

Chapter One

SELF-HELP

THE BLACK COMMUNITY is in a critical situation because of historical, economic, cultural and political conditions. Many groups have sprung up through the years in an effort by blacks to alleviate their position. Some of these groups have been initiated and patronised by white individuals and institutes. However, blacks have also initiated their own self-help projects within their community, particularly in the awakening reality of Black Consciousness.

1972 saw the springing up of associations such as Black Community Programmes, which played an important role in bringing together youth, religious, educational and cultural groups. This led to the creation of several associations which stood for the positive development of self-reliance in the black community.

The Association of Self-Help (ASH)

In June 1972 a training workshop was organised by the Community of St. Stephen (COSS), which consists of members of St. Stephen's Church, at Merewent, Durban. The workshop was sponsored by the Black Community Programmes. It was agreed that conscientisation as a means of heightening the awareness of the black community included re-orientation and self-help as essentials of the affirmation of blackness.

Self-help was described as a means of making people 'develop a pride in themselves and their potential—to show the relationship of their environment to themselves', so as to increase self-reliance and interdependency.

In June 1973 the Association for Self-Help (ASH) was set up as a result of the workshop.

Its aims and objects are:

to inculcate the principle of self-reliance;

to encourage the community to work co-operatively to satisfy their wants and needs.

ASH works in the communities to the south of Durban, with initial projects in the Merebank-Wentworth area. The following policy is extracted from ASH's Progress Report of December 1973:

The Association for Self-Help believes that the problems prevailing in the black community, e.g. poverty, illiteracy, crime etc., militate against the true humanity of black people; that these social disorders are responsible for the dearth of a dynamic cultural expression in the black community; that these social conditions inculcated in the black community breed an attitude of complacency, suspicion and fear which work against the establishment of communal harmony; that the lack of communal harmony in the black community frustrates joint efforts to express and fulfil basic needs and aspirations; in order to fulfil these basic needs and aspirations, we therefore commit ourselves to inculcating, fostering, organising, directing and extending in the black community the principle of self-help, and to uniting the constituents of the black community in their efforts and desire to be self-reliant.

ASH is a private, non-political and non-profit agency.

Before embarking on any projects, the ASH field workers conducted an economic survey of the sub-economic housing area of Merebank (the Old Marine Drive valley), which they had chosen as their starting point. They found that 60% of the families interviewed received a monthly income of below R60; the majority of these families consisted of 8 members or more; the income of the other 40% did not exceed R110 per month; in 80% of the families expenditure was twice the income; those families living in the transit camp (Minitown) revealed feelings of intense dissatisfaction with living conditions; 35% of the adults interviewed were illiterate; of a total of 150 children of school age, only 88 were going to school.

The findings led ASH to establish a communal buying scheme in the area.

Essential foods (rice, oil, sugar, etc.) are bought in bulk, and then distributed. Families have been able to save a fair amount of their meagre income. The scheme is also helping in closing the gap that existed between families and is teaching them the importance of acting as a communal unit.

A by-product of this scheme has been the communal reserve fund, where families have agreed to put whatever contribution they can afford into a 'communal bank box', and the money is used to assist any local family in desperate need, on condition that the money is reimbursed at some stage. In

December 1973, the family groups decided on a fund-raising drive. It is hoped that by June 1974 the whole project will be entirely in the hands of the community.

The ASH field workers hold regular meetings with the people, discussing their problems. ASH also hopes to organise lectures on family budgeting and health advice. Sub-committees run development projects in the areas of youth and education. These sub-committees are presently arranging for the establishment of a nursery school and adult literacy classes.

The Association runs an office at Merebank with two full-time staff. A Board of Management meets monthly to review progress of the sub-committees. The Administrator and the General Secretary make a quarterly evaluation of the work of their field workers.

The South African Student Organisation (SASO)

SASO has involved itself in projects as part of its Self-help Projects Programme. In 1971 it aided the progress of the Phoenix Settlement Project with the help of students from the Medical School at Wentworth.

In 1973 SASO donated R500 towards the building of a rural community school near Umtata and students were physically involved in this project. However, government interference disturbed the project, with the government claiming sole rights in the building of schools. The local people were planning to approach the Transkei Minister of Justice over the banning of a SASO Acting-President, the Rev. L.H. Qambela, the initiator of this project.

At Upper Gqumushe near Alice SASO started another project with the support of Fort Hare students and students from the Federal Theological Seminary. The bricks were baked by the students themselves. SASO contributed about R375 towards the project.

At Dududu on the Natal South Coast the SASO project is still continuing. It is being mainly run by students from the University of Natal (Black Section).

SASO was not able to play a more effective role in its Projects Programme owing to government bannings imposed on its leadership. To date more than 16 SASO members have been banned.

During 1972 all the black universities were affected by students strikes which resulted in expulsions and walk-outs. As more and more black students found themselves with no university to go to on principle, there were dangers of frustration and inertia amongst those students disillusioned over the tribal university system.

In December 1972 students met at a formation school at Edenvale where the idea of a Free University was mooted. The desire for a Free Black University stemmed from the belief that students had to enjoy problem-

solving; know what is relevant to their survival; rely on their own judgment; avoid fearing the possibilities of being wrong; avoid being fast answerers—but rather seek fair judgment; be flexible and understand that answers are relative and therefore, have a high degree of respect for facts and be skillful in making distinctions between statements of fact and other kinds of statements.

The present educational system for blacks was found to be an impediment to the students' access to basic truths and objective judgment.

Therefore it was felt that a Free University would have to:

- define and refine the field of black education and black studies;
- develop a new approach towards black education,
- research the experiences of the black people,
- encourage black artists,
- devise new means of relating to black children,
- encourage contact with artists, scholars, educators, etc.,
- train teaching cadres for the black community,
- sponsor seminars, workshops and conferences,
- develop a publishing program.

The Free University Project was beginning to operate by February 1973.

Black Community Programmes (BCP)

The BCP has sponsored several projects undertaken by various black groups and organisations. The Free University Project was also partly initiated by it (for more details see Chapter 16).