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Distribution Point: Dr. C.A. Odora-Hoppers
 HSRC
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 0001

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Mar 28, 1999

Rural People First: Challenges for the 21st Century

Opening Address to the Free State Sedimosang Rural Development
Initiative

Phillip Sanders Resort - Bloemfontein
29th-31 March

Catherine A. Odora Hoppers
Human Sciences Research Council - Pretoria

Introduction

- The 20th Century is almost over. It has brought to humankind tremendous advancement in terms of technology and various forms of scientific development. It has brought tarmac roads, airplanes, schools, hospitals, and cars.
- But it has left us with scars that are deep, and struggles that we must continue to wage, and to win.
- For rural people, the 20th century has been a heavy one; bringing in dichotomies and classifications among people that has had untold consequences.
- It is during this century that, throughout Africa, the rural became a category different from the urban, and of lesser value than the urban.

From a Crisis of Identity to Overt Exploitation

- ▶ This century has introduced, in the generations that have been born and raised in Africa, a fear of identifying with, and involvement with the rural.
- ▶ Africa's very own "educated" children, its very own future and hope, are today trapped in the urban section of reality.
- ▶ Their contact with the rural consist of brief hurried visits so characteristic of "developmental tourism"¹.
- ▶ In developmental tourism, the urban group visits the rural when the destination is along the tarmac road, or when it is not the rainy season.
- ▶ They come because the rural is part of a "project", or part of some externally determined professional interest.
- ▶ When they come, they target the slightly wealthier of the lot, especially the male ones, or seek well groomed rural show pieces which are already well documented, and document this once more.
- ▶ They are often ignorant about rural poverty, but at the same time, they do not want to know what they do not know, because the less they know, the easier it is to mask that reality.
- ▶ What the eye does not see, Robert Chambers once wrote, the heart does not grieve about².
- ▶ Education (of various sorts), in the schools, in the media, in films, have all brought about a type of conditioning that have turned Africa's offspring into half blind, and often quite irresponsible people, unable to connect with where they come from, and to articulate *that* as their starting point in meeting and dialoguing with others.
- ▶ In many government departments, to be posted to a rural area is equal to a "penal posting", a punishment zone, to which those who have incurred the displeasure of the seniors, are banished.

- ▶ When journalists visit the rural areas, they have to justify to their editors that the visit is worthwhile, or that there is some juicy or succulent news - - often a disaster of some sort - - .
- ▶ Academics, trained to criticize, or argue and find fault, are pre-occupied and immersed as ever, with an evaluative, rather than a listening mind-set.
- ▶ They analyze the communities to pieces, find fault with everything, and then leave it there
- ▶ When the researchers come “down under”, it is to extract information, move it to some urban or overseas metropolitan center for processing and value adding that end up profiting only the looter in question.
- ▶ The processed extraction of course result in rows of Masters degree or PhD holders. But these are people who are not really interested to ever contemplate sharing what they became with the original objects of their research.
- ▶ In most of these instances, the rural people do not really speak at all.
- ▶ In university and academic institutions, courses that are taught about the “rural” is permeated with doom and gloom, and are the most cognitively depressing of all areas of study, consistently portraying rural people as the personification of physical and cognitive deprivation³.
- ▶ Poverty is quickly explained by climate.
- ▶ One famous academic wrote: *“The correlation between monthly temperature and poverty is truly astonishing.... “Almost all poor countries lies between northern and southern temperature zones of 20 °C, and the rich countries outside of it”⁴.*
- ▶ Harrison forgets that it is also this belt that has contains the *one hundred and twenty eight* (128) countries comprising the now infamous “Third World” .

- ▶ These were the countries and peoples conquered, occupied and impoverished by seven (7) countries from Europe.
- ▶ Of the 128 countries, 55 were taken up by the British, 34 by the French, 30 by Spain, 11 by Portugal, 5 by Germany, 7 by the Netherlands, a few others by Italy.
- ▶ The entire production systems of these countries were, by force, 'integrated' into the 'world economy': meaning directed towards serving the interests of the countries of those countries in Europe⁵.
- ▶ These countries were not only plundered, but were relegated to the role of providing the resources and labour required by the colonial countries.
- ▶ It was a transformation that implied lasting social, cultural and spiritual deformation. The internal needs of the Third World were of no concern to the colonizers. The only question was, and still largely is: what contribution could the colonies make to the economic development of the metropolitan powers?
- ▶ Yet the history of the struggles to be free, of rejection of domination by these societies are often omitted from historical records.
- ▶ What remains to guide the thinking or generating knowledge about the "rural" is a framework of arrogance and historical inevitability that quickly consolidates pessimism into complete impotence.

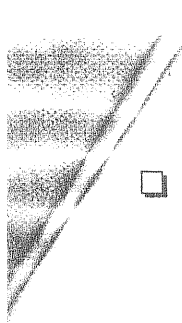
The Problem of the Consciousness Gap

- *The first problem is that of the "consciousness gap"*⁶ between intellectuals who usually provide leadership in times of transition to independence, and the "masses".
- This group has found it difficult to trust the "masses" or give them the authentic credibility that they actually deserve.

- They often find it difficult to engage in either dignified dialogue, or in stimulating people's collective self-inquiry without teaching them through one or another type of training blue print.
- Instead of aiming at creating a sense of dignity and assertion among rural people of their own truth or reality as they perceive it, and thereby to become equals in creating intellectual trends as any other groupings elsewhere in the world, rural people are repeatedly reduced to inferiority laden groups completely insecure about what they actually have.
- Most paradigms of liberation moreover, have been incapable of inviting the people to participate for once in an intellectual search for an answer, and articulate their own vision of the society they want beyond the ballot box democracy⁷.
- For as long as development remains premised on the individualist pursuit of private gains, appealing as it does, to individual acquisition, the needs of the majority of the people may not be fulfilled for sometime to come.

The challenge of building in respect when doing research in rural communities.

- The manner in which research on oppressed or marginalized communities are conducted assumes and asserts the myth of the incapability of the people to participate in the research as equals.
- This humiliates the people and alienates them from their own power of generating knowledge relevant for transforming their environment by their own initiative.
- It is this that makes people wait upon the elite researchers to come and find the facts about them, write about them, and make policy recommendations for outsiders to solve their problems.
- The consequence of this has been the reinforcement of inaction of the people, and a further separation of mental from manual labour.

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- It must be emphasized here, that there is no universality in any science for as long as the entire human race does not constitute a collective for the purpose of scientific knowledge generation

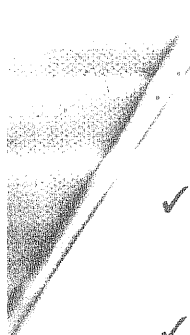
The challenge of mobilizing people's knowledge

- ◆ It can be said that for the oppressed or marginalized groups to be mobilized for purposeful economic and social development, they have to be mobilized, at least initially, for resistance against exploitation that thrives essentially on dominance-dependence relations - - that is to say - - exploitation that relies on the goodwill of the exploiter for the development of the marginalized.
- ◆ One way around this is to see the rise or generation of a methodology of self-reliance-sensitive catalytic action in the rural sector.
- ◆ In human terms, this means a return of the intellectuals to new and composite roles of learners, listeners, and animators in the development of people's praxis.
- ◆ It would also mean active return of Africa's children into facilitators, and openers of windows of legitimation of popular or indigenous knowledge, and ensuring their development into the pool of scientific knowledge.
- ◆ What is often experienced as domination or marginalization by rural communities is not only an issue of economic inequality.
- ◆ It is closely connected with control over the means of *knowledge production*, and especially the social power to determine what is valid or useful knowledge⁸.
- ◆ At the centre of the polarization at global and national levels is the gap between those who have social power over the process of knowledge generation - - and those who haven't.

- ◆ The challenge of consciousness raising brings to the fore the fact that people cannot be liberated by a consciousness that has no link or basis with their own knowledge, culture and spirituality.
- ◆ From this point of view, it is by crediting rural people with the ability to systematize their knowledge, and building their science that we can begin to view the 21st century as one that will inaugurate people-centered and human-centered development.

The challenge of Identifying and Acknowledging “People’s Knowledge”

- ✓ This knowledge is what often appears under the various titles of people’s science, ethno-science, local knowledge, people’s knowledge, or indigenous knowledge.
- ✓ Together, they constitute what is referred to as the *Indigenous knowledge Systems (IKS)*.
- ✓ Ethnoscience has sometimes been used to refer to the method of eliciting, translating, categorizing and interpreting the knowledge system of a particular culture.
- ✓ Indigenous refers to something originating from, and naturally produced in an area.
- ✓ “People’s knowledge” is useful in acknowledging that most of these knowledges are carried by live members of a community or culture, and are rarely written down.
- ✓ Most common, but taken for granted however, are crucial scientific knowledges related to farming practices, indigenous methods of seed conservation, genetic manipulation, animal husbandry etc.
- ✓ Another is the knowledge of land, soils and soil systems.
- ✓ Yet another is in meteorology and climatology.

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- ✓ We cannot forget the health , social and and pharmacological systems... The list can go on and on.
 - ✓ This knowledge range can be categorized as follows:
 - ★ those that have exchange value and which, with support, can be transformed into enterprises or industries.
 - ★ those that perpetuate social, cultural, scientific, philosophical and technological knowledge, which can provide the basis for the recovery of African identity, for the transformation/deepening or expansion of the curriculum in schools and tertiary institutions.
 - ★ those that represent major socio- cultural institutions and organizational systems.
 - ★ those that informed the liberation struggle.
 - ✓ Knowledge of these institutional forms and practices, and of the ethos and principles that undergird them can provide a response to the search for the sustainable guide to African's intellectual, spiritual and social recovery.

The challenge of returning to holism and respect for nature.

- ▶ Any approach to the liberation of any segment of society that is based on a polarized view of social reality (men versus women, majority versus minority, etc) is unreal and self defeating⁹.
- ▶ It is also a reflection of arrogance and insensitivity.
- ▶ When a development paradigm is based on dualism of man against nature, destruction of nature is legitimated and called "productivity", and dehumanization is called progress.

- ▶ The dualism, or separation between man and nature is what helped to remove all ethical restraints against the violation of the sacredness that African societies have associated with nature.
- ▶ Apart from dualism, the privatization of land for revenue displaced women and eroded their traditional land use rights.
- ▶ From then on, fragmentation, uniformity and hegemony rather than holism and equality in diversity took over as the new orthodoxy.
- ▶ In no time at all, the integrity of the organic, interconnected and interdependent systems that bound African societies with nature for centuries and spirituality was being blatantly violated, and the dominance of men over the control of resources was intensified.
- ▶ The ideology of development that was to follow bundled up and confused subsistence living together with material poverty.
- ▶ While in reality, subsistence does not imply a low quality of life, the arrogance of the development model introduced with colonialism made anything that did not resemble the Western way become an anomaly.
- ▶ The distortion to arise from collapsing anything that does not look western as “poor” soon turned into a high pitched rationale to turn everything to a Western conception of reality.
- ▶ Henceforth, throughout the world, man shall exploit without restraint, all aspects of nature, and call this progress.
- ▶ The cultural perception of prudent subsistence living as “poverty” has in turn provided the legitimization for the development process as *removal of poverty*¹⁰, leading to great confusion as to what exactly people need to do in order not to remain poor.
- ▶ One costly consequence of this has been the creation of the illusion that fleeing the countryside and squatting in shacks in townships is part of the removal of poverty.

- ▶ All knowledges that are non-western are not recognized, not taken note of, and even worse, the non-western expert is deprived of both the right of access to knowledge; AND to judging claims made on its behalf¹¹.
- ▶ This systematic silencing must be actively interrupted and reversed if humanity is to survive in the coming millenium.

Towards the 21st Century

- One way around this impasse in generation and ownership of knowledge is to support the development of *Participatory Action Research (PAR)*, as a method and a strategy of joint generation of knowledge between researchers and the researched.
- It is such a method, uniting research and action, that can lead to conscientization.
- The concept of conscientization, originally developed by Freire when refering to the role of literacy, can be applied in development work to encompass *social investigation and analysis by oppressed or marginalized people*.
- The injunction here is to shift the emphasis from what people *do not have*, to motivating society to become engaged in moving forward.
- It is through constructive engagement *that people can show imaginative ways of progressively fulfilling their needs*.
- This is very different from economic achievement *per se*.
- It is about realizing the simple fact that it is only with a liberated mind of the people, which is free to inquire and then conceive and plan what is to be created, can structural change release the creative potentials of the people.

- Liberation of the mind, in this sense, is the primary task both *before* and *after* structural change such as has occurred here in South Africa since 1994.
- It is about realizing that there can be no development *which is endogenous unless the people's pride in themselves as worthy human beings inferior to none is asserted, or if lost, is restored*¹².
- A strategic task in fostering people's self-inquiry is the *recovery of history* by people's collectives
- Another strategic task is to assert rural people as the subject of their own destiny, and to reverse the negative self image that we, couched in distant urban centers, have given to them.
- A third strategic task is to recover and assert the values and cultural elements of the people themselves.
- But the final task is to bring back to the fore, the realization that the human quality of a people is independent of their economic condition. *It can even shine and inspire under the most trying conditions.*

I thank you for giving me this opportunity to share with you my concerns, and wish you a fruitful deliberation.

Pretoria - March 28th 1999

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