

## Building capacity not a simple task

By MICHELLE BOOTH

**F**OR MANY people "capacity building" is yet another bit of jargon to emerge from the transition process. It has become a buzz-word in many of the forums set up across the country to address a range of issues, but it is used without a common understanding of its meaning.

To assist in the process of developing such an understanding, the Western Cape office of Idasa recently held a workshop on the subject in Cape Town. The workshop brought together a wide range of NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs) and funding organisations, as well as delegates from local authorities. Several of the organisations are actively involved in both the Western Cape Economic Development Forum and the newly formed Cape Metropolitan Negotiating Forum.

Organisations committed to participating in the numerous forums are under tremendous pressure to "perform", from within and without their structures. Many CBOs damaged by the repression of the 1980s have been struggling to rebuild and strengthen their organisations while at the same time meeting the demands of the various forums.

These demands are stretching the capacity of organisations in many ways, given their often limited human and financial resources. This in turn results in a limited capacity to consult properly with membership, with possible serious implications for accountability.

Effective participation in the transition processes depends not only on political knowledge and experience but also on skills and knowledge to which most communities have not had access as a result of apartheid. Disempowerment is often the consequence of the lack of information, lack of skills and weak organisational infrastructure which bedevil many CBOs.

One interpretation of capacity building sees it as aimed at addressing these lacks so that the CBOs concerned can participate effectively and on an equal footing with better-resourced organisations. In some respects this understanding of capacity building is similar to the concept of levelling the playing fields - addressing imbalances brought about by apartheid.

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lentionous matter agitates them. Hikes in property rates, zoning applications, the burden on ratepayers allegedly subsidising people who won't pay for services, the salaries of councillors - these are common causes of political apoplexy.

Insider local government elections often have extremely poor turn-outs; even by the narrow standards of the insiders, participation is low. Deliberation occurs mainly at the behest of a city council, and within its specialised committees the power politics of the cabal hold sway.

The prevailing concern seems to be with getting central government off the back of local government, and getting local government off individual backs. Local government is viewed mainly as a regulative agency, there to preserve a certain way of life in the city that is wholly congenial to the insiders.

The outsiders are those who apartheid tried to define out of existence in the cities, but couldn't. Economic imperatives dictated otherwise and the administrative and policing chores necessary for another outcome proved to be beyond the state's capacity.

Circumstances have changed somewhat but the vacuum created by apartheid plagues the outsiders still. They are still disenfranchised, for example; still regarded as objects of administration. However, they have proved far from content to acquiesce in the mechanisms of local government thrust on them in the 1980s.

As to participation, outsiders mobilised by means of residents' associations, civics, street committees. However, there is little indication that such organisations embrace entire communities. Scope for participation is thus limited to devotees, and to reluctant converts. In similar fashion, deliberation, while ostensibly welcomed, is determined by the constrictions of membership, and often monopolised by the tight preserve of the leadership.

Of course, one has to remember the hostile political climate in which such organisations began and still find themselves. Nonetheless, the puritanical ethos and ideological intolerance of many a civic association bodes ill for democracy.

Collective action is the urban outsider's most discernible political style, using direct methods of street theatre - marches, rallies, delegations of protest, boycotts, and at times violent shows of strength. For the outsiders, governmental structures are perpetrators of discrimination. Thus no compromise is possible. Outsiders often feel impelled to become outlaws in defence of their communities, in protest at their lack of rights.

While the organs of the apartheid state were the enemy, a post-apartheid society, so it

is thought, will convert them into agencies of social justice, designed and equipped to address the basic needs of the citizenry. Here lies the rub. To what extent can the local state provide services and facilities to match the expectations of the populace? And, a related question, to what extent can the worlds of urban insider and outsider converge?

The primary line of demarcation between the two worlds should disappear forthwith. Only when all are enfranchised can we start to conceive of the beginnings of political equality in this country. Only then can a sense of belonging grow in each South African, linking each to a specific locale and community.

On such foundations, agreed terms of participation and deliberation in urban governance can be forged. But getting there is proving highly problematic.

The interim proposal, of merging existing racially defined local authorities so as to yield "single city" governance, has foundered for the moment on the rock of right-wing hostility. The current govern-

ment has capitulated and, no doubt, the onus will now be on the Transitional Executive Council to find a way ahead.

Very recently, the city councils of Durban and Pietermaritzburg fended off efforts to open mayoral elections to other than the white councillors already in place. The closer to home the imperatives for political change are experienced, the fiercer the rearguard action by those who fear the future. Democracy at the local level is crucial, yet it is the most daunting step of all - for everyone, no matter their political hue.

Still, muddling along towards democracy is preferable to doing nothing. If we can proceed towards this goal in our cities, keeping our aspirations muted despite our wildest dreams, we will crack the shell around the treasure of democracy. For it is a fruit with an urban flavour, and it is not an exaggeration to say that much of our political salvation depends on the fate of democracy in the cities.

Ralph Lawrence teaches political science at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

## Building capacity

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However, critics of this view of capacity building find it problematic, since it implies that capacity and resourcefulness do not already exist in communities. This may lead to a situation where attempts at capacity building increase dependency relations with outside agents, rather than improving reliance on local knowledge and expertise.

Capacity building has been the subject of much dialogue and debate between CBOs and the service organisations often called in to help them acquire information and skills. This can be a problematic relationship, with CBOs becoming dependent on service organisations and the belief being reinforced that community organisations cannot fulfil their capacity needs without other organisations.

But who does capacity building? Do communities identify their own needs and initiate their own programmes, contracting



Workshop in progress

service organisations to provide specific assistance? Do communities and CBOs rely on other organisations to do the whole job? Ideally communities will reach the stage where they no longer need service organisations.

Another difficult issue is who has access to capacity building in the community or organisation? It may well be that those who already have power in organisations and communities are first in line for capacity building and thereafter control access to capacity-building programmes.

Ideally, as many people as possible should benefit. However, capacity building can create, foster and sustain powerful elites within community organisations and encourage the development of hierarchies.

Building capacity is clearly an enormous challenge to all those involved in development and democratisation.

Michelle Booth is office co-ordinator in the Western Cape office of Idasa.

# Tackling the feverish state of the nation

By ALISON CURRY

VOTER EDUCATION is the growth industry of the moment. The demand is huge and the supply is not always able to meet burgeoning needs. If the whole exercise is to be worthwhile, however, it is important to ask some critical questions about who needs to know, and what it is they need to know.

If voter education is simply about how to make a cross on a ballot paper, then the implications for those involved in voter education are clear: voter education is for those who have never voted before. But, at Idasa's Training Centre for Democracy, we have found that voter education goes much deeper than the mechanics of voting.

If one were to take the emotional temperature of the average South African (if such a creature exists), the reading would reflect a fairly feverish state of fear, confusion, cynicism or disillusionment.

It is quite clear that such feelings exist across the board, although black communities are probably the most traumatised communities, with the least access to support and counselling. No one is unaffected, however. No one is immune, despite the height of their walls or the cost of their security systems.

Although it is the black citizens of this country who have borne the brunt of years of apartheid and now reel under the most staggering levels of daily violence, many whites are traumatised by the fear, albeit less direct, that they too could become victims of an attack like the St James Church massacre; the fear that things will change for the worse after the election; that there will be a slide into chaos.

If one thing is certain it is that the future holds change on a whole lot of levels. For most people, regardless of colour or culture, change is a scary business, even positive change such as promotion or the birth of a baby. Fear of change, a very deep-rooted fear operating on a number of levels, is what we are experiencing on an unprecedented national scale right now. Those involved in voter education therefore need to be sensi-

tive to the fears of all South Africans.

Obviously the people who need the most assistance are those who have never voted before. For people who are illiterate, the thought of having to enter a voting station and make a cross on a ballot paper – in the right place in the right way – is extremely intimidating. Added to this is the often expressed fear of violence on polling day and the related fear of exposure to violence while commuting to and from township areas.

However, to maintain that voter education is a "black" or shopfloor issue is to miss the challenge of nation-building, of shaping a common vision, understanding the real constraints, and developing commitment to the long road.

All South Africans are suffering from different degrees of limited vision. It is a national disease and no one is immune. We all tend to see things from where we are standing and we as trainers are not exempt from the syndrome. We too see only a part of the picture, perceive it from a particular angle.

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But by sharing and discussing our fears and confusions in groups we can help to build a sense of the bigger picture, the process operating behind the events – the headline-making, the tragic, the technical, the traumatic events that are our daily media meal.

I have been deeply moved in training sessions where real honesty has emerged in groups made up of very different people. A white clerk said: "Well, I am a Rhodesian and I lost all my family in the war so I am pretty bitter. I had to start all over again here, and I'm not going to let the ANC take away my assets."