

# *What it looks like when it's fixed*

A case study in developing a systemic model to transform a fragile social system



Dr Barbara Holtmann

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## What it looks like when it's fixed



- 1 Schools are centres of community activity
- 2 Classrooms have working electric lighting
- 3 Schools are equipped with computers
- 4 There are books for the children to read
- 5 Health facilities are easy to access
- 6 There are recreational facilities where children can play freely and safely
- 7 Trees create shade and uplift the environment
- 8 People live in proper brick houses
- 9 Community buildings are of solid construction
- 10 Teachers are present, pleasant and qualified
- 11 Happy, healthy children go to school
- 12 There are taps with clean running water
- 13 Community activities like growing vegetables keep people busy
- 14 There are gardens with flowers
- 15 Youngsters play soccer on a field with real grass and goalposts
- 16 Organised extramural activities keep children busy

## What it looks like when it's fixed

The more we study the major challenges of our time – such as poverty, crime, unemployment, health and the environment – the more we realise that conventional solutions are failing to create the impact they had in the past. *What it looks like when it's fixed* provides a case study in the development of a different approach that offers new hope in tackling the most daunting challenges facing our society and institutions.

This work draws on the growing body of systems and design thinking knowledge to address the wicked social problems facing our society. *What it looks like when it's fixed* offers a new holistic way of understanding complex social systems, building stakeholder cohesion and designing solutions that will work in our era.

What it looks like when it's fixed is not extravagant or unrealistic – it looks like a place where things function properly and where basic community needs are met, where everyone has a useful contribution and a meaningful role to play.

Creating such a reality is not just about responding to community needs, but also about helping communities to articulate those needs and to envision the possibility of different outcomes. These are outcomes in which everyone can live their best life and contribute meaningfully to the sustainability of their communities.

## From fragile systems to social transformation

English, unlike most languages, distinguishes between the words security and safety. Security is about protection against known or perceived risks and threats. It includes, for instance, 'target hardening', guarding and law enforcement. Safety is about not needing such security; it is about freedom from fear, about open windows and children playing in public places, about trust and the opportunity for everyone to live their best life.

This study is concerned with safety. While it recognises the need for effective and efficient policing and criminal justice, it is not about how to fix the criminal justice system, nor about using the law as a deterrent against crime, nor about arresting and punishing criminals. The author uses the term 'unsafety' to describe the status of many communities – fragile systems in which individuals and communities cannot access rights and opportunities and are exposed to high rates of crime and violence.

In this groundbreaking work, safety is framed as a whole society transformation in which there is a vested interest not just in the balance between offenders and victims, but in resilience and opportunity for all members of a community.

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*The opportunity inherent in this systemic approach is grounded in the knowledge that the capacity, will and motivation to facilitate change for the better inevitably lies within communities.*

## Creating a vision of a better future

The primary research on which this book is based was gathered by asking people to respond with drawings to the question 'What does it look like when it's fixed?' Despite the perceived aspiration to live in a secure exclusion zone, respondents across the socio-economic spectrum did not draw high walls and electric fences.

Instead, they drew houses with picket-fenced gardens, neighbours chatting, children playing in the park, old people sitting in the sunshine, women walking at night under bright lights, food gardens and school events – in short, vibrant communities in which people go about their business without fear of victimisation.

Finding the most commonly depicted elements of a safe community, the author tested their validity through consultation and workshops with experts and through an intensive review of literature across a range of disciplines. These included health, social welfare, criminology, violence prevention and community development.

The links between these elements were recognised as being at least as significant as the elements themselves. This in turn led to an exploration of systems theory, which helped define unsafety as a symptom of a fragile, failing system that could only be 'fixed' by means of a systemic transformation and not by responding to any simple or isolated element.

## Design thinking

Design thinking methodologies present a natural fit in developing practical responses to community problems. Solutions are developed in facilitated, participative processes in which the potential beneficiaries are fully engaged in articulating both the problem and the strategies for transformation.

In addressing unsafety, the 'Safe communities of opportunity' model, developed by the author over a number of years, provides a consensus-building mechanism in which interventions can be verified at the outset through a shared vision and understanding of the systemic nature of the challenges faced. An appropriately systemic strategy for transformation is then developed, but nothing is done without anticipating the impact it will have – and the impact is then monitored with the community in an inclusive and transparent way.

Experience has taught us that nobody can apply change to a community; it must come from within. The opportunity inherent in this systemic approach is grounded in the knowledge that the capacity, will and motivation to facilitate change for the better inevitably lies within communities. It is the role of government and other stakeholders to help unlock it.

## Safe communities of opportunity

The 'Safe communities of opportunity' model is a methodology that incorporates:

- Identifying elements of a safe community of opportunity, verified through research;
- A shared current worldview which articulates the gap, if there is one, between 'what it looks like now' and 'what it will look like when it's fixed';
- Suggested simple indicators that rely on local knowledge and experience rather than months of data gathering;
- Indicators that relate directly to the impact of the programme;
- Accessible information about the linkages between elements and their significance;
- Visual representation of stakeholder mandates and functions, and the identification of useful collaborative partnerships;
- A simple, practical action-planning process;
- Longitudinal impact assessment and measurement; and
- Diagnostic and remedial guidance.

*This inclusive, systemic approach to transformation can enable and empower all of us to live our best lives.*

## Taking on other social challenges

The 'Safe communities of opportunity' model and its methodology are grounded in design thinking and systems theory. While the model was initiated in response to years of research into the prevention of crime and violence, during its development it emerged that crime and violence are no more than a symptom of frailty and vulnerability. Unsafety is an outcome of a failing social system – just as corruption and non-delivery are outcomes of failing social institutions, or poor financial results flow from failing corporate systems.

It soon became apparent that the model could easily be adapted to address other kinds of failing social systems.

The model employs a hybrid methodology, drawing from both the social sciences and business processes. It facilitates consensus building through the participation of an inclusive range of stakeholders; first to draw and analyse 'what it looks like when it's fixed' and then to populate the model with a baseline understanding of the current status of the system or 'community'.

Unlike traditional research methodologies, this process relies on what is known in the room, which is backed up by more than 10 years of verified research into the elements of a sustainable system and how they can contribute to the transformation from frailty and vulnerability to opportunity and sustainability.

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*The model facilitates the development of a social contract in which all stakeholders are committed to collaboration through their own analysis and for their own benefit.*

The model gives even the least educated participants entry into the world of systems theory, making visual and tangible the inter-relatedness of problems and desired outcomes. While it offers all participants equal authority and every process is transparent and inclusive, the methodology also delivers rapid results.

## **Success stories**

- The model is currently being implemented in Kenya as part of an intervention by UN Habitat Safer Cities as a tool for the transformation of a struggling slum school into a community asset.
- The model has been adapted into a planning and management tool for application in urban management.
- The model has been introduced by the government of Delhi in India to transform the city into an inclusive city for women.
- In Hammanskraal in South Africa, Khulisa Social Solutions is employing the model as a community transformation tool.
- Khulisa has also embedded the model in its Restorative Justice and Diversion programme.

## **Looking ahead**

For government, donors and corporate social investment funds, the model provides a way of ensuring buy-in and ownership by beneficiaries and the development of a social contract in which all stakeholders are committed to collaboration through their own analysis and for their own benefit.

The 'Safe communities of opportunity' model is premised on the notion that each of us knows the difference between a dream and reality. We should trust and encourage one another to dream big, and follow up with practical, pragmatic collaborative action that takes us towards our shared goals. This inclusive, systemic approach to transformation can enable and empower all of us to live our best lives.

## About the author

Dr Barbara Holtmann uses systems and design thinking to facilitate understanding and insight among key stakeholders dealing with fragile social systems across the world. She has worked in business, government and most recently at the CSIR. Dr Barbara is Vice President of the International Centre for the Prevention of Crime and serves on the boards of Women in Cities International and the Open Society Foundation of South Africa. She was the recipient of the Ann van Dyk Applied Research Award in 2010.

## PwC's commitment

Our clients, our staff and their families live and function within the current South African, African and global context. On the one hand we are stakeholders, on the other we are facilitators of change. We embrace the message and philosophy espoused by *What it looks like when it's fixed* and encourage you to explore this new approach as you consider the challenges facing your organisation and our country.

## Contact

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***“Essential perspectives for those in government, civil society and business.”***

Stanley Subramoney, Deputy CEO, PwC South Africa

***“Showing how safety is a public good, the work of Dr Holtmann brings an extremely innovative and positive approach, which demonstrates that every community has its own vision and the potential to be safe.”***

Dr Paula Miraglia, Director General, International Centre for the Prevention of Crime

***“A positive approach that offers new hope in tackling the most daunting challenges facing our society and institutions.”***

Jonathan Cawood, Lead Partner: Consulting, PwC South Africa

***“Working systemically means having a chance to win the war against society’s problems, while fragmented development efforts are forever doomed to fight only minor battles.”***

Lesley-Ann van Selm, Managing Director, Khulisa Social Solutions

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*Photo courtesy of the CSIR*

