“We can’t work together if we hate each other”: the challenges of community development in a post-conflict context.

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Introduction

At this early stage of the 21st century we live during a time of growing instability, inequality and fear. The past century was marked by unprecedented levels of violent conflict, allowing for the shameful record that during “the 50 years following the end of World War II, there were only three weeks of peace around the globe” (Firer, 2002, p.57). Conflict, particularly violent conflict, is a major source of uncertainty and a serious impediment to development. The retarding effects of conflict often extend long into what we refer to as the post-conflict stage.

The relationships between conflict, development and peace-building are complex. The effects of conflict on development in terms of loss of lives, livelihoods and resources have traditionally received much attention (Abadie & Gardeazabal, 2003). However, the deleterious effects of conflict on the relational space and social structures have received relatively less attention. Considerations of Community Development in an Age of Uncertainty, the theme of a recent symposium organized by this journal, thus needs to pay some attention to growing instability and inequality in society and how such conditions give rise to and flow from conflict. The ways in which conflict affects the relational space of a community has consequences for development and peace-building. This is so because conflict fragments and disables social networks, relationships and systems of trust, all of which are important for development. In addition, conflict often activates or exacerbates systems of mistrust, fear and hate, which impede development. The quotation in the title of this paper, from a community development worker in KwaZulu-Natal, highlights such negative and impeding relationships.

If we accept that community development is an inherently social activity and promote participatory processes of development, then conflict-induced fragmentation of the relational space in a community can have profound implications for community development and peace-building. Development practitioners, vital agents of development and peace-building, are dependent on the collectivity-owned capital (Bourdieu, 1986), a form of communal power, that they can muster in local contexts. In a post-conflict context such power, or what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as a credential, needs to be renegotiated and reestablished in order for practitioners to feel legitimate and safe, and to be
productive. One way of theorising this type of communal power or credential in the development arena is through social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986).

This paper explores and theorises the experiences of a group of development workers involved in a community-based project in the context of post-conflict KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. The paper draws on findings from a recent study (John, 2009) into the Human Rights, Democracy and Development (HRDD) project, an adult education and development project in rural KwaZulu-Natal. To facilitate such a discussion and theorisation, some background information and historical context of conflict in KwaZulu-Natal is necessary.

**KwaZulu-Natal and its history of political violence**

The successful struggle for political freedom in South Africa has not translated into social freedom nor social justice. Too many of South Africa’s ‘new citizens’ remain in poverty and continue to struggle to meet basic needs for food, water, health care and education (Human Sciences Research Council & Education Projects Unit, 2005). A large proportion of these people live in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, on the east coast of South Africa. With 9.4 million people, KwaZulu-Natal is the most populous province accommodating approximately 21% of South Africa’s population of 44.8 million people (Statistics South Africa, 2003). KwaZulu-Natal also has the most severe concentrations of unemployment, adult illiteracy, rural marginalisation and HIV infection in South Africa.

Apart from such massive development needs, KwaZulu-Natal is also in need of programmes of reconciliation and healing, in other words, peace building programmes. The province is deeply marked by political division and violent power struggles. During the 1980s and early 1990s, this contestation manifested in some of the worst political violence in South Africa. According to Aitchison (2003a, p.47) this was a period when “thousands of people had lost their lives and homes and a deep bitterness had infected the life of the province”. The main protagonists in this conflict were the Inkatha Freedom Party, supported by the apartheid state, and the United Democratic Front associated with the then-banned African National Congress (ANC) (Aitchison, 2003a; Aitchison, 2003b; Jeffery, 1997). Currently, the division only occasionally leads to violence (as experienced during recent elections), but tends to permeate all aspects of civic life in more enduring and subtle ways. The history of political violence has left a seemingly permanent scar on communities and individuals, which is visible in how people relate to each other, value each other and negotiate daily activities within development projects and other aspects of community life.
The HRDD project

The Human Rights, Democracy and Development (HRDD) project which ran for 10 years from 1999 until 2008, was an adult education and development intervention in seven rural communities of KwaZulu-Natal. The project offered a combination of adult basic education classes and livelihoods activities to adult learners in these communities. In using a development model which combined literacy and livelihood activities (Oxenham, Diallo, Katahoire, Petkova-Mwangi & Sall, 2002), the learning content focused on the themes of human rights, democracy and development. The combined activities of the project thus aimed to contribute towards a literate, informed and active citizenry who could participate in development in their communities and access their rights in a new democratic South Africa. The HRDD project was a partnership between an education NGO, a university department, an international donor agency and the seven rural communities. The seven communities, namely, Dalton, Tugela Ferry, Qanda, Estcourt, Trust Feed, Muden and Stoffelton are all characterised by high levels of unemployment and poverty, and low levels of education and development, all of which contribute to marked social exclusion. The facilitators of the literacy classes and livelihoods activities were recruited from within these rural communities and constitute a new cadre of community-based adult educators and development workers (hereafter referred to as community development workers) who have been trained and supported by the NGO and university partners. The learners and educators who participated in the project were predominantly women.

A case study of the HRDD project

Between 2006 and 2008, the author conducted a case study of the HRDD project (John, 2009). This study set out to critically document, narrate, analyse and theorise the practices, learning, and identity development within the HRDD project. The entire HRDD project served as the unit of analysis for the case study. Data collection for the study included 28 in-depth interviews with learners, community development workers and project partners and analysis of more than 100 project documents.

The history of violence and its present day effects featured significantly in the narratives of all seven community development workers in the sample, and have thus been identified by these practitioners as a significant frame for viewing the HRDD project. Most of the development workers in the study were directly affected by the political violence either through attacks on members of their family and their homes or through threats to their own lives. Some lost family members, their homes and other possessions in the violence. A number of them had to flee their homes and take refuge in other communities, sometimes repeatedly. The experiences of loss and displacement have been traumatic for these development workers and their loved ones. For many the violence is
remembered and narrated as a critical event in their lives, shaping much of who they are and what they do or cannot do in the development arena.

Amongst other lessons, this case study of the HRDD project provides an especially good view of the challenges faced by development practitioners in a post conflict context. As noted in the report of an eminent panel of the United Nations “Development has to be the first line of defence for a collective security system that takes prevention seriously… When wars have ended, post-conflict peacebuilding is vital” (United Nations, 2004, pp2-5). Given the widespread occurrence of conflict in many developing countries and the delicate relationship between development, peace-building and human security, the findings of this case study offers some insight into community development in an Age of Uncertainty.

In the sections below, several direct quotations from community development workers are provided to illustrate the challenges they face in their work. Pseudonyms have been used in all instances.

The challenges of development work in a post-conflict context

As indicated earlier, the history of the violence is not just a background contextual factor in the lives of community development workers. Rather, embedded in personal remembrance, it is a sad and painful experience which is presented as being critical to who the development workers are, to what they have in material and educational terms, to how they relate to those around them, and in what they can do as citizens and community development workers. Thus, the violence continues to influence their present-day lives. The stories told by community development workers of their violence-racked lives are significant for understanding their roles, learning and identities within the HRDD project.

Several community development workers spoke of the absence of trust and solidarity in the communities in which they conduct their development work and of how these conditions hamper their efforts. For many, they not only deal with the general barriers which bedevil adult basic education such as attitudinal barriers, financial barriers etcetera (Rogers, 2006), they also have to contend with ongoing suspicion and fear about their motives and the purpose of their work. Their political allegiance is often questioned and this constrains their efforts. The political tensions make recruitment and retention of learners a very serious challenge. Levels of trust and solidarity, vital for effective project implementation, are low in a context of political division and historically violent power struggles. The quotations which follow illustrate how the history of violence and political division has affected the relational space in these communities and how such a climate impacts on development.
Khosi, a community development worker, explains the chasm created by violence, and need for a peace committee in her community:

I think what creates a necessity for a peace committee here … like in other areas, is because there were wars when we grew up. People always resorted to violence whenever there were problems to be resolved, with guns. You see? Therefore a peace committee would bridge the gap that opened during that time.

She explained how the political division and suspicion affects her development work:

Since I am under another Inkosi [traditional leader] there are people of this area who do not understand what I am doing here … Some people have a tendency of thinking that I work for political parties.

Another development worker, Cosmos, also talks of the political divisions and power struggles which hamper the work of development committees in his community. He draws attention to the need for reconciliation amongst political enemies and how the absence of reconciliation impedes development. In contrasting relationships of hate and love in his community’s development committee, Cosmos advances a distinctly Freirean position of love and solidarity for transformatory development (Freire, 1970):

Our committee is not working … People focus on the politics … because the members of our committees are not of the same political party … you find that I come from party A, another from party B, another comes from party C. So we hate each other. Right here in the committee, so where is progress if we hate each other? We must love each other first, then we can work together. We can’t work together if we hate each other … Here, it is mostly politics that divides people. Only politics I see as a stumbling block to development. It is just it. There is no harmony.

The HRDD project encouraged development workers to build relationships with community structures and local development fora. However, the history of violence and ongoing power struggles make it difficult for community development workers to forge such relationships in the context of their work. Nokthula explains her difficulty in this regard:

… I can no longer manage to attend community meetings. Another thing is that it will always be in my heart that I did not have a good experience with organisations. When I got to Estcourt, it was Inkatha that ill-treated me. In Durban I was ill- treated by the ANC. So I will just stick with church, because I have never been attacked there.
Nokthula has managed to develop a good relationship with the traditional leader in her area and gets his support for her work but has experienced enormous difficulty in establishing a relationship with the ward councillor (the elected local government representative for her area). The councillor has repeatedly avoided her and fails to attend meetings. Nokthula’s explanation for the ward councillor’s behaviour is:

Maybe she thought that I am here to take her job. Sometimes the councillor, when they hear that there is someone who is working with the community, she just [assumes] you are against her according to political affiliation or you want to take the job that she is doing in the community.

Orvil also reveals distrust of the local councillor in his ward. His statement below points to how community work generates the kind of capital which can be hijacked for political ends:

… we live in times of transformation that involve councillors. For someone to rule better in his area he is always looking for people to use to achieve that. To me, specifically, I have been used by someone who used my achievements to have a better image in the community.

Welcome is likewise skeptical of the politicians’ influence in discouraging learner participation, saying:

Because they [councillors] are the ones who want to come up with everything. They don’t want somebody else to come with his own idea … If somebody comes up with other things they think he is going to overpower them... I wish that maybe politics should be put aside for a while in order to carry on with development.

The depth of the scars left by the KZN’s political violence has meant that even peace related activities and committees are ineffective because of suspicion and fear. Two community development workers spoke of how peace processes in their communities have been thwarted by political division and of the difficulties in separating political identity from peace committee membership. Welcome stated:

At home they are not happy with working with [the peace committee] because of [political] parties. When you are in [a peace committee], you are considered as being in a particular party. Yet [a peace committee] was not started as a party… Now if you are in it [the peace committee] you appear to be the party, whilst you are not that party.

Likewise, Khosi explains the lack of progress with the peace committee in her area:
No, it is not biased … When [the peace committee] had just been formed, it suggested that the government should be approached so that a technikon or technical college should be built. But that idea was resisted by those who believed that such a college would be for ANC members only, you see? … Even if the government was trying to bring some developments, some people resisted them on grounds that they were brought by the ANC. Those are things that made me withdraw from [the peace committee] …

Social capital theory and development

Almost a decade ago, Dhesi (2000, p.201) noted in the *Community Development Journal* that a “broad consensus is emerging that development initiatives should take into account the role of social capital, that is, shared knowledge, understandings, values, norms, traits, and social networks”. Social capital theory provides a framework for exploring how development, in its broadest sense, is influenced by trust, relationships and social networks. This article explores the utility of the theory in providing a lens for viewing and theorising the relational space in communities after periods of protracted violent conflict, and for further exploration of how such a relational space impacts on development.

A large and growing body of literature on social capital theory has developed internationally (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1993; Putnam 2000; Portes, 1998; Burt, 2001; Fine, 2001; Fine, 2002; Mansuri & Rao, 2004; Dika & Singh, 2002). In South Africa, social capital theory has been used in research into entrepreneurship (Pingle, 2001), HIV/AIDS (Campbell, 2003; Campbell, Williams & Gilgen, 2002), into the relationships between government and communities, on membership in stokvels (saving clubs), into land reform, mineworkers’ health, and into civic organisations (see Thomas, 2002), into local economic development (Nel, Binns & Motteux, 2002) and research into inclusive education (Muthukrishna & Sader, 2004).

Morrow (1999) notes that *social capital* is an elusive concept which defies easy definition. Social capital has been associated with sociability, social networks, family ties, social support, social control, trust, reciprocity, group solidarity, community engagement, civic mindedness, social justice and participation in civil society. Fukuyama (1999) correctly notes that many definitions of social capital refer to its manifestations rather than to social capital itself. There are several definitions of social capital, each originating from different conceptualisations and strands of the theory associated with different theorists. The development of the theory is mainly associated with three theorists, namely, Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam. Farr (2004) provides a useful overview and history of the concept of social capital.
While there has been widespread employment of social capital theory in a range of contexts and studies, there is also strident critique of the theory. Fine (2001, 2002), Portes (1998) and DeFilippis (2001) all provide robust critiques of social capital theory, highlighting the weaknesses in the theory. Robert Putnam's work, in particular, has been the source of considerable critique. Mansuri and Rao (2004) argue for a contextualised understanding of social capital where community heterogeneity, culture and politics are considered. They see the delinking of power and social relationships as one of the chief problems in the Putnam-influenced World Bank's conception and application of social capital.

Many commentators express clear preference for Bourdieu's theorisation of social capital (Portes, 1998; Morrow, 1999; DeFilippis, 2001; Campbell, 2003; O'Brien and O' Fathaigh, 2004; Burnheim, 2004; Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Portes (1998, p.3) sees the work of Pierre Bourdieu as the “first systematic contemporary analysis of social capital”. Burnheim (2004, p. 5) captures Bourdieu’s more critical use of social capital when comparing Coleman and Bourdieu in stating that, “Coleman [and Putnam] wants more social capital; Bourdieu questions what sort and for whom”.

A key distinguishing feature of Bourdieu’s work is his focus on social class as the unit of analysis of social capital as opposed to the family, neighbourhood or nation. A further distinguishing feature is Bourdieu’s interest in how societies are structured through the unequal distribution of different forms of capital. Bourdieu offers social capital as a tool for analysis and critique of hierarchy, power and inequality in society. Bourdieu’s work also fully acknowledges the less desirable effects of social capital. The value of drawing on Bourdieu’s work in this article lies in the attention paid to the socio-cultural and historical nature of inequality and exploitation. Furthermore, Bourdieu takes account of the lived experiences (an explicit interest in this case study) of actors and provides explanations for how advantaged and elite groupings dominate particular fields such as education, market and state, amass capital and power and thus maintain and reproduce social inequality.

While this paper primarily employs Bourdieu’s theorisation of social capital, it also proposes that Coleman’s (1988) concept of closure has relevance for theorising the conditions of fracture in community relations in KwaZulu-Natal. Closure has been found to a useful concept in social capital theory (Burt, 2001) and even enjoys some support amongst detractors of the theory (Portes, 1998). Closure refers to the density of relations within a network or structure which helps to cement expectations, norms and obligations of members. Bourdieu’s definition of social capital and Coleman’s notion of closure serve as a theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of development workers in the post-conflict context of KwaZulu-Natal.

**Relationships in post-conflict communities: depleted social capital**
As depicted in the quotations from development workers in the HRDD project, the problems of political division and power struggles dominated their narratives when they spoke about their lives and work. There is a sense that the physical violence of the past remains as long-term socio-psychic violence and manifests in division, suspicion and lack of trust. Ironically, the violence and current division run against project goals of fostering human rights and democracy and, are also clearly counter-productive to community development in this context. Cosmos, a young development worker, offers an interesting example of this phenomenon.

The community in which Cosmos works has a history of deep political divisions which manifested in violence over a number of years. Political identities are strong in this context, perhaps stronger than identities of educator and learner. The learning environment and curriculum faces challenges and doubts regarding its political motives. To reduce the overt politicization of the classroom, Cosmos has requested that his learners not wear the T-shirts of their political organizations when attending class. He explains:

So people who support Inkatha here, they think we are preaching to our learners to join the ANC. So now we have realised that there is a need for us as teachers to tell our learners that they must not wear [party] t-shirts in our classes, or even in the street because people think we teach them to wear those things they are wearing ... So, we are very, very committed to teach. We are advising them not to wear t-shirts in our classes ...

In a project which aims to foster tolerance, respect for diversity, rights to freedom of association and speech, Cosmos’ actions appear counter-productive and not aligned to the democratic goals of the project. However, in a context where an educator has personal experience of people being killed because of their political affiliation and where his own political identity is under scrutiny it can be expected that he would not want to take many risks, irrespective of the importance of these in terms of project goals.

There is clearly a major incongruence between the HRDD project’s goals and the political climate in which the project exists. The project sought to develop and reinforce productive relationships in contexts where relationships are fragile and potentially life-threatening. In social capital theory productive relationships and networks based on trust and norms of reciprocity are beneficial to development. Social capital in development is attributed to the social glue it brings in the form of trust, reciprocity, coordination, information sharing and control (Coleman, 1988; Coleman, 1990). These features of social capital make development work easier, more productive and more sustainable. From the accounts of the challenges experienced by development workers, the lack of social capital in the broader community context is hampering several project efforts. It is as though the political violence has drained communities of the social capital needed for development action and social change. It is in this regard that this study suggests
the notion of *depleted social capital* as a significant characteristic of the post-conflict context in KwaZulu-Natal.

According to Bourdieu (1986, p.51) social capital is:

> the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition - or in other words - to membership in a group - which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.

In this study several community development workers reported that they were treated with suspicion, particularly by authority figures in their community. Their political allegiance and motives were called into question. In the light of Bourdieu’s conception of social capital, community development workers appear to be lamenting the lack of “the backing of the collectivity-owned capital” and the absence of the “credential which entitles them to credit” in the social sense. These context-imposed deficiencies pose a serious challenge to community development workers working with a human rights, democracy and development agenda.

Smith (2001, p.10) noted that social capital has the effect of “enabling people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric”. In the HRDD project, however, community development workers repeatedly reported that their efforts were not supported if political leaders in their community could not take credit for bringing such initiatives to the community themselves. Two community development workers spoke of the difficulties they had experienced in getting an audience with the local councillor, both referring to such leaders as avoiding them or “running away from them”. These findings highlight the importance of considerations of socio-political climate and social capital in planning and implementing development work in post-conflict societies. A significant lesson emanating from this case study relates to the level of attention paid to the fractured nature of communities and the disarming effect of power struggles when the HRDD project was planned. With respect to the goal of getting people to practice democratic citizenship in a micro project context as preparation for a broader community and societal context, it is highly questionable if such a goal was realistic in a context of such extensive fracture.

The extent to which the condition of being a post-conflict society with ongoing power struggles affects development implementation in South Africa, and particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, needs to be taken into account seriously in planning phases. The same may be said of other post-conflict contexts. The findings of this study point to the value of tapping into the lived experiences of project actors when making such assessments as this perspective challenges the more official discourse in South Africa which speaks of freedom, democracy, and
The findings also call for a serious reassessment regarding demands made on change agents who have to work in divided contexts, especially when they themselves have had traumatic experiences and have faced some of the most devastating consequences of such conflict. The important questions that these findings raise are:

- What levels of social change can one realistically expect community development workers to facilitate in such conditions of a post-conflict society?
- Can community development workers who do not themselves feel free, work successfully to facilitate empowerment and freedom with their communities?
- What levels of social transformation can one reasonably expect of small-scale projects in an oppressive post-conflict context?
- What kinds of uncertainty and challenge should future generations of development practitioners be prepared for, particularly those working in post-conflict contexts?

A relational space of fracture rather than closure

As indicated earlier, closure according to Coleman (1988) refers to the density of a structure or network which can be beneficial for social and economic development. Closure offers a useful lens for theorising the post-conflict, divided conditions in communities of KwaZulu-Natal as illustrated through the case of the HRDD project. This understanding of social capital, arising from the interconnectedness of one’s network, sees it as an asset which could be acquired, grown and also destroyed. As family and community relations weaken, closure is reduced and social capital dissipates. According to Coleman, a community’s social capital is greater when there is greater interconnectedness or density of relationships. Such closure brings benefits of better information sharing, increased trustworthiness and collective sanctions. The relevance of these benefits to community development and to a project such as the HRDD are fairly evident.

How is closure beneficial for members of the network or community? Closure, as the density of relations within a structure, helps to cement expectations, norms, obligations and trustworthiness amongst members of the structure or community. It is in this sense that closure can be treated as a community asset which can be acquired and grown. A relational space characterised by closure appears similar to relationships of solidarity advocated by Freire (1970) and also akin to the collective energy and power associated with modern social movements (Walters, 2005; Crowther, Martin & Shaw, 1999). However, closure can also be weakened and destroyed! The violence and power struggles recorded in this study indicate
that the latter has occurred in KwaZulu-Natal. As community relations weaken, in
the manner so vividly described by community development workers in this
study, social capital can be seen as having dissipated. The absence of closure
negatively influences information sharing, trustworthiness and collective
sanctions, to the detriment of community development.

In the development context of the HRDD project, the level of dis-connectedness
or what has been called fracture in his study, denotes a distinct lack of closure!
The earlier-introduced notion of depleted social capital stems from the condition
of fracture and is presented in this study as the antithesis of closure. If thought of
as a position on a spectrum ranging from fracture to closure, the HRDD
communities would be located at the fracture end of the spectrum, denoting a
space where education and development activity takes longer than those at the
opposite end of the spectrum, and are more fraught. This is because such a
space is short on trust, coordination and efficient information exchanges, all
those characteristics associated with closure. In this space of fracture, community
development workers and learners become frustrated and fearful, and their energies are constantly sapped. This retards development and change. The HRDD project has the potential to move communities along the spectrum but its reach, lifespan, resources and influence appear to be too limited to make a
meaningful and sustained impact (John, 2009).

For new forms of closure to be established in a post-conflict society closure of a
different kind must first take place. Development practitioners who are survivors
of violence need to be supported in dealing with trauma and attaining closure of a
psychological nature. Without psychological closure, closure in social capital
terms is difficult to achieve. There is also a need for development practitioners to
be supported in establishing their credentials as non-partisan practitioners when
working in contexts of fracture and political division.

Conclusion

Connections and fragmentations, the sub-theme of the symposium organized by
this journal, are of particular pertinence to notions of social capital in a post-
conflict society. Fracture, absence of closure and depletion of social capital are
signifiers of fragmentation of the relational space in a post-conflict context.
Development practitioners face serious challenges in navigating this complex
and fragile space. Remembrances of violence propel systems of fear and hate
which further complicate such navigation.

Community development in the Age of Uncertainty, requires development
practitioners who feel credible and safe. Without these basic conditions, their
transformative edge in community development and their contributions to peace-
building are severely blunted. Cosmos’ practice so adequately demonstrated this.
Findings of this case study of the HRDD project highlight the importance of considering the level of social capital and the socio-political climate when planning and implementing development in post-conflict societies. These findings also draw attention to the need for programmes of healing and support of development practitioners operating in post-conflict contexts.

References


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