

## Reflections on Planact's history and South Africa's current challenges

Summary of address by Ahmedi Vadwa at Planact's Annual General Meeting, 28 November, 2002

*Ahmedi Vadwa was on the staff of Planact during a time of South Africa's exciting transition to democracy the early 1990s, a transition during which organisations like Planact played a critical role. He is now the Deputy Director General for Policy and Programme Management at the national Department of Housing, and provided reflections on how Planact might assist in addressing current challenges.*

Vadwa began his address by reflecting on one of the most important lessons he took away from his time at Planact—the ability to think and work “without boundaries.” In a time when the apartheid regime was trying hard to control the discourse, Planact and other organisations were “seeking progressive agendas,” and were able to exercise a great deal of creativity in their visions of what society could be like. He suggested that the enormous challenges face South Africa currently--such as the urbanisation of poverty and continued inequitable redistribution of wealth, and increasing numbers of women-headed households without access to the economy—are in many ways associated with globalisation. There is a need for “an alliance of progressives,” to engage vigorously around these issues.

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“The battles Planact has fought and continues to fight centre on protecting the poor.”  
---- Ahmedi Vadwa, Deputy Director General, Department of Housing.

Vadwa offered some thoughts concerning the approach he's adopted in his housing work—that the ultimate goal is not just to develop housing, but to contribute to “constructing the citizen.” Fundamentally this means more than voting, it means that if you participate in the economy, you have a right to participate in how the economy is run, but not just as a consumer. He argued that the Constitution places at its centre the construction of the citizen, not the consumer, and this lends strength to this approach. This establishes the fundamental principle of democracy and creates the conditions for good governance. He argued that the consensus reached in 1994 put a very significant condition on the market-based approach--the need to protect the poor in the market—and that: “we must defend this.”

Asset-building is the key programmatic response of the Department of Housing to the problems of the poor. There has been an active withdraw of the private sector from housing provision, and South Africa has to come to terms with a ‘demand-led’ strategy in the face of supply-led failures. One response has been the People's Housing Process, shifting the ‘regime of production’ to the community level, and also shifting the approach from shelter to ‘human settlement.’ Other efforts of the Department of Housing would focus on institution-building, better resource rationalisation and promoting better management practice.

Vadwa recalled the early days of Planact's history, when Planact served as a "place of exchange, where everyone's views were respected," although points were heavily debated. He felt that this healthy exchange enabled Planact to be a learning organisation, one that encouraged the development of the "reflective practitioner." He suggested that there is the need for this kind of environment even today, and wondered whether Planact might still be able to play a role in fostering such debate. He also noted that it was at Planact that he first learned the meaning of integrated development, the "notion of a core package of services," around which you build communities and citizens. He also learned, through the Wattville project, that we have to deconstruct people's experiences of apartheid before we can successfully reconstruct a new society.

Vadwa challenged Planact to participate in evolving understandings of the processes of urban change—what do we do that makes for a successful urbanisation process or an unsuccessful one? He suggested that it was important to understand how the poor often employ "generational investment"—that rather than invest in their housing, they invest in their children. It was important to reflect forwards and backwards in time—to access knowledge over generations and bring it to bear on today's problems. Finally, he suggested that there is a need to encourage innovation, but with a "solid centre"—if you get the centre right, you can afford to develop creative solutions.