

FROM LEARNING TOGETHER TO WORKING TOGETHER

MOBILISING RURAL CAREGIVERS IN SOUTH AFRICA TO
ENGAGE GOVERNMENT CO-CREATIVELY

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Almost six years ago, 18 South African NGOs all working on early childhood development formed a learning alliance. Over the years they have established a collaborative learning and working platform, involving organised community-based women caregivers, to develop workable and sustainable solutions for the well-being of young children in South Africa. This is their story.



Late in 2006 the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA), a South African NGO, was approached by the Netherlands-based Bernard van Leer Foundation, to coordinate a community of practice for 18 of its partner organisations working in four of South Africa's provinces in the field of early childhood development.

The group of partners is diverse. Some work directly at the grassroots level improving the skills and organisations of women caregivers, upgrading the crèches they run and registering the centres with the state. Some work on advocacy issues, supporting or challenging the government to adopt more policies and practices that support young children, while others focus on developing practices through training, materials production and research.

CDRA proposed a workshop with its partners to test the feasibility of the donor's proposal and develop a comprehensive design for the 'learning community'. This workshop took place a few months later in March 2007 in a small hotel south of Durban. Each organisation was invited to send its director and a practitioner. Even though the process was donor-initiated, it was not donor driven, focused on all the participants' creative input.

The five-day workshop had its struggles. Some partners expressed doubts about the benefits of something they had never tried before, while others were a little suspicious of the donor's motives. Some of the rural, African-led partners struggled to find their voice amidst the more confident and assertive opinions of the urban, often white-led partners. But they were open and willing to try, a characteristic of spirited practitioners who seem to draw good energy from the openness and playfulness of young children.

A five-day creative process – in which contextual perspectives were shared, questions 'surfaced and deepened', practices described and approaches debated – produced a vision of why and how they might learn together. Work was alternated with frequent drawing and sculpting exercises, role playing, much singing, and a daily session in which partners played children's games, revealing the thinking about how they promote the development of young children in age-appropriate ways. The

workshop not only discussed how partners might learn together; it became an experience of exactly that.

What emerged from the workshop became known as the Early Childhood Development Learning Community (ECDLC), which the author co-facilitates with Vuyelwa Jacobs and Nomvula Dlamini, also of the CDRA. It contained the following core points:



- The ECDLC is a collaboration of partners of the Bernard van Leer Foundation for the purposes of sharing experiences and learning, building knowledge and collaborating in various ways to improve practices and policies in the ECD sector;
- Four-day learning workshops are held every six months with each partner sending two of its members, including the director;
- Each partner has a fund of ZAR25,000 (about \$US2,800) available per year to enable it to visit, and learn and share with, other partners;
- CDRA has a fund available to work individually with partners who require it, to help build their organisational capacity and help equalise their participation in the learning community;
- A website and email list are developed to enable cross-communication and have a common platform for sharing materials; and
- An action research programme surfaces local and indigenous childcare practices and knowledge (this came a year later).

A proposal was developed and sent to the donor for approval and within two months activities began.

THE LEARNING JOURNEY

It has been a remarkable journey of mutual learning, and increasingly of working together. In all of the reviews CDRA has done with partners the horizontal exchanges – 32 to date, ranging from one to five days – have stood out as the most beneficial. These exchanges are about sharing practice onsite, unlocking surprising capacities in a range of areas in both the hosts and visitors. Equally important, relationships have been forged that have lasted well beyond the initial phase, providing a strong foundation for co-working.

The range of areas includes approaches to working where crèches do not exist; sustainable child nutrition programmes; family literacy to stimulate young minds and support parenting; strategies for caring for HIV-positive children; toy-making from recycled materials, savings groups of caregivers, family and community; and leadership and management capacities for running crèches. The list goes on.

But changes were also happening at a less obvious, less visible level. For the rural members of the group, being exposed to others in such an equalising and participative forum has boosted their confidence and leadership. The participative action research programme, which focused on the rich child-rearing traditions and the local and contemporary practices of the communities themselves,

also helped the members to begin to question some of the top-down, western-oriented practices that they had been promoting. They have begun to pay more respect to community resourcefulness and how it can be activated.

It became clear from the feedback that both the hosts and the visitors gave each other a 'psychological' boost, validating each others' practices and reducing their isolation by connecting to each other and



the outside world. Although it is the most difficult thing to pin down, quantify or even articulate, there is no doubt that the most beneficial aspect of horizontal exchange lies in this result. It brings to mind Margaret Wheatley's maxim 'To create better health in a living system, connect it to more of itself.'

A SECOND PHASE EMERGES

Now, since 2011, the ECDLC has shifted into a second phase, built on the mutual learning foundations of the first phase, described above. In this second phase the ECDLC has become a collaborative learning and working alliance based on what is called the Letsema Programme. This has emerged from a major change in thinking, partners realised from the experience of the ECDLC that could work beyond their limited and individualised capacity-building and advocacy projects, and move the centre of gravity of their efforts to collaboratively building the collective organisation and leadership of the communities they were working in, to empower them to engage the world differently for the well-being of their children. From the Letsema brochure:

The Letsema Programme aims to change the way the system for generating services for young children works. The current system is top down. Government, NGOs and businesses try to deliver services to passive recipient communities. This system completely ignores community knowledge of early child development and their agency and leadership. Letsema works towards a system whereby government, businesses and communities co-produce services for young children.

In the Letsema Programme the ECDLC members work together to mobilise the community-based caregiver groups that they have worked with individually over the years. Just as the members have been doing for themselves in the first phase, the community caregiver groups are encouraged and supported to visit each other, learn from each other and boost each other's knowledge and capacities. In the process, relationships and grassroots solidarities develop, creating a foundation for a movement that can more confidently surface and build its own resourcefulness and from there engage government and business to co-creatively find solutions for young children.

It is still early days, but the energy of this initiative from below is refreshing and enlivening and practitioners are relieved to be breaking away from a project mentality. A grassroots leadership development process is now underway with a visit to India scheduled in early 2013 by community leaders and practitioners from different districts of the province of Limpopo, to learn from innovative practices there. It will be a journey where grassroots leaders and practitioners will continue to learn from each other and strengthen their relationships and ability to cooperate and collaborate into the future. This will extend to other provinces in the course of next year.

CDRA'S ROLE

CDRA has been the coordinating member at the national level for the past six years. But its role has been varied and has evolved over time. Sometimes CDRA has played an initiating and motivating role, and sometimes it has played a more restrained and encouraging one. Its approach has been to support the ECDLC members to take the lead themselves, who are, in turn, now working to develop the leadership and organisation of women caregivers on the ground.



In the last two years the programme's centre of gravity has shifted to the provinces, each of which assigns a local lead member to provide coordination and support. CDRA's style of leadership is to facilitate wherever possible but not shy away from taking the initiative when it is called for – a delicate dance that requires it to meet each challenge with a unique perspective.

There are no easy blueprints or accepted structures or procedures for these new kinds of collaborating organisations, and so CDRA has had to 'learn its way forward'.

A BUMPY BUT FASCINATING ROAD

There are challenges and difficulties associated with inter-organisational collaboration. Working across several organisations in an adaptive, emergent process makes it particularly difficult to schedule common meeting and workshop times as they are subject to the schedules of all kinds of other project-related work (which is funded by fussy donors and subject to donor demands and often pre-planned in detail).

Of course collaboration has to adapt to these considerations as well, but things can get drawn out and CDRA frequently grapples with the anxiety that momentum might be lost. Occasional changes in the people representing the participating organisations does mean that CDRA has to go back over familiar ground, but this can be strengthening or consolidating, even if it may initially seem to waste time.

Funding is an ongoing challenge because few donors are accustomed to funding complex processes where the outcomes and timelines are being developed by an emerging grassroots leadership who cannot be hurried and disempowered by donor anxieties for deadlines and 'proof of impact'. They must find their own method and rhythm.

This is the most fascinating and central aspect. The impact will come and when it does it will be real and sustainable because there is a deep ownership developing. Thankfully the Bernard van Leer Foundation has the experience and vision for this kind of work, but it only provides seed funding. Longer-term funding, hopefully from local foundations, will be required in the future.

The most interesting hurdle is how to deal with the sometimes 'messy' nature of the collaboration, which is the result of time challenges and conflicting priorities but also of the collaboration's diversity and the physical distance between its members. Everyone is aware that huge forces exist today that could pull apart collaborations. It is hard enough for people inside organisations to learn and work together. But things are holding together remarkably well, largely because of the

investment in mutual learning forged in the horizontal learning exchanges and workshops during ECDLC's first phase.

It continues to be a learning process not bound by clear outcomes and deadlines, or even a fixed vision, but open to process, open to what will be discovered along the way by those doing the work.



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