

Seductive schemes, dangerous development - or a journey of discovery and healing?

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1 Introduction

South Africa's developmental agenda prioritises the eradication of poverty and inequality, with the result that thousands of development practitioners and officials engage daily with communities as they launch projects; establish cooperatives and small businesses; get beneficiaries trained, skilled, employed, housed or fed; and hand over/out or redistribute assets (land, support grants, equipment, buildings and infrastructure). They implement the policies, strategies and programmes of government departments, municipalities, NGOs and CBOs, while adhering to statistical/fiscal demands. Success is measured in terms of numbers, budgets, audits, hectares transferred and "beneficiaries reached".

However, reports and analyses on progress regarding development (e.g. the National Planning Commission's Diagnostic Overview, and ANC discussion documents) seem to be rife with expressions such as "not yet ...", "failed to ...", "disappointing" and "still a challenge". Poverty, inequality, unemployment and division have grown - in spite of huge investments in development.

These documents also acknowledge that we have a "wounded society", in need of cohesion, healing and caring. However, there is limited evidence in strategic objectives and developmental programmes of concrete plans to deal with these. Suggestions appear to be situated in the realm of ideology and have-to-say, while being profoundly under-theorised and un-planned for by mainstream development.

Without denying the vital importance of the economy, services and infrastructure, it is argued that if the balance and link between economic and healing processes are neither acknowledged, nor engaged with, progress in our quest to eradicate poverty and inequality might continue to elude us.

This paper suggests that dominant theoretical and practical paradigms of development and restorative justice are not adequate to create consciousness about innate and complex attitudes, behaviour and relationships in communities or to bring about real transformation, care or healing. Expertly designed plans and projects will continue to lie dormant in filing cabinets or end in failure if they are not accompanied by a journey to create consciousness, healing and transformation. In addition, failure has the potential to inflict further damage to the psyche and attitudes of communities and leaves them more vulnerable than before.

This suggestion is now explored by reflecting on two journeys that I have undertaken with communities over the past two decades.

2 Two "development" journeys

2.1 The Richtersveld's poisoned soil

Background

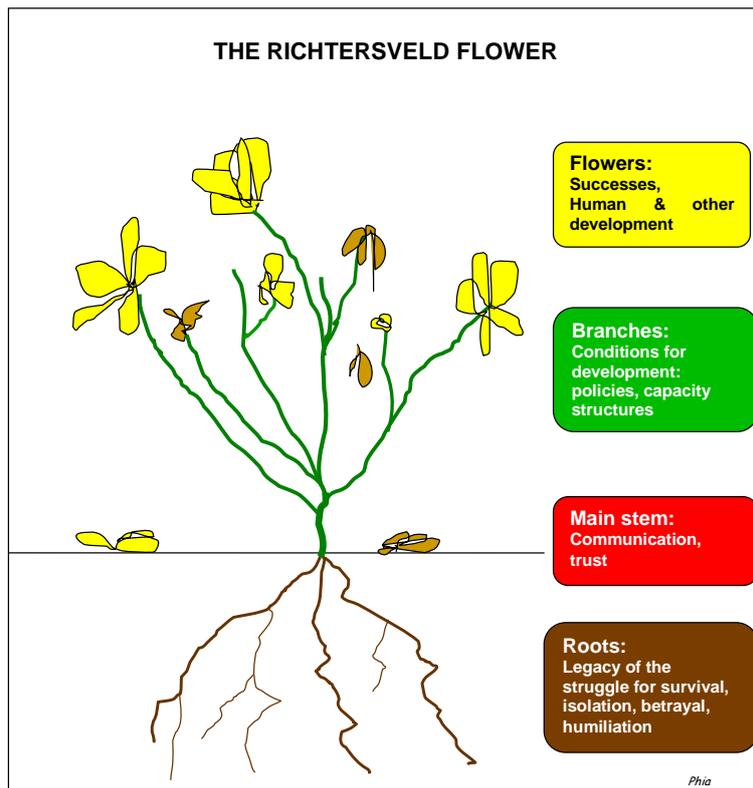
The Richtersveld, on the north-western tip of the Northern Cape, just south of Namibia, is an area with endless landscapes, a National Park, a world heritage site, amazing bio-diversity (especially its endemic succulents), interesting indigenous cultures and diamonds. This is the type of place, which is of interest to adventurers, botanists, anthropologists, conservationists and development planners. Between them, numerous conservation, mining, agricultural, economic and tourism plans have been drafted.

The most sensational event in the past two decades was the high-profile "Richtersveld Land Claim against Alexkor". Through this process the Richtersveld community claimed "reparation" for the loss of income for all diamonds mined there since 1928. When the claim was awarded in 2007, funds were set aside for the design of a development plan. In 2009 and 2010, I was involved in a process to design this plan.

The “Richtersveld flower”

My first task was to “identify key developmental issues”. The methodology I used was a reflective participatory process, through which the community and its leaders could face themselves, their history, attitudes, behaviour, shadows and abilities.

To facilitate this, I used the metaphor of the “Richtersveld flower”. Observations made during many months of engagement with the community were written up on hundreds of small cards and these were organised in categories, linked to the different parts of a flower. Over a period of more than a year, the community built their flower by adding, rejecting and moving around their cards. The picture of the flower thus continued to grow in richness and complexity. The categories were eventually distilled as follows:



The response of the community to the process and their flower was highly emotional, especially the issues under the soil – the psychological legacy of their struggle for survival, the total isolation, and a long history of betrayal and humiliation. “Look at our soil! It is so poisoned, nothing will ever grow here!” “It is no wonder that we never see flowers here: in this soil they all drop off before they can open!” “We have always started with the flowers.”

They were deeply moved by the fact that somebody bothered and managed to see ‘under our soil’ and lamented the fact that this type of process did not happen before or during the land claim process. I was struck by a remark by the leadership, who thanked me for the journey with them and the awareness raised in the process: “We never thought that our people are in so much pain”.

A short history of development in the Richtersveld

For 13 years, the Richtersveld community fought a legal battle for this Land Claim. Their dedicated legal advisors submitted a massive claim of R3 billion, which would make each of the ±3000 members an instant millionaire. During the same period, the interventions of consultants and government departments resulted in the declaration of a World Heritage Site and a transfrontier Park with Namibia, an application for ownership of more land and several conservation and eco-tourism plans. This community was united by utopian dreams of prosperity, international fame and instant wealth. They were seduced into action and participation. Enormous expectations were created, further ignited by media attention and the endless stream of consultants.

And then reality struck: instead of millions of rand, they got an almost incomprehensible negotiated land claim settlement. It comprises a complex set of legal, financial and governance systems. They did not get cash, but uncertain promises of compensation (shares in a mine and dividends on growth of investments). The promised tourists and fame never came and piles of development plans lie abandoned.

Three years later the leadership was overwhelmed by the technical demands, unmanageable expectations and entitlement and by assets that were turning into liabilities. Everybody feels angry, disappointed, frustrated and betrayed. Conflict, fomented by external opportunism (after all, we talk about diamonds here!) has ripped the community apart.

By the beginning of 2011, a court order resulted in the resignation of the leadership.

“Repair” through reparation?

Since then, heads are hanging in Richtersveld. They are publicly humiliated and disgraced through the negative media reports and numerous court cases. This intervention, which brought so much hope, which was aimed at repairing the damage of the past, has repaired nothing. In fact, it inflicted new wounds, compounded negative attitudes, and added even more poison to their soil: “We have failed again to utilise our opportunities.” “Everybody is laughing at us!” “We mess up every chance we get!” “We will always be like this! Unworthy!” “Nothing will ever change here!”

My conclusion at the end of this journey was that the soil and the soul of this community have never been noted. More attention was paid to the fragile plants than to the psyche of the people who are supposed to protect the environment. No process helped them to reflect on what damage needed repairing and what this repair should entail.

The plans and dreams resulting from my journey with this community are now also waiting to be implemented, due to the total breakdown of governance structures. Yet, the journey itself appears to have given the community a yearning for un-poisoned soil and a metaphor to express it: “We will have to clean up our soil and get rid of this poison, so that we can move on and see flowers here.” “We will have to work in a lot of compost, before we can even think of planting anything here.” (PS: in August 2012, the plan was formally accepted during a properly constituted AGM.)

2.2 Families, trapped in negative labels

The second story comes from my experience in the field of early childhood development. Even though the importance of family/parents in the life of children is stressed by all, mainstream programmes and services in this field focus almost exclusively on the children. When they do pay attention to the parent/family, it is usually to enthusiastically encourage them to be better and more responsible parents/caregivers: pay fees, make educational toys out of scrap, prepare balanced meals, pay attention to the children’s psycho-socio needs and respect the rights of the children.

Does this consider that the majority of children in South Africa are raised by parents/families/caregivers, whose lives and self-image have been shaped by mainly negative forces: poverty, hardship, isolation, stereotyping, oppression, degrading living conditions and destructive relationships? Does this take into account that many had the traumatic experience of failing and dropping out of school, that *their* rights have not yet been respected and that they carry the heavy labels of oppression, such as *stupid, bad, lazy, back door, dirty* and simply *not good enough* for this *bus*, that *job* or *good schools*? These have been perpetuated and compounded over generations and are often internalised as personal failures. The perception of a “history of failure” strips both individual and families of the courage and confidence to risk anything new. For these families, who already feel inadequate and guilty because they hardly manage to feed and clothe their children, our well-intended suggestions about “things you can do with/for your child”, merely confirm the fear that s/he is failing as a parent/caregiver.

Through our family support programme we tried to break this cycle, by undertaking a journey with the adults in the family. Until late into the programme we did not even mention the children or the topic of parenting. The programme started by giving the parents and caregivers an opportunity to reflect on their own childhood experiences and the impact thereof on their ability to cope as adults. Only after

many months, when sufficient safety had been created and the most debilitating attitudes and behaviour faced, would we start addressing the complex relationship between adult and children and the demands of child-rearing.

A carefully planned journey is needed to mourn missed opportunities, broken relationships and deal with untrue/unfair labels. Such an open-ended journey with a community is riddled with perils. To mention one: there is so much potential for projection, especially when you draw your team members from the community in which you are working. They share with the participants the same experiences, physical conditions, past and present indignities, fears and anger. A facilitator is always in danger of high-jacking participants' stories to deal with own pain and needs - a guaranteed recipe for failure and damage somewhere along the road.

The programme was thus built on two principles. Firstly, no participant or team member should ever feel a failure through any activity in the programme. This implies cautious consideration of both content and methodology. Secondly, team members have to "start with self", because a facilitator who is unaware of his/her own shadows is a dangerous facilitator. This resulted in numerous journeys undertaken at the same time: families, facilitators and programme developer all embarked on a simultaneous quest for consciousness and healing. This is a very slow and complex process that cannot be fast-forwarded!

The programme did not survive. The team failed to find answers to some critical questions.

- How could we convince the funder or management that a twinkle in the eye of a mother is significant, even if she still wears the same threadbare dress? How many children have to grow up in a gentler atmosphere, without excessive punishment or labelling, before the programme could claim meaningful impact or cost-effectiveness? What indicators and statistics are suitable to proof such subtle changes?
- How much time is sufficient to make a long-term impact on destructive labels and patterns of behaviour, internalised over generations? How long does it take to be ready for the high risk involved in entrepreneurship or communal income-generating projects? Why do funders and organisations become uncomfortable when more than the standard 3-year cycle is suggested?
- How could the unavoidable demand for replication and 'going to scale' be met? The drafting of a training manual was suggested, but this would defy the flexible, reflexive and exploring nature of the programme. How do you remain true to the idea of a journey of discovery, if you have to prescribe the road for practitioners? How can those who did not have the experience of such a journey, conduct these sessions? This would imply that we had to break the most basic principle of the programme: to start with self.

Our dilemma was that we simply could not protect the quest for healing against the demands and policies of funders and agencies, who insist on statistical and physical proof for money "well spent".

3 The significance of these two journeys

From these case studies, it can be argued that the most debilitating legacy of a history of oppression, hardship and isolation is not exclusively on material or economic level. Instead, it manifests in subtle ways: a struggle to risk, difficulties to trust that something can change or be successful, a battle to get rid of paralysing labels and projections, and an inability to let go of destructive and obsolete survival strategies.

Poverty is a complex issue and addressing it thus requires a complex approach. However, these powerful dynamics seem to be under-theorised and un-planned for in mainstream development. Too often communities are approached without sufficient awareness of and skills to deal with these dynamics. The result is that one-dimensional strategies and projects are repeatedly employed - with the same disappointing results.

Unfortunately, we, the community development practitioners, experts, planners, consultants, legal advisors and activists, too often seduce communities with our enthusiasm, attention, energy, confidence, knowledge and guaranteed plans or outcomes – often for our own subconscious needs. Communities and their leaders are blinded by our promises of support, immediate success, quick fixes and wealth. What choice does the leadership have, but to participate? Their constituency

expects “development” from them and they trust us, the outside experts to save them. They have no other option than to get engaged in even the most unrealistic scheme.

Time and resources are seldom dedicated to the slow process of interacting with the history, story and soul of the community and for reflecting on the potential consequences (positive and negative) of the intervention. When plans are eventually frustrated or projects do not succeed, communities and individuals identify with the failure. They become increasingly trapped in patterns of apathy, despair, hopelessness, destruction, broken relationships and conflict. *Post-care* has become common practice – while *pre-care* or *on-going care* is mostly ignored.

Parents are literally disempowered by programmes aimed at stimulating their children, but which ignore them and their needs. The Richtersvelders fell into the trap of believing utopian promises for immediate wealth and international fame with their land claim and world heritage site. And then they got stuck in unmanageable expectations, a pittance in their pockets and conflict. This reality fuelled the syndrome of entitlement and victimhood. Development and restorative justice have failed them.

4 Is un-poisoning possible?

Is it possible for our wounded society to be liberated from the poison in its soil, from the labels with which it is stuck? What would be the key dimensions of a practice framework that could support such a process?

I want to suggest that some lessons from my engagement with the families and with the Richtersveld community could offer some elements of such a framework. These include:

- A journey to create consciousness of internalised behaviour and attitudes resulting from generations’ of oppression. This is possible through deliberate and careful interaction with the history, story and soul of a community. It also implies creating safety to allow personal reflection and to handle feedback - without falling into new despair or apathy.
- Creating a yearning in communities/individuals to break out of these patterns, with “safe” practical tools that do not pose the risk of failure.
- Guidelines, such as “no failure” and “start with self”, which would determine constructive programme content and methodology.
- Preparation of practitioners (training and mentoring) to embark on an open-ended journey with communities, in terms of programme development, time and resources.

Even though it is complex, I suggest that it is possible for the average community worker to facilitate a pure process, based mainly on the experience of his/her own journey. This could enable them to be constantly being aware of own shadows and dreams, of the dangers of projection and the seductive idea of becoming a saviour, hero or messiah. Do we ever consider the damage done to these practitioners if the projects they initiate, fail?

There are thousands of officials, leaders and NGO employees, community development practitioners, community development workers, trainers, facilitators, liaison officers and extension officers, who already work in our communities on a daily basis. Maybe a starting point is to embark on a journey of awareness, healing and reflection amongst them. Based on their own reflective processes, supported by additional technical skills, these thousands can facilitate so many journeys within our damaged society.

A question that still needs to be answered: was new damage caused through the two journeys described above, both of which were abruptly suspended? I want to suggest that it might not be the journey itself that poses the danger: the threat is the frustrated expectations and seductive schemes.

5 Proposed research

The paper proposes research into elements of a praxis, which addresses the complex nature of our society, so deeply injured not only by discrimination and past injustices, but also by the ongoing hurt resulting from seductive but failed “development”. Such praxis should be defined as a reflexive and

open-ended journey, without the promise of pre-determined plans or success. The aim should be the promotion of awareness, the restoration of relationships (with self, community and the environment), a process of healing and the search for meaning. These are perceived as essential preparation for economic intervention and entrepreneurship. Such praxis also implies the availability of theoretical and practical frameworks, as well as strategies and curricula for the large-scale training and mentoring of practitioners and educators.