



## HORIZONTAL LEARNING

# Engaging freedom's possibilities

by Doug Reeler  
of the Community Development Resource Association  
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*Development is indeed a momentous engagement  
with freedom's possibilities*  
Amartya Sen

*The cosmos is a community of subjects  
not a collection of objects*  
Brian Goodwin

*Mrs. Letela, the principal in a small rural primary school in Lesotho, stood at her office window, watching the children playing on the field outside.*

*She was wondering what to do about the increasing number who were coming to school hungry and how tired and irritable the teachers said the children were. How could they be expected to learn? We've got hungry children, whose parents are farmers, and empty fields lying here. Surely we can do something? She started visiting some parents, asking questions, chatting to them about the idea of growing food at the school, listening to their ideas and encouraging them to speak amongst themselves. When she felt the time was ripe she invited parents to a meeting where they agreed to take responsibility for establishing a garden at the school to feed their children. But they would have to do it differently to the way they farmed, because the food needed to be grown and harvested throughout the year, unlike their own annual maize crops.*

*Mrs. Letela asked around town at the offices of a few development organisations and was told about a regional association of NGOs who promoted small-scale organic farming. She wrote to them and they soon replied, agreeing that two trainers would be sent for a few weeks to teach a group of parents an approach that would combine their own farming methods with permaculture, enabling different foods to be grown throughout the year, and without the need for costly fertilisers and pesticides. Fortunately the association had access to flexible funding that enabled them to move quickly on this request.*

*The trainers began by spending good time surfacing what the parents already knew about vegetable gardening, before introducing them to the essential permaculture principles and methods. Throughout the process they involved the parents in every aspect of designing and developing an*

*integrated gardening system for the whole school garden.*

*It was less than two months later that all the children started getting a nutritious meal every day at school, grown by the parents and harvested and cooked by the domestic science students. And it was not long, Mrs. Letela heard, before the parents started adopting some of these farming methods in their own gardens and farms, as did she herself. Soon the word got around and a delegation of parents and teachers from the neighbouring school marched over the hill and asked if they could be taught to do the same. So parents began to teach parents, farmers learning from farmers. And it continued to spread through the district. Within three years 58 schools and communities had started similar initiatives, each taught by a neighbouring school. The idea has since spread even further, with official sanction and support, to another four districts involving a further 200 schools. A part-time advice centre was set up at Mrs. Letela's school, with one person employed on a small grant from an overseas donor, to give advice and information and to put people in touch with each other. Mrs. Letela's school has been piloting organic vegetable gardening as a part of the school curriculum.*



## The poverty of practice

Development practitioners are faced with seemingly insurmountable questions and challenges. We intervene into other people's lives, into their complex development processes, with unpredictable effects, some helpful, some with mixed results and too many where it would have been better to leave be. Development work defies our logic, demanding that we learn to work like the blind in the dark, developing other senses and sensibilities, challenging us to proceed with subtlety and caution.



But this caution seems a bit misplaced when we are confronted by the sheer scale and depth of the poverty we are trying to address. The need for development, for change, is vast and uncountable, but the resources, opportunities and ideas that are at our disposal, including those of the State, are pitifully limited, very countable and not always as useful as we might hope. Great numbers of marginalised people seem to be stuck in a hole, unable to dig themselves out, unable to see what is on offer, unable to see what they can do for themselves, what is possible, what is their right, unable even to ask. And how much do we really know? How many answers can we confidently offer to them? Yes, we can help here and there, bring some hope and relief, keep some people alive, help a few to find themselves, to dig themselves out, to get themselves together and be a bit more organised, even assertive. But what we know is so incomplete, what we can do seems so limited that we have to admit that this poverty is almost matched by our own poverty of response.

For many this is a reality they simply accept and they plod on doing what they can.

But for others this is not enough and the search continues for experiences and ideas that can work at a more significant scale and also stimulate deep and lasting social change.

Many strategies that work at scale are inevitably instrumentalist development projects, engineered plans, like building schools, houses and clinics and providing water, education etc. – necessary work and sometimes with good effect, but too often ill-conceived and unsustainable, leaving people frustrated and poorer, the environment more damaged and society more conflictual. The dormitory townships that have created new ghettos, the huge land-restitution projects in South Africa that have not empowered people to become viable farmers and the national constructs that insist on welfare's financial sustainability, are notable examples. Large-scale, top-down initiated change is politically unavoidable in times that demand urgent transformation, but the art and science of doing this in developmental, sustainable, integrated and humane ways has yet to be learnt and the required ethical, political and economic cultures yet to take root, locally and globally. This remains important work for politicians, practitioners, activists and academics to pursue, but may still only address the more visible, easier and obvious development needs.

## Seeking depth and scale

It is a formidable task to try to describe, let alone research and faithfully present, all the different approaches that try or have the potential to stimulate significant development. But we can paint a broad picture to acknowledge what is being tried and see how the different approaches relate to each other. These are the ones we know of, briefly portrayed without critique.

Firstly, the State (the reasonably accountable type), with no choice but to face this question of scale, can work the levers of its power, of legislation, of interest rates and taxes, of spending and policy directives towards freeing, stimulating, strengthening and connecting the economy and society to create work and programmes for change.

Within this equation activists and social movements too, including some development practitioners, are furiously working on a hundred fronts, sometimes at significant scale, to push the change, to mobilise and educate people to collectively demand their rights, to encourage the State to think and act differently.

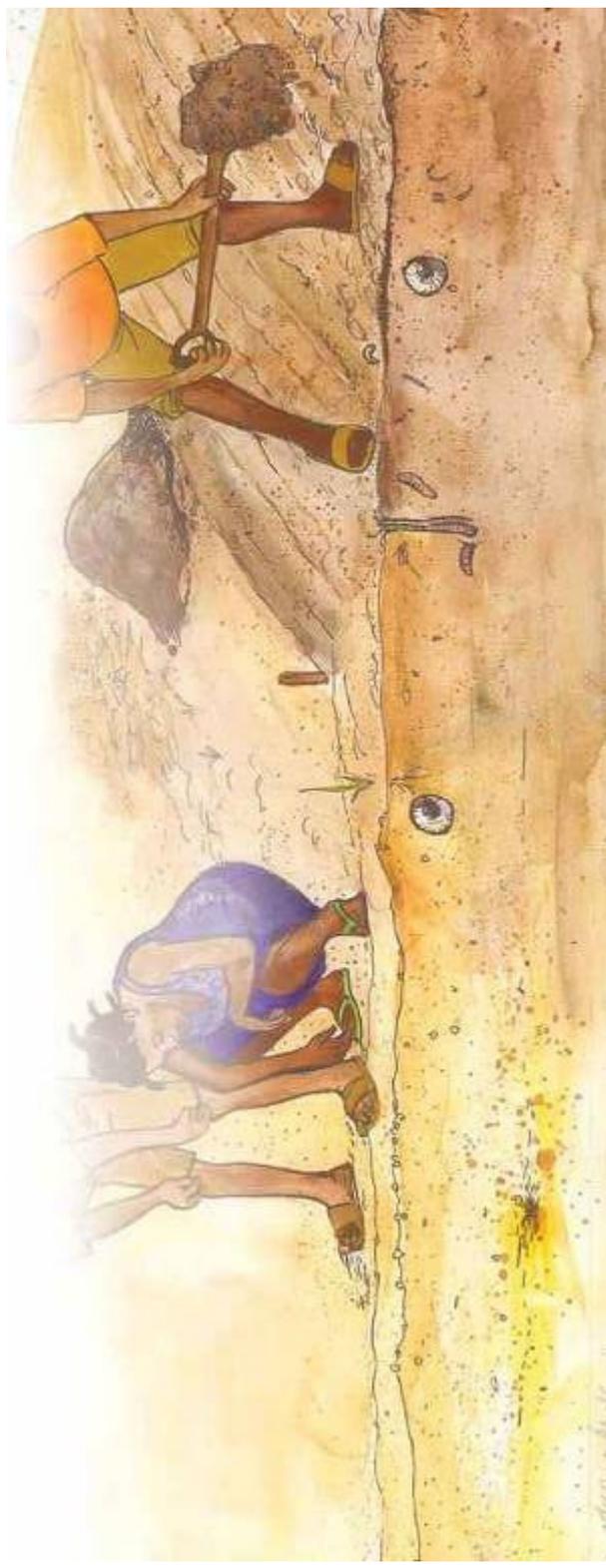
In a similar impulse to activism, but more cautious and compromising, we find “rights-based approaches”, increasingly popular amongst international development agencies, often strongly supported by Northern governments’ foreign policy of encouraging “democratisation”. These approaches come in many shades but in their most developmental form, they aim to prompt and build the capacity of citizens to push the pace of change by lobbying, advocating and insisting that “duty-bearers” (mostly the State) fulfill their legal responsibilities to both national and international law. By securing and enforcing legal freedoms and rights, space can be made within which development can more easily occur.

Practitioners in civil, political and economic societies use several strategies that try to stimulate developmental processes to impact more widely than the immediate intervention. Leadership and entrepreneurial development are the most obvious, where confidence, initiative, resourcefulness, creativity and related skills are fostered to create pioneers to lead and expand enterprises and programmes, and employment and opportunities – all of which can ideally become reproduced, through example and role-models – for current

and succeeding generations.

Allied to this are organisational and capacity-building approaches that encourage the laying of sustainable foundations for present and future growth – in communities, state institutions and the economic sector. Train-the-trainer courses, seeking to build further layers of “capacity builders”, have for a long time held a place in strategies that seek to work at scale. Educational campaigns in print, on radio and TV, through conferences and publications, over the internet and other media to influence culture, to promote alternatives, to expand awareness, build tolerance and spread learnings to a wider audience, are found everywhere.

But of increasing interest to us are approaches that are characterised by horizontal or peer learning processes. Often these are distinct processes, but sometimes also as a part of other strategies, as a vitalising ingredient. We have come across enough stories of such processes, many at the unnoticed and creative margins of practice, several told as case stories in this article including from our own experiences, to suggest that there is something worth taking special notice of.<sup>1</sup>



## Where is the real work?

Before continuing our exploration of these approaches, we make a diversion here into an examination of four radical and intimately connected principles that lie behind what we believe to be good practice. These have exciting implications for working at depth and scale and can help us to deepen our appreciation of where the real work lies and thus to gauge the potential of approaches that want to be developmental.

***The first principle is that development and the will or impulse to develop is natural and innate.*** In whichever state we may find people, they are constantly developing. They may or may not be developing healthily or in ways they like or are even conscious of, they may be inhibited to a point of stuckness in some places, but they have been developing long before development workers came into their lives and will continue to do so long after they have left. We cannot deliver development – it is already happening as a natural process that we need to read, respect and work with. That the will and capacity to develop may be hindered, half-buried or restricted, points to the primary challenge we face as practitioners: to help people to more consciously free themselves of hindrances to their own development, to take increasing and willing responsibility for the course of their own lives.

But more than this, it is the act of people freeing themselves, choosing to take initiative and responsibility for change and then doing something about it, that is most important. Understood in this way, we can see that the process of development becomes the point of development itself. In South Africa, the struggle for freedom produced qualities and capacities of leadership, a culture of humanity and of self-belief, relationships of solidarity, and much more, that have become the foundation of building a new country. Had we been “freed” by some external force, as in Iraq, these would not have been available to the new democracy – what would have

been set free would have been intense political and sectarian rivalries and competition which, like in Iraq, may have torn us apart.

People are poor not only because they lack capacity, skills and resources – these apparent deficits are also symptoms of their poverty, and if development is only about delivering these, as it is for most instrumentalist development projects, then at best delivery will bring relief and at worse will serve to mask and perpetuate the deeper causes of poverty. People, more often than not, already have enormous capacity in their experience, understanding, knowledge, skills and relationships which are hindered and hidden from use. The poor are generally poor because of inner and outer hindrances to their natural impulse to develop, blockages to what they know and can do. Unless they are free of these, no amount of smartly delivered capacity-building, skills or resources will make any sustainable difference.

Outwardly, people are trapped in unequal social and economic relationships. A focus on removing the outer, more visible, hindrances can help to create conditions of civil, political and economic liberty to free up space and opportunities for people to pursue their own development. This is crucial work, usually the focus of activists and rights-based approaches, but on its own can be insufficient. The deep inner hindrances of poverty and oppression that lie within and between people, are often the most important challenges, and point to a practice of helping people to deal with or unlearn such things as fear, self-doubt, self-hatred and other deep consequences of deprivation, oppression and abuse. Without letting go of these, no-one can fully deal with outer hindrances.

People need to be free to be creative, to make their own futures. Helping people to be free in these ways should be seen as both a primary purpose of development and also a condition of continuing healthy development.

***The second principle is that development is complex, unpredictable and characterised by crisis.*** Hindrances to development can be particularly complex, particularly those

mentioned that are inner and hidden from consciousness, hidden from other people. There is no straightforward path to dealing with these things. What does it take, and how long, to help a woman in crisis to find her courage to deal with an abusive husband or for a community to find the confidence to deal with corrupt councillors? When an organisation seems to be on the verge of imploding is this the end or a chance for renewal? Who can guarantee that a community that finds its own voice will stick with the logframe and please the donors? What complex and unanticipated development of forces contributes to a once-flourishing social initiative rolling over and dying? Development is inherently unpredictable and prone to crisis.

Yet almost miraculously, developmental crises are pregnant with opportunities for new movement, for qualitative shifts. Recognising and working with crisis, with all its unpredictabilities, become central to a developmental approach.

This has major significance for practice, requiring a very different orientation to the conventional project-based approaches that insist on steering by predetermined outcomes, which want and then assume an unrealistic degree of predictability, and abhor crisis as failure. Working realistically with human development requires an orientation that understands that “a path is made by walking it”, that works flexibly and lightly with plans that are unattached to specific outcomes, that meets each developing situation freshly, in its own right, that welcomes crisis as opportunity for transformation and one that values, above all, learning from experience. Which leads us directly into the next principle.

***The third principle is that people’s own capacity to learn from experience is the foundation of their knowledge and development.***

We are what our experience has made us and many if not most of our inner capacities and hindrances come from these experiences and how we have chosen to face them.

Practitioners who like to deliver development as skills and resources, tend to not only ignore the inner hindrances to

development that have been learnt from hard experience, but find it difficult to recognise the enormous wealth of experience, knowledge and skills that people unconsciously gather over their lives. Training a group of mothers in rural Transkei to do Project Planning (a favourite, like Governance training) without surfacing, appreciating and expanding the skills that these same women have already developed, through organising highly complex weddings and funerals, is outrageously common.

Learning from experience is as old as the hills, one of the natural, organic processes, though seldom used consciously, by which people develop themselves. It is so obvious that it is easily disregarded. We learn by doing, by thinking about what we have done and then doing it a bit better next time. We learn from people who show us their experience, connecting it to our own experience.

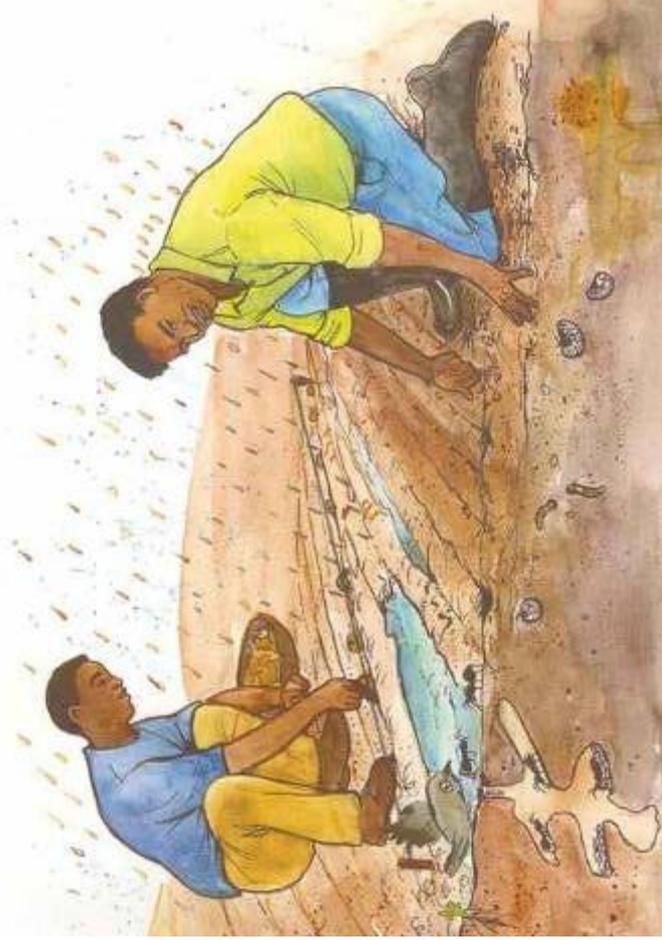
Action learning is the term we give to a more conscious, disciplined use of the process of learning from experience – in many ways it is a central pillar of our own purpose and approach, both in our fieldwork and for internal development.<sup>2</sup> Practitioners, who use action learning in the field, help people to learn from their own experience, more consciously and collectively, and hopefully in continuously improving virtuous circles. In so doing people can build themselves, their community’s or their organisation’s ability to act in more sustainable and resourceful ways that are less dependent on outside knowledge or expertise.

What is significant for our exploration here is that knowing how to learn well from own experience, how to observe and remember, to ask the right questions and reflect, how to search for meaning and draw learning and understand what this means for practice, provide the basis for life-long learning and the power to respond to an ever-changing world. A person, community or society that is more confident and competent in their natural ability to learn from own

<sup>2</sup> For those who are less familiar with action learning, we have just published a short article, “Action Learning – a developmental approach to change”, as a Nugget, on the CDRA website.

experience will need fewer deliveries of skills and resources from elsewhere.

We need to embed transformation in natural, innate processes and resources like action learning. It is through such processes that development is already happening. Not only is it respectful to work with what is already there, but it is just simple common sense. The implication for practice, though, is that it takes particular relationships to facilitate this learning and to access what is there, what is latent, relationships that are often quite alien to practitioners who would simply like to efficiently deliver development and move on. That these natural and indigenous processes and resources might be hidden, again points to a primary challenge we face as practitioners – helping people to consciously reveal, appreciate and strengthen their innate capacities and resources of learning. This is a foundation of real independence, inner confidence and sustainability.



(We might want to be careful not to confuse sustainability with longevity, as many tend to do. A developmental approach recognises the need for organic cycles of birth, life and death, each paving the way for the next cycle.

Sustaining the life of something as desirable in itself can lead to stagnation, worse than death. Rather, what needs to underpin sustainability are qualities and abilities of leadership, learning, creativity, freedom, mutuality, responsibility, response-ability etc. that enable change to be learned from and worked with, that enable continuous organic development and healthy change.)

Most significantly, the ability to learn well from experience enables us to continuously navigate the crises, the unpredictability and the complexity of development. It is a core process of development and therefore of developmental practice and, like freedom, is both a primary purpose and a condition of continuous healthy development.

***The fourth principle is that development is held in relationships.*** We live, learn and develop within three differently experienced kinds or levels of relationships: relationship with self, interpersonal relationships with people around us and external relationships with the rest of the world. These three levels span the inner and outer experiences of human beings and so it is at these levels of relationships that we find the work of helping people to free themselves. Power is held in relationships, whether it is the struggle we have with ourselves to claim our inner power, or the power we have over others or the power we hold with others, or the power the State wields in relation to its citizens – without relationship power means little, it has no force, for bad or for good. If we want to shift power, we have to shift relationships.

It is within each or all of these three levels of relationships that people are free or unfree. If in our view of ourselves we have self-doubt or self-hatred (not at all uncommon) we become inhibited,



entrapped or unfree. A stuck, abusive relationship with a partner may be as great a hindrance to development as a lack of social opportunity or (relationship of) political oppression. These kinds of “unfreedoms” at the three levels of relationship mutually reinforce each other and add up to a recipe for entrenched marginalisation – the core target of development interventions.

In healthy and free personal and interpersonal relationships people are empowered by their own and each other’s humanity and are able to learn together, cooperate and provide for their needs to a much greater degree, developing willing and mutual responsibility – even to tackle outer restrictions or oppressive relationships. Simply put, we need healthy relationships through which we can develop ourselves and help each other, again as a primary purpose and as a condition for further healthy development.

Many people have said to us at CDRA that they “get” what we say about development but challenge us to say something more concrete about the kind of developmental practice that we promote. This article now turns to exploring the nature of horizontal learning as one kind of approach that can be both developmental method and broader strategy, and even core purpose, offering potential for working at depth and at scale. In describing this approach to development, we will see how the four principles we have explored above reinforce each other in practice in many ways.

### **Dusting off horizontal learning<sup>3</sup>**

What is horizontal learning and how does it relate to other forms of learning?

We have already explored action learning. As its close companion, much of what we have said for action learning is true

<sup>3</sup>

We want to acknowledge all the participants of the CDRA Action Learning Group workshop, held in February 2005, on “Horizontal learning and community exchanges”, itself a horizontal learning process, for their input and inspiration. The results of this process will be made available on the CDRA website this year.

for horizontal learning. Learning from our neighbours and peers is surely an ancient practice, as natural and as casual as action learning, seldom consciously employed and similarly innate. Horizontal and action learning are usually, though not always, intertwined, the same process – my brother showing me how he fixed his gutter, a farmer demonstrating to her neighbours how she controls cutworms or a fellow worker telling the story of how they organised, at another factory, to get medical benefits. These are all examples of both. The case stories in this piece are examples of people learning and acting from their own and each other’s experiences, as peers.

When Education arrived in the form of expert teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, agricultural extension workers etc. – for most people as part of colonial domination – the result was that people’s belief in the value of their own and their neighbour’s experiences, knowledge and ideas became increasingly diminished. Cultures and practices of horizontal, community learning and knowledge have become half-buried and vertical dependencies have emerged over the past few generations, continually reinforced by modern society. Knowledge and learning have become external commodities increasingly removed from the organic life of communities, robbing people not only of access to their own local knowledge and potential, but weakening the accompanying age-old interdependent relationships of community. Restoring or renewing cultures and practices of horizontal learning, hand-in-hand with action learning, surely becomes central to a developmental practice, central to purpose.

This is not to say that teachers and experts have unimportant roles. They often have both experience and knowledge that have a critical place in learning and it would be foolish to deny ourselves access to these. They can bring more conceptual clarity than is often available in the peer group, of immense value. The thing is to know when to bring it and how. The parent/farmers in Lesotho, described in the story at the beginning, gained vital knowledge from the

permaculture trainers, without which little may have developed. But this new knowledge was brought only after their own knowledge and experience was collectively surfaced and validated by the trainers, so that the expert knowledge acted to complement and expand what they already knew, rather than to ignore, deny or replace it, as so often happens.

We also know that teachers learn much from students and that vertical teaching relationships often progress into more horizontal and mutual peer relationships.

We have discovered in our own work, paradoxically, that those to whom we are likely to give more expert inputs on our courses or processes would be the groups of participants who already have the experiences and concepts into which they can absorb what we offer, and who see us more as their peers – peer teachers, if you like. Less experienced participants often struggle with too much input from us and derive more from experiential exercises and case stories, both from us and surfaced from themselves and their peers, from which we can help them to draw new learnings and develop new concepts.

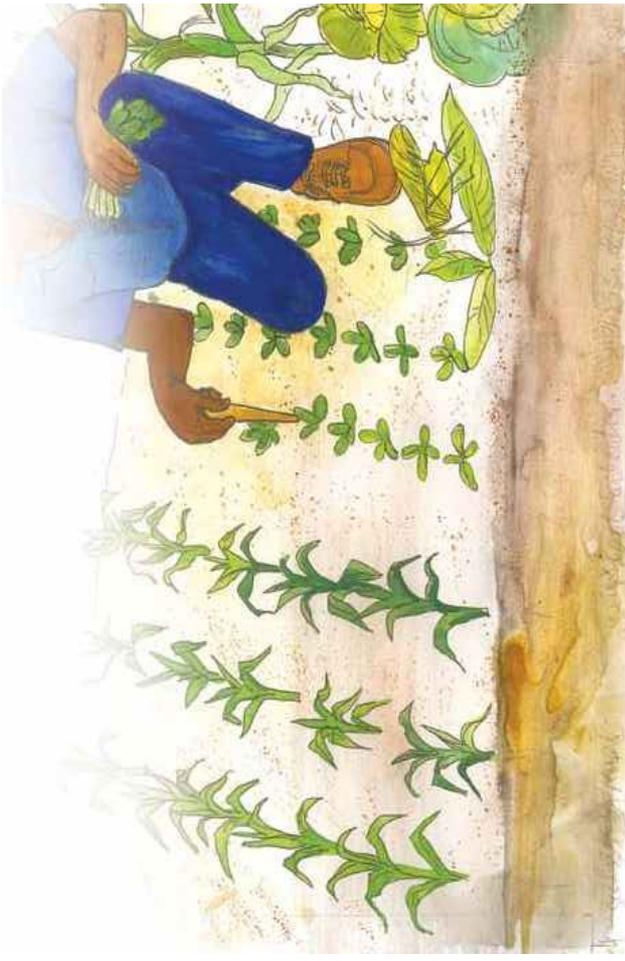
In the original conception of this article we included elders with teachers and experts because of the more vertical relationship they appear to have with their more junior community members. But it felt wrong to do this so easily. On reflection we have realised that elders have a more interesting role because their relationship with the learners, and their context, is usually more intimate and complex. As members of the same community they share many aspects of a peer relationship, as insiders, but also bring with them story and history, local knowledge and wisdom, culture and tradition (useful or not). When these are shared they come not from the outside but deeply from within the community, from out of the past, revealing what already belongs to the community, its heritage and deep identity. Although there are dependencies and other power issues in relationships with elders they do represent something quite different from those between learners and teachers or experts.

Horizontal learning, like action learning, is another natural and innate process in which we can embed transformation. We will explore below how practitioners are also starting to dust off action learning and horizontal learning and use them more consciously and fruitfully in their practices.

## Horizontal learning as method

*The course ended with a collective certificate-giving circle with each participant awarding a certificate to another, accompanied by words of appreciation for the contribution of the other to their own learning, and encouragement for the future. The facilitators were also warmly thanked for their role, but clearly it was from their peers that most had been gained and for whom most gratitude was expressed. For the facilitators this was gratifying but, they had to admit with a chuckle, they had felt a little sidelined and unappreciated.*

Horizontal learning as a deliberate method is not new to the development sector and comes in many shapes and sizes. Most



common are peer learning activities in workshops. In our own processes and those of most of our clients and associates, whether during formal courses or in accompanying others, most of the time is spent in exercises or activities that involve peer learning and peer engagement. Peer-based activities may be interspersed with inputs or individual work but even these are often designed to stimulate or prepare for group learning processes.

Where is the real value in horizontal or peer learning?

Most obviously, peer learning can free people from limiting dependencies on experts, teachers, leaders or facilitators, encouraging a culture and practice, beyond this or that workshop, of openly seeking knowledge, ideas and advice from a wider range of sources.

Peer learning not only makes better use of available experiences and ideas, without excluding those from above or outside, but it also builds personal and group confidence, validating own experience. We like to learn from each other because there is often a give and take, a virtuous circle of knowledge creation as we are helped to hear and make sense of our experiences and develop our ideas, as we build on each other's ideas, and as we experience the excitement of dialogue and mutual discovery. We develop confidence when the answers come from the floor, from amongst ourselves.

We tend to relate to our peers more openly than to experts and can learn in different ways as a result. In sitting next to a peer, on the same level, rather than below, we can connect more strongly and more freely, not only at a head level, but at a heart level, engaging more empathetically in process. We know that someone who has just learned something can often be a better teacher than an expert who has known it for years, because she or he is closer to the experience of learning and can more easily help others to work not only with what has to be learned but with how it can be learned. Our own struggle to learn something new often generates a vitality or infectious excitement that is motivating and energising when sharing it with peers.

Peer conversations lend themselves to working with experiences, providing easier, freer spaces for peoples to tell their stories. Stories, whether related informally or through case studies, are the source of learning for an action learning approach. We know that we learn best from our own experience, but a well-told story in a peer setting is re-experienced by the listeners, making it available for all to learn from.<sup>4</sup>

Storytelling is key to removing inner hindrances to development – it is at the heart of most therapeutic, healing practices<sup>5</sup>, many at an individual level, but it also holds great potential for social healing and development processes, large and small. For example, in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was essentially a cathartic, freeing and transformative peer exercise of national healing, of remembering, of revealing, of acknowledgement and forgiveness. There are several NGOs in the HIV/AIDS sector which have moved from individual counselling practices to surprisingly effective horizontal processes, as a way of dealing with the numbers they face. These practitioners support the formation of peer counselling groups of HIV positive women, who meet regularly to listen to each other's stories, share their learnings and give advice, helping each other to cope with and to face their situation more positively. One NGO we know takes this further into helping the established peer groups to form economic cooperatives to support themselves.

In our own practice we often use organisational story or biography, in peer workshop processes, to help organisations to understand their own life processes, assisting them to move out of

<sup>4</sup> In the CDRA Annual Report of 2000/2001, we promoted storytelling to help to bring life to reports to donors and other accountability processes. This is very different from the two-dimensional reporting that is the basis of most communication and documentation in the sector.

<sup>5</sup> Remission rates for cancer patients who are part of peer support groups are significantly higher than for those who struggle on their own.

the past where many get trapped, through the present and into their own, more conscious and emergent future story.

Contained in storytelling is the narrative whole, where experience – life – is reflected intact, to be seen intact and out of which consciousness can be formed and transformed. Without a sense of story, understanding becomes piecemeal, disconnected and misleading. In peer settings, stories and their telling of the past, present and future, can become powerful processes for community consciousness and transformation.

Fear of judgement, often unconscious and unspoken, can act as a major constraint to development. Participants enjoy the freedom of peer learning, often with great relief, free from the power and judgement that the teacher, expert or facilitator might hold over them in obvious or subtle ways, unintimidated by their ignorance in contrast to the expert's.

From having facilitated many peer learning processes, in particular those that really do release participants from the hold of the expert, we have been struck again and again by the enormous responsibility for own learning that this kind of freedom generates in a peer learning process.

Freer processes require a different orientation to facilitate or to hold, and a challenge, not so much of trusting the process, but of trusting the people to find their own process – and this is where responsibility springs from. Control by the facilitator gives way to a role of holding the boundaries or containers within which free interaction can be generated. It is true that many peer learning processes contain what appear to be unstructured, chaotic periods where anything could happen – indeed they often surface suppressed crises. But within a purposeful, learning environment, as a relatively safe container, this letting go into some chaos, into respectful freedom, can generate a surprising degree of self-management and self-responsibility amongst a group of peers and a mature handling of crisis.

This lies in stark and ironic contrast to the kind of fearful responsibility, the midwife of immature irresponsibility, that is generated out of so many vertical accountability structures and mechanisms, out of unfree or unequal relationships. This is characteristic not only of the world in which we are trying to intervene developmentally, but of vertical relationships in the development sector itself.

Assessed against the four principles of a developmental practice explored above, peer or horizontal learning methods show themselves to be liberating, capable of embracing the emerging and unpredictable unknown, open to working with experience and narrative, and fostering learning relationships and responsibility.

## Horizontal learning as strategy



*The NGO in Tanzania had for decades attempted to teach farmers modern methods learned in the agricultural colleges of the North. But those who had accepted the new methods had not done particularly well, in fact many were poorer, whereas others who had accepted and then ignored the advice, had not done badly. Eventually a new generation of Tanzanian trainers realised that between them the farmers knew more about farming under local conditions than they did and decided to change their approach, based on experiences they had heard about from trainers in other countries.*

*They started to prompt farmers to form Farmer Learning Groups, not quite sure what it would lead to. Farmers were encouraged to meet regularly and to share their working methods and innovations, and to invite into their company some of the older farmers who had stubbornly held on to their time-worn methods and less productive but drought-resistant seeds. The trainers (now facilitators) did not insist on any formality or committees or minute-taking, just meeting each other to share what they knew. It took a little while for the first groups to find their own process, to work out how they wanted to learn together, but this they did and it began to lead to the kind of improved practices the NGO had long been trying to promote. The*

*facilitators, with the farmers' permission, started to document and publish these methods and innovations, in Swahili, making them available, with the story of their origins, to a wider group of people.*

*Soon they were being approached by more farmers for help to set up the same and were able to draw on established Farmer Learning Groups to help, but they also heard of groups elsewhere that had started up spontaneously. Most surprising was that some Farmer Learning Groups, completely unprompted, were embarking on joint farming development projects while others were electing representatives to approach the local council to ask for services that were due to them, especially better roads and marketing facilities. And it was not long before some of the groups banded together and formed themselves into branches of Mviwata, the national independent small farmers union.*

An emerging phenomenon is the use of horizontal learning, not



only as a particular method but as a broader developmental strategy.

We have learnt, through our clients, about approaches such as community exchanges for daily savings and housing programmes, peer counselling groups for HIV positive women, farmer-to-farmer extension work, practitioner dialogues, communities of practice, and the revival of older practices such as community seed-sharing festivals, that form an integral part of the practice of a small but increasing number of developmental practitioners and development organisations, NGOs and CBOs. The Shack Dwellers International deserves special mention for its pioneering work in fostering local, regional and international relationships of inter-community learning and authentic civic action through community exchanges.

The power of horizontal learning as a method lives strongly in all of these strategies, yielding rich learning and responsibility, providing much of the motive force or power. When promoted to supporting a new level of intention, horizontal learning, as strategy, holds even more developmental potential.

The case story told above about the Farmer Learning Groups in Tanzania is increasingly typical of work within sustainable agriculture approaches. At last, through peer-learning, farmers were more consciously and consistently improving their practices, and their improved and authentic methods were being made available to a wider group of peers.

But much more became possible – unintended, unpredictable, even unimagined consequences. The learning relationships that were formed by farmers provided a foundation for more than just improved practice. There was a degree of freedom in these relationships that helped them to find their own process and quality of interaction and consequently the necessary trust, respect and organisation that enabled them to begin to act together in joint development projects, to elect representatives to advocate for their rights and to mobilise themselves to join the small farmers union. We see simple, natural and free relationships of peer learning becoming the foundation for authentic organisation and joint action.

The Farmer Learning Groups' relationships were embedded in natural and innate processes that, in their simplicity, were not difficult to encourage and support, and yet they were able to generate further social initiatives and to model and multiply themselves, without much further support from practitioners.

Could activist or rights-based approaches, which might try to mobilise, educate and prod farmers to directly form delegations to approach local government to fulfill their duties, hope to achieve the depth of relationship and organisation, let alone the solidarity and courage, that became rooted in the Farmer Learning Groups? Or, indeed, the completely unprompted and indigenous response of taking their own initiative? Human relationships are as important as new consciousness, because without relationships little can be done with the consciousness. Activist or rights-based approaches may bring more strident, and often welcome, purpose and backbone to the sector, but the roots of a social movement initiative, and thus its sustainability, often lie in the more subtle processes, qualities and depths of the close peer relationships that get fostered amongst people themselves within their own cultures. (This is what distinguishes, or should distinguish, social movements from political movements, which are characterised by less rooted cadres of political activists and a shifting base of mass support.)

We cannot so easily or usefully define the “need” for these intimate relationships as “rights” to be struggled for or claimed, as we are led to believe is possible and strategic by rights-based practitioners. A developmental approach, as directed by communities themselves, may well move towards a stage of claiming and insisting on the enforcement of rights, but if that is the starting point, set in motion by preset outcomes in the agendas of the facilitating practitioners, then the strategy is in danger of becoming engineered, no matter how participative the method.

However, the notion of peer learning relationships developing into authentic forms of organisation and action, may help to provide a bridge between two social practices that have often been seen as distinct and at loggerheads – the practice of community

development and the practice of community organising. In the story of the Farmer Learning Groups they became seamlessly part of the same practice. The same may be said for the story below:

*The NGO director was feeling a bit overwhelmed. The street savings groups were growing beyond what was originally envisaged. The whole thing had developed a life of its own in the three to four years of its existence. One group had collapsed and some were in conflict. Scores of savings groups had formed, mushrooming all over the place. The focus on savings groups as a counter to domestic violence was difficult to keep track of and impossible to measure without interfering, though the stories of the beating of the pots and pans was a hopeful development. What would the donors say, what proof would they require?*

*Now the streets had joined with more assertive savings groups from out of town to form a movement, boosting the number of groups to over 100, which was exciting, but it was not yet clear where it would lead and what would be asked of them as practitioners. Three groups from towns up the West coast were applying as organisations for lucrative fishing rights – what was the significance of this? As an NGO they now had good connections with over 200 collectors, trusted salt-of-the earth informal community leaders who had surfaced, elected by fellow savers, and they sensed some enormous opportunities for helping them to take their leadership to another level – but what kind of leadership and what approach could they take? And little of this was in the original plan.*

The daily savings strategies of NGOs, one of which we know of in Cape Town (inspired through horizontal practitioner exchanges with NGOs in India) use horizontal approaches in several ways. The NGO plays an initiating and supporting role in the process, but the strategy itself is spread through peer teaching, with established savings groups showing newly forming groups the systems and methods of saving, and promoting the values of the programme. Not

only more effective but also more efficient than top-down capacity-building.

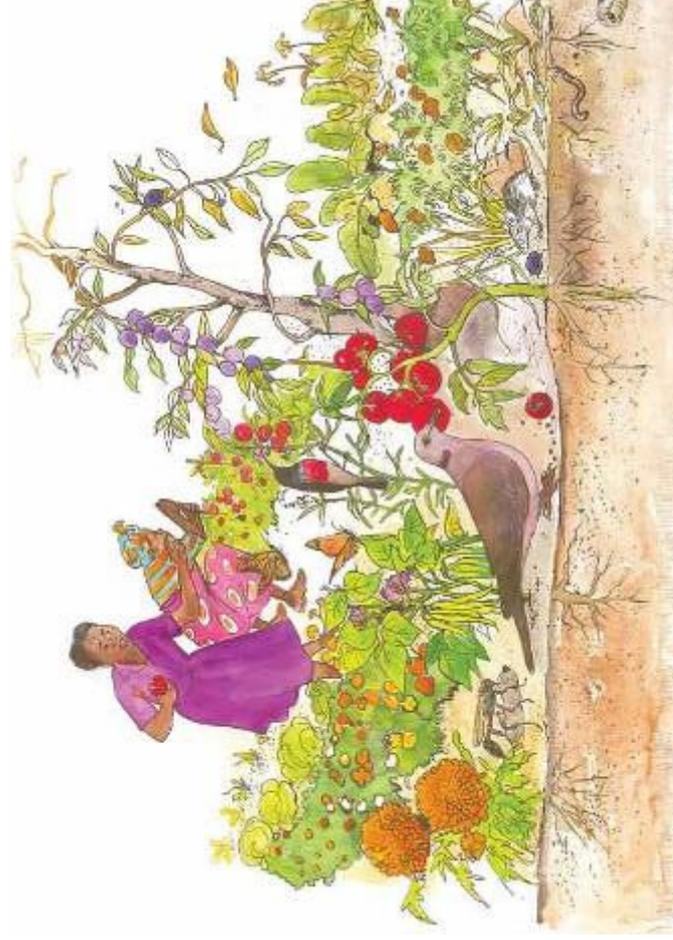
A network of peer relationships amongst (mostly) women is encouraged by this approach which not only creates and strengthens a discipline of regular daily savings and a system for managing small loans – often a key resource for women needing some independence from abusive partners – but creates a solidarity which enables them to collectively counter domestic violence in their street communities. The stories of women belonging to these savings groups coming out banging pots and pans whenever they hear fellow savers being beaten up by their partners and then giving them the choice of mending their ways or leaving, represent a powerful cultural response rooted in peer relationships. Three of the groups, finding that they had formed a firm enough organisational foundation for entering the mainstream economy, were able then to apply, as organisations, for fishing rights. The development of all the groups forming a social movement of some kind to represent their interests collectively is a fascinating grassroots response to their mutually sensed situation and the unforeseen opportunities that they themselves created. Similar to the Farmer Learning Groups in Tanzania, we find here simple peer economic and learning relationships forming the basis for the development of deeper relationships of caring, social solidarity and authentic grassroots organisation.

Significant in this case story is the challenge faced by the practitioners in working with chaos and crisis and their respectful practice of responding as things develop. Helping people to work through their own unpredictable confusions, to find their own processes and purposes, rather than trying to control, avoid or pre-empt the chaos, is profoundly developmental and more likely to yield authentic change.

## Underlying qualities and enabling conditions

One common and unfortunate myth in the development sector is that there is a valid choice between quality and quantity. Anxious donors and impatient activists fall prey to this fallacy most often – though it probably lives in us all in some measure. Out of this myth develops an easy scepticism towards a qualitative approach expressed most commonly in such comments as “it’s a pity but we just don’t have the luxury of putting that much time into learning, we are too busy, we have to deliver” or “we don’t have the resources to work at that depth, we have to impact on a bigger scale”.

Focusing on doing more has become synonymous with doing better. But experience has taught us that there is no real tension between quality and quantity in this work, only a clear and easy relationship: quality is the foundation of quantity. Quality of preparation, of leadership, of relationships, of learning from experience, quality of approach and practice. We know deeply that



if we pay attention to these less visible qualities in any human development endeavour that, if there is a potential for something fruitful and lasting to emerge and multiply, the chances are immeasurably increased that this will happen. Ignore these and while there might be short-term, impressive, even visibly accountable results to tick off on the logframe, the chances of long-term sustainability are immeasurably undermined – disappointment is almost certain. The monumental failures of the development sector in the past 50 years may have much to do with this myth and the consequent failure to pay attention to the kinds of qualities listed above.

How do we explain the story of the school gardens in Lesotho told at the start of this piece? A tiny initiative that snowballed to 250 schools in 7 years, feeding tens of thousands of children and impacting on the farming practices of hundreds, possibly thousands, of farmers.

It might be that it was a very fortunate concurrence of several conditions. Something in the people had to be ready for this, the ground fertile, the seeds ready, waiting for rain. But were the conditions so exceptional when the initiative was able to spread widely into so many different local contexts?

To understand this we might want to take a closer look at the catalysts that initiated the chemistry and the factors that gave ongoing support – for us these are, above all, the qualitative and organic leadership and approach of Mrs. Letela and the developmental approach of the permaculture trainers and the donors.

Mrs. Letela had no grand vision of more than her own school at first but as the process unfolded and more schools approached her, she let the process devolve freely outwards. Her leadership and organisation were extremely modest and respectful and the process she brought very participative, not as a typically once-off event but as peer engagement naturally built into the process from very early on, and embedded throughout. Once it moved beyond her school, people worked out their own process within their own leadership and school/community structures. As it became more complex Mrs.

Letela initiated a small advice office as a shared resource centre, very horizontal, not to take control or to manage the process, but to facilitate further relationships and access to peer experience and knowledge.

Mrs. Letela's real work and success was to organically connect people with each other in purposeful relationships of mutuality. Her open, uncontrolling process enabled her to work where the will lay, mostly with parents whose responsibility for their own children provided the most powerful and natural motive force. In doing this she liberated latent relationships of interdependence, of peer learning and self-reliance, of generosity, first within her own school and then in a chain reaction through schools in all five districts. Just as the impulse to develop is innate and natural, so too is the impulse of human generosity, constantly looking for ways of expression. Mrs. Letela was able to tap into these natural social processes and impulses and give them free expression.

With all the effort that the world puts into leadership development, how much focus is given to the kind of leadership that Mrs. Letela embodies? How can we help to reveal, encourage and support this quality of leadership in community?

The permaculture trainers had a small but significant role, bringing not only a quality of knowledge (permaculture) to the farmers in Lesotho but also a peer approach which respected, validated and expanded the farmers' own experience and expertise and enabled them to become peer trainers in turn with considerable impact. Indeed the modesty, quality and impact of their role is a real example and model of a catalytic practice and effective use of limited resources. It is a pity that so few donors are attracted to supporting modest practitioners and practices of this kind.

There is good attention and useful work happening these days around the notion of indigenous knowledge systems – we can see these “systems” as useful sources of knowledge, but also as relationships with enormous potential to generate indigenous organisation, initiative and development.

In terms of donor practice and support there was also a surprising modesty in the Lesotho and Tanzanian experiences, compared with the scale and depth of what was achieved. In Lesotho, there was some flexible funding for training and transport costs, a small advice office and a part-time salary. If Mrs. Letela's initiative had been turned into a logframed project it would likely have been over-funded, tightly managed by a foreign technical advisor and limited to one or two schools, whatever grand replicable visions the donors may have had. Mrs. Letela's own enthusiasm may very well have been defeated by requirements for complicated planning matrices and maintaining complex, accountability-obsessed relationships with foreign donors. If required to submit 3-year proposals and quarterly reports she might have balked at the whole prospect. But by having access to discreet, modest and easily-sourced funding, she and the trainers were able to do what they do best – respond positively, humanly, flexibly and quickly to the opportunity, and thus create and maintain momentum.

In Tanzania, there was funding to support a small NGO of trainers/facilitators including some media production and printing costs. Importantly, the Tanzanian facilitators, in recent years, had donors who did not constrain them by insisting on preset outcomes and detailed plans but funded a practice that enabled them to work sensitively and experimentally to discover the right approach over time. When will more donors and back-donors realise that they too can be developmental practitioners, like the donors in these stories, with deep, meaningful and interesting practices, rather than the hard-nosed bankers of the sector?

Practitioners and donors who would have favoured a more thoroughly planned and organised, instrumentalist approach in both the Lesotho and Tanzania stories might also have promoted the setting up of Village or School Development Committees of some kind, even bringing some formal governance training into the mix. The “committee-fication” of development is prevalent – the establishment of formalised, modern, objectives-oriented, supposedly more



democratic but effectively vertical, superficially participative structures. These may appear to bring efficiencies but they are usually shallow, unnatural, de-energising and a drain on the life-forces of development initiatives, especially those that lie in more horizontal processes. The potential for horizontal relationships and learning probably exists in all development approaches in some measure – how often is this cut to bits by vertical formalities and externalities?

There is an essence in the clever instrumental approaches of the development project package, delivered into the cultural heart of communities from the offices of the modern city, smuggled within the mandatory logframes, governance training, committee procedures, monitoring systems, quarterly reports and constitutions, etc., that is so lifeless and untrusting. Perhaps when we render things lifeless in this way they seem easier to assemble in the correct order, to control, to predict and to properly manage. How much harder it is to give time and space for the natural impulses of people to express themselves and take their lively, unpredictable course when there are deadlines, outcomes and fixed budgets to account for.

Yet the lack of life in the development project approach is not about death – if it was there might be some real space opened up for change. Rather, this lifelessness is a stagnation of life, of dulled imagination, perhaps even a fear of death, a fear of real change, and the development project a smart cloak that hides an awful projection of modernity's own cold stagnation.

People need to meet each other humanly before they need meetings – and if they are not sure yet how they would like to meet or to organise themselves to face new challenges or to take new initiatives, then this too is a developmental challenge that requires patience and respect. Lightly held by the Tanzanian facilitators, the Farmer Learning Groups each found their own way and were able to be themselves and take their own initiative, in their own language and culture. People need the freedom, sometimes with gentle

guidance and helpful questions, to create and participate in their own processes.<sup>6</sup>

But it is not that easy. As much as people enjoy the horizontal, more fluid, free and open initiatives and processes, there are strong forces that both resist fluidity and push these to formalisation and verticalisation. People, donors, practitioners, government workers, all of us, need structure to create security and stability and inevitably, as we have been Educated, hierarchy is the only form we are taught to respect. It may very well be that beyond the change that horizontal learning has stimulated there is a need for more formalised structures and processes to manage the change and hold the gains made. With the right kind of leadership and culture some formalisation and hierarchy can work, but the danger of squeezing out the life-force that gave it birth is great.

Flatter, freer forms of organisation and leadership take time to sink their roots and we still have much to learn about how to enable them. Peer forms of organisation, with more interdependent relationships, cannot be invented, but have to grow out of experiences of more vertical dependent and independent phases. But with freedom, respect, common intention and the right containers – each authentic and indigenous – human beings are able to exercise a high degree of self-organisation and management. We know this is possible, from many experiences, including our own. Certainly for NGOs who are trying to centre their own strategies more on horizontal approaches, it is important that their own inner organisational processes reflect these, both as a matter of integrity but also as a rich source of learning. In a related article we describe CDRA's own organisational process and structure, based on peer learning processes and rhythms.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Meas Nee's "Towards Restoring Life in Cambodian Villages" JSRC Phnom Penh 1999, for a poetic story of remarkably respectful facilitation of development in deeply traumatised communities. Chapter 5 of this book has been republished with kind permission from the author on the CDRA website.

<sup>7</sup> [Experiencing freedom's possibilities: Horizontal learning in CDRA's Home Weeks](#) under Writings-Annual reports on the CDRA website

## Concluding

“With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programs.”

Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom*  
The case stories told here may have inspired some of you, as they have us, and may also encourage you to take another look at your own experience and practice for clues, ideas and opportunities. There must be many more living stories out there, unheralded, which we can surface and share with each other, and from which we can learn and draw inspiration – horizontally of course. We invite you to share these with us.

Working at depth and at scale may be more possible than many realise, without always defaulting to grandiose and “cunning development programmes”. But as with any developmental approach, working with horizontal processes has no easy formula, no project planning matrices to figure out and doggedly follow, and no guarantee of what will emerge. But as developmental practitioners we can be awake and available to possibility and when this is sensed we can help to reveal, encourage and support the quality of leadership and approaches that are the catalysts to these kinds of generative development processes.<sup>8</sup> What is needed are willing feet, fresh eyes and open hearts.

Without blueprints, we have to work with each situation on its own terms, but we can be informed by learnings and questions from

<sup>8</sup> For useful guidelines on supporting and facilitating community exchanges see “Capitalising on Local Knowledge : Community Knowledge Exchange – A toolkit for the preparation, implementation and evaluation of community-to-community knowledge and learning exchanges, I and II” by N. Oettle and B. Koelle, World Bank Africa Region Indigenous Knowledge for Development Program, 2003. We will also be publishing a new resource on Horizontal and Peer Learning out of an Action Learning Group workshop, under Dialogue Resources on the CDRA website in this year.

elsewhere, from peers with experience, as well as continually working with the principles of a developmental approach and practice to guide us to where the real work lies.

We need to remember that people are already developing – our task is to assist in removing inner and outer hindrances to this innate process and impulse, to help people to free themselves to take control of their own development, however unpredictable; that peoples’ experiences and stories and their natural ability to learn from these are the key resource and a foundation of their ongoing independent and interdependent development and their ability to navigate change and crisis; that our work lies in helping people to form or strengthen the kinds of relationships, often freer relationships of peer learning, that they need to mutually support their own processes of development.

We have tried to show here that horizontal learning is not only good method but can be fruitful strategy. But if restoring or renewing the mutual and organic cultures and practices of horizontal learning amongst people and their communities is worthwhile in itself, in which transformation can be embedded, then it can also become core purpose. The story of the annual seed-sharing festival, told just below, is a wonderful illustration of this.

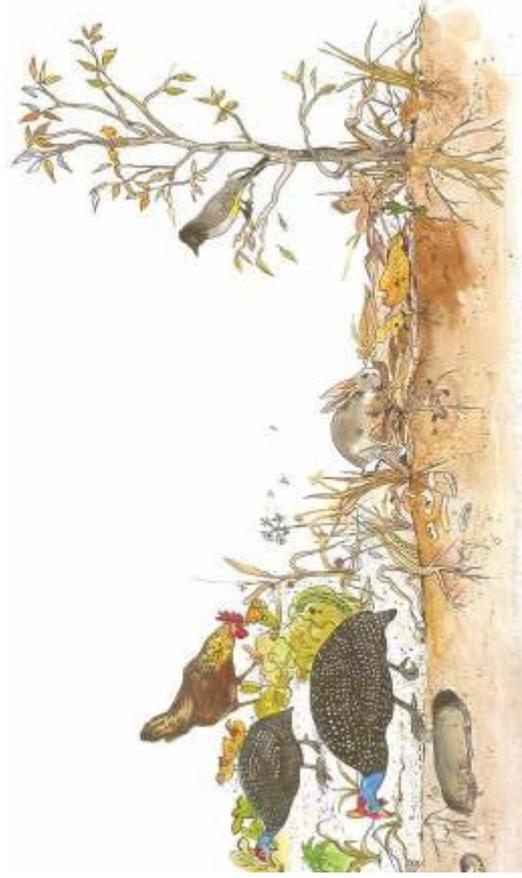
For practitioners these principles, purposes, strategies and methods can come together into a practice of respectful intervention that, rather than trying to deliver or direct development from above, can assist in unlocking it, by helping people to connect with each other and their own experience, generosity and resourcefulness, and thereby stimulating what is waiting and wanting to be born.

*We heard a case story from a small-farmer/community-worker in the Limpopo province of how a group of 60-odd villages revived a traditional practice of meeting once a year for a seed-sharing festival.<sup>9</sup> This had fallen into disuse since the agricultural industry, ushered in by government extension officers, began showing small*

<sup>9</sup> Farmers need to continually bring in fresh and diverse seeds to prevent genetic weakening.

*farmers the modern way, creating deep and worrying dependencies on corporate-controlled seeds, fertilisers and pesticides. An awareness workshop by a local NGO on the looming dangers of genetically-modified seed finally tipped the scales and provoked the renewal of the old practice.*

*Now, at a different village each year, the farmers once again send representatives of each village to gather and congregate for several days, each bringing bags of their beans and grains to cook and taste and then to freely share as seed, with advice on how best to plant and grow. And all of this generates the revival of other cultural practices, of songs and dances and stories that express a renewed identity of community and interdependency.*



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Email: [info@cdra.org.za](mailto:info@cdra.org.za) Webpage: <http://www.cdra.org.za>

P.O. Box 221, Woodstock, 7915, South Africa

Telephone: -27 -21 462 3902

Fax: -27 -21 462 3918