

Shelter: enabling housing standards in Kenya



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The young man grips the lever and arches his body sharply down. The machine clanks. Inside its chamber a new brick is pressed – a stabilised soil block (SSB), a mix of water and soil with a fraction of cement.

This and other simple building technologies now have the potential to transform lives in Kenya's cities – thanks to a ten year fight by ITDG and its partners.

simple building technologies now have the potential to transform lives

Three million people, one tenth of Kenya's population, live in cities. Most are in unrecognised informal

settlements or cheap, basic rentals. Social conditions are poor, services non-existent.

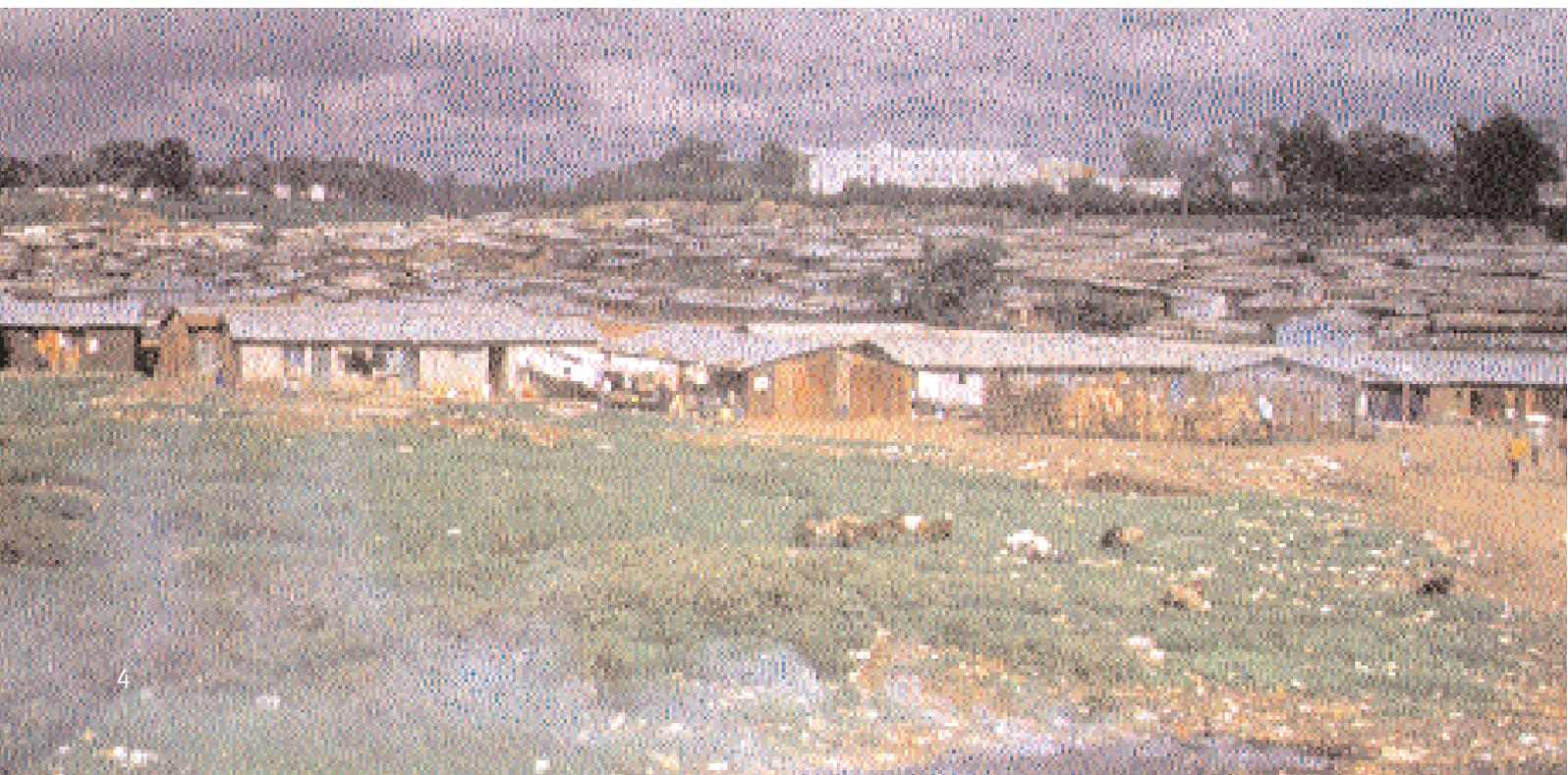
Appropriate technologies could help them build affordable houses – SSBs cost one penny each. But until recently people did not take them up because the houses would not be legally recognised.

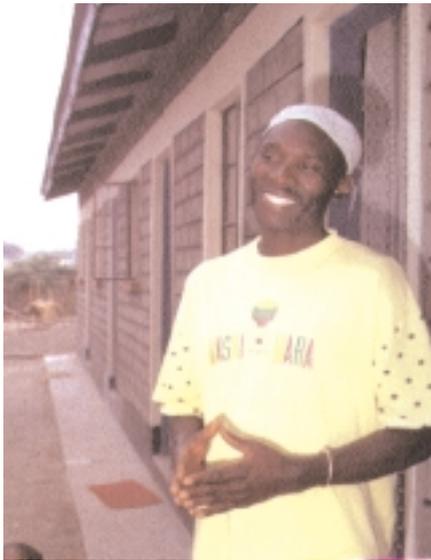
That was because Kenya's housing standards were written by the colonial authorities, partly to protect areas of 'good' housing against settlement by poor indigenous people.

ITDG and its partners changed that. Their campaign led, in 1996, to a new national housing code, more appropriate for low-income people.

But then what? Little changed. Local authorities did not know how to work with the new code. So ITDG took up the challenge again.

60 PER CENT OF NAIROBI'S RESIDENTS LIVE IN SOCIALLY DISASTROUS SLUMS





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ALFRED MISANGO OUTSIDE
HIS NEW HOME

A two-year project in Nakuru has proved that the new regulations can truly benefit the poor. ITDG got the local authority to streamline planning procedures, standardise building plans and formally recognise appropriate technologies.

It organised plot owners into co-operatives, brought in financial credit and created new housing designs. And it organised and trained a group of artisans to make the soil blocks. Together they built demonstration houses throughout the community to show what the new technology, laws and procedures could do.

Land owners and co-operatives immediately began to build to the new design.

“The new houses were easy to make and low cost, and you can make a very beautiful house,” says developer David Kimemu. The low-ceilinged, gloomy mud-built houses he previously rented out were “cheap to build, but expensive to maintain”, because the mud cracked in dry weather and slipped when wet.

Alfred Misango moved from a mud house to one of Kimemu’s 12 new units, built with SSBs, a cement floor, metal roof and ventilation. “This house is better, it’s higher and much more spacious and the air is better,” he says.

With demand for SSBs booming, the original artisans have trained 11 more. Their income has risen and their co-operative is in profit.

This technology is now taking off in Nakuru, a town of 350,000 people predicted to swell to one million in ten years.

The project’s mobilisation of communities and the local authority has led ITDG to develop a new project of integrated urban development in three neighbourhoods, with housing and environmental concerns at its core.

It also meant ITDG was asked to run part of a massive new project aimed at improving living conditions for the 600 000 people who live in the socially disastrous slums of Kenya’s capital, Nairobi.

improving living conditions for the 600 000 people

The need to revise outdated housing standards exists in dozens more developing countries. The lessons learned by ITDG are truly pioneering and are attracting worldwide interest, with over 20 countries represented at a workshop held in the UK in 1999.

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