

Inequality and sustainable development: Hearing the voices of ordinary people

How do people in poor communities understand their needs when it comes to sustainability? *Charles Nhemachena and Diana Sanchez Betancourt* were involved in a study that attempts to understand community needs and perceptions around issues of social, economic and environmental sustainability in marginalised communities in urban areas, where the provision of basic services to an increasingly growing population is limited.



Background to the study

In the lead-up to the Rio+20 Summit of the United Nations, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched a global conversation on issues of sustainability and the future we want. This global conversation became an opportunity to look ahead to the world we would like to live in and to share ideas on better ways of doing things. Several organisations and movements around the globe joined hands to be part of this conversation and inform the debate with

voices from the ground on this complex and sometimes abstract issue.

The HSRC joined one of these movements, the Initiative for Equality, in their efforts to coordinate equity and sustainability field hearings to ensure that diverse individuals and communities around the world were able to have their voices heard at the Rio+20 summit. As Deborah Rogers, coordinator of this initiative, noted, 'understanding what people need and want is the most basic prerequisite to intelligent collaborations,

interventions, and assistance and it is relatively easy to discover. Yet so often this step is skipped, as governments impose their agendas, international agencies carry out their mandates, businesses look for profitable relationships, and NGOs rush in to help'

The project, A Global Dialogue on Sustainable Development: Rio+20 Earth Summit, attempts to do just that: to close the gap in the approach to understanding community needs by asking ordinary people what they need and would like to have in

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order to improve their wellbeing and access to basic services. With the financial support of the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa (OSISA) and collaborating with social and environmental justice activists, the HSRC embarked on a preliminary study to learn what people in currently disempowered communities are thinking, so that we can contribute to advising development of more effective and collaborative grassroots strategies for moving towards greater equity, equality and sustainability.

Hearing the voices of the disempowered

These voices of South Africans and African immigrants were gathered through seven focus groups (average of eight persons each) and 82 individual interviews in different urban locations in the Western Cape (Khayelitsha, Cape Town CBD, Knysna township and Suurbraak municipality) and Gauteng province (Diepsloot, Mamelodi and Soweto). These field hearings contributed towards establishing an understanding of what currently disempowered communities need, want and think and provided a glimpse into some of their adaptation strategies.

In the field hearings participants were prompted with a list of potential areas to be addressed and were asked to identify the changes they thought were needed in order to move their community towards sustainability. Common themes which were identified include:

- Meeting basic needs, such as food, health care, education and training
- Access to land for local people to engage in own activities such as food gardens
- Better socio-economic services and improvements in infrastructure (such as

roads, electricity, water, sanitation etc) and investments to promote local economic development and employment

- Improved access to decision-making processes
- Social integration, through better relationships between men and women, between community members, and between groups in society to allow people to work together to solve problems.

Preliminary findings show that despite notable improvements in some areas, such as the position of women compared to the past and improved access to health and education some of the problems (lack of employment, increasing socio-economic inequality and social problems like crime) are worsening in these areas and there is a string of challenges that require government attention and for all relevant parties to play a role.

African immigrants (from the DRC, Rwanda, Congo Brazzaville, Zimbabwe, Angola, Cameroon, Ethiopia and Somalia) expressed similar concerns but these were exacerbated by their experiences of isolation and disempowerment in South Africa. While in their view South Africa offered better access to services such as water, electricity and health than their home countries, they experience difficulty in accessing these resources due to their disadvantaged position in the society. In their view, they have little access to decent jobs and little possibilities to become part of the broader South African community, or move beyond their own individual community or personal networks. They felt their voices were not heard and will never be heard since as foreigners they usually felt like second-class citizens.

Towards a sustainable lifestyle

The findings of the equity and sustainability field hearings are preliminary and a more comprehensive effort needs to be put into place before firm conclusions can be drawn on the circumstances and views of common people across the country. This is seen as the first step in a larger effort to address underlying causes of the difficult circumstances afflicting poor, disempowered, marginalised, and common people across the country.

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As part of the project outputs, some of these voices were compiled in a short video which was shared at various events at the Rio+20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012. The final short video *Sustainable Development, Hearing the African Voices* debated at an HSRC public seminar in Pretoria, Durban and Cape Town in February 2013 also portrayed the adaptation strategies of communities that are taking on the challenge to create a more sustainable lifestyle.

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VOLUME 11 NUMBER ONE MARCH 2013

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