

Superb video offers negotiation advice



'The meeting in Middelfontein', produced by the Development Action Group (DAG). Reviewed by **JOSETTE COLE**

HISTORIANS LOOKING BACK ON THE 1990s will identify the period as the 'negotiations era'. Most historical and political analyses will focus on high-powered national constitutional negotiations and key political players of the time.

Less will be said about the scores of communities engaged in a parallel political process known as "local-level negotiations".

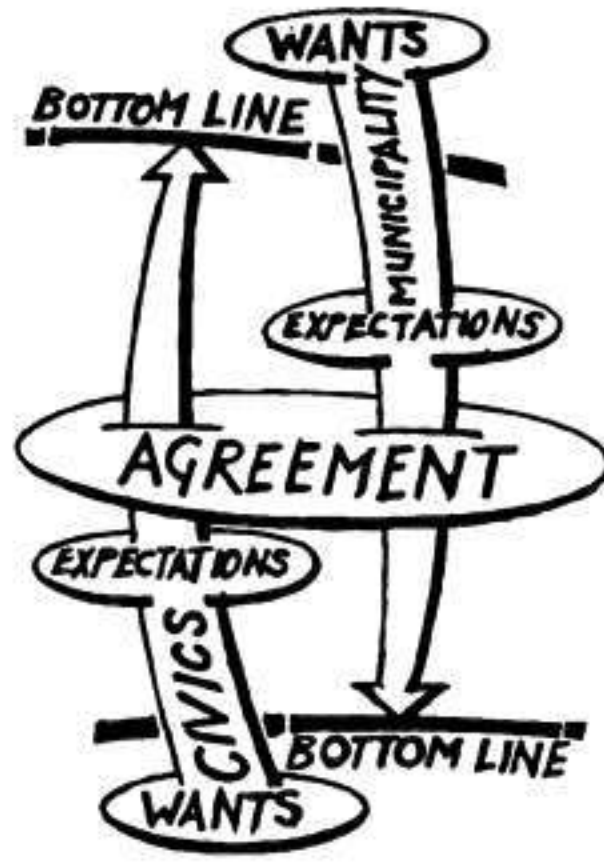
During the 1990s, community struggles for land, services, and development moved from the barricades of the 1980s into the boardrooms of local and regional government authorities where community representatives, NGO advisors, and local government officials negotiated local development settlements.

While CODESA 1, 2 and the Kempton Park negotiations proceeded in fits and starts, this less visible, more localised, but similar process accompanied the constitutional proceedings in black communities all over the country.

At these meetings, those without formal power and resources sit across the table from a variety of government representatives, rapidly developing strategies and experience in negotiated 'development' settlements.

DAG, a Western Cape NGO working in the field of urban development, has produced a video on these negotiations. 'The Meeting in Middelfontein' and the accessible workbook that accompanies it (available in English, Xhosa, and Afrikaans), is aimed at providing communities with "a training tool to assist communities to participate more effectively in complicated negotiation processes".

Following decades of hardship and anti-apartheid struggle, the fictional community of Middelfontein wins the political space to negotiate a better deal for itself.



■ **HANDY HINTS:** A booklet of advice accompanies the video

As the narrator reminds us, the resources demanded by the community's residents — land, services, and housing — are the direct result of the social legacy of the apartheid era.

Visually and technically superb, the tightly produced video uses authentic locations, local actors and residents in a Western Cape informal settlement to capture the realities and pitfalls that typify local-level negotiations.

As a training tool, it succeeds in highlighting the essential issues confronting a community, as well as any 'technical' advisors, who venture into the murky and complex arena of negotiations.

We are introduced to the community negotiating team, assisted by a member of DAG as the 'technical' advisor, going through the complicated negotiations process.

These include explaining the community team's objectives:

- obtaining a clear mandate;
- gaining the support of the wider community for the negotiations process;
- preparing to meet local and regional authorities;
- negotiating with the authorities;
- reporting back to a community meeting with residents unfamiliar with the politics of negotiation.

Each stage of the process is peppered with tips for local communities and NGOs on what to expect, what to avoid, and how best to tilt the balance of forces in favour of disadvantaged groupings.

If you have been involved in, or played a supportive role in local-level negotiations, you will easily identify with the dynamics portrayed.

The video's 'soap-operatic' style vividly captures the posturing and positioning of both sides; conflicts around who controls agendas, language, and venue; tensions between officials of local and regional authorities; deadlocks; caucuses; compromises; problems of "selling" the settlement to those unexposed to the process and that negotiations remain an ongoing site of struggle.

As an education-training tool, 'Meeting in Middelfontein', is an undoubted success. DAG needs to be applauded for bringing to light the changing nature of grassroots struggles in the 1990s.

The video's quality, humour, and stylishness conveys something of the absurdities and comedy that inevitably accompanies any visual portrayal of the South African political reality.

However, the conflicts, divisions, violence, attempts at leadership co-option and the politics of patronage — most directly linked to the site allocation process — which accompany most community 'negotiated development' processes in the 1990s are also captured in the DAG video.

Community development in the 1990s is essentially a political, not a technical, process. While recognising that this is a story that goes beyond the scope of the DAG training video, it nonetheless needs to be conveyed by somebody, somewhere.

Without it, the true story of local-level community negotiations in the 1990s will never be fully understood or appreciated. ■

• For more information about the video, phone DAG at (021) 448-7886