SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL STRANDS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

by Eve Annecke and Pierre Roux

"What hope is there for individual reality or authenticity when the forces of violence and orthodoxy, the earthly powers of guns and bombs and manipulated public opinion make it impossible for us to be authentic and fulfilled human beings?

The only hope is in the creation of alternative values, alternative realities. The only hope is in daring to redream one's place in the world – a beautiful act of imagination, and a sustained act of self-becoming. Which is to say that in some way or another we breach and confound the accepted frontiers of things."

Ben Okri, A Way of Being Free, 1989

SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL PARTICIPATION

THE CONTEXT

A socioecological approach to sustainable neighbourhoods embeds all human activity within the eco-system of which it is part, recognising its limits and constraints. It seems the fabric that knits together individuals, communities, nature and sustainable resource use is intangible, uncertain and ambiguous. While

the challenges, contradictions and paradoxes within sustainable development are frequently stark and conflictual, it is also within these tensions that possibilities arise for 'doing things differently'. This chapter will attempt to provide pointers and various approaches to socio-ecological development within sustainable neighbourhoods. These approaches can serve as forms of scaffolding which can bridge the gap between policy, current practice and the goal of sustainable living and livelihoods. This we intend to do firstly through key aspects of enabling capabilities within multiple participants in neighbourhoods; and, secondly by highlighting South African stories of sustainability in practice.

What is proposed is that learning is determined by context. Deeply embedded practice may demonstrate possibilities in one context that are different in another. A way of being that rests in not-knowing may well be better grounded in listening, learning, making connections and stitching together solutions combining skills, knowledge and wisdom of officials, communities, professionals and technologies. While one-size-fits-all approaches are understandable in their attempt to standardize learning and 'take it to scale', these approaches too frequently ignore complexities, provide simplistic and mechanistic solutions which deny possibilities for a local home-brew that creatively works with potentialities of specific contexts.

The importance of the role of the public sector is critical in designing and building sustainable neighbourhood settlements. It is well recognised that the paradigm of development emphasising financial investment or growth per individual has shifted. Indeed, South Africa's own proclamations of 'a developmental state' are moving encouragingly towards a more appropriate paradigm. Amartya Sen and Peter Evans argue for 'development as freedom.' Evans (2002) quotes Sen as follows: "Development as Freedom's basic proposition is that we should evaluate development in terms of "the expansion of the 'capabilities' of people to lead the kind of lives they value—and have reason to value" (Evans. 2002) which is Sen's definition of freedom.

Unlike increases in income, the expansion of people's "capabilities" depends both on the elimination of oppression and on the provision of facilities like basic education, health care, and social safety nets. Basic education, health care, and women's rights are themselves constitutive of development. Growth in real output per head is also likely to expand people's capabilities, especially at lower levels of income, but it cannot be considered, in itself, the ultimate yardstick of development or well-being. (Evans. 2002)

Evans continues by pointing out: "The upshot of Sen's argument … implies that choices about those allocations and growth strategies must be "democratic," not just in the "thin" sense of having leadership succession determined by a regular electoral process, but in the "thick" sense of messy and continuous involvement of the citizenry in the setting of economic priorities. And, this democratic imperative does not flow from the fact that "democracy is also a good thing." It flows from the fact that it is not possible to evaluate economic outputs without such full-fledged discussion and exchange." (Evans. 2002)

In continuing to grapple with Sen's proposition, Evans makes the point that Sen's work is still in the liberal tradition of focusing on individuals and their relationship with a social context. Evans takes this further by making collectives and collective approaches the bridge between the two: "In practice, my ability to choose

the life I have reason to value often hangs on the possibility of my acting together with others who have reason to value similar things. Individual capabilities depend on collective capabilities." In fact, as Sen's own formulations about the importance of "public discussion and interchange" imply, the capability of choosing itself may be, in essence, a collective rather than an individual capability." (Evans. 2002)

SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL PARTICIPATION

THE PRACTICE

Beginning with what is, what exists and, in particular, individuals and small groups already demonstrating the will to take responsibility for change, we have chosen several multi-nodal, often parallel, processes that seem most helpful in building thick networks of socio-ecological capabilities. These are: continuous social conversations, alliance and partnership building; appreciative inquiry; accredited capacity building in community development practice; and the people's housing process. It is recognised that there are other processes (like micro-credit clubs linked to housing) and definitions of processes that are not explored in this chapter. It is also recognised that many of the case studies listed below could fall within more than one category.

Continuous social conversations, alliance and partnership building

The capacity of officials to build capabilities in continuous social conversations, alliance and partnership building, in formal and informal ways, within enabling policy frameworks appears to be one of the keys to successful implementation of existing policies within sustainable neighbourhood design. Officials who are able to play an active role in participating with communities through providing deep knowledge of the planning laws and processes; active participation in conversations that co-create solutions within legal limits and constraints; making connections between various participants in local spaces that generate new energy; actively seek ways of making possible creative innovations within accountable and ethical terms of engagement between community, private and public sector partnerships contribute in major ways to building spaces of possibility.

Sakhasonke Village
by Pierre Roux

The medium density multi-storey 'pedestrianised' Sakhasonke (Xhosa for 'We built together') Village some 5km from Nelson Mandela Bay's Central Business District constitutes an innovative best practice model in delivery of a high-quality environment for poor people. This fully government-subsidised housing project developed by General Motors Foundation in partnership with the Urban Services Group, the Department of Housing and Local Government and Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality won the South African Housing Foundation's 2006 award for the top national housing project and the prestigious Impumelelo Platinum Award in 2007.

Sakhasonke Village demonstrates that densification is a strong instrument for city reintegration and sustainable human settlements

Photo: Pierre Roux, 2007

The village design theme successfully fused the concepts of density and community. Lance Del Monte, who planned and designed Sakhasonke explained, " Community issues had to be incorporated with the design, as close living conditions sometimes result in social friction. Great emphasis was therefore placed on the spatial development and the 'feel' of the complex to create a safe and 'open' atmosphere. Elevated surveillance from the double-story buildings creates a safe atmosphere where people can relax in their own defendable space. The atmosphere was further enhanced by natural symmetry in the layout of the village as well as the overall cubic structure of the buildings" (Kotze. 2007).

Community participation and buy-in by the community was central to the ultimate success of the project. People living in South African townships and residents from informal settlement areas have no experience of medium-density suburban environments and would typically think of multi-story housing in terms of the legacy of the 'single-quarters' hostels constructed in the apartheid era to accommodate migrants on the mines in Gauteng or in relation to the infamous gangland tenement blocks on the Cape Flats.

In order to address this resistance, strong emphasis was placed on a continuous participation process and community programmes that were implemented to promote social cohesion and sustainable

livelihoods. The Impumelelo annual magazine, Innovations Award Trust Winners 2006/7 (Impumelelo. 2007) commented that:

"As a project, it successfully combined engineering with social development, creating one of the definitive low density housing areas, where community buy-in became central to the development of the area."

Local residents were consulted throughout the process and were actively involved in the planning and construction. Although initially designed by Metroplan Town and Regional Planners as a pilot to demonstrate the advantages of medium-density housing in the inner city, would-be beneficiaries soon bought into the village concept and became involved at a level of 'functional participation' and as such, ownership passed on to the beneficiaries.

The residents of Walmer township were notified of the development by way of flyers and a series of general meetings. A 'showhouse' was built in 2002. Following a positive response to the showhouse, the Urban Services Group (USG), a local housing and urban development NGO, facilitated various workshops at which the concept was carefully explained using a 'dolls house' and models of the units and overall planned development. Floor plans were discussed and house and plot sizes physically scaled at these workshops.

Clive Felix, Director of USG patiently explaining the complex to would-be home-owners.

Photo: Metroplan files

Various aspects associated with home-ownership were also discussed. Felix explained the importance of institutions to help previous shack dwellers realise the responsibilities of homeownership to the Impumelelo project evaluator:

"The majority of the people have previously lived in shacks for up to forty years where they never had the financial responsibilities of maintenance of a formal house and paying for consumer charges. Attitudes must change and that takes time and is a continuous process which needs to be supported and managed. A holistic approach is necessary and the social element should be recognized and funded by the provincial government as part of the housing process." (Sakhasonke. 2005).

Shakhasonke surrounded by informal settlements.

Photo: Pierre Roux

An elected Residents' Committee co-ordinates different working groups to contribute to the long-term sustainability of the project. House rules have been adopted which prohibit shebeens, erection of backyard shacks and rentals. Rules are rigorously enforced. Some groups manage a garden; others an HIV/Aids home care; another group manages the Women's Forum; patrols formed a Neighbourhood Watch and from the community centre a pre-school and crèche are operated. A few unemployed residents run a recycling and sewing business.

Developmental dialogue - Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a tool of social construction that is used internationally. It provides a framework or an approach for a co-evolutionary search for the best in individuals, organisations and communities within an eco-system, and engages them in its transformation and development. Drawing on stories of success, it is a process that co-evolves possible futures that build on what is doing well, and is thus appreciated in a particular context.

"Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It centrally involves the mobilization of inquiry through the crafting of the "unconditional positive question," often-involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people." (Cooperrider & Whitney. 2005).

AI is a particular way of asking questions collaboratively that focuses on what is working well in a particular context, not on its problems. It is used to generate change in communities, cities, local authorities, NPO's, CBO's, education institutions, etc… across many diverse and large groups of people.

It envisages futures that nurture positive relationships and builds on basic decency and goodness in people and communities. It enhances the system's capacity for co-operation, collaboration and change.

Worth noting is that AI uses a 4-stage process:

1. Discover – what works well?
2. Dream – envisioning processes that may work well in the future
3. Design – planning and prioritising envisioned processes that may work well in the future
4. Delivery – implementation of the design

Deceptively simple, the art is in the questions developed to substantiate these phases, and the entire thrust on what works, what is positive, what can be built upon rather than what needs fixing, what is negative or what the problems are. Exploring and working with what can be appreciated makes possible liberated energy, connections and enhancing relationships of possibility.

The full participation of community membership, officials, CBO's, NGO's, professionals, private sector, entrepreneurs, etc… in AI processes focusing on the development of an area into a sustainable neighbourhood has the benefit of building a common approach towards an envisaged future. However, the possibility of inspiring, 'vision-led' processes being left high and dry is very likely if there is not ongoing investment in **community development practice.**

It is common cause that community membership and organisations of civil society play a critically important role, alongside government and the private sector in solving the problems of poverty, social and environmental injustice. Yet despite this, there is no effective system of professional development for people working in the field of development practice with its unique mix of developmental and management capabilities.

At present, training and capacity-building in development practice and management are delivered through a fragmented and largely donor-driven model of short skills workshops that do not build competence in any deep or sustained manner, do not allow for any kind of authentic assessment or validation of competence, and do not enable coherent learning or career pathways in the field. As a result, work in this field is under-valued and unrecognised by individuals and by society at large.

The following case study illustrates how developmental dialogue can be used creatively in the delivery of appropriate housing. This case uses many of the tenets of the appreciative inquiry process.

Freedom Park settlement upgrading in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town
by Pierre Roux

On Freedom Day 1998 a group of households, mostly women-headed occupied a vacant school site in Tafelsig, Mitchell's Plain. The Development Action Group (DAG) and Legal Resources Centre (LRC) assisted the community in a struggle against eviction by the City of Cape Town. The households came from backyard shacks and overcrowded homes in the surrounding areas. The City eventually agreed to develop the area and the Freedom Park housing project commenced in 2006. About 300 families lived in the settlement. It is a phased in situ upgrade which involved an innovative participatory lay-out planning process that gave rise to a medium-density housing development. This process allowed all beneficiaries the opportunity to design the community lay out and to indicate their preferences with regard to housing typology, neighbours and plot location. In order to address this resistance, strong emphasis was placed on the participation process and community programmes implemented to promote social cohesion and sustainable livelihoods.

Freedom Park 2007

Photo: Pierre Roux, 2007

Urban poverty is complex and multi-dimensional. The poor are not a homogenous group and single sector interventions cannot improve the shelter conditions of urban poor households in a sustainable manner. A one-size-fits-all approach to informal settlement upgrading, which ignores the differences within them, is rarely successful – it is crucial that the complexities of informal settlements need to be understood before developmental interventions are made. An understanding of the livelihood strategies is particularly important as a basis for designing housing and development interventions (Smit. 2006).

Understanding household's livelihood strategies, using participatory assessment, can be an important methodology towards achieving more integrated housing developments. In Freedom Park, DAG carried out a participatory livelihood assessment together with the community, which was then used

as the basis for planning a range of developmental initiatives in partnership with other NGO's: for example a savings club, a recycling project, a home-based crèche, a food garden and multi-purpose community centre.

The participatory social mapping exercise of Freedom Park (reproduced below) graphically illustrates the diversity of social problems in the settlement. Gang turf and where they meet to fight are illustrated. Shebeens are also shown and one of them is considered as being a 'place of danger'. Freedom Park is spatially divided into "well off" and "vulnerable/poor" sections. "Rastas" (Rastafarians) and "alcoholics" are part of the "vulnerable/poor" section. The prominence of a soup kitchen and places where food is donated highlights the complexity of poverty and vulnerability within the community, (Smit. 2006).

Hand-drawn social map of Freedom Park.

Source: DAG. 2004

This project resonates with the Breaking New Ground housing policy that calls for "communities and community-based organizations to engage more effectively with the housing programme". It encourages community involvement in informal settlement upgrading by way of participatory layout planning. In Freedom Park DAG assisted in building the capacity of the community through training courses and workshops. It engaged with the City housing officials through a 13 member Housing Committee, mostly women elected on a yearly basis.

DAG and the Freedom Park Development Association also conducted workshops where the beneficiaries had the opportunity to design the proposed layout as well as select house typologies. Aside from infrastructure and services, which were seen as 'technical issues' by the City of Cape Town, the community was involved in the planning process. The level of participation in the layout planning proved to be a real achievement, as evidenced by the even different drafts before a community layout plan was finalized that satisfied the needs of the residents.

A vulnerable/poor section of Freedom Park.

Photo: Pierre Roux, 2007

The infrastructure (roads, sewerage and water lines) was completed in 2007. A multi-stakeholder partnership was formed with the Naill Mellon Township Trust (NMTT) who agreed to construct the houses. During October 2007, some 1,350 Irish volunteers in the Trust's annual housing blitz constructed 439 homes (single story freestanding and semi-detached units and double story row houses and semi-detached units) which are larger (42m2) with improved finishes as well as a community centre.

It involved a roll-over development as shacks were moved around by residents themselves when the roads and services were under construction. This approach prevented the removal of the community to a transit camp and the displacement of social networks and vulnerable livelihoods. The Freedom Park project demonstrates the merits of in situ settlement upgrading through community-based methodologies such as participatory poverty assessments, social mapping and community layout planning to achieve integrated development.

Freedom Park, Mitchell's Plain, 2009.

Photo: Pierre Roux, 2007

Similarly, in the Hangberg informal settlement on Sentinel Hill above Hout Bay harbour, DAG is involved in an innovative socio-economic participatory survey and mapping exercise that is spatially referenced to a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) community register and a digital data base. It contains not only narrow household income figures but also poverty data on issues such as HIV/Aids, child care, security, perceived safe spaces and so on. Since the spatial form and demographics of settlement

communities continuously changes over time this household data base is consequently updated by community-based field workers trained up by DAG. Data on public open spaces, footpaths, trees, no-go areas, shebeens and drug dens as well as all informal businesses are incorporated into the Arc-GIS database known as the Hangberg Land and Services Management Tool.

The purpose is to use this tool to underpin a tenure arrangement and incremental site and service upgrade. The engineering works will have to accommodate the squatters' home-made infrastructure into the formal plan. This project was recently commended in the Sunday Times (2008) as an ideal sea-facing location for informal settlement upgrading.

Accredited Capacity Building

To support sustainable neighbourhood processes, it seems vital that accredited training programmes in community development practice are offered on a mid-to long term basis. Focusing on the development of capable and competent development practitioners through the meeting of sensible and useful standards, this approach offers the possibility of a shared language being developed through education in core areas such as project management, financial management, leadership, IT, etc…, and the enhancement of skills through actual work within the sustainable neighbourhood design and delivery process.

Over the years, low cost construction was expected to have created hundreds of thousands of formal employment opportunities, though this has rarely materialized. According to Khan and Thring (2003) the emphasis on 'delivery as quickly as possible' and the dominance of technocratic delivery approaches rarely permits engagement with the livelihood and coping strategies of the poor.

In this regard Khan and Thring (2003) argue that 'greater development of local government in the location of housing projects requires linking housing approval processes to integrated development plans coupled to aggressive capacity building programmes and broader organisational development. The nature and content of the capacitation programme will need to go beyond the technical sphere, however, encompassing the building of appropriate capabilities to construct developmental partnerships between local government and communities'.

An example, albeit limited, of the type of cooperation suggested above, is illustrated by the following development in Limpopo.

Mawa Block, Tzaneen, Limpopo
by Pierre Roux

Mawa Block is a rural housing initiative which successfully combines service delivery with local economic development (LED) in a rural district of Limpopo about 90 km northeast of Tzaneen. Unemployment in the area is high and the majority of working people stay on as migrant labourers on the Phalaborwa mines and surrounding citrus estates.

It is another best practice project identified and rewarded by the Cape Town based Impumelelo Innovations Trust with a Silver award as an effective model in public participation, service delivery and rural governance. The innovation of this housing project lies in its methodology. It seeks to use, as well as create, resources within the community, thereby cutting costs on unnecessary external bodies like contractors that build for profit. Hence the community of Mawa was involved at all levels of the process and were paid for services rendered, with 75% of project funds allocated for this purpose (Impumelelo. 2007).

The community was mobilized through a participation process involving politicians and tribal authorities and community members empowered in building construction, paying them from project funds and providing opportunities for further employment. It is an example of how low-cost housing initiatives in conjunction with community involvement and LED can work well in rural areas in order to create sustainable livelihoods.

Photo: Pierre Roux, 2007

Four show houses were constructed in the village of Mawa. Mass meetings like the one pictured above initiated the project. Tzaneen Municipality dedicated a facilitator to the project and placed two full-time community workers within the village. A series of workshops took place. A Steering Committee represented the community at municipal level and site meetings. Regular open air meetings were held where project management, the local ward councilor, politicians and the tribal leaders reported back to the community on problems and delays with the project, progress and new developments and so on.

During 2005/6 this project finished 115 homes of 50m2 (2/3 larger than standard RDP houses) located on freehold agricultural plots. In 2007 another 200 units were completed in a neighbouring village. The Mawa project created employment for 34 bricklayers and 87 labourers of which 53 were women (Since most households in the community are female-headed) and provided jobs for 30 more people at a local brickyard. Apart from employment, the project provided training to 119 community members in basic building skills such as bricklaying and construction. 50 people were indirectly employed to make bricks, window frames, and to transport materials. Residents who owned tractors as well as donkey carts were paid for transporting materials to and from the site. In the words of the Impumelelo Evaluator, "An outstanding aspect was that the Local Economic Development input was taken full advantage of" (Impumelelo. 2007).

Another spinoff was the Merekome Brickyard that was set up for the project is the only semi-industrial business in the vicinity and employ 30 people. (For a photograph and discussion of the brickyard see the Chapter on Building Materials).

People's Housing Process

The People's Housing Partnership Trust defines the People's Housing Process in this way:

"While many people need houses, official housing programmes have not been able to meet the diverse needs of our various communities, and the necessary resources are not always readily available. People have consequently, over the years, been building houses for themselves. This is what is referred to as the "People's Housing Process." Typically it is where individuals, families or groups take the initiative to organise the planning, design and the building of, or actually build, their own homes" (PHPT. 1998).

Breaking New Ground, on the other hand, envisages the a participatory housing process in the following way:

" Housing authorities at all levels are moving in the direction of increased use of the People's Housing Process (PHP). The thinking behind this expansion is however contradictory. On the one hand, PHP is promoted as it provides residents a greater choice over the use of their subsidy. This generates positive housing outcomes, increased beneficiary input, and greatly enhances beneficiary commitment to those outcomes.

Thus, the PHP achieves its two main goals of 'more for less' and improved beneficiary commitment to housing outcomes by increased productivity through 'intellectual equity' (not primarily cost reduction through 'sweat equity'), and by increasing beneficiary 'ownership' through the exercise of considered choice (not by forcing

beneficiaries to provide free labour). Other participants view PHP as primarily a vehicle for the mobilization of sweat equity as an alternative to existing beneficiary contributions. This 'sweat equity' approach to the PHP tends to undermine the key benefits of the approach. The current approach towards PHP is thus inherently contradictory (BNG. 2004).

People's housing process projects have found multiple applications in South Arica over the years. An example of a modern PHP approach is illustrated below.

CASE STUDY

The People's Housing Process, Ocean View, Cape Town.

Ocean View is on the mountain behind Kommetjie in the South Peninsula of Cape Town. When Simon's Town was designated as a white area in the 1960's a forced removal relocated the port's coloured community in flats and small council houses at Ocean View.

No formal housing had been erected since the 1970's, despite the growing population. By the 1990's some 30,000 inhabitants were living in extremely overcrowded conditions in 600 flats, 1800 township houses and in backyard shacks. An informal settlement was also formed in an area known as Atlantic Heights.

The project illustrates how the housing crisis prompted self-mobilisation of the community from the bottom up and through collective action they took control over this resource. In response to these conditions, a number of community-based organisations (CBOs) banded together and founded the Ocean View Development Trust (OVDT) in 1992. OVDT represents 30 CBOs with trustees drawn from community leaders. Its aim was to seek ways of alleviating the accommodation crisis through community action.

Since 2000, the OVDT facilitated the construction of about 700 homes in Ocean View through a self-help scheme for beneficiaries drawn from overcrowded township homes and from the informal settlement. This project was initiated in 1994 and was financed by the original 'Consolidation Subsidy' for site-and-service developments. It was a National Housing Board pilot project for the development of a self-help People's Housing Process programme.

To ensure that residents could make the best use of the small consolidation subsidy (around R7,500.00 in 1994) OVDT implemented a number of support initiatives. A Housing Support Centre where would be owner-builders obtained advice on technical and building trade matters was established. The concept of a housing support centre was subsequently adopted as formal policy in the government's PHP housing delivery mechanism.

A community block making facility had by 2002 produced over a million blocks for Ocean View residents at affordable prices. OVDT projects a vision that housing and construction should provide an impetus for community development and local economic development through job creation and capital re-circulation. Aside from the building contractors and artisans employed it created various micro enterprises such as plumbers, glazing operations, carpentry shops, backyard welders and so on.

Many builders site their 'Wendyhouse' (temporary wooden lodging- a house within a home) on foundations and over time as savings are made build a house around it.

Photo: Pierre Roux, 2007

A key feature of the Ocean View initiative was to encourage homeowners to engage in incremental building which allowed them to consolidate and extend their dwellings over time. In 2000, the OVDT, introduced a' Roll Over Fund' that lends money to households that wish to extend or improve their dwellings. Repaying has proved satisfactory.

A decade later, and housing projects should only be audited after a long period, the result is a suburban milieu with its own character of diverse structures (depicted below). The nature of upgrading and extensions, which is an ongoing organic process, suggests that given enough time, households prove resourceful in obtaining the money to invest in their dwelling.

The Ocean View community certainly view their homes as valuable assets. Ocean View's success has provided a model project for the government's PHP programme. In 2005 it received recognition as an UN-HABITAT World Award finalist.

Photo: Pierre Roux, 2007

CONCLUSION

Socioecological participation strives to expand the capabilities of people, in order to help them lead the kind of lives they value, via growth strategies that are democratic. These strategies allow continuous involvement of the citizenry in the setting of socioecological priorities. Though by no means exhaustive, this chapter has provided several methodologies that can be used in successful participatory housing and settlement delivery.