Seeking the eye of the needle

bringing to life the intention and impact of our work

picking up the thread...

..last year, our Annual Report focused on the world in which we work, presenting a shattered view of global and local realities that was also a source of inspiration and motivation. Out of the shock at suffering's boundlessness, we sought and found encouragement in human capacity to renew, to live another day, to continue in striving, despite, despite …

Globally, this last year has heralded a cynical twist and, with that, a new polarisation; new camps to belong to, new axes to grind. A year of war and deceit has confirmed for weary idealists the world over that collaboration and trust are unlikely pursuits for those who believe they have much to guard for themselves alone.

Amidst continuing turmoil, marginalisation and suffering, we are resolved that a developmental approach, concerned as it is with the enduring human issues of solidarity and freedom, is a worthy and worthwhile contribution to pursue. Through this year, the target of the CDRA's efforts has continued to be 'the development sector.' We work with those people and organisations that seek to distribute a small portion of the western surplus more equitably, that seek to combat poverty through resource distribution.

In our work, we are witnessing a new impatience, an irritability. And with these increased stakes comes increased demand for results, because giving requires a corresponding return. To this imperative, the CDRA, like many other development practitioners, has continued to emphasise a developmental approach. We do not seek fairness in distribution of resources and ideas alone, but strive to do this while enhancing freedom and building community. The specific nature of a developmental approach, as distinct from simply working in the development sector, is what we address ourselves to in this Annual Report. Internally, it has been a hard year, marked by loss and paced by unrelenting change. As we have worked at holding a still point through this time, we have drawn on our inner resources. It is from within, from the ideals of the CDRA and in community with one another, that we draw assurance towards pursuing the very particular contribution that we have to make in this world. Through continuing to hold and use our space for reflection, creativity and learning, we have emerged out of this year strengthened in our collegiality and clear about our future

contribution. In this year's Annual Report, we focus on bringing to life the intention and impact of our work. We begin with a description of our practice from the point of view of a client and an account of one particular process. Then we examine that process, and related processes of the CDRA, from the other side, from the point of view of our thinking about our practice, what we do and what we intend to do. We then take that further, exploring some of the deeper thinking and values underlying this approach, and examine their implications for practice in general; and for a specifically developmental approach to a divided world.

... to begin

To begin we return to one of those who participated in our Annual Report's account last year of the reality in which development work takes place. The Surplus People Project is an NGO based in the Western Cape, tackling land reform and capacity building for engagement for land and agrarian reform. Its vision states –

> *'SPP seeks to be a multi-skilled, efficient, radical and committed organisation, instrumental in achieving a transfer of power and resources to the most marginalised and unorganised, especially women, through supporting rural communities in struggles pertaining to rural development, and land reform in particular.'*

The SPP has been in existence for 16 years. It is an NGO and operates in the Western and Northern Cape Provinces of South Africa. It is affiliated to the National Land Committee (NLC), a network of similar South African organisations. NLC engages in both Southern African and international networks pursuing similar objectives. SPP is also a member of the South African NGO Coalition.

SPP's main administration office is in Cape Town. It has regional offices in Springbok and Calvinia (Northern Cape Province) and a smaller satellite office in Citrusdal (West Coast of Western Cape).

In 2002, the SPP asked the CDRA to help strengthen the field practice of one team in the organisation. The following article - Practice – offers an account of that process from the point of view of a senior participant. We offer this perspective not so much as evaluative comment, but as description of the practice out of the CDRA from the vantage point of one for whom it is intended. This story is accompanied by a poem, written by elsbeth e, also a participant in that process, and offering insight into the heart of her practice.

practice

In 2002, the SPP realised the need to change the way it does things. Demands from funders were becoming tighter and the need for impact and change in communities had become central to debates and thinking. The organisation had to determine what it meant by development, and also how 'what we do' and 'how we do things' is central to our development practice.

One of the programmes of SPP, of which I was then manager, was at the time not delivering effectively. Various approaches and methods for engagement with community were used. Reports lacked substance and statistics, and the rich experience from the field did not reflect in any way. The team operated in a segregated, incoherent fashion and no linkages were made between various projects. No sharing happened and trust relations were shaky. No one dared to risk new ideas, share

frustrations or discuss blockages they experienced. No one opened up on mistakes and failed interventions. It was an all male team and that added to the team dynamics.

SPP as an organisation upheld the value of a learning organisation, but this value was never formally stated in the organisation's vision and mission and it never took root institutionally. The performance management process became the time for reflection and review, although this was a fairly technical process of measuring performance against objectives set. Very limited time was really spent on what the lessons were, what the learnings were and what needed to change at the essence. Documentation of these processes was also lacking. The rich knowledge and experience was often lost, or lived on in the head of one or other individual (who then tried to make sense of it all in their own particular way).

So there we were as a team – fairly vulnerable, stereotyped by management as not delivering, yet filled with information, knowledge, experience and insight that waited to be tapped…

So the journey with CDRA began.

The process of engagement started off with a threeday session to clarify the purpose of this proposed process and to gain the commitment of each individual. We agreed that it was about us as a collective; but more importantly, it was about each individual development practitioner and the need for all of us to critically question our practice. The challenge was there. There is no textbook for development. Therefore how does SPP as an organisation, and this team in particular, begin to write its own textbook in the context of land and agrarian debates and issues?

The opening workshop further explored the process of learning and made conscious our own ways of learning and how often these learnings do not result in action or new action. The readiness of each person to confront new learning – that was the challenge. The action-learning model became a tool for further reflections and for ongoing practice. The transforming value of questioning, and tools to formulate good questions, were introduced into the process and subsequently became a practice in the team.

The ongoing process with the CDRA involved monthly half-day sessions where opportunity was created for field staff to share experiences, relate stories from the field in the form of case studies and begin to trust each other. The spaces provided theoretical perspectives and insights, brought to the fore various tools, methods and field interventions and stimulated the creativity of team members by means of various innovative activities.

What emerged from these monthly sessions, spread over a period of about eight months, was phenomenal and provided us with much more than expected.

Team relationships improved, trust was built to the extent that people could both begin to agree on issues and also to challenge opposing views. In short it became a space of critical reflection, serious practice review and openness to explore new possibilities. The attitudinal changes in the team were extraordinary and this positive change filtered down to the actual practice. Some examples include field notes, shared between team members; meetings to discuss problems in projects (even without a manager) and, notably, willingness to take up new challenges and issues.

Of particular significance was the creation of a framework in which to capture learning, a guide that has since become the living manual of SPP. It is still in an extremely fragile phase of its development, but it provides the basis for broader organisational learning and practice. The other two programmes of SPP have since joined this journey and have contributed to the framework and the learning process in a fundamental way.

Most exciting is, that what begins to draw us together is a core process for SPP, used during our various engagements with community. Case stories are used to inform government, to influence policy makers and to strengthen our lobbying and advocacy work. Now SPP's valuable experiences, realities and practice can emerge for the world to critique, to inform the sector and to stimulate debates. Our recent Annual Report is a proud contribution for the world to learn from storytelling.

The challenges are endless. It requires dedicated and consistent leadership and drive. It requires the ability to see linkages and facilitate them. Sustaining the team's commitment to make time for reflection and learning is an ongoing struggle. Previously diligent practices fall back when the workload adds up. To draw and distil the learning from the actual implementation is one challenge, but to translate that into a new creative and transformational energy and action is the key.

SPP has not as yet arrived, but we are committed to reflect critically on our purpose as an organisation and our practice to achieve those intentions. The process has challenged organisational strategy and values, and our indicators for measuring our success. SPP has begun to formulate the right questions and what we believe should be the principles for development. We have slowed down to make an assessment of what we bring to the real world and what we hope to achieve through our work. We have identified the weaknesses and strengths of our human resources, the core competencies and skills required to build best practice. The Gender programme has begun to question practice and through the CDRA journey has begun to introduce tools for critical reflection, learning and documentation. The practice of journaling is still in its infancy but a growing awareness and belief in the value thereof is promising. At the core of this all was the individual reflection on roles, contribution, practice and purpose.

The impacts in the field? What a transformational experience and moment when field practitioners question power relations, dependencies in relation to communities; when we can boldly say we have failed and be able to assess why and pave the future path differently; when we can confidently question our impact, based on our practice, not driven or defined or imposed from the world of donors. The commitment to be present with the process and continued belief in its worth, is of amazing value.

A little town at a time
elsbeth e (2003)

I know too many small towns from the inside out.
I know.
No one really knows how many people live there. They don't count the bodies in that place. It is not important. They know how many graves are marked and how many not. How many people left and how many stayed. And those who are yet to be born they leave to the hands of the rubbing old women and knowing gods for they have their own ways that few can recognize and most must fear. Here every thing has its place and for some nothing has its time. At this place, washing hangs because it must on days when the wind blows strong.
There.
They know enough…how many houses there are, whose child was fathered by which man on what day of which season, who sees in the burning playfulness of the sun revenge from a living God, which woman needs to be watched carefully, whose clothes need to be passed down to whom.
There.
Small towns live in two minds. Its back turned to that which it cannot change and that which their own eyes cannot believe. I know. I come from there. I was born there. I return now. To small places. Every other week I pack my bags and I go. Back. On gravel roads cutting away the skin of distance, carving me back into what ought to be…a little town at a time. But it cannot be the same. I speak with a pausing tongue for the things I have to say are strange and out of place.
Development.
A secluded word that falls too easily off my mother's tongue and puts out the fire between them and me. Us. They who are black and rural like me, make me walk in mourning with a bowed head and closed eyes swaying dangerously like a thirsty child towards tears. Here. Learned knowledge loses its certainty and the mind is tripped like a circle drawn violently in the air given belief by the nod of a passing stranger.
For
they know what time it was when the world stopped and stared and moved on leaving its name behind in the starving bark of a dog chasing leaves.
Here the world waits and redeems itself in the name of dogs who answer to Bin Laden, Pagad, Mandela…Here. Dogs, who are seldom called, seldom touched, often chased away and mostly fed with the shame of left over meatless bones are the memory of a world gone forgotten. Here. Dogs are a white smile and a black scream. They are explained in time. Never understood with time.
It is here.
That they know they give birth to me every time I return. They know.
And I know.
That I must know my place.
Here.
I know too few small towns from the inside out.

... the story

The story told by SPP is an example of one process in the CDRA's practice. In this process, and generally, our work is increasingly focused on helping clients to evolve a developmental field practice. And we pursue this aim through working with the actual practices of groups, teams and organisations. Our interventions occur neither in the field, nor in the training room. Rather, we work with organisations and teams in their ordinary internal organizational time, helping shape practice as a living reality in organisational life. This is built and carried amongst all who pursue it and renewed through cycles of reflection and learning.

Identification of living and responsive focus areas in our work, appropriate to our strategic objectives and the current needs of our clients, is possible because we maintain a reflective approach ourselves. We are continuously conceptualising and describing practices as they emerge from the field. This conscious, thinking, approach – pursued collaboratively – gives us the professional wellspring from which we can all draw when we return, alone, to the field.

The CDRA practitioner team does not have a step-by-step methodological formula that we adhere to, nor do we have a single model that we promote or test. Instead, we share a common approach, itself grounded in a particular worldview and set of values; a range of flexible methodologies and a distinct set of practices. These methodologies and practices are used in myriad different ways, depending on the circumstances, relationships and intentions of each situation.

While we share an approach that is distinctively the CDRA's, and while we increasingly focus on practice as an over-arching area of concern, no two intervention processes are the same. Each intervention is shaped, ultimately, by the needs, interests and concerns of each client and by the creative interchange between practitioner and client, the outcome of which is, by definition, impossible to predict at its start.

In this next section, we look at our practice, from the inside. We begin by describing the core process that our work tends to follow. Then we examine how this has extended our understanding of our profession, concluding with a sketch of three emerging processes in our current work. These are offered as a description of what our learning has generated, all of it within a very specific context, not as abstract and fixed formulae for application in any other scenario.

the inside of practice

'*Enthusiasm, insight, action, and result ...
those are the successive phases of the development process ...*' – Bernard Lievegoed

Our core process

The core process we have evolved and described over the years reflects what we understand as the archetypal path of the developmental process, a thread that follows through the vastly diverse interventions that constitute developmental practice. While many have devised their own ways of describing this same process, ours continues to resonate and have application for us. Here follows a brief summary of our take on this process:

The developmental process begins with the element of warmth, of relationship. Of human feeling and of enthusiasm. This element creates the conditions for all else that flows from the practitioner-client relationship and, conversely, where it is not properly established, prevents subsequent growth in those areas. Next, and out of a context of an established and trusting relationship, even while continuing to build on it, comes the creation of a shared understanding of and insight into the client's unique character as a social player as well as a perspective on the particular situation the client is in.

Only with these two elements in place, those of evolving trust and understanding – themselves transformatory qualities – is it possible to begin to venture intervention with the intention of bringing about change. Often this process of change begins with a facing of self, using the 'mirror' provided by the practitioner's observations, feedback and presence. Whatever coming-to-terms this demands, it is through that very process – a kind of passing through the eye of a needle – that the will to move, to take things a step further, to shift a current reality is found. Thereafter, and towards supporting the ongoing establishment and manifestation of the new, comes the element of supporting, of grounding, of seeking visible results and changes.

While these four elements operate as a conceptual and practical touchstone throughout our practice, they are held together through the essential element of review. Our practice is constantly developing, as are the abilities of our practitioners. To this end, we meet regularly with a view to reflect on practice and build it further. It is here that new ideas, approaches and concepts are developed. In these meetings lie the single most important source of vitality and effectiveness in our practice, and as such they constitute the fifth element of our core process.

Emerging processes

Achieving a developmental approach requires specific activities, concrete practices and particular ways of thinking. It goes well beyond a statement of belief or desire. In our very practices, we are either developmental, or not. Our work at the CDRA is aimed at bringing about and supporting the growth of developmental practice in our clients. This goes beyond traditional organisational development (which aims at healthy organisational environments), aiming for a developmental field-based practice as an outcome of our interventions. The way in which we help bring these two (internal organisational health and field functioning) together is through helping our clients to set up internal learning systems.

Working within the parameters provided by the developmental core process, we bring our expertise to the establishment of internal learning systems. Here we help develop approaches to group and organisational learning and map the processes required to sustain these. This last year has seen the crystallisation of three related methodological departures, all of which are pursued as open-ended processes, and all of which are relevant in establishing appropriate approaches to organisational learning.

Establishing learning rhythms
This first process promotes and supports learning as a distinct organisational activity, and offers the idea of rhythms as a crucial way of ensuring and reinforcing that learning.
Experience has confirmed, repeatedly, that developmental ideals and aims cannot be pursued in a straight line, rather they should be approached in a cyclical fashion. Development itself is not a linear process. It is iterative – advancing in small, to and fro processes of advance and retreat,

sometimes piecemeal, sometimes promising, sometimes apparently not. Into this, occasional large shifts make their impression, taking the system to new places. Here new struggles and old habits continue to surface and small changes continue to arrive. However, with these large shifts, the system is irreversibly altered, it will never return entirely to the place where it was. It has entered a new phase.

Pursuing a developmental approach, we try to ensure that the processes we run and the practices we promote map the developmental process itself; that we do not set up systems that run counter to the way in which people tend to develop and learn. For this reason, we work with rhythms, seeking those that come naturally to organisations and systems and enhancing them, bringing them into consciousness and giving them form. To ensure that these cycles are not an endless round of repeating mistakes, our processes strive to ensure that they are marked by rigorous learning.

Effective learning in organisations demands both proper method as well as the correct rhythm. For many, 'learning' is still synonymous with training of individuals to improve their abilities, or take on board new abilities. In this approach to learning, new knowledge is imparted from outside of the system. Yet another view of learning sees it as strategic review in which the achievements of a team or organisation are measured against its plan, and tactical corrections made in order to ensure that future 'doing' approximates more closely to the intentions of the plan.

When we work at establishing learning rhythms with our clients, a great deal of energy goes into developing a different approach to learning. In this approach, knowledge and learning emerge out of individual and collective reflection on experience and practice. Participants are helped to make meaning of their own working lives and environments, and to create new knowledge (and motivation) out of that. These processes are typically mutual – in that everyone constructs the learning – and creative – in that learning emerge out of the process and the interaction, so new knowledge is being created. As a result, these processes happen to also fulfil a team-building function.

While it is important to set proper time aside for learning, the appropriate rhythm is also crucial. All too often, organisations confine learning-time for whole teams to year-end review or strategic planning sessions, contenting themselves with individual learning opportunities throughout the year. Invariably these annual events are swamped with strategic and team-related concerns, and learning recedes swiftly into the background. Ideally, learning should happen regularly and in ordinary organisational time, and it is towards establishing just these that much of our work around learning rhythms happens. For some organisations, a monthly rhythm of learning makes sense; for others it is quarterly. There is no fixed formula – although learning pursued too frequently results in paralysis and too infrequently, makes no difference at all.

Internal field-practice development
The process of establishing an internal learning rhythm can take years. It is rare that an organisation will simply assume a commitment to learning from practice, and even where it does, it is not always clear what its purpose is beyond what is sometimes referred to as 'feel-good' activities. In some instances, and as a part of establishing a learning rhythm, we work with a team or organisation on developing a conscious and collective field-practice. This process addresses itself to the crucial practice-related and strategic imperatives of development work, and helps practitioners overcome working purely at the level of 'tools' and 'method', broadening their sense of what they do, and ability to do it.

When we work with clients on strengthening their practice, we may work with the field-team over an extended period of time (an example of which was offered by the SPP story). Here, we will help devise the methods and approaches, as well as the required language, for the group to collaborate on actively constructing the organisation's practice. This might involve (re)establishing a connection between strategy and practice, or helping a group identify the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of its approach, or reviewing a method that requires change. Over time, a picture of the actual practice emerges, and out of that, living processes can be devised for subsequent use in the field.

An essential part of this process of developing a field-practice, internally, involves the practice review. These reviews begin where 'activity reports', offering an account and summary of what has been done, end. Practice reviews are concerned with how things are done. They begin with, and rest on, paying attention to individual accounts of practice. Through making time to give these consideration and building the necessary climate of trust and shared commitment, a field-team can collectively come to a point where a living picture of its collective practice is built. Sustaining the life of that practice – both in the field and internally – is then achieved through the longer process of establishing learning rhythms.

Facilitated self-evaluation
Very often, the impetus to build a field-practice and to establish longer term learning rhythms emerges out of an evaluation process. For many years, the CDRA has offered an approach to evaluation that is process-oriented and focused on internal, self-evaluation. At times, we have brought this method, and the concerns it addresses, to external impact evaluations. Very often the outcome of these evaluations has been to place internal organisational functioning, and its connection to practice, onto the external impact evaluation agenda.

More recently, we have begun to integrate internal and external evaluation concerns. Adopting an approach to evaluations that treats them as processes, rather than distinct events, we now conceive of evaluations as encompassing both the traditional research concerns of external 'impact' and the internal process concerns of learning, practice and organisational functioning.

In these facilitated self-evaluations, clients are helped to conceptualise the evaluation process as active agents, rather than as passive recipients. From the setting of the terms of reference through to data collection and analysis and into assessment of the implications of these for future functioning and practices, our approach helps hold the whole, together. In this process, our role is not that of neutral facilitator. Rather, we bring a critical and independent external 'eye' to the process, even while we help clients do the same in relation to themselves.

Out of these evaluation processes, we work with clients at establishing the organisational wherewithal to meaningfully address the answers to the questions that emerge. This is aimed at long-term organisational capacity to work more effectively and developmentally, rather than just a short-term capacity to answer difficult questions from outside. Very often, this endpoint brings us to helping establish a field-practice internally as well as establishing learning rhythms.

A final thought
Taken together, these three processes constitute a picture of CDRA's own emerging practice, focused increasingly on helping each client achieve a viable and vital practice of their own. We

strive to help each client translate the rhetoric of a developmental approach into a truthful reality, pursued with confidence and demonstrating the results with pride.

In our own continuing efforts to bring our practice to life and make meaning out of it, we return, always, to the elements described earlier in our core process, and particularly that first element of warmth and trust. Human relationship, trust, appreciation and openness – despite their being spoken of as necessary qualities – are rare in the working world, even that of the 'development sector', which claims to put people first.

Instead of trust, we find doubt; instead of warmth, we find formality; instead of collaborative endeavour, we find jealously guarded empires; instead of risking the new, we find the refuge of the known. Even while we know that the development project will fail if we do not overcome the lack of love and the absence of freedom in our work, we struggle to find a way through all the reasons militating against courageous action. We are constrained by a paradox – that a developmental approach results in trust and warmth and freedom yet it also demands these qualities as a condition for its success

The CDRA's emerging processes are small in this big scheme of things. Our processes take a long time, some fail. However, they are substantial. And despite all of the constraints, the processes described here both strive and often manage to resolve just this paradox, working with openness and warmth towards openness and warmth. In this sense they constitute a small, but significant contribution towards real change, both in the lives of our clients and in the work of the 'development sector' more broadly.

... so far

So far we have explored this evolving practice from two points of view. We began from the end point, with a description of what our practice becomes through application, through being brought to life in relationship with others. Then, we looked behind that, and offered an account of our conscious, and best, intention; our sense of what it is we are doing when we enter the field of practice. While our work must be useful, in each particular instance, it is also a general contribution towards a greater good, and enlarged humanity.

Now, we move further back and explore this from yet another point of view. In this final piece, we return to the conceptual and ethical underpinnings of our work and to the broader contribution that it may make in the world.

In this exploration, we encounter measures, not of quantity, but of quality; a view of developmental practice as being bound by exacting standards, even while it is open, responsive, fluid; we meet developmental practice as something **particular**, beyond a general helpfulness in the world of resource distribution. Here then, we seek the eye of the needle. That precise measure through which our practices must pass if they are to merit the description 'developmental'. It is to this task – What, in this world of development and developmental practice, is the eye of the needle? – that we now turn.

seeking the eye of the needle

'I am not interested in whether I act correctly or incorrectly from the point of view of a method. For me it is important if in a very specific, concrete situation I can do something fruitful. The good always takes place in a situation' Bernard Lievegoed

CDRA works primarily within (or with, or through, or however one describes it) the development sector. The sector which, broadly speaking, works with processes of social transformation. The sector which, ideally speaking, works to reduce poverty. Poverty can be seen, in its narrowest sense, as a lack of material resources; more broadly speaking, the development sector may work with wider poverty concerns – imbalances in society, questions of equity and freedom, of ecological and social sustainability, of economic relations, of political and cultural repression, or any area in which social dysfunctionality exists. Generally speaking, however, the intentions of the development sector are often reduced to their narrowest denominator: the reduction, alleviation or – stated with more vigour or hubris (depending on where one views it from) – the eradication, of material poverty.

But the rhetoric associated with poverty reduction is no longer the preserve of social activists, within or outside the development sector. They are all at it these days. George W. Bush wants to 'attack global poverty'. Tony Blair is up for 'attacking the causes of global poverty' and the remaining G8 leaders are apparently engaged in 'the fight against global poverty'. Meanwhile, the World Bank is 'fighting grinding poverty', the World Trade Organisation is 'reducing poverty on a worldwide basis', and the International Monetary Fund, bailiff to the developing world, is 'actively combating world poverty' (Steve Tibbett in the Mail and Guardian, 04/07/03, *A spoonful of sugar for the poor*). Yet the rich get richer, and the poor, poorer.

Now, it has become clear to all but the most ignorant ostrich, that that little word 'yet' in the previous sentence is badly mistaken. It is in fact, the name of the game – even while the game is played in another name – for our world institutions to get the rich richer, while the poor stand in ever lengthening queues in the polluted city streets. This perspective used to be the preserve of the cynic; it must be, by now, surely, the preserve of everyone save the dumbest ostrich. The forces which have usurped the terrain of social activists, and of the development sector, are as rampant as the US special forces in Iraq.

Given the state of world affairs, the overall intentions of the development sector are not good enough. They never have been. Those intentions, outfitted with all manner of laudly aims and objectives, and decorated with rhetorical devices like 'partnership' and 'ownership' and 'mainstreaming', have never really delivered on their promise. Not only because, now, they have been drawn into a game not of their making (or have they?), but because those intentions were never fleshed out with a practice, a methodology, which was articulate and elaborated. We have, for so long now, rested on our intentions, that we can no longer differentiate between the mainstream and an alternative stance. In a certain sense, the development sector has always operated from within the mainstream, where hegemony and control are the name of the game. The only way to build the alternative approach is to pay attention to practice. It is, indeed, by their practice that you will recognise them.

A perspective on social change

The development sector has never (or only as an individual whisper from the corner of the room) articulated an approach to social change which informs intervention into social processes. Relying mostly on baldly stated objectives and a comforting rhetoric, its approach to social change is couched within the dominant scientific world view of our time. This means, to be very concise and precise, that it takes an engineering approach to the world, views it as a mechanical device, reduces complexity and the interdependence of systemic wholes into fragmented parts which can be isolated and manipulated, and then attempts to input 'causes' which will have predictable 'effects'. In this way, social change (for example, poverty reduction) may be controlled in much the same way that an air conditioner might control the temperature in a room. Not only this, but development projects (and organisations) themselves can be controlled (and held accountable), through time-bound objectives which can be rigidly foreseen and tightly measured.

This is the instrumentalist approach, which results in – indeed, calls for – the use of tools and concepts which have their origin in business, the military, or engineering concerns: the strategic plan, the logical framework instrument, quantitative measuring, the emphasis of product over process. This is the powerful and persuasive tradition behind the promotion of strategic thinking and planning as the way to achieve impact in development. And so little outcome of any import is achieved.

Because a social situation, or community, or organisation, or even an individual human being, is not a mechanical thing, a product. It is an organism, an evolving phenomenon always in a process of change and becoming, with porous boundaries and complex interdependencies. Social situations are complex systems, existing at the edge of chaos, with deep underlying patterns of order; simple elements relate to each other in rich, dynamic ways, from which complex phenomena emerge which cannot be predicted or explained by the simple (individual) components or their individual relationships. There is a 'web' of relationships with positive and negative 'feedback loops' which 'result' in the complex phenomenon – aka the new sciences – made up of relationships. And the phenomenon, too, feeds back and patterns the relationships which form it, so cause and effect are not easy to discern ('cause' is affected by the 'effect' which becomes a 'cause'). So the 'whole' system is non-linear, constantly evolving, 'becoming', affecting us as we affect it. Who then controls what? Such a system is alive, emerging, becoming, developing, changing, metamorphosing *all the time*.

Phenomena have to be apprehended not as static or completed products 'out there' but as processes, flows, movements and activities, because they are always becoming. And we are participating in that becoming, both effecting and being affected by it (never separate). We try in vain to 'map the territory' – through strategising, planning, and myriad management tools – but the territory is changing even as we map it, and as a function of our mapping. Our job is not management of input towards preplanned outcome as a rational activity performed by an outsider on an inert object. Our real job – as development practitioner, social activist, development sector – is to get inside the movement, and keep it open, alive, emerging. Be inside and outside at the same time. Guide and be guided. Be aware of the flow, the process, the becoming. Be aware of self as much as other, of changing relationships, of pattern and balance, of the ephemeral whole. This is a far cry, a very alternative approach, from the game of prediction, control and manipulation, which seeks to do to others (or, at best, on behalf of others) without oneself being affected or changed in the process (other than, perhaps, to become more comfortable)

The development activist, then, cannot rest with the vacuous and grandiose intentions espoused by both those who dominate our social, political and economic fields, or by the development sector which can barely be discriminated from the former (except in the sense that it influences very little). The bluff contained in the intention is exposed by the plethora of engineering instruments borrowed from elsewhere and by the absence of an identifiable, unique and alternative practice which is geared to actual intervention into the maelstrom of social development. What, then, are we really talking about?

The development sector re-imagined

The above characterisation of the development sector – as little different from, perhaps handmaiden to, the forces of global hegemony – seems to amount to what we have made of the sector. Potentially, though – possibly and ideally – the development sector has a vital and significant role to play in these desperate times. If it can imagine itself differently, and adopt an approach to practice, to intervention, which reflects this difference. This calls for a radical rethinking of the place it (we) occupies in the social sphere. Ironically, such radical rethinking does not call for a repositioning, but rather for a recognition of position already taken (though without due regard).

The development sector struggles with issues of accountability. Rightly so. These are not to be avoided by the (supposedly) rational utilisation of management instruments which attempt to elicit a 'bottom line'. (The very notion of a bottom line is, in the realm of social change, a fiction.) More immediately relevant, though: they should not be avoided because they are the most startling indication of the development sector's place in the world we have created. This world exhibits an increasingly dominant centre surrounded on all sides by increasingly ragged and under-resourced margins. Those on the margins, increasing numbers of them, have little recourse to the fruits of social (and scientific) progress; while the centre gathers ever more surplus to itself, sometimes dispensing largess with the indifference of an infrequently ashed cigar.

The development sector is positioned precisely on the continuum between the centre and the periphery. This is why we struggle endlessly with issues of accountability (not to mention identity). Are we primarily accountable to the structured institutions of the establishment or to the loose social formations and movements of the majority who reside at the margins? The development sector operates at the interface between the citizenry of the world (and their living planet) and the sovereign institutions of the state and economic sectors. We operate where there is critical dysfunction in the relationships between the different parts of society.

When the excesses of the economic sector result in the exclusion of the majority of the people it is meant to serve, there is need of intervention by the development sector. When the ecology of relationship between human society and its natural environment breaks down, there is need of a development sector. When the relationships that characterise a civil human society erode to the point of dysfunctionality, the development sector is compelled to respond. This is the common thread that defines our sector. Examples are endless – relationships between women and men, between human and planet, between citizenry and the state, between minority and majority, between 'developed' and 'developing' worlds, between centre and margin. At the interface where relationships become unbalanced, dysfunctional, or fail outright – the development sector should find its home. The development sector straddles – in the name of a more ecological, social, humane, civil society.

Given such a position, there is a powerful role that can be played. Thus far, however, the development sector has chosen otherwise. By and large, it has chosen to act as go-between in the relationship between unequals – the centre and the periphery. Accountable de facto mostly to the centre, it has chosen a particular role – to manage the transfer and delivery of essential goods and services in situations where the mainstream relationships and processes of society have failed. The intention is not to seek to intervene into the malfunctioning of the relationships themselves, but to act as an efficient and effective palliative measure.

This is obviously so where the sector is engaged with welfare, or with emergency aid, or generally with the delivery of resources, the promotion of economic development alternatives, self-help schemes, and so on. (The latter two could be engaged with differently, but within the current scientific management paradigm, the comment stands). This is the arena, in the narrow sense, of poverty reduction. Where the sector engages with activism, advocacy and policy influencing work, with human rights issues, it is less obviously so; but in a profound and underlying sense, the notion of transfer remains paramount. We do to others, or on behalf of others, without expecting change for or within ourselves. All the strategies we pursue risk becoming simple transfer as opposed to transformation.

Of course there are many within the development sector who act differently, who increasingly adopt a more developmental approach. Our institutions constrain us, however. The distinction between the current work of the development sector, and a developmental approach to social change, has not yet become clear enough for an articulated response and an alternative practice to emerge, at least with any thoroughness. The seeds of the developmental approach, though, are contained within the recognition of the interfacing position within which the sector finds itself. There are myriad possibilities, myriad responsibilities, entailed by such a positioning.

A developmental approach

There is a significant distinction between 'development work' – as the transfer of something from one party to another – and 'developmental practice', as critical intervention into social change. Yet the distinction is a subtle one. We take the ubiquitous notion of 'capacity building' as a case in point.

Capacity building is currently enjoying a revival as one solution to the development sector's greatest conundrum – that no matter how much we put in, things seem to stay the same, or worse, they get worse. Proponents of capacity building argue that resources alone cannot solve the problems that development sets out to address. What is needed is 'capacity' – human, organisational, institutional – to solve problems and harness resources in an ongoing way. More so, this capacity does not entail simple skills (though it includes them). Capacity has gradually come to be understood as a far greater competence and health and, increasingly, resources are being allocated for building just this vision.

The nuanced understanding expressed in this analysis indeed goes against the grain of the development sector, which is why it has been so slow in gaining credence. Yet, even now that it has emerged, the practice that flows out of this analysis tends to fall very short of the promise it offers. Money is set aside for short-term technical interventions; capacity building is implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) seen as the next new thing done by those with capacity to others who do not yet have it; 'capacity building' becomes an event, a product to be delivered, not an ongoing process; the capacity 'gap' (between our intentions and our abilities) is something that can be filled . . . and so

we fall back to where we were: Development remains the simple delivery of product; and capacity, then, is just its latest commodity. The complex accompanying relationship changes and challenges that are begging to be tackled, questions of one's own capacity and ongoing capacity needs, become lost in the drive to delivery . . . the people involved in strategising and establishing capacity building programmes are often aiming for just the subtle and complex relationship work that a developmental approach requires, yet somewhere along the way, it becomes lost. The underlying tendency of approach contained within the development sector surreptitiously – and often unconsciously – gains the upper hand.

Of course, there will always be transfer work to be done by the sector, we should be under no illusions about this, either in terms of need or rationale. But it is the way that it is done, the practice of doing it, that is at issue here. A developmental practice, we read above, requires 'subtle and complex relationship work'. What might this mean?

Working 'developmentally' involves a fundamentally different starting point from simple transfer. This approach embraces a systemic understanding of society in which the party intervening considers itself a part of the system into which it is intervening. Thus, we cannot simply 'fix' a wrong, or an imbalance, through focusing only on another (on 'the other'). A developmental approach demands that we consider ourselves in relation to that other – and so any attempt to intervene must reflect back on the intervener, asking the same questions we ask of the other, of ourselves. Seen developmentally, capacity building – to return to our example above – becomes less a simple transfer from one with 'more' to one with 'less', and more a continuous process of increasing awareness of one's own capacities in relation to others, and therefore, enhancing the capacity of the system as a whole. Which means, too, understanding the other in context – the forces that constrain and enable – and recognising oneself as an integral aspect of such forces, requiring, as well, change and development (learning and unlearning) if the system is to renew itself.

And more. The 'system' we are intervening into is alive, with 'porous boundaries and complex interdependencies'. It is an organism, not an artifact. Development itself is a process inherent in all natural, living and organic entities. It is not something created by the intervener, from the outside. It already exists, as internal to the organism. Development is the life process that keeps the infinitely complex web of relationships – which is the organism, which is society – constantly unfolding and transforming. Becoming. This is what it means to be alive.

Developmental intervention, then, is guidance from the inside, out. Not a 'doing to, or for', but facilitation. A 'working alongside'. Not preplanned from the outside, but
responsive to the shifting needs of the system as it moves along its path of becoming. Social organisms, being self-conscious and therefore responsible for their own process, can hit impediments with respect to this process. The flow and movement can become blocked and entangled. Imbalance, dysfunctionality, stuckness can set in. A developmental practice seeks to work with these stucknesses, to help the system right itself, open itself, and come into movement once more.

The pith of a developmental practice lies in helping the system to find its balance, so that it can continue to emerge. (Developmental practice, then, implies an open-endedness, an approach which does not seek to predict so much as anticipate). And balance means mediation between order and chaos, between established pattern and new impulse, between centre and periphery. The centre, the established order, is necessary for stability, but stability can easily turn into stasis, arresting further movement; while new impulses arise from the margins, from a periphery free of the taboos imposed

by the given, but risk fragmenting evolving process into unproductive chaos. The interdependence between center and periphery cannot be overstated.

This is why the position that the development sector finds itself in, its place in society at the interface between centre and periphery, is so relevant, so apposite, so precise. If it could match its practice to its position – or take its guidelines for practice from a perceptive reading of its position – then it would find its place, its alternative stance. Not simply to transfer, from one side to another, in a manner which leaves both itself and society as is; but to engage in the ongoing dynamic between centre and periphery, in an open ended, non-prescriptive, self-reflective fashion – to bring movement back into that dynamic, so that the social is able to come alive once more.

Coming alive

Complex systems are composed of relationships, both between their various aspects and between themselves and the environment they interact with. They are nothing less than that which arises through such relationships. Like the rainbow which emerges through the complexity of a particular relationship between water and dust and light and dark; and, like the rainbow, they have no beginning and no end, and gather themselves and fade away again in response to particular configurations of relationship at particular moments in time. They are, in fact, those relationships – and the story that they tell.

Complex relationships are alive where they are becoming and developing; they are alive to the extent that there is a free interplay between the relationships which compose them. They are alive where these relationships find a balanced freedom of movement. Which in turn is found in an absence of inner contradiction. Tension, yes, between one polarity and another, so that movement is generated through the energies entailed in seeking resolution; but inner contradiction leads to sufficient imbalance to grind the process of becoming to a halt. At which point, we have an inert object, incapable of further movement – other than decay – rather than a living process. Freedom from inner contradiction, in the realm of relationship, is what we mean when we speak of 'sustainability'; though we lose accuracy with respect to what we mean when words degenerate into jargon.

The developmental approach – the way through which development work is carried out – should be entirely about relationship, in the first instance human relationship (though it seldom is). Building relationships free of inner contradiction is not only the means, but also the outcome of the endeavour; from beginning to end (though it is seldom seen this way). When workers in the development sector enter a new situation, they often describe their initial activity as 'fact finding' – and so employ the requisite instruments – when in reality this phase of engagement (if it is to be real engagement at all) is all about establishing a relationship of trust between parties (which requires no instrumentation, rather the necessity to 'be oneself', and therefore, of course, to know oneself). When the development sector assesses outcomes, it focuses on quantifiable measures with respect to the tangible product which was originally predicted (and employs the requisite instrumentation). In reality a developmental outcome has everything to do with the changes in relationship that have occurred (which may be anticipated but cannot be predicted, and which cannot be assessed via any instrumentation, rather via the very human capacity for knowledgeable understanding – an admittedly 'developed' faculty which requires disciplined application).

An engaged, authentic approach to relationship is a prerequisite for a developmental practice, rather than the current propensity for simplistic procedures, participatory tricks and managerial techniques. The more we work on, and through, relationship, the more we connect all of us to more of ourselves. And this, surely, is development itself.

Relationship is one side of the coin; freedom the other. Freedom to pursue authentic relationship, freedom from inner contradiction, freedom from the stuckness which curtails movement, freedom which is movement, which allows the development process to unfold, which enables 'becoming'. Freedom which comes as new impulse from the margins to shake the center awake; freedom which enables those on the margins to shape their society towards a sustainable future. Freedom to engage.

A developmental practice, towards social transformation, will always – must, almost by definition, always – act in the service of freedom. A developmental practice will seek inclusivity, and lessen exclusion. The development sector will find its place within civil society, that social process which works between the excesses of polarity to encourage the human project in its quest for a more humane, purposeful and conscious future. The privilege of occupying an interfacing position entails the maintenance of free space in which to develop.

It is about rolling back boundaries that limit change, and encouraging the risk-taking required to let go of old ways so that experimentation may lead to the new. It is about building ways of relating in freedom, and out of freedom. A developmental practice must facilitate the creation of spaces in which, through which, people can move, risk, experiment and recreate images of themselves and of their relationships with others, and with their environment.

Seeking – the eye of the needle

This is not the place to detail details about practice. The details, anyway, are still emerging; the discipline is young yet. But something must be said about the fundamentals of a developmental practice. Its particular challenge; the question that it asks of us, perhaps. Or: What, specifically, is the eye of the needle through which an evidently developmental practice must pass?

We are asked to entertain the thought of a practice which is open-ended, reliant on authentic human relationship and knowledgeable understanding, working towards opening things up through working alongside and facilitating the emergence of the new, which will hopefully involve a lessening of inner contradiction in favour of a sustainable living dynamic. Knowing that we cannot predict the outcome of our interventions, only seek to anticipate and so adequately respond to the shifting needs of the system as it moves along its path of becoming.

Such an approach, geared towards freedom, can only be practised in freedom. It stands to reason. Not only can instrumentalist managerial techniques never hope to encompass the nuances of such a practice, but the need for them, in the name of accountability and control, undermines the essential capacity demanded of developmental practitioners. The use of such techniques implies a mistrust of authentic and accountable free human endeavour – which lies at the base of such a practice – rather than the propagation of it. In fact, such techniques imply – let us (try to) get away with – irresponsibility.

We cannot engage freedom without engaging responsibly. Not as an opposing polarity, but as part of the very notion itself. Freedom without responsibility is not freedom at all, but license. License and

responsibility, as polarities, give rise to freedom. Freedom, in the sense of a living sustainability, entails responsibility.

And responsibility can only be encouraged through free human activity. For a developmental approach to be authentic, for practitioners to hone the faculties and capacities indispensable to such an approach, the discipline must become an inner practice, emerging out of an inner propensity and striving. Anything less will take us back to where we were – the need for prediction and control, for the short term project and its quantifiable result. Bogus intention will again replace alternative practice.

To adopt this stance will challenge the development sector – with its managerialist tendencies – to its outer limits. In a sense, this is the eye of the needle, this is what is being asked of us. To engage fully in a radically different approach to life, and to the social. To regard the social as alive, and to treat it as we would a loved one.

We know that we are, as yet, inadequate to such a practice. It is only through engaging such practice – authentically and thoroughly – that we will become adequate. Such a practice demands far more of us than an instrumentalist practice ever will. To become adequate is to recognise our inadequacy, and practise nonetheless.

We can only proceed, in that case, by committing ourselves to continuous and relentless reflection on action. So that we are learning, and unlearning, all the time. This is the accountability which can, and must, be demanded of the sector, by the sector. If the developmental organisation, the developmental practitioner, is constantly inquiring into the validity and calibre of their practice, then responsibility can be seen to be authentic. Such a questing stance is accountability. Seeking the eye of the needle, then, we discover that the very activity of seeking is the eye of the needle. An attentive awareness, a rigorous interest cultivating an intimate engagement, is the eye of the needle through which a developmental practice, and the developmental practitioner, must pass. The question such a practice asks of us is, surely, whether we are serious about our humanity, or not.

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