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Regaining knowledge: an appeal to abandon illusions

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• Introduction

This article is extracted from a report¹ outlining the experiences of a partnership between the People's Dialogue in South Africa and a group of three organisations in India: SPARC, the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan*, a federation of women's collectives.

The People's Dialogue is a national network linking representatives from illegal and informal settlements which emerged from a meeting of community leaders of 150 informal settlements in 1991 (Bolnick, 1993). SPARC² is an NGO working broadly in the area of housing and community development which has developed a close alliance with the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan* (D'Cruz and Patel, 1993).

As a result of this partnership People's Dialogue members were able to benefit from community-based shelter training programmes in India where the National Slum Dwellers Federation and *Mahila Milan* have been engaged in such programmes for over eight years. They have since experimented with and developed the training process within communities in South Africa. This article explains why the training process is important to community development, describes several of the participatory methods and techniques involved in the process, and argues that such experiential learning is a more useful approach than those offered by conventional training.

¹ Copies of this report are available from the authors; please send an International Money Order for \$10 to cover printing and distribution costs.

² See NGO Profile, *Environment and Urbanization*, 2(1).

• The training process and community development

The experience-based learning of the training process has two separate but interrelated purposes. Firstly, it enables low-income people to evolve their own understanding of their social and economic environment, not just on a micro-level but via exchange in regional and global arenas. Secondly, it equips the participants, impoverished residents of informal settlements, with the ability to carry out and drive their own experiential learning programmes. Four particular benefits of the training process have been identified:

- It teaches communities how to involve every resident in the process of making choices. This process of collective social development takes much time and needs to begin before physical redevelopment of the settlement can take place.
- It trains the entire community to participate in the process of change, deepens community participation and educates the community through mass involvement in the process of training. This process also allows new leaders to emerge and sharpens community leadership.
- It creates space for people to consider what they need, what choices are available and allows communities to become fully prepared to discuss their aspirations with outsiders. Often the solutions of outsiders are accepted because the people see no alternative.
- It demonstrates to the community how hard and long the process of development really is, thereby reducing the pressure on community leaders to deliver instant gratification.

Understanding that there are no immediate solutions for the needs of low-income households, the training process focuses on helping communities identify collectively their needs and aspirations. The second stage involves locating the skills, resources and strategies to which the community can immediately gain access and develop. The third stage is to identify potential resources that are currently unavailable.

This community level experiential learning process has several characteristics which are becoming more apparent with each successive training in both India and South Africa. These include:

- Trainers in the community who are not experts but 'grassroots' people. The people must decide their own hierarchy of needs and are best equipped to create their own priorities. All the training team require is to have been exposed to a similar community-driven training programme on at least one previous occasion. There is therefore a rapid transition from learners to teachers;
- Transformation occurs within the boundaries of the people's self-determined priorities and is driven by their own resources, initiatives and skills;
- The sustained replication of experience based learning processes generates an institutional basis for those people marginalised by conventional development processes;
- Experienced based learning has a dialectical rhythm of action/reflection/action. This enables the collectives to develop a theoretical understanding of their practice. This understanding in turn helps them to determine the purpose and direction of future practice; and,
- Women are central to the training process. No group is more adversely affected by landlessness and homelessness than women. Community based shelter training programmes are a mechanism through which the pivotal role of women in communities is recognised and supported.

In summary, an innovative shelter training programme is an all-encompassing, community-based effort aimed at retrieving

knowledge about the living reality of the homeless poor and using the results to strengthen their position in an antagonistic social order. This process cannot take place in isolation but needs to draw on and contribute to its own development through linkage to other settlements that are a part of the training process. Replication strengthens the federation of the urban poor, and exchange programmes between settlements enable scattered grassroots organisations to support each other.

Shack counting

Once the community leadership (civic, residents' association, church organisation etc.) are ready to undertake the training, a start date is arranged with the training team. Normally the training begins with the physical counting and mapping of all houses and other structures in the settlement and this shack counting exercise always starts with a huge celebration. Much depends on the skills and imagination of the community-based training team. Here are some examples of what has been done in the past:

- Inviting other homeless communities to visit the settlement that is hosting the training programme;
- Helping the community to organise a concert;
- Encouraging community-based drama teams to put on a performance that demonstrates the need for a training programme;
- Inviting dignitaries to attend the opening ceremony (particularly people who have influence in the sphere of land and shelter); and,
- Inviting leaders of other settlements who might be interested in initiating their own training programmes.

If the opening celebrations are held in the evening, then the shack count begins the following morning. The training team prepares for the activities of the next day by completing a few practical tasks. A rough map of the settlement, drawn a few days before, and a series of photographs of the settlement are displayed. The team has a meeting with the leadership of the community to explain the activities for the following day. The leadership

and the training team decide how to divide the settlement into sections (either by zone or by block, or if they do not exist, by means of prominent landmarks).

Everybody should be ready at the start of the day to begin the counting. One member of the 'training team' is assigned to each section. They become the leaders of groups of people who will assist in counting all the structures in the sections. While counting the shacks with training team members these people receive a thorough experience-based training. People who are identified to be trained can include:

- Residents of the settlement holding the training programme. These people will sustain the training programme and other shelter activities once the training team and other guests have departed;
- Residents from other settlements who have expressed interest in setting up experience based training programs in their settlements;
- Trained members of the network/federation from other settlements; and,
- People in the broader society whose participation could benefit the community in its struggle for land and/or shelter.

Once the teams have been formed and assigned to their sections a standard settlement enumeration begins. The significant difference is that the information-gathering is done by homeless people themselves. This information is used to improve their chances of influencing housing development initiatives in their settlements. While the enumeration is taking place, members of each training and information gathering group engage the members of the community.

These informal exchanges are the very soul of the process. This simple process of dialogue and exchange only occurs when the people from communities do the counting. The informal discussions that accompany community driven enumerations are both an outstanding method of mobilisation and an exceptionally accurate way of identifying issues that people in the community regard as relevant. Community-driven enumerations, where they are backed up by a strong but loosely structured federation of informal

settlements, achieve what professional enumerators are unable to do. The process helps identify and release the real feelings, frustrations and expectations of oppressed people. The way a squatter responds to the inquiries of a fellow squatter is very different from, and more relevant than, the way that same squatter responds to the social scientist or researcher. This is especially so if squatters know that the information they give can be used by a people's housing movement to strengthen the position of the country's millions of homeless people.

While the training groups talk to the people in the community, they share a few words about people-driven housing, a people's housing movement, community-controlled surveys and housing savings schemes. In this way, the ground is prepared for what will follow. In tandem with the shack count and numbering, the training groups draw rough maps of the settlement.

Mapping

A big myth that keeps shack-dwellers dependent on professionals is that specialised skills are required to accomplish technical tasks. Members of the training team are equipped with the confidence and the knowledge to destroy these myths. They do so by enabling community members to accomplish technical tasks themselves. A good example of this is mapping.

As the groups progress through the settlement numbering and counting shacks, shops, creches, churches and so on, they draw a simple one dimensional drawing of the streets and structures. Key landmarks are included, as are drains, sewers, electric lights, rivers and other major features. Once the shack counting and mapping have been completed, the sections are combined into one by a community member who draws well. The result is that the community members have produced their own physical map of the settlement in which they live: a concrete example as to how the attainment of knowledge through practice generates energy and power. Once people have demarcated their settlement themselves, they go on to examine landownership and related matters in terms of their own needs and experience. When professionals undertake this

exercise, it is often referred to as a cadestral survey. Such a survey may be necessary later when the redevelopment process has to begin but it is simply a sophisticated version of mapping. Once the mapping exercise has been completed, it is possible to learn to read the cadestral survey.

Surveys

Although this training programme does not follow any set formula, a survey usually follows a shack counting exercise. Once the information generated by the shack count has been reflected back to the community via a mass meeting accompanied by the graphical display of all the information gathered, the survey is started.

For at least half a day the members of the training team accompany the training groups, helping to fill in the questionnaires. The members of the training team step aside as soon as they are confident that the new trainees from the settlement are able and eager to complete the survey on their own. It will be the task of this newly trained team to continue with the survey until every family in the settlement has filled in a form. The training team does not usually remain in the settlement until all the questionnaires have been completed; after a few days they are ready to return to their daily lives in informal settlements throughout South Africa. It is not unusual for the people who are being trained to signal to the training team, before the trainers volunteer to step aside, that they are ready to conduct the surveys on their own.

When the training team returns home, its members continue to keep in touch with the new trainers in the settlement where the training is taking place - at least until the surveys have been completed. At that stage - which can be several weeks - the training team puts the information together and returns to the settlement to convey all the knowledge to the community. The new trainers from the settlement do this work together with the training team. This collated data becomes the basis for future analysis and action for the people of the settlement. The survey and analysed data become powerful tools for community organisation. By providing a realistic assessment of the capabilities and the

weaknesses present in the community, the analysed data reduces the danger of undertaking unattainable or undesirable development activities.

House models

Like everything else in the training, the house modelling exercise begins with a dream. Members of the host community are encouraged by the training team to imagine the house they would like to live in, and to put that dream on paper. This expression of a desire is the starting point of a sustained system of concrete learning. By drawing the house of their dreams, people begin to visualise possibilities in terms of their abilities and their levels of affordability.

Invariably these dreams are extravagant. The houses of people's imaginings are usually too elaborate and costly for their meagre earnings or resources. In the steps that follow, aspirations are realigned by the participants themselves, by means of a process of criticism and exploration:

- Individual members of the settlement draw their dream house;
- Once the drawings have been completed, people come together in groups to explain the homes they have drawn and to provide details about the structure. This group dialogue brings people together and gives them the chance to adjust their dreams in response to insights and practicalities.
- People form groups to make cardboard model houses based on the discussion;
- People then cost the building materials for their model house and consider the affordability of the model house.
- A house modelling competition is held in the community. People get together to select the most appropriate model(s); and,
- The chosen design(s) is/are modelled using cloth or paper as material. People get together to officially open and view the model house(s).

This exercise is repeated and elaborated right up to the day the community is ready to start its own housing development. After the training team departs, women in the housing savings

groups often keep the house modelling exercises going. Group dialogue is crucial to the house modelling exercise. It constantly brings people in the housing savings group together and it helps them develop practical insights into organising, planning, building technologies, materials, regulations and landownership.

Housing savings groups

Housing savings groups are the central energy point of the training process. They are loosely structured organisations that enable homeless people to develop financial systems that they control and manage themselves. It is impossible for homeless people to get money directly from formal financial institutions. Housing savings groups enable poor homeless people to save money that can then be used as leverage for obtaining financial support for their development plans.

Such groups allow the savers to benefit directly from their own savings. When poor people save in banks or post offices, their savings never entitle them to loans. They save their hard earned cents so that the banks can lend that money to the wealthy and middle classes. In housing savings groups, the savings of the people work for the people themselves. Members of these schemes can take loans for small business ventures or for crises in their families. A crucial element of these savings schemes is that the majority of members are women. This is important because it is women who are in charge of such things as keeping the house, controlling household expenses and deciding where things are kept in the home. Women are also less likely (but certainly not immune) to become involved in community power struggles. They are more likely to be comfortable with the need for low-income people to work collectively.

The shack counting and the start of the survey will have generated much discussion on the land and shelter needs of the community. Without fail, the discussions will focus on money. People will point out that they are homeless and landless because they cannot afford formal housing, they will start to think how they can harness resources so that formal housing is possible. One arrangement is housing savings groups. By actually starting these groups, the training process creates the

momentum that will help to drive a people's based housing movement in the 'trained' community.

In nine cases out of ten, it is the women who are interested in starting or joining housing savings groups. Housing savings groups become a locus for the organisation of women from informal settlements around shelter needs. A federation of housing savings groups can become the driving force in a people's housing movement. Women are mobilised and given the space to build organisational structures around the central issues of housing and savings. Housing savings groups also can become loose community-based affiliations to enable the members to pressurise formal institutions such as banks, donors, NGOs, political leaders and governments to participate with them in creating institutional arrangements that will facilitate social change.

• Concluding observations

This is our understanding of experiential learning. It differs significantly from the conventional kinds of housing or shelter training provided to students at universities and technical training colleges, and staff of government departments and housing parastatals. Similar approaches are used for housing and development by most South African NGOs and civic organisations. There are three premises that are central to these conventional kinds of training:

- Urban planning and housing development are very complicated affairs that need to be handled by experts;
- The skills, technologies and ideas from the mainstream are appropriate for solving the 'problem of informal housing'; and,
- The homeless poor need to participate in their own development, but their participation is limited to collaboration in the plans produced by external experts.

These externally propagated strategies are not providing solutions. The result of these training programmes is the opposite of what they have been designed to achieve. They help to keep knowledge, power and resources out of the hands of the poor. The training systems ensure that knowledge production always happens

elsewhere, that is, outside the community. This makes poor people dependent on the outside world and on social classes that are indifferent to their interests. They rely on professionals for a top down, often disempowering transfer of knowledge. The way out of the trap is to develop alternate, more appropriate systems of learning. This is the basis of the kind of experiential learning sketched.

Only by sharing and accumulating experiences in order to create sustainable alternatives will long-term aspirations for land and shelter stand a chance of being fulfilled. Each training is like tempering steel in the fire. The more the steel is tempered, the stronger it becomes. Community leaders become stronger as they give more of themselves to others. The more they teach, the better they become. The more people who become trainers, the larger the number of communities reached and the greater the mobilisation process. The more the leader gives, the stronger the faith of the community in their capacities and commitment. The more accountable the leader is, the stronger the support of the community. By locating the reproduction of the training within the organisations of the poor, the organisations of the poor become the owners of this process, and develop and evolve it as their demands emerge.

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