

Building capacity

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However, critics of this view of capacity building find it problematic, since it implies that capacity and resourcefulness do not already exist in communities. This may lead to a situation where attempts at capacity building increase dependency relations with outside agents, rather than improving reliance on local knowledge and expertise.

Capacity building has been the subject of much dialogue and debate between CBOs and the service organisations often called in to help them acquire information and skills. This can be a problematic relationship, with CBOs becoming dependent on service organisations and the belief being reinforced that community organisations cannot fulfil their capacity needs without other organisations.

But who does capacity building? Do communities identify their own needs and initiate their own programmes, contracting



Workshop in progress

service organisations to provide specific assistance? Do communities and CBOs rely on other organisations to do the whole job? Ideally communities will reach the stage where they no longer need service organisations.

Another difficult issue is who has access to capacity building in the community or organisation? It may well be that those who already have power in organisations and communities are first in line for capacity building and thereafter control access to capacity-building programmes.

Ideally, as many people as possible should benefit. However, capacity building can create, foster and sustain powerful elites within community organisations and encourage the development of hierarchies.

Building capacity is clearly an enormous challenge to all those involved in development and democratisation.

Michelle Booth is office co-ordinator in the Western Cape office of Idasa.

Tackling the feverish state of the nation

By ALISON CURRY

VOTER EDUCATION is the growth industry of the moment. The demand is huge and the supply is not always able to meet burgeoning needs. If the whole exercise is to be worthwhile, however, it is important to ask some critical questions about who needs to know, and what it is they need to know.

If voter education is simply about how to make a cross on a ballot paper, then the implications for those involved in voter education are clear: voter education is for those who have never voted before. But, at Idasa's Training Centre for Democracy, we have found that voter education goes much deeper than the mechanics of voting.

If one were to take the emotional temperature of the average South African (if such a creature exists), the reading would reflect a fairly feverish state of fear, confusion, cynicism or disillusionment.

It is quite clear that such feelings exist across the board, although black communities are probably the most traumatised communities, with the least access to support and counselling. No one is unaffected, however. No one is immune, despite the height of their walls or the cost of their security systems.

Although it is the black citizens of this country who have borne the brunt of years of apartheid and now reel under the most staggering levels of daily violence, many whites are traumatised by the fear, albeit less direct, that they too could become victims of an attack like the St James Church massacre; the fear that things will change for the worse after the election; that there will be a slide into chaos.

If one thing is certain it is that the future holds change on a whole lot of levels. For most people, regardless of colour or culture, change is a scary business, even positive change such as promotion or the birth of a baby. Fear of change, a very deep-rooted fear operating on a number of levels, is what we are experiencing on an unprecedented national scale right now. Those involved in voter education therefore need to be sensi-

tive to the fears of all South Africans.

Obviously the people who need the most assistance are those who have never voted before. For people who are illiterate, the thought of having to enter a voting station and make a cross on a ballot paper – in the right place in the right way – is extremely intimidating. Added to this is the often expressed fear of violence on polling day and the related fear of exposure to violence while commuting to and from township areas.

However, to maintain that voter education is a "black" or shopfloor issue is to miss the challenge of nation-building, of shaping a common vision, understanding the real constraints, and developing commitment to the long road.

All South Africans are suffering from different degrees of limited vision. It is a national disease and no one is immune. We all tend to see things from where we are standing and we as trainers are not exempt from the syndrome. We too see only a part of the picture, perceive it from a particular angle.

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But by sharing and discussing our fears and confusions in groups we can help to build a sense of the bigger picture, the process operating behind the events – the headline-making, the tragic, the technical, the traumatic events that are our daily media meal.

I have been deeply moved in training sessions where real honesty has emerged in groups made up of very different people. A white clerk said: "Well, I am a Rhodesian and I lost all my family in the war so I am pretty bitter. I had to start all over again here, and I'm not going to let the ANC take away my assets."



An election training workshop at the University of the Western Cape.

ERIC MILLER

A black colleague replied: "Well, I lost the two closest people in my life – my husband and my son – in the struggle for liberation, and still I am not free. My home has been burnt. Every day when I leave for work I don't know whether I will see my daughter that night. But still I try not to be bitter."

This kind of sharing enabled us all to shed a little bit of blackness, a little bit of whiteness, and to engage a little bit more with each other as individual people – a bit more of Mercia, a bit more of Thembeke ...

Then there is, of course, the factual and logistical level to deal with and the fact that the coming election will be different from all previous elections not only because it will be the first democratic election, but on a number of other counts:

- The size of the electorate – 22,7 million as opposed to the approximately 4 million who voted in the last whites-only referendum;

- The scale of the election – there will be between 7 000 and 9 000 voting stations throughout the country, each requiring trained officials, monitors and party observers;

- The number of parties participating – at present there are 26 parties taking part in multi-party negotiations;

- People will be voting for parties, not candidates;

- Parties will have lists of nominated candidates at both a national and regional level;

- People will vote once, but the vote will be a dual vote, counting as both a national and regional vote;

- A system of proportional representation will be used, unlike the previous Westminster winner-takes-all, constituency-based system;

- The voting period could be between one and three days;

- In all probability there will be no voters roll;

- There will be a negotiated electoral procedure, including a code of conduct;

- Party campaigns will be subject to negotiated restrictions.

Thus, the challenge facing us lies beyond ensuring a high turn-out for the election. Certainly a high turn-out will enhance the legitimacy of the elected government, but it is political tolerance before, during and after the election that will legitimise the process. It is only if we really seek to understand one another's fears, for fear is at the root of all prejudice, that we will help to achieve this.

Alison Curry is a tutor in the Training Centre for Democracy.

Voter education 'can work'

By RONEL SCHEFFER

"IN CAMBODIA we learnt that voter education can work," said UN electoral officer Judy Thompson. Later, she added: "But part of our message to Cambodians was that there are no instant fixes."

Right now the latter lesson must stand Cambodian voters in good stead. Four months after a hugely successful election – and on the eve of the departure of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (Untac) – the country remains fearfully fragile. A shaky transitional government is trying to rebuild the country and write a constitution, but the Khmer Rouge still controls some 20 per cent of the country and continues its campaign of violence.

On May 23 this year, the Cambodian people – victims of war and terror for nearly three decades – decided that, whatever the difficulties, any election was better than no election. They were determined to complete the final stage of the settlement agreed to by all parties in Paris in October 1991. A 90 per cent poll was returned despite a Khmer Rouge boycott.

An atmosphere of violence and intimidation still prevailed shortly before the elections. Yet it seems that the four million voters believed what they had been hearing from Untac over the previous 11 months: their vote was secret and no one would retaliate against them for casting it.

"Under the circumstances it was truly an act of courage to vote," said Thompson. "When Untac arrived the year before we were dealing with people who were full of fear, and there was real skepticism about a secret vote."

"But then slowly the people began grasping the idea that they were going to do it. It was quite amazing."

The government of the day did not win the election and did not accept the results. The vice-president and his army (there were four armies in Cambodia) attempted to secede but the whole exercise fizzled out two days later.

"The voters believed that they had voted and they were not going to give it up. Sooner or later the politicians have to listen," said Thompson.