

# A REVIEW OF

# THE E.D.A. PEOPLES WORKBOOK

(Robert Berold, Collette Cain (ed.), Environmental and Development Agency, Box 62054, Marshalltown, 2107, Johannesburg, 1981, pp. 560, R10 or R5).

by M. G. Whisson.

E.D.A. came into being in 1977, a little group of practical radicals whose concern was to provide the expertise necessary for impoverished communities to make the most of what little resources they possess, and to tap other sources of knowledge and materials for self-help projects. The broad concept is excellent and admirable, meeting people at their point of need - hunger, ill health, poverty - and working with them to overcome their problems in such a way that they can become self-sufficient. Putting the concept into practice at the level of the individual community, where ignorance, fatalism and lassitude born of malnutrition and generations of experience, may be more formidable obstacles to self-help than any material deprivation, presents all sorts of challenges more difficult for middle class matriculants and graduates to understand. Development for survival then involves more than telling the people how to do things better, and showing them how to maximise their potential, it involves the vastly more complex task of convincing them that they **can** do things better, and that they have potential to be maximised. It is hard indeed to respond to people's needs, when they have found that it is less painful if they stop wanting. It is greatly to the credit of the leadership and fieldworkers of E.D.A. that they have not allowed themselves to get bogged down by too much agonising over the priorities of motivation and action, but where their help has been sought and opportunity has arisen, they have got on with the job.

**People's Workbook**, which at R5 (or even at R10 for those willing to meet the real costs of production) for 560 large pages must be the best bargain available in 1982, reflects both the philosophy and the practicality of the E.D.A. It begins with a twenty-page picture history of South Africa as seen and experienced by an unusually well informed Transkeian ancient, who integrates the experience of his adult grandson into the wider context of the sub-continent's history. 'Baba's' account tends to see the blacks as either moved by the inevitable processes of history (Shaka gets no credit for the rise of the Zulu empire), or reacting to white greed and power as their golden age came to an end - either way, rather lacking in initiative. In terms of the purpose of the book as a whole, this section is not very important, but it could set an unfortunate tone and raise the hackles of conservative power brokers who would object to 'political' matters being dealt with in this way. Whilst it is indubitably true that the situation of blacks in rural areas today is the outcome of white government policies over two centuries or more, to stress it is to put the moral obligation on the government to put things right - when the purpose of the book is to help and encourage the people themselves to put things right. And

while raising conservative hackles is a helathy exercise in itself, if it leads to any inhibitions being placed on the valuable practical material getting to the people at whom it is aimed, it will be most unfortunate.

By far the largest part of the book is devoted to 'agriculture' - which includes making the most of one's tiny garden in town or resettlement camp as well as dealing with larger scale peasant activities. Most of the material is presented very clearly, with adequate pictures and diagrams to show how a reasonably literate and careful person can make compost, grow vegetables, breed and slaughter pigs, chickens, rabbits and ducks, keep bees and house all his living creatures. For people with a little more land than those who live in resettlement camps or in towns, there is a long section dealing as simply as possible with farming on a larger scale, including the cultivation of grain and the proper use of commercial fertilisers and pesticides. But 'agriculture' is not purely technical; advice is offered on how to keep proper records and marketing. The whole section is interspersed with interviews which have been recorded between E.D.A. personnel and people who are actually engaged in small scale farming and marketing - making the vital point that anyone can make life for themselves a little better through their own efforts and the application of simple techniques.

The next major section, on water, deals with some of the problems associated with that lethal resource - for it has been remarked that more people die as a result of drinking water than of anything else. The twin problems of supply and cleanliness are dealt with in about forty pages. Here, perhaps as nowhere else, the strength and weakness of the engineering expertise of the editor is most apparent. While the construction of pumping equipment is skilfully presented, and very simple if one has a well equipped workshop where the parts can be cut to the correct size, such things are not readily found in the areas in which the pumps are most urgently needed. But as with so much of the book, there is sufficient good advice on what is possible under the most primitive conditions, that the section is well worthwhile. The reader however needs to look for what he can do, rather than be put off by what he cannot do (or cannot afford), which demands an attitude to reading which is rarely incalculated in primary schools anywhere in South Africa.

The section on health, which covers seventy pages, provides a well balanced account of what the reader can do for himself, and what must be taken for professional attention. The signs, and symptoms of the more common ailments are simply described, together with treatments where these are readily and safely carried out at home, and the need for professional

care where appropriate. The importance of a proper cure rather than the alleviation of distress is also indicated. What is most striking perhaps in the long list of disorders that the editors saw fit to mention is the number of diseases which come about, or which are exacerbated through poverty and the lack of clean water supplies for drinking and cleansing purposes. Pregnancy and the care of infants also occupies a substantial amount of space in this section, as is appropriate in communities where infant mortality is often over 20% .

The section on legal rights brings the editors back into the sensitive political arena, although here the case for upsetting conservative power brokers is much stronger than it is in the opening 'history. The thrust of this section is not "haven't they been awful to us", but "this is what we can do in the situation", an approach much more in keeping with the book as a whole. The section on hire purchase is particularly well done – not the predictable counsels of perfection, but a clear recognition that hire purchase offers many people their only chance to obtain their material wants, but that by knowing what the dangers are, the buyer can protect himself from gross exploitation. (Much the same good sense pervades the similarly morally and emotionally charged issue of birth control, as the editors recognise that there are more than macro-Malthusian issues involved in peoples' decisions about the number of children that they should have).

"Working in groups" covers a wide range of practical activities, most of which may be better carried out in groups, but several of which can be engaged in by individuals or families equally well. Advice ranges from the use of sewing machines to "fixing cars" and from shoemaking to literacy. Dying and blockprinting might strike the casual reader as activities more appropriate to middle class suburbs than to the target communities, but as with the interviews about newspapers, museums and theatres, which come into the same broad section, the editors have recognised that even in the poorest communities, especially among the younger people, there is a demand for cultural activities, and for means of communication other than word of mouth. Sport gets no mention – clearly it is seen neither as educational, nor as a form of group "work" – though here perhaps the bias of the editors is showing.

The final substantive section, which deals with building, has the same strengths and weaknesses as that which dealt with water supplies. It also includes one remarkable lacuna. Having stated (through an interview) that more and more people have forgotten the art of traditional housebuilding, the editors do not tell their readers how to do it today. Wattle and daub, with anthill cement and a grass roof probably provides the best value for money and hours of labour of any building technique used in housebuilding in Southern Africa. There are various ways of doing it, techniques in different areas having grown up around the materials available, but the topic is very well worth airing. Also missing in this section is any account of solar cooling systems. Solar heating systems are mentioned here and under 'agriculture', but the construction of solar refrigerators could have come in either section. They are easily built, and are invaluable for storing perishable foods for a day or two.

The last part contains much miscellaneous advice on such topics as group buying and sources of supply for materials and information, how to start a library, and further recommended reading. Few topics are covered in the book in such detail that further reading is wholly superfluous, and the recommendations are generally for the inexpensive and least technical works on the subjects being pursued.

In a project of the size and scope of the **People's Workbook**, it is easy for any reviewer to find fault and argue with the selection of what should have gone in, what been covered in greater detail, and what left out. This reviewer has indicated some of his own prejudices in this respect, notably about how far explicit political comment is appropriate if the E.D.A. want to get the book distributed to and through state employees in the rural areas – men who are often the literate leaders in the sort of activities covered in the book. But quibbles apart, this is a remarkable and valuable book for South Africans in every walk of life, not merely those who are materially disadvantaged. Gardeners and owners of holiday shacks will find much of value here, and it is to be hoped that all those who do own a pleasant garden or a holiday shack will get a copy for themselves and another copy or two for their employees. In all walks of life, making the most of available resources is the basis of happiness. In the **People's Workbook** survival as well as happiness is involved, and it should be spread far and wide. □