

Two villages, one inspiring experience

Four researchers working on post-schooling go on field research to find out what is happening in post-schooling in the Eastern Cape and they write about communities that are innovative in building alternatives. **Britt Baatjes, Sonya Leurquain-Steyn, Olwam Mnqwazi and Khanyisile Ngalo** write on what inspired them about the communities of Is'baya.

Setting off one Sunday on a nine-hour drive from Port Elizabeth to Port St Johns, we were working on a research project as the Education Policy Consortium (EPC) and our task was to visit the first of 10 South African 'Profiles of Possibility'. These groups/organisations/communities were doing something that could be defined as a 'transition', a 'prefigurative expression', an 'intermediary', and 'pocket of hope' in an increasingly hostile world in which millions struggle to survive largely because traditional forms of employment were becoming a thing of the past. Zizek extends Vilfredo Pareto's 80/20 rule when he states: 'The global economy is tending towards a state in which only 20% of the workforce will do all the necessary work, so that 80% of the population will become basically irrelevant and of no use, potentially unemployed.'

This was the Emerging Voices (EV2) – part of 'Building a progressive network of critical research and public engagement: Towards a democratic post-schooling sector'.

PROFILES OF POSSIBILITY

Throughout the world there are numerous movements, spaces, groupings, organisations, ideas, learnings, activities, and ways of doing things differently – against 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. 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 explored 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

was 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 words by Foley. '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.'

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. They currently work on the Uvuselelo (Integrated Village Renewal Programme) with



Is'baya communities produce fresh fruit: Bellam is one of the farmers.

55 villages. Uvuselelo is a long-term (five to seven 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 rural and urban. The guesthouse owner (where we stayed) knew very little about the villages or what is being farmed there. She told us 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 ‘POVERTY’ AND ‘POOR’

We were 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’), and we acknowledge that assets within a livelihoods framework focus on what people have (their strengths) – and build on that capital – rather than seeing people as passive victims – and concerns about the inadequacies of traditional measurements of poverty based on income or consumption.

Despite knowing this, 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 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 implements. 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’)?

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 farm workers got re-trenched in De Doorns, Western Cape. Lumka Oliphant from the 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 whim, leaving you ‘working and eating seasonally’.

AGENCY ROOTED IN STRUGGLE

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. According to Patel, 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, sanitised and shorn of meaning to fit the view from the city’.

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 10-year-old with her head wrapped to cushion 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 for real justice, peace and dignity for all.



OUR ROLE

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 implements. 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 did this remembering the words of Freire:

'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 - as he said to us: 'ukuba nithi niyunivesithi nyayabuya niza ezilalini, icacile ukuba iyunivesithi isilibele singabantu basezilalini' ('the university is coming back to the rural communities').

We end with reflection poems by Sonya and Olwam on 'poverty'. ¹⁸

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Having enough

Sonya Leurquain-Steyn

A culture of avarice deepens this widening gap
Between those who have and those who don't
Desensitises our recognition of gross inequality
Irrevocably destroying our planet
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
Enough land for everyone to have homes

It's the capitalist system which subliminally feeds our wanton desire for more
System which thrives on this need for excess
Can only ever reproduce this growing gap of inequality
System so ingrained within the fabric of our society
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
Not as human capital
A world where enough truly is as good as a feast
Said Mary Poppins' quoted by Neville Alexander
A feast that everyone can enjoy



Fruit is abundant in Is'baya.

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
 Arms feel sore just where your skin meets the bones
 Voice grows faint and it becomes harder to shout as energy is depleting

Today you learn new lessons that help you 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
 Stomach growls digesting the saliva that's been collecting in your month
 You drink water to stay alive
 It will also make your skin look fresh and hydrated

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 realise 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