

## DOCUMENT 2 B

# iTRUMP [inner Thekwini Regeneration and Urban Management Programme] AREA BASED CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS MANAGING THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

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## MEALIE COOKERS FACILITY

### 1. PROJECT

To conceptualize, design and implement an alternate method of boiling bulk quantities of mealies [corn-on-the-cob] for distribution and sale throughout the inner city. At the inception of the Project the mealies were being prepared in three distinct locations with significant urban management, health and safety challenges. The initial assessment was, that unless the open wood fires were replaced by low pressure [LP] gas, the practice would have to be discontinued. Approximately 60 cookers were involved in the practice.

### 2. BACKGROUND

With the commissioning of the Traditional Herb and Medicine Market, the Warwick Junction Project's focus moved towards Brook Street [North] and the necessity to relocate the spontaneous residential settlement that had established itself on the underutilized hard landscaped urban park. Associated with the community were a group of mealie cookers. The sidewalk impact of this activity was significant. Open wood fires, extreme heat and the resultant damage to the paving, waste water, ash and mealie leaves - all threatening the storm-water reticulation.

The second group of mealie cookers were located in Market Road, alongside the rail corridor in the vicinity of the English Market. The urban management impacts were similar to those described in Brook Street. This was the smallest of the three groups of mealie cookers.

The third group were operating from a large vacant residential site in Acorn Road, adjacent to the current iTRUMP Centre. Although this group were not operating on a paved sidewalk, the site conditions were equally problematic in that the waste water had saturated the area, creating a virtual swamp with the attendant health risks.

In all three locations the urban management challenges were indicating that the activity must either minimize its impact significantly or cease operating. The open wood fires were considered the primary nuisance, hence the early opinion that the cookers convert to LP gas to boil the mealies.

Generally, “13 dozen” mealies are packed tightly into a 200 L recycled mild steel drum, together with approximately 40 - 50 L of water and 45 g of bicarbonate of soda. The fierce wood fire surrounding the drum boils the contents in 20 minutes! After approximately 1¼ hours the mealies are removed, placed in large poly bags which are in turn placed in a slightly larger bag. The space between these two bags is then filled with boiling water, forming a hot insulating “jacket” around the cooked mealies. This is placed in a supermarket trolley and hawked throughout the inner city.

At inception the price of a single mealie was approximately R3.00 at the height of the day. When making a purchase, the customer selects their own mealie and removes the outer leaves themselves - thus the edible portion remains untouched.

The food health concerns were primarily the source of the recycled drum and the water quality. The risk in the latter instance, was the tendency to re-use as much of the pre-boiled water as possible.

It was recognized that a mealie was a low cost carbohydrate “fast food”, which through its preparation, also provided informal incomes.

### **3. LOCATION**

As described above there were the three primary locations, but also the occasional single cooker ie. one drum located in a secluded place eg. Neville Lane. These tended to also be nomadic!

The implementation Project that matured out of the Warwick Junction Operations Task Team [OTT 3] investigation, was located in Lorne Street.

### **4. INTERVENTION**

After a thorough investigation into an alternate means of boiling the drum, it was proposed that a site be identified that could be designated to permit the use of open wood fires; be secured to prevent flames spreading to surrounding activities; and have the necessary hardened surfaces and drainage.

The intervention entailed the implementation of a single mealie cooking facility for the inner city. It would retain the informal incomes for those already engaged in the activity.

## 5. PROCESS

To the casual observer, the complexity of an informal economy activity is often obscured. In this case study, the complexity was one of technique ie. the cooking of the mealies, but equally important, the human network involved in the activity. Perhaps more by luck than judgement, these complexities were revealed!

The development of the mealie cooking facility was a product of the [then] Warwick Junction Operation's Task Team. These Task Teams were formed out of the monthly Operations Meetings to focus specifically on urban management challenges that required particular and focused attention. The Task Teams were formed around a challenge [in this instance OTT 3 Mealie Cookers] and consisted of Local Authority officials who were best skilled to contribute towards a solution, but also those whose line function responsibility encompassed the activity. OTT 3 had representatives from City Health, Emergency Services [Fire], ITSBO [Informal Trade and Small Business Opportunities], Architecture, Markets, Storm Water Management, Urban Design and the Warwick Junction Project Team. The OTTs met outside of the regular monthly meetings to avoid extensive, speculative discussion until such time as recommendations were formed that could be contributed into the plenary. [See: 7. LEARNING 7iv of this case study for a current list of the Warwick Junction Operations Task Team]

Beyond site inspections and a broad assessment of the urban management challenges from the Local Authority's perspective, little was known about the mealie cookers. The Task Team commenced field work with the three groups with the ultimate aim of inviting them all to an initial consultation. The purpose of this meeting was to:

1. Alert the cookers to the Local Authority's urban management concerns regarding their activity.
2. Raise obvious health and hygiene observations.
3. Alert the cookers to the Local Authority's initial assessment that open wood fires needed to be substituted for LP gas **but** with the assurance that the Task Team needed to understand the detailed operation of their business before finalizing their position on the matter.
4. By default, initiate a process of sector organization and elected representation.

The first meeting established the initial data base and a more accurate confirmation of the field survey of the numbers engaged in mealie cooking [later the number involved proved to be far more complex]. Approximately 40 women attended this first meeting.

A significant portion of the meeting was devoted to establishing details of the cooking operation. Richard Dobson facilitated a simulation of the perceived operation using jam tins [the 200 L drums]; film spools [the 25 L fresh water containers]; dried beans [the mealies]; matches [the wood]. The three groups were asked to work independently and describe the cooking operation using a game playing technique. Additional staff from City Health were in attendance to observe the groups at "play".

Their initial response was quick and superficial, but when asked for more specific detail eg. how many beans [mealies] are in the tin?; how many 25 L's of water?, the groups became involved and animated. This workshop established the basis of cooking operation and the early formation of an identifiable group of "mealie cookers".

The challenge of conversion to L.P. gas remained and it was agreed that technical research was needed to establish the viability of this assertion. There were interactions with various gas companies, who although rather surprised at the unusual enquiry, were all convinced that LP gas would work using a multi-flame industrial burner under the drum. This was conveyed to the next consultation meeting but no firm answers could be provided with respect to the cost of the gas - simply because there was no accurate assessment of how long the drum would take to boil.

All this, together with the polite but perhaps highly strategic planning on the part of the women, resulted in a message to the OTT, "challenging" Richard Dobson to a cook-out! This summer's morning event at 04:30 hrs, determined the future of inner city mealie cooking.

As arranged, Richard Dobson and two Local Authority colleagues met at the vacant site in Acorn Road [it being adjacent to the iTRUMP Centre]. Next to arrive was a middle aged man pushing a trolley with two 200 L blackened drums. These were carefully off loaded because each were already filled with approximately 50 L of fresh water. He left, advising that he would be returning with fire wood. [ In the meantime, an irate resident in the adjacent apartment block appeared on a balcony in his dressing gown and enquired whether the party were setting up business!]

The "mealie cooker" arrived and seated herself in an advantageous position to direct the event. Richard Dobson's drum was placed on top of the gas burner and connected to its 40 kg bottle. Immediately it looked incongruous - which should have been a warning. Next, two market barrow operators arrived with sacks of fresh mealies. They were duly paid for by the cooker and the mealies were packed tightly into the drums, 156 per drum requiring skill in its own right. By then the first man had returned with the fire wood [shipping pallets] and additional fresh water. The wood was prepared around the drum and additional water was added to both. At this stage the mealie hawker arrived with her supermarket trolley and polybags. Out of this collection of bags, some suitable ones were selected to carefully cover the top of each drum to prevent the steam escaping. Someone remembered that the bicarbonate of soda was still needed, so the hawker was dispatched to the supermarket. She returned with a number of sachets and in total precisely 45 g was added to each drum "to help their customers' stomachs and keep the mealies firm."

The hour of testing had arrived and all participants were standing around in an awkward silence. It transpired that the wait had been for the first man who now returned with an armful of scrap wooden tomato boxes [from the Early Morning Fresh Produce Market] to be used as kindling.

The cooker on her up-ended paint tin nodded and the fire was lit. This was Richard Dobson's signal to light the gas burners.

The mealie cooker's drum with the wood fire was boiling in less than 20 minutes, whilst the gas fired drum was only luke warm at the bottom! The point had been diplomatically made on behalf of the mealie cooker community. It was politely suggested that "we don't waste the drum of mealies" and Richard Dobson's drum was unceremoniously removed from the gas burner, a huge wood fire built around it, and it too was boiling in less than 20 minutes. The decorum, non-verbal communication and transfer of information had been amazing.

What was particularly significant was the extended informal employment chain associated with the process [each earning an income for their contribution] and the unique assembly of all the necessary production resources. The significance of the fierce fire was to boil the mealies quickly to ensure that they remained firm.

Later research confirmed that high pressure gas might have been able to achieve comparable wood fire results, but unless the drum had been made of high grade stainless steel, the flame jets would have burnt holes in the drum. Substituting the mild steel drum for stainless steel would have rendered the process financially unviable and the drum would have had a street value which would have made its safe-keeping virtually impossible. Survivalist incomes are founded on solid logic!

## **6. PRODUCT**

It was clear that the quality of the cooked mealies depended on rapid boiling which could only be realistically achieved with an intense wood fire that shrouded the drum. Having established a clear understanding of the process, the OTT recommended that a site be identified that could accommodate these robust activities. The Project negotiated an approximately 300 m<sup>2</sup> portion of a Council owned site in Lorne Street for this purpose.

The entire site was fenced - a solid precast concrete fence along the shared boundary and a pallsade fence along the street frontage. A central drainage channel was formed to receive waste cooking water draining onto paving that covered the entire area. An innovative double basket grating was developed to prevent waste ash and mealie leaves blocking the underground waste reticulation. This grate was maintained by the cookers. An idiosyncrasy that remained for at least three seasons was that the three primary groups of cookers would not agree to operate from the facility as a singly entity. The compromise was two groups with a wire mesh fence separating the facility! [The facility was originally designed as a single space and with the passage of time the fence has fallen into disrepair and been removed.]

The initial group of cookers numbered approximately 60. This has grown to between 120 - 140 and in the height of the growing season, the facility operates on virtually a 24 hour basis, cooking 26 - 28 tonnes of mealies a day. The gross turnover from this informal activity is in excess of R1.0 million / week. The total capital expenditure for the Project over two phases was R65,000.

## **7. LEARNING**

i. **Process:**  
 The process [See: 5. PROCESS] has been reported in detail and in a narrative style to emphasize the event and its unique occurrence, that was largely a result of an area based management approach. The design and operational information that was acquired from the 1½ hour “cook-out” was exceptional and reflected an almost mysterious willingness by the women to convey the critical aspect of their work [the intense fire and its contribution to the quality of the cooked product] to the OTT, but on their terms. The OTT was sympathically inclined to the practice, but nothing during the foregoing consultations had revealed the extent of the employment chain associated with an individual cooker and the livelihoods that were potentially at risk.

Not unlike the Traditional Herb and Medicine Market, the retention of mealie cooking reflected acceptance of a cultural preference. All these aspects are nuanced in a way that can only be attributed to Local Authority officials being “in the field”, observant and immediately accessible to stakeholders.

ii. **Economy:**  
 It was never anticipated that the disparate practice of bulk mealie cooking with its enormous urban management challenges, would aggregate into a turnover in excess of R1.0 million / week. For many in the informal employment chain, the income is a survivalist’s stipend, but the jobs were recognized through the considered retention of the practice. The intervention by the Warwick Junction Project Team was highly cost effective - R65,000 for a weekly return of R1.0 million. [It was often joked that had the mealie cookers raised the capital as a loan, they would have been able to pay it back in full by lunch time on the first day!]

A consistent theme throughout the 5 case studies is the developmental benefit arising from the decision to invest in infrastructure in support of the informal economy. [See: Document 1. 7 Learning 7iv. Page 15]

iii. **Role of Women:**  
 Within the mealie cooking community, women are in the majority and the most influential. Notwithstanding this influence, they were vulnerable and deferring at the inception of the consultation process. It is believed that the OTT was able to read the signs and responded to the overtures from the cookers that enabled their opinion to be heard, which in turn secured their livelihoods and most certainly, enhanced their self-esteem.

iv. **Operations Task Teams:**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Proposed Task Team</b>
OTT 1	Containers
<b>Number</b>	<b>Proposed Task Team</b>
OTT 2	Cardboard Collectors

OTT 3	Mealie Cookers
OTT 4	Brook / Bond Street Environs
OTT 5	Taxi Rank Management
OTT 6	Bovine Head Cookers
OTT 7	GIS [Leopold, Cannongate Sample]
OTT 8	Fencing of Warwick Triangle Road Reserves
OTT 9	Formalizing of Shebeens / Taverns
OTT 10	Prototype public convenience/s
OTT 11	Overnight Accommodation
OTT 12	Creche
OTT 13	Food Courts
OTT 14	City Police Satelite Station
OTT 15	Informal Trade Enforcement
OTT 16	Stable Theatre and Environs
OTT 17	Pavement Sleeping
OTT 18	Hairdressers
OTT 19	Security
OTT 20	Urban Decay / Better Buildings
OTT 21	Theatre Lane
OTT 22	Alice Street
OTT 23	Repairs and Maintenance Public Reporting Process
OTT 24	Operation “Big Blitz”
OTT 25	Underground Services Management
OTT 26	Driving Schools
OTT 27	Market Barrows
OTT 28	Special Operations
OTT 29	Signage, Graffiti and Pamphlets Task Team
OTT 30	Centenary Road Task Team
Ott 31	Braaing on pavements

The above list indicates the range of urban management challenges being addressed by iTRUMP in the Warwick Junction district. The approach is innovative in that it utilizes existing line department officials, but concentrates their expertise and responsibility in an efficient manner, with an element of job satisfaction in that iTRUMP’s preferred outcome is an implementation project that mitigates the intensity of the urban management challenge. OTT 3 Mealie Cookers is demonstrative of this principle.

- v. Small Learning, Significant impact: An area based presence permits the indulgence of observation and co-learning alongside stakeholders.

The neighborhood presence of the mealie cooking facility is generally observed because of the smoke from the wood fires. A simple but profound learning was, that if the wood is **dry** it smokes less [obvious!]. iTRUMP's planned and continual investment in the facility will to be sheltered wood store.