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**Localisation as a strategy for sustainable poverty alleviation:
some action research experiments in Nelson Mandela Bay**

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Introduction

The National Development Plan Vision 2030 ‘story we propose to write’ involves

Creating jobs and livelihoods

Transitioning to a low carbon economy

Transforming urban and rural spaces (NPC 2011:5)

The strategies explored in this paper speak to these three ‘stories’ (goals) in respect of creating livelihoods (rather than jobs), transitioning to a low carbon economy, and transforming urban spaces in the Nelson Mandela Metro.

The NDP proposes ‘moving investment and jobs towards dense townships that are on the margins of cities’ (p 16) and the three projects described in this paper are doing precisely this: engaging the poor and marginalised communities in both townships and informal settlements of Port Elizabeth in creating local and sustainable economies.

The critical question posed in these projects is the link between localised economies and livelihoods, and the transition to a low-carbon economy. The argument is put forward that not only are projects focussing on transition to a low-carbon lifestyle compatible with projects to empower the poorest and most marginalised sections of our society, but that the two are mutually reinforcing and result in higher quality of life as well as economic and social empowerment. It is further argued that in the future it will be easier for such low-consumption communities to build sustainable livelihoods based on economic localisation, than it will be for high consumers to ‘transition down’.

This argument is examined through practical strategies being implemented in the Nelson Mandela Bay municipality. Projects linked to three broad strategies – sustainable settlement development, urban agriculture, and cooperatives – are explored. These three projects are linked to action research projects coordinated by the author.

Project 1: Sustainable Settlements Pilot Project:

On Sunday 12 August the communities of Zwelidinga and New Rest in Seaview, on the urban periphery of Nelson Mandela Bay, exploded in a typical ‘service delivery protest’, blocking the road to disrupt the normal life of the affluent residents of the nearby suburb of Seaview, demanding service delivery. The residents of these impoverished informal settlements were expressing their long-standing frustration at the lack of development of their community, as so many communities have done over the past few years in so many parts of South Africa.

The National Development Plan (p 14) prioritises the upgrading of informal settlements (p 14) – but how is this to be done? The argument put forward here is that provision of housing and services can be done in such a way that sustainable settlements based in sustainable local economies are developed.

The NMMU Development Studies Department, in partnership with the Eastern Cape Provincial Department of Human Settlements, the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality and the Nelson Mandela Bay Transition Network, is piloting one such Sustainable Settlement. This involves the in-situ upgrade of an informal settlement on the outskirts of the city. The residents of this settlement are among the most marginalised people in the city, living in appalling conditions in a settlement remote from many amenities. What makes this particular community different is that it will not be able to ‘be developed’ in the conventional sense, as it is situated on the urban edge in an area of protected indigenous forest. There is an imperative to find alternative means of development which will meet the needs of the residents and at the same time not increase the ecological footprint of the settlement –in other words, to establish a truly sustainable settlement.

The notion of ‘transition to low carbon economy’ is usually understood in societies of overconsumption, where the imperative is to reduce carbon emissions through ‘transitioning down’ to a lower consumption economy. However, in communities of ‘marginal’ consumers – the poor who do not have enough fuel, water, food or shelter - the aim cannot be to have a transition to a lower consumption society. The challenge is in implementing the ‘transition paradigm’ in such poor communities in South Africa. Sustainability in the most basic economic sense in this context means that people can sustain themselves, can feed, clothe and shelter their families, and

can maintain the health and education of their children. The profound challenge faced by poor urban communities is that most people in these communities are not economically self-sufficient, and are dependent on income from government grants to meet these needs. Most poor people – in line with the current economic orthodoxy - see the solution to their poverty as getting ‘a job’ or ‘decent work’. This ‘solution’, based as it is on economic orthodoxies premised on industrialisation, growth and increased consumption of energy and goods, has little to do with sustainability in the environmental sense, and even less to do with climate change and a long-term vision for sustainable communities. While many see the solution to poverty as job creation, the ‘transition paradigm’ explores innovative ways of creating sustainable livelihoods by harnessing the assets of poor communities. The pilot project explores whether and how settlements in poor communities can create sustainable livelihoods using local skills and resources; the

use of local resources, by local people, for the creation of local livelihoods, wealth and quality of life (PL Lemercier, Sustainable Human Settlement, input to Sustainable Settlements Seminar, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, ...2012)

This requires a strategy of creating localised systems, including micro finance systems, local markets, community exchange networks, cooperative construction, production and distribution systems; and infrastructure and technology systems. Organisations such as *Shackdwellers International* mobilise residents of informal settlements to take control of their own development, encourage community savings schemes, and train residents in planning their own settlements. Additional training in integrated planning on the principles of permaculture design and resource use by the *Transition Network* will ensure that the pilot settlement is sustainable in all respects – from energy, sewerage and waste, to food security and construction methods and materials.

Is this really a viable model? What distinguishes it from the dependent, unviable and unsustainable projects which hardly make a dent in the levels of poverty? Does such a model not go against conventional economic wisdom?

The answer is yes, that it goes against much conventional wisdom. In two key respects: one is that of scale. Production of huge volumes of cheap goods is at the heart of neoclassical economics based on ‘economies of scale’. Yet it has been argued that it is possible for small-scale food production (and conservation agriculture and other sustainable and environmentally friendly methods of food production) is viable in a local economy where diversity and quality are valued.

The other is that of asset-based development using existing local skills and resources. It is argued here that such a sustainable settlement can be replicated and that it can promote circulation of money (from social grants and wages) within local communities. Yani has argued, from a Black Consciousness perspective, that black consumers in townships need to use their buying power to support black-owned

business, and hence ensure distribution of wealth and promote poverty alleviation. The argument in these projects is similar, but is not based on a racial premise: it is based on a premise of localisation.

This project is in the initial stages of community research and planning. If successfully implemented, it will provide a replicable model for in-situ informal settlement upgrade and creation of sustainable local economies.

Project 2: Sustainable urban agriculture and food security in the Metro

This project, which is a partnership between NMMU Development Studies Department and the NMB Transition Network, is a research project to document and evaluate urban agriculture projects in the Nelson Mandela Metro. On a ward by ward basis, urban agriculture projects are being enumerated and assessed against two primary criteria of sustainability: Firstly, are they sustainable in terms of production (inputs and methods)? Secondly, are they sustainable economically (instead of being 'dependent projects' which collapse after the initial grant has run out)?

A pilot survey of two wards in Motherwell township has been completed, evaluating all the functioning projects (fifteen in the two wards); introducing the project to the local roleplayers and obtaining their interest and support; and testing the survey instrument. This project serves a number of purposes. Firstly, an accurate and flexible database of food production in the Metro will be constructed, and as the survey is extended to the rest of the Metro, the data will be captured in the database. The survey may then also be extended to other food production such as household vegetable gardening (at the smallest level), and commercial farming (at the biggest level), to result in an accurate estimate of how self-sufficient and food secure the Metro is. Thirdly, this research is also 'action research' in that in the process of conducting the survey, the researchers are sharing with ward councillors and project members information about permaculture, climate change and sustainable methods of food production. Moreover, the findings of the survey are feeding into the process of creating a policy on urban agriculture for the Metro.

Evaluation of many small agricultural projects funded by Department of Social Development or Department of Agriculture reveals that such projects are unsustainable, both environmentally and economically. Initial findings from the pilot in the two wards of the Metro confirm an almost complete lack of sustainability, both environmentally and economically, of the existing urban agriculture projects.

The research hopes to identify localised food production projects which are sustainable, and replicate these by linking them in with the sustainable settlement pilot project, and sharing their best practices with other projects. What will differentiate such localised food production from the unsustainable or dependent projects that currently exist?

The proposed answer is that they will be part of an integrated strategy premised on a local economy of solidarity, which involves institutional support for local business, through local schools, hospitals, old aged homes, local government departments and universities' conferences and events providing markets for fresh local produce.

They will be based on control of the whole chain of production by local roleplayers, whether small businesses, cooperatives or projects; as Yani notes, (black) communities should control the whole chain from land, production, processing or storage as necessary, packaging as necessary, to distribution for sale to local markets. Each business will draw as far as possible on local inputs and resources, which are cheaper in the local area than inputs which from elsewhere.

Transition Network members are currently involved in training schools in Kwazakele in permaculture. Such projects can draw on lessons from Venezuela and Cuba, both of which have in recent years promoted successful and sustainable urban agriculture projects. Other examples to explore are the use of conservation agriculture and various sustainable methods of food production which are shown to produce higher yields with lower input costs; such projects have been explored by the FAO in rural contexts in Zimbabwe, Malawi and elsewhere. There is no reason why a city like Nelson Mandela Bay should not have food security in production of basic vegetables, and engage in trade with neighbouring municipalities for fruit, maize and some other staples. Promotion of fish-farming may also result in a viable and sustainable protein source, which can be produced in peri-urban parts of the Metro within the 'sustainable settlement' model, and sold in other parts of the Metro.

Project 3: The Amabutho of Nelson Mandela Bay cooperative project:

The *Amabutho of Nelson Mandela Bay* are a self-constituted organisation, membership of which is determined by having been an active member of the informal 'militia' aligned to the liberation movement in the 1980s. This group of now-middle-aged men are for the most part unemployed; many are homeless and destitute; and many have spent long terms in prison. Their participation in the township uprising of the mid-1980s when they were youth left most of them without formal education. Marginalised from the mainstream economy, they 'fall through the cracks' of state support: they are not eligible for special pensions or veterans pensions as they are not acknowledged as having been a 'non-statutory force' in the case of the former, and were not in 'full time service' for more than five years in the case of the latter. They are too old to receive NYDA grants; too young for old age pensions; and as men, they are not usually eligible for child support grants, nor for project support for women's cooperatives. Having never been part of the formal economy, they are not eligible for UIF either.

The *Amabutho* project is part of a national project called *Legacies of Apartheid War*, which involves documentation of history, exploring memory and healing, and empowering former combatants from various forces in the liberation struggle. There are currently approximately 80 members of the *Amabutho* (although more are eligible to join and it is anticipated that if the project has some initial success, the numbers will grow.) They reside in almost all of the townships of the Metro, with groups in New Brighton, Kwazakele, Veeplaas, Zwide, Soweto on Sea, Motherwell, KwaNobuhle and Langa. In addition to the history project, the *Amabutho* have engaged in a democratic process of establishing their own co-operative, which is now registered, has a constitution, an elected committee, and a bank account. Through this co-operative they are producing cultural products including CDs of recordings of their own performance of songs of the liberation struggle, and performance of these songs at political and heritage occasions. Other planned products are documentary films, drama productions, and heritage tours or enactments of events in liberation struggle at local level. What is important in this case is their own control of the product of their own history – that they are the owners of the songs and stories of the struggle, and that they benefit from this and are able to generate income from it. In addition to the products of the history project, the *Amabutho* benefit directly from running the actual project. With the small funding available, instead of hiring venues in the city centre, or catering companies, the three workshops that have been run thus far have been held in a municipal hall in Kwazakele. The Co-op buys food in bulk from local wholesalers; and women associated with the *Amabutho* (former UDF marshalls, for example) cook two healthy meals for the 60 – 80 people attending each workshop. Coop members manage the budget, the purchases and the logistics of the workshops themselves.

While still at an early stage, the Co-op is learning from the experiences of other co-operatives in the Metro. Many so-called ‘cooperatives’ established through government programmes are in fact subsidised businesses, with a manager or a small group benefitting, and providing short-term low-wage employment to others who perform the manual work (such as cleaning up litter) but who have no say in the running of the project. This is not to say that subsidized businesses providing a service for local communities is inherently problematic; however, it does not result in the empowerment of the marginalised. Moreover, it may be problematic in the ‘outsourcing’ of services which could (and perhaps should) be provided by local governments together with secure employment for the workers providing the service.

The *Amabutho* Co-operative is currently exploring the possibility of expanding into productive enterprises, including vegetable gardening (where they can link into Project 2) and the manufacture of solar cookers (which could supply markets in the informal settlements without electricity, as well as contribute to Project 1, the Sustainable Settlements Project). As with all truly empowering projects, the

Amabutho Co-operative is a dynamic and democratic process, running on the 'action-reflection-action' model.

While the National Development Plan emphasises the creation of jobs in the townships, the model presented here is one that emphasises livelihoods rather than jobs. Self-employment in small businesses and co-operatives is posed as an alternative to 'jobs'. The NDP also sees the need for investment in the townships – and again, the question posed by these projects is investment by whom, and for whose benefit? Yani (2012:17) notes the closure of local self-owned businesses like hair salons and shoe repairs in townships. Furthermore, he argues that far from the 'second economy' growing, it is shrinking with the influx of *Spar* and other big national and international companies into the townships. So while social grants are still spent in the townships, the money goes straight out, into the pockets of the shareholders of these companies, instead of circulating in the local economy.

Localisation of food production and production of other goods and services is both possible and economical. Moreover, localised and community-controlled savings, exchange and distribution schemes can create food security and accessible ways of procuring necessities, including stoves, lights, furniture and many other goods.

Conclusion:

It may be argued that these are just three small projects in a city of a million people, most of whom are dependent on a combination of formal employment in the private sector, and social grants from the state. Nelson Mandela Bay is an industrial economy, still dominated by the motor and component industries, and according to some interests it is desirable that it expands in the direction of 'heavy and dirty' industries (manganese ore processing, aluminium smelting, sulphur processing, iron ore etc) for export via the Port of Ngqura.

The localised economies described above are not 'outside' of the economy of the Metro, and it would be naive to think of some kind of 'parallel economy' in the townships which is divorced from the major industries and business interests in the city. However, it is argued that instead of depending on 'big business' to create jobs, township communities can use local resources to produce, process and distribute many goods and services within their communities. Moreover, this can be done in such a way that instead of a society of overconsumption of imported goods, we build a society of moderate consumption based on local production. This can not only reduce carbon emissions, but can create resilient, self-sufficient and empowered communities. A pragmatic argument for the viability of local or community economies can be found in the work of Shuman (2010). Shuman argues that the "The wealthiest communities are those with the highest percentage of jobs in businesses that are locally owned" and that "The wealthiest communities are those that maximise self-reliance" (2010:1).

It should be remembered that the National Development Plan (p 50) cites the World Economic Forum as listing climate change as the highest-ranked risk by likelihood and impact combined. Any development planning addressing the problem of poverty and inequality will have to take this into account. Food security, clean water, shelter and warmth are the basic needs that any community must meet. If this is done sustainably, in a way which builds self-sufficiency and resilience, and in addition economically empowers the poorest residents of the city, then surely these are models to be replicated and built into a resilient and sustainable society.

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Shackdwellers International

Amabutho of Nelson Mandela Bay