

COMMUNITY MOBILISATION: CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT DONE BY THE PEOPLE, NOT TO PEOPLE

A Paper Presented by Ishmael Mkhabela to the Leadership Forum convened at Spier Estate Conference Centre on 9 and 10 February, 2011

Today we need to remember that in 1997 UNICEF sponsored a research project on social mobilization in South Africa. The study led by Southern African Development, Education and Policy Research Unit (Sadep), at University of Western Cape aimed to understand mass mobilization, namely, “ways of bringing people together whether by spontaneous acts or by organized and planned methods of mass action.” In our discussion then and today I shall primarily highlight the need for broad-based community organizing for continuous social action by the people for the people. We cannot build our society by reliance on spontaneous actions, emotional response by a mass of people to a specific undesirable social or economic condition. Implied in this form of social action is that an emotionally-charged issue, without deliberate organizing and planning, is capable of starting a mass uprising. Planned actions by experts, on the other hand, tend to suggest that the poor are passive victims rather than active players in the battles against marginalization, injustice, homelessness, poor education or poor health and other social and economic ills. Movements like the anti-apartheid, civil rights or anti-slavery movement are large-scale social actions that are cause driven. Such campaigns depend heavily on charismatic leaders and massive mobilization of resources. When the cause is realized, or loses its appeal, or the leader dies so does the movement!

ASSUMPTIONS

In preparing this paper I have assumed that the organisers of the Leadership Forum have made a conscious decision to remind South Africans that vibrant democracy, sustainable change and development can only be achieved through the agency of informed and vigilant people who opt to organize themselves in order to promote their basic values as well as defend and protect their interests. In our discussion we need to relate ourselves to past dialogues. What motivated our compatriots to examine social mobilization in 1997? These were the assumptions that underpinned their enquiry:

- In order to address the needs of the most disempowered in South Africa, such as poor women, children and poor people in rural areas, it is essential to mobilise people for human development and social reconstruction.
- Mobilisation could result in a process of joint action, with the new, democratically elected government and organisations of civil society working together to promote development.
- There is a need to restructure the relationship between the state and organisations of civil society, so that organisations and communities have the control over, and say in, decisions which affect them directly.
- Strategies for social mobilization can help to promote a substantive, participatory democracy not just a formal, representative one; a democracy that builds on the past experiences of participation and contributes to nation-building.

In 2011, just as was the case in 1997, it is important for us to make our assumptions more explicit and identify the critical processes, structures and strategies for effective community organizing as one of the pillars of the South African democratic programme. Africa is also experiencing people's power and people are demanding to influence and making their voice heard in their societies. In 1989 the people of the then Soviet Union demanded full democracy. Democratic values can be achieved by organized people. People are settling old and new scores with dictators and bureaucrats.

ORGANISING FOR PEOPLE'S POWER

The rallying slogan of the 1980 was: "Organising for People's Power." Our people have used three kinds of organisations to confront social and economic injustice. South Africa has a long history of protest organisations against racial oppression and economic exploitation. The most recent in our memory was the uprising in the 1960s against the pass laws as well as the students' revolt of the 1970s and 1980s. Blacks have effectively boycotted payment of rent and municipal service charges in the 1980s. We have since witnessed and lived with violent spontaneous community actions prompted by government's failure to provide service delivery and address adequate maintenance issues. Failure by government to respond to popular demands is one of the effective means for mobilizing community for social action. The arrogance of bureaucrats and state employees do help to mobilise community. It is in fact very hard to organize in a situation where public servants and leaders are responsive to people's concerns. It is

also near impossible to organize mass actions where oppressors and exploiters enjoy the support of their victims. You cannot successfully challenge a legitimate leader or system.

Strong civic associations of the 1980s were in fact organized in reaction to rent increases within communities. Civic bodies that mushroomed in South Africa owed their existence to the illegitimate and unresponsive community councils that were established by the apartheid government in order to deal with local government matters that affected Black people in the country.

Most people are familiar with service organisations that are increasingly spawned by nongovernmental organisations that are supported by corporates or government. These organisations by their nature are run by few staff or volunteer members to provide relief to the needy. They rely heavily on support from government, business or charitable donors in order to continue with their work. They rely on the expertise of a small number of people to help a series of single individuals that require their service. The people involved in providing such essential services as consumer protection, aiding of rape and abused victims, rehabilitating ex-offenders, and similar services often are incapable of changing the situations that cause problems.

Legal resources organisations and firms have helped the cause of bringing about legal reforms and in securing the rights of victims of social injustice. Lawyers provide critical help within community organisations or social movements. We need, however, to take note that where lawyers are involved community members often disengage from involvement in the activities of their organisations. Members often place all hope for success on the shoulders of the lawyer as a substitute for a popular community organizing.

South Africans today are rediscovering that the quality of their lives, without organizing themselves in the work places and their communities, will deteriorate. South Africans are also coming to terms to the hard reality that political parties that helped to bring about liberation are not adequately shielding and safeguarding communities against present and new social injustice. The time to test the efficacy of new kind of organizing seems to have arrived. We are realizing that the old and new elites that disproportionately derive massive benefits by virtue of their position within the status quo are failing to express genuine social solidarity with the people. People are still using inappropriate social tools and untransformed structures to fight for safe and affordable housing, community development and revitalisation, fair rates and taxes, affordable and safe public transport, environmental protection,

security of older people, children and women as well as opening the process and practice of good governance to the people.

People's organisations and community media have gradually been choked since the dawn of our democratic dispensation. The voice of people is faint while that of researchers and politicians is growing. The development of successful mass-based community organisations that still command strong membership and their own organized money are rare in South Africa. This country is experiencing a scarcity of autonomous people's organisations. Outside the labor movement that started to boldly and vehemently wield its power in the early 1970s we have ineffective dependent paper, not people's, organisations that are controlled and manipulated by sinister, or political or business organisations. These paper organisations are people's organisations only in name.

What we, proudly South Africans, need in order to deepen and broaden our democracy are people's organisations that have the strength of purpose, the power of their numbers, the power of their liberated and valued vote and the power of their own organized money. We need to organize people's power that is capable to win and achieve victory on specific disputed issues and controversies.

South Africa does not need more political parties. We need broad-based people's organisations that provide viable bargaining platforms and express the power of people not ineffective and status quo-boosting vehicles. Saul D. Alinsky, a doyen of community organisers, in his work throughout the United States of America concluded and strongly advocated for building people's organisations that, through the combined strength of many organisations and people's leaders are able to cope effectively with major forces which pervade the entire social order and converge upon communities to establish the blight that afflicts both neighbourhoods and the lives of inhabitants.

HOW CAN WE BUILD PEOPLE'S ORGANISATIONS?

We need to start where we are and skillfully use the legitimate and legal means available. For a start we need not go far in order to gain and learn useful lessons on organizing membership-based organisations that understand and use the power and strength of its membership dues. Workers are able to recruit fees-paying members in the work places. We also need not look far from our own communities for examples of congregations-based initiatives and learn from the experience of religious bodies.

People's organisations can be built by people themselves through their leaders, that is, those persons who the local people define and look up to as leaders. We are called upon, therefore, to identify credible local leaders and work with them. Any organizer worth the profession will need no convincing that people's organisations are built through developing intimate association with interest groups within a community. Organising implies talking, listening to and working with such groups including religious, business, social, labour and all others. We work through these leaders and their interest groups to discover and develop real leaders. In addition we have to realize that we need to develop the local leaders and ensure that they gain public recognition from their followers. We build relational power by weaving relationships of mutual recognition and support among people and their leaders.

In clear terms we organize people by talking, working and building their organisations with them. We also pay special attention to getting them to meet one another, talk among themselves and arrive at a common agreement regarding their community and their lives. Local people themselves diagnose their problems and agree on taking appropriate corrective actions. Issues and actions taken to address them constitute a programme of popular adult education that relates to their personal lives, social and economic experiences, and positive and negative actions of people with whom they interact both within and outside the community.

Competent community organisers are agreed that building a community organization begins with conducting one-on-one meetings with key people and local leaders. The meetings aim to arrive at profound understanding of concerns and fears as well as aspirations of these people. Organisers need to be curious enough to spend time gaining insights on values that people have for themselves as individuals, their families, community and the world beyond their immediate surroundings. Organising is essentially a deliberate and intentional conversation that prepares leaders for extended dialogues with other leaders. The one-on-ones are ideal means for sharing life stories with leaders, prioritise important issues and understand and appreciate "what make them tick." We also conduct an ongoing analysis of problems and forces that impact on their lives, organisations and society.

WE MAKE THE ROAD BY WALKING

Myles Horton and Paulo Freire in their "Conversation on Education and Social Change" have convincingly argued that without practice there is no knowledge. It is my experience that we learn the art of organizing by organizing people for power and change. In organizing we give life to what

universities teach. Universities teach us models and theory that undergirds community organizing practice. It is easy to intellectually grasp the three models of community organization practice as elaborated upon by Jack Rothman in the 1970s.

We learn to organize through constant planning, action, and reflection!

The challenge that we face is to secure commitment and resources to put into practice what we know ought to be done. We know that we could make a difference to the life of our people by promoting locality development that entails promoting self-help and community capacity. What we lack are competent enablers and catalysts of problem-solving skills. We are doing too little to develop among the people relationships and democratic problem-solving abilities. We are content to shamelessly become passive spectators of crude and undignified so-called comrades as they coerce and harass people to act in pursuit of undemocratic ends

We know that social planning requires professionals to help our people address substantive social problems that include mental and physical health, housing, teenage pregnancies, recreation, housing, and employment. We do not have professional practitioners that will gather facts about all these, analyse data, facilitate and support the implementation of agreed course of action.

We also know that in order to fundamentally transform our society shifting of power relationships and resources is an imperative. We know that the work of bringing about institutional change in our country is far from over. Yet we shy away of committing ourselves in acts of human solidarity as activists, advocates, catalysts, power brokers, negotiators and funders of nation-building and organized community organisations.

We know that we cannot solve the problems confronting our burgeoning democracy by throwing money at projects that are prescribed for people by external vested interests. We know as well that our people need to make their power felt at the polling stations yet we are contented when communities are manipulated and intimidated by hostile and criminal forces that have entrenched themselves in our communities. Some people live for and by buying favours from the system even when their blood money is undermining our hard-won democracy and development.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY ORGANISING

There are a number of principles that might be associated with organizing or building people's organisations. Among these I have religiously adopted the "Iron Rule" that emphasizes that an organizer or any professional that works with people must "never do for people anything that people can do for themselves and on their own." People must experience a sense of their own power, the ability to act and do things for themselves. We cannot emphasise enough that the focus of a people's organization is building people's power and increase their competence for addressing community affairs and ensuring that service and public as well as business organisations are responsive to their needs. In addition the following are principles that are worth observing by aspiring community organizers and community leaders:

- Broad-based community organizing will have to be a transparent and accountable process both within and external to the community organization.
- People's Power is predicated upon the thesis that combined members or community organisations and people's own organized money is the foundation of real power and influence.
- Organising should mean building community organisations that are free from external ideological influence and political control.
- Organising should recognise the basic values of the people and be values driven.
- Organising should aim to win real and immediate improvements in the people's lives.
- Leaders, despite their different backgrounds, should mutually recognize each other
- Organising should recognize and embrace diversity and work to bridge the social and economic divides in the interest of community and organizing people's power.
- Organising is about gaining public recognition and utilizing the organization as a springboard for development of other people's organisations throughout the nation.
- Meaningful change is impossible without confronting the entrenched power structure and associated interests.

THE FUTURE

During the second half of 2008 and early 2009 a team of South Africans from various political parties, government, civil society, religious groups, academia, media, business and trade unions met together at

Dinokeng in the north-eastern corner of Gauteng and crafted three futures for South Africa. Their purpose was to “create a space and language for open, reflective and reasoned strategic conversation among South Africans, about possible futures for the country, and the opportunities, risks and choices these futures present.”

The team was in agreement that South Africa was at a crossroads, that South Africans are capable of realizing the country’s potential and that citizens need to take ownership and responsibility and contribute to a better future for South Africa. The team acknowledged that while the country is proud of achievements made since 1994, the country still faces severe challenges. Quality schooling and healthcare have not been achieved. South Africans are worried about failure of self-serving leadership and accountability, high levels of crime, unemployment and poverty. The team further noted that our Constitution guarantees citizens an efficient public service, but the guarantee was not being met.

Among the three scenarios that were crafted by the Dinokeng Scenarios Team, “Walk Together” envisaged a future where our challenges are addressed through active citizen engagement, capable state, and strong leadership across all sectors. Good governance, competent delivery, and active citizen involvement become the key to fixing the most serious social problems that pose a grave danger to the country if they are not addressed. The scenario also envisage a future where politicians are more directly accountable to voters and if voters have problems with healthcare, or education, or housing, or the state of roads, parks or libraries in their areas, they can go directly to their representative to help them fix the problems. If their representatives fail them, they can vote them out of office.

The message of this scenario is that it is going to take all of us to address our challenges. If citizens engage, take initiative and hold government to account; if a more effective and capable government is built; and if leaders in all sectors rise above their narrow self-interests; then we may just set the country and the right future path.

Confronted with a similar situation Moses M. Coady, the founder of the Antigonish Movement of Adult Education Through Economic Cooperation in Canada, counseled his people thus: “It may be disheartening for most of us to think that the job is a big one. It may be discouraging to realize that the task must be done by the people themselves. It may be doubted that the so-called ignorant masses are capable of rising to the economic, moral, and intellectual level necessary for the effectual operation of their economic and political machinery. But that is our dream. If we are prepared to offer men the task of self-government, if we ask our people to run the biggest business in the country –the country itself –

we cannot then, in the next breath, turn around and say they are not competent to run their own grocery store. We cannot rant the privilege of political democracy and at the same time withhold the opportunities for economic democracy on which it should be founded. That would be a contradiction between our fundamental philosophy and our application of it.”

It does make us think!

Community organizing hold for our people the golden prospects of regaining their human dignity, economic democracy, learning new social and economic techniques, gaining power through exercising their vote and making their voice count where it matters, constructively realizing their human energy through universal dissemination of ideas, and envisioning an open society full of possibilities and opportunities for themselves, their children and society.

CONCLUSION

It is my considered opinion that the thoughts that I have shared in this paper might be beyond the experience of some of the listeners. For those of us that might through our own actions alienated ourselves from the people let us rekindle a new vision of society founded on human solidarity. May we together advocate for the establishment of real people’s organisations that are built on the firm foundation of our democratic Constitution. We need to sponsor community organizing initiatives and trained professional community organisers. Let us make the way by walking. “AS in nature, so in man, the lofty mountain peaks shall rise not from the level plains but from the foothills.”