

Embracing the future

In transitional societies young people are not only a reflection of the future in the present but also ideally positioned to shape and mould the future. **ANDRÉ ZAIMAN** reports on a weekend project in the Eastern Transvaal wilderness which brought black and white youths together to start this process.

"Dialogue requires an intense faith in human beings; their power to make and remake, to create and recreate; faith that the vocation to be fully human is the birthright of all people, not the privilege of an elite."

— Paulo Freire



Four Pretoria scholars make friends in the wilderness.

have in common: the future. But true dialogue is only possible if there exists in the group a certain degree of **trust**, a climate of acceptance of **all** the participants: black and white, rich and poor, strong and weak; an ability to **listen** to other people and a commitment to a democratic **process** that guarantees the equal participation of all.

- For black and white pupils to start a dialogue that is based on honesty and sincerity requires that they be taken away from their known environments to an environment that is more or less **equally unknown to all the participants**. Quite often the selection of the venue for these kind of encounters predetermines and structures white youths into an even more advantaged position over the township children simply because they are used to and feel comfortable in fancy, urban hotels or conference centres whilst their black counterparts experience these centres as "white, foreign and hostile". As urbanites, they share the same anxieties about the wilderness and the rural or bush context places them at least in this respect on a more equal footing.

- The starting point for real and fundamental change lies as much in the individual as it lies in the society and its institutions. If the individual does not fully grasp what democracy means, if he or she does not begin to **internalise democratic values** at an early age, the battle against tyranny in transitional societies will be lost. It is therefore crucially important that pupils are conscientised about the kind of society we live in and how it has affected all of us individually; and that their understanding of true democracy based on freedom, equality and respect for human dignity, be deepened beyond rhetoric.

- The relationship between human beings and their environment is a fundamental but neglected aspect of the debate about a common future. As people striving towards a more progressive society, we dare not ignore the environmental factors that are destined to influence and change the political, economical and social aspects of the world.

Taking in the environment... the scholars explore nature.

It was decided that the planning of the weekend should be left in the hands of the pupils to the largest possible extent, and therefore a committee was mandated by the whole group to plan the structure of the weekend. This committee consisted of pupils and Idasa staff members, who acted as advisors and facilitators.

After a six-hour bus journey the group arrived at Thornybush Game Lodge near Hoedspruit and immediately went into the boma for a dinner by candlelight around the fire. As the rest of the group sang in the reed-enclosed boma till late in the evening, the committee did the evaluation of the day's activities and final planning for the following day.

Despite the late night, we were all in time for early morning tea and sandwiches at 6.30 on the verandah. We were met by our two armed game rangers and set off into the African wilderness for a three-hour walk during which we saw game ranging from cheetah to giraffe, many beautiful birds, trees and insects and received an interesting talk on ecology.

After a hearty brunch, the rest of the day was spent in workshop. The workshop was started with the Idasa-facilitators giving a brief input on theory:

- Gibb's four needs of a group (acceptance, sharing information about ourselves and the issues we feel are important in our lives, setting goals and organisation for action).
- Paulo Freire's work on critical awareness.
- Dialogue and human relations training.

But the essence of the workshop was to teach through self-discovery and participation, not through lecturing. Therefore we built the workshop around a series of games, with each game having a particular theme. The seven themes that were tackled during this particular workshop, were trustbuilding in groups; learning to listen; sharing leadership and responsibility; constructive self and mutual criticism; strengthening team relations; making democratic decisions; evaluation: reflection and action.

The games produced much laughter and fun, interspersed with periods of silent and serious reflection, much debate and sometimes even serious differences; but at the end of it all a common understanding and commitment to a true **democratic process**

