ABSTRACT

Internationally, settlement informality (informal housing and informal settlements) is increasing, not decreasing. Thus, according to United Nations estimates, there are currently 924 million people living in various forms of slums and unauthorized or informal settlements (UN Habitat, 2003, p2). In Sub-Saharan Africa 71.9% of urban dwellers lived in slums (ibid). In South Africa, official government sources estimate that over two million households are accommodated in shacks and the number is increasing rapidly as new household formation outstrips formal housing supply.

Despite the scale of the phenomenon, a field in which there has been surprisingly little research is the spatial organization of informal settlements, the processes which bring this about and the relationship between spatial organization and the way in which life is lived in these settlements.

To explore these issues, the author recently undertook a comparative evaluation of five informal settlements involving different contexts (inner city urban, peripheral urban, small town, suburban) in the Western Cape, South Africa, in order to understand processes and patterns of informal settlement formation, the strengths and weaknesses of these settlements as containers of urban life and to attempt to generalize about these issues (Fig 1).

Key words: Urban settlement, Case study, South Africa.