**Two villages, four researchers, one inspiring experience**

**2014**

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Four of us who work on a research project – Emerging Voices II (part of ‘Building a progressive network of critical research and public engagement: Towards a democratic post-schooling sector’ (Education Policy Consortium)) set off on a Sunday on a nine hour drive from Port Elizabeth to Port St Johns. Our task: to visit the first of 10 South African ‘Profiles of Possibility’ – groups/organisations/communities that are doing something that can be defined as a ‘transition’, a ‘prefigurative expression’, an ‘intermediary’, a ‘pocket of hope’ in an increasingly hostile world in which millions struggle to survive largely because traditional forms of employment are becoming a thing of the past.

Zizek (2011: 211) extends Vilfredo Pareto’s 80/20 rule when he states:

*The global economy is tending towards a state in which only 20 percent of the workforce will do all the necessary work, so that 80 percent of the population will become basically irrelevant and of no use, potentially unemployed.*

**More on ‘Profiles of Possibility’**

Throughout the world there are numerous movements, spaces, groupings, organisations, ideas, learnings, activities, and ways of doing things differently as opposed to the dominant, oppressive system of global corporate capitalism which favours a few at the expense of the majority. These ‘possibilities’ argue for something new, better, equitable and just. They often do this against all odds – they struggle to survive and constantly bump up against power and domination. And yet, against all of this, they are there – they exist, even if they are marginalised and invisible to many or even to most.

Our research explores these ‘profiles of possibility’, with a specific focus on the *learning* that happens there – learning which may not be confined to a classroom; or to a day, week or month; or may not happen in a traditional way of ‘teacher – expert’ and ‘student – empty vessel’; or may not be prescribed; or may not have formal assessment. Our search is for learning within a group/organisation/community that is connected to the everyday struggles of people within that group. This kind of learning can hopefully point to something new, better and more meaningful in what has come to be termed the ‘post-schooling’ sector (the education/training/development that happens ‘around’ schooling).

Learning that is of interest to us is aptly captured in the following: *For me the most interesting and significant learning occurs informally and incidentally, in people's everyday lives. And some of the most powerful learning occurs as people struggle against oppression, as they struggle to make sense of what is happening to them and to work out ways of doing something about it* (Foley, 1999: 1-2).

Our first ‘profile’, Is’baya, together with the ARC-Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Crops, has worked in the Port St Johns area of the Eastern Cape for 15 years. Is’baya Development Trust was founded in 1998 and was registered as a public benefit trust in 2001. Is’baya believes that in seeking rural development solutions, people should be at the centre of their own development. Is’baya identifies partners and resources, and co-ordinates all activities including assisting with building capacity in communities for the attainment of greater self-reliance. Is’baya has an office in Somerset West, Western Cape, headed by Peter Jones, and a field office in Port St Johns, Eastern Cape, run by the Field Manager - Paul Oliphant.

Is’baya currently works on the Uvuselelo (Integrated Village Renewal Programme) with 55 villages. Uvuselelo is a long-term (5 to 7 years) holistic model that has to do with self-reliance and is being implemented interactively with organised village communities.

Noqhekwana, the first of two villages we visited, is 10km away from town. This is a misleading measure if gauged by the urban experience. The village is roughly 40 minutes from town (on a non-rainy day) owing to the gravel road, pot holes and the mountainous landscape – the latter being a feature telling of the spatial (and other) divide between the rural and its town counterpart. The guesthouse owner (where we stayed) knew very little about the villages or what is being farmed there. She told us that there is ‘*cattle farming, but the youngsters are not interested and are more interested in having cellphones, etc’*.

We experienced something quite different to her description.

**Grappling with the concepts of ‘poverty’ and ‘poor’**

We were all still struck by the ‘wealth and richness’ of the farmers – a pride and dignity within themselves, a collegial and cooperative relationship with their neighbours and, indeed, a stunning richness in the blossoming of their trees and plants. None of us felt that we were in the presence of ‘poverty’ – except for the fact that the farmers are lacking in certain basic rights and necessities, like not having easy access to water and not having enough farming utensils. Besides these vital missing components (and we do *not* wish to minimise their importance at all) - there was no sense of starvation or desperation or helplessness or hopelessness – none of the middle class assumptions or labels of what ‘poverty’ is.

The four of us (all middle class) experienced a tremendous sense of peacefulness, serenity and calmness over the two days. Perhaps for the two researchers who grew up in a similar environment, it felt a bit like home, or for the two of us who did not, it felt a bit like we wished it was. How could we feel envy for people who seemingly have so little when we have so much (or perhaps that is the problem – it is how we define ‘much’)? We are aware of numerous studies showing that as people’s income and consumption rises, their levels of *happiness* don't necessarily rise too (see, amongst other, Schumacher’s ‘Small is beautiful’, 1973).

There is no alienation of work here as many urbanised workers feel being part of a factory line. Instead there is a deep connection to the land and a sense of harmony and balance within and among it. The children, chickens, chicks and dogs sitting and playing side-by-side are testament to this. We visited the villages at the same time as seasonal farmworkers got retrenched in De Doorns, Western Cape.

Lumka Oliphant (Department of Social Development) said: *There's a problem with seasonal workers, where they only get money for a certain period and where they only get food for a certain period. And then they go back to poverty.*

The farmers in Noqhekwana and Qhaka and the other villages grow fruit and vegetables the whole year round and they are working their own land. In this way, they are not part of a capitalist system that can hire and fire at a whim, leaving you ‘working and eating seasonally’.

We were momentarily carried away to some romantic place for two days, and then rudely re-awakened as we drove away from the villages through towns and cities - re-awakened by the pollution, hooting of cars, people scurrying, and litter lining the streets. This jolt back to reality was a good thing as it reminded us to always be very aware that *airbrushing the countryside serves us badly…..to become and remain an idyll, the rural is forgotten, sanitized and shorn of meaning to fit the view from the city’* (Patel 2007: 21).

This ‘little piece of heaven’ in the rural Eastern Cape is a site of struggle and hardship for those who live in it – carrying water up and down a mountain is no easy task and we witnessed a few people doing this, including a child of about 9 or 10 with her head wrapped to cushion it from the heavy bucket.

While the villages, farmers and the work being done there shows us that something else is indeed possible, we should *not* romanticise it – a few examples of hope will not change this world but they do show us that another world *is* possible – it is already emerging. This is an example of agency within struggle.

This example and others like it need to be amplified in order to bring a new world order into being. This requires new thinking, heightened conscientisation, mobilisation, resistance to co-option, and embracing the ethic of social justice. It will be a hard, long struggle against those who care very little (if at all) for real justice, peace and dignity for all.

**What is our role in this?**

What is our role in this struggle? What can we do, as middle class researchers, who research the so-called ‘poor’? Some of the farmers asked us if we can assist with water or with utensils. We said that we cannot, even though we wished we could. We did promise to get ‘word out there’ – to try to do something with the little power we have – our ability to write – to write on behalf of others. We do this remembering the words of Freire (1998: 73): *No one can be in the world, with the world, and with others and maintain a posture of neutrality. I cannot be in the world decontextualized, simply observing life.*

We can listen and we can learn, we can be angry and we can stand in solidarity.

One of the farmers gently scolded us (the ‘University’) for forgetting about rural communities like his - then he said to us: ‘*ukuba nithi niyiyunivesithi nyayabuya niza ezilalini, icacile ukuba iyunivesithi isilibele singabantu basezilalini’ (‘the University is coming back to the rural communities’).*

We end with a reflection and poem. The reflection is written by Sonya and the poem by Olwam – both pieces looking at ‘poverty’:

**Having Enough**

(Sonya Leurquain-Steyn)

A culture of avarice deepens this widening gap between those who have, and those who don’t; it desensitises our recognition of gross inequality and is irrevocably destroying our planet - and yet this insatiable appetite for more grows, seemingly apathetic to the destruction it causes. I sit back and wonder what world we could have if everyone was happy with enough - because there most definitely is enough for everyone: enough food for everyone to be fed, enough land for everyone to have homes. I think of this capitalist system which subliminally feeds our wanton desire for more; a system which thrives on this need for excess and can only ever reproduce this growing gap of inequality; a system which is so engrained within the fabric of our society that we barely notice its effects on our everyday choices until we’re forced to step back and assess the disastrous state of our world. I imagine a world untainted by the greed of capitalism where people are seen as human beings and not as human capital. A world where enough truly is as good as a feast (Mary Poppins’ words oft quoted by Neville Alexander) - a feast that everyone can enjoy.

**Five Days of Hunger**

(Olwam Mnqwazi)

You know it’s bad when there are no hunger-pains anymore.

Your mouth taste like something between metallic and alkali – one is too hungry to tell.

Your face, belly and thighs start to lose fat from the past few days of no food.

Your arms feel sore just where your skin meets the bones.

Your voice grows faint and it becomes harder to shout as energy is depleting.

Today you learn new lessons that help you to last longer in tomorrow’s battle:

Lie flat on your bed and move slowly to preserve the little energy left in your blood;

Be careful not to jump too quickly off the bed because dizziness and weakness will send you to the floor;

The stomach growls digesting the saliva that’s been collecting in your month;

You drink water to stay alive and it will also make your skin look fresh and hydrated.

The human body can take much more beating than three days of starvation.

With two more days to go before any sign of a good meal,

My hope is stirred up knowing I have endured this long.

I realize it’s not hunger but poverty that is my enemy.

Two more days of hunger that I need to withstand.

At this moment I put my pen down to save the little energy left in me.

I lie prostrate, drained on my bed dreaming of a better day.

Thinking of all the good things in my life, I am comforted.

Seeing my future screening on my shut eyes, I am consoled.

Hunger is but for a while then harvest comes.

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