpose community centre.

The Warwick Junction project has begun to deal with informal traders as serious economic actors within the city, encouraged working with trader organisations in tackling crime in the area, spent much time building up better relationships and negotiations between different interest groups as a way to tackle problems in the area and brought on board gifted and committed city officials as leadership.

According to Francie Lund, Associate Professor at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's School of Development Studies, cities all over the world are trying to reconcile two conflicting mandates – creating spaces in the city for poorer people to work and managing public spaces for the free flow of people and traffic. “Many people see this as an either or issue – either get rid of the informal traders or public places will be unmanageable,” she said.

According to Lund, the political transition in South Africa created a unique situation. The long years of over-regulation and exclusion – no vendors anywhere except in built markets or selling newspapers on pavements – were followed rapidly by total deregulation. Cities opened the doors and many lost control over numbers allowed to trade.

“The re-regulation that is now going on is one in which there are strong conflicts between different interest groups. These are often restricted to confrontations between formal and informal traders or clashes between informal traders against the city – but this is much too simple an interpretation”, she said.

