

Maria Christina Georgiadou



Dr Georgiadou is a Reader in Construction at the School of Applied Management, Westminster Business School, University of Westminster. She has expertise in low carbon construction, energy efficiency, project management and digital innovation in the built environment. Christina was the Principal Investigator of two prestigious projects; a three-year ESRC project titled 'ISULabaNtu: Community-led Upgrading for Self-Reliance in South Africa: Integrated Construction and Environmental Management Systems in Informal Settlements' and a 6-year Royal Society Newton Advanced Fellowship titled 'BURSAC: Building Urban Resilience in African Cities'. Both projects explored self-upgrading participatory methods and processes to enhance community self-reliance in informal settlements upgrading in Durban, South Africa.

LESSONS learned

- 1 INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS ARE NOT JUST PLACES OF POVERTY AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION.**
They should be an integral part of the city fabric open to connectivity, cooperation, collaboration, and communication.
- 2 INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS SHOULDN'T BE VIEWED AS A HOUSING PROBLEM REQUIRING A PHYSICAL SOLUTION.**
Rather, primarily as spaces offering opportunities for habitation, livelihood creation, self-organisation, economic growth and environmental sustainability.
- 3 YOU CAN'T HAVE IT ALL.**
For example state-funded housing, with a full package infrastructure and environmental services, title deeds and formal town planning is an impossible solution, therefore, grassroots/bottom-up approaches are essential.
- 4 CATASTROPHIC AND UNPREDICTABLE EVENTS DUE TO CLIMATE CHANGE HAVE SEVERE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS ON COMMUNITIES.**
Particularly fragile informal settlements that cannot adapt.
- 5 PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH REQUIRES A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.**
Academic knowledge should be blended equally with indigenous knowledge. Both are essential for impact, mutual learning, and broader dissemination.
- 6 MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION GOES BEYOND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.**
It involves accepting informality and working with it, instead of finding ways to eradicate it.
- 7 AN ACADEMIC TEAM SHOULD WORK ALONGSIDE COMMUNITIES, NGOS, POLICY MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS.**
As the African proverb suggests, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together"
- 8 LITTLE CONTROL IS POSSIBLE IN 'REAL-LIFE' RESEARCH PROJECTS.**
Community participation and access to case studies can be delayed particularly in uncertain political environments.