

# South Africa is squandering a valuable and unique NGO resource

Cape Times, August 21, 2007 *Edition 1*

By **James Taylor** of the Community Development Resource Association



The Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), a Cape Town-based NGO, is celebrating its 20th anniversary. Formed at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle to support and strengthen development and activist organisations, it has its roots in progressive and humanist approaches to social development and change.

Describing itself as a centre for developmental practice, CDRA has an international reputation for the work it has pioneered and is widely respected as a leading development agency. Its work takes its staff all over the continent of Africa and to many parts of the world, working at strengthening NGOs, civil society organisations and cultural initiatives.

In the preface to a book (*Dreaming Reality: The Future in Retrospect*), launched by the CDRA as a part of its anniversary celebrations, Professor Njabulo Ndebele writes about the effects of the immediate post-apartheid period on NGOs:

"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 1980s in South Africa was a prolific period of popular community-based engagement and action. A time of civil

society vibrancy and ascendancy. The rallying call of the cadres of community workers and activists was "mobilise, conscientise, organise".

Community organisations in townships and towns all over the country mobilised local resources to address their own unmet needs. Every aspect of life from early childhood education, through community health to adult literacy, community arts, community policing, and community media were among the many sites of local organisation.

What added to the uniqueness of the South African experience was the inherently political nature of this acceptance of responsibility for one's own circumstances.

As a part of the very process of providing services for their own communities, these organisations formed the foundation of the mass democratic movement. Through organising to address local needs, these organisations became the vehicles through which citizens mobilised in taking responsibility for demanding and creating a state that would represent and support its concerns and aspirations.

The period of political struggle in South Africa gave birth to a level of community engagement and organisation that is an enviable asset, a potential foundation for meaningful participatory democracy.

But 20 years on there are ominous signs that South Africa is squandering this resource. These organisations that emerged from the needs of people at the periphery of society should have provided the building blocks for a form of South African democracy that is a worthy reflection of the creativity, sustained effort and sacrifice that went into achieving it.

However, instead of continuing to be supported, they have been depleted. NGOs

have been used to manage the people's participation in the change, to write the new policies, to contribute skilled people to the new leadership of state and business, and now, increasingly, to deliver services.

However, the inherent value of organising - undertaken by local membership organisations and supported by service NGOs - itself has come to be downplayed in the drive to "delivery."

Where NGOs have managed to re-tool themselves as small-scale delivery vehicles, they may continue to secure contracts, perpetuate their own survival and play a small role. But there is little appreciation for the distinctive formative function that this type of civil society organisation could play in building our democracy in this crucial and fragile phase.

NGOs, in the past, supported spaces in which freedom of expression and freedom of association were actualised. Now, judged only in terms of their usefulness, their contribution to the delivery project, the cadres of community workers and activists, generated through struggle, are not being replenished or institutionalised.

Indeed, people themselves seem to have abandoned responsibility for their well-being, lapsing into passivity, or disgruntled entitlement when their needs are not met. This narrowing of appreciation for the role that local organisation and NGOs can play is reflected internationally.

In many countries, where the development industry is firmly rooted, vibrant indigenous social formations are not necessarily recognised as civil society. Here civil society has become associated with foreign-funded NGOs and the international development project, itself preoccupied with transfer of resources, to the detriment of building a vibrant civil society, capable of advocating for its own interests and meeting its needs.

In South Africa, the corporate social investors, the new philanthropists and the state itself are showing little real understanding and appreciation for the unique assets that organisations in civil society represent.

For all of these, easy abandonment of the space previously occupied by civil society organisations, including community-based membership organisations and NGOs, risks losing the holders and drivers of democratic impulse.

Far from abandoning these organisations, they should be supporting them as though democracy itself depended on it.

- James Taylor is the Executive Director of The Community Development Resource Association.