

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORK ON ONE'S EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL WELL-BEING: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Lindokuble Vellem

Working with marginalised communities, what I refer to in this article as spaces of scarcity¹, is a fulfilling vocation, where one gets to witness and experience the liberation and emancipation of communities that have been forgotten and somewhat excluded from mainstream economic trajectories within society and even from political activities.

As fulfilling as it may be, the job comes with its own challenges. Often, in building capacity, empowering, standing with and pushing against, as some of the activities one often engages in as we work in these spaces of scarcity, we have to make sure that they come out whole on the other side. That is easier said than done because the work takes a toll on one emotionally.

I had worked on numerous projects that were aimed at holding elected representatives to account and often felt like pushing up against a solid mountain. For the past 3 years, I had an opportunity to participate in the Accounting for Basic Services (ABS) project² which was a truly humbling and exhilarating experience. This article draws on this project, its successes and challenges but mostly, the emotional toll and strain that it left one with. This article is an account of my personal experiences looking at the oppressive nature of the work we do in the

*It is the destruction of
the world in our own
lives that drives us half
insane, and more than
half. (Wendell Berry
cited by Macy & Young
Brown, 1998)*

spaces of scarcity, engaging a non responsive state. In the main, this article highlights that the social justice activism work we do within civil society is 'heart work' and cannot be dismissed by simply saying that 'one must be objective'. It is just not that simple.

In this article we draw on a skeletal frame designed by Macy & Young Brown (1998) in the book "Coming back to life: practices to reconnect our lives, our world" to explore and reflect on experience and state of being during the implementation of the ABS project

and generally, in my work in the spaces of scarcity, particularly when interacting with and engaging a non responsive state.

The ABS project in summary

The Accounting for Basic Services Project was jointly implemented by the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF), Afesis-corplan, the Built Environment Support Group (BESG), Isandla Institute and PlanAct. The project was designed for and approved by the European Commission Delegation to South Africa within the rubric of its Socio-Economic Justice for All – Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Support Programme, and was implemented from June 2016 to September 2018.

The project's central approach hinged on empowering marginalised communities to begin re-shaping their relationships with public representatives. As such, its outcomes and activities focused on the support and capacity building required by citizens marginalised by geography, poverty, race, class and gender, to hold

local government to account. The project as a whole posited that when citizens are able to hold local government to account, the willingness and ability of the state at national and provincial level to support and sanction underperforming municipalities would also be strengthened.

Glenmore Community

Glenmore community was established as a result of forced removals of groups of people from farms in the western parts of the Eastern Cape Province in the late 1970s. Today it has just over 2 000 people living in the area, approximately 570 households. Glenmore is in the western edge of the Ngqushwa Local Municipality along a gravel road that cuts across the Fish River into the Makhanda Local Municipality area. It is in a corner of the municipality that is not easily accessible, is away from national routes and is hidden away. There are many admirable characteristics of this area, from the landscape, to a less explored quarry and the Great Fish River that borders the community. The area has no history of traditional leadership because

of the different areas that most people came from. The area used to be a privately owned farm and not communal land, which therefore eliminates any grounds for traditional leadership in the area.

The people of Glenmore still have fresh wounds from forced removals of the past and having to create a community in the middle of nowhere with no ancestral backing from the land on which they now live. Most villages that have had decades and even centuries to develop are characterised by a sense of unity amongst the inhabitants. They are often brought together by a local authority and most often people in that village will belong to one of three to four clans in the area and with inter-marriages in some villages you may find one or two dominant clans.

For Glenmore the story is different, the Social Audit⁹ that had been done in the area revealed over 100 different surnames in one village community. This speaks to unity and loyalty to one another, or in this case, the lack thereof. For most families in Glenmore, the youth is the first generation of children born and raised in Glenmore after the removals, which also indicates the fragility of the community. Where community maturity is concerned, Glenmore



is a mere child whose behaviour needs to be carefully guarded because it has the potential to self destruct if the forces are strong enough.

The community of Glenmore, through own fundraising efforts, had established the Glenmore sports facility. In 2016 Ngqushwa Municipality allocated funds for the refurbishment of the sports facility. These funds were allocated from the Municipal Infrastructure Grant in the 2015/2016 financial year, a sum totalling R2 915 680.80 of which 80% has been paid out to the contractor who has been certified as having completed 90% of the work. The people of Glenmore and surrounding villages were excited to be recipients of a refurbishment project in their ward. However that was short lived because the end result was not to their expectation. Despite the resources allocated and spent by the municipality, the facility could not be safely used for its intended purpose.

Afesis-Corplan was introduced to the community by a whistleblower in July of 2016. Afesis-Corplan's aim was to support the community of Glenmore to hold both the municipality and its appointed contractor accountable for the poor workmanship at the stadium and finally to get it fixed. It seemed like it should be fairly simple for the municipality to hold the contractor to account, but in the case of Ngqushwa it wasn't. The contractor was a senior ranked political office bearer, much more senior than the councillors of Ngqushwa municipality and the municipal officials seemed powerless at the hands of this contractor. The story of Glenmore was an important one in that here was a rural community in a remote area standing up against powerful political elites, business interests and a municipality that did not have their interests at heart. If it could be done by the people of Glenmore, it meant any other community of similar features could.

Pain for the World

From the initial conversations with the people of Glenmore I felt great distress for what the community had gone through from the time of its establishment, having been forcefully moved from various areas, to losing an



access road that was passing through the location which impacted the village's accessibility and livelihood opportunities, and the collapse of the Tyefu irrigation scheme that promised great economic spin offs for the people living in the area. Macy & Young Brown (1998) describe this pain as the price of consciousness in a threatened and suffering world. It is said to be a natural and necessary feeling of collective healing. The world we live in can be so depressing at times, from the news we hear and watch, and the constant bombarding of signals of distress. These generally stir up feelings of anger, fear and sorrow, and pain although we seldom express these feelings. The purpose

of this pain is to trigger remedial action.

Unfortunately we go through the motions of our work and do not fully recognise this as pain; pain for the situation or the world we live in. It is almost dangerous because of our inability to recognise it; we also fail to properly treat it. I identify with this as I experienced all kinds of fear in my work on the ABS project: fear of despair, fear of appearing morbid, distrust of our own intelligence, fear of guilt, fear of causing distress, fear of being unpatriotic, fear of appearing weak and emotional, belief in the separate self and ultimately the fear of powerlessness.

Fear of despair

“A sense of some overarching meaning to our lives is as necessary as oxygen. We can face and endure tremendous hardship with heroic courage so long as we believe there is some purpose to our existence, some value to our existence...” Macy & Young Brown (1998)

The quotation above is one that clearly defines an existential crisis that I experienced during the ABS project. For the longest time the community was pushing, hoping to hold someone accountable for the failure in the delivery of the sporting facility. They felt powerless against the municipality and wealthy contractors. When we came along to support the community, they thought we would be a ‘knight in shining armour’. It took everything we know in our advocacy tactics handbook to draw attention to the plight of the Glenmore community, not because the evidence was not there for all in government to see and correct, but because there is no culture of accountability in government and any attempts to hold to account are met with great resistance.

There were many times when I questioned the ideals and values upon which our democratic government stands: does anyone in government live up to them? The oversight and accountability measures of government proved weak and very few were willing to

listen. Many times it felt like the community was pushing against a mountain and they trusted us – me - to shift the mountain. I started questioning my own abilities, my own resolve and strength and whether I had what it takes to make a difference. In my moments of weakness I started questioning whether I had the resolve and tenacity necessary for social justice advocacy. These questions are almost paralysing, so often I felt like walking away, giving up and just letting things be.

Fear of appearing morbid

Whenever I was asked how the project was going, all I could do was smile and say everything was going well, which was true in terms of the programme. But when the municipality does not show up, they don’t respond, you write to Eastern Cape Provincial CoGTA⁴, they don’t respond, and yet the community looks up to you as the resource person, as the one who should be able to unlock the doors that they have tried over and over again to open but failed. All you can do is just keep trying and hoping. This takes a toll on one emotionally.

Yes, these responses were outside of my control, and it frustrated me so much that a democratically elected government would treat citizens in this manner, both the locally elected representatives together with provincial civil servants, all behaving in the same way. Constantly it felt like government was callous and “my” efforts were a waste of time. I had to soldier on, lest I brought such despair to the community, causing them to abandon the process of trying to improve their own conditions. This feeling of anguish and despair can be construed to mean failure of maintaining confidence and at times, can be seen as incompetence.

Distrust of Own Intelligence

Working in spaces of scarce resources with an unresponsive government can make one question the kinds of strategies that they (and the community) are employing.

Finding oneself in a position where most of the strategies and tactics we employ do not yield the desired results can make one doubt their strategies and their ability to plan and implement effectively. It did not help that the ABS project was a technically advanced project which required an intense building of technical skills such as municipal budget analysis, understanding of the Municipal Finance Management Act and municipal procurement processes, ability to read and comprehend grant agreements and service delivery agreements concluded between the municipality and contractors, etc. It is easy when things go wrong to begin to doubt one’s technical ability and proficiency in newly acquired skills. I often wondered whenever I felt like this, how much more for the community members? Would they have carried on in the absence of a support organization like ours? In conversation with just the people I worked with in Glenmore, they are adamant that in our absence they would have long given up.

Fear of Guilt

Working in Glenmore brought about a sense of guilt. I would often drive to the community (a 2 hour journey from East London where I live), do whatever business brought me there for the day and then drive back home back to my life in the city. That I was working with and lamenting the plight of the community when I did not really experience their daily struggle made me feel guilty. It took a long time to accept and be at peace with my life and my work and to not see the two as mutually exclusive or to doubt my commitment to social justice and to understand that my work need not be in conflict with my desire for a comfortable life. I know there are many of my colleagues in the social justice space who have expressed this feeling of guilt. This is partly because the activists before us or perhaps the ones we grew up watching in movies and in the textbooks we read were the kind that rejected any form of personal comfort for the cause. I do not. With my growth and development comes that of my family and others connected to me, mine is a responsibility I cannot forgo. That said, it did not make the guilt any less.

Fear of appearing weak and emotional

In a patriarchal society such as ours, it is often expected of women to show signs of weakness especially in difficult situations. So in order to stand their ground as equals, women always have to be strong, hold it in and forge forward. Crying, which is a natural reaction to great internal pain, is deemed the worst sign of weakness and crying at work is unforgivable when women have fought so hard to earn their place in the workplace. Towards the end of the project, I just couldn't hold back tears. I had kept in so much pain and frustration, so much so that I would be sitting in a meeting and a searing pain would cut across my heart and streams of tears would roll down my face. It was not something I could control. At those times I felt weak and hopeless. I was exceptionally troubled by the struggle of the community of Glenmore to which it seemed there would be no positive outcome. Often I asked, what was the use of it all? In those moments I felt drained and exhausted, very exhausted but I knew I had to push on, giving up was not an option.

Belief in the separate self

"It is hard to credit our pain to the world, if we believe that we are essentially separate from it" Macy & Young Brown (1998).

We have been conditioned by western culture to be individualistic. This I grappled with because of how I saw myself within the bigger scheme of things, seeing my work as not just a job that pays my bills at the end of the month, but a vocation, a spiritual calling that brings me to the fullness of my being every time I connected with marginalised communities. Civil society is an amazing space to work in as it grooms individuals that are connected to social, economic, political and ecological

systems. And this connection is often ignored when a psychological analysis of individuals is done.

According to Macy & Young Brown (1998), we are conditioned to take seriously only those feelings that pertain to our individual needs and wants. We find it hard to believe that we can suffer on behalf of society, and on behalf of the planet, that this suffering is real, valid and healthy. I am of the view that the fear that comes with the social justice defence work can make us feel powerless and want to shrink our spheres of attention to just ourselves, a 'me and my own' attitude.

Making a case for self care as a political activist strategy!

Reflecting back on my response to the experience I went through as narrated above is that we - those exposed to working in 'painful' worlds - need to guard against burnout, general depression, feelings of hopelessness, political passivity,



avoidance of painful information, diminished intellectual performance and a sense of powerlessness. Granted, most of these are intrinsic emotions and cannot be picked up on unless individuals stand still long enough to reflect, self-check and even share with others their experiences and be willing to be open about their feelings.

Recognising and actively taking the steps to heal the pain that comes with our work begins with self: self-care, love and power. For example, Hope and Chigubu (2015) write about finding inspiration, for them a soul song. This can literally be a song, or a book, or scripture that enhances power within and supports the soul to withstand processes of rusting and erosion. This should inspire and remind the individual to stop and live, to allow themselves to be distracted from the cult of productivity and the busyness of life, pushing the owner

of the soul song to create wholeness in a fractured world.

Furthermore I encourage and advise social justice activists to be present, not just physically but being present with heart, mind and body. It would mean that we are cognisant of what is happening within and outside of us, making sure not to be repressive - ignoring the churning from within. Self-care is about making a choice - a conscious one - to care. It is power of mind over matter. It is embracing weakness in a world where one is forced to be strong. It is about wrestling with how power is understood and to claim it for oneself in ways that do not compromise one's wellbeing. This is political.

Self-care is not a separate methodology. It is a political strategy underpinned by the understanding that well-being is the ultimate goal of the work that many civil

society activists do. Given the spaces that one often finds oneself in, spaces of scarcity, trauma, disease, violence, constant media bombardment, the harsh socio-economic climate and depressing political experiences, it becomes more than a political act to reclaim our power and use it for our individual and collective well being (Chigubu and Chigubu, 2015).

Practically, we should never feel guilty when desiring to take leave and to simply rest. Managers need to assist in creating a supportive environment and allow staff to take the much needed leave if they so need. Annual organisational budgets ought to include activities for staff-care, medical cover, spiritual retreats and moments of relaxation. Where resources permit, employees who work in conditions already detailed herein should be supported to get professional psychological support.



Conclusion

In conclusion I argue that one needs to learn the art of breaking free, free from the mentality that creates the repressive state. Be emotional, care, be subjective and cry about society. As Macy & Young Brown (1998) would have it, this pain (which includes fear, anger, sorrow and guilt) is not only pervasive, it is in fact natural and healthy. It is only dysfunctional when it is misunderstood and repressed. As I have shared, it is easy to go into a repressive state and go on with life as it comes. I believe that it often costs more to ignore our emotional health and wellbeing. Instead of having the presence of mind to try new strategies and working through community issues, we become apathetic towards society and the work we do, ultimately dimming the glimmer of hope that we once brought to the communities we work with. The key is honouring this pain for what it is and view it as a gateway into deep participation in society's different facets of activism (be it activists in public, private and civil society), towards the better world which we all want to see each day we wake up. Pushing past the pain leads one to greater courage, an entrenched love for the work and the never failing attitude of being **hopelessly hopeful**.



References

Macy, J. R. and Young Brown, M. 1998. *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*, New Society Publishers

Chigubu, H and Chigubu, R. 2015. Strategies for building an organisation with soul. African Institute for Integrated Responses to VAWG & HIV/AIDS (AIR)

¹ These are spaces where the demand outstrips the supply of most basic resources needed for a sustainable livelihood, be it financial resources, human capital and basic municipal services.

² A project supported by the European Union, and implemented jointly by the Heinrich Boll Foundation, Afesis-corplan, BESG, Planact and the Isandla Institute The project supported

6 communities around the country. See <http://afesis.org.za/programmes/local-governance/> for more information.

³ A Social Audit is a community-led process that facilitates public participation in the monitoring of government service delivery and expenditure. During the social audit process, communities study government

documents and compare them to their experiences as recipients of a public service. Evidence and experiences are collected, presented and then discussed with government officials.

⁴ The Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs

