Achieving social transformation from the bottom up: Meaningful participatory democracy and movement building
A collaborative conversation
Ilawu hotel, Pietermaritzburg, October 14-17 2014
Background to the process

Two developments coincided in the conceptualisation of this meeting: one amongst Entraide and its partners, and the other amongst partners of Fastenopfer. Both revolved around a desire for the opportunity to experience a wider time of sharing of good practices in citizenship participation and movement building.

Although initially two separate meetings were planned, it was decided to bring together 18 of the civil society partners of these two European donors (both members of the global Catholic development partnership called CIDSE). This made for a richer and more challenging exchange.

Claude Mormont from Entraide sums up the motivation as follows:

An important element of the context [of all these organisations] is the difficulties experienced by Civil Society Organizations to be heard. There is a growing trend from the side of some politic or economic authorities to discredit those organizations, to silent them and even to criminalize them. International solidarity needs also to be built between those civil society organizations in their different forms (social movements, NGO’s, community based organizations...) and divisions needs to be avoided thanks to a respectful and adequate relationship with each other.

The meeting was set up for sharing, learning and discussion. No decisions were made. The notes from the meeting should be seen as a resource for those who attended and anyone else who is in a similar situation and is interested to tap into our collective experience to go forward on our journey as civil society organisations.

For this reason the notes have been grouped into themes, and don’t follow the chronological order of the 4 days. The most important themes have been captured and following these are some open questions for further reflection.
Participants realised quite quickly that there are more questions than answers! How we work with our many questions will influence whether they bear fruit in our work. This includes:

- who raises the questions,
- how the questions are articulated,
- how long we are prepared to grapple with the questions before jumping to easy answers, and
- how we demand answers from ourselves, and those who are duty bearers.

**Stories of Change**

Each participating organisation (and where relevant their community partner who attended) wrote a story of change, which was shared and received peer feedback. Lessons were drawn out of the reflection, which are reflected in the notes below.

The full booklet of stories is attached in a separate document.

**Meeting notes**

**Emerging themes**

A number of themes emerged during the conversations in response to the stories shared. These are summarised here. Unfortunately, it was not possible to capture many of the nuances, contradictions and fluidity of the conversations, but it is hoped that the points and the ongoing questions will offer a starting point for continued conversations in different contexts.

**Collaboration, ownership, leadership, confidence, trust, support**

Collaboration is a broad concept. Who is collaborating with whom? We discussed different forms:

- Between actors in civil society – NGOs (non-governmental organisations), CBOs (community based organisations), FBOs (faith based organisations), social movements, religious organisations
- Between funders and civil society
- With political leaders, the state
- Between different levels – local/regional/national/international

Essential to effective working together is an awareness of the unequal power dynamics between different actors, to surface these and find ways to consciously equalise them.

**The following questions came up:**

- With whom do we work, and what are the power dynamics?
  - International collaboration can be important, opening our eyes to see that others are also sharing experiences in very different contexts. This is also very important when risks are high, so states know that outsiders are watching.
- Who are the actors when we collaborate with communities? Peer educators, leaders, leaders activists – who has the ownership? Communities should have ownership. What about power relations within communities? Whose voice can be said to be ‘the community voice’ if any? And what does ‘ownership mean? Sometimes it’s difficult to mobilise volunteers in
communities, because many are struggling to put food on their own tables, or are looking for paid work. How to build confidence/trust?

- When do we genuinely fulfill a need? Where’s the border between listening to what people’s needs are and filling it in for them?
- Advice for NGOs - Be prepared to change your agenda in response to what matters to communities we work with. Donors can constrain our ability to really walk in solidarity with community groups, because they do not allow a flexible agenda. Advocacy needs to be done with donors to offer more flexible, process-oriented funding.
- Network with other organisations that are already active in the community.

Who is responsible for what?

- Who sets the agenda? How do we combine all the different agenda’s? How can we cooperate to achieve our different agendas instead of working against each other?
- Who has the money? Who decides how the money is spent? Who accounts for use of the money, to whom?
- Who has the knowledge? People in communities everywhere know from the University of Life. They know what is necessary to change the situation. But we need other knowledge too, knowledge about the law, specific skills. Professionalism can enhance local knowledge. Knowledge of community people is not always taken seriously. On which conditions can the different types of knowledge be combined in a useful and efficient way?
- Who takes the risks? Advocacy and civil society work is getting riskier. It sometimes leads even to risking one’s life.
  - As NGOs, CBOs or community leaders, we need to know what risks we are asking people to take when we want them to speak out. No one can be forced to put their life on the line.
  - Can NGOs offer any protection, or access to legal support?

What is the role of the NGO? What does it mean to accompany and to support?

- Can NGOs play the role of the watch dog – in solidarity with marginalized people, or does this strip them of their own voice? How can we do this in our name without assuming to speak for others, in an authentic and effective way?
- And what is needed for an NGO to walk in solidarity with people in their struggles? They can offer technical expertise, access to funding or other resources – but how can they do this with humility and sensitivity?

What can we do when relationships become strained – eg, when communication or trust breaks down, or when risks become too great, or we find ourselves misunderstanding each other?

- How do organisations deal with cultural and traditional boundaries, and ways to respect each other’s ways – given the power dynamics that exist?

How can we make collaboration as efficient as possible? Different approaches and protocols can cause a process to slow down or stall.
Movement Building:
Rich discussions were conducted throughout the four days about movement building. The following points came up specifically in discussions on movement building:

The following questions came up:
- Should movements use violent means to oppose unjust situations? When do you decide to use extra-legal activities? What peaceful types of extra-legal activities might also be options?
- How can we work together as organisations to create a strong voice that can withstand greater force? To resist the governments’ strategy to ‘divide and rule’

The goals of social movements were seen to relate to being a means to work towards:
- Social change/transformation
- Ownership/ Empowerment / Capacity building
- Awareness / Education
- Support/hope/inspiration/trust for people
- Democracy
- (Political) Participation
- Social cohesion
- Cooperation
- Community building
- Solidarity
- Sustainable social and economic development
- A people process, listening to the community and giving feedback and monitoring the process
- Creating strong grassroots organisations
- Peace building and stability

The following questions and suggestions came up:

Collaboration and Movement Building
- Under which conditions can collaboration lead to meaningful movement building and what could a movement accomplish. The following conditions might apply:
  - Understanding the nature of collaborative partnership and what the partnership is all about.
  - It should be about how we link local and international struggles with each other.
  - We have to realise we cannot fight on our own.
  - It is about identifying the most pertinent issue/need/lack, as well as the local resources and strengths to build on and learn from.

Possible strategies:
- Stay rooted in local community. Organising strategies to sustain the movement, especially at grassroots level:
  - Meet people where they are congregating/gathering
  - Equip people with knowledge, rights-based education and capacity building.
  - Link local struggles and identify the most pertinent issues. Work together to create a stronger united voice.
  - Action is important: - see below under Political strategies. Always be in solidarity with religious minorities, the marginalized and the voiceless.
Particularly, note that women tend to be marginalized in a group or community, because of cultural and social norms that silence them and encourage them to defer to men.

- Engage the community in public debates
- Allowing people to lead their own struggles by acknowledging their indigenous knowledge.

**Build on or develop strategic linkages**

- Link local struggles by helping groups identify the most pertinent common issues, and work together to create a stronger united voice. Connect and liaise with like-minded social movements both nationally and internationally.
- Make sure communities are aware of what happens at the different levels in a way that is relevant to them, relates to their experience, but also helps them to develop wider perspectives and openness to link with others struggles, as part of movement building.
- Unite like-minded people, and people of influence, e.g. religious leaders, academics and prominent civil society leaders around a common theme and a common purpose (with non-violence as core), and in the process strengthen the local movement.
- Negotiate with key leaders for accountability, and where this becomes impossible because of bad faith – demonstrate strongly and do not be intimidated
- Target young people. It is important to target young people at school and especially university level to support the movement. In various parts of the world, including USA and India, this has helped to elect new leaders, and sometimes leaders emerge from the youth themselves.

**Political Strategies:**

- Radicalize local struggles by infusing energy into the masses to make them hungry for more change: road blocking, boycotts, sit-ins, demonstrations, marches, etc.
- Action is important: eg. protest, radicalize people, organize mass action, organize boycotts like during Apartheid era, attract publicity by going on hunger strikes.
  - Get mandates from the community when approaching government – better still support community representatives to take their issues to government directly – NGOs can open up the spaces, but do not take over.
- Negotiate, especially when targeted at government. Negotiations, should be viewed as a site of struggle.
  - Engage the parliamentary portfolio committees, Chapter 9 institutions, which were established as ‘watchdog’ organisations to ensure compliance with the democratic Constitution in South Africa and other state institutions and industry associations and other civil society structures.
  - Use personal relationships with key officials. Raise pertinent issues with Members of Parliament and ward councillors. Lobbying these individuals, groups and institutions in order to have our demands met.
- If the space allows, launch a political party that focuses on the needs of the poor.
We can mobilise people to withhold our power in order to gain leverage. We can withhold our money (consumer boycotts), our labour force (strike action), our right to vote or by whatever other non-violent means.

Be open and flexible – to developing alternative developmental plans, in response to the realities of people’s lives in their communities.

**Funding and resource mobilisation:**

- Fundraise for social movement building, clearly defined in our proposals, with activities to go with it.
- Explore ways and means of pooling our resources in order to bring about a change in perspectives or funding to sustain a campaign. (E.g. The Modi tea in India)

**Ethics:**

- Lead by example, by observing the principles of democracy and good governance within our own structures. If we want to be participative and democratic, our movement must show that.
- Be the change we want to see in the world.
- Embody the values of transparency, consultation and effective book- and record keeping must be maintained at all times.

**Care and self-actualisation**

A movement is built by human beings. The richness of the moment equates to the people in it. It’s the people who provide the direction, who do the work, who put their hearts, minds and bodies into the ideals of the movement. Sometimes they put their lives on the line. Civil society work is risky in some countries. Some governments react with violence when people protest or advocate, other governments condone violence committed by others.

We need to take care of people to bring out the best:

- **Offering capacity building:**
  - including ‘hard’ skills and technology
  - Offering empowerment training. Communities can be trained to own their own development.

- **Offering (or organizing) mentorship, support, hope and inspiration:**
  - Creating a space for the individual within the collective
  - Providing people with a sense of dignity
  - Making people aware of their rights and their position in society. Creating a sense of independence and autonomy
  - Helping people realize they can be agents of (their own) change.

- **Leadership:**
  - Including women, children and youth in projects and giving them voice – also to determine the direction of a project, or initiate or lead
Building broad based leadership, to avoid reliance on one or two people or leaders burning out – avoid building up an ‘elite’ who may then be tempted to misuse their power

The following questions came up:

Whose voices do we actually hear from within the community? Do we not create a new kind of elite within this structure?

How do you get people to commit? Especially when the resources are limited.

How can we create solidarity? Can we make use of issues that are present in the community as a way to unite people, both around their local cause and a wider common cause with wider linkages (movement building)?

Children’s rights and building capacity of young people

Children need a different approach to adults. They don’t only need deep awareness raising around problems. We can help children gain hope, inspiration, direction, ideas about how to go forward.

Build children’s agency and leadership:

- Include children in our projects, give them a voice and build them to take over when the older generation needs to step back
- Encourage children to participate in organisations and make it pleasant for them to have a presence
- Believe that children are knowledgeable, and be prepared to learn from them
- Educate children in a way that makes them active participants of society. Making them aware of their own qualities and. Making sure they are aware of their rights, possibilities and their position in society.

Protect children’s rights:

- and advocate for their rights to be protected, especially when it comes to health, safety and other issues that have to be taken up by various people and institutions (Municipality, clinics, various government departments)
- Campaigns can be undertaken and petitions can be sent to the UN, as the Millennium Goals are being redefined next year
- Create a child safe society, where they can grow up to their full potential.
- Encourage children to go to court in case of abuse
- Work with the children’s primary care givers, if needs be capacitate them on relevant life skills

Strategies to build a strong children’s movement:

- Exchange information pertaining to children’s projects and children’s rights
- Connect to the world to share information, learnings and collaborate via FaceBook and blogs
- Create child protection committees, with strong accountability.
  - Sometimes the people who serve on committees are relatives and friends of perpetrators, especially in smaller communities
- Be active in school platforms
The following questions came up:
- How to create caring communities (Ubuntu) while at the same time getting rid of abuse?
- How to break the silence of abuse?
- How to empower children who have been victims of abuse to play a meaningful role in life? How to help them to work with their memories and pain to become strong survivors?
- How to include children in the community in ways that are relevant and appropriate for them?

The State
The issue of the State came up in various discussions. There are many kinds of State, which may be at various stages of success or failure as States. The State plays different roles in the 4 countries represented at our meeting, Zimbabwe, Madagascar, South Africa and India. The issue of the State and violence was discussed and whether the State is a legitimate partner to negotiate with. Some points surfaced during those discussions:
- In some countries the State commits violence, in other countries it condones violence
- In some countries the laws are strong and mostly just, but tradition, religion and practice oppose the law (caste system, marginalization, patriarchy etc)
- In some areas it is very possible to work with the State and officials in other areas it is very challenging. A lot depends on the capacity and willingness of local Municipalities.

Other points regarding the State were:
- The need for solidarity: if one NGO group is oppressed by the State, we are all oppressed and we need to react in solidarity
- The State is there, because its citizens allow the State to be there. There is no separating line between us citizens and them the State. The State is there, because we chose them to be there in a democratic state – because we have voted for them. We need to vote more critically and think about what kind of society we would lie to see, rather than which party is most influential.
- What kind of democracy do we need? We can’t allow people in government to think on our behalf, and we need to participate much more actively in monitoring the State, as well as taking action in our local contexts to bring about the changes we want to see. We can no longer afford to wait for the State to save us – we need to save ourselves.
- We need to practice participatory democracy – we need more solidarity to challenge the State. We can’t allow the State to victimize people. We need to protect and defend the poor through solidarity.
- The issue of land is an urgent issue in African countries. We have the right to land, but the issue of land has been dragging on for a long time and is debilitating.

The following questions came up:
- What is the nature of the State?
- How do we deal with a State that doesn’t seem to listen or that has little capacity?
- How do we deal with corruption and greed?
- How do we struggle for dignity for all?
- How do we oppose ‘the system’?
How do we explore dialogue with the State? Is policy engagement effective tool for social movements and for change?
How do we deal with State oppression, State violence and abuse of power?
How do you break down a system that is supposed to work for us but doesn’t without hurting yourselves too?

Our learning and feelings
We talked about what we learned and how we felt about this process. Participants were asked to express in one short line how they were feeling about the journey we had been on:

- Be brave, you can do it
- Let’s try and we can
- It takes one person
- Support and determination is essential for change
- We work towards a common goal
- Together we stand, divided we fall
- To self-actualize, I must be in solidarity
- Take care of your sister and brother
- Your world is necessary, but it is possible with us
- Together we can stop betrayal in the name of development
- Hope, be patient
- Nothing is impossible, the sky is the limit
- Reach out to other people
- Unity is power, power is unity
- We all have problems, we need to share to get a solution
- Let whatever come, we need building movements
- Movements can shape the world
- Another world is possible through concerted effort and mutual respect
- Within each of us is more strength than we give ourselves credit for
- Active involvement in struggle
- Respecting the people we serve will make us strong
- Determination/stubbornness can make you succeed
- Working together makes things move easier
- Educate, agitate and organize
- Dictatorship of the masses can change the world
- Different forms of knowledge will change things
- There is strength in diversity, if used positively
- If you do something, make sure you do it properly
- Similar challenges, different organisations
- Action reflection makes praxis
- Dedication
- Love and passion
- Listen to others and understand

Two last critical points:
This is a process, not an event. Change takes time and patience
Respect each other’s positions. Try to accept the fact that everyone has different perspectives, approaches, backgrounds. Instead of focusing on these differences, rather use them to enrich the conversation, and develop joint actions with each of us playing different but complementary roles.

We agreed that the most important question now is:
How will our practice need to change and grow to develop meaningful participatory democratic approaches in our work, so that it can support effective social movements?

Attachment: Attendance list

The meeting was attended by the following delegates:
(All partners were from South African organisations, except where indicated)

- **Entraide Fraternite, Belgium (listener)**
  - Claude Mormont

- **PACSA**
  - Daniela Gennrich

- **(Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action)**
  - Thulas Ndlovu
  - Madalitso Mtine
  - Sonia Nuntoolall
  - Anna Puntman
  - Gita Dickinson

- **Sinomlando, Pietermaritzburg**
  - Gracia Makiwane

- **Zenzeleli, MPopomhoni**
  - Bonginkosi Ndlovu

- **Church Land Programme (listener)**
  - Skhumbuzo Zuma

- **Children’s Rights Centre, Durban**
  - Sunitha Eshwarlall

- **Abahlali Basemjondolo (Shack Dwellers, Durban)**
  - Ndaboh Mzimela
  - Zandile Nsibande

- **Sunflower, Mqumalanga, Durban**
  - Thulile Hlengwa
  - Thobile Cibane

- **Coalition Paysanne de Madagascar, Madagascar**
  - Jean-Berthin Rabefeno

- **Centre for Social Equity and Inclusion, India**
  - Satyendra Kumar

- **Jana Vikas, India**
  - Father Manoj Nayak

- **Pamuacha, Zimbabwe**
  - Precious Myamukondiwa
  - Mutxe Mauhy

- **Lawyers for Human Rights, Upington**
  - Celestine Selborne

- **Surplus People Project Springbok**
  - Harry May

- **Community Representative Springbok**
  - Rosemie Pedro

- **SA Catholic Bishops’ Conference Land Desk**
  - Philani Mkhize

- **Local Representative, Muden**
  - Mbhekisini Mavuso

- **Umthathi, Grahamstown**
  - Monica Nombqophiso Canca

- **Linomtha Gardens, Umthathi Community Partner**
  - Zolani Zondani

- **Delta, Libode**
  - Nosandla Malindi

- **Local Community Forum, Libode**
  - Veliswa Magayi

- **Khanyisa, Port Elizabeth**
  - Simphiwe Dada

- **Makukhanye, community partner Khanyisa**
  - Mzikazi Mjako

- **Namko (Namaqua Ontwikkelingsorganisasie)**
  - Brendon Andrews
This encounter was in part the brainchild of Claude Mormont of Entraide et Fraternite, Belgium, in conversation with its South African partners.

It was also supported by Fastenopfer (FO), Switzerland, in response to a request by FO partners to hold a collaborative learning process on this subject.

The intention was, further, to open dialogue spaces for civil society organisations and social movement in South Africa, India, Madagascar and Zimbabwe, which greatly enriched the process.