



LEARNING HUBS

ACT UBUMBANO

Learning Note #3

Solidarity as facilitation – Giving voice to people's struggles!

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The Development Action Group (DAG), a Cape Town-based organisation, was established in 1986 to respond to evictions and forced removals in Crossroads and in Philippi. DAG describes itself as a:

...leading Non-Profit Organisation that supports communities to strengthen community organising; enable affordable housing, land and tenure security; resist evictions; and shape urban development policies. Our mission is to support and advocate for community led development addressing economic, social and spatial imbalances.

In its day to day work DAG works with communities of people to develop and deliver project focus on:

- Enabling citizens to create change*
- Re-imagining neighbourhoods through facilitation*
 - Financing a just city*
 - Delivery of affordable housing*
 - Learning and advocacy for change*

Background

... these are not forced removals in the same way as those orchestrated by apartheid, these are forced removals orchestrated by the land markets... by power, by greed... If not managed properly we will have no working-class people living in the inner city, which will become the privilege of the wealthy and predominantly white population of Cape Town.

...affordable housing in the inner city [is necessary] where there is employment, tourism and a host of economic opportunities, and where people don't have to use 40% of their income for transport.

Rising inner city property prices across South Africa is leading to a situation where working class households can no longer afford to live close to work opportunities or in areas they have historically lived in. The Woodstock and Salt River communities in Cape Town are rare in that they survived forced removals in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, but now they are increasingly under threat as property prices rise and residents can no longer afford to stay there. The revival of South Africa's inner cities through gentrification is driving demand for both residential and commercial property in previously economically depressed neighbourhoods.

The general response from the State has been to move people displaced by gentrification to the edges of the city, replicating the geography of apartheid cities – a geography in which the largely black, poor and working class communities lived far away from places of work or economic opportunity. DAG worked with the Pine Road community in Woodstock over a period of four years

to facilitate their move from informal housing to formal, social housing in the medium term. However, because of the high risks this community has to live with (fires are a regular occurrence) and the need to progress the development plans for the land, an interim solution was sought; the development of a transitional formal housing facility while the broader social housing projects were being planned.

A series of advantageous circumstances, including the availability of the site and there being significant political will within the City of Cape Town, made this innovative housing solution possible. Working closely with the Pine Road community and city officials, DAG facilitated relocation to a new communal housing site, using the opportunity to demonstrate that with a bit of imagination and political buy-in, there are new possibilities to respond to the country's housing crisis.

During this process, the DAG team played multiple roles. They delivered training and education programmes for the community, and collected data about the people who lived there and the challenges they experienced. They facilitated the establishment of local leadership structures, made the contacts and supported negotiations between the community and the City. DAG provided technical inputs into the location and design of the new facility, and advocated for policy changes to support the process and the broader inclusive housing approach in the City of Cape Town. Once the new housing site was established, DAG continued to work with the community to problem solve during the relocation. Details of the processes are documented [here](#).

Insights gained

It is important that we engage in partnerships on the basis of principle and an alignment of values. The organisational position and commitments of all parties were made clear and public, and discussed with all those who engaged in the project. Where principles and values do not align, we have to step back when it is obvious that no agreement can be reached. It is important that the accountability relationship extends to all parties engaged in the work. Intermediary organisations have a strong role to play in holding project participants to account for both their actions and the integrity with which they engage.

People are at the centre of change processes. The approach recognised that personal relationships take time to develop and are central to the success of any social justice work. If we work in a way that is truly participatory, we recognise that people's lives are complex, that we have to work to understand their reality, and that we have to be willing to adjust our plans in response to changes in people's personal circumstances and shifts in the context in which we work. We have to be creative, adjusting and adapting our approaches as we learn from process and action.

Facilitating contact between those affected and those who have the authority to make decisions and allocate resources, DAG emphasised direct engagement between officials and community members, stepping out of the way when requested. Ultimately, organisations should be working towards building a 'bilateral relationship of trust' between communities and representatives of the State, where their role is no longer necessary. It is important then, for the sustainability of the projects, that the communities we work with are at the centre of all processes and decision-making so that they are, if necessary, able to carry forward projects without external support.

It is important not to underestimate communities' information needs. Providing them with technical knowledge complements the solutions they derive from their lived experience, and allows them a range of information on which to base their decisions about their own lives. Understanding systems and processes and how these function, and how they limit or enable change is important for sound decision-making. Awareness and education are therefore important components of the organising process.

Supporting decision-making is a process of providing information, discussing options and allowing people to interpret these into their context. Out of this the opportunity to imagine possibilities to resolve issues before proposing solutions becomes possible. This takes time, but the results of this engagement and trust building are invaluable because people can see themselves in the solutions that are implemented. In all of these, process concerns were to be dealt with honestly and directly so that workable solutions to the challenges presented can be found. The value of demonstration can't be overestimated. If alternative solutions to issues are to be adopted, then these have to be proven to be effective. Organisations have to accompany people to the end, making sure that all the challenges related to the model are addressed and that community ownership and control is maintained throughout.

Questions for our practice

- How much of our work truly recognises the need for affected people to be involved in ALL of the decisions that affect their lives? Do we provide them with as full a set of information as they need in order to make informed decisions? Do we trust that the people most affected by the issues can/will make the right decisions for themselves, or does our own worldview predetermine the outcomes of process?
- Do we go far enough - do we invest fully enough – in finding and proving that alternative solutions can be found? Is our commitment to change limited by the availability of funding, or by the interests of actors other than the people we are working with in the development process? Are we, as development workers, working hard enough to not be necessary anymore?
- What is our role and position in relation to the powerful interests at play in much of the social justice work we do? Do we have the courage to step away when processes are not working or when the outcomes of the work we do may cause harm?
- Can we imagine a new and different world in which all people live in dignity? Do we invest enough of our time and creativity in imagining a new and different world in which all people live in dignity?

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