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**Young People as Drivers of Public Innovation: The Approach and Experience of the Activate!
Leadership and Public Innovation Programme**

Being young in South Africa today requires a complex negotiation between a brutal apartheid history, a post-apartheid era characterised by frustration, continued inequality and violence, and an uncertain future. Young people are also very much at the forefront of the South African consciousness: the “ticking time-bomb” that menaces on the margins, growing in severity with each new failure to address issues of education, employment and opportunity. One of the critical problems with current youth development paradigms is that they have often taken anaemic crisis-management approaches, seeking quick-fixes such as life-skills programmes, and developing stand-alone opportunities that ultimately cannot be capitalised on. Scarcely do we engage with young people as agents of their own, and the country’s broader successes: as innovative, capable and with the potential to input wisely, inventively, and responsibly into the public realm. If we are to truly capitalise on the youth dividend of our population, we have to shift this way of thinking away from a pure crisis-management approach, to a proactive, positive approach that embraces and supports young people to lead South Africa. We also need to broaden our understanding of what characterises leadership capacity in youth – so often conflated with academic achievement or business success – to recognise the extraordinary capacity of thousands of young people working toward the public good. One mechanism to do this, is to draw together young emerging leaders from across the poles of South African society, equip them with a mind-set of innovation and the capacity to navigate the socio-political environment, and create platforms for them to influence public policy and discourse. This approach would create what Otto Scharmer describes as a “field of inspired connection and action” rather than simply “filling a gap” in an individual young person.¹ This paper will discuss the approach and experience of the Activate! Leadership and Public Innovation programme, which seeks to adopt this mechanism, to support young people to drive public innovation in South Africa over the next five-years.

The Activate! Programme

Activate! Leadership and Public Innovation was born out of the experience of Dr David Harrison, former CEO of loveLife, where over a number of years it became evident that there was a cohort of young people emerging from the groundBREAKER programme who were talented, motivated and committed to transforming their communities. However, these young people tended to hit a glass ceiling – constrained by their skills, isolation and lack of access to opportunities. The existence of these young people led to the development of a mechanism to capitalise on their spark and commitment, while building their capacity to drive public innovation and social transformation in South Africa. The hypothesis is that if we can capacitate young people at a

¹ Scharmer, O. (2009). “Leadership development is not about filling a gap but about igniting a field of inspired connection and action: Ten propositions on transforming the current leadership development paradigm.” Presentation to the Round Table Meeting on Leadership for Development Impact, The World Bank Institute, Sept 27-28 2009.

local level, and connect them together nationally, we can reach a critical mass of action that can positively develop and drive public innovation at a national level.

In 2011, as part of its Leadership portfolio the DG Murray Trust commissioned the establishment of a special purpose public benefit organisation, to develop and deploy the Activate! programme. The goal of Activate! is to promote public innovation by developing the leadership and innovation ability of a cohort young leaders between 20 and 30 years of age. They are drawn predominantly from marginalized communities, connected to one another and to points of influence and opportunity across social and economic divides. They are selected on the basis of their proven commitment to the public good, and their abilities are developed and directed to some of the toughest social problems faced by their communities.

Through partnering with other donors and the South African government, over the next four years the programme will work with up to 5,000 young leaders drawn from marginalised communities, civil society organisations, government programmes, education institutions, and the private sector. Each young person joins the programme for three years. In the first year, Activators participate in three nine-day residential modules which focus on 5 key spheres of content:

- *My identity*: Getting to grips with individual identity, history, goals, values, networks, strengths etc.
- *Our identity*: connecting across divides, building networks and solidarity.
- *Innovation and leadership toolkits*: a suite of tools and materials focused on developing leadership, project management and innovation skills.
- *Socio-political navigation*: understanding how to mobilise and navigate political systems.
- *Deploying ripples and waves of change*: building skills and confidence to initiate public innovation action and discourse locally, and link up nationally to amplify impact.

Alongside the residential modules, Activators will participate in two further years of specialised workshops, seminars, and other opportunities as well as use various platforms to link together their local innovations for national impact, and communicate with the South African public on their ideas and innovations. Through this process, the programme aims to build a network of young people who can act as role-models in their communities, create pathways and precedents that expand access to opportunity for marginalised communities, connect across socio-economic divides to aid social mobility and build social inclusion, respond innovatively to community challenges, and participate effectively in public policy development and governance processes.

The Activate! programme was built on the basis of three core hypotheses: firstly, that in order for young South Africans to overcome the many challenges facing them, we need to create new purpose-driven post-apartheid identity that empowers rather than undermines young people's agency. Secondly, we hypothesised that despite often having had 12 years of poor quality education, young people retain the capacity to develop significant problem-solving, critical thinking and innovation skills. These are precisely the skills vital to re-invigorating civil society

and securing government accountability. Finally, we noted that post-apartheid plans for social transformation have not paid enough attention to the critical *connections* needed to overcome the country's extreme socio-economic polarisation. Plans focused on schooling, but failed to provide the mechanisms to keep children connected to schools until they completed Grade 12. They stressed financial empowerment and land ownership, but failed to link beneficiaries to opportunities that translated ownership into long-term sustainable prosperity. They created incentives for upward mobility, but failed to connect enough young people at the margins to those opportunities. Connections to appropriate opportunities can instil in young people a sense of real and *imminent* possibility – which is critical to ensuring continued motivation.

Crafting a new identity

If we are to begin developing a new post-apartheid youth identity, then we must first acknowledge that we currently sit with a generation defined by deficit. As Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko understood, a deficit-based identity creates indelible negative impacts on the human psyche and undermines people's capacity from the outset. Critical to overcoming this deficit-based identity must first be an acknowledgement that in our mobilisation of the term youth, and the mechanisms through which we do so, have more to do, as Durham argues, with the "social landscape" of South Africa than with young people themselves.² Durham argues that youth is a "social shifter", a term that indexes the society in which is mobilised according to the conceptions identified with it. Durham argues:

As people bring the concept of youth to bear on situations, they situate themselves in a social landscape of power, rights, expectations and relationships – indexing both themselves and the topology of that social landscape. They do so not necessarily...in a static manner, but in a dynamic, contestive, and imaginative way. Shifters work metalinguistically, drawing attention to specific relations within a structure of relations, to the structure itself. This seems to be particularly the case with the mobilisation of the idea of 'youth' in social life...To imagine youth, and to imagine the concept relationally, is to imagine the grounds and forces of sociality.³

That our conceptualisation of youth says much more about our social structures than about young people themselves emphasises both the importance of reimagining and reinventing the concept of youth, as well as bringing attention to the social structures that reinforce and interpret young people through particular, usually negative, lenses.

Our lack of imagination about the ways in which young people engage and contribute to society is reflected in the very narrow way in which the academy investigates youth. There are numerous studies focussed on youth unemployment levels, HIV rates, educational access, but almost none that ask explicit questions about young people's social contributions. Even traditional civic engagement and social participation activities, often cited as key aspects to young people's development in society, are rarely comprehensively measured. The HSRC's 2005 report – *Young People in South Africa in 2005: Where We're at and Where We're Going* – notes that the importance of engaging in community activities is the development of skills and

² Durham, D. (2000), 'Youth and the Social Imagination in Africa: Introduction to Parts 1 and 2,' *Anthropological Quarterly*, 73(3): 113-120.

³ Ibid.

competencies alongside an increased social capital making it less likely that they will fall through the cracks or engage in risky and self-destructive behaviour.⁴ While measuring the civic engagement of young people is important, the way in which this engagement is framed – as a mitigator against self-destructive behaviour and not as a positive contribution to broader society – places young people as beneficiaries of civic engagement rather than agents in processes of community transformation. Thus, while the report commendably argues that young people should be given more access to decision-making forums, and particularly to local government, it does little to illuminate the substantial contribution young people can and do already make to their communities. From the 1970s onward, young people were acknowledged as critical players in bringing about social transformation and the end of apartheid in South Africa, yet in the post-apartheid era the notion of young-people’s agency to contribute meaningfully to building the nation is almost non-existent in our dealings with them. Where we do take notice of active young people we too easily fixate on publically visible political characters, who stand-in as signifiers for young people more broadly.

Eighteen years into democracy, the world view of most young people is still parochial and their sense of identity determined largely by participation in community-level social structures and/or their individual responses to privation. Before democracy, the ability to define the oppressor gave focus to activism and kept resistance alive. Black Consciousness subverted the apartheid concept of self-determination, while the less-racially defined politics of the ANC could still galvanize against the institutions of state oppression. In the new South Africa however, the identity of young people – more than that of any other group – has taken a knock.

Where new identities are emerging they are predominantly shaped by popular culture and materialistic trends – with a significant lack of social purpose, but creating systems of belonging and identification through cellphones, clothes, music and cheap accessories. These products provide an avenue for identity, but not one that ultimately connects young people to opportunity and redefines what is possible.

If progress is to be made, agents of public innovation need to know who they are, where they come from and where they are going. Young South Africans need to understand that they are a product of influences and ideas derived from many people and places over time. They need to know that that without accountability and creativity, even pro-poor government interventions may fail to offset structural and social biases effectively. Young people need to understand who they are in South Africa today – and what they can achieve for the public good. In her book, *Join the Club: How Peer Pressure can Transform the World*,⁵ Tina Rosenberg notes the extraordinary power that identity and belonging can have to bring about social transformation and tackle specific social challenges. One Activator – a former gangster – describes the centrality of the desire for belonging: “I’m still motivated by the same basic instincts that caused me to join the gang. I want to belong, to know who I am and to feel that I have a purpose.”⁶ A gang provided him this sense of belonging and purpose, with extraordinary social costs; Activate! aims to

⁴ Morrow, S., Panday, S., and Richter, L. (2005). *Where we’re at and where we’re going: Young People in South Africa in 2005*. Johannesburg: Umsobomvu Youth Fund and the HSRC.

⁵ Rosenberg, T. (2011) *Join the Club: How Peer Pressure can Transform the World*, WW Norton & Company Inc, New York.

⁶ Molohanyi, T. *I just want to belong*, The Sunday Times, 3 June 2012.

provide that same sense of purpose-driven identity, and belonging, but this time with the social benefit of building public innovation.

Sparking public innovation

One of the major premises behind the Activate! Leadership and Public Innovation programme is that even after 12 years of dismal schooling, passionate and motivated young people can learn and innovate in a way that will drive social transformation in South Africa. We know that the first 1,000 days after birth are a critical period for developing learning capacity, and that a solid education is fundamental to developing people's intellectual capabilities. But the latest cognitive science research also shows that our brains retain an enormous amount of plasticity far beyond early childhood and adolescence. Particularly up to the age of 25, our brains have an extraordinary capacity to develop neural pathways that support positive risk-taking and entrepreneurialism, managing uncertainty and unpacking new forms of knowledge. And it is precisely these competencies that we require to shape the kind of country that can meet the needs of all its citizens: an entrepreneurial, creative and continually learning society.

The process of "rewiring" a generation is certainly no mean feat, and requires a nuanced and complex approach. One of the major failings of South Africa's educational reforms is that they often focus predominantly on curricular changes, when the major barriers to teaching and learning – in the context of our brains' innate capacities to learn – is often the social factors that limit motivation, engagement and teaching time. There is little incentive in going to school when the school is in chaos, the teacher absent and textbooks scarce. Hence the current focus on the Three T's: 'Textbooks, Teachers and Time'. But many researchers have shown that even the successful implementation of this mantra is unlikely to bring about profound changes in learner performance without demand-side interventions that shift the capacity and motivation of young people to engage fully in their education. A 2008 study by Mambo-Kekana of black physiotherapy students in South African universities found that high school performance was not a significant predictor of success for these students.⁷ The real predictors of success were: sharing a residence room, obtaining information about university support systems from classmates, and feeling part of a group of classmates. What this tells us is that being smart is not enough to succeed, success requires multiple systems of psycho-social support.

When embarking on the journey to equip young people – many of whom may not have completed high school or had access to any further studies – it is clear that until we have helped them to build a learning community amongst themselves, and a solid sense of self, the process of learning would be impossible. Thus the work of building a common identity, and developing the social capital of Activators, is critical in preparing the way for public innovation skills and practice to take root.

⁷ Mambo-Kekana, N.B. "Predictors of success for African Black Physiotherapy Students in South Africa", PhD Dissertation, Wits University: Johannesburg.

Public innovation is a process of improving the lives of people by improving institutional performance and addressing the major challenges facing society. The role of social capital in public innovation is not as extensively researched or documented, but has been described as:

- Facilitating distributed leadership (allowing for multiple nodes of innovation)
- Allowing intermediaries to cross sectoral boundaries in pursuit of common objectives
- Promoting creativity and enterprise in service delivery and programme implementation
- Creating 'social accelerators' – initiatives through which new ideas can be fast-tracked for implementation
- Building trust across Government, business and civil society.⁸

But, in order for it to be productive, social capital requires agents who are able to activate it for the public good, mediating between the individual and the state and converting the 'capital stock' into a flow of social benefits. In India, Krishna has shown the importance of entrepreneurs in public innovation and development.⁹

This 'agency' must be deliberately and systematically fostered; encouraging voluntarism on its own (such as in a national youth service) is an important source of social capital, but it should not be equated with 'agency'. Rather, the process of investing in public-minded citizens – 'growing their literacy to live in a civil society, their competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to think critically and act deliberately in a pluralist world, the empathy to accommodate others' – is the basis for public innovation.¹⁰ Unlike long-run interventions like universal education, social capital can be built up in a relatively short period of time, provided the agents are in place.^{11,12}

The challenge of public innovation in a highly unequal country like South Africa is particularly daunting: Risk tolerance is inordinately high, making social problems like crime, HIV/AIDSs and violence particularly 'sticky'; socio-economic polarization and high financial capital mobility prompted the democratic transition, but at the same time created the conditions for institutional inefficiency and corruption – which risk becoming the new 'rules of the game' at all levels of Government. Supply-side development – investing in education, for example – may do little to reduce inequality unless we can change the rules of the game. This requires us to strengthen institutions of redistribution and justice, but it also needs 'nexus interventions' that build new social capital and bridge the horizontal divides of South African society. The focus of the Activate! programme on building innovation capacities, alongside the social capital developed through the common purpose-driven identity described above, does precisely this.

⁸ Adams D and Hess M (2008). Social innovation as a new Public Administration Strategy. Australian Innovation Research Centre Working Paper. <http://www.irspm2008.bus.qut.edu.au/papers/documents/pdf> (Accessed December 2008)

⁹ Krishna A. (2002) *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Development and Democracy*. Columbia University Press. New York

¹⁰ Barber B (1992). *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America*. Oxford University press. New York

¹¹ Scheider J (2006). *Social Capital and Welfare reform: Organizations, Congregations and Communities*> Columbia University Press. New York

¹² Hall, P (1999). Social capital in Britain. *British Journal of Political Science*, 29(3): 417-61

Reimagining connection

One of the many travesties of our greed-and-grab society is that the word ‘connection’ has acquired a bad name. We associate it with corruption and ‘tenderpreneurship’. Yet appropriate connections could transform South Africa. Without them, efforts to right the wrongs of the past will benefit a few without mending the country’s deep and persistent fractures. The risk of an agent-driven model is that individuals capture the benefits for themselves or that the network becomes a new cabal. At the same time, ‘bonding social capital’ is important to achieve a level of cohesion and influence. Ultimately, both ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital are required, and programmes need to be specifically designed to ensure that the benefits accrue to the broader society.¹³ Public innovation stems from active social capital – helping break the vicious cycle of inequality and institutional inefficiency, and changing social norms that tolerate corruption and destructive risk. The key attribute of social capital is ‘connection for the public good’ – compared to the patronage and cronyism that characterise corrupt connections.

One of the main reasons for the indolent response to upliftment efforts in South Africa is its extreme social and economic polarization. Much of the post-apartheid focus has been to create upward mobility, yet the drag effect of the masses at the bottom of the pile has stretched South African society even further apart. Social security has tempered the lower extreme: Statistics SA’s recent community survey found that provision of social grants narrowed the Gini-coefficient from 0.80 to 0.72¹⁴. But the extent of exclusion – 60% of the population earns a sixth of the national income, while the richest 20% earn four sixths – has severely limited the returns on investment. At best, cash transfers and social capital invested in poor communities have helped stabilize incomes, but have done little to effect upward mobility.¹⁵

Without profound structural change, we cannot assume that the poorest half of the population will in time accumulate the capital and insurance needed for upward mobility. In marginalized communities, the development of social capital is critical. But it must be supported by efforts that:

- expand access to opportunity in poor communities through diversification of income sources;
- connect them to information and social and economic influence; and
- strengthen public accountability and innovation in addressing the major social problems facing South Africa.¹⁶

Yet it is *precisely* in these areas, where the strategies of the state have had limited impact, so far. The net effect is an entrapment of the majority of South Africans in life circumstances characterised by high levels of crime, HIV and domestic violence. Structural inequality creates

¹³ Putnam R (2006). E Pluribus Unim: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-First Century. The 2006 Johann Skytte Prize Lecture). Nordic Political Science Association. www.utoronto.ca/ethnicstudies/Putnam.pdf (Accessed January 2009)

¹⁴ Statistics South Africa (2007). Community Survey, 2007. Basic results: Municipalities. P0301.1

¹⁵ Adato M, Carter M, May J (2006). Exploring poverty traps and social exclusion in South Africa using qualitative and quantitative data.

Journal of Development Studies 42: 226-247

¹⁶ Krishna A (2007). Escaping poverty and becoming poor: Who gains, who loses and why. *World Development* 32 (1): 121-136

the trap; an entrapped mind-set completes the sticky web. This is starkly illustrated by the extraordinarily high risk tolerance of people in marginalized communities.

Detailed analysis of the HIV epidemic in South Africa reveals that that the variation in condom use by age cannot be explained by a desire to have a baby, frequency of sex, erosion of condom self-efficacy, significant differences in duration of relationships, nor marriage.¹⁷ The most likely explanation is a radical shift in identity – from learner to incipient mother and job-seeker. Day-to-day pressures and family expectations intensify and, linked to a sense of aimlessness and a lack of *real and imminent* possibility, increase risk tolerance.

Political theorists Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky have suggested that the response to risk in different societies is shaped by prevailing norms ('ways of life') rather than rational choice alone.¹⁸ Their 'Cultural Theory' argued that the degree of risk-averseness is influenced by two main factors, namely the degree to which choices are circumscribed by place in society ('grid'), and the sense of collective solidarity ('group')¹⁹. High-grid, low-group societies tend to fatalism (discounting future benefits and willing to take significant risks), while low-grid, high-group societies - like that of the Netherlands – tend to egalitarianism, concerned about society as a whole and reducing risk [Figure 2].

While recognizing the limitations of a simple construct and the risk of social stereotyping, this framework is helpful in designing the strategy of a nexus intervention: Apartheid – rather than innate cultural factors - has shaped a high-grid/low group society in South Africa characterized by circumscribed choice (poor perception of opportunity) and steep social and economic gradients. Given its polarized nature, only transition towards a low-grid/high-group society will increase risk-averseness.

The multiple effects of structural inequality seem to be channelled towards one cognitive outcome, namely the perception of limited opportunity. We argue that perception of social and economic opportunity – and *immediate* opportunity, at that – is the pivotal mediator of structural influence on individual behaviour. Through this cognitive link, the constrained choices and sense of social exclusion that typify the lower pole of polarized societies predispose to high risk. Individuals in limbo – so characteristic of South African young people living in limbo – are especially vulnerable.

A key objective, therefore, must be to change the prevailing perceptions of social, educational and economic opportunity – enabling young people to break through ceilings which trap them in an interminable phase of life that they refer to as 'the meantime'. However, simply expanding opportunity to more young people will not be enough to change aggregate levels of risk-taking behaviour significantly. The social and economic gradients in South Africa are so great that any expansion of opportunity without corresponding increases in solidarity will mainly result in

¹⁷ Harrison D, Richter I, Desmond C (2007). Changing perceptions of opportunity: The link between structural change and behaviour change interventions for HIV prevention. Unpublished paper prepared for presentation at the 3rd Global Conference on Hope: Probing the Boundaries, Mansfield College, Oxford 17-19th September 2007

¹⁸ Douglas, M, and Wildavsky, A. *Risk and Culture: an Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983

¹⁹ Thompson M, Ellis R, Wildavsky A (1990). *Cultural Theory*. Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado

those at the top of the pile capturing new benefits as private gains. That society – where anyone, but not very many, can be a winner – will probably do little to change the underlying dynamics of risk tolerance and their social expression through crime, HIV infection and domestic abuse amongst others.

In order to rein in the skewed distribution of risk, the objective of expanding opportunity must be welded to that of social connectedness. Much social theory is built on the premise of ‘agents for change’,²⁰ and store placed on their attributes of leadership and communication. This suggests that investment in young people with leadership potential could strengthen societal cohesion and solidarity. In order to avoid investments in leadership being captured as private gains with little spin-off for broader society, investments should be made in young people with a proven track record in community service. However, leadership development on its own won’t necessarily build solidarity and, for this, social networks that build trust and facilitate co-ordination and cooperation for mutual benefit need to be fostered. The Activate! programme responds to this analysis both through attempting to build up the social capital and connectedness of its participants as well as their sense of imminent connection to opportunities and possibility.

Through the diversity of its participants – some from big business and others small community organisations; from the Democratic Alliance and the Young Communist League; from the hamlet of Jan Kempdorp and the bustling hub of Johannesburg; and from a variety of disciplines and sectors; some are studying, others are working, while some are unemployed; some are graduates and others have only high school education – and a specific focus on crafting a common identity, linking together to tackle social issues, and connecting through technology and in-person, Activate! seeks to re-engineer the social networks and social capital of its participants.

Already, we have seen that this is opening up new forms of possibility, overcoming a common sense of isolation, and exposing each other to opportunities of various kinds. But we are also cognizant that we have a responsibility to actively work to connect Activators to precedent-setting opportunities. Thus, in their second and third year in the programme we seek to connect activators to a variety of opportunities: bursaries, internships, innovation master-classes, project funding and networks of mentors. The need for these connections is clear: many Activate! participants remain unemployed, or have not completed studies, despite being incredibly passionate, motivated and committed to their communities and this country. As one Activator put it recently,

I am a 24 year old black female who finished Grade 12 in 2007, with an exemption. From then on I have been a volunteer with many NGOs, worked with big names and prominent organisations in civil society, and was featured in the Mail & Guardian’s Top 200 Young people. However 2 years down the line I often go to bed without food because either there are no jobs or you have to have a connection to get that internship or that learnership.

²⁰ M Durantini, D Albarracín, A Mitchell, A Earl and J Gillette, Conceptualizing the Influence of Social Agents of Behaviour Change: A Meta-Analysis of HIV Prevention Interventions for Different Groups, *Psychological Bulletin* vol. 132(2), 2006, pp. 212-248.

It is a serious indictment on South African society that a committed, talented, motivated young woman who has been celebrated a game-changer in our media cannot afford to feed herself or her family, and feels excluded from opportunity. Connecting young people to opportunities – and particularly expanding the networks that have access to opportunities through supporting agents of change committed to the public good – is a critical, often missing, piece of the puzzle of youth development.

In placing social capital development alongside personal development, innovative leadership programmes can create opportunities for young leaders to cultivate what Granovetter calls “the strength of weak ties”:²¹ that is, individuals who are not solely tied to one particular network (for example a family, locality, or specific organisation) but who can move between groups and become bearers of new ideas, information, and innovation.²² As long as we focus only on training, and not on connections; on entrepreneurship skills but no access to capital and support; on bursaries that allow initial access to tertiary studies but no mechanism to provide reliable ongoing funding, or to crucial psycho-social support, then the reality of a post-apartheid society filled with opportunity will never seep down far enough to change the reality for marginalised communities.

Youth Leadership as a Nexus Strategy

The transformation of South African society needs new impetus. While there may be no shortcuts to social and economic prosperity, there are undoubtedly catalysts to that end. If, behind the cluster of pressing problems facing South Africa – HIV, crime, unemployment and violence - there were at least *some* common links, successful intervention at the points of nexus could have a compound effect. These ‘nexus interventions’ could not replace systematic sectoral development, but may open up new ways of addressing some of the country’s most intractable problems.²³ Developing a highly connected, diverse, innovative and motivated critical mass of young people – working on different issues, and linking up nationally to influence public policy – is just such a nexus intervention.

It has almost become a truism that there is a leadership crisis in Africa, and that it is one of the critical factors underlying the post-colonial continued under-development of the continent as a whole.²⁴ The less rhetorical Von Doeppe notes, “Academics, policy makers and opinion leaders have increasingly singled out the importance of leadership as a variable in shaping the various development and governance outcomes witnessed on the African continent.”²⁵ One of the

²¹ Granovetter, M.S. (1973). "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology*, 78: 1360-80.

²² Fukuyama, F. (1999). "Social Capital and Civil Society", paper prepared for the IMF Conference on Second Generation Reforms.

²³ Bardach E (1998). *Getting agencies to work together: The practice and theory of managerial craftsmanship*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC

²⁴ See: Agulanna, C. (2006). Democracy and the Crisis of Leadership in Africa. *Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies* 31(3): 255-264. Ayittey, G. (1998). *Africa in Chaos*. London: Macmillan Press. Rotberg, R. (1998). Leadership Factor: The Political Dimensions of Africa’s Economic Development, *Harvard International Review* 21(2):72-75.

²⁵ Von Doeppe, P. (2009). *The Leadership Variable in Africa: Situating Structure and Agency in Governance Trajectories*. Leaders, Elites and Coalitions Research Programme.

critical perspectives on why leadership plays such a key role in the fortunes of African countries is that in new democracies, institutions, governing structures and newly imagined social relations are as yet unconsolidated and thus the scope for personal influence is far greater than in more established systems.²⁶ Yet, despite the importance of a robust, responsive, ethical and highly capable leadership, there is little work being done to support the development of emerging generations of people able to shift our societies for the public good.

Where they do exist, youth leadership programmes are often approached under two guises: the first as youth development programmes equipping young people with life-skills and self-confidence to take up leadership positions; the second as mechanisms of participation and representation, in which young people are selected to input into processes and/or represent their peers on decision-making bodies. Leadership development is a tricky field to define and often even programmes that describe themselves as promoting leadership development do little to distinguish between life-skills and leadership training. In fairness there is a large overlap between the components of the two fields. For example, the internal factors that Theron and Theron identify in their meta-review of young South Africans resilience reflect traits such as goal orientation, empathy, autonomy, conscientiousness, the ability to self-regulate, problem-solving, an internal locus of control and assertiveness.²⁷ Arguably these forms of self-development are all crucial in leadership development.

Perhaps the most insightful thinker on questions of leadership development in the 21st century is Otto Scharmer. In his view, traditional leadership development programmes – whether they are aimed at the business elite or young people – have focussed solely on the development of technical or life-skills, and internal self-development, rather than truly on the process-nature of what it takes to lead in a transformative way. As he describes it, we need to move away from an individualised notion of leadership development towards systems-thinking. He notes, “Leadership development is not about filling a gap but about igniting a field of inspired connection and action.”²⁸

According to Scharmer, current leadership development models tend to focus primarily on building an individual’s technical ‘leadership skills’. Real leadership development, he argues, needs to move to focussing on developing whole systems interventions that build system-wide transformational capacity. Thus, for Scharmer, the definition of leadership becomes the “capacity of a community to co-sense and co-create its emerging future”²⁹ with the individual no longer working *for* their organisation, community or company but working *from* it towards system-wide transformation. This version of leadership calls for individuals to be situated locally but connected and acting at a deeper systems-transforming level – something which is at the core of the Activate! programme.

²⁶ de Ver, H. L. (2008). *Leadership, Politics and Development: A Literature Survey*. Leaders, Elites and Coalitions Research Programme.

²⁷ Theron, L.C. and Theron A.M. (2010). “A critical Review of Studies of South African Youth Resilience 1990-2008” in *South African Journal of Science*, Vol. 106(7/8).

²⁸ Scharmer, O. (2009). “Leadership development is not about filling a gap but about igniting a field of inspired connection and action: Ten propositions on transforming the current leadership development paradigm.” Presentation to the Round Table Meeting on Leadership for Development Impact, The World Bank Institute, Sept 27-28 2009.

²⁹ Ibid.

The development of young leaders, and specifically the task of equipping them to drive public innovation, requires the development of a unique, high-quality, experiential programme. The content of the Activate! programme will drive the values, practices, and ultimate success of this intervention. The content of the modules was thus developed through consultation and dialogue with youth development experts, leadership trainers and young people themselves, to ensure its relevance, quality, and impact on all levels. This content aims to do build five critical capacities:

- Self-development, personal leadership and project management skills.
- Social capital of Activators! as individuals and as a connected network.
- The ability to innovatively and effectively take action.
- Keen socio-political insight into the challenges facing South Africa.
- Innovative use of technology and social networking, to deepen and strengthen social impact locally and connect nationally to amplify their impact.

Through developing these competencies amongst the Activators!, supporting them to engage with their peers, undertake community-based projects, and influence policy development the programme aims to have developed a cohort of young leaders that have a multiplier effect and change the risk tolerance equations for young people in their communities.

The residential programme which covers 27 contact days during the first year is the real heart of the programme. Core to the goals of the programme is the development of this cohort into an active, engaged, and innovative network with a presence. The residential modules follow the model of 'Developing Self' → 'Building a Network' → 'Engaging with Context'. Through this process of self-development, working effectively with others, and tackling critical issues in South African society, the programme aims to build a group of young community innovators, equipped to be points of influence and change throughout South Africa's public, private and civil society. Unlike many programmes which focus on one or two of these components – personal development, values, or understanding a particular aspect of the socio-political landscape – Activate! brings together a core curriculum across a number of competencies, in order to support these young leaders to be able to operate and influence at all levels.

The primary objective of extending the formal programme beyond the first year residential modules is to ensure that the sense of cohort identity, peer-to-peer support, and project roll-out becomes a core aspect of the Activate! programme and are 'owned' by the Activators! over time. The Activate! programme is specifically designed for the participants to reflect, engage, learn and share with each other and their broader communities key lessons and ideas in public innovation and public discourse – a process which will most certainly take longer than the initial one-year residential 'incubation' period. Some Activators will pursue careers in politics; most won't. Political leaders with substance are important, but it is vital that at this time, the drive for

public innovation flourishes across the leadership of government, business and civil society. As we move towards the end of the second decade of democracy, it is time we look to young people to radically shift the South African landscape.

Perhaps foremost of the advantages of this approach is that it has a dual-focus: firstly, the development of highly-skilled, principled and innovative individual leaders; and secondly, the development of a prolific *network* of leaders that can have a reach beyond their individual impact to shape broader social norms in South Africa. Through reaching what we believe will be a critical mass level of participation – 5,000 young people over the next four years – we believe that this network of agents for change can significantly

- impact on the social norms within their communities;
- reduce risk tolerance through establishing connections to opportunity in precedent-setting ways;
- deploy innovative locally-sourced, nationally relevant solutions that through being communicated effectively can transform the social understanding of all South Africans;
- Break through and connect South Africans across the multiple divides and polarities of race, class, generational and social identity.

A number of attitudinal shifts are implicit in the Activate! programme: Firstly, shifting Activator's mind-sets away from being passive beneficiaries (as they are often treated in traditional youth development) towards being pro-active developers of public innovation solutions. We articulate this as a shift away from an "if...then" approach (e.g. *if* government provides more services, *then* I won't be poor) towards a "now...how" approach (e.g. poverty is a problem *now*, and here's *how* we are going to tackle it). Secondly, we aim to support Activators to develop critical-thinking capacities that allow them to tackle both symptoms of social problems, and their root causes. Thirdly, we seek to build an understanding of the multiple capacities of individuals and communities beyond traditionally recognised frameworks. In their Activate! experience, an Activator with a Master's degree may realise that in certain contexts they are far less of an expert than someone who did not finish high school. You do not have to be a member of economic, political, academic, intellectual or creative elite to be a change agent in your own society and beyond. Finally, in an increasingly globalising world, two opposing trends are emerging; international socio-political and cultural uniformity and radical adherence to cultural, political and national identity and difference. The Activate! programme argues a third position: that the very basis and motto of the South African emblem and constitution a *!ke e: /xarra //ke Diverse People Unite* is a radical ideal and challenge.

Conclusion

The premise of Activate! is that new connections to information, opportunity and influence can be a powerful catalyst for innovation in highly polarised societies. If directed to the public good, these connections can strengthen development and democracy by building trust and accountability and making people less tolerant of destructive risk. By creating a public profile for

the network of these young leaders, they will in time be able to participate in and help to substantively shape our national discourse.

Specifically, many of our most difficult social problems (HIV, crime, domestic violence, substance abuse and corruption) have at least one common root, namely a perceived lack of real and imminent possibility in life. Developing a new cadre of youth leaders represents a 'nexus strategy' that tackles this common root by changing the way in which young people *respond* to their circumstances while building social cohesion at the same time. In highly polarised societies such as South Africa, individual empowerment (financial empowerment or training) often results in the benefits being captured for private gain – with little direct benefit to society. The experience of India is that a key strategy for *public* innovation is to create social and economic connections between the poles of society. The need for public innovation at this moment in South Africa is dramatically clear: civil society struggles to respond to growing social crises, hold government accountable and ultimately maintain itself and deliver impact; government's capacity to deliver services, develop an enabling environment, and respond to growing levels of inequality is stagnating as endemic corruption grows; and business remains largely untransformed, and unable to negotiate the complexities of competing demands from labour, social context and investors. Innovation across these contexts is vital to securing our democracy, delivering equitable social outcomes, and open new channels of ethical business that robustly builds South Africa's economy.

If we are to ensure a vibrant democracy, social activism needs to go beyond the party-political structures where it is currently concentrated. Some Activators will choose to work through formal political structures; others will choose other avenues for civic engagement. Both need to be able to engage substantively in addressing the major challenges facing the country. Lastly, activism cannot just be protest action, and must lead to innovative change.

Activate! is leadership for the purpose of *public* innovation, not as an end in itself. We are growing connections across social, economic, racial, geographic and other divides and the result is a charged up critical-mass of change-makers. The Activate! Programme seeks to develop Otto Scharmer's "field of inspired connection and action": a network of youth who recognise their individuality, celebrate their commonalities, respect their differences and are bold enough to take positive risks to shape their future as individuals and as a network of activist-activators. There have been significant youth development efforts over the past few years, driven both through Government departmental initiatives and through civil society organisations. Many of these are short-term, narrowly focussed, or engage simply as a crisis-management intervention. What is missing is a strong move towards an asset-based model, where young people are supported as wise, capable and ideally placed to transform their communities. Even where programmes manage to move young people out of crisis, there are few next stage programmes that capitalise on this and build a national network which allows the programme graduates to continue to develop as leaders and to link to each other in ways that sustain the transformation of South African society – Activate! seeks to become that network.

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