

Addis Ababa: A City of Challenge and Charm

By Adina Israel

A ROOSTER'S CROW joins distant chants from the Orthodox Church. It is dawn and the city is quickly gaining consciousness. The din of the city is rising outside the walls of our compound. Soon it will be time to get ready for another day's work in Addis Ababa.

Ethiopia's capital city has been my home for the past five months. I am here as an intern, sponsored by CIDA's International Youth Internship Program, working on the CUI's Urban Development Partnerships Project (UDPP) Ethiopia. CUI's project is providing Canadian know-how in support of the country's agenda to improve urban management and governance. My placement has been with the City Government of Addis Ababa within its Department of Plan Preparation and Inspection (DUPPI) working on an initiative to improve living conditions for urban slum dwellers.

"Ecocity" slum upgrading

I am reminded daily of why I'm here, as I pass the shanties, corrugated iron fences, and children playing in the narrow paths of the slums. These are communities with limited access to the basic necessities of urban life, whether it be food security, potable water, proper sanitation, adequate shelter, livelihood, education, health care, environmental health, or safety and security. "Addis Ecocity" is the city government's slum upgrade initiative, which aims to provide a holistic approach to the many inter-related problems in these communities. Providing sanitary facilities, refuse collection, and social infrastructure, such as schools, clinics and recreation facilities, will collectively address the missing links in the social and physical structures.

Given the state of these neighbourhoods and the residents' lack of involvement, the solutions are neither obvious nor easy. DUPPI is seeking practical solutions. It has initiated a participatory process, whereby residents will help identify the problems, map their communities and specify their needs. This will not be without hurdles as residents may question the motives of new external involvement in community affairs. Therefore, those involved in

the initiative must be patient yet persistent as building trust with communities may take some time.

While working with DUPPI, I have focused on slum identification, but was also involved in helping embed simple yet crucial organizational procedures, such as intra-departmental communications and project documentation. These routine procedures make a huge difference to project implementation, the working of teams and how a department functions.

I deeply appreciate the exposure I have gained here. Aside from the slum upgrade project itself, other benefits include a real understanding of the little things that make institutions tick, of the term "incremental planning", and of the importance of social capital and informal networks.

Before the internship, I was under the impression that a plan is strategic by default. Now, I see the importance of following and completing strategies and their visions, goals and objectives. Continuity contributes to social, economic and political stability.

The organic city

What I appreciate most is the unique urban flavour of Addis Ababa. It is an anomaly in the African context with people from all backgrounds and socio-economic levels intermingling throughout neighbourhoods, where slum settlements can be found next to towering villas. The small "chika" houses (traditional mud and straw homes) are found in wealthy areas as well as impoverished ones. This is one of the challenges for Addis Ababa: slum identification can only function at the neighbourhood level otherwise the smaller clusters of slum housing situated within predominantly affluent areas may be at risk of being passed over. Yet, on the other hand, this diffusion of poverty throughout the city avoids the geographic concentration of poverty and contributes to streets here that are much safer than in other African metropolitan areas.

I walk the rubble-surfaced streets in the inner neighbourhoods daily while basking in the warm sun and charm of the city: the children walking to school hand in hand, the men in blue coveralls marching to work, the well-dressed office workers seated on stools while sipping their morning *caffè macchiato*, the goats and sheep searching for patches of green, and the dogs wandering aimlessly between puddles, people and vehicles.

The urban animals are an element of the city that I had not anticipated. In my first days here, I was surprised to see donkeys carrying heavy loads up steep hills, goats and sheep led to markets and grazing spots, cattle stampeded along the city's main arteries toward the abattoir, and stray dogs roaming about everywhere. The city struck me as an urban ecosystem and, in my mind, this is its charm. Addis Ababa is an organic city that blends many life forms and uses and, while they may slightly infringe on each other, they all seem to co-exist in relative harmony. ●

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Photograph by Teferra Sileshi