

ERASMUS MAGANIZE

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How to face the day after

The square black building with the letters IHS on top can hardly escape anyone's notice as they walk through the Erasmus University campus. Yet very few students know what the abbreviation stands for, what the people who work there are involved in, let alone how they can be of assistance in the tragedy that happend in New Orleans.

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IHS stands for Institute for Housing and Development Studies, whose mission is to develop human resources together with institutional capacities, to reduce poverty and to improve the quality of life in cities. It cannot be categorized solely as a school or as purely a consulting institution. The idea behind IHS is an international centre of excellence associated with the Erasmus University Rotterdam that offers specialized postgraduate education, training, advisory services and applied research in the fields of urban management, housing and urban environment.

Link between theory and practice On the educational side, IHS offers a PhD programme, short courses such as the three-month 'International Course on Housing and Urban Development' and the one-month course 'Land Management and Informal Settlement Regularization'. Yet its main programme is a twelve-month master's in 'Urban Management and Development'. This course is constructed in such a way that it provides an opportunity for cities and professionals to invest in their future. The idea is that cities are facing increasingly complex challenges, relating to social, economic, physical and environmental concerns. At the same time, the processes of globalization and decentralization are creating new opportunities for cities to attract businesses and highly qualified residents. In addressing all these issues the aim of IHS is to help make better use of available resources to develop cities and alleviate urban poverty. The master's prepares the participants to become innovative urban managers and development specialists who can advance their cities through their thorough understanding of urban theory and best practices.

According to Wouter Weerheijm, head of the Course Bureau and Assistant Education Group Manager, this link between theory and practice is the most important feature of the IHS Master's programme. He comments: "The practical focus of IHS is combined with academic urban research done at Erasmus University Rotterdam and Lund University, which contributes American research and experience. Rotterdam and other European cities offer a design studio for urban processes. Participants receive lectures as well as a combination of working groups, best practices, discussions, field visits and fieldwork. This combination of training methodologies creates a solid link between theory and practice."

No ready made solutions Since its establishment in 1958, more than 6,500 urban professionals from 120 different nations have made their way into IHS classrooms to take part in a post-graduate diploma course, a Master's course or a PhD programme. The current master's course has 72 participants, from 28 countries. To provide a better idea of the feeling of being in Urban Management and Development master's, Camilo Mendoza, IHS student from Colombia, explains his experience: "I'm about to graduate from the programme and I consider that, for me and for my colleagues, it was not only a great academic, but also a great life experience. Not only have I learned a lot about many interesting topics, I have also acquired new skills such as negotiation, strategic planning, improving and encouraging private sector participation in public activities, infrastructure management and much more. Outside the professional training I have seen many places, encountered new cultures and made friends from all over the world. This combination of studies, social and cultural life makes the IHS master's an all-embracing experience." IHS is not only a school, but also a consulting institution. A brief glance at the profiles of the academic staff at IHS makes clear how much practical experience resides there. Claudio Acioly, for example, not only lectures at IHS but is also an architect and urban planner. He has managed large-scale housing and urban development projects and institutional development programmes in many countries. In addition, he has worked for several organizations including the World Bank, UN Habitat, UNDP, and the Netherlands Development Cooperation Agency-DGIS.

From a person with such broad experience the phrase 'IHS does not provide readymade solutions' sounds credible. He adds: "We bring lessons learned from different countries - including from our own experiences from the projects IHS has been involved in various corners of the world - and introduce them to the group of participants who can then carry out comparative analysis and further develop issues to suit their own situation." About the tragedy that has hit New Orleans; the general opinion in IHS is that it is not worth dwelling on what should have been done, but rather on what needs to be done in the future. IHS staff can be called upon as consultants for helping to rebuild the city. Claudio Acioly clarifies: "Our strong point is how to face the day after: planning and organizing reconstruction and urban rehabilitation."