Warwick Junction contains Durban’s primary transport node and on an average day accommodates 450,000 commuters, and around 5,000 street traders. Given the confluence of rail, taxi and bus transport, this area has always been a robust market for street traders. During the height of apartheid however, informal trading was tightly controlled. A newspaper article of the day described the area as a “cesspit”.

By the mid 1990’s nearly 4,000 traders were working in the area but it remained underserviced and neglected. In 1996 the city council launched an urban renewal initiative— the Warwick Junction Project. The project was mandated to focus on, among other issues, safety, cleanliness, trading and employment opportunities and the efficiency of public transport. The area-based team, initiated substantial capital works and established a number of operations teams to deal with issues as diverse as curbside cleaning, ablution facilities, child care facilities and safe pedestrian crossing.

The development process encouraged unprecedented levels of volunteerism as expressed through participation in community mobilisation, public cleaning campaigns and community policing.

One of the first project interventions was the establishment of a market for the traditional medicine traders. For many years the area had been a hub for this activity but no provisions were made for these traders. In 1998 a market was constructed in close consultation with traders that provided shelter, water and toilet facilities, making use of an unused freeway spur. The market currently accommodates nearly 800 traders. In 1998, the first year the market operated, it was estimated that the annual turnover was R170 million and that the cumulative employment generated, mostly people gathering medicinal products, was 14,000 people. The city council spent approximately R4 million on this infrastructure, through this, supporting not only a significant contributor to the city’s economy but also an employment generator. The market building itself was identified in December 1999 by the Sunday Times as one of the ‘Best of the Century’ in South Africa.

The traditional medicine market was one among a number of such sector-specific interventions. Facilities were also provided for, among others, fruit and vegetable traders, live chicken sellers, cardboard collectors and those cooking and selling corn-on-the-cob and the Zulu delicacy, bovine heads. The cooking activities, for example, utilise open fires and are thus potentially hazardous trades. Rather than ban these activities, council officials worked alongside the cooks to design appropriate infrastructure.

In parallel with infrastructure development there was a focus on improving management of the area. One of the many management concerns was the issue of crime. The Project supported and developed a trader initiative— Traders Against Crime (TAC). The project arranged training sessions with the South African Police Service, on issues such as how to conduct citizen’s arrests. This has resulted in a significant reduction in both petty and serious crime in the area.

The Warwick Junction Project has secured employment opportunities for over 5,000 people, in a context where informal traders in other cities both in South Africa and elsewhere, have largely been denied access to similar lucrative inner city trading opportunities. With secure tenure, traders are able to invest in and grow their businesses. Particularly for some of the more marginal traders, the opportunity to trade makes the difference between having food on the table or not. These activities are one point in a chain of economic activities that assist not only in growing businesses but ensure long term sustainability.

Architect: Richard Dobson  iTRUMP Programme Leader


Photo Credits: Dennis Gilbert, Yusaf Patel, Richard Dobson, Sue Wilkinson, eThekwini Municipality, Justine Whittle & Terence Hogben

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The Warwick Junction Project combines appropriate and attractive infrastructure with an innovative approach to urban management issues. It provides a rare model of how to integrate the informal economy into urban plans. The Project was based on the premise that the informal economy is an economic asset. This approach is not only a complete turnaround from apartheid logic of the pre-1994 period, but also formed the basis of what became a city-wide approach through an Informal Economy Policy, accepted by the Council in 2001. The Project also piloted an economically informed, sector-by-sector approach to supporting the informal economy. This was combined with high levels of consultation. A leader of the traders noted that through the Warwick Junction Project, the Council afforded informal traders the opportunity to participate on a sustained and continuous basis in negotiations about their needs and priorities. Consultation dissolved conflict, facilitated interventions genuinely informed by user needs and led to users having a sense of ownership of the area. Finally, part of the success of the project was a series of innovations with respect to transforming the bureaucracy. Coordination problems within local government were resolved through an area-based management approach. Council staff, through experience and training, changed their views about the value of stakeholder participation. In a context where the dominant trend both in South Africa and internationally is to remove street traders, Warwick Junction has become symbolic of what is possible in developing country cities.

Text: Richard Dobson and Caroline Skinner

Architect: Richard Dobson  iTRUMP Programme Leader


Photo Credits: Dennis Gilbert, Yusuf Patel, Richard Dobson, Sue Wilkinson, eThekwini Municipality, Justine Wintjies & Terence Hogben