The More Things Change, the More they Stay the Same?

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Abstract In this article, reflecting on the history of the Community Development Resource Association's (CDRA) approach to 'capacity development', the author suggests that in 15 years, very little has changed in the theory and practice of capacity and capacity development. It begins with a short introduction to the historical context out of which CDRA works. A detailed summary from a 1995 article on 'capacity building' is shared with a view to illustrating its relevance to the present. The article goes on to suggest that thinking and engaging with the notion of capacity is itself a reflection of CDRA's organisational capacity. Through another extract, CDRA's approach to capacity development is shared. In conclusion, it is suggested that it is purposeful and thoughtful engagement with one's circumstances that is both a reflection, and generator, of capacity.

1 Introduction

The Community Development Resource Association (CDRA[1]) has been involved in capacity development (organisation development, capacity building, community development, learning organisation) for some 23 years. Much has come and gone – inside of ourselves, and also in the world around us – but when considering this topic, I was reminded of our history, and the adage – 'the more things change, the more they stay the same'.

2 Capacity building in the early 1990s

In the early 1990s, CDRA, like many NGOs worldwide, found itself engulfed in the preoccupation with 'capacity' and 'capacity building'. Emerging, as we were, out of our peculiar context of transitional South Africa, we were equipped with an openness borne of a sheltered existence. 'Capacity?' we wondered. 'Of course we know about that'.

South Africa in the 1980s experienced simultaneous isolation and intense worldwide interest. Solidarity, anti-Apartheid mobilisation, service organisations, Church intervention, development, action and care were all intertwined into a broad-based mass movement. CDRA was founded in this context with a view to contributing focused organisational expertise and thinking into a sometimes chaotic and overly ideological organisational environment. Rooted in the two bases of community organisation and organisation development (OD), CDRA presented an unusual and challenging offering to the times.

While the strategic imperatives[2] of 'contextual scan', 'environmental reading', 'strategy and tactics', 'structure' and 'programme of action' rang true for us and for those we served, we also emphasised the more nuanced invocation to turn within, to delve into questions of purpose, value, biography, aspiration and – even – self.

With the prospect of fundamental change and democracy arriving in South Africa in early 1990 (the twentieth anniversary of which looms large in South Africa today), CDRA, along with thousands of funded organisations, joined the world of 'development', no longer protected from the vagaries of international aid through back-door solidarity funding. And there began an interesting journey of justification.

The roots of our engagement with the notion of 'capacity' go back many years to a time where training was equated with organisational ability. To be sure, the training that emerged out of the Freireian inspired adult education and grassroots community development movements of the

1970s and 1980s was thorough and far-reaching.[3] This training was about intellectual, personal and technical ability in service of an essentially political goal.

As South Africa's transition (and donors) demanded more measurable skill, so training became reduced, abstracted from its organisational and political roots. More to do with personal expertise and competence; less to do with organisational health, functioning and, dare I say – capacity.

In this context, Allan Kaplan wrote an article distinguishing training from organisational capacity, arguing for a more nuanced and grounded view of capacity, one that linked it to an organisation's (or collective's) ability to think and act together (Kaplan 1993). At the time, his insistence on the distinction between training and 'capacity' generated some controversy. Despite South Africa's intensely organisational social and political history, we seemed unable to transition our organisations into the new, unable to imagine how we might carry them along with us. Instead much of their good was left behind as individual competence and technical skill emerged as the new measure of worth.

3 A theory of capacity and capacity 'building'

In early 1994, and in this context, CDRA was asked by Oxfam-Canada to conduct an evaluation of its 'capacity building programme' – an extensive country-wide programme of funding NGOs and CBOs that were particularly focused on issues of urban transformation and development (Kaplan, Msoki and Soal 1994).

This topic was then, and remains now, a difficult one. How could we go in there with abstract and decontextualised measures of 'organisational capacity' when the measures were being generated every day by those very organisations that we had been asked to evaluate? Already organisational confidence and competence was going to ground as the new (external) measures took hold. The very moment in which South Africa's extraordinary capacity for organisation, mobilisation and 'participation' peaked, things began to get fragile and unclear.[4]

We set about doing the evaluation in a way that attempted to see, surface and name what was on the ground. The categories for 'capacity' had to

be generated by the subjects themselves. Our task was to inquire, to see what they had done, and out of that seeing, to help everyone involved – ourselves, the recipients, Oxfam-Canada itself – to grasp what capacity had been developed (or 'built') in practice.

That evaluation provided the basis for a theory of capacity that we published in our 1994/95 Annual Report 'Capacity Building – Myth or Reality?' (CDRA 1995). This theory continues to pervade CDRA's practice, combining as it does 'political', 'community' and '(technical) organisational' concerns.[5]

A summarised account of the 1995 article (from Kaplan 2007) is offered below.

> We have all been talking about capacity building for some years now. We know that the building of organisational and institutional capacity is an essential development intervention towards the strengthening of civil society. Indeed, it is the heart of development practice. Donor agencies, international and indigenous NGOs, and many governments in developing countries recognise the importance of capacity building for development. Yet even while they claim to be practising it, their concepts and practice often remain confused and vague. The greatest area of agreement appears to be that we do not really know what capacity building is.

In quest of a theory

It is interesting to note that, during our evaluation into capacity building, it emerged that community-based organisations (CBOs) whose capacity had been built to some extent were far more articulate about what capacity building is than the NGOs actually doing the capacity building. And the CBOs themselves were only able to point to their experiences, not to present a coherent theory out of those experiences.

Generally, NGOs also tended to refer to discrete experiences and instances when talking of capacity building. While this has proved a vital point of departure in the development of a more coherent picture, it presents us with the major dilemma faced by NGOs: the lack of a capacity building theory severely constrains practice. In fact, it demonstrates a lack of organisational capacity on the part of NGOs.

The research showed clearly that organisational capacity is dependent on individual capacity, and that building individual and organisational capacity follows the same line of development. What emerged from the interviews were identifiable elements of organisational capacity and, broadly speaking, a sequence in the way they are acquired.

A conceptual framework
The first requirement for an organisation with capacity, the 'prerequisite' on which all other capacity is built, is the development of a conceptual framework which reflects the organisation's understanding of the world. This is a coherent frame of reference, a set of concepts which allows the organisation to make sense of the world around it, to locate itself within that world, and to make decisions in relation to it. This framework is not a particular ideology or theory, it is not necessarily correct, and it is not impervious to critique and change. It is not a precious, fragile thing, but a robust attempt to keep pace conceptually with the (organisational and contextual) developments and challenges facing the organisation. The organisation which does not have a competent working understanding of its world can be said to be incapacitated, regardless of how many other skills and competencies it may have.

Organisational 'attitude'
The second requirement concerns organisational 'attitude'. An organisation needs to build its confidence to act in and on the world in a way that it believes can be effective and have an impact. Put another way, it has to shift from 'playing the victim' to exerting some control, to believing in its own capacity to affect its circumstances. Another aspect of 'attitude' is accepting responsibility for the social and physical conditions 'out there', in spite of whatever the organisation faces in the world. This implies a shift from demand and protest politics to a more inclusive acceptance of the responsibilities which go with the recognition of human rights.

Whatever the history of oppression, marginalisation or simply nasty circumstances which an individual or organisation has had to suffer, these 'attitudes' are the basis for effective action in the world. This is not a question of morality, of fairness or justice; it is simply the way things work. With clarity of understanding and a sense of confidence and responsibility comes the possibility of developing organisational vision and strategy. As we were told during the interviews, understanding and responsibility leads to a sense of purpose in which the organisation does not lurch from one problem to the next, but manages to plan and implement a programme of action, and is able to adapt the programme in a rational and considered manner.

Organisational structure
Although these requirements are not gained entirely sequentially, we may say that once organisational aims and strategy are clear it becomes possible to structure the organisation in such a way that roles and functions are clearly defined and differentiated; lines of communication and accountability untangled, and decision-making procedures transparent and functional. Or, 'form follows function' – if one tries to do this the other way around the organisation becomes incapacitated.

Acquisition of skills
The next step in the march towards organisational capacity, in terms of priority and sequence, is the growth and extension of individual skills, abilities and competencies – the traditional terrain of training courses. Of course skills also feature earlier; they can, in and of themselves, generate confidence and a sense of control. Development cannot be viewed simplistically; these phases overlap. Yet what emerges clearly from our research is that there is a sequence, a hierarchy, an order. Unless organisational capacity has been developed sufficiently to harness training and acquisition of new skills, training courses do not 'take', and skills do not adhere. The organisation which does not know where it is going and why; which has a poorly developed sense of responsibility for itself; and which is inadequately structured, cannot make use of training courses and skills acquisition.

Material resources
Finally, an organisation needs material resources: finances, equipment, office space, and so on. Without an appropriate level of these, the organisation will always remain, in an important sense, incapacitated.

The elements of organisational capacity identified here and the sequence in which they come about was confirmed by CBOs whose capacity had been

developed through NGO intervention, as well as by NGOs responding to questions about the effectiveness of CDRA's interventions. This accords with organisational theory and it seems to make common sense. Yet it is clear that the order cannot be regarded as a simple sequence. Capacity building is part of a developmental process, and organisations repeat phases at different stages of their drive towards capacity.

Recurring phases at different stages

A small, new NGO has a different level of impact and 'sophistication' from a large NGO which is established and effective. The larger NGO has more need of 'sophisticated organisational conditions' because development and growth in capacity implies greater sophistication of organisational processes, functions and structures. While the new NGO will need clarity of vision, it may not yet have the problems which often accompany organisational vision building activities within the older NGO. The needs of individual staff members in terms of skills – and therefore training courses – will differ at different stages of the organisation's life, as will material resource constraints and assets. Similarly, with respect to structure, organisations will have different needs at different stages of their lives. At times, an increasingly complex structure is called for; at other times 'restructuring' is required.

The basic order in which capacity building occurs is: conceptual framework first; appropriate organisational attitudes leading to vision and strategy; followed by structure (organisational form), which in turn is given content and energy through skilled individuals. The whole is then supported through adequate resourcing. Needs change with respect to all these elements as the organisation develops, but the central point is this: intervention or work on any one of these elements will not prove effective unless sufficient work has been done on the preceding elements in the hierarchy.

It does not help to train individuals when organisational vision is unclear, organisational culture is unhelpful and structure is confusing or obtuse. It does not help to secure resources when the organisation is not equipped to carry out its tasks. It does not help to develop information management systems when the basic organisational attitude is one which rejects learning through monitoring and evaluation in favour of frantic activity. In terms of the hierarchy and sequence of capacity building steps explored here, interventions can only work if they address the problem at an appropriate level for a particular situation.

Demand for capacity building services

Effective capacity building interventions must address the unique needs of an organisation in its particular stage of development at that specific time. This means that the service organisation must be capable of close observation in the field and of being able to provide a nuanced and differentiated response to the needs of the (client) organisation at a particular time. Put another way, it must have a range of capacities which it can employ in differentiated strategies. The most important thing we learn here is that there is no single way to build organisational capacity. And this in face of the fact that many organisations are in search of the single intervention methodology, rather than an adequate understanding of capacity itself.

Patently, if the presence of a conceptual framework is part of the development of an organisation's capacity, then many donors, NGOs and governmental services are severely incapacitated. Their activities do not take place within a theoretical understanding which would lend coherence and continuity to their efforts, as well as enable practitioners to reflect on, and learn from, their activities in structured ways. This is what would enable them to modify and improve both the theory and the practice. Most of us are incapacitated in this sense. How can we then 'teach others to fish'? It is high time that we paid our discipline a little more respect by taking the time to think it through.

Implications for practice

The rudiments of theory which have been described here seem to make perfect sense. Indeed, they accord closely with the practice of organisation development itself. We wondered whether the fact that practitioners appear to remain oblivious to such theory is an avoidance mechanism, because the implications bear radical consequences for practice.

There is no single way to build organisational capacity

There is no single capacity building response or intervention which is right for all times, phases, organisations or contexts. This may appear

obvious, but it takes on profound implications for capacity builders when considered against a background in which attempts by government, donors and even some large NGOs to devise and implement mass-based capacity building formulae are the order of the day. Of course, the alternative to formula approaches is not to continue in the unsystematic and intuitive way in which much NGO capacity building work presently happens. On the contrary, all our knowledge about organisational capacity building demands that capacity builders are able either to supply, or arrange and coordinate the supply of a range of different interventions. Capacity builders need the ability to observe accurately, to interpret their observations intelligently and impersonally and then to deliver the appropriate intervention at the appropriate time.

There is no end to capacity building

There appears to be a prevailing assumption that, if we could arrange for the correct quantifiable inputs to be inserted into organisations, then certain pre-determined outputs would occur, and the organisation would be 'capacitated'. Clearly nothing could be further from the truth. Inputs must be determined by context, and their efficacy is further dependent on the competence of the intervening agency. There is no straight line between input and output, between cause and effect. Output is the result of a multiple range of factors and, even more to the point, it is naive to imagine that any organisation is ever finally capacitated.

Capacity building takes time and money

The pre-packaged (usually training) programme is at best a paltry response to the intricacies of capacity building, but it is by far the most ubiquitous response. No package can answer an organisation's development needs, except in part, and then only when it is presented at the appropriate time within a wider, more systemic approach. This suggests the very concept of 'cost-effectiveness' needs to be reconsidered. Short-term responses will not satisfy long-term requirements. The question arises as to whether donors and NGOs operating within the framework of time-bound projects and products are really concerned with development at all. Perhaps these organisations are more concerned with the husbanding of their own resources than they are with the genuine facilitation of capacity building in others.

Capacity building is marked by shifts in relationships and strategies

All too often, relationships between capacity builders and their client organisations come to an end or decline at the point at which they should be changing. This happens because they cannot find the way of shifting their relationship or the strategies which inform the relationship. It is often the practitioner who fails to make the change. This may be due to the capacity builder's own insecurities, to limitations in strategic versatility or even to the (unconscious) development of co-dependency. Whatever the cause, it is at these times that the practitioner becomes the greatest stumbling block to the client's development. There is abundant evidence that programmes and assumptions are thrust upon recipient organisations in spite of, rather than as a response to, their real needs.

Capacity builders must give attention to their own development

In order to determine, embark on and shift strategies and approaches, practitioners need to pay close attention to the process and understand what they are seeing. If capacity building occurs through the development of long-term relationships, which are marked by shifts in strategies and attitudes, those wishing to build capacity need to be continually observing, reflecting on, changing and improving, those relationships. The marked absence of self-evaluation in NGO and donor practice does not bode well in this regard.

Practical consequences

If these are some implications flowing out of the theory, what are the practical consequences for capacity builders? We believe the consequences are relatively radical. We also contend, however, that there is no way out.

Critical self-reflection

In order for a capacity building organisation to maintain the required level of responsiveness and strategic clarity, it is necessary that it constantly engages in critical self-reflection, learning and strategising.

Letting go

A willingness to relinquish control, to let go, is necessary if the capacity builder is to be open to the client organisation changing.

In NGOs, we often find that conceptual frameworks, reasoned strategies and action-learning processes are conspicuous by their absence. A form of *ad hoc* intuition often takes their place – either this, or hide-bound, formula-driven activities which do not respond to their changing context. Further, fieldwork – the heart of capacity building – is often relegated to marginal status in the organisation. The ability to 'let go'... appears particularly difficult for NGOs. Management practices are often not geared to strategies in which outputs do not relate easily and linearly to inputs, and where, therefore, a form of 'disciplined flexibility' is required.

Donor agencies
So far as donors themselves are concerned... it appears from the behaviour of many that capacity building, and even development itself, is not their primary intention... donors need to engage in (self-reflective) practices themselves in terms of their own organisational needs as capacity builders. Yet the honest donor will admit how little this is practiced, how little responsiveness there is, how little real listening, and how many preconceived programmes and methods are foisted on the South. Some of these are in response to the most superficial fashions prevalent at the time, some of them to political pressures which are of Northern, rather than Southern origin... If donors cannot respond to what is needed with considered flexibility and openness, then they should avoid the straw allegiance to the concept of capacity building, and even development itself, for it can only be regarded as posturing.

4 Looking back, looking at now
What strikes me, on re-reading this article, is how familiar and contemporary it is, despite it having been written 15 years ago. If anything, the difficulties described above have only got worse. For many in development, including CDRA, our understanding of 'donors' and the exacting frameworks within which they work has become more sophisticated.

Many NGOs remain bewildered, working as they do between the poles of simple technical implementation, on the one hand, and making the world a better place, on the other. And when we eventually manage to fight our way through the layers of bureaucracy and compliance, we often, still, find 'CBOs' – people's organisations, civil society – getting on with it. Acting out of an intuitive and very material 'needs-based' knowing of what is right.

What CDRA then called 'conceptual understanding' carries real currency now as 'theory of change'. Certainly there have been huge advances in social theory in the last 15 years and we are only beginning to experience the potential impact that complexity thinking could have on policy and ultimately practice in our world. There is no doubt that our ability to express what we know intuitively to be true has expanded. The language of strategy and organisation was strong in the 1980s and 1990s – now we have process and emergence – and all of this has enriched how we see things, if not do things.[6]

One of the interesting features of this old article is that it attempts to describe the process of change, of movement, and how that very movement generates requirements for practitioners and supporting organisations; how it generates the next set of conditions that must be seen and worked with (and cannot necessarily be anticipated from the start).

This view of development was to be elaborated on in subsequent CDRA work (Kaplan 2007), and now also finds its place in contemporary thinking about the complex, fluid and inter-connected nature of social reality, and what that requires of us seeking to bring about change.[7]

However, what was a 'hard' point then, remains true today – this 'theory of change' is antithetical to the view that sees development as delivery on objectives, rather than as a process over time. It is antithetical to the view that sees change in terms of simple causal relationships between actions, rather than complex mutually reinforcing relationships among people and systems. All of the words that are thrown at this debate (including mine here) serve to confuse things further. It becomes abstract, 'academic', ideological, whereas in fact it is intensely practical, the material consequences of which we all live with every day (not least the hapless 'beneficiaries' of short-term delivery projects).

When CDRA wrote about 'attitude' 15 years ago, I now see resonance with current pressing discussions about agency and leadership, about

horizontal organising and association. Sadly now, as then, our ability to claim purpose – and to choose our stance in relation to the world – is diminished through the framing of development as something neutral and normative. As if things will change, and develop, if we all just follow a given path and acquire the right skills to follow the path *better*.

It is perhaps in the field of organisational structure, that the things we were saying then have least connection to today, and most relevance as a result.

Development is pursued or, more precisely, development goals are implemented, via projects and programmes. These are elaborate matrices of activity and output, and little regard is given to the organisational integrity that should rightly be there if any of this is to stand a chance of success. Perhaps, in removing the 'fat' from development, we have lost the heart. It leaves me wondering what 'capacity' we can rightly target as the recipient of our attentions. Between the abstract notion of 'community' and even 'programme' capacity and the very concrete world of individual skill, we seem to have lost the middle – we have lost organisation.

Using the terms of the above article, in order to have an organisational structure, we need to have organisations that can safely and justifiably anticipate a life into the future. And this is not given to any of us working in this field. Instead, we see now a preoccupation with skills, tools, methods – all of which are valid, but without a strong holding context of sustainable organisation, doomed to small scale impact at best.

5 CDRA's capacity and capacity development
Looked at from the point of view of now, I am struck by how the article is itself an expression of capacity – of CDRA's capacity at the time and, given that the organisation has continued to grow and produce, an expression of enduring capacity. It is clear that it is written out of an organisational context that is thoughtful, engaging, purposeful and able to act on its intentions.

So how has CDRA sustained its capacity over the years?

Much has been said about our homeweeks – regular gatherings of staff in which the

organisational business of learning, strategising, accounting, managing and bonding is accomplished. Consistent with our times, there has been fascination with the form of homeweek: we meet for a whole week almost every month, and of course the quantity of time spent is a great conversation piece arousing envy, derision and respect in equal measure.

There is also an interest in our methods. How do we sustain participation? Grow new practitioners? Account to one another in practice? Generate data? And then the harder question – how is it that this particular constellation of (ever changing) activities, in this (enduring) form manages to sustain the organisation and its impressive 'output'? We can *see* the agenda, the space marked out on the calendar, the people present – even the outcomes of their activities, but this alone is not sufficient to account for CDRA's capacity development.

In an attempt to identify the elements underlying the particular form of our approach to learning, I identified five features (Soal 2009).[8] These are:

1 **Space** – and the determination to make space, hold it and use that space. Not all organisations and practices need a week per month. Many organisations meet for a few days every quarter, or perhaps a day each month. The point is that learning only happens with dedicated space. It is a distinct activity in its own right.

2 The second element is **rhythm**. Learning is best done when there is experience to learn from; and experience is constantly changing and accumulating, so learning should be continuous too – a steady presence that keeps pace conceptually with the ongoing emergence of that same practice.

3 Like creating any new culture and discipline; practice, persistence and adaptation is needed. And to get through the early stages, especially, a **champion** is needed. Responsibility for ensuring that learning happens cannot be delegated to people who do not have the authority to make it happen. These processes demand huge resource investment, with important strategic and operational implications. If the leader is not behind them, they are unlikely to work.

4 The fourth element is **approach**; a clear way of working with learning. For us, the primary value is on learning from experience, collectively. This means rendering that experience transparent. The 'inputs' that this requires are also the 'outputs' – trust, confidentiality, warmth, respect, listening, suspending judgement. And to work meaningfully with these qualities requires a rigour in method, sometimes belied by the ease and informality of our meetings. We use multiple methods in our internal processes, and they also have multiple purposes. In CDRA, peer supervision, strategising, accountability, monitoring, reporting and team building all happen through our learning processes. The trust and mutual understanding of the learning processes generates a robustness that carries into other meetings, where more direction, discrimination and judgement are required. It seems that business is far easier done when the relationships and the values between people are clear.

5 Finally, there is the shared value of **collegiality**. Our sense of accomplishment or failure comes not from one another, but from our sense of the extent to which what we do is in keeping with the requirements of the practice we are also trying to build. Our colleagues mediate our relationship to that practice, but they do not control it. When we are learning together in our homeweeks, we are building that practice.

Reading over this, I wonder if there isn't something missing, something not revealed in this account? In order to work consciously, deliberately on one's capacity, there has to be an intention, a commitment to doing just that. In order to preserve space, hold a rhythm, champion a process, develop an approach and maintain collegiality, there has to be an understanding that this is a worthwhile thing to do, an attitude of commitment to pursuing it and only then a form and method that best supports it. Behind the form and method lies conscious intent and action.

In CDRA, we are fortunate to have such a commitment so deeply embedded in our identity that we are not always conscious of it. We also have (like so many features of 'capacity') features

that are both outcomes of previous attempts at developing capacity as well as contributors to future capacity, a 'virtuous spiral'.[9]

These include the fact that we are stabilised by staff of a certain age with a common experience (despite our overt differences of race, class, gender) of living through Apartheid, the struggle against Apartheid and subsequent transition to democracy.

We have also been fortunate to have strong leadership, in the form of individuals, in our Board and also dispersed throughout the organisation in such a way that initiative and personal responsibility are encouraged and rewarded. This is not just in behaviours of leadership, but also in content. Despite massive attention to conscious 'capacity development', to reflection and to learning, CDRA is primarily a purpose-driven organisation, not a simple technical service provider. This gives us the basis from which to make strategic, sometimes risky decisions, and to stand by these.

6 Conclusion
That combination of conceptual framework and 'attitude' described in the article above is present in CDRA's identity today. It is essentially a political reading of the world and what is required in order to contribute to changing it. And it is in the very act of reading and committing to a course of action that our capacity continues to develop.

Put another way, we develop our capacity by exercising it. Left un-exercised, that capacity immediately begins to wither (a case of use it or lose it, it cannot be banked).

Further, our capacity develops in a collective or relational context. Without organisational life, there is little 'capacity' to develop. Thereafter, form, method, tool, and skill come into play, but it is strictly speaking, in that order. Without purpose (without politics), without leadership and without organisation, no amount of the other develops capacity.[10]

It seems to me that the process of change (capacity development being one such example) does not change. And this very brief reflection on CDRA's attempts to theorise the process bears that out.

However, I do not think that our ongoing attempts to theorise change are futile. Indeed they are evidence of life, of an awakeness and real engagement – and in that sense, of capacity itself. Perhaps 'capacity development' lies less in the perfection of the definitions that we come to, and more in the act of striving for that definition. If that is so, then I am left asking how, in our current context, do we support development of *that* capacity – to engage and act intentionally in our world?

Notes

* I am very grateful to Allan Kaplan and Peter Clarke for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

1 CDRA is a centre for organisational innovation and developmental practice. We value people's ability to organise, and so shape the world. We foster and promote innovative organisational forms and practices that seek to transform power towards a just world characterised by freedom, inclusion and sufficiency. See our website: www.cdra.org.za (accessed 29 March 2010).

2 Even before the language and logic of strategic planning entered our discourse (as aid recipients), South African organisational life was permeated by these terms, drawn as they were from the theory and practice of community organisation and political mobilisation. For example, Lenin's 'What is to be done?' was a favourite and essential standard in the many reading groups that were a part of the extensive organisational web that characterised South African life in the 1980s.

3 Anne Hope and Sally Timmel's *Training for Transformation* (1984) was an essential guide for community activists of the time.

4 I remember a meeting of educational support NGOs in which a returning exile who was well-versed in the machinations of international funding admonished us all to 'get your act together. Things are changing and you are going to have to keep up, or lose out'. It was as if all we had achieved through organisation was mere child's play. The real world had arrived.

5 It also provided us with concrete experience in an inductive approach to doing research and evaluation. Needless to say, this method is entirely at odds with an objective-oriented/results-based approach to evaluation.

6 There are however, some notable practitioners, for example Margaret Wheatley (2002), Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (2007), who have expanded how we see organisation and also developed accessible approaches to engaging systemically.

7 A great deal of new thinking about change is happening in the field of evaluation as practitioners are challenged to provide credible accounts of the thinking behind their interventions as well as the results of those interventions. Patricia Rogers (2008) and Michael Quinn Patton (1994) are important thinkers in this regard, drawing attention to the role of theory (and thoughtfulness) in both planning and evaluation.

8 This article was written for Capacity.Org. It is a shortened version of a keynote address previously given to the Australasian Evaluation Society (Soal 2007).

9 Peter Senge's (1990) view of change as a dynamic process of mutually reinforcing interactions which can either go in a positive direction – the virtuous spiral – or in a negative direction – the vicious circle.

10 These conclusions find much resonance with Peter Morgan's work on defining capacity (Morgan 2006). His definition and descriptions of capacity as potential, and also as relational, or systemic are particularly illuminating.

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