Ubumbano Learning Event

Community Organising: Solidarity in Action

A Report on the Process

Prepared for

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“... organising capacity has become increasingly depleted over time, with little work being done to identify, mentor and support emergent community leadership. Beyond this though, when leadership is present, the models of leadership that are aspired to do not lend themselves to accountability. We see a constant replenishment of charismatic, autocratic leaders who, once they have become publicly visible ‘move on to bigger things’.

Communities members are increasingly aware of their role as ‘cannon fodder’, to create high visibility and a sense of mass power during mobilisations, but largely being ignored between events. The processes of mandate building, report back and accountability have been eroded and community members find themselves feeling increasingly marginalised and powerless.

The consequences of the current organising practice is that communities increasingly lose faith in all forms of organising, increasingly questioning the motives of leaders and the interests they serve.

An emergent trend that is increasing the sense of helplessness is the tendency towards litigation that many NGOs who frame their work as rights or social justice based have adopted. Legal strategies, are increasingly not accompanied by political education and mass action, and this has further eroded community agency. Communities are increasingly becoming minor players, bystanders in the response to the issues they confront on a day-to-day basis.

... collective agency must be built on the local—on communities’ experience of structural challenges as they manifest in their daily lives. Through this local experience to develop the skills, attitudes and knowledge to engage power holders and through building connections with others who experience similar, a broad-based movement of civil society can be supported to engage in broader collective action to create change.”

*dala! consulting Services, Expression of Interest: Community organising workshop design and facilitation, December 2017.*
Five key questions to guide our practice:

Are our **values** reflected in our **practice**?

To **lead or follow**—what is my **role as an organiser**?

How do we make ourselves **accountable** to the communities we work with?

Are we responding to the **symptoms or to the root causes** of the problem?

Am I **conscious of and mediating power**—my own and others?
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1. Background

The quote on the first page of this report provides the basis for the design of a workshop intended to reflect on the practice of community organising. Held over two days, the learning event brought together a diverse group of community organisers from Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe ‘to share and discuss experiences and lessons emerging from the practice of community organising.’

The learning event was driven by participant-generated content using an adaptation of Open Space Technology—a participatory workshop approach that allows participants to agree the topics for discussion in process, rather than having a fixed agenda set before the workshop. Time was loosely managed to allow for depth of discussion rather than breadth, and participants were encouraged to ‘self-manage’ both in terms of timekeeping and the direction the conversations took. The facilitator took a framing, listening and reflecting role throughout, posing critical questions as and when appropriate, providing minimal guidance on the form report back sessions would take.

While the resultant content was rich and valuable, the process itself was extremely taxing, with participants having to work with large volumes of content in a relatively short space of time. Despite this, participants maintained high levels of engagement, applying their minds actively and confronting some of the critical questions facing community organisers and the broader development sector. This during a time when civil society is under increasing pressure from both conservative and progressives to better articulate its value in creating positive change.

Participants were not always in agreement about all issues and approaches, but time and space was allowed to air differences, without pressure to resolve them, to allow for an open and honest learning and exchange. Debate was encouraged and divergent views challenged throughout the conversation. Wherever possible, participants were also asked to reflect on their experience by illustrating positions through examples that emerged from their own practice.

Feedback on the process in terms of what worked well included:

“leading sessions with questions allowed more thinking and discussion.”

“the selection process of topics to be discussed during the workshop: we as participants chose our own topics to be discussed. For me, it worked!”

“participants ventured well beyond thematic silos.”

“the workshop was so educative, informative and action-oriented.”

“straight to the point.”

“learning by sharing our experiences made things easy.”

“very good facilitator pushed for more critical thinking.”

“breaking into groups allowed more space for discussion and diverse experiences to come out.”
Areas that participants felt did not work so well included:

“very little lessons around practice came out probably because we are not used to asking ourselves these questions.”

“we are content on our practices and not willing to open up to critique.”

“domination of other participants in group discussions.”

“not being able to express ourselves in English even though we have much to share.”

“limited time for everyone to learn and share (everyone has got a story to tell).”

“lack of youth representation in the whole process. Most of the members were ‘older’ in terms of age so issues pertaining particularly to youth weren’t well represented in the group discussions and feedback.”

This feedback would be useful for taking into consideration in the design of future learning events. More detailed feedback on how to improve the events is provided later in the report:

2. Process

Part 1: Setting the agenda

After introducing themselves, participants were invited to work together to develop a context analysis based on their own experience of what was happening and important to the communities they worked in, and to present those in plenary using an image/drawing.

In the next session, groups were asked, on the basis of their analysis of the context, to select the most critical issues for the group to take forward into discussion. These were recorded and posted on a wall, with the group working together to cluster common/similar issues and begin to refine topics for discussion.

The final exercise in this part of the workshop was to then select three issues that would be taken forward for deeper discussion. This was done through a process of ranking and further clustering.

Part 2: Deepening the discussion

Working in small groups, participants were asked to discuss the selected issues in more detail, with a specific emphasis on drawing out recommendations/lessons that would be useful for community organisers and on surfacing any additional questions that might emerge during the discussion. Participants were encouraged, beyond the practice questions, to also discuss the principles that informed their practice.

Part 3: Practicing solidarity

Participants were asked to discuss the idea of solidarity. What did it mean in practice? What impeded and promoted solidarity? What principles could guide solidarity work within the Act Alliance?
3. A context analysis from below

Weak economies are unable to absorb young people into formal employment resulting in increasing disaffection, anger and anti-social behaviour. Drug and alcohol abuse are on the increase and teenage pregnancy continues to impact on opportunities for young women. Growing and increasingly visible income and other inequalities (gender, access to social services, ownership and control of natural resources) further erode communities’ confidence in the State.

Corruption and the mismanagement of public resources are becoming increasingly normalised. Elected officials are less and less accountable and the delivery of critical social services is being hampered. Poor delivery of services was identified as a form of structural violence. The attitudes that are manifesting locally amongst official and political representatives are seen as a reflection of the broader lack of accountability of national Governments. Communities, feeling less able to influence Government through formal mechanisms, are resorting to protest action which often turns violent—a vicious cycle.

Violence has become a norm, with increases in personal violence reflected in gender-based violence statistics, a marked increase in violent crime against members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer+ (LGBTIQ+) community because of their identities, and a general increase in violent crime. Communities are under siege, feel isolated and have great difficulty ‘seeing themselves in others’. Communities increasingly act to protect their own narrow interests because of the sense that ‘there isn’t enough to go around’, which in turn increases this sense of isolation.

Political and social elites control resources and actively exclude others from meaningful participation—in the economy and in democratic and social spaces. Poor, marginal and minority communities are easily ignored because of their socio-economic position and perceived lack of power and influence. Rights are routinely violated despite the imperatives of the democratic systems in which these communities are located.

While communities know their rights, or can be taught their rights, knowledge and information gaps persist. Compounding the challenges is a decreasing sense of agency—the ability to make community voices heard in order to influence policy. Even more concerning is the gap between the intention of policymakers and the practice of civil servants who, for a variety of reasons, including resources and skills deficits as well as a lack of political will amongst their principals, are unable to implement policy provisions adequately.

The environment in which community organising takes place is increasingly complex. Compounding the challenge of community organisers is the fact that the issues communities are grappling with are complex in and of themselves and intersect with each other in highly localised ways. There does not seem to be one solution or an approach that can be universally applied—solutions to challenges seemingly have to be developed locally through application, trial and error.
4. Emergent questions for community organisers

The plenary conversations resulted in rich conversations that covered issues of practice, principle and described some emergent questions that would be useful for practitioners to consider.

Conversations included reflections on the role of community organisers. Should they lead or follow communities? How directive should organisers be? Ideas ranged from organisers as active agents of change who have a predetermined analysis and agenda that they use to direct action, to passive providers of information and analysis that communities themselves would need to act on, to organisers as listeners and facilitators of community-generated agendas.

Power was a dominant theme that was reflected throughout the workshop with deep discussion being held on the power and agency of communities in relation to the wealthy, politically and socially powerful—including corporations and political parties. Community organisers need to develop the skills to manage power and power relations. Most importantly though, community organisers need to be more conscious of their own power and manage it actively to ensure that community voices are heard and responded to. A critical reflection was that managing power is not a ‘zero sum game’—that the intention of organising work is to ensure that the needs and interests of a range of stakeholders is balanced.

This balancing requires that community organisers become more comfortable with contradiction and complexity to ensure that the best possible outcomes are achieved when there is contestation. Communities are not homogenous and consensus is often difficult to achieve. People will disagree on the analysis of the root causes of the challenges they are facing and/or the strategies to respond. A good organiser is patient, comfortable in process and allows and manages conflict as it arises. Good organisers work with communities at a pace that is comfortable, brings everyone along and in a manner that is inherently affirming and developmental.

But, what drives the agenda of community organisers? Are the organisations doing the work led by a set of common principles and values or does the promise of funding and currency (keeping up to date with trends) define the agenda? Do community organisers play a ‘pacifying role’—directing the energies and intentions of communities in a manner that reinforces or protects the status quo? Are we critical enough about who we talk or listen to or how we engage community representatives? Do we reinforce the role of the usual gatekeepers—the articulate, educated and ‘marketable/publicly acceptable’ community representatives? Does the narrative we present to the outside world perpetuate biases and stereotypes?

Are we able to step back, follow, be directed, relinquish power and be humble to listen and learn from the communities we set out to ‘help’?
There are no easy answers to the above questions. They cannot be answered in two days of conversation or even a week or year’s debate. Rather, these should be the questions that community organisers reflect upon constantly to develop their practice.

5. Setting the agenda

A number of themes were defined through the group work including:

1. Youth engagement
2. Advocacy for the implementation of policy (health, child protection, land, etc.)
3. Strengthening the justice system for the benefit of the marginalised
4. Holding the State to account: corruption; public mismanagement; succession
5. How to organise for inclusion of marginalised people and make sure that the rich and powerful are part of the process of finding solutions
6. How to build alternative modes of resistance
7. What principles govern our action
8. Gender within the context of land
9. The slow process of land reform
10. Land—access, ownership and rights
11. Exclusion/developing an inclusive organising practice
12. Mobilisation to action: building better organising practice
13. Defining our purpose as activists
14. Exclusion
15. Violence
16. How do we reclaim our spaces for mobilisation?
17. How do we build a unified voice?
18. How do we assert our humanity through the practice of democracy?
19. How do we deliver community education programmes more effectively?
20. How do we mobilise for solutions?

The process of clustering and ranking yielded the following three broad discussion topics, which were agreed as being the most critical for the group to take forward:

**Land—access, ownership and rights:** the process and outcomes of land reform processes, the gendered nature of ‘landlessness’, contestation around land use, e.g. between mining and agricultural communities and the methods and practices employed by organisations and communities to address these.

**Exclusion/developing an inclusive organising practice:** focused on the purpose of activism and the principles that inform such activism and organising, who is included in the process of organising, what methods/processes/approaches support ‘good organising; the role organisations play in setting/defining activist agendas, and alternatives modes and tactics for activism/resistance.
Moving from education to mobilisation/action: interrogated how activists could build better organising practice, mobilising for solutions and thinking through methods/tactics for delivering effective education programmes that translate naturally into activism.

6. Exploring the issues

**Land – access, ownership and rights**

The question of land: ownership, control and redistribution, is very topical in the region with recently proposed changes to the way South Africa will manage expropriation, renewed interest in the Zimbabwe ‘model’ and the increasing inter and intra community conflict around land use and disposal, e.g. mining versus agricultural land use. It was agreed that there is no one model, each context needs to be viewed on its merits and the appropriate ownership decided on the basis of engagement and negotiation.

There have been many attempts, driven by both land activists and Governments, to address the land issue. Given the vested interest that the powerful agricultural and mining sector lobby has in maintaining the status quo, these have not been very successful. Increasingly also, in the urban context, property developers have provided significant resistance to attempts to shift land ownership patterns. Many land rights activist/organisations have not made themselves very accountable to communities, thereby eroding already tenuous trust.

As with many other social justice issues, women are the most affected by the land question, as they own and control the least land, are the most insecure in terms of tenure and are most responsible for food production. Cultural practices in relation to the inheritance of land affect women’s security of tenure and place them in a particularly vulnerable position.

Land occupations are increasingly bringing communities into more direct conflict with the State. In many countries, the State is responding with force—both physical violence and the law. Community are ill-placed to defend themselves in these instances, lacking both the might and resources to oppose either form of attack. Police brutality is hardening communities’ attitudes and violence and confrontation may increase.

But it is more than just land—it is also the entire natural resource management framework that land rights underpin: the management of water, pasture and mineral rights. Over and above this, the question forces us to balance communal and individual rights, to reflect on freedom of movement and mobility laws, removals and compensation criteria and the question for dignity and intergenerational assets transfers.

**Actions to address the land question**

- Ensure the safety and security of land (and other) activists challenging institutional power.
- Support land reform initiatives that are initiated by the poor themselves. Support the building of a grassroots land movement.
- Continue to raise awareness on land rights and the systems and processes that govern the realisation of these rights.
• Address traditional/cultural practices that create insecure tenure for women.
• Design and implement programmes to understand and address questions of urban land reform.

**Exclusion/developing an inclusive organising practice**

The definition of exclusion varied from person to person and the following four ‘definitions’ were put forward as a framing for the conversations that took place:

• Exclusion is a root cause of violence: people feeling left out or ignored and responding with violence.
• Exclusion is a structural issue that supports the interests of the powerful—the systems themselves perpetuating violence deliberately.
• Exclusion is a practice within civil society—not listening to or allowing some voices or identities to be represented in our work, influenced by our awareness of and openness to ‘other’.
• Exclusion is the silencing of voices through conscious or unconscious actions—people choosing to hear/listen to the voices they agree with and rejecting others.

People who do not ‘have’ (power, money, access) are excluded by a system that is designed and perpetuated to keep them on the edge of society. The excluded have little agency in decision-making spaces, are provided with little information about the things that affect them, and are treated as if their experience and issue are unimportant. To create change, there is a need to challenge ourselves and disrupt systems and a worldview that treats excluded communities as if they are stupid.

Women and members of the LGBTQI community experience an almost general exclusion because of the way in which laws and policies are constructed, e.g. inheritance law in some countries, but also because of socio-cultural and religious practices. Women, because of limited information and the burden of care responsibilities placed upon them, can sometimes ‘self-exclude’, preferring to take care of their families first before engaging in activism or public participation.

While some of the change that needs to take place can be achieved through formal institutions and policy, inclusivity can only be achieved by addressing social norms. Institutions often pay lip service to inclusion, ignoring the deeply rooted norms and values underpinning exclusionary practices. More investment needs to be made to ensure that institutional practices are improved and excluded groups are provided with the skills and opportunity to fully engage.

Religious institutions and traditional structures are at great fault here, as they perpetuate and sustain social norms, which uphold patriarchal practice. These social norms are sometimes internalised by women themselves, who then support and reinforce the systems, processes and attitudes that exclude them.

Activists for social justice need to be aware of and challenge negative social norms that perpetuate gender and other inequalities and exclusion. Part of the process of engaging is to understand and respond to hidden power that subtly creates exclusion. There is a need to
update programme approaches, to make them contextual, contemporary and relevant to excluded groups. Workshops do not work and moving beyond providing information and raising awareness to joint action is critical to creating any meaningful social change.

**Actions to address exclusion**

- Challenge the culture or exclusion and social norm that make it difficult for excluded groups to engage equally in social, economic and political spaces.
- Work to establish and maintain solidarity between the excluded groups.
- Representation is important, but there is a need to go beyond the numbers—to shift culture and behaviours.
- Create and sustain platforms from which excluded groups can speak, and be heard, about the issues that are important to them.
- Move beyond process, sensitize communities about attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate exclusion and challenge negative norms programatically.
- Invest in women’s leadership—political, economic and social.
- Move beyond education. People have rights—provide support to exercise them.

An important principle that emerged from the conversation is the need to recognise and work with the agency of communities. It was suggested that organisations listen and follow more and be respectful of the experience of the communities they work with and in.

Two weighty questions also emerged from this conversation that could be considered for a deeper conversation:

- Is inclusion into a destructive/chaotic system (the current one) truly an ambition? What alternative to the current system can we imagine that does not create exclusion?
- Are people vulnerable because they are excluded or are people excluded because they are vulnerable?

**Moving from education to mobilisation/action**

It is important to work from a principled position, to support the struggles of communities with whom we have a political alignment, allowing them to lead and shape the actions that emerge from processes that are flexible and adaptive. It is not always possible to predict the course of an action with any great certainty and therefore it is important that resources are reserved for opportunistic action and that contingency support be provided, e.g. bail money or legal fees, when actions do not go as planned.

Mobilisation is a long-term process that requires organisations to commit time and resources to build relationships, educate through discussion and debate and build trust with their constituencies. While the support organisations can often provide the structure and resources for action in formal spaces, e.g. litigation, it is really the community experience, energy and commitment that is critical. Organisations have to be careful not to define/pre-determine the issues or emergent actions—they should listen and be led by the expressed needs of community, providing advice and critical reflection in support of building an analysis and choice of strategy. Organising is a patient practice.
An important role is to provide linkages to external technical specialists and make sure the right advice is available to communities as and when they need it. Providing material resources is as important as providing intellectual/conceptual resources.

Linking community struggles and providing opportunities for exchange between communities experiencing similar challenges is important. Exposure to new ideas, strategies and tactics can be catalytic as is the idea that ‘I/we are not alone in this’. Broad solidarity networks that show active support are critical to activation and action.

Social media provides us with a new set of tools that has the potential to allow people to connect on their own terms, engage each other directly, sharing information and learning towards joint action. Organisations have to learn to use the medium more effectively in support of their organising work. Social media is not however, a substitute for face-to-face engagement to build trust and connection.

**Actions to improve mobilisation**

- Support expanded consultation (beyond individual communities) and joint action to build confidence and trust.
- Develop and support a social media networking space to facilitate communication and joint action.
- Document and share community narratives, preferably through community media forums.
- Support dialogue processes—both closed and open spaces for sharing learning, debate and planning action.
- Support strategy and tactics workshops.
- Provide material supports for disruptive actions and safety nets (contingency funds) in the aftermath.

Several other important streams of conversation emerged in the discussions over the course of the workshop:

- The need to **act from a strong and common values base**. Solidarity action demands a strong alignment of values between all actors as fundamental for trust and accountability. Without a shared and commonly understood set of values and principles, no constructive/positive action is possible.
- Participants discussed the potential and **strategic use of social media as an organising tool** that goes beyond information sharing. Many community members are already active on a variety of social media platforms and while customised platforms may be useful, these should be integrated with the social media tools and platforms people already use. WhatsApp, for instance, provides a ready and easy to use platform for the production and distribution of text, audio and video files within an accessible chat format. With many decision-makers on social media, creative campaigns and actions that reach the intended targets are more possible through social media.
- **Community media forums** can be used to develop and disseminate stories in local languages via community radio. In addition to the advocacy/influencing value, processes
like these support the building of a positive community identity, both for themselves and the outside world.

- While much of the advocacy work currently enjoying public attention is focused on policy, it is clear to the majority of participants that the biggest challenge in Southern Africa is **addressing the range of implementation gaps** that are evident. These range from gaps in social policy implementation to failures in upholding rights and the pursuit of justice through legal remedy. Generally, the rights and interests of the powerful seem to take precedence with little concern for the challenges faced by marginalised communities, despite what policies and laws stipulate.

- **Violence** in all its forms, personal and structural, is on the increase and poses a significant threat to the possibility of making sustainable change. The State is increasingly hostile to its citizens, especially the poor and marginalised.

- **Addressing power** is central to shifting the social dynamic in communities, to changing the nature of the relationship between the powerful and the ‘powerless’, and to support a practice of accountability and inclusion. Organisers need to develop their practice around a keen understanding of power and how to manage it effectively.

### 7. Practicing solidarity

**A conceptual model**

Conversations over the course of the workshop informed a solidarity model which is depicted overleaf. A brief description of the diagram is provided below. The agreed principles, as well as the resources and knowledge list, are illustrative and not exhaustive. The Alliance is encouraged to add to this or select those most relevant to its operations.

Participants in the meeting agreed that in order for the Alliance to be effective, it needed to base all its work/actions on a set of common values—that the basis for any solidarity action was an alignment of individual and organisational values.

These values, in turn, should be supported by a set of principles that would inform/guide interactions between members, relationships with the various constituencies Alliance members engaged with, e.g. community members and the actions that the collective engaged in.

Knowledge and resources were the additional elements required for stability and the reinforcement of the solidarity framework and actions.

A diagrammatic representation of a solidarity network
The network members play differentiated but interconnected roles in creating the enabling environment in which communities themselves are able to act and create change. The network functions as both a support and safety net—backstopping and underwriting when needed and using its strategic influence (individual and collective), reach and technical capacities to extend the power and reach of communities’ actions to influence.
Practical roles for the Alliance included:

- Supporting/facilitating practice exchange and learning through, for example, the facilitation of regular platforms through which partners can share learning and experiences, solicit advice and identify opportunities for collaboration; supporting organisational exchange and learning visits; and supporting community-to-community exchange.
- Joint reflection in support of an adaptive practice to build a shared understanding of the context, to identify trends and opportunities for action and reflect on and respond to sudden and unforeseen changes in the operating environment.
- Leveraging the internal skills, expertise and capacities of the Alliance partnership to provide technical assistance, training and skills development to members and communities.
- Planning for and resourcing opportunistic actions and providing contingency funding for legal fees, etc. in the light of potential shrinking opportunity for civil disobedience.
- Resource mobilisation is still seen as an important part of what the European affiliates have to offer Southern partners. While it is acknowledged that a more balanced arrangement of power is sought, funding may still play a role in the way relationships are managed. Separating resource contributions from decision-making is a central challenge towards and equitable power balance.

8. Recommendations for improving future learning events

Participant feedback on how to support learning included:

“expand the sharing process so that others can relate through other’s learning.”

“have mandate-specific conferences.”

“allow participation in language [participants are] comfortable in and translate where necessary.”

“provide ‘manuals’ for mind refreshing.”

“document and share lessons learnt from this event.”

“cluster groups working on the same issues. This way they make connections and could plan exchange programmes and plans.”

“map communities for exchange programmes.”

“include more community members, those at grassroots level so that they may share their lived experiences instead of us telling their story.”

“try out this model in our working spaces and develop a praxis that can take us forward.”

“open up to more social movements, community-based organisations, NGOs.”

“[have] a learning space with [both] managers and coordinators to inform proposals.”
9. Concluding remarks

The process, while intense in terms of the amount of content covered, yielded a number of notable insights into the work of organisers. It provided a moment for practitioners to stop and reflect on their practice and to have others interrogate some of the ideas they may have begun to take for granted in their day-to-day work. They had time to examine the inevitable difference between stated practice and ‘real world’ operations.

Civil society organisations all over the world need to do more of this. We have all become so caught up in the ‘doing’—the delivery of outputs, measurement of outcomes and completing projects and reports—that we have very little time to take stock of our practice. We need to stop more often to reflect on our ways of working, to ask ourselves: Do our actions remain true to the values and principles that underpin development work? Are we truly delivering on our mandate to create positive change in a way that reinforces the agency of individuals and the collectives within which they choose to cooperate? Are we addressing fundamental issues of power and control?

The deep questions of development that we need to ask regularly, and answer honestly, are the ones that make us uncomfortable. They should not be avoided if we are to remain true to our values—if we are to live by the principles of solidarity.
Attachment 1: Overview of the Solidarity Hub process

Ubumbano Southern Africa: Overview of a Solidarity initiative by ACT Alliance members

Background

We are a network of South(ern) African and Northern NGOs working to confront economic, gender and environmental injustice. We do this by facilitating joint reflection and collaboration, and supporting innovative solidarity initiatives that address unjust power relations in South(ern) Africa and globally. In response to changing global conditions, and to effectively amplify the impact of their work, three European Protestant development agencies¹ and members of the ACT Alliance² have joined forces with Southern African partners to explore new models of solidarity and collaboration between European development organisations and CSOs in South Africa and Southern Africa.

A key element of this process is building a “Solidarity Hub” (initially called “Solidarity Platform”). The Hub is the focal point for interaction, learning and dialogue amongst local and international partners and allies seeking to engage in deepening solidarity, knowledge and practice in the field. This reflection informs new and existing programmatic action that is rooted in the communities we work with, and that builds solidarity across the global south and north.

The higher level goal is to develop new forms of action for social justice that contribute to the transformation of structures of injustice and inequality by accompanying and supporting communities in their struggles. This is based on the conclusion that social change will happen if there is increased community agency, mobilisation and voice.

This work is centred on the pillars of i) social and economic justice, ii) environmental justice/climate change, and iii) gender justice and SRHR, and contributes to the implementation of the SDGs, notably the SDGs 1 (no poverty), 3 (good health and well-being), 5 (gender equality), 10 (reduced inequalities), 13 (climate action) and 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions)³ in Southern Africa.

Advances to date

The inaugural solidarity hub took place in February 2017 and focused on ‘Inequality and the Struggle for Humanity in Southern Africa.’ It brought together senior leaders of the European agencies and about 30 local organisations from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Mozambique, and social movements from Brazil and South Africa. This was followed up by smaller thematic platforms during mid-2017 on “Economic Justice” and “Gender Justice & SRHR”.

¹ Church of Sweden, Christian Aid, Brot für die Welt
² http://actalliance.org/
³ https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300
Out of these sessions, there has been agreement to jointly implement activities that give practical expression to our commitment to working together. These actions include:

- a learning event for activists, community members and NGO/FBO workers to learn from the sharing of their experiences, challenges and strategies in community organising,
- a scoping of community initiatives being done by participating organisations to help deepen our knowledge of current social justice and community organising practices,
- the development of an app and website, to equip activists and community members with media and communication technology to allow them to speak directly to the general public, without the need for intermediaries. This will influence decision-makers and strengthen calls for accountability from authorities. The website mock-up can be viewed at www.ubumbanovoice.com. (Ubumbano is Nguni for Solidarity, or Unity).
- various gender & SRHR activities developed out of the solidarity hub on gender and contributing to 16 days of activism. These actions have raised the voice of GBV victims and enabled open dialogues with faith leaders and government.

The March 2018 Solidarity Hub is next moment to refine further actions locally and link with global solidarity actions or campaigns. A small programme seed fund and commitment to funding initial steps in the process in 2018 were agreed by the European agencies, as well as creating and supporting a resourcing strategy towards continuity.

An advisory group of seven Southern African partners was mandated by the February 2017 Solidarity Hub to, together with the group of European partners, provide strategic leadership and decision making for the change process, until such time as another, more formal structure is established.

**Reflections arising from the Solidarity hubs**

In seeking to access the knowledge and experience that is present in communities and organisations active in Southern Africa, the process has led to a deep reflection on our practice in pursuit of social justice:

- There is an erosion of organisational capacity and consciousness in Southern African communities. Traditional civil society organisations have not sufficiently interrogated or engaged with new movements for more sustainable impact. Furthermore, poverty and the struggle to survive means that political organising is that much more difficult to sustain.
- There are often violent responses from communities whose voices are largely ignored by the state. The undermining of community voice is also sometimes aggravated by NGO’s taking unto themselves the responsibility of speaking for communities.
- Generally, there is a reduction in funding available for social justice work, and funders are often reluctant to support work seen as being “political”. There is also decreased support for work at community level, where the ‘high profile’ impact is not always as visible.
Because advocacy takes a long time to bear fruit, and the reality of poverty and marginalisation from economic opportunity is an ever present experience, many NGOs find it difficult to manage community expectations for change.

Gender justice is often seen in isolation of other social justice struggles. Instead, its connection and intersection with social and economic justice and climate justice efforts should be what drives our search for solidarity, and we should guard against silo approaches to work.

**The way forward**

Key learning emerging from the three Solidarity Hubs define our next steps:

- Critical self-reflection and analysis by organisations working directly with communities is what informs the solidarity actions. This process is enabled by the Solidarity Hubs, and results in actions that are defined by the communities most affected. In so doing, the power dynamics that characterise traditional funding practices – and traditional relations between NGOs and local communities – are challenged.

- This change process is not driven by the availability of funding. In fact, the process of supporting communities in their struggles is often difficult to fund, as this form of solidarity is frequently a long process with limited immediate and apparent impact stories. Notably, the primary input is led by organisations of the global South. The emphasis is thus on supporting community movements and organisations in their efforts to mobilise and organise for change, and ensuring that their autonomy and self-determination remain at the centre.

- The diverse range of participants in the Solidarity Hub brings a diversity of resources to the process of building this relationship of solidarity, including funds, expertise, networks, and community rootedness.

- We can be issue-based, while seeking to increase inclusiveness in our work, especially between FBOs and secular civil society. We don’t have to be homogeneous to solve problems, but use differences in approaches to find solutions.

- Community movements face the key challenge of organising capacity, and need partners to actively support them with financial and other resources. We need to walk with communities and listen to what they are saying, and to take the lead from them in how to fight their struggles for dignity.

- While there is a strong faith-based constituency participating, this remains an inclusive process with diverse participation.

This process will continue to use the Solidarity Hubs to reflect on the lived experience of communities bearing the brunt of social injustice and the organisations that support them, to analyse the structural causes of injustice and our limitations in challenging these, and to plan and implement collaborative action that seeks to transform society.

We are working towards a new model of solidarity and cooperation, but there is no preordained outcome of this process. Instead, we have committed “to make the path by walking it together”.  

<Contact: agreen-thompson@christian-aid.org / Date: March 2018>
### Attachment 2: Agenda

#### Ubumbano Learning Event – The Practice of Community Organising

12-13 March 2018

**Day 1 – Monday 12 March**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Description</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>08h30-09h00</td>
<td>Registration</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>09h00-09h30</td>
<td>Welcome and introductions</td>
<td>Participants in the process will know who is in the room</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The facilitator will open the meeting, confirm the purpose</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of the meeting and facilitate a round of introductions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09h30-09h45</td>
<td>Background to the event</td>
<td>Participants will understand why the learning event is being held and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The ACT Alliance Change Manager will open the learning</td>
<td>what it is intended to achieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>event and provide a brief background to the meeting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11h00-12h30</td>
<td>Setting the scene: Defining our agenda</td>
<td>An agenda for the workshop learning sessions is agreed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants will work together to define a potential</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>agenda, and then make strategic selections about what topics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or issues will be covered during the course of the learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>event.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12h30-13h30</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Session Description</td>
<td>Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 13h30-15h00 | Learning Session One  
Based on the selected topics, participants will have the opportunity to engage in deep discussion based on their own experience and practice. The discussions will focus on drawing out lessons, raising new questions or developing strategies/recommendations to respond to obstacles to effective community organising | Participants will have:  
- had the opportunity to interrogate an issue that is of interest to them;  
- shared their experiences (successes and failures);  
- made concrete recommendations as to how these issues can be addressed;  
- identified new questions/areas of exploration |
| 15h00-15h30 | Tea / Coffee                                                  |                                                                          |
| 15h30-17h00 | Learning Session Two  
Like Learning Session One, a similar process of discussion will continue for the second topic or issue that was identified. | The same as outcomes for Learning Session One |
| 19h45-      | Free Evening / Optional Movie Screening                     |                                                                          |
|           | Evening session – participants may choose to network with others, or watch a documentary movie on the land struggles in Zimbabwe |                                                                          |
## Ubumbano Learning Event

### Day 2 – Tuesday 13 March

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session Description</th>
<th>Session Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>08h30-09h00</td>
<td>Overnight Reflections&lt;br&gt;Check in and sharing insights that may have emerged overnight.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09h00-10h30</td>
<td>Learning Session Three&lt;br&gt;Like Learning Session One, a similar process of discussion will continue for the third topic or issue that was identified.</td>
<td>As per the Outcomes from Learning Session One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10h30-11h00</td>
<td>Tea / Coffee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11h00-12h30</td>
<td>Learning Session Four&lt;br&gt;Like Learning Session One, a similar process of discussion will continue for the third topic or issue that was identified.</td>
<td>As per the Outcomes from Learning Session One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12h30-13h30</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13h30-15h45</td>
<td>A way forward&lt;br&gt;Participants will have time to reflect on the process and to make recommendations about what should be fed into the Solidarity Hub process.</td>
<td>Participants have agreed a set of recommendations to input into the Solidarity Hub process.&lt;br&gt;The experiences of community organisers and activists will help shape the agenda of the Solidarity Hub</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15h45-16h15</td>
<td>Closing&lt;br&gt;Summary, Key pointers for the way forward, closure</td>
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<tr>
<td>16h15-16h45</td>
<td>Tea / Coffee – Farewells and Departure</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>