Learning to Walk –

NGO Practice and the Possibility of Freedom

Occasional Paper No. 3

August 2007

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>
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[1] Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p 41-2

1. Introduction

What does it really mean when an NGO says that it is committed to "building the critical voice of the marginalised"? This Occasional Paper doesn't answer that question – but it does tell part of the story of Church Land Programme's confrontation with it. For Church Land Programme (CLP), this confrontation has been brutal and perplexing at times, but joyous and liberating too. We – the members of CLP – have found that if the confrontation is to produce better practice, then especially important are collective processes marked by honesty, critical reflection, and careful attention to the actions, spaces, words and insights of the marginalised and impoverished themselves.

As we have written this Occasional Paper we have also tried to ensure that it is true to these characteristics. It is our hope that it might share some of CLP's internal processes of learning with other individuals and groups in civil society (and in particular NGOs and churches), and thus play a part in the building of better practice. We believe that the connection with practice is key if the confrontation is to be taken seriously. It is all too easy for civil society organisations – ourselves included – to speak and to make analyses, that have the appearance of radical insight and politics, without matching this with different ways of working and being in actual practice.

And so in this spirit of improvement, rigour and growth, we invite you to read the story of our practice-in-transition over the last few years. It amounts to a recollection of important moments and insights on our journey to change who we are and what we do.

Actually, there probably isn't a 'beginning' to that journey that we could nail down – and certainly there's no end in sight! In the process of confronting our practice we have uncovered very old questions and insights, as well as current and urgent ones. But a strategic planning event in 2004 was probably a seminal moment.

At that event, we were assisted by David Hallowes and Davine Thaw, two of the best in the business. David had done an external evaluation of and for CLP and thus brought key insights and challenges into our strategic discussions and planning for our future work. Davine's facilitation helped ensure we could appropriate and use the evaluation productively – and perhaps most importantly, that we did so in a structured and conscious way. Members of the CLP Board were present too. This was important – not only because their input was valuable, and they enriched the discussion by drawing on wider circles of experience than the staff – but also because the broad direction that emerged for CLP was owned and supported throughout the organisation's structure.

The material and the issues gathered through the external evaluation allowed us to discuss and consolidate, firstly our understanding of the context in which we work, and secondly our positioning in that context and in relation to its key voices and issues. This was then connected to questions about the character and effect of the work CLP does 'in-the-world' and 'on-the-ground'. For us, this connection has proved to be fundamental – not easy, certainly open-ended, but really fundamental.

The rest of this paper follows on from that point, telling the story of CLP's change in praxis over about a three year period. The first chapter draws from the discussions CLP had at and around the time of the external evaluation and strategic planning event. It recalls some of our realisations about the evolving church-land context and our analysis of these which have guided and challenged us. Chapters 3 and 4 cover the period that followed the strategic planning event, where we tried to find ways of inserting these realisations into our ongoing work and of searching together for new insights. The two chapters describe some of the ways we did this and some of the many new questions we faced. For purposes of writing, there are two chapters describing more or less two parts of this process although, in practice, there was not a rigid division between the two. The first part was the shift to animation through reflecting on our practice, and the second a kind of 'struggling' with this new, emergent praxis. The very nature of the work means that there is no defining 'conclusion', 'summary' or 'challenge' for the final chapter, Chapter 5. But what we have done is tried to consolidate some of the key points from our experiences into two lists – one at the end of each of Chapters 3 and 4.

2. The Context and our Analysis of it

2.1 Where we started

When CLP began its work in 1997 a major focus was on the connection between the long history of land ownership by churches in South Africa on the one hand, and the short history of new approaches to land issues by a formally democratic post-apartheid state on the other. Among the majority of ordinary South Africans, there was a broad expectation that democratic land reform policies would really change the unfair status quo inherited from colonialism and apartheid.

For many people with strong connections with church-owned land (including people living on such land and those with different experiences of church as land-owner), expectations arose that the land-owning churches would or should 'do the right thing' i.e. restore land to Africans. These expectations were not only tied to desires for justice and restoration, but were imagined as the basis of a really better life for all, at all levels. The potential contribution of church-owned lands became the subject of wider debate and, at times, somewhat exaggerated expectation (e.g. the extent of land-holdings was consistently over-stated). The land-owning churches felt this pressure. They also no doubt imagined that the new land reform framework of the government, offered possibilities for them to make a contribution to justice and restoration, by transferring the land they owned to 'communities' living on it, using the mechanisms within the framework.

CLP's take on these developments was always an attempt to maintain a careful line that tried to maximise the good possibilities offered by the new land context. These included opportunities to validate the contested history of church-land ownership, to recognise the important challenges that the new context raised for such churches, and to simultaneously insist that important questions and nuances not be ignored as the context and associated policy-framework unfolded.

The negotiated settlement that secured South Africa's transition out of apartheid was marked by contestation and deep compromise, and the attendant land reform policy that it delivered was no less so. It had very real limitations. At a time when there was a growing clamour for churches to 'give back the land' through the land reform programme. Given the proramme's limitations, we urged caution and reflection. We suggested that in fact churches had an opportunity to experiment with – and perhaps even model – land options that might be far more just and transformative than those stated in the official policies. But it was equally clear that if indeed creative alternatives were going to arise, then they were not going to arise by a 'lone voice' making abstract arguments unconnected with the actual needs and players in the church-land context. Rather, we endeavoured to make CLP relevant and useful to groups living on, or in authority over, church owned land. CLP established itself as a

key resource and this often meant 'partnering' groups using the mechanisms of the land reform programme.

In many ways it was precisely this journey – walking with communities and churches through the maze of land reform – that made it increasingly necessary for us as CLP to clarify what we thought and had learned about the land question in post-apartheid South Africa. The publication of the first CLP Occasional Paper entitled *Land in South Africa: Gift for All, or Commodity for a Few?* was a key statement of our emerging analysis. It concluded that:

> "Land reform in South Africa has been effectively subordinated to an economic development model that will not ultimately transform land and agriculture along biblical, ethical lines. Under enormous pressure from powerful economic interests and ideologies – globally and within the country – the real priorities of land and agricultural reform are being directed away from the interests of the poor. ... [W]e are not convinced by repeated calls to simply 'speed up' land reform without asking where it is headed. The gulf between an agrarian reform that is in line with biblical morality, and government's market-oriented land reform is too big to ignore in good conscience. As we have done in the past, the Christian church in South Africa assumes a prophetic role and speaks for the interests of the poor" (p 33, 34).

Analysing the context through the lens of the land reform programme, exposed the realities that at the true heart of this South African state project, lay a capitalist restructuring and accumulation, as well as the creation of a somewhat de-racialised class of 'elites'. And further, that this inevitably implicated it in ongoing exploitation, domination and disempowerment of the poor. For an organisation of democrats and activists, these were disturbing conclusions to arrive at only one decade after the 'end' of apartheid.

2.2 Realisations about NGO practice

The challenge that necessarily followed was to examine the roles and practical effects of civil society – including ourselves – in relation to this state project. We became aware of the dangers of reaching an analytical conclusion to speak '*for* the interests of the poor' without serious reflection on and criticism of our own practice.

Certainly it was correct to expose the contradictions of the new democracy. To uncover the huge gap between the official rhetoric of democracy, development, and a 'better life for all', and the realities of a hollowed-out democracy experienced by poor South Africans: a worsening gap between rich and poor, the continuation of poverty, disempowerment, a state anti-poor bias, landlessness, joblessness, and so on. But the truth is, our *own* practice on-the-ground felt out of step with these contextual re-

alities. Somehow the way we were working as an NGO seemed to be in a pattern that depoliticised our contact with the landless poor, and stayed within the boundaries and bureaucracies of the official controlling system.

What we came to realise, is that this approach is not only our own, but is also endemic to NGO practice, and is expressed in different ways. As a first example, at the local land reform project level, NGOs tend to (largely uncritically) assist in keeping processes moving forward through the legal and bureaucratic steps defined in the official instruments of the government's land reform programme. This is done even though so many of us who work in NGOs surely know by now that 'successful' outcomes from using this framework are hardly worth celebrating – certainly not if we take seriously equality, democracy, dignity, and a decent sustainable and productive life. What this means is that in practice such principled questions are being sidelined and silenced, whilst the dominant system is being serviced.

Another example, is the way NGOs tend to shape interactions with grassroots people, so that while claiming the opposite, NGOs in fact 'teach' and impose on people, rather than supporting and assuming people's own capacities for learning, analysis and action for genuine transformation. The relationship between NGO workers (usually drawn from the dominant classes) and grassroots people (drawn from the oppressed classes) is characteristically an unequal one, and there is a parallel here with one of the abiding concerns of Paulo Freire, the radical Brazilan educator:

> *Some of the dominant classes join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. Theirs is a fundamental role and has been so throughout the history of this struggle. However as they move to the side of the exploited they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin. Their prejudices include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and to know. So they run the risk of falling into a type of generosity as harmful as that of the oppressors. Though they truly desire to transform the unjust order, they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation.*
>
> *They talk about the people but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his [sic] trust in the people, which engages him [sic] in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favour, without that trust. (Freire, P. Pedagaogy of the Oppressed, 36 & 41).*

These tendencies in civil society (and especially in the NGO sector) have been identified and discussed by others too. In the South African land-sector, Greenberg and Ndlovu (2004) make useful comments about the 'developmentalist' approach of

NGOs. They draw attention to the existence of organisational typologies:

> Many of the biggest and strongest civil society organisations orient upwards, justifying and elaborating the actions and ideologies of the dominant power. Others orient to the grassroots, and within this there are two different types: those that organise and mobilise to fit into programmes constructed by dominant power, and those that organise and mobilise to confront the dominant power (Greenberg and Ndlovu, 2004: 24-25).

A key idea for which Greenberg and Ndlovu argue, is the link between these organisational typologies and the co-option of the majority of civil society into systems of domination and exploitation – especially by their commitment to developmentalist ideology and practice. They point out that:

> [d]evelopmentalism has become the guiding ideology of the post-apartheid hegemony ...[and that it] also has an international character [that] is rooted in the rise of the United States as the hegemonic power in the post-World War Two era. ... Developmentalism restructured global relations of production and proposed a political model of liberal democracy plus welfare as a counter to communism. In South Africa, post-apartheid developmentalism serves a similar purpose: to re-orient the national economy towards global capitalism, while simultaneously deflating rising grassroots struggles through a combination of welfare, meeting some popular demands, and market discipline (Greenberg and Ndlovu, 2004: 27).

[2] 1996, quoted in Pithouse 2004: 176 & 7.

Robinson[2] presents much empirical evidence to show that the United States and transnational interests now globally and actively promote an elite-based 'polyarchy' system as the best guarantee of social control and stability. This serves to relieve pressure on the state from subordinate classes, and assure elite control over popular mobilisation. This is in contrast with earlier US foreign policy which saw authoritarian and military regimes (and before that, colonial states) as fulfilling these functions.

In this broad effort of domination then, the conscription of civil society into the developmentalist mode is of huge concern. In our South African context, the consequences are real and evident everywhere in civil society projects that:

> take on a variety of tasks but generally function to co-opt the expression of social antagonism by encouraging various forms of (always unequal) 'partnership' (Pithouse 2004: 179).

NGOs (including Faith-based Organisations - FBOs) appear more vulnerable to this trend but it is wrong to think there is

> a simple distinction between 'bad imperialist/co-opting NGOs' and 'good rebellious social movements'. ... Distinctions must be made on the basis of political content rather than organisational form … (ibid: 179 & 180).

While a small minority of NGOs retain a commitment to supporting grassroots self-organisation and the consequent expression of independent political action,

> a wider layer of NGO workers was more interested in using grassroots mobilisation or organisation either to carry out developmental work more effectively or to maintain their privileged positions in the middle stratum of society that they now occupied (Greenberg and Ndlovu, 2004: 33).

2.3 Realisations about church practice

For CLP it has always been important to reflect specifically on the church-related[3] parts of civil society. Based on material gathered during the evaluation of CLP, David Hallowes (2004) drafted a working paper for CLP which discussed aspects of the relation between some church structures and these dynamics of the co-option of civil society. He describes a trend similar to NGOs, and claims that it is broadly accepted that there have been three shifts in the language used within ecumenical circles to describe the relationship between church and state since 1994:

> *'Critical solidarity' reflected the optimism at the dawn of democracy but also a determination on the part of the church and civil society to exercise autonomy;*
>
> *'Critical engagement' indicated a more strained relationship between church and state provoked by the adoption of GEAR, the arms deal and government's neglect of formal consultation. A sense of urgency for social justice on the church side added to the tension.*
>
> *'Partnerships' indicates the shift in church advocacy from policy to delivery.*
>
> *... [more recently], this was articulated in terms of a partnership between government and church. Critics argue that this position dissociates delivery from the overall direction of development, and so dissociates poverty alleviation from the market processes that produce poverty as much as they produce wealth. Further, it reflects a 'developmentalist' discourse that constructs community to fit with government policy and the technical / bureaucratic requirements of state programmes. ... They believe that 'partnership' is … a reflection of government's successful management of its relation with the church. Government has been able to engage selectively with church leaders to exclude more critical voices… and has effectively used the rhetoric of 'ultra-left' and 'reactionary' to dampen the criticism of church leaders who are reluctant to expose themselves to this labelling. (Hallowes 2004: 8 & 5; italics added).*

[3] It is important to define here – and for the rest of the paper – the term 'church'. We use it to refer to the various institutional structures of denominations and ecumenical organisations. It is also recognised that 'church' is not a single or unified entity.

2.4 Our analysis

Becoming aware of these developments provoked deep reflection at CLP on at least two levels. Firstly, it reinforced the need for critical analysis. Analysis of what is happening in our context, of what is driving the trajectories, and of what the actual effects of the roles of different players are in relation to these trajectories.

Secondly, being aware of these developments also made it necessary to re-think some of our fundamental assumptions about the relation between freedom, the state and political power. For many of us, our tendency had been to assume that the interests of justice and freedom were more or less compatible with the new democratic state. But the reality of post-apartheid South Africa raised a more generalised question as to whether state power as *such* – and here we include all the apparatus that goes along with it (like representative democracy, political parties, etc) – might not invariably be an oppressive and alienating force over people. This was a new question for us and the debates it opened up are far from closed or concluded. It has been very useful and interesting to see that this question has also emerged within movements in different parts of the world, and the struggle of the Zapatistas[4] in Chiapas, Mexico, has been especially relevant and helpful to CLP. John Holloway is a writer who has been very influenced by, and interested in, the Zapatistas. In an interview during 2006, he said:

> Although no one talks much about the Revolution these days, everyone knows we need one. But what will we do with this revolution? Take state power again? ... Substituting one state power for another just repeats the same problems over and over again and eventually exhausts the revolution. This is the old way of thinking about revolution and it doesn't work anymore. We have to find a new way. There is no alternative.

[4] For more information on the Zapatistas, visit the CLP website: www.churchland.co.za

Our analysis and reflection always seemed to come back to the challenge of our own praxis. With regard to this, two things were becoming clear.

Firstly, we could not 'know' any answers except by taking very seriously the fact that our prevalent NGO practice either silences ordinary people or carefully rehearses with them what they could/should say, so that what is heard – even when it is done in the name of 'giving voice to the poor' – is actually the echo of our own voice!

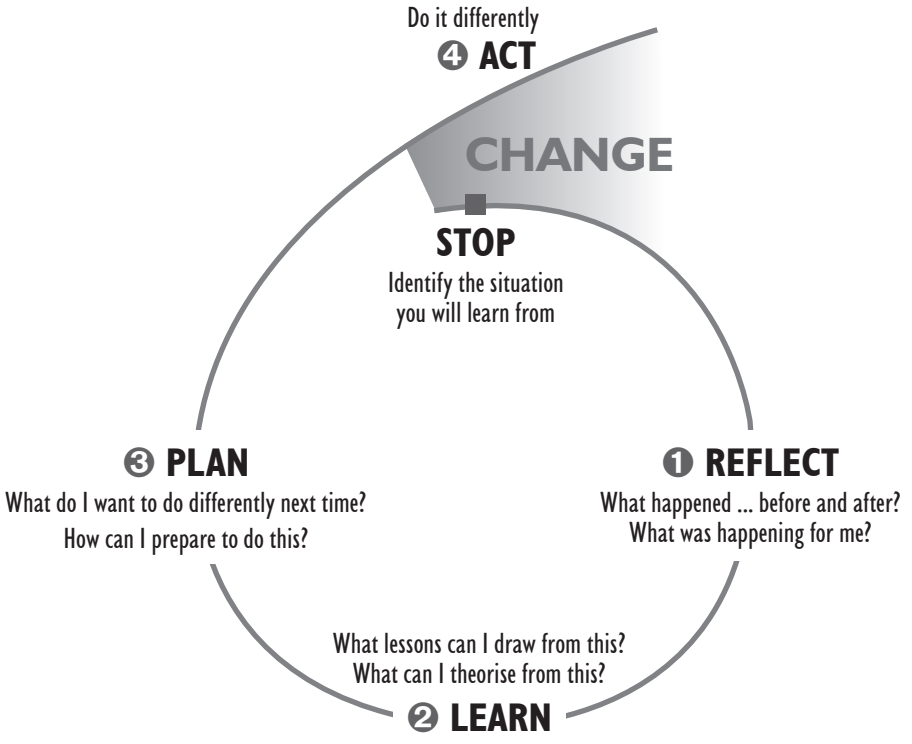
Secondly, if CLP was going to be a productive part of a broader process that actually had (and built) the possibility of transformation, freedom and humanity, then our practice as an organisation needed to nurture and learn from the difficult task of building *actual* movements of *actual* 'poors', taking *self*-conscious, *self*-defined and *self*-initiated actions. Given the power imbalances between resourced NGOs and weak, emerging movements of the marginalised, we recognised that these were clearly going to be difficult and subtle tensions to work with – but it seemed to us they were necessary tensions to confront, and a worthwhile possibility to hope for.

Changing the world meant changing the balance of power. And for CLP this meant not only against more easily identified enemies – classes and elites 'out there' – but also confronting the power and domination within so-called progressive civil society, including ourselves.

3. The Shift to Animation through Reflection on Practice

Following Davine Thaw's comments at the strategic planning event in 2004, we looked for ways to build a "a structured and conscious cycle of action and reflection" (see below[5]). This broad approach reminded some of us of a central theme in the series of books written by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel called *Training for Transformation* or *The Community Workers' Handbook*[6]. Describing the key ideas of Paulo Freire, Hope and Timmel introduce the question of "reflection and action (praxis)" as follows:

> Most real learning and radical change takes place when a community experiences dissatisfaction with some aspect of their present life. An animator can provide a situation in which they can stop, reflect critically upon what they are doing, identify any new information or skills that they need, get this information and training, and then plan action.
>
> Often the first plan of action will solve some aspects of the problem, but not deal deeply enough with the root causes of the problem. By setting a regular cycle of reflection and action in which a group is constantly celebrating their successes, and analysing critically the causes of mistakes and failures, they become more and more capable of effectively transforming their daily life.



[5] Taken from: *Learning in Organisations, Ideas for a Change Part 10,* Olive Publications: Durban (2003).

[6] First published by Mambo Press in Zimbabwe in 1984, with a South African edition first produced in 1989.

They quote Freire himself as saying:

> At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must themselves as people engage in the vocation of becoming more fully human. Reflection and action become essential. True reflection leads to action but that action will only be a genuine praxis if there is critical reflection on its consequences.
>
> To achieve this praxis it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason.
>
> Whoever lacks this trust will fail to bring about, or will abandon, dialogue, reflection and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiqués, monologues and instructions.
>
> While no-one liberates themselves by their own efforts alone, neither are they liberated by others. ... Only the leaders' involvement in a real historical situation leads them to criticise it and to wish to change it (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p 41-2, quoted in Hope and Timmel 1989: ibid).

This approach needed to be embedded in actual work 'on-the-ground', and this is covered further on in the paper. The first task though, was to pause and reflect on our own practice, precisely and partly, to create space in our work 'on-the-ground' for dialogical relationships[7] with grassroots people and formations. This is described in CLP's strategic planning document for 2005 – 2007 as follows:

> *Getting trapped in the project approach on church land also implied a separation between a politicised struggle for recognition of rights and depoliticised 'delivery' of rights and economic development... CLP has concluded that its commitment to mobilising people, to enabling a critical rural voice, clearly requires a different practice.*
>
> *Developing the capacity for this practice requires a new organisational culture based on team work and on habits and methods of reflection and learning on practice, while also developing a new set of skills for the practice of animation. CLP will need to devote time to these processes. ...CLP is committed to walking with communities towards the realisation of the choices that they make. CLP understands that these choices are open-ended because they are constantly negotiated with other parties and because they create conditions which lead to new choices. It will monitor the consequences of community choices as a basis for maintaining a critical dialogue with communities on the meaning of agrarian justice (CLP 2004).*

[7] By this we mean a productive exchange between parties aimed at: building understanding and acceptance between the parties; building solidarity and commitment; formalising relationships for change and establishing democratic values; and producing action for change.

We introduced two ways to facilitate reflection on our practice. Firstly, we agreed to hold regular reflection days where each CLP worker would take a turn to lead and facilitate a full day's discussion on a theme or issue arising from their ongoing work, and which deserved collective and critical reflection. Secondly, we adopted an activity we dubbed 'accompaniment' for some in-the-field interventions, whereby the principal worker was accompanied by a colleague who's role was to be with, observe, and raise questions for critical reflection together afterwards. We consciously wanted to begin a fundamental shift toward 'animation'. The rest of this chapter draws on notes[8] from specific work occasions to share some of the key things that were surfaced.

[8] Unless referenced otherwise, quotations in this section are from notes made during CLP discussions. We avoid referring to any specific places or people. This is simply because the focus is on lessons and questions that can be generalised from specific experiences. Of course, each place, each moment and each struggle is unique and concrete and in practice this must be respected. It is further worth mentioning that in a spirit of honesty and desire to open ourselves to as much learning as possible by not hiding away from the hard questions, the 'accompaniments' were often selected precisely because some contexts raise more problems and challenges than others. Not all of our work is quite as flawed and difficult as the notes might suggest!

3.1 Collective reflection session

In the first reflection session, we talked about some themes that, as it turned out, were going to crop up again and again in the experiences that were to come on this journey.

One of these themes is the fact that this approach implies **continuous critique of practice – everybody's and especially our own** and that this was likely to make it demanding, requiring of us honesty and openness, as well as care and support for each other as activists and comrades.

Another theme was recognising that **conflict is not necessarily bad**. This can be difficult to embrace, especially for those working in the church sector where the preference is often for conciliation and conflict avoidance, often presented in 'reasonable round table discussions'. But in fact, the animator's task is to uncover conflict – even provoke it – in order to bring what is latent out into the open. It's the creative juice of making history. This realisation brings real responsibility – especially since as NGO-workers and outside activists we are not the ones carrying the real risk. We'll go back to Maritzburg and our comfy office and homes. So the responsibility is really huge, and requires that we are honest and thorough with the people with whom we work, and for whom this is a matter of life and death. *They* must make the choices, take the actions, reflect on and live with the consequences, and then act again.

Part of this thinking included the idea that the shift is toward **people making their own history**. Someone remembered a quote from SubCommandante Marcos of the Zapatistas who says that it is "not The Revolution, but revolution to make revolutions possible". This means that the question of agency is key and has huge implications for method and practice. It means that our praxis needs to put agency and creativity within the immediate grasp of the marginalised; it needs to "make rebellion ordinary" by locating it in the immediate life world of those who are dominated.

Drawing on Richard Pithouse's work (2004) another theme emerged. We anticipated that in the course of our journey, it would be imperative to sharpen the **distinctions between the practices of democracy and liberation on the one hand, and those of the state project on the other.** The shift must be a turn away from the latter as it is dominant in civil society. It functions to co-opt any expression of social antagonism by encouraging various forms of (always unequal) 'partnerships' so as to manage 'conflict' (lobbying, participation, etc), and it reduces political issues into questions of policy detail or alienating research.

If we *did* manage to shift through mutually transformative dialogue and learning – partly amongst ourselves, but especially with the marginalised – then we would be more likely to create and find possibilities of solidarity and mutuality with the oppressed. As someone in the group remarked:

> "It could be great fun, and it will be rewarding but it will be tough. It will probably provoke resistances and defensiveness (amongst ourselves and the people and structures we've been working with) – these are the enemies of liberating praxis."

3.2 Accompaniment: Mission land

The orientation and possibilities of work in a particular place can be powerfully shaped from the very beginning by **decisions taken to respond or intervene** at all. Sometimes these decisions are made unconsciously, and it requires careful self-reflection to recognise them as decisions at all.

In this place for example, CLP got involved in response to an appeal from the church hierarchy that had owned mission lands, and then donated these to the people living on the land. When this process, and the 'development' it promised, came under threat from a rival claim to the land by another group of people, the church hierarchy asked CLP to help out. This had a number of powerful results.

In the first place, we entered into quite a **complex social setting**, with all sorts of interests and dynamics. It was more or less assumed that we were the agents of the church, even though we are nominally an independent organisation. What happened is that we landed up feeling compelled to try and satisfy the needs of the church hierarchy and it became very difficult to raise critical questions back to them. The church in this place – as everywhere – has its own history and its own agenda and vision for what should be done, and it had made alliances and interventions within the groups of local people.

Secondly (and partly as a result), we had a **role more or less scripted** for and expected of us. But the script and expectations did not come from properly democratic processes. Rather, they were shaped by local elites even though they were presented as those of the 'community' and the greater good.

A third result was that the script reflected a strongly-held church emphasis on **pacification through problem-solving** by getting all the parties around the table and being reasonable. Our experience in this place and elsewhere is that this approach usually involves brokering deals between local elites. It does not mean genuinely working with those who are disempowered to allow them to problematise and challenge the elites' plans and deals, and to articulate and fight for their interests and vision of what should be done.

It was also very obvious that these local elites are men alone – especially older men with authority derived from relative wealth, property, education and/or connections to political and traditional authority structures.

All of these things create a real tension with our rhetorical commitment to 'the poor', and they raised the question whether we are really employing an animation approach at this mission site. By **being drawn into processes** driven by local elites (including the church leaders), our ability to grasp the actual community-level dynamics is severely limited:

> "To get to that level, one needs to make the community a priority and get out of the obvious and expect to dig deeper".

Given our principled commitments to justice and real transformation – and without the space to really work at the grassroots level – we realised that in this situation, it is impossible to answer even for ourselves, some fundamental questions like what really matters here and where should this process be going?

Talking more about these things after a meeting held at the mission site, we thought that it is necessary to try and ensure that *if* we continued to work here (or in a similar situation in the future), then our focus must be on creating **democratic processes and informed spaces** where ordinary people get a chance to take control of what is happening on their own terms. Getting into elite-driven processes and working within the parameters of governmental land reform mechanisms is just hopeless without this element.

A comment must be made here about the dominant approach that gets all the parties around the table to find mutually acceptable, negotiated and reasonable outcomes. This needs to be questioned because it can be dangerous: if the starting conditions of any context have characteristics of injustice, marginalisation, and inequality, then

any outcome (and certainly a good and just outcome) *cannot* be equally satisfactory to all parties. Rather it will be a continuation of what was there at the start. In fact the only reason this approach 'works' – and probably why it is favoured – is that 'the parties' are normally limited to contending elites who can negotiate a compromised deal between themselves, precisely and only by excluding and silencing those in their midst who are oppressed and marginalised.

As one CLP worker put it:

> "What I know for sure is that we are not agencies of the church or of the government. We want to see justice done in word and deed. Through animation it is hoped that we begin to change things upside down by giving power to the people. In my mind that's what I want to do here and in other communities I work with".

3.3 Accompaniment: Mother of a murdered rural man

A later accompaniment and de-briefing focused on a different set of circumstances. In this case, CLP was making first contact with the family of a young man allegedly and recently killed by white farmers and policemen. The visit was initiated by CLP, and it required a long drive from the Pietermaritzburg office into 'deep rural' areas of KwaZulu-Natal. Already, this set up different dynamics from those that arose from the intervention discussed above: whereas in the earlier one, CLP's role was very much dictated by our 'guest' status in relation to that situation, here it was **our own initiative**. This allowed us the opportunity to really test what we could learn about our own practice and intentions.

Of course, just because it was a CLP-initiated intervention, does not mean that all the other questions about the political and social mediation of contact fall away. In fact, one of the first things we reflected on was that some of our most helpful contact was enabled through a committed local ANC councillor. We realised at the time that, although he:

> "seemed like a nice guy, ... of course there are potential difficulties that arise from his interests and agendas. These can impact on CLP's profile and work in the sense of being seen as aligned with, or working for, a political party."

There was no question that this was an important situation to respond to because it spoke of the brutal domination and de-humanisation that remain defining characteristics of the lives of the rural poor. When checking back on what we actually did in the first visit, we reminded ourselves of a sort of simplified outline of the basic features of an animation approach which would need to include:

(i) to be immersed in, and start to learn a little about, that reality;

(ii) to enable critical consciousness through dialogue and reflection about that reality, that in turn (iii) enables agency and action by the dominated to

(iv) transform the underlying conditions and relations that reproduce domination (which then only brings us back to step (i) in a continuing cycle of transformation).

With that basic framework in mind, we raised a number of questions for our own reflection and discussion. Looking back at it, we could see real **tensions between our intentions for this visit and our actual practice** once we got there.

We realised that, having gone to the trouble of finding the victim's mother, she was the one who spoke the least and CLP spoke the most. Partly this simply reflects the power dynamics set up, and inherent in, the situation. But that made us painfully aware that it is imperative to find, develop and practise methods and approaches that might help to break these down, so that the dominated are 'empowered' to tell their stories on their terms and in the light of the broader communal history and experience. It was clear that we had not thought the visit through as an opportunity to enable the mother to tell her story. It turned out mostly to be about what we thought would be best, and to extract from her some data that would enable this to be done. The next step/s (using the crude animation model we've sketched out above) could have been to engage with her and her story, and to encourage the articulation of a critical consciousness by probing with questions, thereby unlocking the broader significance of the murder. For example: What does it tell us about the life that people are living here? How did/does the neighbourhood or community feel about the killing of one of their sons? And to unravel the root causes: Why does this happen? Why is it a 'true' story about the people here? What factors cause this? And so on. At the end of the day, the ways forward that the mother and the family agreed to were effectively imposed by us. Our insight on our own practice was, having approached it in this way, the focus was on the individual 'victim' case. This served to undermine our commitment to social mobilisation of the rural poor – in other words, to animation.

3.4 Accompaniment: Church leaders' meeting

A third accompaniment was to a meeting of concerned local church leaders in a predominantly rural region. Reflecting on this site of work, and CLP's role in it, raised questions about the relation between a commitment to animation and working with (the different layers of) the institutional churches. It has been important for CLP to win over churches to support struggles for justice. But as some of this work actually unfolds in practice, we have seen this slip – in our language and approach – into a project of informing and empowering church *leaders* around issues of land so that they can "make a contribution". So we discussed how the **animation approach in working with church leaders would start with humility and repentance**, recognising that churches – and more particularly church *leaders* – are implicated in the system of domination over people, and that they often silence or ignore the voices of the dominated.

From that starting point, an animation approach that engages with church leaders would be more likely to encourage them to "hold their tongues" ("speak less, listen more"), and to live with and learn from the people who are resisting injustices. From that experience, it then becomes clear if the church leadership is needed at all. This respects the church not as a hierarchical structure, but as a community of the faithful, and gives them more space to act to liberate the church. Under these conditions, the church that is animated to act will not be the leadership except in solidarity with the people. We thought that if CLP took this approach, we would probably be doing something about transforming the church.

In the case of this particular meeting that we were thinking back on, there was a concrete example. One participant in the meeting was not a church leader, but a local activist fighting farm evictions and abuses, who had agreed to work with the church structure. During the meeting she received a phone call about the demolition of some farm dwellings.

Now the question that we could have raised in the meeting could have been: "So let's reflect on why she receives that call and no-one else in this meeting ever gets such calls". (The answer to that would probably be not so much about the fact that she can dispense food and blankets, but rather because she is *there*.) Instead the response in the meeting was to use the experience of the oppressed farm dwellers as an opportunity for the church leaders to plan to shower them with patronage and goods (collecting food, clothing – the usual welfare response to poor people in trouble).

Later in reflection on this we realised that this usual practice is very different to the assumptions that hold in an animation approach. There is a speech which offers some alternatives to the behaviour where 'the church' rushes in with resources for 'the victims'. It was made by Adelar Pizetta, a member of the collective leadership

of the 'Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandes', a national school set up in 2005 in Sao Paulo by the MST[9] (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra). Pizetta's seminar that was given at the opening of the school is entitled "The Training of Political Cadres: theoretical structure, experiences and present situation", and offers some insights:

> *Therefore… aim at preparing organisers of people. We cannot solve poverty, its causes and consequences without giving power to people. To give power to people is to give knowledge and to expand their participation in the political, social, cultural life of society….*
>
> *Possibly the most difficult battle is the one we must fight with ourselves. To fight the deviations that we have inherited from bourgeois ideology: individualism, selfishness, consumerism, etc. which are lodged in our conscience and uses our behaviour to manifest when the opportunities arise. To be vigilant, to use criticism and self-criticism are indispensable…*
>
> *One of the main tasks of the cadres among people is to analyse and interpret with people the cause of their problems and collectively, through the organisation and conscious struggle, seek alternatives, solutions for the problems. Only people are the protagonist of their own emancipation.*

[9] The MST is Brazil's Landless Workers Movement which grew out of the mass struggles of the rural poor against the military dictatorship of General Geisel in the late 1970s, but was officially founded in 1984. Progressive sections of the Catholic church played a key role in its creation. MST activists have occupied unused land to establish cooperative farms and build schools and clinics. There are now 1 800 schools on MST settlements.

This reinforced for us that while relief can deal with immediate crises, it is in fact an inadequate response. We need to be promoting people's own collective analysis of their context so as to promote their own organisation of the struggle.

Some further insights much closer to home, come from Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM)[10], the shack-dwellers' movement, and its engagement with the church.

[10] For background and current material see www.abahlali.org

When CLP was asked by sections of the national ecumenical movement to set up a meeting to explore a dialogue between 'churches' and the new social movements, we thought hard about what the appropriate response should be. Certainly it didn't seem right to select a few 'leaders' from the social movements and put them in a hotel conference room with church leadership so that the latter could resolve their questions and pat themselves on the back for 'standing with the poor'. Instead, over the next few months, we tried to work out an 'answer' through democratic process within AbM specifically. We tested ideas about how people within AbM felt about this growing interest from churches in the new movements; discussions were held that turned the request around until the movement had its *own* reasons for exploring dialogue with churches; and finally we worked with a mandated sub-committee

within AbM who began to talk about their collective understanding of a developing relationship between movements of the poor and the churches.

The first meeting of this churches sub-committee took place, with some extraordinary discussion, excerpts of which are included here, but a full length version can be found on the AbM website:

> The discussions responded to the following two questions. First, "What are our experiences of the church in our struggle so far?", and second, "What do we need from churches?".
>
> So far, in the struggles of the AbM, there has only been a loose connection with churches and it has not been well-defined. It has really only arisen from time-to-time in response to incidences of tragedy. For example, after there was a death from a shack fire, a couple of Bishops attended a memorial service for the victims. Later, a delegation from AbM attended the funeral of the son of one of these Bishops. That Bishop… had been with us when tragedy struck us, and so it was important that we should be with him when he needed support.
>
> But beyond these tragedies and crises, there has been no time really to celebrate liturgy in our place together with church people, and nor have we had a constructive workshop to talk about these things properly before now. Because of this loose connection, the church doesn't know about our life in the shacks, it has no experience of it. Because it has not been present, the church does not know about the difficulties that the people go through and it does not know about the crises we face … and so, the church does not feel our pain.
>
> Because of this loose connection too, the church is not here with us to pass on important moral principles that are about how it is to be human beings – the church is not here with us.
>
> This distance is not healthy. The tragedies that happen here in the shacks, and the knocking down of people's houses, can put people onto the streets. Surely in these cases, the churches could even provide temporary shelter?…
>
> Although we ask the question about 'what do we need from the churches?', we must start from the position that we must work together. We must acknowledge that we are together actually because, inside the church, we have women, children, people who are from the jondolos – so why do we disconnect the 'Sunday church' from the day-to-day life and struggle [of] AbM? This '2-in-1' division must be discussed and the two aspects must be made to complement each other.
>
> We acknowledge that the government is a very bad listener to the poor. But it listens to the churches. So maybe we can use that to add to the strength of our voice. Perhaps church leaders can use their status to persuade the government

on our issues. How would it be if church leaders joined us in our marches – wouldn't that make the government listen more?...

This discussion makes us think not only about the church out there. It is starting to revive the religious person in us and we are beginning to wonder, 'what is our religious belief?' - if we are God's children, then what does this mean for us living in the shacks?, and what does it require of us to do?...

In the history of South Africa, before 1994 and at the peak of mobilisation and unrest, we saw some religious figures playing a role. But discrimination, racism and apartheid are not over! Now apartheid is between those who are rich and those who are poor, and we see that this apartheid is getting worse. This should make the church to be uncomfortable and therefore, the need for their intervention is just as important now as it was then – and they cannot do it on their own, they must work with the movements of the poor…

There seem to be many possibilities that can be developed between the struggles of AbM and the churches. But, we are also not naïve about the churches. We know that some parts of the church pray with the rich and powerful people, that some parts of the church continue to give their blessing to this government. But although the church has these problems, we are sure that God is on the side of the poor…

3.5 Accompaniment: Farming group

Other aspects of CLP's praxis were reflected on using yet another accompaniment, this time to a community meeting of a farming group. In this case, CLP had interacted with the people here for some time and was known, recognised and appreciated, using a very egalitarian and relaxed **style of engagement**. These sorts of subtle qualities are important because they can help determine what kind of relationships with the people are possible. We saw that the way we interact with the people can expose our underlying assumptions which, in the work of many NGOs and activists (ourselves included), are all too often arrogant and superior rather than humble or egalitarian.

Reflecting on the **'culture' of the meeting** gave insights into how meetings are generally 'done'. There are dangers of allowing a boring, deadening approach to dominate at the expense of creativity, openness and flexibility. (This shouldn't be exaggerated because of course there is a lot that is good when people take some meeting rules seriously e.g. keeping records for accountability, responsibility and sharing of information). Nonetheless, it seemed to us that we would benefit from a greater awareness of, and more practice with, facilitation skills for meetings. This would be helpful not only for our own interactions, but also to expose others to a wider set

of tools and options that they could use to make their meetings more effective and participatory.

Generally in NGOs, these are limited to good, almost 'technical', facilitation skills. In the animation approach however, the intention is to get people working with issues at deeper, more critical and conscious 'levels'. This is not to suggest that ordinary people don't work with issues at all sorts of levels – they do. But we decided we needed to find ways of making the underlying levels of discussion and debate more conscious during meetings. If we could achieve this, then they would become, potentially at least, a far more powerful (and 'self-reliant') resource for transformation.

Observing this particular meeting we realised that there really would be space to use *method* more consciously to get people to analyse beyond the immediate level (i.e. the level of factual data, or of the formal bureaucratic processes and procedures). Obviously this does not replace getting and sharing good information. But it's to move a meeting to a level where people are not just operating and defining themselves as cogs in someone else's big machine, trying to work out what they should or could do. Its a level where they're surfacing, and building awareness about the underlying forces and structures that shape the experiences and challenges they are facing. Surely this is one of the essential requirements for people becoming 'agents of their own histories'?

The necessity for a participatory method was driven home in this case also because, although there was no direct exclusion of people's participation, much of the meeting landed up being a conversation with the chairperson. This usually reflects – and results from – information, processes and power being centralised in the leader. When reflecting on this, we began to discuss methods that encourage and ensure a more democratic spread of information[11], tasks, responsibilities, and initiatives, and how CLP could facilitate these being practiced in people's own organisations and also for that matter in our own staff meetings. When democratising these processes, sometimes existing leadership resists and then undermines such efforts in an attempt to hold onto their power. The shift to animation frequently provokes resistance by existing power blocks – something else that seemed to be emerging as a common theme.

We went on to discuss that in building the possibility of people's self-resilient action (for the longer term too), it is vital to work in **ways that unlock capacities within people.** For example, in this place when ideas are being floated around, conscious effort could be made to enable farm dwellers themselves to contribute meaningfully to, and take democratic leadership on, agriculturally-based initiatives. There is a pervasive attitude that places farm work low down on a social ranking system[12]. On the one hand, these attitudes shouldn't be left unchallenged. On the other hand though, an animation-style process should build from reflections on this very reality. If people are going to transform the present into a better life, then that has to be informed

[11] 'information is power'

[12] Obviously at a certain level this results from the experiences of people working on South African capitalist farms where conditions are appalling, but it also reflects other negative or reactionary attitudes – e.g., relating to gendered roles and the devaluation of 'women's work', or relating to western urban and industrial ideas about what marks 'progress', 'success' and 'modernity'.

by an imagination of what that better life is, and especially what underlying conditions would make it possible. An essential part of that transformation is to critically analyse what it is that makes the present unacceptable, and only after that is it possible to consciously choose and build an alternative that really has the possibility of remaining an alternative in the longer run. There was a lot to learn and think about from this particular accompaniment!

Here it became clear that the point of the animation approach is to move beyond finding ways to appease the poor, enabling them to scratch out a living and not mobilising beyond that to change the bigger picture. In practice, we know that the big picture really *is* big. It's a globalised system of capitalist domination and exploitation – and we know that the marginalised and impoverished can't wait for some global revolution to change the whole world before they can start to make advances. Nonetheless, those advances need to build towards that future rather than accommodating and reinforcing the status quo. They need to express, in the liberated spaces that people make, the values and the ways of being and working that are necessary to change the big picture.

So for example in this place we thought that, before marching into new projects (e.g. using the land to grow food or crops), we and the people there should *first* reflect on their experiences of poverty, and then together explore and choose different approaches that could build into their imagined projects. So much of the experience of farm dwellers is shaped by values such as putting profit and productivity before people, authoritarian 'baaskap', competition, exploitation, racism, patriarchy, and so on. If these are surfaced as part of an analysis of experience, then the people could choose to build in ways that are consciously trying to express and nurture *different* values – values that come from putting people and their needs first, democracy, participation, cooperation, solidarity, non-racism and post-sexism. Of course that's no guarantee that these values will magically emerge or that they will remain intact just because we as animators had that intention – the values and systems of domination are powerful and deeply ingrained forces. To keep the vision of an alternative alive requires constant reflection and determination. Anyway, this approach could express itself in practices like ensuring cooperative approaches to food production, collective decision-making and discussion processes, non-sexist divisions of labour and so on.

In the community group's discussions they talked a lot about the role of the local councillor. This highlighted the fact that these processes are inherently **political in the formal sense** too. Later we talked about three aspects of this:

Firstly, by working in some of the ways discussed above, people began to articulate their understanding that the frustrations they experience locally are seldom just the result of the attitude of a particular local politician. This perhaps echoes a more general concern that many rebellions across South Africa at the moment focus on

the ‘lack of delivery’, and vent huge anger at a local politician when it’s clear that replacing that individual won’t change the fundamental underlying reasons for their situation.

Secondly, of course people must decide on political tactics and methods themselves and adopt these at their own pace at a local level etc. But it’s equally important and useful for people to learn from and discuss with others who are in similar situations but at different stages in their local struggle, or who can offer other experiences and possibilities worth sharing. There is a tendency to begin with the ‘petition’ approach to make requests to or demands of authority. There’s nothing inherently wrong with this, and we discussed how it is essential for CLP to accompany people as they try these sorts of approaches. But, in the light of any analysis of the broader context, it is very likely that there will be real limits to what can be won on this basis. As people pause to reflect at the various stages of their struggle, an organisation like CLP could help to expand the ‘struggles and tactics toolbox’ offering them more choice.

Thirdly, we speculated about how different social classes within a community tend to favour different tactics. In this particular place, the land committee is dominated by respectable older men. Would disgruntled youth favour a more militant approach that could contribute to a more transformative political culture? Would unemployed women lay greater stress on wider participation?

Lastly, this accompaniment prompted a conversation about **the role of clergy**. Some of us were wondering why so few local clergy are active within the structures, struggles and processes initiated by people on church-owned land. Maybe in the back of our minds is a romantic vision of activist-priests, but talking about the dynamics in this particular place reminded us of a more general point: that church leaders are at best an ambiguous force and at worst (and in most cases) an oppressive one. Their allegiances and accountability are seldom to local people but rather to and through their location within church structures and systems. So, while there may be all sorts of reasons why not many of them are involved in community processes directly, at least part of the reason is the entirely correct perception of local people that, to defend and control their own processes and agendas, they’d better keep the clergy at a distance!

3.6 Consolidation

The following highlights some of the key points from this chapter:

a) Animation requires a continuous critique of practice – everybody's and especially our own.

b) Ongoing cycles of reflection and action together with the marginalised, enables a more critical consciousness and transformation.

c) Making distinctions that are based on *real* practice, people's *actual* struggles, and the *different* parts of 'civil society' is important.

d) From the first intervention in any place, it is important to be principled, clear and consistent and, where necessary, to challenge others' presumptions about the role to be played by the animator.

e) Surfacing conflict, and/or disrupting existing elite consensus, can be productive and necessary to the process of animation.

f) The focus of animation must be on creating opportunities where ordinary people can take control of what is happening on their own terms, and challenge elite-driven processes.

g) A necessary starting point emphasises listening to those who suffer, and encouraging them to tell their story. This requires creating opportunities for it to happen, and is based on an assumption that those who suffer are intelligent, creative and resourceful. It is premised on a love for people that can never be reconciled with a contemptuous or arrogant attitude.

h) If the institutional churches (and in particular church *leadership*) are to play a constructive role in the struggle for justice, this needs to begin in humility, recognising their complicity (historical and ongoing) in processes of domination, and from there move toward possibilities of principled solidarity with the oppressed.

i) The paths toward freedom begin in the concrete realities of the struggles of poor and oppressed people, and cannot be mapped beforehand or outside of these.

j) There are approaches, tools and methods to use and adapt in our work that enable this kind of praxis, – a praxis that promotes a deeper level of reflection and awareness about the underlying forces that shape the experiences and challenges that people are facing. From this place their creative capacity for transformation may be unlocked.

k) Tactics for action and change that emerge from such democratic spaces must be respected as the principal drivers. This requires that outsiders, NGOs, and activists do not impose their projects onto people.

4. Emerging Praxis – Dialogue, Action and Reflection in Struggle

By 2006, many themes and challenges had repeatedly emerged (and still do!), and were becoming familiar to us. But by revisiting them at a different stage in our journey means they always contain something new – including new possibilities – if we are prepared to be attentive and open. So this chapter draws on some of our notes and reflections during the year 2006, and as previously, in each case they are based on specific work experiences that we took time to think through reflectively, collectively and critically. But we had adjusted our method: Whereas in the first phase our method was to accompany and *then* debrief and discuss based on tough questions, this time around, we preceded these steps with some joint discussions *before* going in order to try and find – and prepare for – opportunities to shift our practice closer to the kinds of processes and outcomes we were aiming for.

4.1 Preparing for practice: Community meeting I

One of the interventions early in this phase reinforced real questions about our praxis that had already surfaced. The context here was a residents' committee meeting of older men, and its institutional-political dynamics mirrored others that CLP has been drawn into, where the processes and terms are set and dominated by these local elites and institutional players:

> *"In these spaces it is nearly impossible to make moral claims on behalf of constituencies and principals that are not organised and representing themselves".*

We had begun to see that in general, but especially in these elite-dominated spaces, CLP cannot limit its presence to meetings like this. It is clearly **necessary to work intensively at grassroots level** over time, and precisely outside these elite-controlled spaces. Failure to do this means that all that's left is to try and manipulate the space to grant reformist concessions in response to the carefully coded and timid appeals that we as CLP feel capable of making. This does not feel at all like animation!

We realised that these sorts of challenges confirmed that we must return to two fundamental tasks that had emerged already from the first phase of our critical reflections: Firstly, it is necessary to **articulate certain principles for our work** – especially that

we will *not* work where access to the people of a place is denied through the control of undemocratic leadership, and that we *will* work in open, democratic and participatory ways. Secondly, is the task of doing it – actually **working democratically with the people**.

Neither is easy. Practice of this nature *will* be resisted by existing gatekeepers and elite leaders, and this may well make it difficult, and at times impossible, for CLP to continue to work in some places. Certainly this particular meeting illustrated these problems very well. It was very clear that the existing local leadership exhibited all these negative tendencies, and they had shown themselves to be willing to keep control through intimidation and violence – both of which could also well be directed against CLP if challenged.

In our pre-meeting discussions, we had talked about whether there was any possibility of making some clear statements of principle and of democratising processes. During the actual community meeting, one CLP worker chose a moment to take the risk of challenging the leadership to a degree, and the rest of us from CLP who knew what was happening, were aware of our own real fear and tension. We essentially tried to insert two principled positions into the discussions: firstly, that evictions[13] are hurtful and bad and that they create the conditions for worse conflict in the future;

and secondly, that we should hear from *all* the people living in this place in order to move forward. The reaction of the meeting to these two points and how they were made, was interesting and revealing.

We heard the stand against evictions as pretty decisive and strongly made. The committee itself had been somewhat divided on this issue but our sense was that in spite of the way the point was made, there was almost palpable relief to leave the threat of carrying out evictions behind and to move forward. And it was striking that this had the further effect that people immediately started to see and to talk about the inter-connectedness between the two different groups and their problems on the land there.

By contrast, CLP's pointer to a more democratic process was resolutely shut down and the leadership closed ranks and aggressively articulated their gate keeping function, reminding each other of their good intentions and their history of leading the people. For us this sharpened the question: how do we justify continuing to work here? For it is clear that democracy in this place will come, if at all, through animating a mass base against the existing elites. Without such a base, the existing leadership clearly feels empowered and burdened with the responsibility to act wisely on behalf of the people.

[13] The 'residents committee' is deeply invested in a claim for all the land at this place and other, more recently arrived, people are seen as a threat to their plans. Key players in the 'residents committee' have actively taken steps to forcibly evict these 'illegals' and 'encroachers' as they call them (when they're trying to be polite). As far as CLP can tell, these 'illegals' have very real and important issues too, and it is not at all clear that they really have a less morally-compelling basis for fighting for land and a decent future as well.

Another related element to emerge from our debriefing conversations – and to which we will return in section 4.3 – is that perhaps one way to begin shifting practice would be to ensure that CLP *starts* with participatory processes of social analysis of the place we're going into.

4.2 Preparing for practice: Workshop of church & local activists

On this occasion, we were facilitating a workshop of an emerging network of local church-based and grassroots rights activists from different rural areas. Again, we tried to think beforehand about the process from an animation perspective, and also to de-brief afterwards, surfacing for ourselves a series of critical questions and observations[14].

[14] One of our frustrations in this experience was that, although we had planned to work consciously with different process tools and try some new participatory exercises, a number of these had to be abandoned as a result of time and logistical problems that we couldn't control – not an uncommon experience!

At the workshop, a first observation that just less than a quarter of the participants were women again surfaced a theme with which we were becoming familiar. Compared to women's almost complete marginalisation in so many other structures, this gender ratio is actually a step forward but it still indicates **male dominance in the representation of struggles**. Thinking about this after the workshop, we wondered what impact this generalised pattern has in terms of either entrenching or shifting these patterns at the grassroots. What is happening is that mostly men attend these sorts of occasions, and therefore mostly men appropriate the political 'capital' out of networking and discussions. Consequently there are proportionately fewer women being 'empowered' to organise and take initiative when they return to their different grassroot constituencies.

Another observation concerned the role of participants who were either clergy or, in some way, formally linked to local church hierarchies. During the workshop, this church-linked sub-group had quite a dominant presence, and we noticed that it infected the collective mood or culture for much of the time, inducing a sort of obedient restraint. Now in the struggles waged by this network, this sub-group actually has an important role to play, but we nonetheless recognised that we had not taken concrete **steps to sensitise these *de facto* elite and authority figures to listen** and encourage speaking by poor and less powerful people. This sensitisation is also necessary because it is so different from the role usually associated with, replicated by, and expected from church leaders, and because their pre-existing authority and leadership claims are not directly democratic or accountable to a grassroots base.

In workshop discussions about what participants thought was essential for taking their struggles forward, there was a **persistent emphasis on 'a fund'** – and this concern with the issue of resources became a third focus area in our debriefing reflections. In retrospect, perhaps this should have been challenged more directly and

immediately by CLP. Although it would be clearly wrong to oppose accessing resources that enable struggle, we also know that the mindset – often created by the practice and patronage of NGOs – that fixates on securing external funding brings with it horrible distortions and tendencies that infect and shape the emergent vehicles for struggle.

In a similar way, we were struck by the **repeated reference by some participants to 'experts'** – meaning outside experts – whose help was considered necessary. Undoubtedly there are resources (including both expertise and money) that can and should be drawn on in the unfolding struggles and movement-building processes. But the powerful and predictable tendency of these is to turn against the people's agency, and to render the emerging activism dependent on, and servants of, outsiders' projects and fantasies. In hindsight, we could have shared more explicitly with workshop participants our conviction that a key step in building sustained and effective grassroots movements, is the strengthening of a democratic base and a collective self-confidence to speak and act in and for itself. This includes a strong critique of outside 'experts', be they NGOs (ourselves included), activists, politicians, leaders and so on.

Allied to this, we were struck listening to language from some participants that persistently pointed to an expectation of 'salvation' by outside agents – in other words, an even greater level of dependency than the 'help' mentioned above. We reflected that sometimes this expectation provides a far-too-easy explanation of failure, excusing people from honestly reflecting on why *they* have failed. The first explanation runs something like this: "We did not have (insert the nominated outside agent – money, experts, lawyers, and so on) and therefore we have failed", and the second is rendered as: "The outside agent that we did have, and from whom we expected salvation, has let us down, and therefore we have failed".

We had tried to structure the workshop process so that it was necessary for participants to draw on their *own* resources and capacities for analysis and intellectual work. One noticeable result of this, was the **extraordinary potential for theological production**, which is linked to the close connection between participants' activism in this project, and their faith. We realised that theological production by people in the context of struggle, can become an opportunity for both critical thinking and militancy – in contrast to its more usual function to induce resignation, conservatism and submission. We therefore decided to explore these opportunities further, since they have the potential to service people's struggles and faith, and also extend that struggle against the dominance of institutional church structures and their theological armoury. One idea coming from the participants that illustrated this for us, was that the people must "taste the Kingdom here and now". This seemed to us enormously evocative and powerful: It linked not only to a radical perspective found within eschatology,[15] but also affirmed the need for 'prefigurative politics'

[15] The theology pertaining to death and final destiny.

which some (especially in the anarchist traditions) have always insisted is absolutely necessary if action is to produce future freedom.

An important element in the overall shift to animation has been a greater awareness for CLP of how important it is to **listen to what people actually say**. This probably sounds ridiculously obvious but it is surprising how prevalent the opposite is in the actual practice of many NGOs and activists. As we attempted to listen during this particular workshop, it became very clear just how sick and tired the rural poor are of talking, negotiating and waiting for what they know to be their rightful justice. It was also noticeable that the effort to facilitate a democratic workshop process enabled us to hear a deeper and more honest mix of how people felt about this struggle. Firstly, it was being said that there are moments of being really dispirited and feeling abandoned. However, secondly there appeared genuine indications of commitment to greater militancy and targeted struggle *against* power. Then thirdly – and it was very important to hear this – the absence of yet more appeals *to* power in the plans and strategies that were developed. To the extent that these **features are present within group action** is indicative of a shift to animation – the constitution of people's power outside and against existing power. In this light, we can see that the recognition of abandonment and betrayal *and* the simultaneous assertion of independent power are two elements of the same moment – a moment that carries both the awful necessity for radical struggle and the beauty of its possibility.

One of the most subtle ways in which those outside of this struggle effectively undermine people's own capacity *to* struggle, is the (often sub-conscious) **assumption that we know what 'real' struggle looks like**. While we believe we should improve the forms and practices of democratic participation, at the end of the day it is also necessary for us to abandon any 'fetishisation' of one or other of these forms or practices. An example of this for CLP is our usual response to the 'preachers'[16] within people's structures, whom we have often seen to be problematic, with their propensity to dominate and silence quieter voices, and thought they must be challenged through disciplined commitment to democratic participation.

[16] We mean here those who often step forward and volunteer themselves to articulate on behalf of others – the 'high talkers'.

In this workshop, we had an old man who in his speaking performed an extraordinary feat, telling a story that started in the articulation of historical, collective failure:

> "We fought this fight with our own minds and we failed; we tried all we could and we have not succeeded; we have come here discouraged".

He moved to an explanation of failure in terms of poverty and powerlessness:

> "The farmers still have the power; our children are killed; they have the lawyers and still win the cases; because we are poor, it is difficult to move forward – and they prey on that".

But then his story moved into the venue of the workshop, collecting together and charging with potency, elements of the moment which spoke of movement towards collective struggle:

> "Thanks for this meeting, a space to talk and bring people together. God is on our side – we can win this battle".

So actually sometimes the 'preachers' are organic story-tellers whose gift is to weave narratives that are authentic and representative for a particular moment and people – not just in content, but more especially in where they start and where they take us. We realised that we cannot make assumptions about the forms of real struggle!

In one part of this workshop, participants had to work together in an exercise to imagine and describe some sort of ideal future, a future worth fighting for. There was some real difficulty with this task – which we have seen happen elsewhere too, so it seems it's a characteristic moment. But nevertheless it is important to let people grapple with it in ways that allow for (i) critical distance[17] from their own very immediate context, issues and struggles and (ii) the imagination of freedom, liberation, and the good life. We reflected afterwards that the use of **tools and methodologies that push people to work and think critically** in this way are really important. They are necessary also because we should not assume that brainwashing, dominant ideologies, and messed up ways of thinking don't exist and affect us all. Tools for animation help people to work through collective processes of critical reflection among themselves, that start to break down these illusions and distortions, and allow for new insight and greater clarity at a much deeper level of analysis and perception.

Later in the process, people started to develop action plans – but they were subject to a 'rule' that these had to be completely independent of outside resources[18]. We did this because, if we are serious about animation as a process to build movements for **people's *independent* action**, then the models of action that we, as NGOs endorse, must be replicable *without us*. Our intention should be to work ourselves out of a job, and not (as has become more and more the case in the NGO sector) to work in ways that make us indispensable, justifying our concern for our own institutional 'sustainability'. In this workshop, the insistence on plans that could be carried out independently of external resources was a useful and productive experiment – though we didn't realise until much later how productive it had actually been. Weeks after the workshop, the network was mobilised to take action concerning yet another brutal violation of basic human rights in the area. What was very telling was that the decision, the mobilisation and the action happened independently of any NGO contact person. The people later explained that this was the result of the workshop exercise. It was a conscious effort to make decisions and take actions by and for themselves – this is massive in our view.

4.3 Preparing for practice: Community meeting II

From our notes and discussions of yet another intervention in another place, there are two related and key areas that are about this shift to animation as a whole. The first is a short comment: in the earlier phases as we made this shift in our practice, we were sometimes tempted to think that we could achieve it by learning and using the right 'tools'. Now however, we are clear that new *tools* are essential, but it is a mistake to see them as discrete parts that can be deployed without changing the real fundamental *orientation of our mode* of engagement at the particular places where we work.

The second area that was sharply raised by thinking about the challenges in this particular place, was a return to a question that has already been mentioned, namely: do we not need to re-think the process of our engagement with places and groups, so as to avoid landing up being trapped again and again in scenarios where we are scripted into roles that are not in line with the animation approach? We still need to work some more on what this entails, but we can share some of our initial thoughts about what a better process might look like from the beginning:

- After receiving an invitation to a place, we should make clear our basic approach that would be explicit about the fact that we will work in ways that are: open; democratic; principled; reflecting a decisive option for the marginalised; supporting processes of liberation and transformation that are chosen by the people in this way; and building broader movements of transformation.
- Once that's clear, our first contact should perhaps be a minimum of two days listening to the people and getting to know the place and the people *in situ* and more or less 'informally'. This process can be enriched using Freirian 'community survey' techniques (for example, the processes spelled out in the *Training for Transformation* books as well as other participatory exercises that are available).
- We should then return, reflect and write, adding also additional information from other sources about this place.
- This draft 'product' could structure a community-wide consultative process or meeting around key questions that have arisen (i.e. what we have genuinely heard and learned from the people) and not be an opportunity to drive home our separate conclusions!
- Perhaps we can be involved in the convening of such an open meeting by supporting local efforts and by ensuring that it is known about and open to all. But simultaneously, it would be vital to make sure that processes of convening, planning, and running it are very much locally 'owned'.

- Perhaps too, we would be in a position to share tools and methods we are learning about, that help discussion to move beyond the surface level towards critical thinking and the surfacing of conflicts and difficulties.
- The formation of local structures and processes, and clear mandates to work on key emerging issues could be encouraged, accompanied and nurtured.
- Later, we should try and write reports that service these processes and also draw on our own reflection to facilitate ongoing mutual dialogue with the people in deciding what to do next.

4.4 Consolidation

The following points highlight some of the key things we draw from this preceding section:

a) It is essential to clearly articulate certain principles for the way the work of animation is done: that the animator will *not* work where access to the people of a place is denied through the control of undemocratic leadership, and *will* work in open, democratic and participatory ways.

b) It is necessary to work intensively with people at grassroots level over time, and outside of the control of 'elites'.

c) Challenges to power require courage, and they provoke reaction from threatened elites. It is therefore important to recognise that for the local people in each place, the risks associated with these challenges can be very high. Outsiders must understand this, and respect that local people are best placed to make these assessments.

d) Despite uneven progress, the 'voice' and representation of the people is still overwhelmingly male dominated and, until this is challenged, then democratic praxis does not exist.

e) People who are in recognised positions of leadership in the institutional church have a source of power and authority which is usually used to sustain domination over people. Therefore it is important for them to be challenged to listen and encourage speaking by poor and less powerful people.

f) People in a place of struggle, often have an expectation that solutions and salvation will be delivered by outside agencies or resources. It is necessary – and tough – to disabuse people of this notion so that they turn to themselves for their own liberation. For NGOs, churches and activists this very often means forsaking the 'saviour' role.

g) People's spiritual capacities can become a source of hope, insight and strength when accessed critically in processes of struggle.

h) It is essential for the animator to put aside assumed cleverness and listen to what people *actually* say.

5. Walking in Circles or Making new Paths?

In a sense it may seem strange that, after three years of this journey of ours, we have basically returned to the same challenge that set us off in the first place – how to change our praxis, through critical reflection, to enable building the critical voice of the marginalised! Have we simply been walking in circles, or is this a little bit how it feels to make the paths by walking them? To be honest, there are moments when it feels more like the former. When we walk into another 'community' meeting dominated by hard old authoritarian men; when we are undermined in our approach by other NGOs and activist elites; and even when we sit together before or after meetings knowing that we still have more questions and challenges than answers and victories – it's hard not to wonder whether we are moving forward at all.

We realise that we do not have a 'blueprint' for good praxis that will inherently produce good results and guarantee we don't make mistakes – far from it! But somehow it is precisely the paradox of certainty that our uncertainty is correct; that a shift has in fact already taken place in our approach which is slowly finding expression in our mixed-up practice – that convinces us that we, and the people we work with, are indeed making new paths by walking together. This shift in praxis is commented on in a letter to CLP, by one of the groups with whom we are working:

> *[you have an] approach of being the servant of the poor rather than being the master; … willingness to listen, learning rather than masterminding and dictating over the poor. It is [your] … common practice to ask the following question: "how can I help? Where do you think we should support? To what extent?" Many service providers offer what they think, and eventually this imposes on the poor and ends up shifting the focus and diverting the whole agenda…*
>
> *We remain committed in building a massive Social Movement united and democratic, to challenge all the immoral policies and inhuman practices by the State that forbid our fundamental rights to consultation, a right to know, a right to life, a right to land and housing. Yours is to add value.*

When we began this journey, the imperative for change in our praxis was derived at least partly from *our own* analysis of the context. Now – three years on – that imperative is reinforced far more forcefully in the analyses and the anger of the *poor* that our efforts at a new praxis have at last enabled us to hear more clearly. In other words, as we have attempted to walk in this way, we are now hearing from the poor themselves, confirming that the way we are walking opens up the possibility of freedom.