

CHAPTER THREE

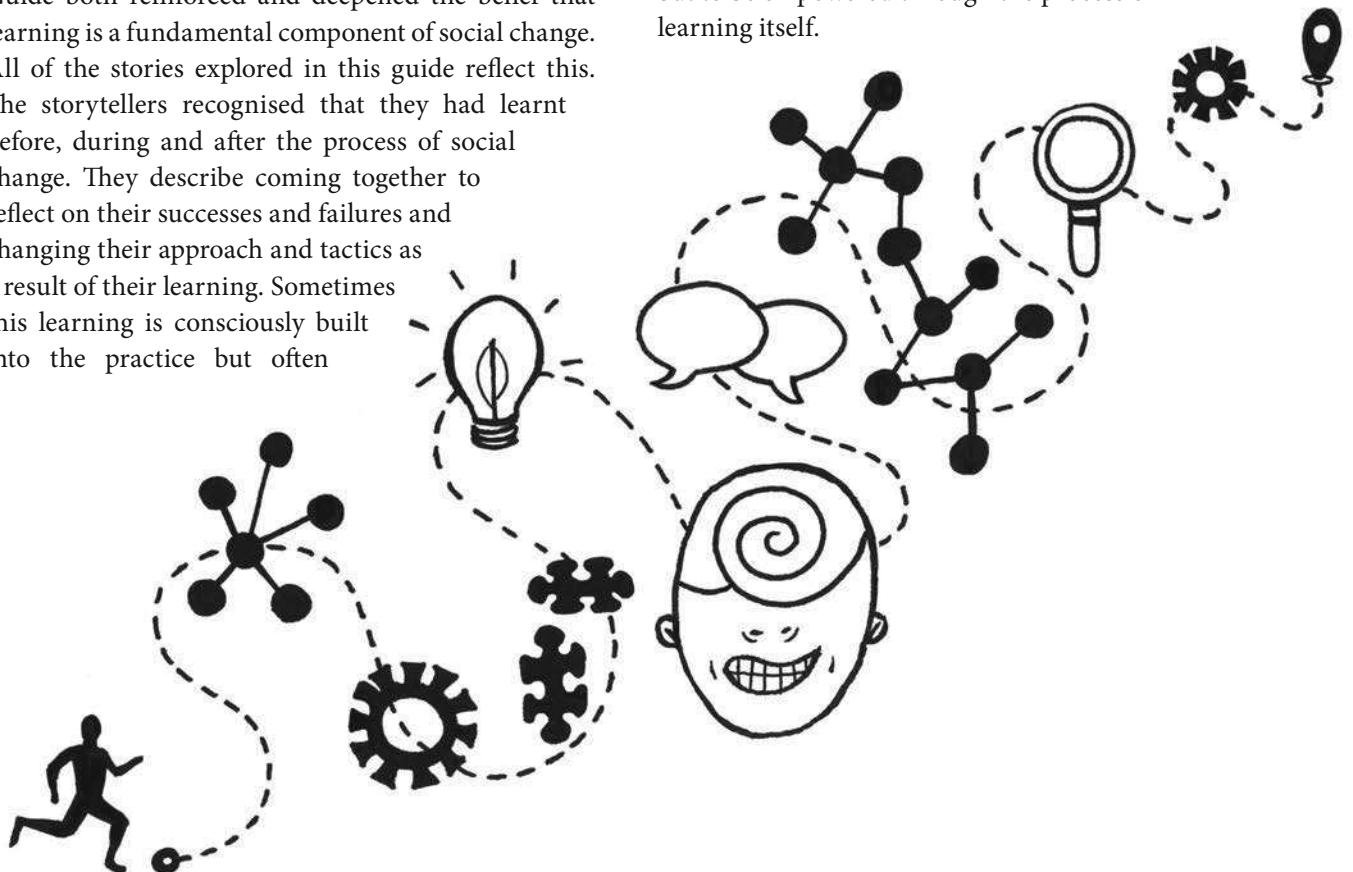
Creating space and time for LEARNING to enable social change

Enabling ourselves to learn

From the very first Barefoot Guide – *The Barefoot Guide to Organisations and Social Change* – writers have recognised the importance of learning in initiating, supporting and embedding change in organisations. This recognition led to the second Barefoot Guide – *The Barefoot Guide to Learning in Organisations and Social Change* – which focused specifically on learning – both as essential to organisations and to the process of social change. The process of developing this Barefoot Guide both reinforced and deepened the belief that learning is a fundamental component of social change. All of the stories explored in this guide reflect this. The storytellers recognised that they had learnt before, during and after the process of social change. They describe coming together to reflect on their successes and failures and changing their approach and tactics as a result of their learning. Sometimes this learning is consciously built into the practice but often

this learning is ad hoc and emerges from the change process. It is a matter of trial and error.

Perhaps this is why people find it so difficult to explain to others exactly how they learnt and describe in detail the learning process. It is rare to find people or an organisation that, from the very beginning, reflected on why learning is important and how they could consciously use their own learning to bring about social change. This chapter focuses on a story that describes in detail how a group of people started from a belief in their own ability to learn and used this to develop a process to enable others not only to learn but to be empowered through the process of learning itself.



Everyone can think, speak and act – Part 1

Julie Smith, PACSA

In 2013 PACSA, a faith-based social justice and development NGO, was approached by Monash-Oxfam (Australia) to develop and test a model of public policy engagement to increase awareness of, and accessibility to, policy with communities across the uMgungungdlovu District, KwaZulu-Natal South Africa. We were to use the National Health Insurance (NHI) as an instrument for the basis of work. The NHI is a new government policy to ensure that all citizens have access to free and good quality public health care.

We were excited about the project as it provided us the space to shape a contextually appropriate type of action research model using the fundamental principle of our organisation which is that everyone can think, speak and act. If we imagine a world where everyone has space to speak, everyone is listened to and treated with dignity, where people make their own decisions around their lives and development, and a world where there is justice and equity – then we need to model these principles everyday in our daily work.

Three organisations: Abanqobi Men's HIV Support Group, uMphithi Men's Network, and Springs of Hope HIV Support Network agreed to be part of the project. All three were rooted in the communities they worked in, and were in a position to optimise the use of information and dialogue on the NHI for future public policy engagement and advocacy.



The three partners elected 3 members each to be part of the project team. None of us had worked together before and did not know one another very well.

As the PACSA staff member, I was to manage the project and to 'process facilitate' or 'accompany' the team. I had no experience in public health care. I knew nothing about public health policy. The 9 team members had substantial experience of the public health care system, but not a lot around policy. At our first meeting,

we shared our worries. I confessed that I was the least experienced to provide guidance around the content of the context and policy.

We spoke about what this might mean and agreed that we were all able to think and so would find a way to navigate through the process together. We then did what every self respecting group does when not sure how to proceed – we gave ourselves a grand sounding name "the NHI Research Team." Xolani Nsele, who happened to be sitting at the head of our table, was elected as our 'chairman'. Xolani was the 'opener' and 'closer' of our meetings. We had a name and some semblance of order. Before we closed our meeting we agreed on one absolutely critical principle. This principle was that we should always have fun. This was something we needed to check on every time we met.

At our next meeting we analysed the competencies we would need to successfully deliver the project outputs. As a team we were confident in being able to develop a new model around consultation which was contextually appropriate and one which created real spaces for people to think and speak. Because nine of us had substantial experience of the public health care system, we knew that we would be able to ask the correct questions to open up the space for participants to reflect deeply on the challenges they saw with the current system, what was causing them, what remedies could be sought and what an improved public health care system might look like.

We identified one major gap in our competencies. We needed to develop our own knowledge around the content of the NHI to structure the consultation correctly and to deliver a training component on the NHI so that participants were provided with the tools to engage and critique the NHI.

As a team we worried about how to address this knowledge gap. When the project started a consultant was sent to give us a quick snapshot of the NHI. We were given a booklet which summarised the NHI policy. The brief training and literature was not sufficient in delivering complete information nor was it enough to enable us to formulate substantial questions to really engage with the policy. We spoke about this at length. We discussed how we could bring in another expert on the NHI to train us and share more complete literature, or perhaps even do the training part of the consultation for us. This option was contested. Could we really trust this person to do a better job than the previous expert? What if the new expert was not really an expert? Even if the new expert was proficient, how would we feel about bringing in an outsider to run the training sessions in the consultations? How would we feel about not doing the training ourselves?

The discussions then moved to what we thought about thinking and learning and who or what makes an expert. Our previous conversations around what is real consultation and how we were experiencing democracy assisted us. We were not empty vessels. Consultation was not simply about receiving information. It was actually about critiquing it and questioning it, not just around “clarity seeking questions” but real questions about process and content and context, and ‘would this thing actually work?’. We asked ourselves: Can we not think? Are we unable to learn? We have experience. We can make meaning, we can theorise and reflect. Is it impossible for us to learn about the NHI? We can read and we can think about what we are reading. We can also question what we are interpreting.



... we thought about thinking and learning and who or what makes an expert.

After these discussions we focussed on what we had. We had one another. We had spaces to reflect and question jointly as a team. We did not have literature but we could find it on the internet or directly through the Department of Health— we could pull off the policies around the NHI and public health care, we could look at what other people had written about it and read through the different critiques. We decided that we had all the tools to learn. We had the resources, the capacity to learn, the commitment to learn and the support to learn. We also had the experiences to position the policy correctly and we had the ability to question. Learning, we decided, meant bringing all of ourselves to the process: our humanity, our experiences, our worries, our intellect, emotions and intentions. We decided to learn about the NHI ourselves.

Our decision has been a revelation. It emerged out of the philosophy that everyone can think, speak and act. What we did is to structure this thinking in practice. One does not need to know the subject to teach it. One simply needs to facilitate the space, provide support and ask questions to enable learning to occur. We structured ourselves to meet weekly to reflect and learn together and to commit to reading and critiquing the available NHI literature in the context of 'our democratic experience' as a type of study group.

Something amazing happened in the process. We really became that team with the grand sounding name. We all recognised that we were equal to one another and that we had significant contributions to make. We owned the process together. We took on the 'burden' of learning together and being accountable to the team for our learning.



“*Something amazing happened in the process. We really became that team with the grand sounding name.*”

Every week we committed ourselves to reading policy or other NHI or health-related documents and returning the following week to have a discussion – not about what we had read (information) but about what questions we had about the things we had read; about what it meant to us and how it related to our experiences.

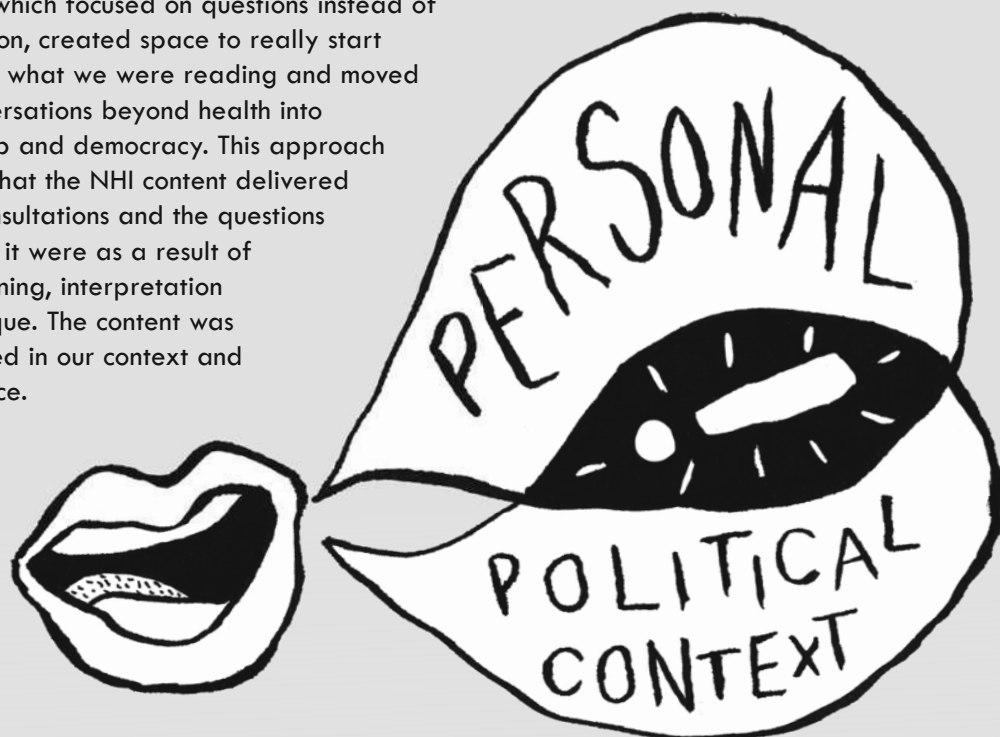
Our meetings were spaces of great excitement where we shared ideas, thoughts and 'awakenings' about what we were seeing. We challenged one another and compelled one another to go deeper, to find meaning and to share it.

Our meetings were not deliberately structured but typically started with a quick discussion of the main items we wanted to cover. These items would be added to the standing items of ‘how is everyone doing?’ (the personal) and then ‘what’s been happening?!’ (the health and governance context). These two items connected us personally with one another and further opened the scope for discussions within our context, but more importantly they embedded the readings (which came later on our agenda) *within a framework of the personal and the political context.*

For example, when we asked ‘what’s been happening?!’ Sphamandla Makhathini spoke about how he noticed that three private hospitals in our city were undergoing what seemed to be substantial renovations and construction. When we moved onto questions around readings, we could pick up on what he had seen and what it meant that private hospitals were investing in building new hospital wings before the roll-out of the NHI. This link provided the space to ask critical questions of the NHI e.g. Is the NHI seen by private companies as a way to boost their profits because the NHI will now ‘deliver’ them more customers

The way we started our regular meetings thus opened up the space to deepen our analysis, critically reflect and keep the discussions grounded in both the person and the context in which we lived – which injected a relevance and a meaningfulness for every one of our team. Moreover the unstructured dialoguing provided the room to retain the informality of the space which optimised the richness of thinking whilst providing the security to share thoughts and ideas. The meeting spaces therefore were places of high energy – questions, comments and critique were quickly fired and retorted against or agreed. It assisted us that we had agreed that there could be no assumptions; the speaker was always challenged to back up what s/he had said. The why and how questions mostly followed the speaker’s input from the floor. Perhaps the last point to share is the question of time. Our meetings were not short. We played generously and long with time – we met for 4-5 hours at a time. This time was precious and provided space for us to be more human – to be able to be, to share, to laugh and to think.

The result of this joint learning was that everyone of the team was able to articulate questions on the NHI and public health care. The process, which focused on questions instead of information, created space to really start critiquing what we were reading and moved our conversations beyond health into citizenship and democracy. This approach ensured that the NHI content delivered in the consultations and the questions asked on it were as a result of joint learning, interpretation and critique. The content was embedded in our context and experience.



Learning is a continuous process. It requires a safe space where all are confident that their views will be heard and engaged with. It requires a belief in our own ability to learn. Learning leads people to ask questions – of themselves, of others and of the society they live in. Questions lead to new information. This information can lead to more questions and to a better understanding of why things are as they are. This can lead to a recognition of the need for change. Learning isn't just part of the social change process, it is the beginning of the recognition of the need for social change.

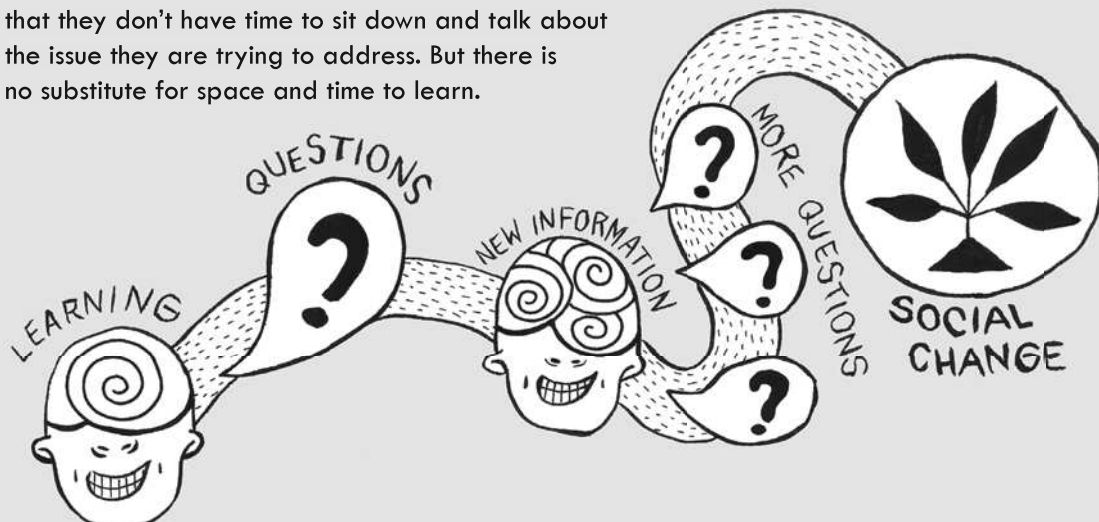
Many of us want to bring about change. We tend to focus on doing this by giving people information and spurring them on to action. We are in a hurry for change to happen. But we cannot do people's learning for them. And we also need to remain open to learning from others, whoever they are. Encouraging people to believe that they can learn and understand even complex issues and then creating a space for everyone to discuss the information available creates the opportunity for social change. What happens next will come out of their learning and their felt need for change.

How many of us take the time to engage with people who think differently about the issue ...

The story also reminds us that we need to start with ourselves. These days you can support social change with one click on a computer. You can sign a petition or write a letter to someone in authority within minutes of becoming aware of an issue. How many of us have the time and energy to read through the documents. How many of us have a group of people we can meet with to discuss the issue in detail and to really understand it. How many of us take the time to engage with people

who think differently about the issue, to challenge our own assumptions about what we have read?

Julie and her fellow learners are unapologetic about the time it took them to understand deeply the information they had. They worked with official documents, academic papers and their own experiences. They embraced differences of opinion as an opportunity to explore more deeply. They did not start working with others until they were confident that they understood the subject matter themselves. It is a great credit to Monash-Oxfam (Australia) that they allowed PACSA and its partners the time to do this. Funders often want to see results as soon as possible and expect all the preparation to have been done before the project starts. NGOs are usually so busy getting the project proposal written on time that they don't have time to sit down and talk about the issue they are trying to address. But there is no substitute for space and time to learn.



A TOOL: HEAD-HEART-FOOT

During the Barefoot Guide 4 writeshop, we listened with head, heart and feet, working with three different types of human intelligence – intellectual, sensitive and intentional.

We worked in groups of four (A, B, C, D), A tells its story while B (head), C (heart) and D (foot) listen. Each person tells A what they heard and understood thanks to the type of intelligence they used. A's story is deepened by B's, C's and D's listening. Then B tells their story ...

See *The Barefoot Guide to Organisations and Social Change*, pp. 30 - 32



Learning Together

In order to prepare to support social change, social change practitioners need to work on their own learning. We can only do this if we are able to listen deeply and to ask meaningful questions both of the information we are receiving and of ourselves. **When quality listening and questioning is achieved, critical reflection and authentic dialogue become possible.** Regarding the quality of listening, it is both the orientation out of which we are listening as well as the depth of listening that is important.

Learning and change are linked. To change you need to understand, to understand you need to learn. Learning is about asking questions, of ourselves and our organisations and of others.

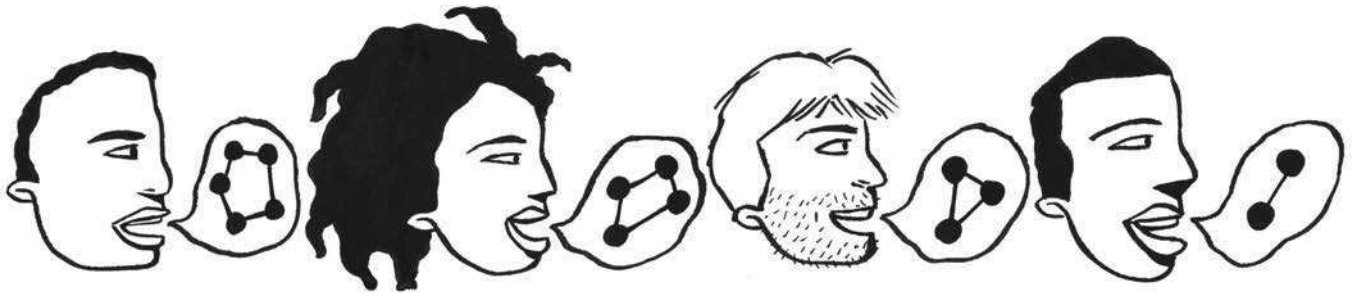
We must challenge ourselves to listen to the whole person, to move beyond only listening to the ideas and rational thoughts – we have to acknowledge that every human being is a thinking, feeling and willing being and the way in which we listen to them has to incorporate all these aspects. When engaging in a social environment, what most people are really asking is to be listened to and for their humanity to be recognised, respected and appreciated. **Our work is about creating spaces that allow people to be listened to and heard.**

Many social change practitioners are not part of the community or society they are working to change. We want to help and we believe passionately that social change is needed to improve people's lives, but we must be humble and recognise our own need to learn and keep on learning. When decisions are made far away from the people who will be affected, decision makers rely on others to listen for them. There are often gaps in the learning process and, too often, learning is lost and inappropriate decisions made.

Before a meeting or workshop, ask yourself these questions:

- What are we going to talk about? What are the different ways we can use to understand it?
- How do we create the necessary space for listening? How can we make sure we listen with our head, heart and feet?
- How can we establish an equal listening relationship between different actors? Who is learning from whom?

To change you need to understand, to understand you need to learn.



If we have taken the time and given ourselves space to learn before we intervene, we will be in a better position to support others in their own learning process. If we give others time and space to learn, then not only will everyone engaged in the social change process be able to learn and to use their learning, but they will also feel ownership of the process.

Enabling others to learn

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When you have worked hard to understand something, perhaps over many years, you may feel entitled to call yourself an expert and to give your opinions on this topic to others. You may expect to be listened to and your opinions to be respected. And we would be unwise to ignore those who have expertise and who have spent more time than we can on learning about something. If we are sick, we don't have time to go through years of medical training to find out what is wrong with us – we go to a doctor. However, we are entitled to get a second opinion and we have the right to access to information about the pros and cons of different kinds of treatment. We can talk to others who have a similar diagnosis about their own experiences and what has worked for them.

We can make information more accessible and we can give people tools to help them learn, but we must be prepared that people may reach different conclusions than we did and be prepared to listen to and respect this. They bring their own experiences to the process. But the learning is empowering and where there is injustice and an imbalance of power people will recognise this.

The work of the project team accompanied by PACSA did not stop with their own learning. The purpose of the learning was to create spaces where people could themselves learn and thereby become aware of how policy was developed and what impact it had on their lives.

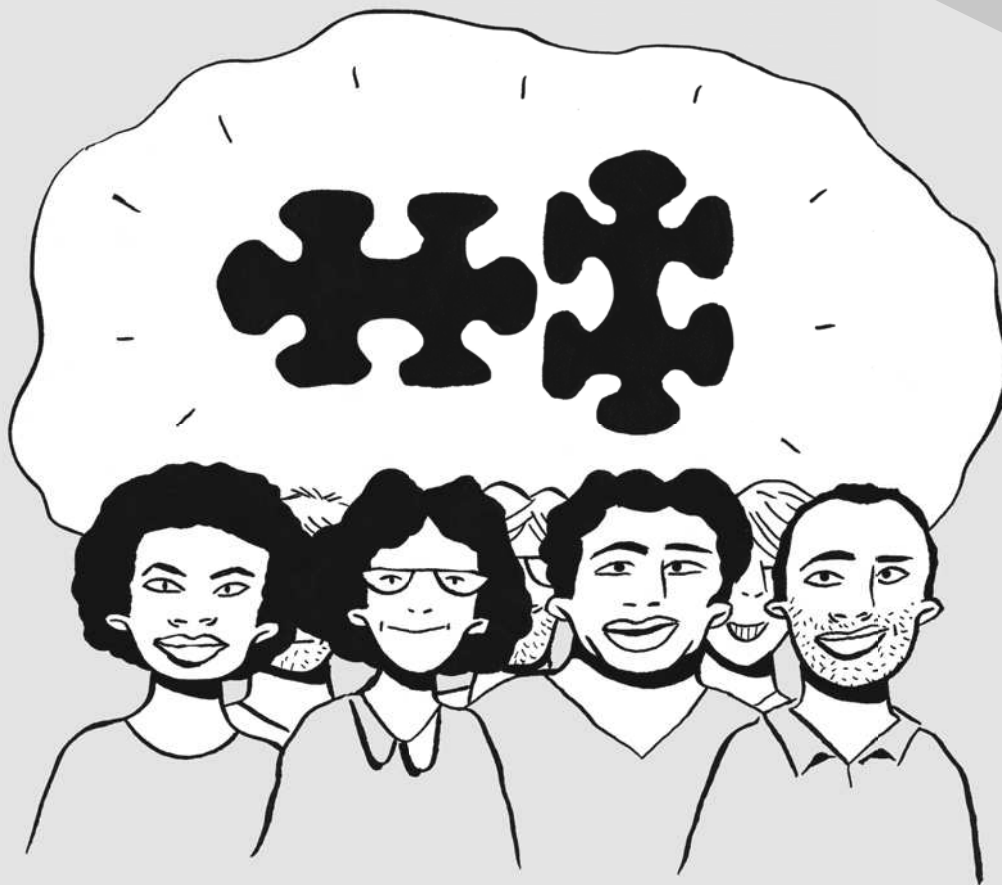


Everyone can think, speak and act – Part 2

The social change that we experienced as a team shaped how we planned, approached and implemented our consultations. We structured the consultations around the same principles around which we had organised ourselves and found such liberation. We provided real space for people to think and speak. We embedded the discussions in the experiences of each of the participants. People felt confident to delve deep. When it came time to deliver the training on the NHI, we did not present ourselves as experts but people who had learnt slowly and reflected on what the policy had meant for us. We were gentle with the information that we provided and made space for rich dialogue around questions that participants had, not so much on the content but on the type of questions the information provoked.

We included many of the questions we, as a team, had been grappling with about how we would want to be consulted and what democracy meant for us. Many participants reflecting on their ‘consultation’ experiences with the state and political parties, expressed that typically they felt that they were not being listened to at all, that political ‘representatives’ were not actually representing them – with many participants struggling to remember when they were actually part of any substantial government decision making. These discussions worried participants in our consultations. They questioned the notion of democracy. “Here (in the consultation) we feel free, we are listened too – we are part of the discussions, we feel that we can be part of future actions; but this is not what happens in our communities when we participate in government spaces.” The consultation process evoked in the participants how poorly the state has really done in structuring its democratic spaces. They questioned that democracy operates differently for different people; and that for them, democracy was not something they were experiencing in the sense of being part of making decisions about their lives. The state simply informs ‘us’ about the decisions it has made ‘for us’ but excludes ‘us’ from being part of making these decisions – this is not democracy, many participants reflected.¹

1. The dialogues in the consultations have been documented in a report to Monash-Oxfam (Monash-Oxfam NHI project. Final NHI community consultation process report. Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action [PACSA], 5 October 2013. To access a copy, please contact Urvarshi Rajcoomar, Oxfam, Durban on +27 (0) 31 277 0358 (direct) or varshir@oxfam.org.au

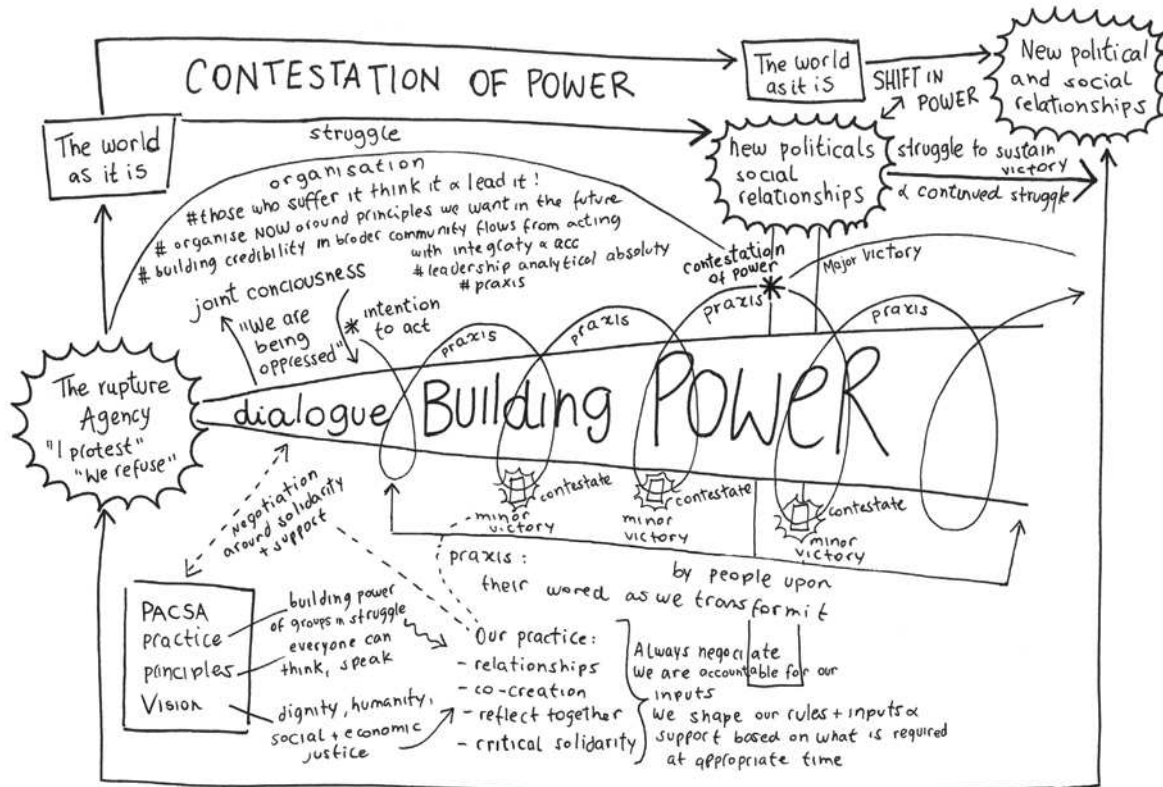


Reflecting with the participants, we noted that naming the oppression and imagining a different way of doing things – dreaming together – assisted us not only to move beyond apathy but provided us strength to work together differently to struggle for not only a better system of health care, but also a better way of being included in our own lives.

We spoke about moving into advocacy, about our strength being built in our togetherness, our solidarity, our continuous questioning about the world around us, and our ability to learn. For us, as 'the NHI Research Team,' we felt excited that our own changes that we had experienced were finding expression beyond us. We believed that if we took our own thinking seriously and the thinking of others seriously; and if we deliberately provided space for this to happen, then other people too would do the same. We learnt that if we were prepared to work slower but in the correct way – treating people with dignity, respecting the experiences and questions of people, being vulnerable, and believing that everyone has the capacity to think and speak – we would find a similar type of magic which we ourselves had previously discovered. And we did.

Our project with Monash-Oxfam (Australia) has ended. We are still having fun. The NHI Research Team still meets weekly. Sometimes we just meet to have lunch together. Most times we reflect deeply about the type of health care system we want and how we will make it happen. We have decided to move into advocacy, but before we start moving into boardrooms or requesting audiences with government officials, we want to build power on the margins. To do that we will continue to ask questions on the margins. Continue speaking with ordinary people, citizens collecting their medicines from public clinics, people who rush their loved ones to public hospitals; we will continue speaking with nurses and caregivers, with cleaning staff and clinic security. By learning that we can learn anything, we started also thinking that we can think anything and we might just be able to do anything. And we will ...together. We will.

The project team knew what they were talking about. They had a deep understanding of the National Health Insurance based on their learning. But they did not present themselves as experts but as ‘people who had learnt slowly and reflected on what the policy had meant for us’. They gave others the opportunity to do the same. They knew the power of this process of learning because they had experienced it themselves.



PACSA'S EMERGING THEORY OF CHANGE

They knew that by encouraging people to relate to the information they gave to their own experience they would begin to ask questions, not just about the legislation and its implementation, but about the whole relationship between themselves and the authorities and how this had an impact on the health system. They knew the power of people learning things for themselves and they trusted this. Social change is about creating new power as well as addressing power imbalances. Learning gives people the power of knowledge and understanding. It also gives them the evidence they need to challenge injustice.

Social change practitioners and activists can support people to create their own spaces where they can explore their own situation and their relations with those who have political and economic power. Within such spaces, people can find their voice and hold onto it without fear of being undermined.

“ Social change is about creating new power as well as addressing power imbalances.”

Working with Questions:

What is Horizontal Learning and how can it Contribute to Social Change?

Many people see learning as a way to improve practice over time, to better navigate complex change.

This is true, but, in our view, learning is even more important than that: for us *social change is fundamentally a learning and unlearning process and so to work with it in an authentic way requires a learning-based practice*. Indeed change, development and learning are virtually indistinguishable. Learning is in the DNA of social change.

What kinds of learning are there?

The Action Learning Cycle

This involves individuals, communities or organisations continually observing and reflecting on experience or actions, drawing learnings from those reflections, and building the implications of those learnings into future plans and actions – from these new actions further learnings can be drawn which leads to improved actions and so on in a continuous learning cycle. This connects strongly to emergent change discussed earlier. (see *Barefoot Guide to Learning Practices in Organizations and Social Change* - Chapter 12, page 159).

Unlearning

Sometimes, in order to move forward, learning does not help because we are constrained by ideas, beliefs, or attitudes that are too close to us to easily let go. Before we can continue to learn our way forward we have to pause to unlearn these things, i.e., how white people see black people, how men see women, how women see themselves. These prejudices have to be unlearnt. This connects strongly to *transformative change* discussed earlier.

Indeed change, development and learning are virtually indistinguishable. Learning is in the DNA of social change.

Horizontal Learning

Since time immemorial people have learnt from each other, informally sharing stories and wisdom, trading innovations and recipes, teaching each other techniques and technologies, neighbour to neighbour, farmer to farmer, parent to child. This kind of horizontal learning has always been a powerful motor of social change.

One of the most important discoveries is that if we want to work together, to collaborate, we should begin this by learning together, horizontally. Horizontal learning builds trust, helps people to learn each other's way of seeing the world and helps everyone to see what contribution they can bring. By so doing this can lay strong foundations for working together.



Working with Questions:

What is Horizontal Learning and how can it Contribute to Social Change?

The powerful housing and farmers movements of Shack Dwellers International and Via Campesina use horizontal exchanges at the heart of their mobilization and organization.

But it can be even more helpful: The need for change in marginalized and impoverished communities the world over is widespread and vast. But the ability and resources of governments and NGOs to work with these needs, in helpful ways, are extremely limited. So how can such limited resources coming from the outside help so many impoverished or marginalised communities to develop themselves.

Communities, who often appear to outsiders as needy victims, have reservoirs of hidden and potential capacities and resourcefulness from hard-learned experience that vastly outweigh what can be brought in from the outside. Once surfaced and validated by people themselves these are the seed-beds out of which change can be nurtured. Through horizontal learning processes, communities can share this resourcefulness, stimulating and supporting change in each other. This can happen with minimal external help, with development spilling from community to community, or catching fire as good ideas and innovations spread widely and generously by word of mouth, as they used to before modern times. In this way change is no longer constrained by the limitations of government or NGOs.

In the Limpopo province a group of 60-odd villages revived a traditional practice of meeting once a year for a seed-sharing festival. This had fallen into disuse since the agricultural industry, ushered in by government extension officers, began showing small farmers the modern way, creating deep and worrying dependencies on corporate-controlled seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. An awareness workshop by a local NGO on the looming dangers of genetically-modified seed finally tipped the scales and provoked the renewal of the old practice.

Now, at a different village each year, the farmers once again send representatives of each village to gather and congregate for several days, each bringing bags of their beans and grains to cook and taste and then to freely share as seed, with advice on how best to plant and grow. And all of this generates the revival of other cultural practices, of songs and dances and stories that express a renewed identity of community and interdependency (Reeler, 2005).

The question that we continue to ask is how can we gather support, including funding, for open-ended horizontal learning practices and approaches that, while they cannot guarantee pre-ordained outcomes, are able to prepare the ground for solidarity and creative collaboration and the authentic outcomes that emerge from these?



... good ideas and innovations spread widely and generously by word of mouth, as they used to before modern times.

An African Elegy

We are the miracles that God made
To taste the bitter fruit of Time.
We are precious.
And one day our suffering
Will turn into the wonders of the earth.

There are things that burn me now
Which turn golden when I am happy.
Do you see the mystery of our pain?
That we bear poverty
And are able to sing and dream sweet things

And that we never curse the air when it is warm
Or the fruit when it tastes so good
Or the lights that bounce gently on the waters?
We bless things even in our pain.
We bless them in silence.

That is why our music is so sweet.
It makes the air remember.
There are secret miracles at work
That only Time will bring forth.
I too have heard the dead singing.

And they tell me that
This life is good
They tell me to live it gently
With fire, and always with hope.
There is wonder here

And there is surprise
In everything the unseen moves.
The ocean is full of songs.
The sky is not an enemy.
Destiny is our friend.

Ben Okri