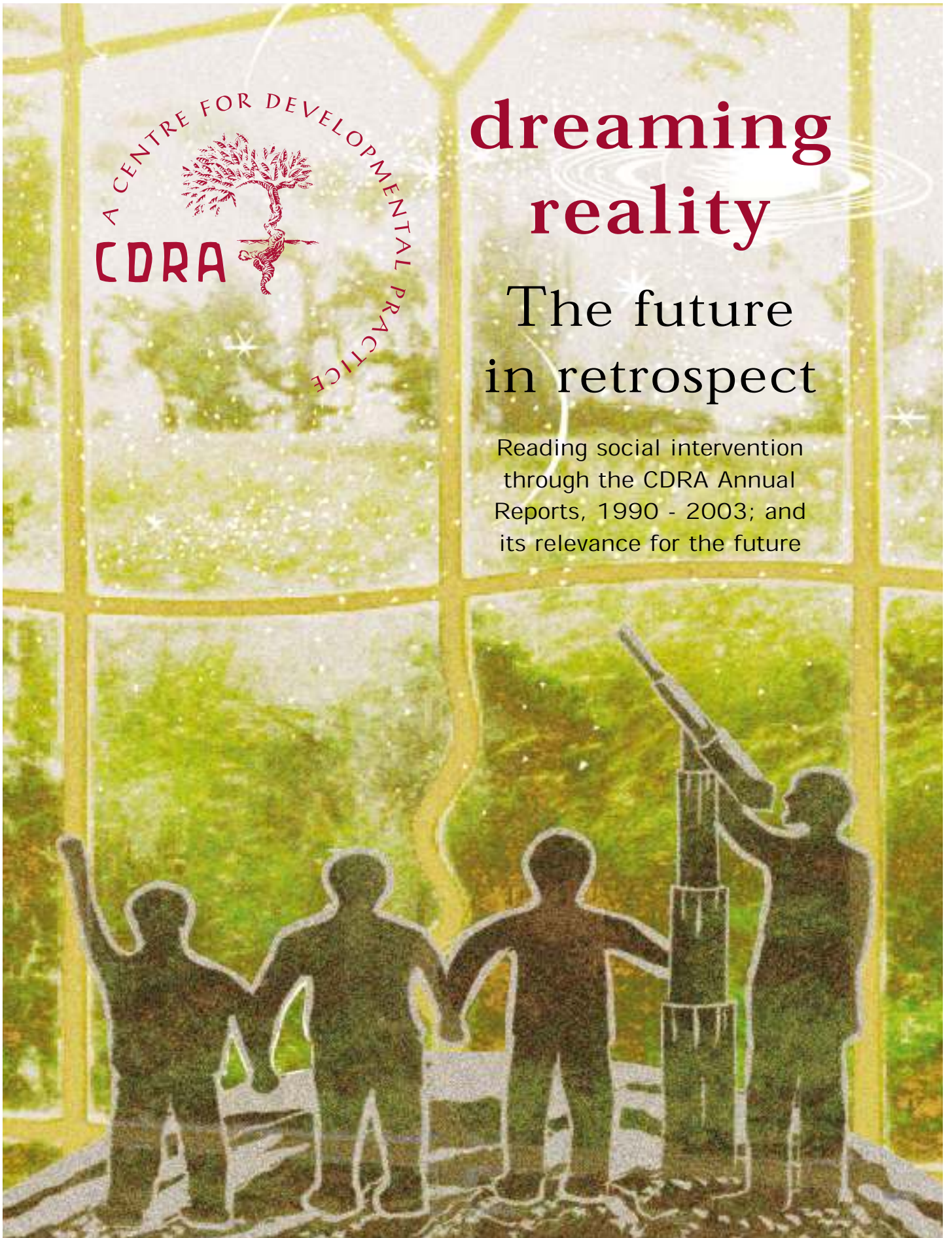




# dreaming reality

## The future in retrospect

Reading social intervention  
through the CDRA Annual  
Reports, 1990 - 2003; and  
its relevance for the future





# dreaming reality

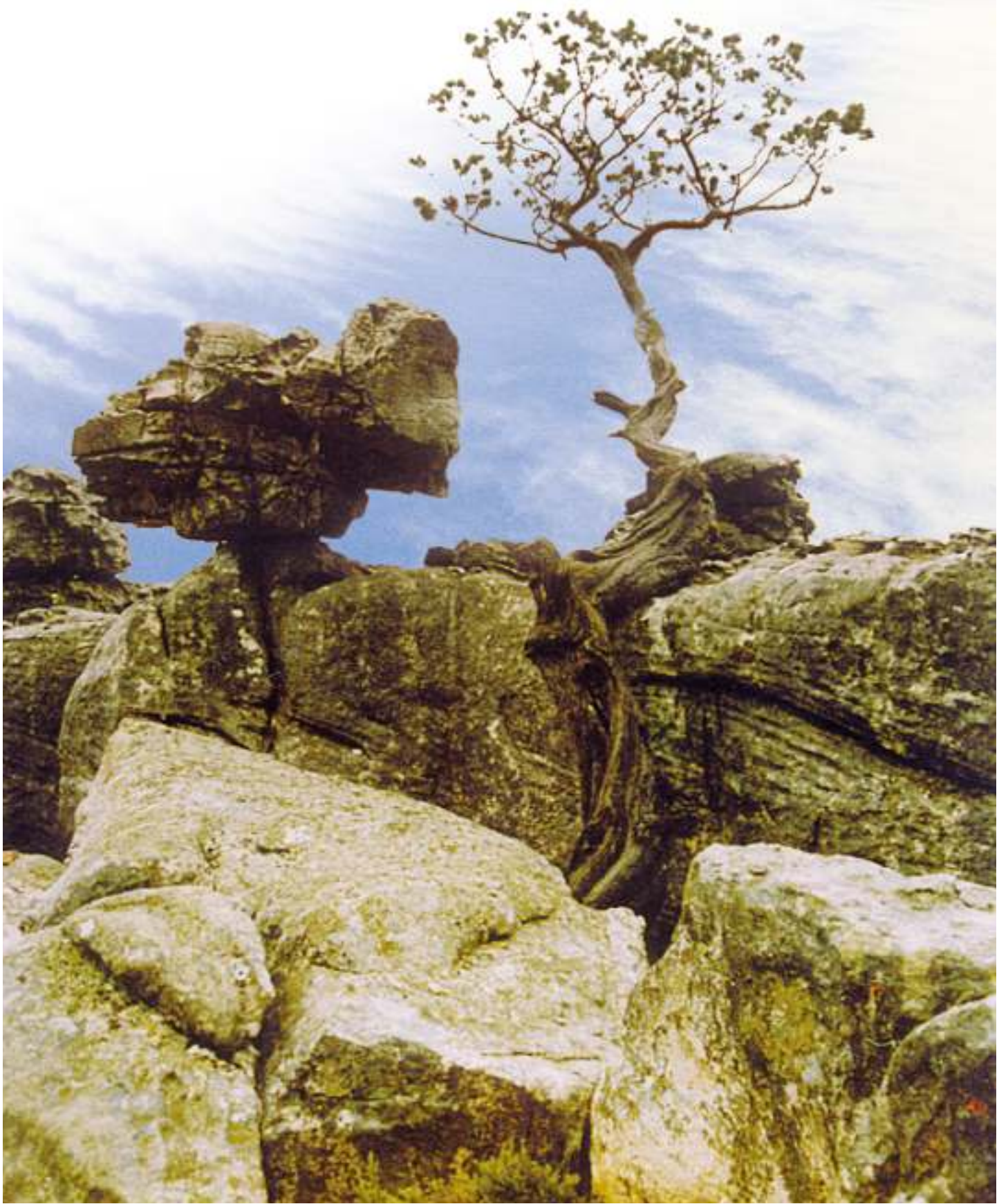
## The future in retrospect

Reading social intervention through the CDRA Annual Reports, 1990 - 2003; and its relevance for the future



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# Celebrating Resilience

*by Njabulo S. Ndebele*

“Resilience” is a word I admire. Microsoft Word’s Thesaurus confirms why. It lists as “resilience’s” synonyms, the following words: pliability, flexibility, elasticity, buoyancy, spirit, toughness. “Rigidity” is listed as the antonym. If you imagine the synonyms placed on a continuum, you could say “pliability” on one end, is the “weakest” form of “resilience” and “toughness”, on the other end, its “strongest”. You could be right. But you could be wrong. “Toughness” and “pliability” could equally represent respectively, the “weakest” and the “strongest” aspects of “resilience.” The power of “resilience” comes from the paradox that what is pliable contains an inner toughness that prevents it from breaking up, no matter how much it is bent; and that what is “tough” conveys the sense of outer rigidity and therefore strength, that only its inner pliability protects from disintegration. What is weak only appears so. Equally so, what is tough.

Chinese ancient wisdom reminds us of the story of the willow tree. It has the ability to stay rooted through the harshest storms. Its pliable, flexible branches are able to “flow” with the storm, taking some pressure off the trunk of the tree, while “tough” trees without that capability brace against the storm and are uprooted.

The message here seems to be that there is a lot more to see beyond what we can see with our eyes. A related message is that what we can see with our eyes has become an overwhelmingly dominant means of perceiving the world. We have constructed awesome knowledge systems out of that mode of perception. The march of science and technology in the last four centuries or so has seen the prevalence and dominance of the world of the senses. It is a world that has served us well. However, its dominance is historical rather than a necessary condition of human life. There is much in our contemporary world that sends out strong messages that the inductive, logical mode of sensory perception cannot continue to hold sway on its own.

I believe it is this kind of understanding that has seen the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) being able to remain rooted through the harshest storms. With the advent of democracy in 1994 South Africa began to shed the intuitions toward human solidarity of the kind that drove much of the struggle for liberation. We increasingly began to measure the “progress” of our emergent reality through statistics as opposed to the quality and extent of

human involvement. We were going to build a million houses; increase the numbers of people with drinkable water by so many millions; create millions of jobs. So many millions of people would receive health care. So many millions of telephones! So many more millions of young South Africans would go to school, and many millions more citizens would be trained through Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) which would have millions of rands allocated to them. This trend toward the primacy of statistical goals gathered more momentum after the frenetic policy making activity of the first five years of our democracy. That was when “delivery” became the mantra of politics. The age of delivery would get us closer towards “a better life for all.”

One of the early casualties of the period was Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). In a world of statistical goals, the state, and the state alone, would define the problem, identify its constituent features, work out solutions, and then prepare a “business plan” to achieve them, and then implement the plan. The objective reality to be changed, and the plans for changing it, began to replace the vital sense of the people who would be participants in bringing about the change. The centralizing tendency in politics grows in proportion to the increase in the urgency of statistical goals. As this happens, the connection between politics and people will tend to decrease as the connection between politics and statistics increases.

The fact is, it is paradoxically our best intuitions that led us in the direction of statistics. We wanted to succeed in the interests of the people. And that is the nub of CDRA’s difficulty. We appear to have forgotten that we needed to succeed with the people. In the rush to formulate and then implement policies for “delivery” some politicians were heard to declare that there had been “enough consultation” or in some cases “too much consultation.”

In retrospect, a people-centred approach would have opted for the more persuasive: “let’s try to implement with the level of consultation we have achieved and review our efforts after an agreed period of time.” “Delivery” that depends on the “end of consultation” suggests, rather definitively, if authoritatively, the end of a process. The latter approach suggests a continuing process of implementation and consultative review. It is one thing for government to pursue statistical objectives alone; it is another to pursue them with communities.

It has to be said, though, that pursuing statistical goals with communities is no easy matter. In fact, it is so inherently complex it is fraught with frustrations, delays, doubts, intended and unexpected victories, pains and joys. It requires a public service approach that is conscious not only of rules, but also of the people who have to work with those rules, and are affected by them. The notion of efficiency in the public service, or in any other sector, for that matter, will include the awareness, acceptance, knowledge, and skill in approaching and working with the inherent complexities of engaging communities in achieving desired social change. In short, South Africa’s public service must discover, embrace and perfect the art of resilience. New notions of efficiency lie there.

CDRA’s own resilience has been in insisting that development practitioners insert themselves in the inherently difficult yet ultimately fulfilling interface between government and statistical goals. In this position, CDRA would insist on not being cast in the role of “implementing agency” but more importantly, in the role of participants in social change. Working in that interface is to

work in the space of invisible yet ever present realities: perceptions, judgments, understandings, the sense of relationships or their absence, time, and patience to work with time. CDRA calls development practitioners willing to work in such space “artists of the invisible.” Since Jacob Burckhardt introduced the notion of “the state as a work of art”<sup>1</sup> we know today that everything that is science is art, and everything that is art is science. Today we work with the continuum. We work with the miracle of paradox.

There is one other thing to underscore about working in the space of the invisible: it is that it allows for failure. Inside resilience is the courage to accept when a policy or its implementation has failed. In this way, failure transmutes into strength and ethical trust. Failure becomes part of learning what to avoid in future in order to increase the chances of success and limit failure. Strong is the government that abandons failed policies; weak is the one that demonstrates resolve through holding on to them.

The resilience of CDRA is captured in its remarkable annual reports. This treasure of reports will not give you your usual statistics and glossy pictures. CDRA annual reports invite the reader to participate deeply in the thinking of an organisation. In this way, CDRA invites us to experience a rigorous humility in place of the kind of organisational posture we have come to expect from annual reports. By the time the statistics and organisational profile are given right at the end, we have been taken through a transformative journey in which the “Detailed Expenditure Statement” and its “narrative” are embodied in organisational thinking and practice.

The message of CDRA at this crucial moment is that we can still make a go of it. The signs pointing towards the need for a new direction in achieving the goals of our liberation are there all over around us. One sign is a key election in the offing. All individuals and organisations competing for power or social influence are called upon to recreate themselves. No organisation, no matter how well tested, can afford to take the electorate for granted. The grounds for loyalties may have shifted significantly. The space to be in is the one between politics and declared goals. It is the space in which communities play an active role in meeting constitutional goals through community agency interacting with government, in particular local government. *That* is the space of renewal.

Hopefully, CDRA’s resilience will ensure not only its continued presence, but its increased influence. We look forward to twenty more years of resilience.

*Professor Ndebele is an author and Vice-Chancellor & Principal of the University of Cape Town.*

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1 Jacob Burckhardt. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Vol. 1. (San Francisco, USA: 1958).





# The CDRA: 1987–2007

## A perspective from the Board

*by Di Oliver and James Taylor*

For twenty years members of civil society have served on the Board of the CDRA. Each of us has a story about how we came to be Board members and each of these stories is part of CDRA's story. There has been some turnover of Board Members, but a solid core has maintained its commitment and contributed to the organisation's stability. Attendance at Board meetings – which is often a challenge to NGO staff to maintain – has been characterised in CDRA more by a desire to be present at and with the organisation than an obligation. It is to be greatly celebrated that Bishop Rubin Phillip chaired the Board for twelve of its twenty year history and it is with a sense of great rejoicing that, in 2007, this baton will pass to Mzwandile Msoki, a long standing member of the Board who is also past co-director and senior consultant.

CDRA takes issues of governance extremely seriously and has always affirmed its Board members for the role they play in oversight and leadership of the organisation. It has used its experience with its own Board to craft its practice and responses to questions about the role of Boards in its OD work with client organisations.

The story of CDRA takes us back to the post-1985 period in South Africa. Repeated States of Emergency were the order of the day, declared by a government fast losing control. Many sacrificed what safety they had and the limited possibilities for personal progress. Apart from the violations of human rights at the time, the social effects of apartheid and repression were a heavy burden on communities. South African civil society organised itself impressively with the limited space it had, and a plethora of community-based initiatives appeared as did service organisations. Given the pressures to fight injustice, attention to governance and the fabric of organisational life was often neglected. Leaders of organisations tip-toed around mention of the need for “management” as it was equated with control, for it was control and an absence of freedom that dominated people's lives.

One organisation, MAG – the Montagu-Ashton Community Organisation in the Western Cape of South Africa – invited an OD practitioner to assist it with the questions its work in a rural

farming environment had raised. It was this successful intervention that led to the formation of the CDRA in response to the desire to make OD – unheard of in NGO circles till then – available and accessible to other organisations outside the public and private sectors, in order to strengthen civil society. Together with its pioneering Board, the organisation started with two consultants and a secretary, four client organisations, an adventurous funder and a brief to work in the Western Cape.

Twenty years later the CDRA is a Centre for Developmental Practice with an international reputation for the work it has pioneered and deeply respected as a leading development agency. Its work takes our staff all over the continent of Africa and to many parts of the world. Its sought-after publications, enviable resource of development publications and vibrant website are hallmarks of its profile. Development practitioners from around the globe are attracted to its formation courses and the unique opportunities it designs for sharing and learning together. It seeks to bring its African identity and experience to what it offers and how it works.

We were prompted to put this book together by the appreciative feedback we received over the years in response to our Annual Reports. James Taylor, CDRA's current Executive Director observes that "Our rather unusual use of Annual Reports goes back to the very early days of our organisation. I can remember us thinking that if we have to go to all the effort to produce these things every year, we must at least do something interesting and challenging. I can also remember from those very early days being a bit overwhelmed by the privilege of bringing organisation development to so many different organisations, working in such an intimate way. Helping organisations reveal more of themselves to themselves, and learning together about their complexity, often in slightly perplexed wonderment. Our Annual Reports became our way of sharing our privileged journey of learning with others."

We share them now in collected and edited form as a part of CDRA's 20th anniversary celebration. In doing so, we also celebrate our founders who understood ongoing reflective learning to be an essential part of human development and recognised that writing brought rigour to this discipline. We give credit to our funders who have had the foresight and courage to support it. We thank Allan Kaplan in particular, who wrote much of what is contained in this book, and in so doing instilled an organisational culture and expectation that all practitioners write as a part of their learning practice. Their writing is also contained in these pages.

Allan's example and inspiration has ensured that the tradition of the CDRA Annual Reports lives on, albeit in slightly different forms. This collection concludes with the 2002/03 annual report, *Seeking the Eye of the Needle*. It was at this point that we felt we had concluded what turned out to be a 13 year journey of exploring and coming to describe developmental practice. Since then, the Annual Reports have continued to be produced, tackling aspects of practice and experimenting with different approaches to representing it. We are beginning to see new voices emerging, new ideas ... and therein lies another story, for another book, another collection of Annual Reports, perhaps, when the time comes.

It is our privilege to serve on CDRA's Board and, with our dedicated staff and funders, we celebrate this milestone in our history with deep gratitude for what has been achieved.

**dreaming  
reality**

**The future  
in retrospect**

'Nor does the freedom to dream come at birth;  
it is a capacity and an awareness  
that needs to be defended'

*Gao Xingjian*

# reading social intervention

through the CDRA Annual Reports, 1990–2003;

# and its relevance for the future

Compiled by Allan Kaplan

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# An Approach to Struggle

*'The lesser loyalties depart,  
And neither race nor creed remain  
From bitter searching of the heart'.*

Frank Scott

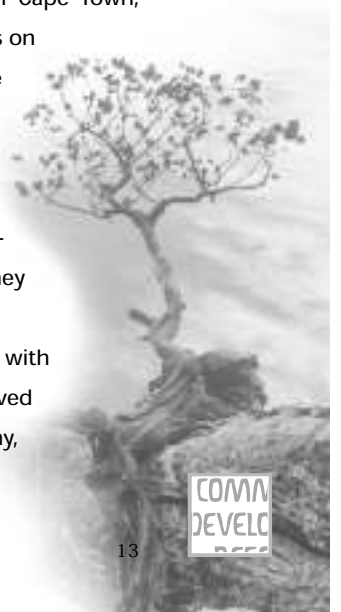
## A DEDICATED LOVE

The end of the last century, and the start of this, has seen our world move rapidly into a whirlpool of desperate ironies – increasing chaos and growing paralysis, increasing poverty amidst growing wealth, expanding economies and shrinking ecologies, a globalising centre accompanied by fragmenting peripheries. The frantic call for sustainable development merely emphasising the rape of commonage.

As contradictions tear painfully, as complexities collide, those working in the field of social development – simultaneously the kernel of the human project and its largely unremarked hobby – have their own choices to make. These choices are often hidden; swept up in the main stream of the rising tides, we often no longer realise where they may be taking us. Alternative readings and practices become obscured.

Through the late 80s and the 90s of the last century, into these first years of our ricocheting future, the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), a South African NGO based in Cape Town, gathered a reputation for reading and practising differently. Through an unwavering focus on the question of humanity as the heart of social intervention, and through rigorous practice and unrelenting reflection on that practice, an alternative reading of social intervention has emerged. As it emerged, so it was poured, with a dedicated love, into pictures and patterns woven of words and sentences, and sewn together into yearly offerings. Annual Reports with a difference, publications that concerned themselves with reading and impassioning, with exploring and critiquing, with probing and exhorting, the world of which they were so much a part, and so much apart.

These Annual Reports travelled. They were written with dedication and they were read with love. They pretended to artistry, in word, image and provocation; at their best, they proved themselves worthy enough to travel the globe, hand to eye as it were. They were read by many,



thirsty travellers all; year on year these travellers anticipated them, drank them in, and then moved on. To live is to move on; we are all migrants in one way or another.

These Annual Reports, seemingly, belong to the past, collectors' items at best, out of print, out of mind. Yet they have not been overtaken; surprisingly, they remain, as a whole, one of the few coherent arguments with which to challenge an increasing hegemony of mediocre and mendacious approaches to social intervention. Individually many provide access routes into avenues of thinking and practice which are insidiously regarded as apostate. They may, perhaps, provide indications to enable us against the coming storm.

So we publish them again in this form; not as individual wholes, but partially, as lines and shadings and colours informing the grand picture of what they amount to as a composite whole. So that those who read this whole piecemeal, year by year, as well as those who did not, can follow the thread. For, though each was written separately, from year to year, we find, in the end, that they form one narrative. A narrative of freedom.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN APPROACH

It is a remarkable phenomenon, that separate arguments written year by year, and spanning thirteen years, could eventually come together as a coherent narrative. What was written at the beginning – and indeed, each Report signalled a new beginning – were merely incipient ideas, groping explorations based on a dedicated practice given continuous, thorough and rigorous consideration. There was no conscious intention to produce a consistent body of work. There was, though, always the intention to focus on the question of humanity as the heart of social intervention. This has led to a deepening exploration and argument, both informed by and informing practice. In the case of these Annual Reports, one thing has indeed led to another.

As the years rolled on, the CDRA changed as organisation, its strategies and practice refined themselves in response to a continually expanding field and rapidly changing context. Born into the anti-apartheid struggle of the late 80s and committed at that time to servicing the development needs of a very confined geographical area – the Western and Northern Cape of South Africa – CDRA has seen the demise of apartheid and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the rise of globalisation and the free market, a burgeoning new world order and a collapsing world ecology, the disappearance of old certainties and positions amidst increasing ambiguities and complexities, the gathering unto itself of a global centre and the growing violence of its marginalised shadow.

During this time CDRA's field of operation extended from South Africa to southern and east and northeast Africa, western and eastern Europe and parts of Asia and Latin America, and its clientele also expanded to include organisational players at all levels of the aid chain and the development sector. Neither the development sector nor CDRA have escaped the ravages of the new dispensations that we are all having to find ways of dealing with now. But throughout all this time and change, CDRA tried to focus on the essentials of the human question and of authentic social intervention, holding at bay the many centrifugal and seductive forces that threatened to pull it into disparate trajectories of action. It responded to the times and the changes with methodological and strategic innovations and adaptations, yet with a core understanding and intent that deepened as it evolved, and revealed itself as increasingly valuable the more it revealed of the context in which it lived.



The struggle has broadened and deepened, from apartheid to the human condition. As CDRA recognised and attempted to bridge these seismic shifts, developmental leaps sometimes occurred, and both development practice as well as understanding evolved to new levels of discourse. At the same time, consistent and coherent threads of narrative ran through the whole, forming a story in which themes and patterns are reiterated, growing through the reiteration but changing (developing) all the time, so that there is no repetition but rather a constant deepening and articulation of particular themes. The themes are manifold, though all are centred on the question of human freedom.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the nature of the emerging narrative itself, which has unfolded organically, through its own developmental impulse, rather than having been planned instrumentally from the outset. There is an echo here of CDRA's approach to the social and to the human condition. This approach is essentially an organic, as opposed to a mechanistic, one. The narrative has unfolded much as a human being would, or as an organisation or group or community does – that is, as a developing organism rather than as an artefact. Treating the social as artefact, we manipulate, engineer, input, predict, and hope to control the outcome; in so doing we work with many fragmented parts, and we plan and manage their combination so that the wished for product is (theoretically) produced. Treating the social as organic, however, means that we simply cannot work in this instrumental way. The organism is always whole, wherever we find it in its development, and therefore respect for human freedom demands a particular response to such wholeness. The infant of one year is no less whole, no less perfect, than the youth of 11 years or the adult of 43. The tree is no less a whole tree when it is a sapling than when it is 600 years old. The organic is always whole even as it is emerging; it is always itself, always beyond our power to create. We can, at best, facilitate, nurture, perhaps guide, as we learn to anticipate its unfolding movement.

This theme became central to CDRA's understanding over the years, as an indelible aspect of an approach to human freedom, as a constituent of respect for that freedom, and as a central tenet of an alternative approach to social intervention. This idea of organic development is made manifest in the narrative which has formed through the gradual conflation of ideas as they have emerged at different times, through different experiences and observations, in the different individual themes and arguments presented in the Annual Reports. Thus the *fact* of the composite narrative itself, the very *form* it has assumed, is reason enough to put this book together as clarion call to a new understanding and approach.

In so much of what passes as social intervention as it has come to be practised, there is an assumption that interventions should be planned down to the last detail, or else we may expect only chaos to result. Thus we reap the underlying fear and alienation contained in an instrumental logic when applied to living organisms. An organic logic has very different implications, less comfortable perhaps, demanding more intimacy, openness and courage of the practitioner. The argument contained in this book circles around this conception of the social and social intervention. And the very way that it has developed is convincing recognition of its significance. And with every organism, there is nothing that emerges that was not contained in the seed, in the egg. There is, on the other hand, profound and limitless maturation, deepening, expansion, in response to context, to unique and changing circumstance, and – in the case of the human organism – to the observations of a self-reflective consciousness.

COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT  
RESOURCE  
ASSOCIATION



ANNUAL REPORT 1991

COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT  
RESOURCE  
ASSOCIATION



ANNUAL REPORT  
1992/93

COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT  
RESOURCE  
ASSOCIATION

Annual Report 1992/93

The developing of capacity



## OF SEEDS AND FIRST THEMES

CDRA was first conceived in 1987, as an NGO committed to providing an organisation development and capacity building service to civil society organisations working in the field of political resistance and community development. At the time, both the concepts of 'organisation development' as well as 'capacity building' were as yet unheard of in the world of social intervention; CDRA was partly responsible for inserting them into the discourse on development work. Even the term 'civil society' had not yet become the ubiquitous catch-all phrase into which it has subsequently evolved.

From the outset, CDRA took a particular approach to 'struggle'. Its founding intention was to insist that the 'struggle project' consisted of enabling both those with much power and those with less to come to greater consciousness, greater awareness, of what they were about, and in this way become more capable of acting for the social good. It focused, though, on those with less power, on the marginalised, and within this focus it did not seek to do battle on behalf of others but to facilitate others to do battle on their own behalf. The idea was always that both healthy human community and the struggle for freedom are premised as well as informed by the development of consciousness with respect to both self and other. Our understanding, our intentions and our initiative are the arms we bear into the terrain of struggle. The struggle for healthy community and for freedom is the struggle for consciousness and for humanity.

From 1987 through to 1991 CDRA tested and experimented with ideas and practices. Early 1991 saw a participatory evaluation of CDRA take place, and as a result CDRA's first Annual Report was published. It was a small and insignificant affair, read by a few locals at best, CDRA's immediate circle. This Annual Report was followed by another dated 1991/1992, and then by a third, 1992/1993. By the time this latter Annual Report was produced CDRA had begun to understand something of how alternative, and of how valuable, its approach was within the global development sector; CDRA had begun to discover that it had something rather startling to say, and had begun to find its own voice. For this reason, the 1992/1993 Annual Report became the first in the rest of the series of Annual Reports to concentrate on serving as a 'think piece' around a particular theme heralded in the Annual Report's title. In the case of the 1992/1993 Annual Report the theme was *The Developing of Capacity*.

These first three Annual Reports, taken together, were the sowing of a seed, in terms of articulating ideas and developing a format within which to present them, as well as gathering a growing readership. They may be regarded as the Reports in which 'first principles' were articulated with respect to CDRA's main spheres of understanding and practice. In what follows in this first chapter they will be quoted from in relatively piecemeal fashion in order to set the scene for the developing argument and for the deepening of particular themes.

The Report of 1991 – largely a description of the evaluation of CDRA which had just been conducted – contains a page entitled: *CDRA's Working Methodology in terms of our Value Base*. Some excerpts follow:

❖ ❖

By community development we mean social transformation towards a strong and competent civil society ...

We aim to achieve this through providing a service which facilitates the development of organisational capacity. This service is in essence a developmental one. We are not management



consultants but facilitators of development. For us development means movement towards greater consciousness and self-reflective ability. Organisation development strives towards increasing an organisation's ability to

- listen with deep interest and empathy to clients, context and one's own organisational impulse;
- become conscious of and capable of self-reflection on the principles, values and conceptual framework out of which work is done as well as the implications of these.

❖ ❖

At the time – as still today, interestingly – the main method employed by service providers towards strengthening 'civil society' organisations consisted of training in the form of training packages. CDRA took a different approach:

❖ ❖

Training implies the didactic transfer of particular methods, techniques and skills. Rather, we attempt to facilitate individual development through formation of concepts, attitudes and behaviours which allow individuals to develop appropriate methods and techniques out of the specific situations they meet. In this way we strive to enable individuals to handle fluid reality rather than to respond with particular modalities and mindsets. We talk of forming in the sense of individuals being able to draw out of themselves ... their capacity to respond to future and unknown situations.

We uphold respect for the human being as our ultimate value, and attempt to help and heal individuals, organisations and communities in their paths of becoming.

❖ ❖

The second Report is prefaced by the Chairperson's introduction, which contains the following paragraph:

❖ ❖

This annual report reflects the diversity of skills and experience of each member of our team based in Beach Road. It is their individual motivation to build CDRA as an organisation serving the needs of other organisations that has enabled us to grow and develop. This is why we have asked people to write individual articles on their experience of the organisation and what we are trying to do in the world. Often we see an annual report giving a 'corporate view', a smoothing over of difficulties and presenting an 'image'. We have decided to break through this and share how we see ourselves – an organisation with lots of questions, a dynamic interchange of views and very few neat solutions ...

❖ ❖

These ideas of breaking through the conventions as well as 'sharing how we see ourselves' – a relentless commitment to transparent self-reflection – are important to note here as they constitute one of the significant differences between these Reports and those of more conventional ones; the intention continues throughout the Reports of the following years. At the same time – specifically at this nascent juncture – it means that very little of the organic development of the overall argument itself is contained in this report, so that there is little to share from this Report here. A few sentences will suffice.

❖ ❖



(Our work consists of) the attempt to assist organisations to become more self-reflective, more self-critical and analytical, more aware of the complexities and options in their environment and more capable of making conscious decisions. Capacity building is not simply the quantitative increment of skills, it is the development of a learning organisation capable of operating at the cutting edge of social transformation. Therefore, organisation development work is successful when organisations become capable of a continuous self-development process ... The consultant's work of facilitating this process is extremely sensitive and always ambiguous. He/she is valued for his/her ability to analyse, diagnose and bring solutions to bear; yet he/she is also valued for his/her ability to facilitate these processes in others, to help others to see, to hold back on analysis, diagnosis and solution. This balancing act is a precarious one ...

❖ ❖

The third Report, *The Developing of Capacity*, marks the beginning of the argument proper, and contains a substantial number of the 'seeds' which inform the subsequent argument as it unfolds. At the time it constituted a radical departure from conventional approaches.

❖ ❖

Our major source of personal inspiration and motivation comes from the perspective that our primary allegiance is to development, not to consultancy. Therefore, although it is necessary that we bring expertise and experience to bear on organisational problems, we do not regard ourselves as experts whose task it is to input knowledge of solutions. Rather we see ourselves as facilitators ... Development implies growing consciousness and awareness, greater capacity for responsibility ... A developing organisation is a learning organisation, and interventions are designed to increase an organisation's capacity for self-reflection and self-regulation ... the integrity of the organisation and its development process is of paramount concern, rather than a particular input or package or solution or evaluation which is delivered at a particular point



in time ... We take a holistic view of organisations and therefore our services are not one-off packaged deliveries but are instead longer term interventions ... We intervene at the request of the organisation concerned, never on behalf of donors.



This last point constituted a particularly radical move away from the conventional practice at the time (and once again, still today). It contains within it the understanding that development interventions cannot take place other than under conditions of freedom and choice between intervener and intervened, if the intention is to promote such freedom through the development intervention (and, so far as CDRA was concerned, what other intention could there be?). And further, that development cannot be forced, it can only be responded to.



Building capacity involves the whole person, and it is a long term process not attainable through short training courses. It demands follow-up and assistance with reflection on action. Development is as much a process of 'letting go' of mind sets, fixed attitudes, ingrained habits as it is a process of 'taking on the new'. Indeed, 'letting go' is a prerequisite for change. Developing capacity has more to do with confidence, maturity, flexibility, fluidity, creativity, coherence and integrity than with specific skill acquisition ... (The capacity to undertake development and organisational work) demands emotional resilience, thinking ability, and engagement of the will – the capacity to act – in the face of ambiguity, uncertainty and contradiction ... the ability to handle 'fluid reality' ... (it) implies the emergence of objectivity ... being strong enough to be vulnerable, and resourceful enough to acquire the skills needed in a given situation ... Such capacity cannot be trained ... it is developed through guided interaction, preferably within one's own work arena. One needs to bounce against one's own context and reflect on the interface.



As with the individual, so with the organisation.



The point is, training is an important response to the issue of capacity building, but by itself it is inadequate and is a secondary response. Issues of organisational process and organisation development are primary. The organisation needs to gain mastery over itself in order to take responsibility for and adequately utilise the individuals it sends for training. This is the arena of organisation development, rather than training.

The problem is compounded by the seductive nature of the training option. Recipient organisations can use the training package as an easy option, an easy response. The package is all arranged, and the organisation need do little itself to change its situation. The NGO which provides the training packages its product neatly, employs its specialists, and is in business. The beauty here is that there is a product – none of this messy, unmanageable process stuff.

Numerous donors are happy to fund packaged training courses. They can provide the donor with the complacent glow of having responded to 'real needs', and courses are easily quantified and evaluated. The number of packages contracted for are carried out ... whether individual or organisational capacity is actually being built or not is beyond the boundaries of the funding contract. Finally, on a sadder note, the reality is that there are many trainers, while competent OD consultants (read 'development practitioners', as this was CDRA's meaning at the time, though the discourse was different) are almost impossible to find.

The result of this is that plenty of money is being made available for training ... Under the guise of capacity building, it seems we are being seduced into equating training with development. Even our discourse is changing – we are becoming 'training vendors'. We are in danger of succumbing to myopic mega-agency approaches from within and outside South Africa, and we ourselves are adding to the problem by expounding a reductionist view.

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There are a number of signals contained in these last remarks. The year was 1993, just prior to South Africa's first democratic elections, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The times, as the poet says, were a'changin'. CDRA was working outside of South Africa now, it was in the process of developing first a regional and then a global perspective; as it did so, it was beginning to address itself to the growth of certain global tendencies. The dominance of 'training' on the development agenda was in fact the least of these, merely a symptom really. The real issues were contained beneath the action, almost as incipient and unconscious intention; the situation had to be *read, intuited, made sense of*, if it was to reveal its real guiding impulses. The twin hegemonies of managerialism and globalisation were beginning to assert themselves, and with this the rise of a materialist, instrumental and reductionist view of the human project. These things were beginning to be felt by CDRA at the time, still largely unconsciously even to itself. CDRA's sense of a new call to arms, on a far larger canvas and to deal with a more insidious foe than hitherto, was beginning to emerge.

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Organisational capacity building is a legitimate, vital, requisite and central development intervention. But it is in the first instance the realm of the organisation development consultant, not the trainer (or sectoral specialist). We are not arguing for the proliferation of consultancy agencies. We are saying that ... our organisations need to be employing a new kind of development practitioner ... We are arguing for an expanded understanding of the development practitioner ...

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This is the first time that CDRA uses the term 'development practitioner', in the sense of an entirely new discipline and practice. Contained within this call lies the seed of the unfolding argument which follows. An argument which gradually iterates, and reiterates, an entirely new and alternative approach to the understanding and practice of social development. An argument which takes exception to the mainstream hegemonies which have come to dominate this realm of human endeavour. Not simply for the sake of the odd NGO and marginalised community, but for the sake of human freedom itself. Though neither the extent of the danger, nor the depth and challenge of the alternative, were apparent to CDRA at the time.





**ANNUAL REPORT 1993/94**

*In the name of development?*

**EXPLORING ISSUES OF CONSULTANCY AND FIELDWORK**



# A Call to Arms

*'This is the faith from which we start:  
Men shall know commonwealth again  
From bitter searching of the heart'.*

Frank Scott



## TENTACLES OF A NEW WORLD ORDER

With the ending of apartheid and the dawn of a new democracy, South Africa opened itself to the world; as it worked towards a new dispensation which entailed development for its marginalised masses, so the world of development and the aid industry rushed in through its newly opened portals, to assist and to influence according to its lights. Simultaneously CDRA's work increased in intensity and scope, and moved firmly beyond its borders, out into the rest of Africa and further afield into the centres of the development industry. Both within South Africa and without, it was impossible to escape the new world order which was gradually asserting itself in the wake of the Cold War and in the early phases of triumphant capitalism and the free market.

CDRA had always placed issues of development practice at the forefront of its thinking, preferring to read world trends through what was actually happening on the ground rather than through academic or abstract theorising. The theme of the first Annual Report which emerged in response to the new dispensation is reflected in the title of the Report: *In the name of Development? Exploring Issues of Consultancy and Fieldwork (1993/1994)*.



Many questions are raised through this Report, questions which emerged as a result of reflections undertaken on direct on-the-ground experience of the new style of development which was beginning to make itself felt. Some excerpts from this Report follow. The reader should bear in mind, in reading what follows, that these were still relatively early days in CDRA's thinking, and terminology may be confusing. Especially, the terms 'consultant' and 'fieldworker', which were in use at the time but which need some translation today. The reader is asked, then, in order to translate what follows into easy reference for the subsequent evolution of the argument, to substitute the term 'specialised thematic/sectoral expert' for consultant, and 'development practitioner' for fieldworker. This will allow a more generous reading of the Report, since there are different kinds of consultants and fieldworkers, and the distinction that CDRA was attempting to point to then makes more sense when read in this fashion.



### **A Challenge To “Bottom-Up” Development**

One of the major potential threats is a challenge to the traditional development focus of building capacity 'from the bottom up'. The small, creative, adaptive organisations staffed by committed activists, seeking mandates from those they serve and living from one month and one funding cheque to the next, are being transformed or are disappearing. Their successors and new organisations are being staffed and managed by increasingly skilled and 'professional' consultants and managers looking for career paths in the field. There are demands for the sector to organise into national structures and networks, and for individual organisations to grow and 'professionalise' so that large amounts of development capital can more easily be disbursed. The expectation is that quick, large scale, measurable delivery of 'product' development takes place in the sorely neglected areas of bulk infrastructure, basic services, housing provision, health care, education, and training.

Changes in the political and development landscape have also seen a massive influx and growing numbers of consultants operating in the field. Specialists are involved in tendering, supplying training programmes, developing means of securing community participation and support in programmes, providing organisation development services and doing impact assessments. Consultants implement programmes, provide advice and even run organisations. Some are foreigners with experience of global development agencies and the developing countries in which these operate ... Experience in the field indicates that large urban-based organisations and agencies employing consultants to do fieldwork are increasing their influence and ability to attract development capital.

As a traditional NGO providing consultancy services to the development sector, CDRA needs to ask itself what this 'explosion' of consultancy means and try to understand its long term effects on development ... At their best, consultants bring specialisation, mobility, variety of service and direct accountability for quality with them ... (but) ... Any kind of short-term contractual relationship has inherent limitations – consultants cannot take responsibility for anything which falls out-

side the scope or time frame of the contract. The (consultant) clarifies the brief or terms of reference, tailors the service to meet the need of the client, delivers the service within the time-frame and the budget, and moves on to the next contract. The provision of specific skills for limited periods can be of great value. But consultants cannot do long-term development tasks which are perpetually unfolding processes rather than time- and product-related things. Building the complex institutions, organisations and relationships which form the basis of enabled and empowered communities requires a level of ‘connectedness’ ... and a sensitivity to (community and organisational) issues that someone who is just a consultant will never have.

The rise to prominence of consultants may work against the development of other vocations vital to development processes ... Skilled fieldworkers are the only development workers who can develop the depth of understanding and empathy to properly understand the complex dynamics of development in a community or organisation, and undertake long-term capacity building ... Fieldwork is the engine of development. Sound fieldwork practice can result in communities which are strengthened by a variety of self-sustaining and vibrant organisations. Poor or inappropriately targeted fieldwork practice results in, at best, development ‘projects’ which remain bound to their (external) initiators. At worst these cause further community fragmentation and even conflict ... There are essential elements of fieldwork that must be adhered to if development initiatives are to stand even a chance of succeeding in the long term – of becoming ‘development’.

We argue that the tendency for fieldwork to become marginalised is in the very nature of the work.

Fieldwork is a highly skilled activity. In order to be an effective fieldworker, it is perhaps most important to have an attitude of extreme patience, flexibility and consistency. The qualities of flexibility and consistency are contradictory, yet they are both necessary. Effective fieldwork requires the ability to be consistent and firm at times, the ability to ‘let go’ of cherished notions at times, and the wisdom to know which is appropriate at a particular time ... Because they often spend a lot of time working by themselves, they should have the ability to manage themselves with strong self-discipline. They need to be able to be open and undefensive when they are criticised. Fieldworkers have themselves as their only tool. Developing confidence, maturity, creativity, flexibility, coherence, resourcefulness and integrity is a life-long process. A range of skills and techniques are necessary but ... a serious commitment to self development is required.

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(There are many reasons why fieldworkers – ‘generalists without a specific and time-bound product’ – are marginalised in the development sector. Some of these were addressed in the Report, with this specific section concluding with this paragraph:)

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Robert Chambers refers to a global picture of rich, urban, industrialised, high status cores and poor, rural, low status peripheries. He talks about strong centripetal forces that draw resources and



educated people to the core, internationally and within third world countries. Within the core 'there is mutual attraction and reinforcement of power, prestige, resources, professionals, professional training, and the capacity to generate and disseminate information'. Those on the periphery become more and more marginalised as resources move to the core. The concepts of 'core' and 'periphery' can be applied to the relationship between the NGO as an organisation and its fieldwork practice. Because the practice of fieldwork takes place primarily on the periphery of the physical boundary of the NGO, it is often accorded peripheral status within the organisation. What one cannot see, one does not prioritise and therefore does not resource adequately.



(This last assertion, on a more all-encompassing level, finds a central place in the holistic argument and critique of development work as it unfolds, some years down the line.)



Fieldwork is central to ensuring that development becomes a reality. The tendency to reinforce the peripheral status of fieldwork ... works to the detriment of development itself.

## **Participation**

So the stage, as it were, is set. We witness the rise of freelance consultancy and the demise of focused fieldwork. Enter the ambiguous floodtide of development capital ... Few developmental (indigenous) NGOs have large budgets for infrastructural and technical development. The development agencies which do tend to be large corporate institutions, state agencies, parastatals, quasi-NGOs and international financial institutions. What these agencies have in common is a need to urgently disburse their money, a tendency to focus on 'product' rather than 'process', a higher respect for 'suits and ties' rather than 'rags and bones', a proactive rather than responsive orientation, and a 'top-down' rather than 'bottom-up' way of operating.

Faced with the contradiction of having money which urgently needs to be spent and the need for community participation and capacity building which is inherently a slow process, the large agencies avoid employing fieldworkers who can work at community level. Instead, they try to quickly set up community committees to control the disbursement of funds for a particular package. Committees are convened and facilitated by highly-paid consultants, and they are serviced by packaged training courses delivered as the final answer to the capacity building problem. Token 'participation' is used to secure consent for projects ... Under these circumstances, not much capacity building takes place at all ... Essentially, development agencies are inclined to take the shortest route to meeting their own objectives rather than ensuring the process performs its proper function of enabling communities to set themselves on a coherent development path.

Outside communities, in the airy realms of corporate development agencies, consultants and trainers thrive. In the name of participation and capacity building, the development sector has

become the place to be, for some, more lucrative than the commercial sector. The finances to really make a difference to the lack of development have become available but the corporate culture which accompanies many development projects does not go beyond the motions of development. Corporate agencies tend to hold that traditional NGOs are disorganised, ineffective and sloppy in the delivery of infrastructural and technical resources. There may be some truth in this, but they, on the other end of the scale, are inclined to plan projects in advance and then use token 'community participation' to implement them.

### **The struggle is not yet over**

... while many activities are carried out in the name of development, the question of who ultimately gains from all of this remains paramount ... After more than 30 years of international development practice and theorising, problems of unemployment, housing, human rights, poverty and landlessness are worse than ever ... A few examples underline this point ... Decades of outreach work by first world countries have increased marginalisation among third world 'beneficiaries' and increased wealth and power back home ... The source of finance and the instruments of its disbursement are very much part of the corporate, professional, urban core with the 'beneficiaries' on the periphery. Is it possible that development, as it is currently being touted, will result in increased marginalisation of those on the periphery?

The tendency of the large corporate agencies to use trainers and consultants can widen the gap between core and periphery ... We cannot assume that the political transition (in South Africa) has substantially altered the relationship between the core and the periphery. It is possible that the ranks of the marginalised will increase, as has happened elsewhere. The committed development worker will always be swimming against the stream.

The increase of money available for development, the proliferation of consultants and trainers, the arrival of foreign experts (in South Africa) may appear to usher in a new era of development. But the Trojan horse wheeled into Troy as a gift brought with it the soldiers who wrought the destruction of the city. For indigenous development NGOs, a new struggle is beginning ... The consequences of falling prey to seduction by the core will be felt, not by us, but by those on the periphery. In a very real sense, the struggle has just begun.

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Community Development Resource Association  
**ANNUAL REPORT 1994/95**

*Capacity building: Myth or reality?*

COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT  
RESOURCE  
ASSOCIATION

## A DEVELOPMENTAL PRACTICE – SOME FUNDAMENTALS

The Report outlined above resonated with many practitioners at the time, and in so doing raised a new question. CDRA was raising the possibility of an alternative practice of development, particularly an alternative way to think about capacity building, which was the term which had achieved almost mythical status within development parlance, being used ubiquitously though not yet with the taint of jargon that it later acquired. Yet it was already beginning to dominate the discourse. CDRA was invoking this concept in its warnings concerning the invasion of a new world order, as it attempted to provide the first of its truly alternative perspectives. But as yet CDRA was only alluding to what a truly developmental capacity building practice might look like; there was no possibility yet of actually acting, in a coherent and disciplined way, towards the pursuit of such practice. What did CDRA have to say, not so much about the dangers besetting the sector, but about the actual practice of capacity building, and about the implications of such practice?

This question was at the forefront of CDRA's collective mind for the following year. During this year CDRA had been privileged to undertake an evaluation of a donor organisation's capacity building strategies, and in the process had interviewed a wide range of actors in the South African development scene. The results of those interviews were put alongside CDRA's own practice and reflections on that practice, and the resultant understanding was then put alongside CDRA's own development and struggles in its path of becoming a capacitated organisation itself. The result of such reflections amounted to the beginnings of a new 'theory' and approach to capacity building. This nascent yet convinced understanding was turned into the theme of CDRA's 1994/1995 Annual Report, entitled *Capacity building: Myth or Reality?*

This Report, considered below, also marked the beginning of another angle to the Annual Reports: the decision to embed the narrative text within an illustrative artistic frame. In this particular Report, the artistry consisted of a photo essay by a prominent photographer, interspersed amidst the text. As the years went by, such a coupling of narrative text and illustrative artwork became a hallmark of the Annual Reports. This was not simply conceit; the idea had begun to surface that development work required a new way of thinking and seeing the world, and that such a new way, intended to counter prevailing hegemonies, required the active development of imagination. The Reports thus began to commit themselves to addressing aspects of thinking and understanding which went beyond the intellectual, abstract, mechanical and instrumental. Such a perspective will find its place within the argument itself as it evolves. At this time, though, such ideas were intuitive only, and barely articulated. CDRA was beginning to follow the trail of its own trajectory.

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We have all been talking about capacity building for some years now. We know that the building of organisational and institutional capacity is an essential development intervention towards the strengthening of civil society. Indeed, it is the heart of development practice. Donor agencies, international and indigenous NGOs, and many governments in developing countries recognise the importance of capacity building for development. Yet even while they claim to be practising it, their concepts and practice often remain confused and vague. The greatest area of agreement appears to be that we do not really know what capacity building is.



## **In Quest of a Theory**

It is interesting to note that, during the evaluation into capacity building referred to (above), it emerged that community-based organisations (CBOs) whose capacity had been built to some extent were far more articulate about what capacity building is than the NGOs actually doing the capacity building. And the CBOs themselves were only able to point to their experiences, not to present a coherent theory out of those experiences.

Generally, NGOs also tended to refer to discrete experiences and instances when talking of capacity building. While this has proved a vital point of departure in the development of a more coherent picture, it presents us with the major dilemma faced by NGOs: the lack of a capacity building theory severely constrains practice. In fact, it demonstrates a lack of organisational capacity on the part of NGOs.

The research showed clearly that organisational capacity is dependent on individual capacity, and that building individual and organisational capacity follows the same line of development. What emerged from the interviews were identifiable elements of organisational capacity and, broadly speaking, a sequence in the way they are acquired.

## **A conceptual framework**

The first requirement for an organisation with capacity, the 'prerequisite' on which all other capacity is built, is the development of a conceptual framework which reflects the organisation's understanding of the world. This is a coherent frame of reference, a set of concepts which





allows the organisation to make sense of the world around it, to locate itself within that world, and to make decisions in relation to it. This framework is not a particular ideology or theory, it is not necessarily correct, and it is not impervious to critique and change. It is not a precious, fragile thing, but a robust attempt to keep pace conceptually with the (organisational and contextual) developments and challenges facing the organisation. The organisation which does not have a competent working understanding of its world can be said to be incapacitated, regardless how many other skills and competencies it may have.

### **Organisational ‘attitude’**

The second requirement concerns organisational ‘attitude’. An organisation needs to build its confidence to act in and on the world in a way that it believes can be effective and have an impact. Put another way, it has to shift from ‘playing the victim’ to exerting some control, to believing in its own capacity to affect its circumstances. Another aspect of ‘attitude’ is accepting responsibility for the social and physical conditions ‘out there’, in spite of whatever the organisation faces in the world. This implies a shift from demand and protest politics to a more inclusive acceptance of the responsibilities which go with the recognition of human rights.

Whatever the history of oppression, marginalisation or simply nasty circumstances which an individual or organisation has had to suffer, these ‘attitudes’ are the basis for effective action in the world. This is not a question of morality, of fairness or justice; it is simply the way things work. With clarity of understanding and a sense of confidence and responsibility comes the possibility of developing organisational vision and strategy. As we were told during the inter-



views, understanding and responsibility lead to a sense of purpose in which the organisation does not lurch from one problem to the next, but manages to plan and implement a programme of action, and is able to adapt the programme in a rational and considered manner.



### **Organisational structure**

Although these requirements are not gained entirely sequentially, we may say that once organisational aims and strategy are clear it becomes possible to structure the organisation in such a way that roles and functions are clearly defined and differentiated, lines of communication and accountability untangled, and decision-making procedures transparent and functional. Put slightly differently, 'form follows function' – if one tries to do this the other way around the organisation becomes incapacitated.

### **Acquisition of skills**

The next step in the march towards organisational capacity, in terms of priority and sequence, is the growth and extension of individual skills, abilities and competencies – the traditional terrain of training courses. Of course skills also feature earlier; they can, in and of themselves, generate confidence and a sense of control. Development cannot be viewed simplistically; these phases overlap. Yet what emerges clearly from our research is that there is a sequence, a hierarchy, an order. Unless organisational capacity has been developed sufficiently to harness training and acquisition of new skills, training courses do not 'take', and skills do not adhere. The organisation which does not know where it is going and why; which has a poorly developed sense of responsibility for itself; and which is inadequately structured, cannot make use of training courses and skills acquisition.

### **Material resources**

Finally, an organisation needs material resources: finances, equipment, office space, and so on. Without an appropriate level of these, the organisation will always remain, in an important sense, incapacitated.

The elements of organisational capacity identified here and the sequence in which they come about was confirmed by CBOs whose capacity had been developed through NGO intervention, as well as by NGOs responding to questions about the effectiveness of CDRA's interventions.

This accords with organisational theory and it seems to make common sense. Yet it is clear that the order cannot be regarded as a simple sequence. Capacity building is part of a developmental process, and organisations repeat phases at different stages of their drive towards capacity.

### **Recurring phases at different stages**

A small, new NGO has a different level of impact and 'sophistication' from a large NGO which is established and effective. The larger NGO has more need of 'sophisticated organisational conditions' because development and growth in capacity implies greater sophistication of organisational processes, functions and structures. While the new NGO will need clarity of vision, it may not yet have the problems which often accompany organisational vision building activities within the older NGO. The needs of individual staff members in terms of skills – and therefore training courses – will differ at different stages of the organisation's life, as will material resource constraints and assets. Similarly, with respect to structure, organisations will have different needs at different stages of their lives. At times an increasingly complex structure is called for; at other times 'restructuring' is required.

The basic order in which capacity building occurs is: conceptual framework first; appropriate organisational attitudes leading to vision and strategy; followed by structure (organisational form), which in turn is given content and energy through skilled individuals. The whole is then supported through adequate resourcing. Needs change with respect to all these elements as the organisation develops, but the central point is this: intervention or work on any one of these elements will not prove effective unless sufficient work has been done on the preceding elements in the hierarchy.

It does not help to train individuals when organisational vision is unclear, organisational culture is unhelpful and structure is confusing or obtuse. It does not help to secure resources when the



organisation is not equipped to carry out its tasks. It does not help to develop information management systems when the basic organisational attitude is one which rejects learning through monitoring and evaluation in favour of frantic activity. In terms of the hierarchy and sequence of capacity building steps explored here, interventions can only work if they address the problem at an appropriate level for a particular situation.

### **Demand for capacity-building services**

Effective capacity building interventions must address the unique needs of an organisation in its particular stage of development at that specific time. This means that the service organisation must be capable of close observation in the field and of being able to provide a nuanced and differentiated response to the needs of the (client) organisation at a particular time. Put another way, it must have a range of capacities which it can employ in differentiated strategies. The most important thing we learn here is that there is no single way to build organisational capacity. And this in face of the fact that many organisations are in search of the single intervention methodology, rather than an adequate understanding of capacity itself.

Patently, if the presence of a conceptual framework is part of the development of an organisation's capacity, then many donors, NGOs and governmental services are severely incapacitated. Their activities do not take place within a theoretical understanding which would lend coherence and continuity to their efforts, as well as enable practitioners to reflect on, and learn from, their activities in structured ways. This is what would enable them to modify and improve both the theory and the practice. Most of us are incapacitated in this sense. How can we then 'teach others to fish'? It is high time that we paid our discipline a little more respect by taking the time to think it through.

### **Implications for practice**

The rudiments of theory which have been described here seem to make perfect sense. Indeed, they accord closely with the practice of organisation development itself. We wondered whether the fact that practitioners appear to remain oblivious to such theory is an avoidance mechanism, because the implications bear radical consequences for practice.

#### *There is no single way to build organisational capacity*

The first conclusion arising from the previous articles is that there is no single capacity building response or intervention which is right for all times, phases, organisations or contexts. This may appear obvious, but it takes on profound implications for capacity builders when considered against a background in which attempts by government, donors and even some large NGOs to devise and implement mass-based capacity building formulae are the order of the day. Of course, the alternative to formula approaches is not to continue in the unsystematic and intuitive way in which much NGO capacity-building work presently happens. On the contrary, all our knowledge

about organisational capacity building demands that capacity builders are able either to supply, or arrange and coordinate the supply of a range of different interventions. Capacity builders need the ability to observe accurately, to interpret their observations intelligently and impersonally and then to deliver the appropriate intervention at the appropriate time.

### *There is no end to capacity building*

There appears to be a prevailing assumption that, if we could arrange for the correct quantifiable inputs to be inserted into organisations, then certain pre-determined outputs would occur, and the organisation would be 'capacitated'. Clearly nothing could be further from the truth. Inputs must be determined by context, and their efficacy is further dependent on the competence of the intervening agency. There is no straight line between input and output, between cause and effect. Output is the result of a multiple range of factors and, even more to the point, it is naive to imagine that any organisation is ever finally capacitated.

### *Capacity building takes time and money*

The pre-packaged (usually training) programme is at best a paltry response to the intricacies of capacity building, but it is by far the most ubiquitous response. No package can answer an organisation's development needs, except in part, and then only when it is presented at the appropriate time within a wider, more systemic approach. This suggests the very concept of 'cost-effectiveness' needs to be reconsidered. Short-term responses will not satisfy long-term requirements. The question arises as to whether donors and NGOs operating within the framework of time-bound projects and products are really concerned with development at all. Perhaps these organisations are more concerned with the husbanding of their own resources than they are with the genuine facilitation of capacity building in others.



### *Capacity building is marked by shifts in relationships and strategies*

All too often relationships between capacity builders and their client organisations come to an end or decline at the point at which they should be changing. This happens because they cannot find the way of shifting their relationship or the strategies which inform the relationship ... it is often the practitioner who fails to make the change. This may be due to the capacity builder's own insecurities, to limitations in strategic versatility or even to the (unconscious) development of co-dependency. Whatever the cause, it is at these times that the practitioner becomes the greatest stumbling block to the client's development. There is abundant evidence that programmes and assumptions are thrust upon recipient organisations in spite of, rather than as a response to, their real needs.

### *Capacity builders must give attention to their own development*

In order to determine, embark on and shift strategies and approaches ... practitioners ... need to pay close attention to the process and understand what they are seeing. If capacity building occurs through the development of long term relationships which are marked by shifts in strategies and attitudes, those wishing to build capacity need to continually be observing, reflecting on, changing and improving, those relationships. The marked absence of self-evaluation in NGO and donor practice does not bode well in this regard.



(These last points are explored and elaborated in depth as the Annual Reports progress.)



## **Practical Consequences**

If these are some implications flowing out of the theory, what are the practical consequences for capacity builders? We believe the consequences are relatively radical. We also contend, however, that there is no way out.

### *Critical self-reflection*

In order for a capacity building organisation to maintain the required level of responsiveness and strategic clarity, it is necessary that it constantly engages in critical self-reflection, learning and strategising.

### *Letting Go*

A willingness to relinquish control, to let go, is necessary if the capacity builder is to be open to the client organisation changing.

### *NGOs themselves*

In NGOs, we often find that conceptual frameworks, reasoned strategies and action-learning processes are conspicuous by their absence. A form of ad hoc intuition often takes their place. Either this, or hide-bound, formula-driven activities which do not respond to their changing context. Further, fieldwork – the heart of capacity building – is often relegated to marginal

status in the organisation. The ability to 'let go' ... appears particularly difficult for NGOs. Management practices are often not geared to strategies in which outputs do not relate easily and linearly to inputs, and where, therefore, a form of 'disciplined flexibility' is required.

### *Donor agencies*

So far as donors themselves are concerned ... it appears from the behaviour of many that capacity building, and even development itself, is not their primary intention ... donors need to engage in (self-reflective) practices themselves in terms of their own organisational needs as capacity builders. Yet the honest donor will admit how little this is practised, how little responsiveness there is, how little real listening, and how many preconceived programmes and methods foisted on the south. Some of these are in response to the most superficial fashions prevalent at the time, some of them to political pressures which are of northern, rather than southern origin ... If donors cannot respond to what is needed with considered flexibility and openness, then they should avoid the straw allegiance to the concept of capacity building, and even development itself, for it can only be regarded as posturing.

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## TRACKING THE FUTURE

Such were the early, rudimentary and still clumsy grappings with both the understanding of a developmental approach and the nascent rise of a particularly undevelopmental global development industry. The intervening years have only strengthened the distortions that have crept into the realm of social development, and indeed into the world we live in. We are left at this stage with a crude and unfinished narrative depicting two diverging paths.

On the one hand, an approach to social intervention that is saturated with bureaucratic and instrumental rigidities, practised perhaps largely (if unconsciously) for the benefit of those who intervene. On the other hand, a recognition of the need for intelligence, responsiveness and flexibility, in pursuit of an approach which will work in the service of human freedom. Or, put differently, simply an approach that will work, developmentally speaking.

There was a line drawn in the sand.





COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL  
*R e p o r t*

Nineteen Ninety Five/Six



**S H A D O W S**

*The development sector -  
face to face with itself*



# Taking Responsibility

*'From bitter searching of the heart,  
Quickened with passion and with pain,  
We rise to play a greater part'.*

Frank Scott

## THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

From here on, CDRA's journey of investigation through practice takes an increasingly divergent path. Having challenged conventional notions of capacity building, it became progressively more apparent that the conventional path had little to do with a rational assessment of the facts but a lot to do with the inability of the conventional development apparatus to question and challenge its way of doing things. It became increasingly apparent that the approach to development interventions was performed more for the sake of maintaining the apparatus intact than from desire to work consequently with what was presenting itself. At the same time it became apparent that much of CDRA's argument was not so much rejected as unseen and unheard. Such lack of objective recognition of valid challenge pointed to a level of unconscious resistance to change in those who were unable to see what was presenting itself. The notion of an unconscious and therefore invisible dimension to development practice began to arise in the CDRA's understanding.

Wherever CDRA looked, whether it was into the development sector as a whole or into smaller and larger players on local or international levels – or, indeed, into the constraints and possibilities within the CDRA itself – this phenomenon of unconscious resistance to change manifested itself. The development sector, and the players within it, had undertaken to act on others in order to change society; the idea that we are all part of that society and that development work must inevitably imply change to oneself, change from within, was never taken seriously. The stated intent was regarded as the reality, but CDRA was gradually becoming aware of the fact that relentless pursuit of outer intent regularly raised demons within, demons that were by and large invisible because unconscious. In C.G. Jung's words: "But what if I were to realise that the enemy himself is within me, that I am the enemy who must be overcome; what then?"

The development project was never going to realise itself unless development actors took their own development – or lack of development – processes into account. This was



one significant insight which arose for CDRA at the time. Another was how insidiously such lack of self-awareness crept up upon development actors; keeping their gaze fixed firmly on the outer – as they were asked to do – seemed to allow unconscious habits and predilections to gain control of the actors' actions. To usurp and contradict their very intent. And finally, it was very clear that these twin constraints to the development project were never to be allowed to even be spoken about, let alone considered and dealt with.

CDRA was thus led – through that which was presenting itself in its practice and through reflection on the development sector as a whole – to give due consideration to the inner dynamics of development processes. This was not a chosen theoretical angle to pursue so much as it was forced upon CDRA's awareness by the work it undertook. In this fashion CDRA's next Annual Report launched it irrevocably on a very alternative path, one which has provided much insight and raised much controversy over the years. Both the insights and the controversy were – and still are – directly related to CDRA's understanding that effective development work entails taking responsibility for self.

The title of the 1995/96 Annual Report was *Shadows – The development sector, face to face with itself*. In it the CDRA developed the concept of the shadow for use with organisational and social realities, and used the concept to illuminate aspects of the inner dynamics of development processes within NGOs, CBOs, government and donor organisations. In the excerpt presented below, the concept is portrayed, together with one example of its application, on the NGO as organisational type.



## Introduction

Over the last while, as the miraculous transition in South Africa has taken shape, we have been witness to a shift in organisational priorities from resistance to development. As an NGO working in the development sector, we have experienced, through our own processes as well as through those of our clients, the difficulties of organisations working with the ambiguities of development; the often contradictory pressures, demands and choices which are brought to bear. We believe that there are common organisational issues which face us all, issues which we would (unconsciously) prefer to avoid because they contain within them the seeds of our constraints, but which we need to be aware of and confront with courage because they contain also the kernel of our strengths and potential.

When organisational contradictions are dismissed or ignored they sap our energy in spite of ourselves; when they are taken on as a challenge they become a creative force.

One concept which we have found helpful in providing us with organisational understanding, and liberating insight into the obstacles which beset those organisations working in the development sector, is the concept of the shadow.

Increasingly we are seeing organisations drawn unconsciously into the power of their own shadow and having little insight into the phenomenon, nor into the constraints which such a

process engenders. We would like in this Annual Report to share some of our own understanding of the way in which the shadow affects the organisational functioning of a range of development players. We use the rest of this introduction to briefly explore the concept of the shadow in theory, before we look – in the articles which follow – at how it manifests in different organisational types in practice.

Life is not arbitrary and unconstrained anarchy; there are patterns which form it and give it coherence. We are subject to these boundaries: the ebb and flow of natural archetypes within which we take root and flower and fade. The shadow is one such archetype, and it relates as much to the life of organisations as it does to individuals. The shadow arises through having too much or too little of something, or through striving too much or too little towards something. It seems that when we direct our energies in too focused a fashion, a balance is lost; yet life strives towards balance. Thus the opposing polarity of our striving will manifest, and the more it is denied or avoided the greater its power will become, until the unconscious shadow aspect of our life becomes paramount, and we become trapped in its field.

Depth psychology uses the concept of the shadow to denote those parts of oneself which one denies. The shadow is that part of us which we fail to see or know ... We are all born whole and, hopefully, will die whole. But somewhere early on our way we eat one of the wonderful fruits of the tree of knowledge, things separate into good and evil, and we begin the shadow-making process; we divide our lives. In the cultural process we sort out our God-given characteristics into those that are acceptable ... and those that have to be put away. This is wonderful and necessary, and there would be no civilised behaviour without this sorting out of good and evil. But the refused and unacceptable characteristics do not go away; they only collect in the dark corners of our personality. When they have hidden long enough, they take on a life of their own – the shadow life.

The shadow is that which we specifically and consciously do not choose; it is that which arises when our attention is elsewhere. It is the counterbalance to that attention, the gap or void which is created and which cries out for attention, for a redressing of the imbalance. It is not an arbitrary manifestation but rather the unconscious twin of our conscious intention. And if the shadow is avoided or denied or rejected it gains in power until it becomes a potentially destructive force, a contradiction capable of fragmenting the individual or organisation, or at least of impairing its productivity and warping its energy.

But the shadow is not inherently destructive. It is the dark side to the light. The more light there is, the more dark there will be. The more energy we focus on a particular area, the more unseen forces gather in the shadows. Dark does not mean 'bad', or 'evil', or 'destructive'. Rather, the shadow lives as a potentially developmental nodal point around which the organisation may turn. It is the obstacle which can shake us out of our complacency, precipitating the crisis, the need for which our conscious self cannot acknowledge. If taken seriously it can wake us up, cause us to take action before we fragment. It is the unregarded friend to our processes of development, the spur to shaking our fixed paradigms into facing (an everchanging) reality.



As organisational players in the development sector and in civil society, we strive very hard to make manifest our intentions, to become in reality the image we project. According to the type of organisation we are, all of our conscious energy goes into becoming an effective instance of that organisational form. Certain possibilities and certain attributes allow and encourage us to become what we are, and to realise our particular contribution in as focused a manner as possible. Yet even as we make this the subject of our striving, the more unseen forces – which are the dark consequences of our admirable intentions – gather in the shadows. They hamper our productivity and warp our impact. The way through does not lie in a switch to the opposite pole in the extremity of these contradictions; neither does it lie in looking the other way. It lies in coming to grips with the contradictions – staring them in the face, as it were – and consciously incorporating certain elements of the rejected extremities into the organisation's reality.

We must recognise the forces we unleash in our concentrated purpose, and bring them into the light of our understanding of ourselves. The creative tension generated by doing so is the real source of our unrealised potential.

## **THE NGDO**

### **A stuck record, or an alternative stance?**

The South African transition throws the worldwide dilemma facing non-governmental development organisations (or NGDOs) sharply into relief. Within two years both the State and Capital, spurned pariahs actively blocking the path to social transformation, have attained the moral high ground of the politically correct. Everyone, it seems, is now humming with the intensity of the development effort; a nation's prosperity and newly attained democracy is at stake. Our government is a new government, genuinely a government of the people, built by the people, and certainly orientated for the people. Its task, mostly through the medium of regulation but also through the discerning use of national resources, is to create an enabling environment which will facilitate the development of both nation and citizenry, thus meeting the needs of its constituency (in the broadest sense). Business (in this instance both capital as well as important aspects of labour) gains legitimacy through highly productive systems which are not only able to meet the direct needs of consumers but which also – and more importantly with respect to the overarching project of social development – are able to ignite economic processes leading to employment, prosperity and surplus.

The power of this combination has debilitating effects on the development role of NGDOs. This is true internationally, even where the general agenda is not necessarily development as such, and where multi-national institutions take precedence over nation states and local business. Within South Africa, the development hegemony displayed by this combination stands in sharp contrast to the bumbling and often seemingly inconsequential meanderings of the NGDO. Thus the agenda for the development effort is increasingly set by others, and the

NGDO is either sidelined or exhorted to 'play ball'. The call, then, in the national effort towards development, is on the one hand for NGDOs to work alongside and in partnership with government; on the other hand, for NGDOs to 'deliver', to formulate 'business' plans, to prove their 'productive' capacity, and to justify their existence thereby.

Increasingly there is an underlying assumption that the legitimacy and use-value of NGDOs to society and the development effort must be assessed by, and based on, those criteria which give government and business their legitimacy. The terms of the debate increasingly exclude the notion that NGDOs may bring something particular which government and business do not, and indeed cannot, bring.

NGDOs themselves are losing their sense of self and are beginning to see themselves through the criteria of other sectors and organisational forms. The exhortations to 'go to scale', to deliver according to the needs of government, to become profitable – or at least financially self-sustaining – all take their toll. And judged according to these criteria, NGDOs are found wanting, relegated to the status of bit-players, cast in the mould of naive and irrelevant youth disturbing the serious and 'real-world' concerns of adults. There is a drive then to become 'efficient' (where the question of effectiveness recedes in importance), and to concentrate on production (even while the concept of production as applied to the development of people remains enigmatic and mysterious). And, regularly, this drive towards acceptance seems to fail. NGDOs remain slightly marginal, smugly tolerated, and desperately berated by those who support and promote their right to existence.

Of course NGDOs must prove their worth to society if they are to gain credibility. And of course NGDOs suffer from disabling gaps in organisational capacity and lack of expertise. But the greatest obstacles to NGDO ascendance and legitimacy underlie these issues, rather than result from them. NGDOs flail in a mire of mediocrity because, in failing to recognise themselves as entities with something particular to offer, they do not seek to uncover and own their unique and inherent value, irrespective of the current and contextual constraints under which they work. And because the driving spirit of the NGDO remains unconscious, the shadow of the organisation is allowed to manifest unchecked, and it is within the ambit of the shadow that many of the ills of the NGDO may be understood. Let us look at this step by step.

NGDOs are something more than merely inadequate enterprises or small-scale delivery-vehicles for government. NGDOs are often referred to as 'value-driven organisations'. In a literal sense, all organisations are underpinned by values. The point is, however, that in the case of NGDOs the values are directly linked to the concept of an enlightened humanity. It is not economics which is the central note here, or politics; not production or the regulation of human affairs, although these are all, in various ways, incorporated. Rather, it is the furthering of the ability of people to act in a responsible and humane fashion, to achieve equity and justice, to participate fully in the influences and decisions which impact on their lives, to access



and (in a considered fashion) utilise resources, and to find meaning and creativity. While profit motive is essentially selfish but undeniably motivating; politics is geared towards social regulation and is often constraining. The NGDO, in its ideal manifestation, provides an alternative stance – the facilitation, from out of the people themselves, of a motivation and enthusiasm towards the furthering of the social good. And this social good implies the redressing of imbalances, the restitution of the marginalised, the fragmenting of power-blocks.

To activate this alternative stance, the NGDO must focus on particular ways of being. Working out of principle, as opposed to expedient, becomes paramount when the end is not profit, regulation or even provision but the realisation of such things as democracy, inclusivity, impartiality, responsibility and justice. (Lest there be misunderstanding it is necessary to emphasize here that the claim is not that NGDOs do not need to ‘deliver’, or ‘produce’, or attain ‘cost-effectiveness’, or collaborate with government, but rather that, alongside all this there is an inherent value and reason for being which is different.) The ability to work from principle implies the need for independence from the agendas of political and corporate interests. This implies not simply a lack of constraint, but a ‘standing outside’ of the current status quo in order to challenge its inevitable excesses, contradictions and presumptions.

Challenge can be played out in a number of ways – through direct action via lobbying, through assisting affected communities to act, through bringing the concerns of the ‘grassroots’ to the attention of the powerful, and also through presenting alternative approaches and methodologies. The NGDO thus requires not only independence and the ability to look from the outside in, but also mobility, flexibility and the ability and means to experiment with new approaches, controversial angles, even radical ideas. The NGDO, too, in order to be responsive to the real currents and rhythms moving through communities, must have local (or ‘grassroots’) presence and the ability to facilitate from the inside out, and must therefore have permeable organisational boundaries, flexibility and groundedness.

Certainly the NGDO must be judged by its performance, but the criteria for that performance are not simply those of government or business, productivity in the conventional sense. The criteria must have something to do with the increasing ability of marginalised interests (in the broadest possible sense of that term) to build themselves into viable entities which can challenge the patterns of society (patterns which often congeal into unquestioned assumptions and the – sometimes – presumptuous power of the prevailing paradigm.)

The central focus and value of the NGDO, then, can be summarised in two words – mobility and principle.

In the Introduction it was stated: “When we direct our energies in too focused a fashion, a balance is lost ... The opposing polarity of our striving will manifest, and the more it is denied or avoided the greater its power will become, until the unconscious shadow aspect ... becomes

paramount, and we become trapped in its field". When principle is taken to an extreme, it rigidifies into unwavering dictate (and hence diminishes mobility). When mobility is taken to an extreme, it becomes inconsequential meandering (and hence diminishes principle). The "dark consequences" of NGDOs' "admirable intentions" (of mobility and principle) which "gather in the shadows ...(and) hamper our productivity and warp our impact" are a bias towards presumption and a loss of focus – the very things of which NGDOs are regularly accused, and struggle to deny.

Interventions with NGDOs often reveal that they frequently impose their own values and perspectives on the communities whom they are supposed to serve, and that many show a marked absence of focused strategy leading to consequential impact. At their worst, NGDOs insist on the value of perspectives, strategies, methodologies and approaches which have not been validated or shown to be effective through adequate evaluation; at their worst, NGDOs lapse into a kind of vapid vacillation which renders them all but immobile. Principle and mobility, when pursued to extremes, release their shadow aspects – presumption and paralysis. (In these extremes, the shadow comes full circle and the claim to principle, to being 'value-driven', is used, sometimes quite cynically, to offset and justify the absence of observable progress and achievement.) It is these manifestations of ineptitude which constrain the status of the NGDO to the role of side-dish at the development table.

There is a point, then, to the demand for a different kind of flexibility – one which encourages collaboration with other players. There is a point, too, to the demand for focused strategy and demonstrable impact. The NGDO does indeed need to learn from other players. But this does not imply a reforming of the NGDO in the image of others, which appears to be the import of the many criticisms unleashed towards this particular organisational type. If the NGDO is to regulate itself without simply bowing to dominant paradigms, (the struggle against which forms the very bones of its endeavour), it must bring to consciousness its own – often veiled – reason for being, so that it can curb the excesses wrought by its unconscious shadow. The NGDO must look to building its capacity from within its own, articulated, understanding of itself. Alternative ways must be incorporated into its focused intention; compromise and productivity must be integrated with principle and mobility. Only in this way will the alternative stance gain power, and the NGDO gain the capacity to assert its unique contribution.

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The concept of shadow is valuable in itself. As applied above to the NGDO, it is helpful when considering any aspect of the development sector, but it is equally helpful as a danger signal when considering the development industry itself; the shadow of the industry as a whole may be conceived as 'presumption and paralysis'. The further insights which this Annual Report gave rise to, insights concerning the development sector's own shadow, as well as experiences from practice gained through the course of the following year, prompted CDRA to investigate the phenomenon of power in its subsequent Annual Report.





COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE ASSOCIATION

ANNUAL  
*Report*

Nineteen Ninety Six/Seven  
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**PARADOXES  
OF POWER**



The 1996/97 Annual Report, titled *Paradoxes of Power*, took the exploration into the (unconscious and mostly hidden) inner dynamics of social and social development processes further, into a consideration of the dynamics of power. This Annual Report explored the shifts which had taken place on a global level, the increasingly compliant development sector, and struggling local organisations and networks as complementary parts of an all-encompassing mosaic which pointed once again to the overwhelming dominance of the conscious by the unconscious, of the visible by the invisible, of outer project by inner condition. In so doing, it further strengthened the argument concerning the value of a different kind of practice and a different approach to the development project. A more sophisticated understanding of the need for working with the inner dynamic of the development process, and the inextricable interweaving of self and other, was attained.

This Annual Report was inordinately long, and the concepts and examples from practice were used to inform each other in quite complex ways. In presenting it here, the Report has had to be summarised in certain parts, in order to curtail the length while not losing the thread of argument.



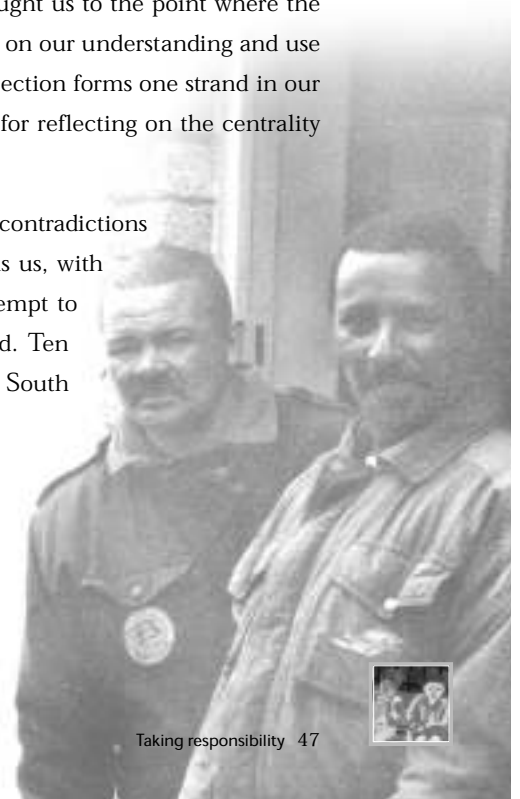
## Introduction

Shattering and monumental changes have taken place over the last ten years; the world is a critically different place from the environment which CDRA first entered. The dynamics of development, particularly, are both contentious and complex; social dynamics are both more free and more fraught; advances and retreats appear to occur simultaneously. Embedded deep within the fabric of our collective destiny, the question of power forms a central axis around which our future revolves.

...

The progress of our organisation over the last ten years has brought us to the point where the future evolution of our strategies and interventions is dependent on our understanding and use of the paradoxes of power. In other words, organisational introspection forms one strand in our recognition of the timeousness, relevance and urgent necessity for reflecting on the centrality of power in the dynamics of development.

The other strand is formed through our recognition of the contradictions which manifest in the local and global society which surrounds us, with and within which we participate, for the sake of which we attempt to intervene, and with which our destiny is so intricately involved. Ten years ago the world was characterised by inertia and separation; South



Africa was isolated within the grip of apartheid, the world was divided between east and west, north and south, between opposing ideologies. Great upheavals have heralded major changes: movement and mobility are hallmarks of the new process of globalisation, and capitalism has emerged triumphant, drawing the twin concepts of democracy and freedom – seemingly with nowhere else to go – into its ever-lengthening caravan. In terms of development, and the overburdening reality with which most people have to cope, however, it is fair to raise questions as to whether these changes have any fundamental and significant meaning.

Or, to put it differently (and to refer back to our Annual Report of last year on the concept of the shadow), is it possible that the very radical nature of our new-found freedoms releases shadow aspects which, unchecked and largely dismissed by those who gain most from the new world order, begin to run rampant and roughshod over the lives of many masses struggling for their fair share of resources and dignity? Is it even possible that for these masses life is more difficult than before, with the added burden that legitimate struggle and alternative ideology have been usurped and emasculated by the twin triumphalisms of globalisation and capitalism? Certainly, for those of us working in the development sector, it is clear that the marginalisation of the poor (and, indeed, of the ecological sustainability of the planet) is increasing at a phenomenal rate. The instruments of capitalism reign supreme, and justify themselves both ideologically and in terms of material progress. It has become unfashionable to question the onward march of globalisation. Yet human suffering increases, and in the name of freedom, mobility, and democracy the developmental needs of many millions of people are reduced from legitimate quest to irreverent complaint.

Money rules. Those who have money rule. Technology rules. Those who control that technology rule. The development agenda itself, supposedly aimed at those who lack, is largely set by those who have, in their own interests. Aid money is no longer a means of amelioration; rather, the very ‘poverty of aid’ itself has become manifest; both aid, and development itself, are increasingly at odds with alternative political striving; they emasculate rather than embolden, and by design rather than by default.

In the wake of the radical changes which have taken place over the last decade, power has accrued to too few, and far too powerfully. In the face of all the good that has been achieved, the very possibility of raising such a perspective has lost much of its legitimacy. This leaves the marginalised, and those of us who work with them, seemingly powerless. Thus many of us have lost our way, have lost our will, and have begun to cast about inconsequentially. If ideological and cultural legitimacy has been usurped by those in power, what possible direction, what possible alternative, is left for the powerless? As we approach the 21st Century, our dreams seem to turn to ashes even as they are realised, and there is little place left to turn. It is high time then, in an attempt to find a way through, to expose the workings of the phenomenon of power itself.

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## A QUESTION OF CHOICE

(A research assignment undertaken that year by CDRA into the organisational capacities of a network of Southern African NGOs had revealed conclusively that capacity was not dependent on outer circumstance but on inner resolve. The organisations investigated demonstrated that access to resources of diverse kinds did not capacitate organisations which lacked confidence, presumption and inner resolve, while the lack of such resources did nothing to incapacitate those organisations which had found such inner resolution.)



If the source of organisational power is to be found internally – in organisational attitude, rather than in outer circumstance – then whence come the differences between organisations in the first place, and how can these be effected? If attitude is both source and limitation of power, what are the sources of constraint or promotion which give rise to attitude? If these could be understood, organisations and individuals might be able to reach more fundamental levels in their search for power.

### *A perspective on power*

An Austrian colleague, Fritz Glasl, a consultant and writer who has spent years investigating the differentials of power in conflict situations, offers this illuminating perspective of power: “Power is the potential of Party A (‘the powerful’) in a given social structure/relationship to impose her expectations on Party B (‘the powerless’) in such a way, that Party B sees less chance not to comply with the expectation of Party A.” This definition is complex and bears re-reading. We



note a number of aspects. Structure, the imposed situation, is a determining factor. This would seem to imply that the powerless are indeed such, with no possibility of alternative. However, the second part of the definition casts a somewhat different light. Here, the way in which Party B sees the situation becomes a determining factor. It operates much like a game of cards. The hand that you are dealt is given; your choice lies in the way in which you play the hand. The way in which you play it is largely influenced by your expectations of the situation, which, in the case of the powerless, is largely governed by the framework set by the powerful. But 'the play' of Party B is not determined by Party A; it is determined by Party B's expectations. The latter are largely governed by Party A, but the way through the impasse is not to expect any change in Party A's behaviour, or even to demand such, but rather for Party B to change her expectation of the play.

In other words, it is the attitude of the powerless which largely maintains impotence, or which at least constrains alternative. This attitude is generated through past experience of what may happen. Note that the definition refers to power as 'potential'. There is a crucial angle here. The expectation of power is greatest just before it is actually exercised; it is much greater in potential. It assumes momentous proportions, warping the expectations of the powerless and devastating their will. But once the worst has happened, the tension has been drawn out. There is, then, a collusion between powerful and powerless; the powerful might not be able to control, were it not for the subservient and compliant attitude – towards themselves as much as to anyone else – of the powerless. Indeed, power ultimately is the use of such potential by the powerful, with its concomitant influence on the very will and attitude of the powerless. The powerful can have little fundamental control over those whose will has not been broken, or over those in whom the will to power has been woken.



### *A paradox of power*

This points to one of the essential paradoxes of power. The expectations of the powerless are determined both by circumstance and by the imposed expectations of the powerful, but any change will be effected by a shift in attitude on the part of the powerless, not by circumstance or by the powerful. Responsibility for the situation does not, perhaps, lie originally with the powerless, but any change in the situation does... . We can demand nothing if not our own resolution; we can assume nothing if not our own response... . Continued abuse of power is a function of collusion by both sets of collaborators – the powerful and the powerless – and this collaboration is an unconscious one. The move towards a shift in attitude on the part of the powerless is both a move towards consciousness and a result of having broken through unconscious barriers. For the (embedded) expectations which prevent the powerless from exercising their power thrive only through lack of consciousness; indeed, they are a manifestation of it. The way to move beyond received attitude, then, is through a form of honest self-reflection which alone can cut through the 'victim mindset' in a fashion which enables the powerless to recognise their own collusion in the expectations which hold them in check. (The taking of responsibility, initially through self-reflection and self-awareness, is manifestly key.)

### **Countervailing Power**

Clearly market forces, the lifeblood of capitalism, dominate both ideological and economic discourse. They will deliver – prosperity, democracy, even freedom and equity. Yet poverty, environmental degradation and injustice loom ever larger, twilight shadows of the coming night reaching back into the brightness of the day.

Who points to the anomalies, who manages to breathe an alternative air, who hums ragged and discordant melodies while the band plays on? Itinerant bands of the marginalised, social movements, small groupings of intellectuals; the organs of civil society, flotsam and jetsam on the capitalist sea, those with nothing or little left to lose. What little alternative voice is left manifests its power from the periphery. The borderline is ever a place of last remaining freedoms, a wild place beyond the reach of the prevailing norm. Yet such is the paradox that the very exercise of such power risks its demise. As the peripheral voices – free to speak because of their very marginality – gain credibility, they get drawn into the centre, where freedom of expression, even of thought, is usurped by the dominant paradigm. Such at least is the danger inherent in countervailing power.

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(Here, CDRA presented its own organisational history of ten years, outlining the manner in which its own choices, as it moved towards having an increasingly developed 'voice' in the development sector, were being constrained and distorted by its very successes in this regard.)

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Insofar as practice is concerned, every bit of organisational muscle which we have has been developed through a rigorous attention to the improvement of our consultancy practice, and



through insisting on the primacy of consultancy practice within our range of strategies. Every other strategic intervention, every presumption to have something of relevance to say or teach, comes directly out of the experience gained through on-the-ground 'fieldwork', or practice. Yet the more we extrapolate from this practice in order to build our voice, or to help others develop their own practice, the more our strategies diversify into realms of talking, writing and teaching, and away from direct practice. Thus our consultancy practice, which once constituted all of our strategy, now accounts for a bare thirty-five percent of our activities. More and more we are being called on, and are ourselves strategically choosing, to intervene at different levels so that the benefits of such practice are spread wider than is possible when working only directly with a limited number of organisations.

Both strategically, and in terms of individual motivation, we are moving in a direction which is vital to our continuing impact – but we are conscious that in order to create more value out of a relevant practice we are moving inexorably away from the source of our power. The higher our profile, the less we practise; and the less we practise, the greater the danger that genuine power will drain out of our profile until we begin to caricature ourselves. The line between strategic balance and excess becomes more complex to hold than ever; consciousness, a staying awake in the face of external demand and internal seduction, is our only defense. Sticking only to practice, we remain on the margins; venturing more, we march towards the centre, and lose touch with our (cutting) edge.

So much for practice – but it leads us as well into the dilemmas of 'political' folly. As a southern NGO, we are a marginal, peripheral entity; an alternative at best, a chimera at worst. But then, to remain so, what is the point? It is the paradigms, the policies and the practices at the centre which dominate, and without change in this arena our work on the margins becomes ephemeral, an everlasting 'attempting', with little fundamental solace. So increasingly we take what we learn and attempt to influence donor policy and practice, governmental policy and practice, the discourse and assumptions of the global (non)development agenda. Increasingly, then, we have to think about writing for this audience, meeting with this audience, networking and communicating within an intensifying global clique of individuals and organisations who already have the means and the power. Less time is available for working directly with our primary constituency; in which case, whose agenda has hegemony? And inevitably one has to adapt one's discourse to be heard, and who, ultimately, is adapting to whom? Yet clearly, once again, if new paradigms and alternative powers are to manifest from the powerless on the margins, then those on the edge have to march on the centre. The paradox of power lies in this: that for the powerless to gain power, non-engagement is not an option, while engagement risks reversing the very power gained... . Every individual, every organisation, every movement which attempts to wrest power for itself or for others runs the risk of being co-opted into the dominant paradigm. We cannot shirk the challenge, and we cannot afford to succumb.



## POWER AT THE PERIPHERY

(CDRA had that year worked with a network of community radios. Every community radio faced a similar dilemma – being drawn away from the vision of raising community awareness and into the realms of commercial radio; their role as agents of countervailing power was always and ever in danger of being usurped by the need – and unconscious desire – to toe a commercial programming line. The irony was that even as community radio grew in power and status in a liberated South Africa, so the forces drawing it away from community and ever closer to commercial radio increased.)

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Unlike commercial enterprises which have a simple bottom line related to profit or return on capital invested, the fundamental purpose of 'developmental' community radio, in common with many other community development initiatives, is nowhere near as clearly definable or easily measurable. The purpose is contained in objectives such as: giving people a voice; empowering communities; creating an open society; giving people control; promoting and nurturing indigenous culture; helping communities identify and address common problems; health education; crime prevention; and many more which become increasingly detailed and specific to individual communities. In addition, the inclusion of all people and interests in a participatory framework is regarded as a central and fundamental principle. The aims of any truly developmental intervention must include the ability to take on those forces of society which maintain fundamental inequalities. The product that developmental community radio strives to deliver is complex in the extreme. It is well known and understood in the radio sector as a whole that the easiest way to fill air time is by playing music and accepting dedications. But in order to fulfil the fundamental purpose of community radio, programmes need to be carefully designed and produced through complex processes of community involvement and participation. Their success is judged by criteria very much more complex than the extent to which they entertain the audience. Good community radio programming needs to be entertaining in order to capture and retain the interest of the listener, but in most cases entertainment value is just the means to other, more developmental ends.

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The forces luring community radio away from community towards commercialism continue. Firstly, the power and experience of the mainstream media and radio shape what radio is, and should be, in the minds of both presenters and listeners. It is difficult to build a new tradition of excellence in community radio when there are no role models or benchmarks readily available, when the strongest influence in community radio at present is a particular DJ who has nothing to do with community radio, and has in fact become a celebrity on commercial radio. It is difficult to counter these commercial forces when the antidote is producing and presenting good informative and educational programmes in order to meet needs, some of which the community may itself not be fully conscious of. As if this were not enough, the vital issue of financial self sustainability further plays into the hands of commercial interests. Despite the incredible newness of



the sector the donors that have supported its 'birth process' are already raising issues of financial self sustainability – as is now common throughout the development sector.

The difference with community radio is that it is tapping into a new, previously unreachable, potential market for the goods and services of advertisers whose interests obviously reflect commercial rather than developmental priorities. When targeting potential consumers, popularity of programmes takes precedence over educational and developmental considerations. As stations become increasingly commercial in order to sustain themselves financially (in the manner to which they are becoming accustomed), it is difficult to imagine how they will continue to justify the 'expensive' participatory, community specific developmental programmes in terms of cost effectiveness.

... There is too little understanding of the dominant forces at work, which conspire to deprive the interests of those at the margins of society of all that is of real value. To be drawn into direct competition for valued resources with the powerful, abiding by their terms and rules, will not necessarily result in any significant shifts in power relations. And when resources are philanthropically given and deferentially received they may further strengthen dependency rather than support the developmental shift towards increasing independence, and ultimately, interdependence.

The ultimate challenge is to penetrate and respond to the dynamic of power, to recognise and utilise the paradox at the heart of power – that there is a power which exists within all individuals, organisations or communities no matter how close to the margins of society they may be; and that there is a weakness that exists within the powerful who reside closer to the centre. This weakness which lives within the core of power forms the subject of the article which follows. The power of the 'powerless', however, inevitably lies in their ability to collectively survive and act free of the conditions considered indispensable by the powerful. Their power lies in those things over which they do have control, not in those things over which they have no control. The problem for the powerless was mentioned in the first article in this series – that the powerful impose expectations and perspectives which do more than anything else to sap the power of the margins and control their response. For it is not in the interests of the powerful that the powerless should tap into their sources of power; therefore the powerful will promote as essential those things over which the powerless have no control. Strategic thinking would reverse this dynamic.

Such thinking would resist the temptation to unconsciously adopt the expectations and dominant paradigms assumed by the powerful. For the community radio sector, it is important that the early history is not forgotten, and that it be used as a source of power rather than dismissed as an ignoble reminder of a time when power was lacking. The power of the sector does not lie in radio, and never has – it lies in community and in its ability to organise and mobilise. The true potential of the community radio sector does not lie in the slick,



Americanised 'hip-hop' patter of DJs spinning the latest CDs from around the world, but in the voice of the community and its need to build its strength within and communicate its message outwards. It does not lie in state-of-the-art studios, but rather in the early 'illegal' transmitter cobbled together for R500, hidden under the examination table in the health clinic and listened to by the whole community. The power of community radio does not lie in the marketplace but in the ability of social movements to tap into resources that are generated through the collective action of marginalised people. Such resources will be harnessed and controlled and ultimately turned by the individualistic forces that operate at the centre of society, so long as community radio assesses itself through the paradigm of commercial radio. Strategic thinking would not allow the end to usurp the means – the assumed demands of radio to usurp the imperative of community. It would use the end to shape a different form of means; use the resource of community to establish a new form of radio.

Liberation involves fighting off the disempowered perception of self inflicted on the powerless by the powerful. And this includes the perception of self fostered by the unwitting development practitioner and donor. Community radio stations would like to maintain themselves in the manner to which they are becoming accustomed through inappropriate donor intervention. But the resources are unsustainable, and the stations risk losing their 'edge' through becoming a parody of commercial radio. The vision becomes tainted, and power is drained. For the donor, and the development practitioner, the quest should be the facilitation of the innate power that resides within a sector, or within any marginalised grouping. The aim of any truly developmental intervention must include the ability to take on those forces of society which maintain fundamental inequalities.

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## **DARKNESS AT THE BREAK OF NOON**

(So much for the powerless. What of the powerful?)

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It is an old truism that power corrupts. One aspect of this corruption appears to be a lapsing into unconsciousness, a 'falling asleep' into a dominant paradigm which usurps all others and which gathers to itself a certain arrogance, not allowing the powerful to see beyond their own truths and their own victories. Excessive power leads to presumption, and a casting out of alternative perspectives. Whatever is done in the name of that power, and in its maintenance, is deemed correct. But what is not so obvious is that such corruption, the abuse of privilege, does not only work to the detriment of those over whom power is exercised. It works as much to undermine and to disable that power itself. And it is in this sense that a paradox of power is made manifest, and reveals possibilities for redress.



...

The centre's weakness lies in this: that it becomes unable to see beyond itself, it is unable to adapt, and some form of (often very painful) death is required before change can take place. Either such breaking must occur, or the centre clings ever more strongly to its discourse and practice, and a souring takes place, a diminishing of potential. Instead of expanding, the organisation begins to contract.

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(An example is provided here of the leadership of a client organisation 'falling asleep' inside their own power and causing great distress for the organisation as a whole. This example can be repeated many times, CDRA had observed the dynamic at work through many interventions. It had received some consideration in a previous Annual Report (1993/94) which described the marginalisation of fieldworkers. The dynamic can be seen anywhere, everywhere, not least at the centre of the aid industry itself.)

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For instance, working with programme officers from donor organisations reveals the paradox in a particularly startling fashion. Here are people who often – at least collectively if not always individually – have the power of life or death over recipient organisations. Certainly NGOs and CBOs are largely dependent on their decisions, and see them as powerful forces, frequently to be appeased. Yet these same officers, when confronted with the need to make changes to their grant making 'instruments' and procedures through a heightened understanding of the development process, claim that their hands are tied because their own principals – either the larger bureaucracy of their own organisation or the bureaucracies from which their organisations draw funds – are incapable of, or unwilling to, adopt the more flexible approach which would be more strategically coherent with a real focus on developmental funding practice. The system, it seems, has rigidified at the centre, and those we think of as powerful claim to have almost no means of changing it, in spite of their own developing understanding of what constitutes developmental funding practice. When the centre becomes too powerful, it rigidifies, lapses into anonymity, and a faceless, intractable tyranny results which no longer has any power to rectify itself in the face of its own increasing awareness. The power at the centre loses control over its own development. A major paradox of power, then, lies in this rigidity which rots the core, in the arrogance which comes to incapacitate the centre.

...

The power at the centre is disempowered through the rigidity to which it adheres. A closing off occurs, a cessation of movement. Regeneration takes place on the periphery, where the ragged and chaotic margins allow new elements to enter and combine with the old. The centre defends itself against such incursions. Perhaps this unveils the essence of the paradox – an essence which reveals that power is fundamentally a developmental phenomenon. Could it be that prevailing power derives from past victory, and thereby risks becoming trapped in its own grandiosity, which will eventually cause it to wane through the weight of its own assumptions?

While the periphery holds the potential of the future, could there be a waxing power to be attained through exercising the freedom to move, which is denied those at the centre? In which case, real power lies in the process of development, of becoming ... in an openness to new possibility. There is constant movement implied in this perspective, a waxing and waning; it is precisely at that moment when you know that you have it, that you begin to lose it. The complexity and ambiguity which this process entails, demands a subtle approach to development dynamics, and encapsulates the potential of the so-called powerless on the margins of society.

## A Brief Epilogue

The foregoing discussions are not intended to naively suggest that understanding some of the paradoxes of power will result in mitigation of the forces which are ranged against the marginalised. But they may be regarded as, in some sense, a call to arms; and they may be used as indicators of possible strategies. We have arrived at an impasse, and the practice of development, if it is not to simply acquiesce in the face of dominant discourses, must construct new ways of approaching its task. Some lessons can be drawn.

The power of the centre, the lure of capitalism and the reductionism inherent in an uncritical globalisation agenda, all conspire and result in increasing the marginalisation of many of this planet's peoples. They also seduce the unwary development practitioner. Wherever a development practitioner works, if that practitioner is not working with the issues of the marginalised and developing consciousness by working through the unconscious hold of power which gravitates towards the centre, then he or she is not working developmentally. The essence of development facilitation must be helping to make conscious the unconscious dynamics which bind us.

As development practitioners, then, we need to remain sceptical of the so-called development solutions which emanate from the centres of power, be that centre the state, the north, the donor, capital, or transnational institutions. As often as not, the plight of the marginalised is increased, and consciousness remains dim.

...

Understanding the paradoxes of power will help us, too, to avoid the excesses in ourselves, whether we be powerless or powerful; it will help us avoid the traps which are incumbent on each, thereby allowing us to grapple with innovative opportunities. For development itself is nothing other than a play upon the dynamic of power, a movement from unconscious to conscious, from the unempowered margins of ourselves to the self-confident centre; and back again, in a spiralling and recurring motion which turns around on itself in its unfolding journey.

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ANNUAL  
REPORT

1997/8



**Crossroads**  
A DEVELOPMENT READING



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE ASSOCIATION

# The Heart of the Struggle

*'We loved the easy and the smart,  
But now, with keener hand and brain,  
We rise to play a greater part.'*

Frank Scott

## A LINE DRAWN

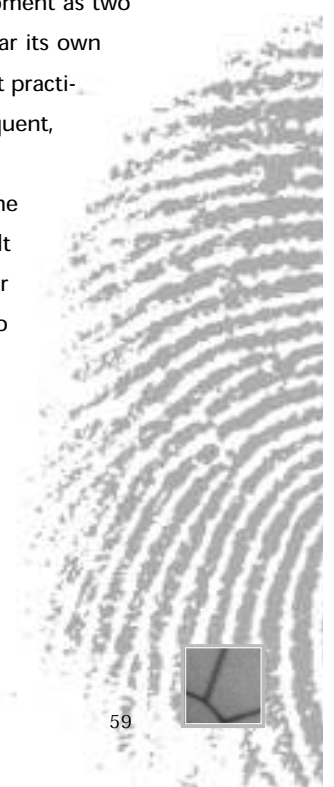
With previous Annual Reports CDRA had firmly situated development work within a global reality and at the centre of the struggle for a new social order. It had urged practitioners to look more closely and consequently at the inner dynamics of social situations, and it had urged them too to look more closely and consequently at themselves – and not only at the situations they faced beyond themselves – in order to adequately grasp the mettle of the struggle.

In its subsequent 1997/98 Annual Report, entitled *Crossroads – A Development Reading*, CDRA took its burgeoning understanding to a new level. It situated development work at the centre of the human project itself, and contrasted what it termed 'conventional' and 'alternative' approaches to development as two very different ways of approaching life itself. In so doing CDRA was making firm and clear its own commitment and at the same time throwing the gauntlet down at the feet of development practitioners and the development industry, making its challenge more direct, and far more consequent, than ever before.

This Annual Report has become perhaps the most well-read and well-travelled of any of the Annual Reports. It has been published in a variety of forms, and used extensively by many. It remains the centre piece of a developmental practice and the cornerstone of the struggle for a new humanity. As such it is reproduced here, not precisely in its entirety, but as close to complete as could be viably entertained.



We write this Report, as practitioners and out of the experience of practice, with a sense of urgency. It is becoming more and more difficult to justify, to ourselves, our allegiance to the practice of development when the development sector has largely become a farce, at best, and yet another instrument of hegemony, at worst.



Our own practice becomes limited when the organisations we consult to, development organisations, are unbearably constrained by having to work within the milieu of a development sector which is unthinking, and which has dominant allegiances with those very forces which conspire to maintain the status quo. There are many development practitioners, organisations and donors who are genuinely trying to develop alternative practices. This Annual Report is dedicated to them all.



## A Story

We have met with them all, up and down the line, and we know that their story, in spite of its collaborative cohesion, is literally unreal; but there is no gap through which we may penetrate the madness. They all appear utterly convinced, their statements reverberating off each other as if we are all caught in a gigantic echo-chamber. Together, they represent the whole chain – from the local NGO responsible for the project, to the expatriate technical advisors and the national government's departmental officials and extension officers, through to the foreign donors and their own governmental backers. For all of them this project is almost a talisman, a repository of meaning and purpose, a self-evident truth. Their easy belief causes us to doubt our own questions, their purpose and their efficacy. But we have been there, and we cannot doubt what we have seen. Or not seen.

Not that we can claim to have really spoken with the people, with the community for whom the project has supposedly been created; we do not speak their language, and our conversations have been frustrated and sullied through broken English and mediocre translation. Also, we come from such different worlds – we from a South African city, they from deep in the African bush. But we do have a limited ability to cross those borders; it is our work, after all, and we take it seriously. So we can at least identify their bemused confusion, their lack of interest, at this strange development project in the bush, even though it is tempered by generosity of spirit towards those who have come to help them, and by the inevitable glimmerings of avaricious desire at the prospect of the resources which may offset their very real struggle for survival.

We have just completed an evaluation of a rural development NGO, and have submitted our report. The impact of the report hinged on the exposure of the flagship project of the NGO – a cooperative farming venture situated some kilometres from a tribal village which traditionally practised subsistence agriculture from individual homesteads. The evaluation report was, we thought, an attempt to report as honestly as possible. It had not been appreciated. We sat now

with a sullen and angry group, representatives of the NGO, of the donors, of government. All were equally distressed. All were at pains to have us retract, or at least amend, our report.

We cannot allow this report to be circulated in Europe, rumbled the donors, we have raised millions on the basis of this project. And we, murmured the NGO, have been doing the best we can; you indicate now that we do not know what we are doing. And the government representatives bleated as if they were lambs being taken to the slaughter – would you destroy our attempts to modernise our people and our economy, they demanded?

Look, we replied, an evaluation is not a judgement, it's a tool with which to learn. There is much that can be done, but not the way you're going about it. Assist the people to increase the yields from their homestead gardens, and build slowly from there. But what you have done strikes us as somewhat absurd. The thing is, none of the villagers asked you to do what you have done. They wanted help simply with increasing their yield. But this was not enough for you. So now, deep in the bush, unconnected by road to any source of supply or marketing outlet, one and a half hours walk from the nearest village, a 30 hectare plot of cleared ground stands fenced and empty. You have put down two bore holes, and this together with the fencing and some unused machinery lying about has cost you 50,000 dollars.

You have provided the cooperative with two weeks training. When we visited the project, at 11:00 in the morning, no-one was working on the plot; actually, no-one was there at all. The two cooperative members who accompanied us – one of whom is the chairperson – appeared to understand nothing about cooperatives, economic agriculture, or the project as an entity. No-one is taking responsibility for, or displaying any commitment towards, their cooperative. One of the members stated that unless some form of salary was forthcoming soon, from the NGO, he would leave.

Apart from calling into question the very concept of cooperative, this clearly, at best, is a long term venture which will only realise profit some years down the line. He wants a job; other villages simply want to continue farming as they have in the past, although better. There is, we put to the circle of staring faces, simply nothing there to speak of, apart from the ruins of your own activities.

But don't you see, they responded, we need a project of this kind to change a way of life which is going nowhere.

We sat back and looked at them. Yes, we were thinking, clearly this is their need, but what does it have to do with the reality of the community? At the same time, we realised that we were falling into the same trap which had snared them. They were our clients, and they had not asked for an opportunity to learn. They had asked for an evaluation report which they could use to raise further funds. We could not alter the report, but we saw that it had indeed become simply a judgement, not a developmental tool. The circle had not been broken; it had simply wound in upon itself, and become stuck in its own grooves.



## Thesis

For many, many years now, for longer than many of us have been around, the concept of development has been with us. At least, development as it is generally understood: as a political-economic project which is intended to assist underdeveloped communities and countries to become developed, in the sense of catching-up with developed countries. Development has thus been understood largely from an economic perspective – as the eradication, or at least the reduction, of poverty (and therefore, concomitantly, development has implied the building of – or entry into – a modern economy). More recently it has also gained a political overtone – developed is often synonymous with democracy, pluralism, justice, equity and respect

for a universal code of human rights. (Moreover, it also often promotes a normative stance – for instance, the promotion of gender awareness as an intervention into traditional culture.) When coupled with each other, the political economy perspective attains a social dimension: in some form or other development has implied modernisation – the transformation of traditional society (characterised by dependence on particular social forms and cultures, as well as on the whims and dictates of nature) towards modern society (characterised by control over nature, by individual free choice, and by independence as freedom from given social and natural reality).

This is a radically simplistic rendition of a highly complex concept, particularly today, when much that has passed for development lore has become contested and contentious. We are living in what is often described as a post-modern era, in which ambiguity, uncertainty and contradiction have replaced former certainties. Many feel that the development project has failed; the gap between rich and poor has increased rather than decreased, and ecological and social problems begin to render our world, in a very real sense, unsustainable. Development theory has undergone many transformations over the years, and today there is a growing body of thought which is beginning to question not simply the various theories but the very validity of the development concept itself. And further, not simply the concept, but the integrity and intentions of those who presume to practise and promote development.

Questions abound, but the mainstream of development practice, polluted though it may be, continues on its inexorable path to the sea. There is little change. For underlying the various theories of development which inform practice, there are certain paradigmatic assumptions which are largely unconscious, and to that extent hold practitioners captive. We will attempt





here to describe these assumptions and practices. Readers may resist recognising the operation of some or all of these assumptions in their practice, and they may in part be right – yet all of us have had our sensibilities marked by these assumptions. They may not describe what we all think – development theory no longer conforms to this simplistic modernist paradigm – but despite the new perspectives which are becoming available, what follows does to a large extent describe what we all do. In the following article we will contrast these with another possible set of assumptions, which may take us some way towards the transformation of practice.

The dominant development paradigm is then, by and large, made up of the following assumptions and practices:

- Development can be created and engineered. Indeed, it must be. It does not exist in and of itself. Interventions, projects, are designed specifically to bring development to those amongst whom it is lacking.
- Development, then, is something which is brought, to and for some, by others who presumably are more developed.
- Development is done on behalf of third parties. In other words, the development practitioner brings development interventions which are designed and financed by third parties, not by the communities and clients who are the subjects of the intervention.
- All of the above constrains the development practitioner to work primarily out of the specifications of the world from which he/she has been sent, rather than out of an accurate and sensitive reading of the particular situation with which he/she is actually faced.
- Development is linear and predictable. Put another way, there is a direct line between cause and effect, between input and output. So long as we have made the correct assumptions initially we should be able to predict output based on input.
- This gives rise to the concept of the development project which is generally short term, time-bound, limited in terms of resources and both limited and finite (predictable) in terms of output. The development project, which is the primary vehicle for development intervention and finance, presumes these assumptions to be true. Development can be said, in fact, to be defined and framed by the concept of the development project – development begins and ends where the particular project begins and ends. Development itself, then, has a beginning and an end; and the assumption is that the end can be defined and provided for at the beginning. (It is also remarkably difficult, in terms of donor demand, to change a project substantially once it has started, in response to what has been learned about strategy and methodology during the early implementation of the project. Despite the rhetoric, real learning is not high on the agenda).
- Development presumes a particular perspective on human nature – that understanding will generate change. (Hence the emphasis on training and technical assistance in development



interventions.) It does not take much account of unconscious factors, of processes of change, of culture, tradition, or the human heart.

- Concomitantly, development places far more emphasis on technical experts and advisors, and on trainers, than it does on change facilitators. This emphasis expresses itself in terms of project specifications, in terms of relative positioning within NGOs and in terms of remuneration.
- Development assumes a preferred culture or value system. This presumption is denied by most development pundits, yet it remains true. The presumption is that there is something wrong, and we intervene to change it. We judge the results according to our own norms.
- As an ironic addendum to the two preceding points, development practitioners are not required to pay attention to their own development as human beings, as part of effective development practice. The development practitioner's own development and processes of learning are entirely removed from the picture. There is thus little or no reciprocity in the relationship between developer and developpee.
- Development has come to accept that the subject's participation in the development project is vital, but it sees that participation as a means, not as an end in itself.
- Development assumes that a successful development intervention, or project, is replicable; indeed, this is one criterion in judging its success. If it is not replicable elsewhere, it is lacking in value.
- Likewise, the successful development project is sustainable, both in terms of financial resourcing as well as in terms of continuity of the effects achieved. If the effects of the intervention are not sustained, the project will be deemed to have been unsuccessful.
- The evaluation of development interventions – which tells us much about the underlying assumptions – is generally performed in terms of the ends stipulated in the project document, not in terms of the myriad other outcomes which may (or may not) have been forthcoming in terms of the individuals, communities or organisations with whom the development intervention had been entered into.

Generally, the underlying paradigm which characterises a conventional development approach is fundamentally about the delivery of resources. These resources come in various guises – they may be finances, equipment, technical know-how, skills, political clout, even a particular approach to life. The point is, those who are under-developed lack certain resources; development (at its best) entails the effort to transfer those resources from those who have to those who do not have.

## Antithesis

At the core of CDRA's understanding of the concept of development is the recognition that development is an innate and natural process found in all living things. It is important for us to understand that as development workers we do not bring or deliver development, but intervene into development processes which already exist. Whether the intervention is into the life of an individual, organisation or community it is critical to realise that the process of development is already well established and needs to be treated with respect. The most fundamental challenge facing the development practitioner is to understand the development process into which she or he is intervening. To know where the individual, the



organisation or the community is located on its own path of development. To understand where it has come from, how it has changed along the way and what the next development challenge is likely to be. And to be able to read in this way, an openness is required, an ability to observe acutely and without preconception, but with a fine understanding of development processes, so that insight can be brought to observation. In short, a certain detachment is required, without pretending to supposedly scientific objectivity.

Equipped with this knowledge and understanding the practitioner can begin to assess how the resources that they bring will impact on the development process. Some of the most common examples of the consequences of the inappropriate introduction of resources are the increase of dysfunctional dependency on the provider of the resource, and the inappropriate use or abuse of the resources to the detriment of the recipient. Equally it is at times almost miraculous to experience the difference that an appropriate development intervention facilitated in a sensitive and responsive way can make to the genuine empowerment of the recipient. And this, surely, is the essence of a development intervention – the facilitation of growing awareness and consciousness such that people are able to take control of their own lives and circumstances, and exert responsibility and purpose with respect to their future. This inevitably implies also an activist stance; that is, assistance with confronting the manifestations and dynamics of power, however these may manifest. If a development intervention does not succeed in this, then it can hardly be said to have been developmental.

To locate the recipient of one's services on their own path of development, and understand the implications of the point it has reached, is obviously not a simple process of quantitative measurement. It demands a clear understanding of the development process itself, coupled with respect for the specific instance of such a process which one is actually facing. We cannot



go into the details of such a framework for understanding in this report, but we will raise one or two aspects of our understanding, of our framework, in order to provide at least a sense of what we mean.

Thus, one aspect of our understanding of the process of development identifies three discernible phases of ideal unimpeded development which we apply to understand humans as well as the social systems they create. The first phase characterised by dependence is a period of great learning and skills acquisition in which others play a major role in providing the environment and resources required for growth. The second phase of independence entails a fundamental change in relationship and a

period of testing and personalising capacities and competencies, using them to act and impact on the environment in ways that help establish the actor as unique and self-reliant. The third phase involves another fundamental change in relationships towards increasing *interdependence* – the actor now understands that the full realisation of own potential is achieved only through effective collaboration with others.

Many examples can be found to illustrate the application of this framework of understanding in trying to better apprehend development in different situations. In the human individual the three phases would correspond with childhood, adolescence through early adulthood, and mature adulthood. The pioneer, differentiated and integrated phases of development often referred to in organisation development theory can also be better understood when the phases are explored from the perspective of dependence, independence and interdependence. Even when looking at the fundamental relationship between humankind and nature (or the environment) over the ages the application of the framework adds insight. From dependence on nature, to the rational scientific phase characterised by attempts to gain control over nature and become independent of it, leading to the conscious rediscovery of environmental sustainability possibly heralding a developmental shift from independence towards interdependence.

It is critical that these phases are all recognised as developmental and one is not judged as being superior to any other. The full and positive experience of each phase provides learning and capabilities which are vital to the ability to engage in the next phase. Each phase is essential to the next and each subsequent phase carries within it the experiences of the phases which preceded it – it is not possible to skip phases. It is also necessary to recognise that these phases



are continually recurring and overlapping in the course of the life of an individual, organisation or community – as one develops one encounters new areas in which these sequenced phases must be experienced afresh. Although skilled and sensitive interventions can help avoid and even remove hindrances and blockages to the process, development does have a pace of its own. There is an absolute limit to the extent to which it can be speeded up through the application of increased resources and developmental interventions.

Following on from the recursive nature of the development process, alluded to above, a further defining characteristic, one which sets development apart from quantitative growth, is its non-linear nature. Development does not constantly progress along a smooth incremental line; at critical points in the process there are periods of significant crisis and turmoil, periods when everything that has previously provided stability and meaning is questioned and challenged, periods when conflict is often symptomatic. These developmental crises serve a critical function in providing the impetus for letting go of the old in order to take on the new (another critical feature of the development process). Often the crises need to be of such gravity that those involved know that there is no option other than to break the old forms in order to build the new. The seeds of crisis are sown in each phase of development and grow at their own pace as the process unfolds; the passing from one phase to another is prompted by their germination. To understand where an organisation has gotten to in its development, the development practitioner must read her or his client's needs deeply, and with respect – this goes way beyond the conventional practice of needs analysis, whether this be participatory or not.

There is a seeming contradiction in what has been written above. Development is non-linear, therefore unpredictable and even anarchic; at the same time, there appear to be natural phases, sequences and modalities which can be said to characterise the process as a particular pattern or arrangement. The contradiction is a real one, but rather than being the kind of contradiction which demands resolution, it can be seen as the beating heart of development itself, an irreducible tension which provides the energy to fuel the process. A constant interplay between order and chaos, between form and flow. Which is one of the primary characteristics – according to recent advances in thinking prompted by the new sciences – of all living systems.

It follows from all of this – which really provides just a taste of the dynamics of the development process, just the first hint of an appreciative framework for grasping it – it follows that development interventions are essentially about the development of people, and that development cannot be imposed. No actor will develop in a particular way just because someone has argued eloquently that they ought to do so. Ultimately, development is driven from within, so while a development worker must bring specialist knowledge and skill to an intervention, the final outcome of the intervention is determined by the client. Moreover, development processes take time, significant periods of time; and their flow – in terms of both time and outcome – cannot be determined beforehand. An effective development practice accompanies clients through their developmental changes; once-off interventions and pre-designed packages are quite literally beside the point.



Finally, while all clients develop, none does so in quite the same way as any other. So developmental interventions are not expert products or packages of resources delivered as input to organisations. Rather, they are processes which are created and applied in response to particular situations. Whatever else they are, and whatever else they deliver, they are purposefully and specifically geared towards helping people gain an understanding of themselves such that, in time, they are better able to take control of their own future and to themselves arrive at effective solutions to questions, problems and concerns, including economic and political marginalisation. This is not to say that the development practitioner should not play an activist role – on the contrary, solidarity is vital, as is the creation of enabling environments in which people are freer to pursue their processes of development. It is only to say that development work itself must leave people in more control of their circumstances, whatever those may be, and not subservient to those circumstances, however advantageous these may be.

Ultimately, then, the development paradigm which we are articulating here has little to do with the transfer of resources, which we saw earlier as the notion which informed the traditional approach to development. On the contrary, development is about facilitating resourcefulness, and this is a vastly different take on a very tired subject. A perspective which demands a vastly different response from practitioners. We would like to take the reader through the points raised in the previous section, in the same sequence, in order to demonstrate the difference between the conventional, and this alternative, paradigm.

- Development cannot be created or engineered. As a process, it exists independently of the development practitioner. All that we can do is facilitate processes which are already in motion. Where they are not in motion, it would be best – and honest – to refrain.
- Development is not something which is brought. Being driven from within, it is not the prerogative of an outsider. Respect for the integrity of others' processes must be paramount, not simply from a moral point of view but because of the reality of the development process. As development practitioners we can assist the flow of the process, but nothing more. It is not so much that we should not impose, but that we cannot – witness the history of the development endeavour to date.
- Real – and read here also honest – development work cannot be done to others on behalf of third parties. (Third parties being those with a vested interest – however benign – in the future of others whom they resource, influence or control). Development interventions have to flow out of the development processes of those seeking to develop. If development interventions are designed by third parties, and not through the free interaction between development worker and client, then it must categorically be stated that the result is not development work; it becomes at best a patronising collusion, at worst a cynical manipulation. This has huge implications for current practice with respect to the financing of development. Instead of fearful control, space must be allowed for real and responsive development practice to take place.

- Similarly, intervention specifications which are predetermined, and which do not respond to accurate and sensitive readings of the particular situation with which a development practitioner is faced, will warp and destroy the development process. And also, because situations change continuously in response to the development intervention (and other factors) responsiveness and flexibility and mobility are required from the development practitioner. And from the development organisation. This places large responsibility on the practitioner and organisation, and demands new capacities with respect to – at least – reflecting, learning and managing.
- Development is not linear and predictable. Quite the contrary. We can never know quite what will flow out of a development intervention. There will always be outcomes which had never been planned, detours from paths which had been planned, unexpected reactions and contradictory achievements. An accurate reading of the actual – and largely intangible – developmental place where the client is at will help, but never entirely. Output is never based on input but on a complicated array of factors, including the precise relationship between input and the developmental process being intervened upon. Our assumptions will always be inadequate, although of course they must be made, for they form the foundation of any intervention; but always with due caution.
- Development has no end; the effective development intervention opens things up, rather than closes them down. Equally, development does not begin when we decide to intervene; it had already begun. The concept of the development project, then, with its beginning and end, its externally generated specifications, its notion of predictability and its lack of adaptability and mobility, has little to do with the effective development intervention, let alone with development itself. Indeed, the concept of the development project is anathema to the concept of development. It is a figment of an engineering mindset, at best a managerial tool used by a form of management inimical to development work, at worst a donor requirement to fulfil inappropriate financial control systems. Given its place at the very heart of the development system, it demonstrates both the rottenness at the core of that system as well as the system's intractability. It is the repository of all that is wrong with conventional development practice, and the greatest stumbling block to effective development interventions. (It is ironic that so much that goes by the name of capacity building today entails training NGO management in what is called project management).
- This is not to say that development practitioners and organisations should be given freedom (and license?) to simply do whatever they want without frameworks to ensure accountability. It is not to say that parameters should not be set for development interventions. Such parameters would include objectives, time-frames, strategies and evaluation criteria. But it is important to regard these as guidelines for continuous monitoring, learning and adaptation – on the part of practitioner, client and donor – with respect to intervention processes. It is imperative that we recognise the development process as the issue, rather than successful



implementation of a particular project. And it is critical to understand the project as a mere fragment of such process, rather than confuse it with the development process itself.

- It was George Bernard Shaw who stated that: Reformers mistakenly believe that change can be achieved through brute sanity. Processes of development are beset with unconscious factors, and realities of tradition, culture, motivation and resistances to change. We fool ourselves at our own peril, and we have been fooling ourselves for years.
- Quite simply, development practitioners skilled in facilitating processes of change are of far more value to the development endeavour than technical experts, advisors or trainers.
- Development always, somewhere, assumes a preferred culture or value system, or way of doing things. This is implied in the very notion of intervening in others' processes. We can mitigate this, but we will never get rid of it entirely, even when we operate out of an alternative development paradigm. This takes us immediately to the next point.
- It is precisely because of our own unconscious projections and assumptions that we, as development practitioners, have to pay attention to our own development. This is not a luxury, and it is not an addendum to other capacities; it is a central requirement of the discipline. At the very least, how can we possibly presume to intervene in others' development if we do not understand our own, or if we are not prepared to engage in our own? At the most, it will enable us to read the developmental processes of others without that reading being tainted by our own unconscious and unworked through norms, beliefs, values and psychological disabilities.
- Participation is an end, not simply a means. The whole point of development is to enable people to participate in the governance of their own lives. If this is not seen then the entire development endeavour becomes a farce.
- The insistence that successful development projects be replicable – as a condition for that success – assumes that different situations are equal to each other. On the contrary, every situation is unique; every client is on their own development trajectory. Certainly we can learn principles and guidelines, develop insights, from both successful and unsuccessful development interventions, but the attempt to replicate is part folly and part disrespect for the specificity of people's processes of development.
- The issue of sustainability is a thorny one. In its current general usage as financial sustainability, the concept is inadequate, inappropriate and sometimes harmful as an assessment of a successful development programme; stability and stasis are foolish expectations. Sustainability, in terms of its applicability to development interventions, is more about achieving the ability to keep moving, changing, and improving one's response-ability to inevitably shifting circumstances, rather than assuming that those circumstances will ever be finally and successfully resolved, once and for all.



- The evaluation of development interventions must therefore take place against the background of the specific development process which has been intervened into, not against the ends stipulated in a project document. This too has radical and far-reaching implications. There is often far more that might have been gained beyond the boundaries of original expectations, if we are only open to looking beyond these boundaries, and beyond the boundaries of our own input.

## Synthesis

The arguments raised above, as well as their meaning for a new form of development practice, demand further elaboration to respond to at least some of the questions which must arise. We attempt some response to some of these questions in this section, through three inter-linked movements.

### *First Movement*

One of the questions which may arise has to do with evaluation, and poverty. What has been said thus far is all very well, but it says nothing of poverty, of the eradication – or at least alleviation – of poverty; and surely this, after all, is the whole thrust of the development endeavour. Development interventions are ultimately about reducing poverty, are they not? So it's all very well making fine points about the development process, but how does this relate to people's needs, and how can we claim that 'the evaluation of development interventions must take place against the background of the specific development process which has been intervened into ...', rather than in terms of whether it has made any material difference in people's circumstances? What does it help that people gain an understanding of themselves if we have not been able to improve their material circumstances?

We could reply that, after decades of conventional development practice which has been governed by this economic perspective, the levels of poverty in our world – as economically defined – have increased rather than decreased. We could also say – as indeed we have already – that helping people gain an understanding of themselves is done in order that they are better able to take control of their own future and to themselves arrive at effective solutions to questions, problems and concerns, including economic and political marginalisation.

We could say too that there are many ways to combat poverty, or achieve political change, but not all of them are particularly or specifically developmental. Whilst the political activist and economic reformer may play roles of incalculable value, and whilst development practitioners may also choose to play these roles as well as their own, nevertheless these are all different ways of dealing with poverty, and not all of them leave people in a better position to move with confidence into their own future. In other words, while the reduction of poverty may certainly feature prominently in judgements on development interventions, it cannot be the only measure, and indeed, it may at times be an inaccurate measure.



So we could use all these arguments, and in fact we do, but in a sense, despite their validity, they are slightly beside the point; at least beside one of the major points which emerges from this kind of discussion of development. And this is that the material, economic perspective on poverty is only one way of framing the subject, and a culturally specific one at that. Put another way, there are many forms of poverty, economic poverty being only one of these. And the question arises as to how much other poverty we create when our goal is narrowly defined as the alleviation of economic poverty. When all values are subsumed to the economic, as they increasingly are, particularly within a conventional development paradigm, how much do we lose with respect to social values, to artistic values, to cultural and language diversity, to biodiversity? We must surely recognise by now that the world we are creating with our fixation on the economic is becoming immeasurably poorer with respect to everything which lives outside of the economic.

And the reason that the three arguments mentioned previously are slightly beside the point is because the general fixation on the economic creates another, much more insidious, type of poverty – lack of choice. Increasingly, people are being expected to toe the economic line, and freedom to choose ‘other’, to opt for culturally different priorities, is frowned upon as in some sense deviant. In this sense we are all being co-opted towards the creation of our own poverty, in the name of poverty alleviation!

Yet a real development practice, the efficacy of development interventions, must be judged on other grounds. People-centred development is about increasing, not decreasing, choice. If it is about enabling people to become more conscious, to understand themselves and their context such that they are better able to take control of their own future, if it must leave people in more control of their circumstances, whatever those may be, and not subservient to those circumstances, however advantageous these may be, then it cannot narrowly define itself as poverty alleviation in the conventional sense.

Therefore judgements on the efficacy of specific development interventions, while they must include the element of (conventionally defined) poverty alleviation, must also go beyond, and take place against the background of the specific development process which has been intervened into. The development endeavour is about poverty alleviation, yes, but in a much wider sense than is currently acknowledged. Development interventions, surely, should not result in a reduction of the world, but in an increase of possibilities.

### *Second Movement*

Given all that has been said above, the question emerges as to how then one actually apprehends development, and the development process. Earlier in the text we have, on a number of occasions, referred to the idea of reading development. We would like here to elaborate this concept.

Conventionally, we have learned not to intervene until we have done a needs assessment, or a needs analysis; until we have done an inventory, or an audit; until, through questionnaires or more participatory techniques we have ascertained the parameters of a situation. These methods, and the information they are intended to elicit, remain valid and relevant, but are not sufficient. Reading development implies something more.

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(Here the Report returns to the framework for understanding capacity building which was originally outlined in the 1994/95 Annual Report. One consequence of this 'theory' of capacity building, which organised elements contributing to organisational capacity into a hierarchy, is that: ...)

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... if you look towards the bottom of the hierarchy, you will see those things which are quantifiable, measurable, elements of capacity which can be easily grasped and worked with. They belong to the realm of material things, easily assessed and quantified; they belong to the realm of the visible. If however, we turn our attention to the top of the hierarchy, we enter immediately an entirely different realm, the realm of the invisible. The elements at the top of the hierarchy are ephemeral, transitory, not easily assessed or weighed. They are to a large extent intangible, observable only through the effects they have. In other words, individual, organisational and community life ranges from the visible, more tangible aspects to those which are less visible, more intangible; and it is these latter aspects which by and large determine capacity.

...

Reading development, then, apprehending the particular dynamics of an individual's or grouping's development trajectory or process, given that so much of it lies beneath the surface, veiled and continuously mutating, demands far more than the kinds of techniques we have become used to, for these are only designed to elicit the material, the tangible. In reality, one needs intelligence, acuity, mobility and penetrating perception to be able to read the particular nature of a specific developmental process. The development practitioner needs genuine observation and listening skills, and the ability to combine an open and non-judgemental approach with enough understanding to make sense of, and draw insight out of, what one is observing. We need to take the time, and have the flexibility, to read specific situations in this way in order to design appropriate and necessarily transitory – necessarily because the individual or grouping being worked with will develop beyond a particular intervention as a result of the effectiveness of that intervention – interventions based on such intelligent reading. A reading of development must remain supple, subtle and nuanced; it must be iterative and gradual; it must be reflective and reflexive. We must penetrate, but softly, so that we can intuit underlying movements; and do so in such a way that the individual or grouping is itself enabled to come to such awareness and understanding.



Such capacities, such competencies, are new abilities which we as development practitioners need to develop – they are not skills in which we can be trained. The conventional development paradigm sees only skills in which practitioners can be trained – along the lines of engineers or technicians. The alternative development perspective demands a more developmental approach to building the capacity of its practitioners; it demands the original skills but adds abilities which may perhaps – by way of contrast – be described by analogy as artistic.

This ability to read is therefore not to be gained on training programmes, although these may provide a useful starting point. This set of abilities must be achieved gradually, through guided reflection on action, through facilitated self-critique, through mentoring and sharing with peers, through observing one's own development and through learning to make use of alternative modes of description in order to penetrate beyond – metaphors, similes, images and narrative. Developmental readings cannot be contained within the cold and dry parameters of the conventional reporting format; warmer and more human forms must be developed, to support the reading itself.

### *Third Movement*

Given all the implications drawn out of an alternative perspective on development practice, the final area to which we must make reference concerns the management of such a practice. This will also lead us to address the question of the development project, which is a management tool which we have criticised as being the repository of all that is wrong with conventional development practice, and the greatest stumbling block to effective development interventions. If this is indeed the case, then what would we recommend to replace it?

Clearly, we cannot go into detail here with respect to alternative management methodologies and tools. Not only will space not allow, but the form of our Annual Reports render them inappropriate, and in any case methodologies and tools must needs be created for specific organisational circumstances and needs. What we will concern ourselves with here are some indications as to the principles and attitudes which may guide our understanding of what constitutes good managerial practice for a new form of development. Building such understanding is all that the reflections contained in these Reports is intended to achieve. We would expect practitioners to make use of such understanding as they see fit.

If we are looking for a responsive development practice which is able to build appropriate and flexible interventions in accordance with nuanced and subtle readings, in a context fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty and continuous change, then a number of things follow. First, you have to develop effective development practitioners, practitioners who do not work out of books or project manuals, practitioners who do not work primarily out of the specifications of the world from which they have been sent but rather out of an accurate and sensitive reading of the

particular situation with which they are faced. And this does not mean training them in new techniques, but fostering their development through guided reflection on action, facilitated self-critique, mentoring, peer reviews, and so on – all already mentioned above. (Already, you see, most management practices, judged simply by this first guideline, will be found wanting.)

Second, they must be allowed the space to be creative with respect to their styles of reading, their styles of reporting, their methods of facilitation (and yes, this applies to donor programme officers as well). Of course, this plays havoc with bureaucratic organisational styles, and requires a very fluid and responsive form of management. One which is simultaneously very hands-on and hands-off. Rigorously present, although with a very light touch. This is very different from the conventional. But how can we possibly expect a management style which is different from the form of development practice which it is attempting to manage?

Third, the supervision of these development practitioners, holding them accountable, must take a form which is different from the conventional judgement by objectives type of management. Of course, these criteria must be fulfilled; we have to know that the job is being done. But if the reading of development is what we have described it to be, if the evaluation of development interventions is as specific and nuanced as we have indicated, then supervision of the development practitioner is complex and intense. It requires, above all, that within the organisation as a whole, and between development practitioners, and between them and their managers, and between the managers themselves, a continuous conversation is kept alive, a striving to consciousness and awareness by the organisation and amongst its many parts. This kind of conversation can take many forms ... such ongoing conversation constitutes the heart of appropriate management practice for development.

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Indeed, such 'continuous conversation' is a call to awareness, a call to consciousness. It constitutes the making of meaning, which may lie at the heart of development. It is not, then, simply to be regarded as good management practice for a developmental organisation, but the essence of the development intervention itself. This may still seem a trifle far-fetched; we look to subsequent Annual Reports to take these ideas further.





ANNUAL REPORT

*Nineteen ninety eight / nine*

DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS -

ARTISTS

*of the*

INVISIBLE



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT  
RESOURCE ASSOCIATION

# Thinking and Practising Differently

*'Reshaping narrow law and art  
Whose symbols are the millions slain,  
From bitter searching of the heart  
We rise to play a greater part'.  
Frank Scott*

## IMMERSION IN ALTERNATIVE

By the time the *Crossroads* Annual Report was written, and certainly in its aftermath, CDRA was immersed and embedded in a thoroughly different way of approaching development work. Many who had read the Annual Reports, or who had come into contact with CDRA through other means, from the most peripheral fieldworker to some of the central actors in the development industry, were intrigued and entranced by the possibilities that the CDRA approach seemed to offer. CDRA's voice now had sufficient credibility for it to begin to tackle some of the more arcane and more fundamental aspects of human and social development, its practice and the organisational implications of that practice.

Many were now approaching CDRA for more specific indications as to how they could engage in an alternative development practice. CDRA had come of age, and was now being asked to take things further, both in terms of understanding as well as in terms of practical considerations. A freedom of expression had been gained, and CDRA took the opportunity to push further the boundaries of understanding and practice which the development sector had erected around itself.

Its next Annual Report, *Development Practitioners: Artists of the invisible*, 1998/99, served to take its argument much further. In the intervening year CDRA had undertaken a comprehensive review of, and reflection on, its own practice. Through a detailed exploration of its own development interventions, coupled with the growing understanding which it had honed through making previous experiences comprehensible and accessible, it was able to produce a piece of writing which penetrated into the very core of its alternative approach. This core proved to be a rich and heady mixture, combining practical methodology with intrinsic meaning in an effort to reach to the centre of the human and social processes of development. It became an exposition on the development practitioner's art.





## Opening

...

It is our intention in this Report to move the discussion further, by looking directly at the developmental practice which is implied by an alternative conception of development. We hope, by so doing, to aid practitioners not simply in their conception and understanding of development but in their actual practice of intervening directly in the development processes of others.



...

In our consultancy work with NGOs, with donors, with multi-national development agencies and with government bureaucracies which are beginning to engage with development, we have noted that the single most glaring weakness – or lack of organisational capacity – lies in the arena of practice. Development organisations are better able to improve teamwork and reduce internal conflict, build leadership and management competency, restructure themselves to become more efficient and streamlined, construct collaborative partnerships with other organisations, improve their information base and financial sustainability, and build sophisticated mission statements and statements of overall strategy. But the most intractable problem with which they grapple (all too often unaware) is their grasp – or lack of grasp – of on-the-ground development practice.

While there may be a general feeling for the values and principles which inform people-centred development, and a general sense of the overall direction of the endeavour, there is often little muscularity, or precision, to this feeling. We can articulate intent, but struggle to cohere into a thorough approach which can be called a discipline. This lack of a disciplined approach encourages us to learn and employ specific skills and techniques, exercises and models, which are applied piecemeal, often as once-off or as incoherent interventions, without being held together and informed by an understanding of the dynamic nature of the system which is being intervened into.

It helps to distinguish between the concepts of approach, method, and tool. An approach is a coherent and informed understanding of how change and development occurs, developed through the interplay of theory and practice; it informs and provides a frame for practice. This then may translate into various specific development methodologies – consultancy, fieldwork, grant making, training and teaching, mentoring, project management, individual counselling, organisation development, micro-enterprise development, and so on. These are different methodologies, but all, if they are developmental, are informed by a developmental approach.



Within the methodologies, sometimes attached to one or the other and sometimes common across many methodologies, are specific tools and interventions – PRA, needs analysis, SWOT, ZOPP; strategic planning exercises, team building exercises, conflict resolution exercises; techniques for managing resources and people, for renewing a group's sense of mission, for building trust, for gaining understanding, for restructuring or making culture conscious; and so on and on and on. There are literally thousands of such tools.

Development practice is compromised when a reliance and focus on techniques is substituted for the discipline of a coherent approach. When they are regarded as points of departure, rather than secondary aids. Practice is also compromised when vague and general lists of principles and values are substituted for the rigour of a disciplined approach. Yet training often consists of little more than building skills in the use of tools; and strategy often focuses mainly on political manoeuvring. We are strongest at tools, weaker at understanding and adopting specific methodologies, and weakest when it comes to disciplined approach. It is our weakness in this latter arena which constitutes the Achilles Heel of people-centred development practice. This Report is concerned with providing a basic orientation to overall approach with respect to development practice, within which specific methodology and the use of individual tools may be informed, understood and congruently applied.

## Unfolding

It's all very well to have a range of assumptions about development. That it is unpredictable and not always rational. That it is not linear but dynamic and often contradictory. That we cannot control it. That the development intervention opens things up rather than closes things down, and that therefore unexpected consequences are to be embraced rather than avoided. But the question is: how can we transform the broad ballpark of assumptions underpinning the people-centred perspective on change and development into a meticulous and disciplined approach?



To be more precise, if the development process is turbulent and unpredictable, how can we construct a formal framework which may structure and discipline the practice of development? If the nature of the work is responsive, specific to individual situations, how can it be given a generalised form and frame? How can we put limits on, a boundary around, what are essentially open-ended processes? How can we develop criteria and thus formalise and evaluate development interventions when we know that 'one thing leads to another'? If we have so little control over results, how can we manage our practice, and teach others to manage theirs?



The way through is not to avoid or deny the realities of change, but to develop an approach which works with, rather than against, the natural flow of a development process. An approach which recognises the whole of the development process as the focus, rather than successful implementation of a tool, technique or project. A framing approach within which such tools are applied is necessary, yet an approach which respects the dynamic nature of the development process.

In our own practice, we find such a frame indicated by the four elements which were known to the world of antiquity, and which are deeply woven as archetypal patterns within our own psyches – fire, air, water, earth. We will use these resonant and ageless symbols to describe our approach. This description will follow a sequence, to aid understanding. In reality, each phase runs throughout the intervention, sometimes more prominent, sometimes less. (We return to this aspect in the following section.)

### *Fire – the element of warmth*

The manner in which the relationship between development practitioner and ‘client’ (for want of a better term) is begun, formed and continued, is perhaps the most important aspect of the final efficacy of the development intervention. Development is about the development of people. The essential facet of a developmental relationship is human warmth and integrity.

The quality of fire is that of transformation, transmutation. Fire is the gift, bestowed upon humankind, which allows us to transform one thing into another, which enables creativity. Human warmth is the resounding note in successful development processes. Human warmth and integrity, and the trust which such warmth and integrity fosters. In situations of change, of ambiguity and uncertainty, trust in the one who is facilitating such change is fundamental. Honesty, confidentiality and openness on the part of the practitioner are vital.

More than this, the client system must be surrounded by a cocoon of warmth in which new beginnings may be gestated and given birth. It is for the practitioner to provide such warmth, to prove integrity, to generate trust. Not least, this often demonstrates a way of working with people which may be missing within the client’s world. Such warmth begins to allow change to take place beyond the specific actions and techniques of the practitioner. It breaks barriers, dissolves rigidity, and enables people to regain a sense of their own worth.

Fire is an important symbol too because it sacrifices material as it generates warmth, and sacrifice of the old is a vital aspect of change. The practitioner who does not consider the warmth of human relationship as a prerequisite for success is merely a technician, never a development facilitator.

### *Air – the element of light*

The client system will not be transparent to itself; if it were the assistance of a development practitioner would be unnecessary. The development process is about enlarging the client’s capacity through self-understanding. Rendering what is unconscious, conscious. The practi-

tioner is called upon to render such transparency. We associate this step of the development process – gaining understanding – with air, which is the medium of light. The practitioner needs to probe deeply, beneath the surface, in order to bring that which is beneath the surface into the open air above. To understand, so that the client can be helped to understand. To bring light to bear on the situation, so that the client may become enlightened about itself.

Observation is the key note of this phase. Observation may take many forms – it will entail listening and seeing, questioning and analysis; but it should also go beyond, to intuiting, sensing, testing hunches, using imagination to create metaphors for the client which may be more en-lightening than simple analysis. The objective is not to break the whole down into component parts, but to use observation of the parts to build a picture of the whole. It is the intangible, the invisible, the relationships between parts, the underlying connections and meaning, which are being sought. The practitioner must be looking, through the parts to the whole. Analysis is one component in the attempt to understand; creative imagination is the other, so that an insightful synthesis may emerge. The practitioner should commit every faculty to paying attention.

The power of deep listening, combined with acute and sensitive questioning in a relationship bounded by confidentiality and trust helps to bring people to greater clarity. The information and insights gained need to be processed and analysed as they are gathered, built into new understanding. Strong analytical abilities are required to deepen understanding of the client system, as well as an ability to organise the information and resultant diagnosis logically and accessibly. Strong creative abilities are required to build living pictures which people can relate to.

The outcome of a survey should not be a simple report back in which a great deal of information is conveyed without offering insight. Rather, a survey should yield for the client system new, perhaps challenging, perspectives and the possibility of seeing itself in ways which had not previously been available. The practitioner is challenged to use his or her intellect, to lift out of the situation and to see it from above, formulating a 'bird's eye perspective'. In so doing, the client is challenged to begin to do the same.

### *Water – the element of fluidity*

This phase is focused directly on transformation. Facilitation is its keynote – facilitation of understanding and acceptance of current reality such that the client is able to own and take responsibility for its own reality as the means of moving beyond.

Developing systems function on the edge of chaos, allowing inherent order to emerge and to build ever new levels of form. A certain looseness is required. Rigidity leads to stagnation and atrophy, and cannot engender development. In this step, then, the task of the practitioner is to break down rigidity and bring the system into movement. The emphasis is on process, on flow. Water is thus the archetypal symbol of this step. Stuckness, rigidity, clinging to the old, refusing to relinquish past perceptions and hurts, inappropriate structures, procedures, cultures,



strategies, ways of seeing the world – all must be loosened, opened, so that the life force of the client system may emerge in a new form.

Water is more powerful than rock, and flow must be engendered to allow new forms to emerge. Water is the image of fluidity, of process. It has been called the sense element of the earth – when water flows freely, it opens itself to myriad forces from beyond the planet, and transfers these to the living processes of the earth. It is the symbol and carrier of life.

This step of the process has two facets. These may occur in an unbroken process, for example in one workshop, or through several contacts over a long period of time. The first element is that of achieving acceptance. The survey (mentioned above) is just a starting point in the process of developing self-knowledge. The practitioner has to design reflective processes which enable the client to go further and form its own picture, and to deepen that understanding; processes which help the client form an insightful, honest picture of itself. In this process of coming to agreement on precisely what the picture is, the organisation is also beginning to accept its actual, current position. Paradoxically, it is only once this acceptance has been achieved that work can proceed to striving to change the situation.

So to the second facet, that of resolving the future. Here the practitioner assists the client through resultant change processes. This is perhaps the most difficult point of any development intervention: the change process itself, the conscious choosing of a new way of being, new aims, sometimes radically revised strategies, new ways of working and patterns of relating, new attitudes, capacities and stances towards the outside world.

The process of letting go of the old is always painful and frightening, and is regularly met with resistance; yet it is only to the extent that this can be achieved that development occurs. The picture built in the previous phase is crucial here – the more denial and illusion contained in the picture, the more likely the client is to resist change. The more disciplined and thorough the picture, the more open to letting go the client is likely to be.

Once the client begins to accept the inevitability of change, the practitioner helps the client to engage with those areas which are the underlying causes of the malfunctioning, in order to begin to 'turn the ship around'. This requires finding solutions and new ways of dealing, not with the most pressing symptoms, but with the deeper issues of which those symptoms are a manifestation. At this point the practitioner must bear in mind that the commitment to this decision to change will fluctuate. Part of the task is to help the client to return to its new commitment and to hold steady on its chosen path. In doing this the practitioner is beginning to focus the process and to turn it from a consideration of the past to one which is oriented towards the future. In addition to the warmth of the first step and the clarity and insight of the second, this step of facilitating ownership requires a strong emphasis on movement in the system as a whole, even as the client proceeds to work on selected aspects, and even if the process is staggered over a period of time.

### *Earth – the element of structure*

Earth is solid, formed, in a very literal sense, grounded. Images of foundation and bedrock emerge, of strength and structure. An image appropriate to this phase of the process, which is concerned with grounding the changes made.

While instability, transition and change are natural parts of evolving systems, and therefore although the client is challenged to maintain fluidity and not lapse into rigidity, nevertheless we cannot remain continuously in a state of chaos, upheaval and transition. A grounding, a structuring needs to take place, so that the new order which has emerged has a chance to settle, and the client can fully adopt its renewed image of itself. It must translate this image into new practices, procedures and patterns which can be managed, which lend a certain security and sense of stability. Development practice continuously oscillates between facilitating fluidity and encouraging structure. Flow must be given form; structure must be rendered fluid. The element of earth, the activity of grounding transitions into continuing and disciplined practices, is the key note of this step in the development process.

At this point it is vitally important for both the practitioner and the client to realise that the system will rapidly slip back into its old habits and patterns if the process of development intervention is not consciously and intentionally continued after this initial phase. It is after all a process, and a long term one at that. For the client itself it is a process which should have no ending, while for the practitioner the process with a particular client might only end when she or he is convinced that the client has achieved the necessary skills, capacities and ways of working which are appropriate to this new phase of its own development.

### **Emerging**

The approach to development practice presented in the previous section is relevant for all developmental situations. It can be applied as much within meetings and with respect to problem-solving situations as it can to long term processes. It can be applied in project design and implementation and on training courses. It can be used by leaders working on their own organisations as much as by practitioners working with others.



Yet the sequential nature in which this approach has been described is an idealised one. The reality of development practice is different from its portrayal above.

In reality, one may enter and leave the client system at various points in the framework, depending on the nature of the work and the nature of the client. One may complete only part



of the whole process, yet succeed in an effective development intervention. One may find oneself engaged in different steps of the process simultaneously. One may engage in them in a different sequence, or in a number of different sequences at the same time.

At the very least, we have to recognise that all of these steps will only ever be partly completed, precisely because we are opening things up, because the client system is in a constant state of becoming, of achieving capacity, which never ends. Because every intervention will always only be partial.

...

On the other hand, it is precisely the formulation of frameworks for practice and deepening understanding, the adoption of a precise approach, which allows us to say that we are practising a particular discipline at all. That we have something specific to offer a client, that we bring a specialised coherence to situations – that others may not bring. It is the frameworks which clarify and express what we have learned. It is to the frameworks that we return, to contribute our further learning. Such frameworks are an expression of the very discipline and expertise which we claim as development practitioners.

Currently, the confused and limited understanding which the development sector has of (people-centred) development practice results in the indiscriminate use of a wide range of fragmented interventions. Clients are subjected to piecemeal and one-off interventions, often unrelated to each other. Yet all these are only the 'pieces' of the discipline. It is necessary to understand the discipline as a whole, so that we may adopt a holistic and disciplined approach. So that we are able to situate our interventions with due regard for the integrity of the client's ongoing process of development.

Developmental practice is a responsive discipline, and therefore open to the use of fragmented interventions. Precisely because it is a responsive discipline, we need to develop, not trained responses to predictable situations, but inner resources out of which we can create and apply processes and interventions which deal adequately with new and unexpected situations arising out of the future. The framework presented above describes an approach which allows practitioners to situate and locate themselves, in a disciplined way, within the turbulent environment of change.

Clearly there is a fine line between use of frameworks in service of a client's interests and imposing models as the only contribution which a practitioner has to make. No model can tell us what exactly is happening at any point in time and therefore, no model can tell us what to do. This is an approach only, allowing one to situate oneself.

...

While this approach may help to situate different development methodologies and specific interventions and techniques, and thus lend a certain rigour and discipline to development practice, it can never itself be applied in a technicist fashion, using an engineering mindset, or

according to the assumptions underlying what was characterised as the conventional paradigm. There is simply no substitute for creativity and respect. For responsive flexibility.

Without these, the very character of a development practice is reduced to caricature.

...

The kind of developmental practice described here, one which is essentially responsive to the development trajectories and rhythms of individual clients, demands that we are able to 'read' the development processes of clients very accurately indeed, and build appropriate responses from out of such ongoing reading. Such reading and response has to do with the underlying and inherent flow of the process. Surface phenomena (facts and figures) may reveal underlying currents and connections, but in themselves they are no more than corks bobbing along on the face of deep ocean currents. It is with such currents that we are concerned. It is these which we must learn to apprehend; it is in terms of these depths that we must respond.

Such an approach demands more than an appreciation of the elements – mentioned previously – involved in a developmental practice. It demands also a new way of seeing, and a new understanding of intervention. The following pages attempt an elaboration.

## Disclosing

A new way of seeing. Not new in itself, but new to us – or at least different from what we have been acculturated to accept as normal. It constitutes a major shift, and as such is difficult to describe and difficult to grasp.

There are two major modes of human consciousness which are complementary. One may be termed the analytic mode, the other the holistic. The analytic mode is that mode which characterises what we have referred to as 'conventional' development, while the holistic mode of consciousness is more appropriate to the kind of reading necessary for an alternative, or people-centred, approach.

The analytic mode is the mode we have specialised in, the mode to which our educational system – within our technical-scientific culture – is geared almost exclusively. This mode develops in conjunction with our experience of perceiving and manipulating solid bodies. The internalisation of our experience of the closed boundaries of such bodies leads to a way of thinking which naturally emphasises distinction and separation. In the world of solid bodies, everything is external to everything else, and leads us to analytical thinking. It is also consequently sequential and analytical, proceeding from one element to another in a piecemeal fashion – the principle of mechanical causality is thus a typical way of thinking in this analytical mode of consciousness.



The principles of logic are associated with this way of thinking and seeing: that one thing is always itself and never anything else, that something cannot simultaneously be itself and not itself, and so on. These principles – derived from perceiving solid objects – are extrapolated and assumed to hold universally.

The problem is that the world with which we are concerned in human development is not the world of solid objects. We cannot ‘see’ an organisation in this way. We can see individual people, a building, equipment, written statements of mission, strategy and organogram, the name of the organisation on its building; but we cannot ‘see’ the organisation. (Where exactly is the organisation?) We cannot ‘see’ a relationship between people. We cannot ‘see’ the evolution of a relationship. We cannot ‘see’ motivation or insecurity as we see solid objects. We cannot ‘see’ an organisational culture, or the connection between a community’s sense of outrage and the concentration of power in the hands of a small elite. We cannot ‘see’ power, or the lack of it.

In the normal sense, we can see discrete objects, but we cannot – in the same way – ‘see’ the connections between them, we cannot ‘see’ the relationships between them. We can see the thing, but not the meaning of the thing. We can see the parts which go to make up the meaning, but we cannot ‘see’ the whole, the meaning itself. We can see the marks on a page which go to make up a sentence, but we do not ‘see’ the meaning of the sentence in the same way. Music remains incoherent noise if it is heard piecemeal; apprehension of the whole renders noise into music. The same can be said of a poem, a joke, a painting, any interaction between people. The meaning, the gestalt, the ‘whole’, is not a discrete object in the way that the parts which go to make it up are discrete objects. We cannot ‘see’ them in the same way. And the whole is not just another object, and it is not simply the sum of discrete parts, or objects. We do not apprehend the whole by adding the parts together; it is apprehended directly, on its own ground. It is, in a very real sense, intangible; it is of a different order, and demands a different mode of apprehension.

The world which we are working with when we work developmentally is a world of such ‘intangibles’. It is a world of systems, of relationships, of connections; ambiguous, shifting and changing, developing, interweaving, continually being formed and continually dying and changing into something else. In a word, dynamic. It is not a world of discrete objects but a world of relationships between objects. The objects, the parts, form the whole, the meaning contained in the relationships between the parts; but the whole, the meaning, is not another object or part. We can see a person, their gestures and actions, but we cannot ‘see’ the character of the person which is expressed in these. Or rather, we can see character, and meaning, and relationship – common experience tells us so – we can apprehend meaning, and dynamic movement, and ‘the whole’; but such apprehension demands a radically different way of seeing, one which is not valued as the analytical mode is valued.



What may be termed the holistic mode of consciousness is complementary to the analytical one. It is systemic thinking. By contrast, this mode is nonlinear, simultaneous, intuitive instead of intellectual, and concerned with relationships more than with the discrete elements which are related. It is important to realise that the holistic mode of consciousness is a way of seeing, and as such it can only be experienced in its own terms. We have to learn to appreciate what it means to say that a relationship can be experienced as something real in itself (or a character, or a state of motivation, or an organisational grasp of gender).

In the analytical mode of consciousness it is the elements which are related that stand out in experience, compared with which the relationship is but a shadowy abstraction. It is regarded as unreal, a figment of imagination. But it is none of these; relationships are as real as the elements which constitute them. (Intangible does not mean unreal.) The experience and apprehension of a relationship as such is only possible through a transformation from a piecemeal way of thought to a simultaneous perception of the whole. This is an intuitive mode of understanding, a holistic appreciation of dynamic meaning, and it demands (and entails) a shift in consciousness.

This is not as complex as it seems, and in fact we do it all the time, but we do not value it. And because we do not value it, we do not cultivate it, and therefore a distinct faculty which we have access to as human beings atrophies, stagnates, and we remain incapacitated and unskilled in a very profound sense. It becomes ridiculed as unscientific, unprofessional, unaccountable; we come to believe that such a way of seeing cannot be replicated, or taught (some people have it, some don't); that it is quirky, or artistic (expressed pejoratively); that it belongs to the realm of religion, or spirituality (again expressed pejoratively).

Yet in fact it is confined to none of these critiques; these are all only the defences of the analytical mode. Meaning, relationships, the whole, remain invisible only when 'seeing' is confined to the analytical mode; under these conditions, a relationship, or the character of a situation, certainly remains invisible. But we can learn to adopt the other mode, and we can thereby learn to see that which forms the very stuff of our interventions. In learning to see in this way we change nothing of what is seen, but everything changes, because we see that which was invisible to us before.

Intuition is not intangible or mysterious; it is the simultaneous perception of the whole (whereas the logical or rational mode of knowledge involves an analysis into discrete elements sequentially linked). We can learn (or relearn) to do this. As a prerequisite, we have to learn to value it, to respect it, to regard it as legitimate. There is no doubt that it incorporates the development of the imaginative faculty. We have to respect and cultivate imagination, and we have to learn to value feeling, and not simply thinking. These cannot be severed from each other, as we have learned to accomplish with frightening ease. We have to relearn to hold these two modes of apprehension simultaneously. Either one on its own becomes absurd. Together,



thinking provides feeling with muscularity, while feeling provides thinking with the ability to apprehend life. Above all, we are concerned with living processes and living systems.

We have to learn to appreciate quality, and no longer assume that quantification alone will allow us to get at the essence, to perceive a system as a whole. We are afraid that 'to qualify' something encourages us to judge individualistically; it raises the spectre of subjectivity. A legitimate fear. So we attempt to circumvent qualification through 'number-crunching', the construction of lists and questionnaires, the quantification of discrete data which we analyse into cause and effect, the creation of (quantifiable) norms and standards. In this way we deny the possibility of developing an initially ad hoc (but ever-present) response into a legitimate faculty of perception. An illegitimate and unhelpful reaction.

At CDRA we, as practitioners, share our experiences by exposing our practices – thereby our perceptions and judgments – with each other, in a mutually collaborative but strenuously self-critical and challenging fashion. Such sharing enables us to get beyond subjectivity in the development of our organs of perception. At the same time, we reflect on ourselves and our own responses to situations in order to hone ourselves as our own best tools – we try to separate what we are seeing 'out there' from our own unconscious projections, desires, inadequacies. This combination gradually allows us to 'see'; it allows us to begin to read the developmental character of a situation. We take seriously that we are 'artists of the invisible', but this means simply that we have to work on ourselves as organs of perception, and it is in this sense that every development practitioner represents added value in a particular situation.

Such practices are open to us all, and are not difficult to effect. This ability to see, and the techniques which develop it – for techniques and tools are important so long as they are congruent within a framing approach – are relevant for all specific development methodologies, whether we be fieldworkers, consultants, donors, trainers or leaders. And it has far-reaching implications for the way we organise ourselves, for the ways in which we take decisions, report to each other, hold each other accountable; for the substance of our practice.

...

The 'conventional' practice of development, and the assumptions on which it is based, will find this approach anathema. And while 'people-centred development' should be based on other understandings, we have already noted that it regularly falls back on those subsumed under the more conventional approach. Thus we know that what has been indicated above will be difficult to accept. It plays havoc with our growing reliance on standardisation, categorisation and computerisation. Yet the shift which it entails is an integral and emergent outcome of all that has gone before – of a people-centred practice, of systemic thinking, of the dynamics of development.

The point is not to eschew the analytical mode, or its tools, but to incorporate the holistic mode into our way of seeing, and to develop the faculties for doing so. For we must be clear on one thing. The development of what has come to be called 'the new science' has shown that we

effect what we see by what we are looking for. The 'particle' (separate and discrete, and so small that it has almost no extension), is also seen as a wave (which can extend to infinity, and be entirely penetrated by other entities) depending on what we are looking for. Thus do we effect what we see by the way that we see it, by our approach to the phenomenon.

The act of observation changes what is observed. And we are part of what we observe, and thus effect both it and ourselves.

We will create what we look for, and eradicate what we do not look for. If we look only for superficiality, for efficiency, for structure, for number, for the discrete object, then we will (have already begun to) create a world which is devoid of the invisible breath of life, of wholeness and meaning. We will reduce our world to a world of inanimate things.

Observation is thus a moral act. We are implicate. We cannot assume, we cannot take for granted, that the world is the way it seems; we build it as we go, choosing the world we want by how we choose to see it. Denying the value of the holistic mode of perception reduces our world to an empty and inexplicable shell. Embracing the 'invisible' allows us to work as social artists in a world which is at once mysterious and meaningful; ever present and always becoming; ever alive.

## Closing

Observation is one component of facilitation; intervention is the other. Side by side with a new way of seeing goes a new understanding of what we are really about when we undertake developmental interventions. Together these two aspects form the core around which a developmental practice revolves.

We have already noted that people-centred development is ... about doing things together with people in order to increase their awareness, expand their own capacity, so that they are better able to take responsibility for their own consciously chosen future. This means guidance towards understanding the patterns and dynamics which trap us into unconscious or unhelpful ways of doing things. It means the facilitation of a growing self-understanding, so that individuals and groups are able to see themselves afresh.

'See' in this sense is to be taken in the manner of the new way of seeing indicated previously. It refers to the gaining of insight about self and world through the intuitive perception of the whole, the relationships and connections which constrain, the dynamics which may free, the characteristics which must be built on and those which must be let go of if a new way of being and working is to emerge. In short, the achievement of meaning, understanding and facility such that the client is enlarged, and renewed motivation attained. The move to a new level of development requires a transitional period of emptiness, sacrifice and acceptance, which



enables energy and movement to replace routine and stagnation, such that new endeavours may be entered into, new attitudes developed, and new faculties and skills cultivated. So that people may begin to take charge of their own future.

There are those who will ask what this has to do with the eradication of poverty, the redressing of power imbalances, the growth in numbers and extent of the marginalised and dispossessed. A people-centred approach, as described here, may seem an effete and flaccid response to the outrageous circumstances within which we work; it may even seem to constitute an avoidance of tackling the situation head on... . (But) such critique indicates that the point of all this has been missed ... . The real point is simply this: conventional development has attempted to work on the world (on externalities) in order to remedy people's lot (poverty and dispossession), while the alternative approach of people-centred development attempts to work directly with people themselves in order that they may remedy the world. Moreover, this alternative approach to development implies that 'the poor' are not the only ones in need of development, and developmental interventions. To the contrary, we are all implicate; we are all creating this world of inequality as we go, and inordinately few are really seeing what they do, or taking responsibility.

...

Such is a facilitative practice. If we approach our work as technicians, we will see technicalities. If we approach our work as social artists, we will begin to apprehend the art of social living, and become able to work with it. If we legitimate the pursuit of meaning, and do not deny or decry the invisible whole, or gestalt, which lends the parts their meaning, then we will begin to see a world filled with character and quality. If we begin to understand relationship and connection as being as real as objects and things, we will begin to appreciate the systemic nature of those with whom we work. If we move beyond the realm of matter, we will begin to apprehend the formative forces of life, and begin to work formatively, rather than mechanistically.

For, just as we can begin to learn to see in a new way, so we can begin to learn the art of facilitating processes which enable clients to come to real and deep understanding of themselves, their worlds, and the way these interact. To bring clients to the point where they can apprehend the essence, experience the truth, of their particular situation at a particular point in time. And to use such insight to move beyond. Such consciousness is the stuff of liberation, and power.

The art of facilitating such processes requires new abilities which we as development practitioners need to develop; many new capacities which we need to cultivate, not skills in which we need to be trained

...

How ... do we become fully human? By relentlessly seeking and cherishing the humanity in others. We make of ourselves what we do unto others. If we treat people as numbers, or as categories, even when that category be labelled 'the poor', then we reduce ourselves to artefacts. If we treat others as objects or things, even where we do so for the sake of efficiency in assisting

them, then we reduce ourselves to mechanical instruments. If we believe that we can guide people's destinies by analysing life circumstances and then providing specified inputs to cause predictable results, even where this is done with their interests in mind, then we reduce our own freedom accordingly. If we do not accord people responsibility, this becomes a mark of our own irresponsibility. If we do not encourage people to find meaning, and insist that only what can be counted can be weighed, then we reduce ourselves to bewildered statistics.

...

For the bureaucrat and for anyone distanced from the field, the complexity of a truly developmental practice will seem a high price to pay when confronted with the demands of facts, figures, short term accountability and efficient delivery of their specific product. But there are grave dangers when our own procedures take precedence over the actual development processes of those whom we serve.

...

Our world is not yet fully formed. It is in the process of becoming. We are creating it as we go, through what we seek and how we intervene. Working facilitatively with people towards the fullest experience and expression of all of our humanity is an astounding act of co-creation. Because inside human beings is where God learns.

❖ ❖

Because inside human beings is where God learns. Which is another way of saying that our own learning is not simply for ourselves but for the project as a whole, whether that project belongs to a particular discipline or to humanity as such. But our learning is dependent on our doing; there is nothing to learn – about ourselves, from inside ourselves – unless we are acting on and in the world, and reflecting on that action. The practice of our craft or discipline or humanness is the ground within which our learning occurs, the food which gives it sustenance. Concomitantly, our practice is dependent on our learning; without learning, practice degenerates into disparate activity.

Through its Annual Reports the CDRA had been directly challenging many development practitioners to improve their practice. But this proved to be no easy matter. While much of CDRA's writing resonated with many, it remained an interesting challenge, rather than integrating itself into daily action. And it would remain so until the reading devolved down into the fingertips, as it were; until it was actually practised it would never really be understood. And attempts to practise it were continuously confounded by old habits and routines, and particularly by organisational realities which concerned themselves far more with form than with substance. In a word, CDRA was suggesting an alternative form of practice, but were there many out there who were practising anything at all (in the sense of a *coherent* practice, a discipline)? And in the absence of such practice, practitioners and organisations fell easily into the routines and habits of the conventional approach to development, which demanded so very little of them.

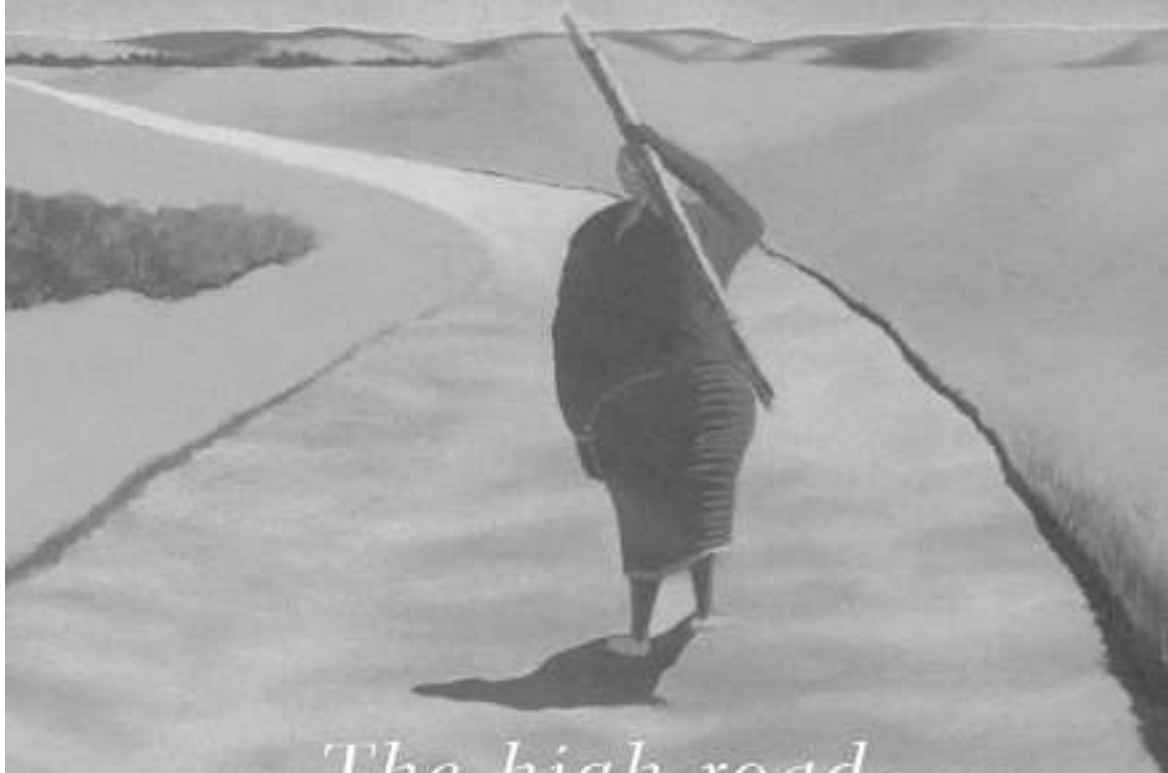
CDRA therefore chose to address its next two Annual Reports – those of 1999/2000 and 2000/01 – to issues directly related to the challenges of building a coherent practice, and to implications for organisational functioning in its various aspects.





*Annual Report*

*Nineteen ninety nine / two thousand*



*The high road –  
practice at the centre*

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE ASSOCIATION





## THE HIGH ROAD – PRACTICE AT THE CENTRE

### Landscape

This indivisibility of process and product; of cause and effect, gives rise to two, related, imperatives. First, to ‘get’ development, we have to work in a particular way, that is, developmentally. There is no alternative. It cannot be undertaken through the means and processes of any other discipline. Development pursued through teaching may result in education, and development pursued through engineering may result in roads, but neither education nor roads are necessarily development. This suggests that development work must itself be a particular terrain of enquiry, practice and learning, and one of the tasks of those presuming to work in development is therefore to deepen their understanding of what the development process is, and how they can work with it more and more effectively.

The second point concerns the pressing problem of efficiency and effectiveness. If realisation of the aim of development necessarily requires that development work, something particular, be performed, then it follows that working developmentally is the most efficient and effective way of achieving development. If this is avoided, and all sorts of other elaborate processes undertaken without facing the central task of working developmentally, our endeavours are doomed to failure, or at least mediocre compromise. The sad result of this widespread mistake is that the very noble end of development comes to be questioned, rather than the short sighted and avoidant means by which it is pursued. Again, the only way to achieve development is to practise it. This is as much an issue of principle as it is simple good sense, and should contain a guiding directive for those most concerned with ‘getting the job done’ or spending funds responsibly. Surely, the old adage – if a job is worth doing, it’s worth doing properly – applies here.

...



Recognising the real complexity of the social world involves more than a sensitive nod in the right direction before proceeding with business as usual. In any event, the elaborate qualifications regarding just how complex social development is are fairly standard preambles to stories from the field, given by fieldworkers, researchers, policy makers and even managers of development efforts. However, the elaborate descriptions of the complexity with which we work often come as a list of constraints and 'inhibiting factors' to what would otherwise be excellent projects, or worse still, apologetic explanations for why things didn't go as planned.

Rather, recognition and acceptance implies profound changes for the way in which development work is organised and undertaken. Working with the real currents of human organisation, motivation, history and endeavour requires a fundamentally different orientation from when we try to work in spite of it all. It may be that the qualifications, constraints and inhibiting factors are really whispered evocations of the real stuff of development, too often relegated to the sidelines. Seen in this way, the more we embrace and work directly with those very things that so often seem to get in the way of our intended paths, the more our efforts approximate to effective development work.

...

Feedback on [last year's] Annual Report suggested that for many working in the development sector, from those setting policy to those working in the field, our attempts at articulating an approach to seeing development and acting developmentally resonated with experience, and with a desire to take things further, to work really developmentally.

Naturally, new questions accompany the sense of something ringing true. Arising out of a recognition of the 'what' of development (and the constraints and opportunities generated by that), questions reflecting a real grappling with the 'how' come to occupy centre stage. A developmental approach requires of us certain ways of seeing and of being in the world. What does that specifically imply for the ways in which we organise and manage ourselves, the ways in which we plan, monitor and evaluate our work and the ways in which we engage with the ever present demands and pressures of the imperfect world in which we all live?

In this year's Annual Report we address ourselves to some of these questions, sharing our own emerging thoughts and learning. While developmental practice may appear an ideal approach, for many it remains just that. The messy reality of a world less concerned with quality than with quantity, a world that relegates recognition of the invisible to the realm of after-hours activities is intolerant of the very human processes needed to work developmentally. And so, we shrug our shoulders and 'get real', buying into the very terms that must be challenged if human development work is to become an effective and credible field of endeavour.

...

It is clearly not enough for individuals to have a good sense of what it takes to practise developmentally. Concerted commitment on the part of institutions and organisations involved in the



endeavour is needed to deepen and support developmental practice. This year, we pursue those features of organisation that best support a developmental practice.

...

The features of organisation that best support a developmental practice emerge in four distinct spheres of organisational activity. The first, in the sphere of practice itself, puts practice at the centre of organisational activity through ensuring space for continuous individual and organisational learning. The second, in the sphere of strategy, links strategy and practice, ensuring that the strategic development of the organisation is firmly rooted in learning from practice. Together, the features in these two spheres make up the processes and activities that constitute a learning organisation.

Features in the third sphere – that of organisational support and systems – reflect an organisation that works in support of practice, rather than in service of procedure, and identifies roles for the support systems in organisations beyond service delivery in the field, and into supporting learning within the organisation. Finally, and as a sphere in its own right as well as a quality that permeates the whole organisation, are those features in the leadership of the organisation that best support developmental practice. Central is the role of continuously holding the organisation on a path of learning, through integrating and maintaining a living vision of what it means to pursue development, both inside of the organisation and beyond.

## Walking

Practice is not simply everything that the organisation and its individual staff members do. Rather, an organisation's practice consists of those 'doing' activities in the world that are specifically geared towards achieving its strategic objectives through the exercising – practising – of its particular discipline and associated methodologies.



A doctor may run a business, manage staff and attend the functions of pharmaceutical companies, yet when she is tending to the medical needs of her patients, that is when she is conducting her practice.

Reading of current medical journals and attending seminars on innovations in the field (including those organised by pharmaceutical companies) are all done towards development of that practice. Similarly with development organisations there is a core process – the organisational practice – in support of which all other organisational work takes place. The particular



forms that this practice might take differ according to what the organisation's core purpose is. Fieldwork is clearly a core process for many organisations working in development. Grant-making is another, and research still another. In addition to the methodological features of these core processes, there is very often a sectoral focus, for example, women, land or human rights, which is also incorporated and requires further expertise.

...

Placing practice at the centre requires time. Where organisations neglect learning, or provide learning opportunities only for more 'input', skills 'acquisition' and individual capacity building (as if individuals can be custom-built to fit their job descriptions), the organisation's core purpose is undermined. This is particularly, although not exclusively, so for those organisations whose work is almost unique to the development sector and here fieldwork and grant-making spring to mind. Where on earth can people develop real competence in these areas of work if not on the job? Yet much organisational prioritising suggests that we assume people pick the work up as they go along, or perhaps even, that it is in some way innate to certain individuals (and this particularly so for fieldwork).

In actual fact, and at best (in organisations with a drive to quality and with effective recruitment strategies), failure to learn from and develop practice results in an organisation in which each person develops their own unique approach, each getting the job done as best they can, putting in what they are best able to and getting out what they most need. For the recipients of these do-it-yourself practices, the relationships are recognised for what they are – lucky chance encounters with a few thoughtful individuals in a sea of mediocrity, and as much as possible is gained out of the relationships, for as long as they last.

...

At worst (in organisations with little appeal for job seekers and with little attention to quality), this results in an organisation characterised by a sense of fraudulence and obsfucation. No one really knows what they are doing, yet the stakes are too high to admit it to anyone else, or even to yourself. So practitioners come to actively perpetuate the already established set-up of keeping practice out of the organisation, in order that their own bewilderment remains unmasked.

Where field-staff have not had the opportunity to come together and make sense of their individual experiences and where they are under pressure to deliver, irrespective of the conditions they face on the ground, resistance to naming their practice tends to grow. Very often, the only protection they have is to oppose 'professionalisation'. The fear is that specific standards and criteria for performance will only make it harder for them to reconcile the idealised and systematised standards of the office with the unpredictable and messy reality of the field.

Our experience has shown that this makes even straightforward training of the field-staff of organisations working in development an extremely complex task. The challenge is to work

with people's caution and resistance to revealing their practice, and help them overcome their lingering sense of fraudulence, through cultivating their ability to see and name the substance of development work. Only then can a vision for meaningful and valid developmental practice begin to emerge. However, without organisational recognition of, and support for, this vision, it soon recedes and practice flounders in its return to obscurity.

Floating in the middle of these two extremes is the drive to leave out what cannot be easily grasped or understood. In these organisations, and this is probably the vast majority of organisations working in development, what can be conveyed fairly directly and uniformly becomes the standard. Thus it is only the observable, the quantifiable, that is seen as part of the practice, and it is only development of this (often through the invention of 'time-saving' systems) that is given any attention.

This phenomenon has been exacerbated by the plethora of personnel and information management systems flooding the NGO market. A bureaucratic principle – one that takes its own processes, for their own sake, terribly seriously – emerges, in which performance is judged by an individual's ability to go by the book, to follow procedures, to obey the dictates of the administration of the organisation. In the absence of a vibrant professionalism that brings the life of the community being served and work done with it into the heart of the organisational life, it is understandable, perhaps, that procedural compliance becomes valued. It might even be argued that some form of professionalism is better than none, and compared to the absence of common standards described above, this does at least offer an element of control.

Yet in these organisations (typically large government and donor bureaucracies and, increasingly, NGOs that aspire to meet this measure), while practitioners may still recognise development where they see it, this observation has little voice within the organisation. Instead, the life is squeezed out, a sombre formality takes hold, and even less space for (ad hoc) developmental work exists than in those of the two extremes described above.

...

Organisations that support developmental practice have, in the first place, a notion of what that practice is. This is different from strategy, which is concerned with the reading of the environment, making of choices and setting of objectives, review and evaluation. An organisation's practice concerns the particular discipline that it offers, its methodology, the way in which it pursues its work in the world. The essence of developmental practice lies at the interface between practitioner and client. It is what happens between practitioner and client. In an organisation that best supports developmental practice, practitioners are firmly rooted in both a clear understanding of the purpose of their work, as well as an understanding of the work itself.

...

It is precisely the fact of development practice's status as an inexact science that demands it be given regular time for learning. There are no textbook answers to how to deal with difficult



situations, as each difficult situation presents its own unique challenges. Building a developmental practice involves building people's inner capacity to deal with each new unknown that they are confronted with.

...

While conclusions out of all of these explorations are more of the tone of resolved insight, rather than binding injunctions to any particular form of action, it is through a wide variety of such focused and attentive learning processes that an organisational practice is evolved.

## Mapping

While effective practice does require that practitioners have some understanding of organisational strategy it is the element of assessment, or evaluation, that provides the necessary connection between strategy and practice. Strategy concerns the thinking and anticipating aspect of organisation and is concerned with plotting the focus of its work, the objectives to which it contributes and the making of choices with respect to intended outcomes. It also concerns assessment of what has been achieved and re-strategising in light of this.



It also concerns assessment of what has been achieved and re-strategising in light of this.

In many organisations – from large bureaucratic organisations to small NGOs – there is a split between those who decide on strategy and those who implement it. Despite the stated commitment of many in development to a 'bottom-up' approach, and despite the many development missions to promote the voices of the marginalised from the bottom-up, the very organisations promoting just these strategies all too often practise a top-down approach in their own workings. This is not just a problem of principle gone awry, not just, or even primarily, that those implementing do not have a full say in what they implement. Rather, it is a very practical problem of point of view.

In organisations where strategy is separated from practice, the considerations informing strategic decisions, choices made and shifts undertaken tend to be those most visible to the decision makers. And where decisions are not informed by real practice and learning from practice they become informed by other contingencies: organisational survival, political profile, internal power struggles and preferences. These are also important considerations, but without the perspective of practice, the potential for strategy to extend a truly developmental approach, even to achieve anything at all is diminished.

...

Organisations that best support developmental practice ensure that their perspectives truly take account of learning and measurement from the field. Ongoing strategy review and formulation is informed, in the first instance, by practice review and learning. In these organisations, practising developmentally is itself the fulfilment of a strategic objective, and therefore, improved practice is an indicator of strategic success. Furthermore, those elements of practice review that engage with the context in which work is taking place and the effects of that work its real outcomes, not just quantities and accounts of activities 'conducted' offer key data towards effective monitoring of implementation of strategy, as well as review of strategy.

This suggests an approach to strategy that is rooted in a deep and common understanding of what is really being sought through the practice of the organisation.

It is often said that development – human development – is difficult, even impossible, to measure and for that reason other, related, indicators of success are sought. This is simply not true. In a developmental approach, practitioners intervene into complex development processes; they do not bring them into being. Through whatever resources, projects, or services they bring, they aim to effect change in the power relations of their beneficiaries. These shifts do not come about as a result of the efficient delivery of the resource or service, but through the developmental process employed.

Where a shift in relationship becomes the aim of practice, and its measure, neat deliverables and packages cease to occupy centre stage. Instead, measurement comes to be seen as beginning with the ability to make developmental assessments. This involves analysing and understanding each situation being intervened into as a living, dynamic, changing process with a rich history, a present reality and a future potential. A central component of this assessment includes qualitative and descriptive pictures of the formative relationships surrounding the subject of the intervention. These descriptions form the baseline against which development is measured. The developmental practitioner is able to isolate and describe different types of relationship by cultivating and using a 'relationship vocabulary'. As development practitioners develop the art of describing relationships before and after their intervention, as they learn to tell the stories of change, so their ability to do so with greater precision grows.

The organisation that best supports developmental practice is receptive to these measures and descriptions and makes central use of them in the course of strategising. It is difficult to represent the shifts described above in numbers, percentages, graphs or tables, and for this reason the narrative form is a central component of measuring the impact of developmental interventions. Out of various accounts, a picture emerges that isolates the central themes, both in practice and in impact in the field. It is these pictures of the essence of developmental practice that inform further work on practice as well as the next steps in organisational strategy.

...



## Accompanying

The support and systems in organisations that best support developmental practice are characterised by features that work in support of purpose and practice, not against it, and not in service of their own logic, which is the prevailing problem.



The first concerns certain elements of organisational life, some of which have been referred to above, which tend to be seen as bureaucratic or experienced as burdensome, even extraneous to the real work of the organisation. In an organisation that best supports developmental practice, these elements, through their incorporation into the ongoing learning and strategising of the organisation, come to be a part of its substantial work. These activities that become incorporated into the heart of organisational functioning include monitoring and evaluation, strategic planning, submission of regular work reports, continuous assessment of staff and team functioning, elements of supervision, team building and information flow regarding movements of staff members and areas of work activity.

While the above sections stressed the time that it takes to work continuously on practice and strategy, much of this time is gained through releasing practitioners from this variety of disparate tasks and activities that often appear unconnected to each other, or to the central work of the organisation.



(For example ...)



In developmental organisations, the number of reports produced for control purposes also diminishes. A clear understanding of what is being sought in the field translates into appropriate means of measuring and recording this. A great deal of this measurement and generation of 'data' comes out in the course of regular practice and strategy review. Where reports are required, they are generated with greater ease and accuracy, as the issues being reported on are conscious and alive for those doing the writing.



...

(For example ...)



Whatever the meeting cycle – weekly, monthly, even three-monthly – in organisations that support developmental practice, meetings tend to correspond with the rhythms of practice, not those of the office. This demands a certain discipline from practitioners, which also emerges as a coherent

practice is built. Obviously administrative and systemic requirements cannot be built around the demands of each, individual practitioner. Instead, as the practice as a whole emerges and takes on a life within the organisation, so the organisation builds itself, and its systems around that.

Such a shift in perspective requires strong administrative and managerial support to the systems of the organisation. It requires the competence to integrate information and learning into the record keeping and reporting systems of the organisation. This applies also to the financial management systems of the organisation. Where systems are geared towards support of practice, the emphasis is on development of systems that can capture and provide information which is relevant to the work of the organisation, rather than on the work of the organisation adapting itself to the demands of these systems. The check always is on whether organisational systems and procedures support or hinder the two primary processes: direct contact in the field and learning towards improved practice and strategy.

...

## Choosing

The features of a developmental organisation described thus far evoke an organisation characterised by conceptual engagement, conversation, learning, an absence of fear and an impulse to action. Development of this quality of organisation requires a form of leadership that sees the leader, or leaders, of an organisation also as development practitioner within their own organisation.



The leader of the developmental organisation sees as their task, the maintenance and development of the organisation as a living 'whole'. This is an ongoing process, based on acceptance of the fact that the cultivation and development of meaning, purpose and understanding is continuous, not achieved through a once-off event.

One of the ways in which organisations lose touch with their practice is when the leadership becomes entirely focused on organisational survival and staff management, neglecting practice and engagement with practice. In developmental organisations, leaders are actively involved in the processes of learning from and deepening practice, and in integrating this into subsequent strategising.

...

Organisational climate – the feel of the organisation – is an important indicator to the leader of the organisation's practice and impact in the field. All too often, awareness of and responsibility



for the quality of the work environment is given over completely to the person responsible for human resources, where things are generally dealt with at the level of individual attitude, competence and performance. Alternatively, leaders are brought to face climate issues only when they become a problem, when the office environment becomes too difficult to work in.

The leader of a developmental organisation is in close touch with thinking, relating and doing aspects of the whole organisation as well as the individuals who make it up. Is there clarity and understanding? Is there trust and mutual respect in the team? Are people adequately supported? Is there motivation to get the job done?

...

A major task of the leader in such an organisation involves a constant integrating function. The reality of work in development is that it is increasingly project-based and so time-bound. The challenge is to help bring a developmental approach – essentially open-ended, the anti-thesis of an outcomes orientation – to projects, to ensure that they are framed in such a way that they protect the space to work developmentally while addressing ‘deliverables’. This involves insinuating the language of developmental practice into the very frameworks that set the terms for development work, and is a key leadership function, not a simple task of writing proposals and filling in forms.

Without this intervention – this creation and protection of the space to practise developmentally – the forms through which developmental work is administered can become so stifling that they limit its potential altogether. In this regard, inappropriate planning and reporting systems are not just time-consuming and frustrating. They can actively undermine the potential for an organisation to work developmentally at all. Leaders that see engagement with these frameworks as a technicality, a mere formality, expose their organisations to an approach to development that is itself merely technical and formal.

Another integrating function involves constant building of meaning and understanding across departments and projects. The pressure to implement projects within their specified time frames generates a kind of tunnel vision in those involved. While its positive effect has been one of undeniable increase in people's accountability for the ‘deliverables’ of their work, in a project-based approach, this work veers constantly towards being seen only as outcomes, and less as process, as practice, as the way of doing things. Even as the frameworks in which development work is undertaken separate means and ends, product and process, so the task of the developmental leader is to draw focus back to the universal developmental task being undertaken within specific projects.

This calls for an organisational approach, even in the face of fragmenting organisational life and forces that constantly draw the attention of the practitioner away from the overall organisational purpose and into their part of that whole. Creating and persistently holding the spaces within the organisation for the building of coherent practice across departments and the formulation



of organisational strategy is primarily a leadership function. Without these spaces, there is no developmental work, and the organisation becomes simply an implementer of piece-meal projects, a delivery vehicle, less and less capable of achieving anything greater than accurate compliance with the minutiae of various binding agreements and plans.

All of the above roles and qualities of the leader rest on a premise – one that runs throughout this description of the developmental organisation. Simply put, it is that an organisation that is geared towards supporting developmental practice has chosen to do so. Its way of working in the world and its way of functioning internally are integral parts of its identity. Building a developmental internal environment is a matter of conscious choice – not a modus operandi that is fallen into, by chance – and its maintenance depends on the actions of those who lead it, deliberately extending the preference into lived practices, in the field and in the organisation.

This is not a simple choice between equally neutral approaches. In the current development environment, to build such an organisation entails an act of partisanship that stands in direct opposition to what is implicitly demanded through current approaches to administering development. Such an approach to organisation involves not, in the first instance, implementation of a set of new (perhaps more palatable) organisational principles. Rather, the developmental organisation arises out of a vibrant vision for development itself, and a clear and sober understanding of what it takes to work developmentally at all. This requires vision and courageous acts of authorship from those leading such an initiative.

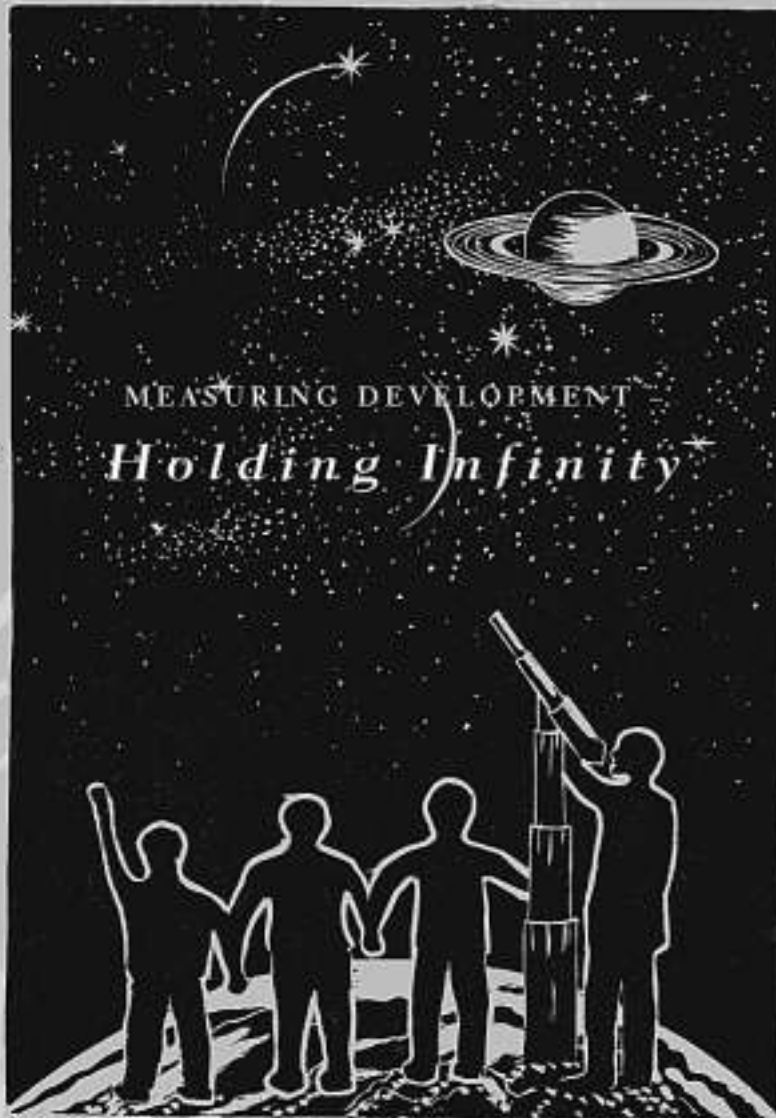
In this point lies the final role for the leadership of organisations that best support developmental practice – that of challenging the terms under which they work, when they are clearly unworkable seen from the point of view of a developmental approach.

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Realising this vision is not made easier by the environment in which we work. The easier path is to abandon development to the lofty heights of principle and to tread the low road, measuring through quantity, managing the processes of others without looking at self, abandoning a vision of best practice, and focusing our practical work simply on the visible and the material. Walking the high road is a lonely struggle, the results of which are shown unevenly, imperfectly and often, are rolled back as we fall into bad habits, lose sight of our purpose, and give in to pressure. But achievement lies not in approximating to yet another blueprint for organisational success. Rather it is found in the very striving to deepen developmental practice, and to build around it, the organisations that best support it.



ANNUAL REPORT 2000/2001



MEASURING DEVELOPMENT

*Holding Infinity*

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE ASSOCIATION



The 2000/2001 Annual Report, *Measuring Development – Holding Infinity*, tackled the issue of practice, and organising for practice, from the point of view of measurement. Evaluating development interventions has always been a vexed and contentious field. This will inevitably be so, implies this Annual Report, until measurement becomes directly coupled to practice. Once again, it is *practice* which is wanting, and no amount of fancy footwork will make up for a paucity of focused, coherent and disciplined practice.



### What is it that we are seeking to measure?

There is a general acceptance that social development is distinct from infrastructural and economic development. Equally, there is acceptance that social development is integral to the sustainability of other, material forms of development. It is through social development that individual, organisational and community capacities are cultivated, and it is these that allow infrastructural and economic development to take hold and persist.

However, and despite acceptance of the centrality of social development, approaches to implementation of development initiatives remain better suited to managing and measuring material development. It is incongruous that we seek to support and pursue social development, but we do not adapt our practices and policies accordingly. An acceptance of the importance of ‘capacity building’ in development does not make for an approach to social development, and neither does adoption of participatory field techniques.

Instead, social development is pursued blindly. We hope that if we put all the measurable conditions in place – availability of resources, information, opportunity, and even work at changing behaviours – then somehow, magically, something will change inside of people that will make all the difference. But we don’t go there. We don’t look inside ourselves, or inside those with whom we work and into whose lives we tread. We don’t incorporate this central aspect of our work into our professional development, our training, our conscious frame of reference.

CDRA’s Annual Reports over the years have explored this contradiction between intended and operational strategy from various angles, and we shall not repeat our arguments here. However, we do need to restate our view that when we are measuring – seeking to see change – in social development, we are essentially measuring shifts in relationship.

To elaborate: Social development is about human development. This is not the realm of the purely internal, not in the field of individual self-development. It is social relationship, that invisible but richly alive space between people that constitutes so much of what it is to be human at all. Development happens not between things, but between people.

Development interventions tend to be introduced on the understanding that all is not well within those relationships, and that something can be done about it. We, in collaboration with the recipients of our intervention, identify a problem, a lack. Often this starts with a material absence – a lack of houses, a lack of water, a lack of facilities for children, a lack of capital to start projects.



In coming to understand the reasons underlying the problems, we move quickly to relationship. Women lack power in their communities and in their relationships with men; leaders are not accountable to their followers; members of staff do not trust their managers; 'locals' are disempowered by 'ex-pats'; civil society organisations do not challenge their governments; NGOs fear speaking out to their donors for fear of losing funds. The 'lack' lies in our capacity, our confidence, to engage in robust, effective relationships in which our humanity is expressed and recognised.

The 'added value' that we development practitioners bring to the equation – beyond the material resources at our disposal – is the view that people can develop their capacities to manage their own lives. They can take charge of how they relate to their circumstances, they have the power within themselves to begin to change the relationships of which they are a part.

We are not naive and we know that unequal, unhealthy and overly dependent relationships are not 'all inside the mind'. They are as they are because they yield some benefit, or protection (or they used to) and it is simply too difficult to move on. When people begin to change their relationships, sometimes at our behest, they know best that they may be imperilling their material wellbeing, even physical safety. At the very least they are beginning to let go of the relative comfort of the known. They are rocking the boat. This is precisely why our work must be approached with such caution, respect for the pace at which people are able to move, and willingness to hear concerns, anxieties and resistance.

But, if we work in social development, we are obliged to acknowledge that it is in this realm of intervening into and changing of relationships that we have chosen to work. Strengthening, supporting, accompanying those individuals, groups, organisations and communities that have become stuck, often as victims, in relationships that do not work. We walk with them towards increasing agency in their own lives, less and less subject to the structures and constraints of others.

...

Our description of the audacity of social development practice is not a call to stop doing it. There is great validity, and honour, in choosing to work here. It involves acting directly on the view that the inner, invisible capacities of both individuals and social formations are the most enduring, and therefore integral towards achieving sustainable development.

...

Measurement of social development – seen as shifts in relationship – cannot happen against externally generated benchmarks.

Development is not always visible – like a plant growing under the surface of the ground, a great deal may be happening that is not readily apparent. We need to develop the capacities to access and understand this movement in order to have a full understanding of the processes at work – be it in preparation for an intervention, or as part of a process of understanding its impact.

This demands a good understanding of the rhythms and patterns of human, group, organisational and community development ... It also demands a simultaneous ability to understand

each situation's unique circumstances in its own context and time; where things are coming from and where they are going to in their own terms.

It is such understanding that must come to life in our everyday practice in the field, in our very relationships with those with whom we work, and in the ways in which we express ourselves to those outside of the field. This is what is being measured in social development.

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### **The current state of play**

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'Official' measurement is the domain of another approach and here a great deal of measurement is going on. In this approach, we work largely with counting as our major measurement tool. The number of women attending workshops. The number of boreholes sunk. The number of children fed. The number of houses built. The number of people trained. The number of people who may eventually be reached, or touched, by all of it. The amount of money it cost. The length of time it took. Bringing it all together, we do cost-benefit analyses and explore ways of 'fast-tracking' development.

This emphasis on the quantitative is reinforced by a special twist. We are both constrained from going beyond simple measurement-as-counting, and conveniently relieved of the challenge to do so, by the predominant approach to programme planning – the logical framework. In this approach, measurement of impact is, ideally, provided for from the start through setting meticulously cascaded objectives, goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound) and plans of action.

Implementation is presumed to follow these guidelines and even the environmental shifts have already been anticipated. And herein lies the twist: such a powerful approach to planning insinuates itself into the very fabric of all that follows it. This approach to development is linear, predictable and quantifiable. Effectively, it prescribes both the methods of implementation and of measuring impact.

The logical framework has a great deal of merit. Emerging out of a tradition geared towards precision planning and effective strategic operations, it offers a comprehensive approach to tackling management of complex manoeuvres. In a system with clear command structures and reliable lines of communication, the logical framework is an ideal tool for getting things done. It simplifies complex tasks, identifies priorities and allocates responsibility and lines of accountability. Even in the broad realm of development, the logical framework may be useful for large-scale operations, and is particularly suited to effective and efficient delivery of material products and resources.



However, its 'fit' is not quite as comfortable when such delivery is wound up with the aim of social development, when the success of such delivery is dependent on effective social development, as is increasingly the case. Here, the strongest features of the logical framework begin to work against it.

First, an approach that really purports to anticipate what life will throw up – be it environmental shifts or unexpected players in that environment – may be 'logical', in a formal sense, but it is simply not sensible. Development happens in an open and constantly shifting environment out of which broad trends may be only roughly identified and tentatively anticipated. To invest any more is to risk committing to something that may not be required. Effectively, working with the logical framework demands of one to think, simultaneously about what is really going on, and also about what would be going on, were things going according to plan. Very practically, it requires that practitioners spend a great deal of time rationalising, when they could be doing other things.

Second, measurement of impact in this format requires only that the practitioner or evaluator checks that 'the logframe was implemented', and provides reasonable explanation for why it wasn't implemented where that is the case. Yet such impact will only be in evidence if occurring in a stable environment, into a predictable community, from a functional and stable organisation, capable of the planning required, and with an effective field practice, capable of implementing as planned. It is an understatement to say that the situation in development is a lot more uneven and uncontrollable than that.

Third, and despite laborious attempts to make space for the 'qualitative', the measures provided for in the logical framework are ultimately concerned with quantity. While this is one valid, and important measure in development practice, it is not sufficient. Considering the proponents of the logframe's concern with 'impact', it is ironic that this approach risks continuous justification of activities that have no impact at all because there is little provision for a measure of impact beyond what can be counted.

Finally, and this is perhaps the greatest absurdity underlying use of this approach in social development, the logframe holds all the thinking. Once a project or programme has been thoroughly 'logframed' (this approach has even generated new verbs), little thinking work should remain to be done. Thought and implementation are separated and the plan can be put into action, machine-like, by functionaries who need only 'do' their part of the puzzle, not see the big picture, and not decide, reflect or judge.

In this approach, development work, which is utterly dependent on thoughtful practitioners if it is to have a chance at success, is perforce separated from that very thinking. Even where organisations develop their own logical frameworks, in a participatory way, this holds true. The very nature of the logical framework is to break elements of an intervention into smaller and smaller parts, with no subsequent practical or conceptual reintegration. The big picture is lost.

Not all organisations, however, devise their own logframes. There is a vibrant industry of consultants who 'logframe' proposals on behalf of organisations. That this is possible suggests either that thinking happens right outside of those organisations (clearly not true), or that thinking happens despite the logframe, and that what goes into the logframe is an expensive, ultimately wasteful exercise, as it pertains to real-life practice on the ground.



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At its best, this approach challenges organisations to think carefully about what they are doing, what they hope to do and what they think might happen next. It makes things simple, so those elements of development work that can be simplified can benefit from the view of the logframe.

However, using the logical framework uncritically, and without any accompanying alternative frameworks being brought into play, results in stunted capacities to penetrate the surface and see the real difference our interventions make. It results in a profound inability to describe that difference to others. Lingering only in this way of seeing, our appreciation of stakeholder voices is experienced as criticism or as more, competing, demands being made of us. Our understanding of context is reduced to an excuse for why things did not go as planned.

The logical framework is fundamentally incompatible with social development work.

...

This really is the problem with current approaches to measurement in development. It is a problem, not of theory or method, but of practice.

### **Living measurements – Grasping a situation for ourselves**

How do practitioners deepen their abilities to truly grasp situations, including the impact of their interventions? It begins with cultivating the capacities to be participant facilitators in the art of truly developmental relationship-changing interventions. There is great danger in believing that development can be delivered through short, 'one-off' contractual relationships implemented by consultants who spend as much time in the air as on the ground. The real facilitators of developmental processes need to have intimate relationships over time.

Relationship must become a primary (if not the primary) focus for those practitioners committed to practising developmentally.

...



Having relationship as the primary focus of development puts the developmental practitioner at the very centre of his or her practice. The same applies to the development agency. It is inconceivable that you can successfully intervene into the development process of another, if you are not fully conscious of, and engaged in your own.

This is where any effective development intervention has to begin – with an understanding of yourself on your own path of development. If you are involved in bringing about change in others through relationship with them, they will only achieve it if you change too. An ongoing striving towards an increased understanding, consciousness, acceptance, honesty and openness in relation to your own needs is therefore necessary before moving into developmental relationships with others.

The second challenge is to understand as much as you can about the developmental paths of the person, group, organisation or community you are intervening into, as well as that out of which you are working. For most of us, what we are ‘working out of’ is an employing organisation – an NGO, a donor, a combination thereof.

...

Those intervening into the development processes of others must be conscious of these same processes in themselves, in those they are intervening into, and out of – and then create a picture of the relationships that exist between them. It is in the changing nature and quality of these relationships that development is ultimately measured.

If every agent of development were measuring their impact in shifts in the relationships they have on either side of themselves in the chain, the overlaps would result in the circle itself eventually beginning to move.

Measuring development is in the first instance about the practitioner’s ability to see – themselves, themselves in relation to others, others and others in relation to one another. The practitioner must see on all these planes, and hold them – in the mind’s eye – conceptually distinct and simultaneously as one.

Reflecting such measurement is about an ability to describe what is seen and experienced. It is upon this basis, in any event, that many measurements in development are actually made. Called gut-feel, instinct, a ‘feeling’, intuition, a ‘sense’. The cultivation of precisely these capacities in all those seeking to influence and measure development is what is needed.

### **What does it take?**

While most people do have an instinctive ability to describe a situation holistically (more often exercised in telling stories after work, telling jokes and in interacting with children), it is seldom that this basic human trait is actively and consciously embraced as part of professional practice. Yet it is precisely this ability that requires work for effective reading of development. It is the ability to read and describe relationships and how they change over time.



It is possible to describe a dysfunctionally dependent relationship and the associated attitudes and feelings of those trapped in them. Similarly it is possible to describe the behaviours, achievements and feelings of those who have achieved high levels of independence. Interdependence, too, is a relationship state that we know and can describe.

These descriptions work best as stories. Stories have served Africa and the rest of the world well for centuries in conveying what is most important to communicate. Holding, as they do, the 'whole' of a situation, stories offer an appropriate vehicle for sharing measurement of social development. Through cultivating our ability to tell stories properly, we can both convey and protect the kernel of what has been sought, and what has been achieved.



...

Effective development practitioners who are able to render clear readings of development – reliable 'measures' of where things have come to – and who are able to recount these, have several characteristics.

First, they have a working appreciation that their work concerns human development and the mediation of relationships between themselves and clients as well as amongst clients. Twinned to this, they have a very explicit understanding of themselves, and an ability to see themselves within any intervention. This implies a capacity for reflection, for detachment even while being deeply engrossed and present.

Second, and paradoxically, the effective development practitioner has a great capacity for intimacy – with people and with situations. Intimacy is the hallmark of a developmental practice. It is the essence of being in relationship. All this is fundamental to 'reading development'. When we are not prepared to risk relationship then we are fearful, and we protect our space by measuring the space of others. This can never render an accurate reading – and neither is it developmental in that it does little for the development of the party being 'measured'.

...

Fourth, they have knowledge – of human and social development and of how things develop, over time – and, most important, an attitude of openness and curiosity. If we approach people with a view to catching them out, a view to making them do something that we believe they should do, they will close down and shut us out. If we approach with genuine interest in what



is going on, in discovering what we do not yet know, the efforts to reveal and show will surpass any expectations we may have of measurement instruments.

...

Finally, they have a conscious appreciation of their practice, whatever that may be. To really understand development – to read it – it is necessary to practise it, in some form or another. If we are only asking it of others, we are doomed to failure and frustration. If, in some small way, we are attempting to work developmentally in our relationships – with clients, colleagues, trainees, recipients, even family – then we are immediately humbled and better able to appreciate the enormity of the task that those practising social development in the field have set themselves.

### **How do we cultivate our abilities to see development?**

We cultivate our abilities to see development through an integrated and continuous striving to deepen the abilities and qualities described above. As in that section, much of what is said here relates to general development of practice, not just that aspect of practice that concerns seeing and describing. This is true. We are suggesting that in order to get measurement right, we need to work on our practice as a whole. This does not negate the role of external evaluations. It simply puts them in their proper context and place, within an overall approach to development that incorporates measurement as it goes along.

To cultivate our abilities, we need to begin with curiosity, and openness, a willingness to learn, to really understand what is happening in development and how it can be better understood. Without this basic stance, we will never see development, no matter what sophisticated techniques are adopted, as our own capacity for absorbing impressions, data and evidence is blocked.

Working on this is difficult. We need to be mindful of the easy assumptions we make, the ways in which we close down possibilities before they have had a chance of expressing themselves, the ways in which we shut ourselves off from seeing and hearing that which does not make immediate sense to us.

We need also to constantly examine our attachment to grand plans, and the difficulty we have in relinquishing that attachment when circumstances change. How much easier it is to demand that a workshop go ahead, that a person use the correct language, that beneficiaries keep up with our schedules. How hard it is to be open to hearing what is needed, why things have changed, what it asks of oneself.

Keeping oneself open is best achieved in relationship with colleagues, or like-minded practitioners. Here, the challenge to see things differently, to let go, to consider alternatives, is immediate and bracing. Doing it alone requires great self-discipline and quiet contemplation, but it can, and must, be done.

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## Formulating and sharing an approach

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To really work in relationship – partnership – requires great capacity to listen and to engage. It would be easy to say “Stories are all very well, but how will we know what has happened to the money?” We have argued here that transparency is a non-negotiable in the development relationship, and that present practices may obscure it, rather than enhance it. The challenge to donors is to ensure that their relationships with recipients really do allow them to hear what has happened to the resources entrusted to them. To develop the capacity to hear the real impact of development practice, alongside accounts of activities undertaken and monies spent.



For practitioners, however, the challenges of the present reality remain. We must face the fact that many of the demands placed on us, including those around measurement, are so inimical to good development practice, indeed, so contradictory of its stated best intentions, that a correction is demanded. To simply comply means neglecting those with whom we work, and severely compromising the very principles and good intentions that bring us into development work in the first place.

And here, our task – for those of us who measure as part of our everyday work – is to develop our practice. It would be easy to blame decision-makers and those who set the frameworks for all that goes wrong. Conveniently, this stance allows us to avoid looking at what we, the hands-on practitioners, do to perpetuate inadequacy in the sector. For the system to change, all actors in it must let go, must change.

The big mistakes being made in the field of measurement are big also because we see them from deep within the gaps in our own practice. As we work on strengthening that practice, we will develop a stronger and stronger basis upon which to engage meaningfully and powerfully with those things we must work with that simply don't make sense. There is very little point in theoretical argument. Our very arguments, and alternatives, must be grounded in evident practice.

The task of measuring development is the task of holding infinity. As practitioners the task is in the first instance ours to develop our capacities to simultaneously hold, in our mind's eye, a picture of the whole into which we are intervening; its changing character as our intervention; alongside all others takes hold; and ultimately, our part in all of that. Holding distinct and together, all at the same time.

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and tremendous effort, but  
in spite of it all, little  
**annual report**  
changed. Meanwhile, on the  
Two thousand and one / Two thousand and two  
ragged and chaotic margins,  
a small band were putting  
together a centre for develop-  
ment practice. High in the  
hills, moving from place to  
place, they had seen the  
effects of empire, the  
ravaging of body and soul.  
These were those who forged  
alternatives, who searched and  
sometimes stumbled upon other  
ways. Hoping to

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT RESOURCE ASSOCIATION



# Forces against Humanity

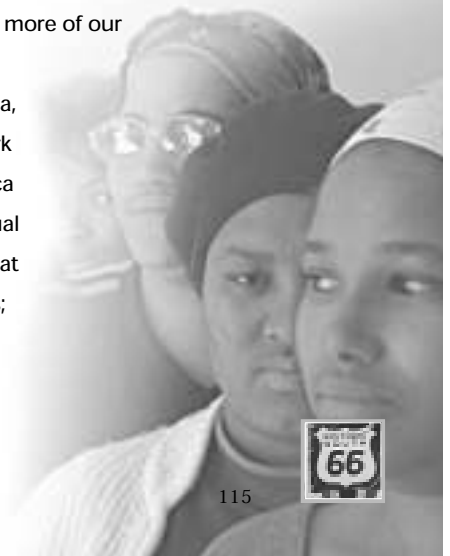
*'Not steering by the venal chart  
That tricked the mass for private gain,  
We rise to play a greater part'.*

Frank Scott

## SHOCKED INTO SILENCE, AWAKENED INTO SPEECH

The 2001/02 Annual Report, in spite of the norm which had been set, does not have a title. In this, there is a certain indication of world events having shocked all those who care, into silence. At the same time, the Report contains a new approach to words and subject matter, a certain indication that all those who care are obliged to talk and think in new ways. During the intervening year the Twin Tower blocks in New York had been attacked and destroyed; the United States of America had reacted vindictively and aggressively. CDRA was constrained to respond differently. In the words of the Chairperson's introduction to this Annual Report: 'This year, the CDRA decided that it could not rest within the confines of its own developed style. This year has seen, somehow, a gathering and concentrating of the inhuman, the unacceptable, the horrifying, on a global scale. Cruelty and callous disregard vie with power and plenty, make one stop in one's tracks at the sheer weight of it all. Are we passing beyond the limits of our own humanity? We cannot simply continue as we were. This Annual Report does not constitute a response. It is hard to imagine an adequate response. But we have to make meaning of what we experience, we have to tell the story as truly as we know how; this remains an aspect of humanity left to us. And out of that meaning, from the unravelling story, we have to take up the thread, and lead ourselves into a future more of our own choosing. We cannot simply continue as we were.'

During this year one of the founders of CDRA had taken a sabbatical in America, to explore further the underpinnings of the approach which informed CDRA's work in social development. On his return he wrote the story of his sojourn in America during this auspicious time. This story, which formed a significant part of the Annual Report, is included below in full. In previous Annual Reports it has been noted that the CDRA's approach was based on developing the ability to 'read' social situations; the importance of story-telling to an adequate reading has also been promoted.



Both such reading and story-telling have been recognised as acquired arts. The story below, then, provides a reading of a complex social situation. It is included in full because, unlike memos, proposals, research results and so on, stories cannot be summarised; the meaning lies in the telling of the story, in the words and phrases used, the connections made. The narrative is a whole which cannot be reduced.

The narrative is also presented here because subsequent events and the turning of the last few years have born out the reading that was made then. In a sense, therefore, this reading of a complex social situation, this assessment and penetration into the inner dynamic of a developing social situation, both bears out and provides an indicator of the approach to the social which forms the foundation of CDRA's developmental methodology. It stands as an example of what has been alluded to in various previous Annual Reports.



## **A SABBATICAL JOURNEY – Being a brief account of a provincial's six-month sojourn in the heart of the Empire**

### **PRELUDE**

#### **January 2002, the village of Philmont, upstate New York**

It's almost mid-morning now, and I'm driving the truck back down into the village, after my early hilltop visit to the cows, they being our responsibility – we look after them and we get a roof over our heads in return; now Sue, my beloved, is ill in bed, the numbing cold having found its insidious way into her inner ear, and the cows are all mine for awhile. The truck is huge and battered a dirty grey, a growling mutha of a vehicle which slouches and slides through the snow despite its four-wheel drive and the fact that it actually has six wheels; this is a weather-beaten haulage job that's seen more winters than it cares to think about. On my hands are filthy but resilient rawhide gloves, my snow boots are full of cow muck and reach up to my knees, my jeans are streaked brown and yellow with old cattle encounters. All around me in the truck are



rusted tools and longhandled spades and pitchforks and battered audio cassettes dusty with irrelevance and pretty much crunched underfoot. At my feet sits Saki, the Japanese Akita hound who will attack any dog of any size or persuasion within sight or smell, though she and me have become fast friends; guess I'm not a dog, though I'm stinking like one. Next to me on the seat is a resplendent copy of Goethe's Scientific Writings, and a brand new hardcover of Steiner's 'Nature's Open Secret', as well as drawing paper, pencils, and a tree branch or two that I'm using for observation practice – for I'm a dedicated man, and while the cows are munching and if everything else has been done I try to get in a bit of reading or observing, sitting up on that snow white hilltop amidst the bales of hay, while the dog gnaws on old skull bones, and the black cats watch with their yellow eyes and their tails twitching as if in profound condemnation. America can be a bit of alright, it seems, and this sabbatical feels good. But this morning I'm not easy in my soul, and my mind isn't at rest, it heaves like a tide between two poles; there's a disturbance in my thinking like grit in the eye, and I can't seem to shake my head to clear it as the truck tumbles and lurches down the hill, approaching the village like some uncouth behemoth crawling out from the depths of an unimagined sea.

Last night we received this email, telling of the stabbing, back in Cape Town, of Karen's father, Karen being a close friend of ours. Her father was stabbed by an intruder, in the heart, yesterday, and is now in intensive care; it seems, according to the doctors, that while he has had to have open heart surgery, and suffered a heart attack as a result of the stabbing, he was 'lucky', and they believe he will survive; though does he even want to? This is part of what is swirling in my mind – does he want to carry on living in a world which has so little respect for an old man who has largely lived his life, and is now forced to try to defend it against hopeless odds?

This instance takes place in South Africa, and raises questions about the point of our being here, in america; but it also seems to bring to a head, through detailed personal anecdote, the entire global perplexity that we appear immured in, quivering like jelly-moulds of humanity-in-caricature before the anonymity and inevitability of increasing violence of all descriptions. Although the incident is so quintessentially South African, it seems, from this perspective over here, to be a result of the spread of whatever it is that the american way of life signifies. And brings me back to grappling with why we have landed ourselves here, and what can be learned.

On the other hand, and at the same time, I'm feeling elated. This morning, sitting amongst the bales of hay, the cats on either side and the dog chewing its newfound deer leg some yards away, and the silence profoundly quiet within the whiteness of snow, I suddenly spy a fox. Tall, lithe, long, well-built, red fur with black snout, it walks through the snow about fifty yards away, completely oblivious of me and the cats and the dog and the cows and the barn and all the accoutrements of farming. Oblivious is not the right word, for the fox seems supremely aware, vibrantly sensitive. But he walked through his own domain and, though he walked through the farm, this was no farm to him, but a wilderness in which he reigned with a haughty confidence. Within seconds, the cats had whipped down into the bales of hay, and were buried out



of sight; within seconds the dog had caught the scent and was off after the stranger. But was already way too late, for the fox was far too wily for the dog, even in the laying down of its scent. I sat agasp and agape, long after the fox had disappeared, for within the half minute of its walk across my line of vision it was as if a veil had been rent, between me and it, as if I had been allowed to enter another world. From my place on the farm I had seen, as if peering over a fence, into an entirely different world, a different dimension. Two worlds co-existed, in the same place – the farm on the one hand, and the fox's domain on the other. I had been privileged to see the fox, not as part of my world, not as a thing to be used or abused, but as a world unto itself, with its own reason for being. It was not a part of something else, but a whole in its own right.

That this was a new experience for me was the surprising part; I have had far wilder experiences in southern Africa. What was the big deal, why did I feel so ... how can I say ... touched? I realised: because I was learning to see in new ways, learning to see whole worlds where before I had only seen reduced parts. I was learning to move into those other worlds, to move between worlds, with a respect which had a new quality, an added dimension to it. This was what I had come here for, and somehow it was integrally tied to the questions which had arisen about violence, and which wouldn't go away. The stabbing of Karen's father, and the incident with the fox, came together in this journey into the heart of the most powerful nation on earth. In ways that I could not yet fathom, for this was all happening at the very periphery of my consciousness, where the depths of uncertainty and doubt beckoned.

In such fashion I bumped back into the village, and was struck once again, as every morning, by the blandness of the place, a blandness which seems to stretch from horizon to horizon inside my own mind and within the american psyche. Another day in paradise. I brought the truck to a halt and was inside the house before realising that I had not switched the engine off. I went outside to kill the idling motor, reflecting on how quickly we can take on the culture that surrounds us, however inadvertently. America is full of idling vehicles, sending smoke signals up to the Keepers of the Ozone Layer, giving them the finger, in a riveting reversal of prayer.

### **Travelling the Empire: Another day in paradise**

*First, travels in space.*

We landed in Phoenix, Arizona, to pick up a car which an old friend was lending to us for the duration of our stay. Turned out to be a white convertible, and with the top down, and sunglasses on, we felt truly anonymous, ubiquitous, and protected; rather than searching for it, we had become the american dream, and could travel incognito.

Leaving Phoenix – an immaculate desert city flawed with the heady fumes of gas from too many fattened cars, and chlorine wafting up from the flaccid-blue swimming pools – we headed north. Soon to enter, in northern Arizona, the Navajo Reservation, where the wide smoothness of the





highways slows to a gravel trickle, the cars transform into rusted death traps, and the dirt poor, sideways-shunted communities eke a living from the unreclaimed desert. Suddenly we were back in reality, we were back home, we could feel again, and the feeling was both of pain and of love. But soon enough we were through the other side – you keep moving on, in america; at all costs, keep moving on – and headed into the canyon lands of Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. This is tourist country; but this country is truly stupendous, the canyons and peaks and rock formations and desert landscapes extending into a vastness way beyond anything we had ever experienced before, a place of monumental proportions. Then we were through this too, and into California, to the capital city of Sacramento, where our studies would begin.

While in Sacramento, we travelled northeast into the hills, through old gold mining towns, where we experienced the wonders of a north american fall. We travelled north through the green forests of Oregon to the wet coastal areas of Washington State. We travelled south to the hiplands of San Francisco, Palo Alto and Stanford. Mostly, though, we stayed in Sacramento, attending the Goethean studies programme of an adult education college. We realised soon enough that while Goethean methodology was indeed what we had come for, and rightly so, nevertheless its treatment at the college was both too superficial and obfuscatingly esoteric – but more of this later. The point, though, is that within three months we had decided to leave Sacramento, a city so boring, so redneck (as they call it here), so conservative, so vacuous, so flat that it is almost concave. Every caricature which we have developed about america comes true in this city, with its bloated consumerism, its nice politeness and smiling acceptance behind which lurks ... how else can I say this ... violence – cold and repressed and deadly. We became convinced that the city survives on a heady mixture of Prozac, Viagra and Ritalin. The streets are dead except for the incessant cars travelling down the three-lane side streets, no-one walks, not even round the block; malls rule; and people care more about the characters on their TV screens than they do about their neighbours, or even their families. S'true's bob.



So then we left, to head for a Goethean studies programme in upstate New York on the east coast. Four thousand miles and three weeks later we were there, having travelled across the continent in the dead of winter, in our tiny convertible. This was an immaculate journey, like sailing across a vast sea in a tiny sailboat, canvas flapping in the wind. Drifting across mountain ranges, through snow and ice and high wind, from the rugged north through the wastelands of Texas to the south, where we finally felt at home again, in the crazy cosmopolitan carouse of New Orleans. Up then through the flatlands of the old slave states, then into the Appalachians, through some really wild mountain country, eventually to upstate New York, and the village of Philmont. Here we settled, studied, looked after cows, made close new connections, integrated into a mature, intelligent and alternative community of pioneers in new forms of living. Studied at The Nature Institute (but more later). From here we travelled to Boston, and to New York a couple of times, and did some country skiing. The east coast is very different from the west, more aware, intellectually astute, rigorous and consequential, less forgiving and vacuous, more forthright, interested to engage in real conversation. Still and yet, always america.

Till finally we headed back west, across middle america, which is like some surrealist's version of hell, three days of driving 13 hours a day. Past, for example, St Louis, where the fast food franchises and the motel chains and the vehicle lots stretch endlessly on and on and on until we feel as if we are driving on a treadmill, fast but pointlessly, trapped like hamsters on a wheel; past, for example, on the plains of Kansas, vast cattle farms housing hundreds of thousands of de-horned cattle squashed tight into tiny pens, the stench of which hits you long before they come into sight – does the smell of evil travel faster than the speed of light?

Finally, the plains give way to wavering landscapes lifted up into the blue, and we hit New Mexico, and there in the mountains we could relax again, and spend three days exploring native american ruins and culture and lifestyle, until finally heading back for Phoenix.



The point is, we've seen a lot of america.

### *Second, travels in time*

We have travelled through time as well as space.

In the first instance, as we travel across america, there is the strange juxtaposition between modernity, including the history of the last few hundred years, and antiquity. Many countries have the ancient past living side by side with modernity, South Africa too. There are inevitable struggles between traditional and contemporary ways of life. What is strange about the american juxtaposition, at least for a South African, is that such struggle does not exist. The native americans have been largely eliminated, physically; culturally, they have evaporated like the hundreds of gallons of water which transpire daily from, say, bluegum trees in their non-native South African habitat – in other words, without visibility, with our not even being aware of the phenomenon at all. For the american psyche, it's as if the native american never was, though every steakhouse bears an over-designed replica of Geronimo and his compatriots glaring down from the walls as if to ensure that the french fries are adequately slap. And yet, and so, there is an emptiness at the heart of america, a vacuousness; like candy-floss (spun candy?) which looks inviting until it melts to nothing in your mouth. When we search for the heart of america, we come up time and again with the realisation – there's nothing there.

In some ways the native american phenomenon is an instance of a wider reality: america has shaken off the fetters of all the old cultures out of which it was formed, and has found utter freedom from most kinds of constraint. (And it has, too, no resource constraints. It is powerfully instructive to see what america has done with this freedom, but we'll 'go there later', as they would say). The native american phenomenon, however, is also unique, because this is not a culture which was moved away from, but rather one which was systematically annihilated, to



the extent that even its memory has been immolated on the bonfires of progress. As we travelled through america, there seemed to be a ghost-like absence at the heart of everything, and it expresses itself as a kind of nothingness – you reach in and try to grab something of substance and your hand closes on air. This is, I think, one of the root causes of the suppressed violence which you meet everywhere – for in spite of the fact that america is so free of crime that every house we stayed in, or car we drove, ignored locks and keys entirely – in spite of this, I felt more fear in america than I have anywhere else in the world; there is a menace lurking behind the facade, and it never goes away. Few interactions are entirely authentic, is another way of putting it; and their inauthenticity arises out of this lack of heart substance – they themselves don't know where they're coming from, and deep down they're scared and angry. Bewildered by their inability to get to the heart of themselves, they discover at the centre only a void, peopled by the ghosts of those mature and wise presences who lived with some care and respect in this great land. It is an unnerving and wraith-like thing, this ever-palpable absence.

Then too, we travelled, every day and every minute, through myriad bite-size chunks of time, a myriad separate 'events', each discrete, fragmented from the whole, scattered like razor-sharp glass shards glaring in the sun, so that one no longer knows quite where one is in the passage of time. There is little continuity anymore, little respect for whatever inner necessities may, from places deep within the fabric of the world, govern that passage of time. Here, now, you move on, as fast as possible, through a kaleidoscope of disparate events, time scattering like little balls of polystyrene. The very fabric of time can feel as if it is collapsing, and with it, the fabric of social process, of community, of moral imperative, of ecological integrity. Of integrity as such. Instantaneous response takes precedence over every other value. When time is so splintered, there is no longer coherence, nothing is joined; and the greatest casualty is relationship itself. And without relationship the whole dissolves, meaning evaporates, and we are left, to paraphrase Lawrence Durrell, with 'the pieces of a broken wineglass'.

Our third journey through time, though, has become the most harrowing. We arrived two days before '9/11', and we lived there for the following six months, as the grip of the Empire tightened. Perhaps america has always been oppressive, perhaps it has always been a police state in which the myth of freedom has been the proverbial wool pulled over the eyes, the carrot to the stick ; god knows, it was many years ago, after all, that Bob Dylan penned those lines: 'And the poor white man is used in the hands of them all like a tool/ he's taught in his school, from the first by the rule/ that the law is with him, to protect his white skin/ and to keep up his hate, so he never thinks straight/ 'bout the shape that he's in, but it ain't him to blame/ he's only a pawn in their game'. This is not about racism, its about being a pawn, in their game, and who are they? Who are they? Are they an oligarchy, a conspiracy, simply the manifest shadow of the myth of freedom? Noam Chomsky believes the great constitution of america itself was written to protect their interests. Whoever they are, and whatever they represent, these people who themselves are represented by the faceless anonymity of George W. Bush, they are Caesar come

to haunt us once more, to straddle the globe and impose their will. Lest we should ever underestimate.

america had been attacked by a hatred so implacable that no-one bothered to claim responsibility, or to explain. To the attackers, it clearly needed no explanation. To most of the horrified world, horrified though it was, it needed little explanation. But americans could not understand. So they followed their President, raised their flags and went to war. To a war which, quite obviously, can never be won by force of arms, in which the enemy is everyone who doesn't comply; a war which can end only through the most profound shift in consciousness imaginable (on all of our parts, not only american). Yet as we travelled america, during perhaps the most auspicious time the world has ever known, we were confronted by a deafening silence. It is as if, during this time which calls for the deepest questioning imaginable, america has lost the ability to question. It has been struck dumb. Not least amongst the reasons for this must be the fact that americans now know the price of such questioning: the enemy is everyone who doesn't comply.

Dylan again: 'And if my thought dreams could be seen/ they'd probably put my head in a guillotine'.

One morning in Boston, we were travelling the underground with the close friend with whom we were staying, heading downtown towards her work with an NGO which defends the rights of immigrant workers. After many weeks of such deafening silence, it was good to be with a Bostonian who was politically astute, aware, and articulate. She was speaking with us about her perspective on america, on what she thought was really happening, on the newly legislated Patriot Act which permits detention without trial on suspicion of terrorism, reminding us all of apartheid days. As she spoke, her voice got lower and lower, despite the increasing rumble and roar of the underground as it rattled the tracks in its staccato tattoo. Her eyes shifted constantly amongst the passengers, watching to see who might be listening. We were stunned; wasn't this the land of the free? In fact, naive us, it took a while to comprehend that her voice was lowering out of fear. Eventually she stopped speaking entirely; the tension had become too much for her. Across the aisle sat two student types; one of them bent over and said, quietly too, and looking over his shoulder as he did so, it's okay, we're on your side. This is america, the new Empire.

A housemate with whom we stayed, a very quiet and gentle French-Canadian, was beaten, handcuffed and arrested for questioning a police officer about a minor traffic incident which the officer had caused. When we expressed outrage and pleaded with him to lay charges himself, his reply was that all the advice he had received was to remain as quiet and unobtrusive as possible, to do nothing and hope that he would get away with a minor sentence, in a situation in which it was clearly he who had been wronged, because 'the atmosphere has changed here, and they will simply deport you'. In another conversation we parted with a woman whose last words to us were, please pray for america, please pray for us. Many such incidents. Most powerful in the end was our own feeling upon finally leaving and spending a few days in



Europe before heading home – we skipped and gambolled along the streets, as if we had been released from a delirious dream out of which we might never have awoken. The shackles were finally removed.

Perhaps we would have experienced america like this even had that September attack never happened. This would not surprise me, but rather rest my case – events have conspired to give america the opportunity which it has needed to further build the long arm of the Empire, and even turn it inward against its own people. During the time we spent in america the world feels to have changed in quite horrifying ways, which bear trying challenges for us all, even those living in the farflung provinces of the Empire.

### *Third, travels in my mind*

What meaning do I make of all this? Of course whatever I think is conditioned by where I'm coming from. I write this in the town of Ghent, Belgium. I had been back in Cape Town three weeks when I had already to fly out on my first mission – am I an evangelist or a spy? – so here I am in Ghent. A medieval town which has retained its 'old city' in its entirety, it is a closely knit conservative community living quietly and prosperously amongst some very beautiful pastel-coloured buildings and canals and cobbled squares and castles and cathedrals. I can imagine, though, a young person wanting to break out and seek their fortune, in america, for instance, where they would be free of the constraints of community and culture; it's boring here, after all. For me, having just come from there, I bask in the detailed facades of the buildings, in the small and winding streets, in the very slow pace of the residents. So from some perspectives, what I think of america would appear ludicrous.

We did have a remarkable time there. Met some remarkable people. There are many remarkable aspects to america which have not found their way into these pages; america is quite capable of doing its own PR. But it is a lonely place, frighteningly lonely. In the name of individuality, of freedom, of mobility, of economic ... what ... progress? ... there is little community life left. america's freedom has left its people lonely and depressed, overweight and addicted to trivia. Utter freedom from tradition, utter freedom from resource constraint, and with such freedom america has imprisoned itself in a feudal world where the very many work as poorly paid labourers for the very few, whose monopolies monopolise the landscape, in endless and dreary repetition. A quest for endless variety and choice has devolved down to the tackiness of infinite franchises and chains, a monotony of architecture and town planning, and the national collective penchant for shopping. Utter freedom has also resulted in a tyranny of Empire, so that whoever is not for us is against us. By definition, debate is now regarded as unpatriotic, and patriotism is rampant over freedom. As always, one polarity, through being driven to excess, has been turned into its very opposite.

And we, out here in the provinces, tend in the same direction. The Empire is mighty, after all. Where to for us?

## Hold the travelogue – what about study?

We did not choose america because we thought we'd have fun there, but because we wanted to immerse ourselves in a new way of seeing, in Goethean methodology, and in america was the only English-speaking programme we could find. On the west coast, in Sacramento. Unfortunately, the programme proved to be both vacuous and obscure, didactic and dismissive, theoretical and outrageously esoteric. Worst of all, we eventually understood that there was to be no practice; we were to be lectured at. And practice was what we had come for. Just before the winter break occurred, we heard of a Goethean scientist who ran an institute in upstate New York, Craig Holdrege of the Nature Institute. Found his email address on the Net, wrote to him, and within a couple of days had resolved to take advantage of his generosity and largesse and head across the country to work with him. He had no formal teaching programme, he said, but a couple of other people also wanted to study with him, so together we would create a programme of self-study through practice, with him as guide and mentor. This was what we had come for; we bought snow chains for our tyres and headed out across america, hearts alive once more.

We were not disappointed. To the contrary. The Nature Institute is a tiny outfit situated in a tiny village, quietly contributing to the forging of a new consciousness. Without presumption, but in fact nothing less than this. How to express Goethe's contribution succinctly, when it is so far out on the leading edge of consciousness that it needs fast horses to follow it across the ruins of the old to the lip of uncharted realms, and powerful binoculars even to begin to see the dust cloud it has left behind as it leads the way into the wide beyond?

Many books have been written; even I had written a manuscript relating Goethe's work to the social realm. I could simply provide you with some references here, and move on; or spend fifty pages trying to capture something. Of course I can do neither. So let me try to find an angle which might elicit a succinct turn of phrase.

We tend to view that which is living, the organic, with a kind of thinking and seeing which has been honed on the inanimate, the inorganic. In olden times we had a more inclusive view of the world; a sense of belonging, of inner spaces as extensive and tangible as outer spaces, a sense that the voice of god(s) spoke to us directly, of things we could understand. This was not neces-



sarily conscious; we belonged, were fashioned by the world around us, not free to do other than what was asked of us by the stars. We remained within the bounty of the given. More recently, with the rise of materialistic, scientific thinking, we have broken free, moved beyond the given, externalised our world, put it outside of ourselves so that we could see it as discrete and separate, as something to be utilised, to be controlled and manipulated to suit our needs. In so doing we have separated ourselves, created a dualism of subject and object, and in the process, whilst perhaps losing a sense of belonging and reverence, we have gained a certain freedom, and a new form of independent consciousness. In the process, the world around us has died away into a collection of inanimate things, and we have lost the living link which originally bound it all into one. Our world has fragmented, the better to control it piecemeal, to free ourselves of the constraints of wholeness, where everything has consequences for everything else. So we have achieved independence. And yet, our world is being torn asunder as the fragments fly apart and collide again, in increasing tension, as the results of our discrete manipulations are born in on us. We have taken freedom, but lost the plot.

Goethe's contribution is really to the development of a new level of consciousness. His approach is to differentiate between organic and inorganic, between animate and inanimate; while a materialist, instrumentalist thinking is legitimate with respect to the inanimate world (and it is this thinking that we have begun to take as fundamental, it is this thinking that we impose on the world around us), it is not at all legitimate for the organic world, the world of the living. (Of course Goethe would not have used all this terminology; apart from anything else, he was a doer, not a theorist – but here we're trying to understand him). To approach, appreciate, the world of the living, we have to see the whole which lies enfolded inside the parts; the living link which is invisible to the eye which cannot imagine it. We have to see the world not as fixed and finished but as in a process of becoming, a process of continuous metamorphosis, change and development; and we have to focus our gaze on that process itself, rather than simply on the discrete pieces which precipitate out from it, which manifest from time to time. And to do so we have to get inside that process, under the skin of the world, so to speak; we have to see ourselves as participants, not simply as observers; as implicate, not as separate. Indeed, nothing is separate from anything else. Yet at the same time he is not advocating a going back to a prior phase of consciousness, not at all; it is to take previous phases, which we have set against each other, and combine them into a new form of consciousness. So that we can be both outside and inside, both participant and observer, both able to appreciate and able to guide out of an appreciative freedom, at the same time. A consciousness which we could say today implies a collaboration with the divine, an elevation towards co-creation.

At the centre of a Goethean approach is then to engage in what William Blake referred to as 'two-fold vision'. To see all organic, living phenomena using two modes of cognition simultaneously. On the one hand, accurate observation of, and rapt attention to the parts, to the details of what is there, to the material of the phenomenon; so that one is not seduced by conjecture.



On the other hand, an imaginative seeing into the phenomenon, a linking of the parts into one whole, attention to the relationships between the parts, to the patterns which hold the parts together. In this way contradictory modes are embraced as a way of lifting meaning from the phenomenon. Other contradictions too – seeing the phenomenon as finished and static, and seeing it as in movement, becoming. Being both observer, with the phenomenon outside of one, and participant, recognising that without you to see, there is nothing to see. Accepting the phenomenon for what it is, and reading meaning into it.

Overlaying these two opposing modes of cognition onto each other, one begins to see and appreciate in an entirely new way. So that the idea which manifests as the material phenomenon begins to emerge, and one sees into the archetypal, invisible, intangible depths which form the world. This is not the equivalent of theorising, or generalising; if one accurately engages in two-fold seeing, the third which arises as meaning, arises as a direct perception. One actually sees it. As Wittgenstein said: '... there is a kind of seeing which is also a kind of thinking ... : the seeing of connections'. Goethe referred to this as a 'delicate empiricism'. It is not an ordinary place to be; Henry Thoreau noted that: 'Wisdom does not inspect, but behold; we must look a long time before we can see'. What I am trying to convey here has nothing whatever to do with a New Age fantasy; I'm talking of the gradual honing of a disciplined, rigorous practice.

The development of this kind of thinking corresponds to what may be called organic, or formative thinking, as opposed to mechanistic and instrumentalist thinking. A thinking which is alive and mobile, able to follow the process of becoming itself, as it passes through metamorphosis and change; a thinking which is able to pick up the intent that lies behind the manifest phenomenon, the patterns or threads or energies which hold it together. We cannot see what we cannot imagine, yet what we see is not an imagination; we cannot accept what we do not see. This is a phenomenology, which avoids theorising and comes back to the phenomenon time and again, yet sees through to the whole which informs the disparate pieces.

This is all so complex, so far beyond current consciousness or practice, that few appreciate thinkers like Goethe or Wittgenstein. Yet Craig manages to render the complex accessible without becoming simplistic, and without reducing. He is a person who always holds the questions and never comes to conclusions, yet who is never vague but always precise, clear and focused. Through painstaking discipline he has, I think genuinely, turned his 'thinking into a kind of seeing', into an organ of perception. Under his guidance we all took further strides along that road.

There were four of us. We worked together about three times a week, both studying texts as well as engaging in actual observation exercises and discussion. In between, we worked on our own. This was truly a learning, rather than a teaching, environment; Craig guided and facilitated but did not impose, and never retreated into anything resembling a didactic mode. In this way we were truly



encouraged to practise, to throw ourselves into the discipline itself, and to recognise that our own questions and doubts and exercising of new faculties were the key to our growing awareness and increasing insight, rather than anything which could be given us from the outside.

And gradually, sometimes painfully and frustratingly – because this practice goes so far beyond what we have achieved with consciousness so far, goes so much against the grain of the habits we have been taught and have incurred – gradually we began to move, picked up momentum, and finally, in those three months, reached a place where the practice is clear enough for us all to further the discipline on our own. There is no end point, (and in any case we are merely at the beginning); there is only the prospect of an endlessly daunting and exciting adventure into new realms of consciousness. The feeling is comparable only to leaving the house to go to a lovers' tryst; or to packing with one's compatriots for the expedition to find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. There is a racing of the heart, a trembling anticipation, and the knowledge that one is leaving the narrow and the known.

... **nu?**

(a Yiddish expression implying: So? What are you saying? Where are you going with all this? Why did you bring us here in the first place? Get to the point already. You go on and on just like Uncle Mottel. I remember, in fact, when Uncle Mottel, may he rest in peace, wanted to explain about the...)

Kind of unintentionally, drawn almost in spite of ourselves, we arrived, when in New York, at the devastated site of the World Trade Centre. They have now built a walkway and platform from which to view the area, you have to go to some place some blocks away to get tickets, I never worked out whether you pay for the tickets or whether this set-up is just to control the



crowds; there is this incredibly resilient and ineluctable naivete with which they turn everything into entertainment – that, and the eternal quest for money. We couldn't face any of this, so we never got to the platform, and from everywhere else, from the streets all around, the site is now closed to viewing. Still, we stood around for awhile with a disconsolate and motley crew on the sidewalk, police keeping us non-ticketholders at bay. Couldn't see much – a fleeting glimpse of a truck still carting debris away after five months, and a half-view of a smallish mound of rubble. Perhaps because of this paucity of stimulation – not much of a story here to take home to the kids – my eyes were drawn, slightly bored and indifferent, to the buildings surrounding the site. I stared without seeing, without thinking, and suddenly, as though I had fallen into or out of a dream, I was able to see through the parts, perhaps, and into some glimmering of the whole. I suddenly saw the site differently; there was another world out there.

I had been looking for something which would impress itself on me, and I saw that I had been looking the wrong way. My eyes were now drawn to the negative space between the still-standing buildings, and the full weight of the horror was suddenly born in on me. It was not 'something' that was relevant here, that I needed to be looking for, but the immensity of the nothingness which had taken its place. There was nothing there! At the heart of everything there was, simply, nothing, a void; but a nothingness, a void, which filled the empty space with a huge and overpowering bearing-down. If nothing had ever been there, it would have been different; but this was something other. It was the overwhelming presence of an absence which struck me with such force. The presence of an absence. The thought hurtled past my mind like wind whistling up out of the darkness of a fathomless chasm, leaving me fighting for breath, as if the very air around us was being sucked away. There is a hole in the heart of everything; at the centre of of the newest and most powerful movement of consciousness we have yet been able to attain, there is an absence which is a new presence in the world, a kind of shadow world, a black hole, a yawning doom. Brought about at the confluence of tradition and freedom, religion



and emancipation. Born of these irreconcilable fundamentalisms. An eerie, malevolent nothingness, making mockery of the human project, standing as sentinel and statue over the manifold atrocities which have been increasingly perpetrated in living memory. Making it increasingly difficult to go on, with any sense of honour or hope.

Which is why, now more than ever, everything we do, or refrain from doing, has such relevance, such profound bearing.

I stumbled away from that site without wanting to acknowledge what I had seen, pushing it aside, trying at all costs to deny its validity. Slowly, though, over time, what I saw has settled within me.

The time is at hand. It is time to bring conflicting and irreconcilable things and ways and approaches together, so that we may find our ways through the ruins of our pride, and unblock the path once more. The time is always at hand, yes, but what is possible now, for good and for bad, has never been possible before.

The spectres and wraith-like absences gather. It is not terrorism that is the enemy. It is the concept of enemy that undermines us.

In all spheres, most of all deep inside our very way of thinking, we have somehow to begin the monumental task of bringing opposites together. I come back, as so often, to Lindsay Clarke's passionate: 'If we (are) to find a key to the explosive condition of the world it (can) only be done by holding opposites together ... (This happens) when you refuse to shrug them off, neither disowning your own violence nor deploying it; not admitting only the good and throwing evil in the teeth of the opposition, but holding the conflict together inside yourself as yours – the dark and the light of it, the love and the lovelessness, the terror and the hope'.

I am beginning to understand. I have seen the spectres, and they do begin to walk. 'So let us not talk falsely now/ for the hour is getting late' (Dylan). (Yes, again)

...

Back in Cape Town, on our return, the ringing of the phone drags me out of the shower. Wet and shivering in the shifting autumn weather, I run to answer it. A friend is phoning to welcome us back, phoning from his cellphone as he drives to work. Pleased as I am to hear his voice, I realise I'm also irritated by the strain it takes to hear him through the static of the connection, as he breaks away and returns again and again. I have never liked cellphones. I learned recently that migratory birds have begun to lose their way, increasingly confused as the number of cellphones worldwide increases; the fabric of the world – which I'm sworn to protect – is under threat, my patience is wearing thin, I'm shivering and the shower is still running, and he's talking away relaxed in the comfort of his car, glad to have something to while away the time with in the rush hour traffic. Suddenly he gets another call, trying to break through. 'Call waiting', they call it – how would we stay connected without the latest piece of equipment?

Hang on, he says, I just need to check who's calling, I'll be back with you in a mo'. And I'm thinking, as I stare at the drops dripping disconsolately to the floor, what the fuck, who called who anyway, I feel violated, what am I colluding with here? I longed for so very long to be back at home, and now I find I've brought america with me. Or found it waiting on my return, having seduced my people during my absence. So where to now? Can anyone out there reading this even understand what I'm saying here, or am I just some creaking Victorian moralist?

I'm talking about different forms of violence. I'm talking about loneliness, the breakdown of community. I'm talking about the evaporation of common culture and understanding. I'm talking about a freedom which has lost all sense of responsibility. I'm talking about ecological and social disintegration. I'm talking about double standards. I'm talking globalisation, which is really another name for the new colonialism masking the forces of Empire. I'm talking about severe fragmentation.

That evening Jesse, my daughter, who obtained her driver's license while we were gone, asks if she can take the car to go out. Of course, I say; but inside I'm thinking – I've never been here before, Jesse going out into that big bad night at the wheel of a car. With the boys it was different, I never thought twice about their taking the car, but this finds me a bit nervy. It seems to show on my face. Don't worry, she says, I'll be fine; anyway I have my cellphone, just in case. I cannot tell you how relieved I feel – she has her cellphone, just in case, she can make contact should she need to. It's only after she's left the house that I think – hang on, when did you get a cellphone, isn't this supposed to irritate me? What about the birds? Which way up is down, anyway?

...

Throughout this piece I have typed the word 'america' in lower case. Because I do not think of america as a country so much as a culture (or as an absence of a culture). america belongs to us all; it has infiltrated our consciousness, our cultures, throughout the world. It is where we have come to, a place of individual freedom which we have not been sufficiently wise to handle, and so it lapses into triviality, excess, lacking all conviction and full of irrelevant intensity. A place where everything fragments, scatters into pieces, wanders off into its own corner, while the very astute make a quick buck on the side. (Not so quick actually, and not at all on the side; turns out all that is left to hold us together is bucks). But there are no coincidences, and the move into this atomistic realm is not chance; we are here because this was always the next place to come to, it is just that we are testing its limits beyond the bounds of endurance.

On the other hand, though, there is a desperate yearning to draw back from the abyss, to return to those ancient and respected and wise ways of being which sustained us for so long; somewhere in there is Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, even Buddhism when it turns religious. Not to mention the nationalisms and blood bonds. Not to mention those seekers who try to resurrect



hearsay versions of, for instance, native American culture, or Australian Aboriginal. Or those who try to cobble various elements of these together into a patchwork quilt which may provide some warmth and a feeling of security as the cold of a starless night gathers about us.

There is no question but that we live in an increasingly fragmenting world. The whole, the given, has been lost. Yet through the very losing are new ways to find. We have never been here before. A place which is so close to the abyss, yet, if we can bring together the streams which, opposing each other, have brought us here, we might fashion the key which could enable us to co-create a future.

**So.**

I know that the incident of the attack on Karen's father – still remember that bit? – is very South African, currently. But it is more than simply local. Gratuitous violence is met all over the globe, as is inhuman poverty, ostentatious wealth, cultural clashes, the untimely deaths of waterways and the lonely fates of bewildered birds and shell-shocked refugees. I think that Steiner is right, in that perspective attributed to him in an opening quote to this piece. We are on the cusp of a new way of thinking and being and seeing, one which is mobile and flexible and creative and penetrating enough to engage with living forces themselves, so that we can begin to co-create.

And the possibilities for developing this new way are being denied us, because division, in every sphere, is defended unto the death. Yet every entity that lives is of such utter magnificence that respect would be the very least that we would feel, if we could but see this. See the wondrous worlds, the worlds within worlds, that are to be found when, as happened to me with the fox, we manage to bring two ways together and slip through the veil which separates us from the sources of our being.

For me, this sabbatical has provided one means of trying to do so; though there is nothing instant here, only a practice requiring such rigorous attention that stumbling, falling, even failure is inevitable. But, to leave you with a quote from Rilke (who writes, as they would put it in Belgium, 'Like an angel pissing on your tongue'):

'If only we would let ourselves be dominated as things do by some immense storm, we would become strong too, and not need names.'

This is how (we grow); by being defeated, decisively, by constantly greater beings'.





## A RESPONSE

What kind of response could an organisation like CDRA offer in those times which were so fast and so unerringly upon us? There was a need to strengthen resolve, to unwaveringly go forth and do what one knew needed to be done. CDRA is an NGO, and in the piece which follows the one above in this Annual Report CDRA speaks directly to some of the central dilemmas that NGOs face as they struggle for relevance in an increasingly hostile world without succumbing to, or being co-opted by, the very world that they are constrained to address. The times are complex indeed, and there is a need for clarity, for a hard-won focusing of intent.



## NGOS ON THE LINE – AN ESSAY ABOUT PURPOSE, RIGOUR, RHETORIC AND COMMODIFICATION

### **Polarity**

One of the complex identity questions that NGOs live with is the polarity between being non-governmental organisations – and all of what that means – and being professional organisations. While these aspects of our identity are not incompatible, they are distinct.

We are not membership organisations; we are generally not accountable to clearly defined constituencies; yet we pursue clear social purpose and align ourselves in terms of our values, political choices and preferred futures. Neither are we simple commercial service providers selling our goods to the best payer (despite great pressure to become so), yet we bring resources – both material and human – to situations that we have assessed, in whatever collaborative ways, as being in need of us.

Somewhere between the extremes of this polarity lies a proper accommodation of both aspects of our identity. This is not ever reached as a fixed place, but is a balance towards which we, ideally, strive in our daily being. Very often, however, sight of that middle is lost and we veer towards one or the other side. We become strident, activist campaigners, yet we have no mandate to speak on behalf of others. Alternatively, we become so engrossed with the technical niceties of our expertise that we lose sight of our social purpose.

The CDRA is both an NGO and a professional organisation. This year we have had many good reasons to think about this polarity in our identity and to aim at holding it in a new way. Using our own experience and reflection, we share some of our thoughts on this question and to the challenge that it raises for NGOs more broadly.

### **As NGO**

We are constituted as a not-for-profit organisation; the entire staff, including consultants, is salaried, and accountable to a Board of voluntary Directors. These are individuals who are drawn largely from civil society and are selected on the basis of their standing and accomplishment in the world of social change. The Board is entrusted with the task of holding the organisation to its vision – to contribute towards social transformation, to work for ‘the good’. What motivates us all is the prospect of channelling our energies and resources to people and places that would not ordinarily benefit from them, in such a way that the possibilities for freedom, consciousness and so, social transformation, are maximised. The vehicle of organisational health and the method of organisational development consultancy has long been a cornerstone strategy of the CDRA.

We are conscious that we often fall short of the standards that we set for ourselves, indeed that we often fail to live up to the ideal that is entailed in choosing to be an NGO. Nevertheless, it



is this striving to fulfil an NGO's best potential that gives concrete meaning to our claim that what distinguishes us, and all NGOs, from other organisations is that we are 'value driven'. While this inhibits us from performing certain functions (for example, social regulation, wealth creation), it frees us to do these others.

As a staff we are in a tremendously privileged position. Within this broad brief, we are free to devise our strategies and approaches and select who we work with. To that end, and because our work is in pursuit of a social vision, we work closely, mutually accountable, with individual practices subject to the scrutiny of the team as a whole. This is not simply good professional practice (although it is that too), but is also about holding the organisation as a whole on course, ensuring that its resources are put to best use, in terms of the purpose that we are paid for and for which we have raised funds. Further, all members of staff are employed on fixed salaries – we have neither incentive schemes nor commissions – and irrespective of our positions in the 'line' of the organisation, we relate, in the final instance, in terms of our contribution towards achievement of the organisation's vision.

The CDRA's status as an NGO is essential to its very being. Because we are an NGO, we pursue all our programmes as strategic interventions into – and contributions to – the development sector. Organisation development consultancy is our core intervention methodology. That we work as consultants in and to the sector has always been a bit strange. Over the years, and as consultancy has increasingly risen to prominence in the sector, we have had to ensure that our NGO identity is preserved. In an environment where even grassroots fieldwork is – increasingly and absurdly – expected to 'pay for itself', we have had to ensure that our consultancy does not succumb to the pressure and temptation to become simply market-oriented.

Instead, we are constrained by the boundaries of our social purpose. In order to be socially relevant (and morally worthwhile), NGOs must address a clear need in the world. However, the core of NGO work tends, of necessity, to be funded from outside of its niche market, either by donors or by other sustainability schemes. This means that direct market-related feedback in the form of people taking their 'business' elsewhere is often missing. In fact, NGOs often do have a captive audience, and poor practice, or inappropriately deployed energies, do not always result in a lack of takers for the goods on offer.

In the absence of this clear feedback we, like many other NGOs, engage in continuous processes of internal strategic review and regular solicitation of external assessments. Seeking balance and relevance in our client profile, our fee structure and our subsidy policies is a central part of our ongoing work. We ask ourselves always 'Are the organisations we serve the best expression of our social purpose and are they best placed to achieve it?' It is precisely because the CDRA is an NGO that we are both able and obliged to work as we do, work with whom we work and contribute learning from this to the broader development community.



## **As professional organisation**

In addition, and parallel to, our identity as 'NGO', the CDRA works also as an association of professional consultants. Viewed in this way, the organisation might best be compared to a traditional professional practice – say, of lawyers, architects or doctors – where individual practitioners who share a common discipline come together to enhance their impact, share costs and, in some cases, meet the needs of a specially defined niche. Meeting as partners, these professional associations are typically flat in structure and collegial in mood.

Decisions tend to be made by all practitioners, or at least partners, in these associations. In these organisational set-ups, the guiding principles of the discipline, and the professionalism of those who practise it, are held in high esteem.

Our consultant's team works in this way. The team as a whole has always held, managed and developed the practice of the organisation. Further, the team has always been at the centre of the essential economic decisions about the organisation's life. These include where to target our resources and energies and which programmes to pursue. While individuals undertake operational and managerial tasks, these are generally within the terms of a broader social and professional identity that is held by the team as a whole.

All consultants, together with our organisational manager, make up the team that thinks through the organisation's work and decides where, and with whom it will work. This working principle is not so much about democracy, or inclusion (indeed, not all staff are included in all decision making). Rather, it is about professional members of staff making a contribution to the ongoing identity formation of the organisation and having a degree of autonomy in, and influence over, the work that they undertake.

The CDRA is also similar to a conventional professional association in the way it manages, develops and 'holds' its profession as a distinct entity, separate from other disciplines, services and professions. Over the years, we have worked hard at articulating a generic discipline of development practice and also at distinguishing process consultancy as a clear sub-set of this discipline. In this regard, we view ourselves as 'development professionals'.

However, it is in this regard that we also differ somewhat from other professions. Where the traditional professions have been in existence for centuries, and have formed their core principles over many years of experimentation, association, organisation and education, development practice is very new. Drawing on other disciplines like social work, psychology, anthropology and organisation development (themselves all relatively new disciplines), development practice has yet to establish itself as a profession in its own right.

Working as a professional organisation, the CDRA has developed an understanding of development practice while holding and practising it. Somewhat akin to building a railway as a journey progresses, so we have developed our understanding of development practice as we have deepened

our practice itself. We have been in the fortunate position of being able to share this learning both in written form and directly through our consultancy and programmes over the years, and so our contribution has been both towards development of the organisation's practice, as well as towards improved practice in the sector as a whole.

Increasingly we have seen that there is good reason to pursue development practice as a profession. For many years we have maintained that one of the greatest constraints to success in the development sector is a lack of 'practice'. Simply put, there are many good ideas in the sector; less honed expertise in putting these ideas into practice. Moving towards professionalism builds institutional, methodological and theoretical boundaries around development practice, lifting it out of obscurity or simple technique, giving voice to approaches that work and space to grow these further.

## **Professionality**

The term 'profession' evokes powerful responses. For us, it includes and goes beyond meeting rigorous standards of quality and reliability. We see professionalism as the ability to formulate, in any given moment, unique responses to unique needs.

### *The argument for*

Within the development sector, there is a widespread desire for approaches to development work that are more transparent, replicable, and visible. The flexibility and diversity of practice within the sector has given rise to a need for recognisable standards of practice, a concern that development practice is whatever one makes of it and, as such, is open to manipulation and abuse. Very often it is simply ineffectual, and a shared understanding of what that practice is would contribute substantially towards enhanced impact. Further, and where good work is being done, there is a striving for recognition that the work is indeed complex and substantial.

These motivations for increased professionalism in the work of development practitioners are often given by different groupings within the development sector, for example, fieldworkers' needing recognition, or managers' needing uniformity and control. However, we can also look at these motivations as expressive of the entire development sector's need. This is a need for recognition that the work undertaken in 'development' is not, as is so often claimed, wasteful, or simply representing the interests of the powerful.

Certainly, a great deal of development money is misspent, through exorbitant consultancy and administration costs, through inept distribution channels, through NGOs making claims that they cannot deliver on, through governments claiming aid so that they can spend on arms, and so on. Certainly development money is often used as a panacea for the world's ills – channelled as disaster aid without end, or now, after the events of 11 September 2001, given as support for anti-terrorism activities. Still other money is used, ostensibly to promote democracy and human



rights as a universal 'good', but actually to lay the groundwork for the expansion of global capital and as a response to anti-globalisation forces in the North, not, in the first instance, as a contribution to quality of life in the South. All of this is true.

Each instrumentalist purpose that development money is intended to serve makes more mockery of the intention of practitioners to work for the good, to strive for balance, to enable improved quality of life – for its own sake – and for the sake of humanity as a whole. Instrumentalism breeds cynicism. And in the development sector, we work in one of the most cynical environments on earth.

In this context, it is hard to imagine taking practice seriously. Yet those of us who pursue human and holistic development, amongst all of the other purposes of development, must take it seriously. It is all we have to set us apart from grand-scale structural engineering that has scant regard for human dignity and the good of the planet, irrespective of its rhetoric.

It is for this reason that professionalism in development practice is such a tremendously important thing to pursue. We seek acknowledgement that an important need is being met through development practice, that a valued task has been undertaken, and that the manner in which this is accomplished is worthy of respect. We will only get that acknowledgement if we give it to ourselves first.

### *The argument against*

In order to accomplish this acknowledgement – both inner and outer – we need to overcome an inherent aversion to professionalism, one that is particularly distinct in our sector. This aversion has several sources. One is linked to the progressive, egalitarian roots of many who choose to work in development. For these, the term 'profession' conjures up images of class differentiation, and the power (and potential for its abuse) that working out of a professional framework gives. For these practitioners, professions are cold and aloof, contrary to the solidarity impulse that got them to the field in the first place.

For others, an aversion to professionalism lies somewhat closer to home. While development practice happens in the field, it tends to be supervised from the office, often by people who do not have, or have forgotten, their own field practice. For these practitioners, a lack of transparent and visible standards of professional practice protects them from managerial control.

There is still another possible root of this aversion – one that is connected not so much to the notion of equality, but to freedom. For these practitioners, the appeal of development work lies in its freedom to innovate, to create, to work intuitively and responsively. Attempts to professionalise this practice could well end up destroying it altogether – particularly if such professionalisation became, as it so often does, the imposition of rigid frameworks and rules. For these practitioners, it is safer to avoid professionalisation altogether than to risk closing their space to work, unregulated and inconsistent as it may be.

### *Moving on*

Our view of this contested and debated topic is that those of us working as development practitioners – in whatever capacities – can, and should, work towards increased professionalism in our practice. If this means that we must tackle some of the legitimate concerns and anxieties around the endeavour, then so be it, but these concerns should not prevent us from ‘reclaiming’ professionalism for our practice.

In this regard, we need to say clearly, however, that professionalism is not, in the first instance about ‘performance standards’ or quality control – less still about line-managing the behaviour of staff in the field. It is also not about establishing a guild that denotes some practitioners as outsiders, and others as insiders. As practices become institutionalised, these concerns do arise and make claims of the profession, and they need to be dealt with. For us, however, professionalism is in the first instance, about what we do in the field, how we think about it (whether we think about it in a systematic or impersonal way, at all) and whether and how we learn from that.

To work with professionalism is not simply to deliver a service that is reliable in its predictability and consistency of standards. The development sector is teeming with people who can provide respectable, even reputable, services: trainers who have their workshop ‘packages’ that get sold all over the world; consultants who ply their methods and ready solutions; NGOs that make their reputation developing something original – then peddle it endlessly, with little regard for need or context. The development sector is home to many who long for easy solutions and who deliver services that bolster the mistaken belief that human development will be made easier if we just find (or buy) the right technique. Professionalism goes beyond this, generating in its adherents the abilities to face each situation they confront, anew, to recognise these and to formulate from a confident inner capacity, responses and interventions that best suit that situation at that time. A person can be trained to deliver a competent solution; their professionalism can only be developed, over time and with practice. A good service can be replicated and delivered en masse (like telephone call centres, the world over, are achieving); a profession can be delivered only to the extent that there are practitioners with the right combination of education, practice and judgement to deliver according to the standards of that profession.

We believe that this view of professionalism takes account of the valid reservations that development practitioners may have about the endeavour. It names the particular intervention that we presume to bring to others in our chosen field; it eschews easy and ‘command’ management approaches, demanding instead an approach that is collegial and mutual and it supports and enhances precisely the freedom that development practice requires.

Contrary to a belief that professionalism implies capitulation, it may well be our most important defence against cynicism and despair. We believe that ‘professionalism’, not ‘service’ is the more accurate description of development practice’s best potential. It may also be just what we need to keep hope through these dark times where it appears that the best efforts of many make little difference at all.





# annual report

2002/2003

Seeking  
the eye  
of the needle

*Centre for Developmental Practice*

# A Dedicated Love

*'From bitter searching of the heart,  
Quickened with passion and with pain,  
We rise to play a greater part.*

*This is the faith from which we start:  
Men shall know commonwealth again  
From bitter searching of the heart.*

*We loved the easy and the smart,  
But now, with keener hand and brain,  
We rise to play a greater part.*

*The lesser loyalties depart,  
And neither race nor creed remain  
From bitter searching of the heart.*

*Not steering by the venal chart  
That tricked the mass for private gain,  
We rise to play a greater part.*

*Reshaping narrow law and art  
Whose symbols are the millions slain,  
From bitter searching of the heart  
We rise to play a greater part'.*

Frank Scott

## THE WHOLE IN THE PART

The final Report in the series under consideration here, the Annual Report of 2002/03, is entitled ***Seeking the Eye of the Needle***. Subsequent Annual Reports, written to date, contain extrapolations on the main argument presented by the Reports considered in this 'Annual Report Biography'; we do not take the argument further here. This final Report encapsulates all previous ones; at the same time, it brings the thread of argument to a head, and completes the narrative.



It was evident that, all the previous Reports notwithstanding, the argument remains elusive to many. It remains an alternative rendering; it remains a site of struggle. And perhaps always will, because it takes such an uncompromisingly different path into the understanding and practice of human and social development. As such, it both demands and aims for an entirely different consciousness with respect to human development. It is possible that, with the reading of this Report, the reading of the entire argument once again will become profitable in the sense of previous assertions becoming more transparent and easily understood.

How much, after all, do we understand of the import of what is being said, and what is being demanded of the development practitioner? This 2002/03 Annual report leaves little doubt that any further elucidation is pointless until the reader is prepared to read these Reports with an active, rather than with a passive, thinking. One has to employ a rigorously and robustly living imagination in order to understand an argument which promotes imaginative and rigorous consciousness as both the means and the end of the development endeavour, as both the path and the goal. If this basic assertion is missed, then we are indeed left within the paucities with which we started.

For both the development practitioner and the social groupings with which they work, the path and goal are the same, the means and the end are identical. We must become what we are working towards if we are to work towards what we hope to become. No further elaboration of the central lines of argument will be of any help until we strengthen our resolve and our thinking, until we take on some of the assertions made in the argument in order to develop ourselves to the point where the argument becomes understandable. There is no substitute for such an intimate involvement. Looked at from the outside, the argument may appear as just another pretty conceit, a sentimental and circular poem unable to make necessary inroads into the harsh facts of poverty and social marginalisation, and into the hardbitten cynicism of the development sector, where thinking seems to have taken on the character of an indulgence. Experienced from the inside, however, it becomes the muscle and the eye with which to understand and engage; it becomes the necessary resilience for both vision and action. It is not an argument that can be assessed from the level of consciousness which it intends to supersede; an attempt must be made to develop consciousness itself so that this argument about consciousness as means and end of the development endeavour may be adequately met.

This implies, as has been stated many times throughout the argument, that the development of the practitioner is at least as important and relevant as the development of those with whom the practitioner works. We are all implicate, we are all both the key and the lock. In particular, the argument presented in this last Annual Report ends with a resounding assertion that immediately takes us back to the beginning of the whole argument, and reverberates throughout this alternative rendering of development practice. In querying where the 'eye of the needle' of a development practice may be found, the Report states in one of its penultimate sentences: 'Seeking the eye of the needle, then, we discover that the very activity of seeking *is* the eye of the needle.'

Precisely so; and in this lies the heart of the matter, the essence of the argument, the core practice of the development practitioner's art. As was stated so many Annual Reports ago, there is no end to capacity building; and if we are not developing our capacities, honing our faculties, then we cannot hope to effect



real change in the world out there. If we do not realise that the essence of the human and social project is our own 'seeking', our own relentless commitment to development, our own eschewing of easy and glib answers for the hard work of intimate engagement with human reality, then our endeavours are spurious indeed, mendacious, a mere chimera, a shadow-play put on for our own indulgence, even as our world spirals downward around us.

It does not bear repeating that not only our own practices but the organisational practices of the institutions which constitute the development sector, within which we are embedded, must be tested and honed in similar fashion if the development sector is ever to 'deliver' anything other than a replica of the global status quo. If the development sector is not *thinking*, then it is not acting developmentally.

The struggle, for CDRA, has moved from local to global, from racial to human, from economic to ecological, from poverty to power and from power to consciousness. This struggle has become the site of struggle for every development practitioner. And it is not over; indeed, it has barely yet begun.

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### Seeking the Eye of the Needle

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 lordly 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 artefact. 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 centre 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 centre 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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How do I help people believe in their own power even tho the world does nt equate it as power? How do I help them realise that it is only in embracing this power that they will be able to make a difference?



# The Community of CDRA





## About CDRA

The Community Development Resource Association is a South African NGO, working as a Centre for Developmental Practice. We offer a variety of services to not-for-profit and civil society initiatives. Formed at the height of the anti-Apartheid struggle to support development and activist organisations, we have our roots in progressive and humanist approaches to social development and change. Our approach aims to support development practitioners, organisations, institutions and networks in improving the quality and effectiveness of their practice. We see ourselves as contributing towards the quest for approaches to social development that truly do “build capacity”, “empower”, and ensure “participation”. This is reflected also in our practical approach and methods which strive to build capacity, extend and transform power relations, all through meaningful participation.

Our work includes -

1. organisational accompaniment - process consultancy to organisations, networks and partnerships around issues of strategy, team building, organisational learning and culture change.
2. courses in social development practice.
3. evaluations and other forms of social research that emphasise reflection, participation and learning with a view to clarifying strategy and improving practice.
4. facilitated dialogue and action research processes aimed at helping those working in complex systems to interact and reach greater understanding and congruence with one another.
5. publication and dissemination of learning out of all these processes.

We are deliberately generalist in our work and as a result have the privilege of working with a hugely diverse range of organisations from small community based initiatives to large institutions with global reach. We also work with networks and associations throughout and have done limited work with the South African government at all levels of governance. This has given us a perspective on issues in development that is simultaneously global and local. Content-wise, we have experienced similar range, working with initiatives that address urban and rural development, youth development, community based development, women’s organisation, health, welfare, environment, HIV/AIDS, policy making and research, non-formal education, grant making, children’s rights, human rights and gender.

CDRA celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2007.

*In these pages we share a selection of photographs taken over the years. Better than words, they convey the spirit and diversity of the people and relationships that constitute the heart of CDRA.*









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*Handwritten text, likely a letter or note, written in cursive. The text is partially obscured and difficult to read.*





Guest participants sharing their own heritages - The Beer-making exercise



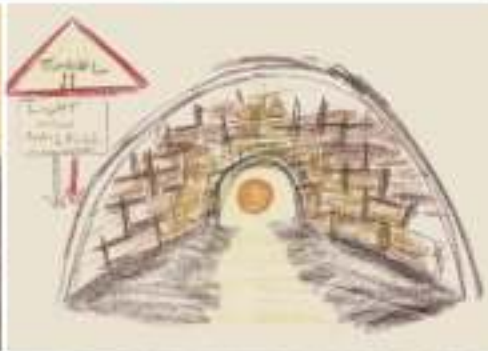
Heritage exercise



Heritage exercise



Heritage exercise





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