

SECOND CARNEGIE INQUIRY INTO POVERTY
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Community Organisation through
Physical Programmes: A Strategy
for tackling Rural Poverty

by

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COMMUNITY ORGANISATION THROUGH PHYSICAL PROGRAMMES : A STRATEGY
FOR TACKLING RURAL POVERTY

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The lack of any real political power amongst the rural poor in South Africa is a factor that has received scant attention from development researchers and practitioners over the years. Through its implementation of the Mpukonyoni Rural Development Project since 1981, the Centre for Research and Documentation has attempted to address this problem, both on a practical and theoretical level. The project forms part of the Centre's 'action research' programme whereby research is conducted by actual involvement in development implementation, thereby having a measurable impact on the quality of life in a rural area at the same time as generating strategies for development.

This paper briefly examines the socio-political context within which the Mpukonyoni project operates, outlines the nature of the project, and goes on to examine the potential for the application of its particular strategy elsewhere in South Africa.

THE TRIBAL AUTHORITY SYSTEM

The powerlessness of the rural poor should be seen in terms not only of the overall lack of political power of 'black' rural areas but also in terms of the uneven distribution of power within those areas. With ineffectual representation less public resources are likely to find their way to rural areas, and the distribution of these meagre resources is likely to favour a rural elite if representation has no basis in democratic practice.

In the 'black' rural areas of Natal and elsewhere in South Africa the Tribal Authority, comprising the chief and his councillors (mainly indunas), is assumed to represent rural residents. Those who live or work in these areas are well acquainted with the numerous complaints relating to the way in which chiefs and indunas exercise their powers. An examination of the history of and legislation governing the Tribal Authority system, however, shows that it is the system itself which is an abuse of the basic principles of representation and administration (Daphne, 1982).

Increasingly, since their co-option by British colonial governments, chiefs and their deputies have become less and less responsible to their own people and more answerable to central authority. The 1878 Code of Native Law Administered in Natal and the Natal Code of Native Law, No. 19 of 1891, gave the Governor of the Colony of Natal the power to appoint and remove chiefs, who then became minor deputies of the Governor. Subsequent legislation such as the Native Administration Act No. 38 of 1927, the Natal Code of Bantu Law, Proclamation No. R 195 of 1967, and the KwaZulu Chiefs' and Headmen's Act, No. 8 of 1974 has refined the control exercised by the state over chiefs and their deputies. The co-option of traditional leaders was an effective mechanism whereby a small colonial administration could control a large indigenous population and it remains an effective vehicle for the minority South African Government's control and manipulation of millions of rural people.

While there is no democratic process in the appointment or functioning of tribal authorities they in fact assume the role of representatives of the people of an area. Thus when development agents offer assistance to an area they are forced to work through the tribal authority, with the strong likelihood that the benefits of this assistance will be appropriated by a rural elite comprising members of the tribal authority and their friends and relatives.

The standard approach to rural development in South Africa accepts without question the principle of working through tribal authorities. Existing inequalities in rural societies are thus re-inforced with the concentration of economic and decision-making power remaining in the hands of a few, with the consequent stagnation of progress towards any broader development.

POLICY OF THE MPUKUNYONI PROJECT

The Mpukunyoni project has, since its inception, attempted to stimulate a process whereby democratically-based organisations are formed in rural areas as an alternative to tribal authorities. This has been done by the mobilization of farmers associations through physical programmes such as agricultural production and water supplies. It is felt that people organise most effectively around concrete, ongoing activities. Hence the project strategy

can best be described as 'community organisation through physical programmes'.

While the tribal authority is seen as inappropriate to development needs it has not been the policy of the project to organise structures which operate in direct opposition to this body. Chiefs and indunas have very real powers in that they control access to land and their permission is often required to hold meetings. Authorization is thus required at the initiation of a project and a certain relationship must be maintained in order that the project be allowed to continue.

With the growth of democratic organisation there will inevitably be a re-distribution of power within an area and the tribal authority may feel threatened. The Mpukunyoni project has therefore attempted to achieve a balance between promoting the process of democratisation and not unduly aggravating those with the power to clamp down on developments.

At the outset, permission to embark on the central activity of the project, assistance with cassava production, was obtained from the Mpukunyoni Tribal Authority and, in response to their request, a domestic water supply programme was initiated. As a matter of policy, however, the resources of the project were extended to as many people as possible in order to stimulate the formation of farmers' organisations. This is the opposite of the 'demonstration' strategy which concentrates resources in the hands of a few model farmers on the assumption that they will pass on newly-acquired skills to others.

HISTORY OF FARMERS ORGANISATION IN MPUKUNYONI

The first 60 cassava growers in the Mpukunyoni area each established 1/2 hectare of the crop during the planting season October 1981 to February 1982. Project staff worked closely with this group of people in order to assist them in forming an organisation to represent their interests and in April 1982 the Mpukunyoni Cassava Growers Association was formed. Further discussions on the manner in which the association was to operate led to the adoption of a constitution in June 1982.

At that stage the project was attempting to render assistance

to a far wider range of people than the cassava growers by getting involved in fruit tree distribution, water supplies and legal aid. The cassava growers themselves were interacting with other farmers in the different sections of the Mpukunyoni area and there was a general stimulation of interest in the formation of farmers' associations. The cotton growers came together to form an association and 12 other localized farmers' associations sprung up. In many instances project staff were requested to assist and an informal educative programme on the principles of organisation was initiated.

In September 1982, at a meeting attended by representatives of the various associations, it was decided to form an umbrella body and the Mpukunyoni Farmers Union (MFU) representing around 1000 households, came into being. Each member association has either 1 or 2 representatives on the full committee of the MFU which then elects an executive of 4 people to see to day-to-day affairs. Finance was raised to enable the MFU to employ a full-time secretary for 2 years on the understanding that after this period the post would be continued on funds generated by the MFU.

IMPACT OF THE PROJECT

At the time of writing it is too early to make strong pronouncements on the success or otherwise of the Mpukunyoni project. The economically productive activities such as cassava and other crop production, and the development of a co-operative, are in their initial stages and their viability has yet to be proved. Short-term development is difficult to achieve, as Mpukunyoni, like other 'black' rural areas, has been starved of its rightful share of state finance over the years and large-scale state intervention is required to develop a proper infrastructure.

Assuming this is not going to happen in the near future, the best a privately-sponsored project can aim at is the stimulation of a process which can be self-sustaining in the long-term. Hopefully the seeds of this sort of process have already taken root in Mpukunyoni.

In an organisational structure such as the Mpukunyoni Farmers Union lies the potential for more effective representation of the interests of rural residents, not only on agricultural

matters but also on broader issues of development. The MFU should be able to co-ordinate and initiate developments and provide a forum for the open discussion of a wide range of issues. It could also act as a pressure group on local authorities to demand a larger slice of public spending and to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources within the area. On a political level the participation by people in democratic structures has value not only in the local context but also on a longer-term national scale. To have taken part in the drafting of a constitution, to have been able to choose between a range of candidates as office bearers, and to have made a meaningful contribution to decision-making, should enable rural people to better link up with national political movements when the opportunity arises.

The promotion of the idea of participatory democracy in every facet of peoples lives is a worthwhile development objective in its own right. This should apply from a national to a household level where rural women in particular often find themselves in the difficult position of being denied certain decision-making powers although in effect having to run all the household affairs in the absence of their migrant husbands. The Mpukunyoni project has from the outset encouraged women to participate in the development process as equals, without restricting themselves to what are generally seen as women's groups such as gardening and sewing groups.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TACKLING RURAL POVERTY

The Mpukunyoni project is possibly playing some sort of role in around 1000 households out of 7000 in Mpukunyoni. A considerable amount of finance, time, and energy has been expended in reaching this stage and yet this impact is a drop in the ocean when one considers the extent of rural poverty in South Africa. The need to extend development assistance to other areas is keenly felt by the Centre for Research and Documentation and it has already raised extra finance in order to be able to expand its operations.

The Mpukunyoni area is structurally similar to most other 'black' rural areas in South Africa and it should be possible for other development organisations to adopt the Mpukunyoni model to achieve similar objectives in other parts. While cassava production has provided a useful catalyst for organisation in Mpukunyoni, a

range of other activities e.g. water supplies, health, education, could be better suited to initiate activity in other areas. Whatever the physical focus, it is felt that development work in rural areas should be geared towards democratic organisation. It should also be pointed out that small projects with little growth potential will make little contribution towards the course of events in rural areas generally.

Ideally one would like to see the development of a form of 'Rural Solidarity', although the effects of decades of underdevelopment and apartheid policy make it unlikely that an effective national organisation representing the interest of peasant farmers and rural residents could be formed.

PROJECT FUNDING

The underlying assumption of the Mpukunyoni project and of this paper is that the state does not have the will, in the case of central government, or the finance, in the case of 'black' administrations, to bring about meaningful development in the reserves. The Mpukunyoni project is largely financed by the Anglo American and De Beers Chairman's Fund on a 'no strings' basis and it appears that there is an increasing amount of this sort of money available for rural projects.

Large amounts of private funding in South Africa are, however, being swallowed up by high-profile projects run by expensive consultants, projects which usually benefit only a select few in relation to the expenditure involved. It is felt that much of this finance could be re-directed towards a more progressive people-based style of development provided this approach can show results. It is not necessary for success to be measured in purely economic terms but it is essential that progress be evaluated at regular intervals against stated objectives. The production of an annual report on the Mpukunyoni project is as much an exercise in self-criticism and evaluation as a mechanism to inform outsiders of the projects activities.

The operation of the Mpukunyoni project from a university base has a double attraction for funders in that a university should provide an effective vehicle for the administration of funds as well as a critical environment in which the project can be

assessed. The idea that university research institutions should not be involved in action for change is on its way out and the Centre for Research and Documentation is happy to add another nail to its coffin.

CONCLUSION

Conditions in the 'black' rural areas of South Africa are far from favourable for the implementation of development projects. The political and economic system which sees these areas as labour reservoirs has taken its toll. There are those who feel it is not possible at this point in time to achieve any real development, and who in fact feel that projects tend to give credibility to the apartheid policy as applied to rural areas.

There is a good deal of validity in this argument and many development projects fall into this mould. If development is seen in human and political terms, however, and project work has the potential to contribute to a change in power relations and the development of a broader consciousness in rural areas, then it is worth pursuing.

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