

The brown house rat that has invaded, and now rules, Cato Crest.

Living with RATS

An HSRC research team has been to Cato Manor to investigate residents' attitudes to living alongside rodents, with a view to improving living conditions there. DAVID HEMSON and SUZANNE LECLERC-MADLALA report.

FORCIBLY DISPLACED from Cato Manor in the early 1960s, Conrad Buthelezi has since returned and painstakingly constructed a single-roomed dwelling, brick by brick. Additional rooms, marked out on the ground, will have to wait until he scrapes together enough money from whatever temporary jobs come his way. Although happy to be back, he is nevertheless adamant that other fruits of freedom have yet to come to Cato Crest. The way he sees it, he and the other slum residents are last in line for the benefits of progress and development.

As the leader of the local Communist Party, he canvassed for the new ANC councillor, Gloria Borman. Together, Borman and the HSRC are exploring the possibilities of participatory implementation research, with the aim of meeting people's post-democracy expectations and generating immediate improvements in their lives.

Some progress has been made: tarred roads and drains now separate the conclave of shacks. But of abiding concern are the health hazards caused by the absence of really effective sanitation. Animal-borne diseases are a particularly

serious matter in dire need of investigation. Health conditions in Cato Crest are, in the words of the councillor, 'horrendous'. A walk through the community confirms that toilets are non-existent, mountains of rubbish lie adjacent to water points, and children are playing near stinking pools of stagnant water. The filth is appalling and disease hangs in the air.

Researchers visiting Cato Crest Primary School have been amazed by how well the school functions, 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.

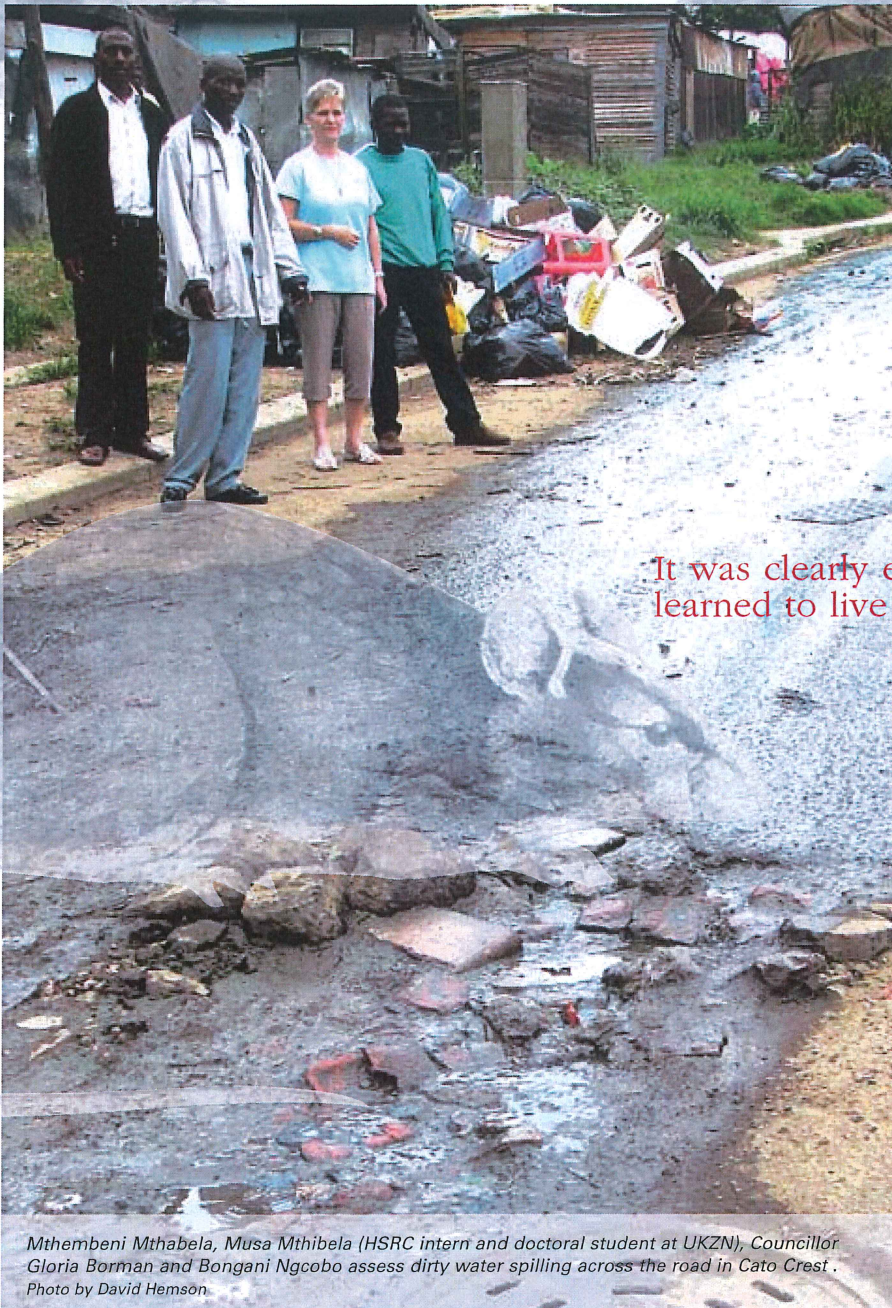
However, learners from Grade 1 to 7 lack sufficient textbooks. And, at an event organised by the HSRC during Water Week, the learners related their negative experiences around water provision and their health. While they welcomed the improved water supply, learners complained about the total lack of toilets in their area. They told researchers that, as a toilet, they either use the bush or plastic bags, which they then

dump by the road. When asked if they suffered from worm infections, more than 6% raised their hands. Only 20% of these learners had sought help at the clinic.

Zoonotic diseases – diseases transmitted to humans via animals – are becoming a growing problem in Cato Crest, as in other slums around the world. A combination of increased exposure to the effects of globalisation, climate change, urbanisation and poor sanitation are fuelling the increase in rodent invasions. The real possibility of bubonic plague outbreaks are causing alarm everywhere.

In 2004, a consortium of European and South African research institutions, including the HSRC, undertook a project to understand the risks that rodent-borne diseases pose to the residents of Cato Manor.

Focusing on Cato Crest as a particularly densely populated and degraded section of the settlement, the project, called Ratzooman, undertook a socioeconomic survey of households, more than 30% of which claimed a family member had been bitten by rats at some stage. The project also undertook to



Mthembeni Mthabela, Musa Mthibela (HSRC intern and doctoral student at UKZN), Councillor Gloria Borman and Bongani Ngcobo assess dirty water spilling across the road in Cato Crest. Photo by David Hemson.

It was clearly evident that poor people had learned to live with their rats”

disease conductors is extremely difficult when they are far more concerned about other diseases as well as other hazardous aspects of their environment, namely, high rates of violence, rape, child abuse and everyday crime.

Research revealed that people tend to describe rats much in the same way they describe thieves: scoundrels, who break in at night or when they are not at home to eat and destroy their few possessions.

Interestingly, rat-management strategies appear to be gender-specific. Men reported either using traps or pouncing on the rats in the kitchen, frightening them off with bright torchlight and loud shouting. Woman on the other hand prefer to sprinkle judicious amounts of rat poison in selected areas, hoping the unwanted vermin will creep off and die.

Analysis of the data showed that although people tried their best to create oases of cleanliness and order in their shack homes, they nevertheless tended to adapt to the filth of their larger environment, resigned to the inevitability of rats in their midst. As one senior citizen put it, ‘Rats need food too. They are trying everything to survive, just like us’.

At the Water Week event, Conrad Buthelezi sang a song of old *uMkhumbane* (as Cato Manor is popularly known) about children in the 1950s longing for a swimming pool. The yearning for a swimming pool may remain, but far more important to the people, particularly the children, is the immediate instigation of urgent measures to deal with all the environmental causes of ill-health. Rats included.

We hope, with this investigation, to support the implementation of better conditions by working with Councillor Borman to identify problems and monitor improvements. ●

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capture and test local rats for diseases such as leptospirosis, toxoplasmosis and plague.

Post-graduate student field workers from the Anthropology Department at the University of Kwazulu-Natal (UKZN) adopted some innovative research methods to record the locals’ perceptions, beliefs and ways of dealing with the health threats that rats bring into their environment. Since rats are especially active at night, daytime interviews were supplemented with night-watch activities, such as participant observation with strong torches around garbage heaps and litter-strewn pathways.

From the anthropological study of current

perceptions and practices of Cato Crest residents in relation to rodent pests (specifically to large Norwegian brown rats), it was clearly evident that poor people had learned to live with their rats.

While local clinic records reveal the high prevalence of a variety of illnesses that patients present with – including illnesses related to HIV/AIDS (55%), tuberculosis (30%), diarrhoea (15%), and an incalculable amount of skin sores, common colds, and influenza – it is only when the rats actually bite either them or their children at night that they seek help from clinics.

Getting people to see rats as dangerous

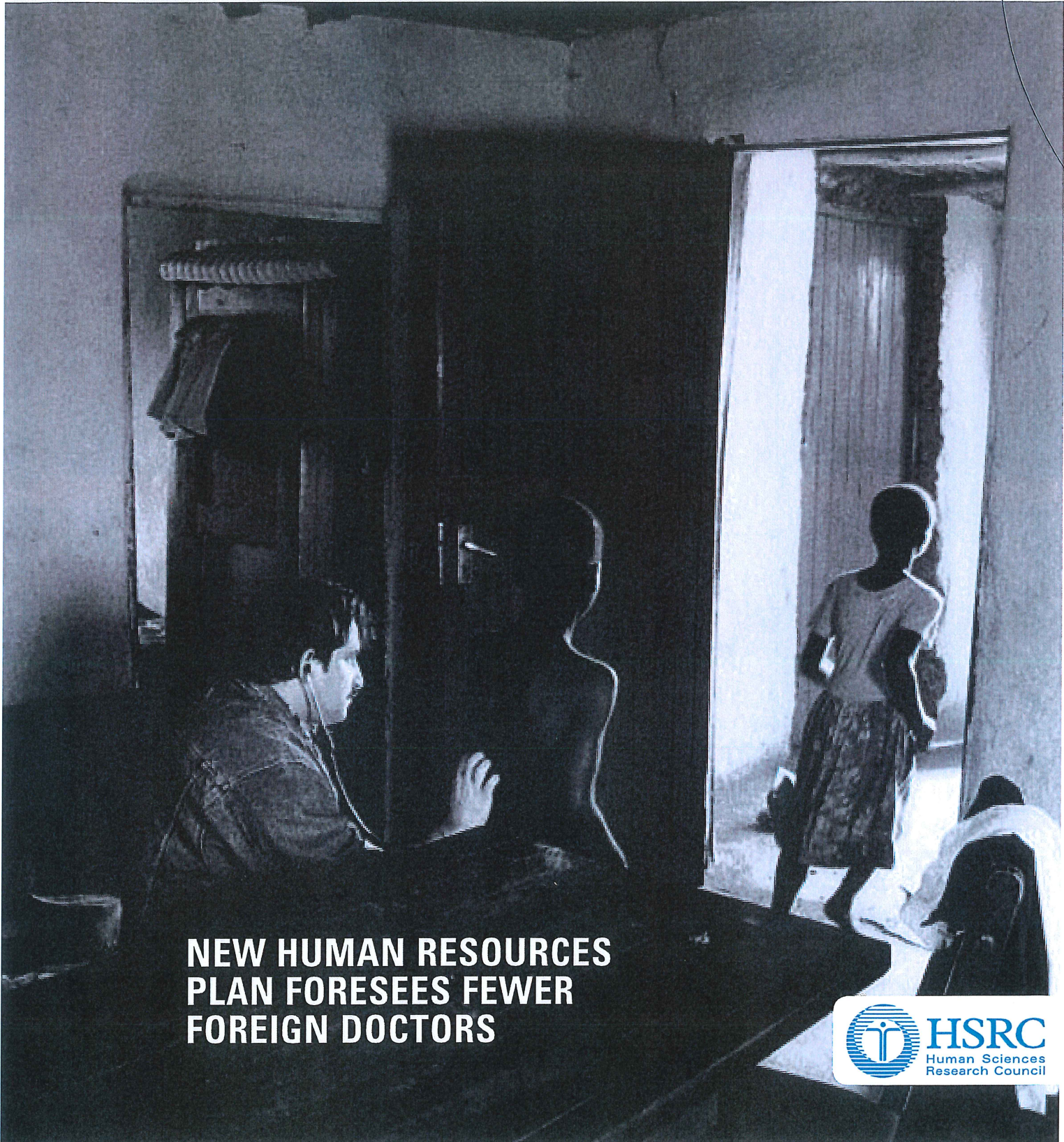
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