Nine years into the new democracy, the black majority in South Africa has discovered the limits of state-funded and privatized attempts to address their staggering need for shelter and basic services. The South African Homeless People’s Federation emerged as a network of grassroots shack dweller associations to address these needs themselves. Not only did they succeed in building thousands of houses in a few years, they have transformed their members into empowered, enfranchised citizens. Two factors have been critical to their success: the conscious attention to participation, learning, and transformation within the Federation and the development of a horizontal partnership with the non-profit organization of professional planners, People’s Dialogue. The result is a grassroots learning organization that is building not just houses, but deep democracy.
Building Deep Democracy

Introduction

Who are these people in the photograph, huddled around a site plan, pondering, discussing, and drawing (Figure 1)? They are a group of South African urban landless who, like several million other black and colored South Africans, live in improvised shacks in the unserviced shantytowns relegated to them by the apartheid policy of divided cities (see Figure 2). Now nine years into the post-apartheid era, they have pooled their meager savings, negotiated with the municipality for a piece of land, and are designing the neighborhood they will soon build. But they are building more than houses. They are building community, voice, connection, and power through their organization, the South African Homeless People’s Federation. They are building deep democracy. It is the story behind this picture that we wish to tell.

Setting the Stage

The efforts to build deep democracy in South Africa play out in three arenas. One is the arena of national policy aimed at addressing the basic needs of the African and colored population for food, shelter, and employment that were systematically ignored during the decades of apartheid. In this arena tensions between public, private, and grassroots approaches to meeting basic needs are playing out. One of the greatest challenges for South Africa’s first post-apartheid government (led by the African National Congress (ANC) party) was how to meet these basic needs. The ANC’s housing policy advocated a people-centered process in which communities were to be equal and important players in providing low-income housing. However, responding to the economic and political pressures of globalization, and in an attempt to spur economic growth, the government chose a privatized approach to housing and service provision that made it nearly impossible for communities to participate (Tomlinson 1998, Laloo 1999; South African Homeless People’s Federation 1998; Swilling 1990). While it succeeded in delivering hundreds of thousands of subsidized houses, the government could not reach the levels needed nor keep up with growing demand (Department of Housing 1994; Goodlad 1996; Jenkins and Wilkinson 2002; Bond and Tait 1997). In 1998 the government realized it must do more to embrace and build upon the efforts of the poor themselves to improve their communities (Bond 2000; Jenkins 1999; Huchzeremeyer 2001; Department of Housing 1997; Miraftab 2003; Oldfield 2000; Mackay 1999).

The second arena is that of local governance. Local government planning was one of apartheid’s most powerful tools for segregating blacks into hostels and shantytowns to provide cheap labor for the industrializing white cities. Now local governance is becoming an arena of reform, seeking a way to give voice to blacks and whites and resolve the tensions...
created by the stark inequalities at the ground level (Abbott 1996; Bollens 1998, 1999; Bond 2000; Rogerson 1999; Watson 2002).

The third arena in which the struggle to build deep democracy plays out is in the community itself—especially the townships, the crucible of violent resistance to apartheid. The challenge to transform the resistance movement into a grassroots movement for building community, solidarity, and voice plays out in this arena. After the democratic elections in 1994, in which Nelson Mandela was elected president, many of the resistance groups became service providers under government contracts. They maintained a political lobbying role through their national umbrella organization, but often weakened their grassroot ties to the community (Millstein, Oldfield, and Stokke 2003; Abbott 1996; Oldfield 2000; Bond 2000).

**Introducing the Protagonists**

At the vortex of this struggle to build deep democracy in the three arenas of national policy, local governance, and the townships, we find the protagonists of this story: a non-profit organization of professional development activists called the People’s Dialogue on Land and Shelter, and the network of grassroots community organizations that it helped to spawn, the South African Homeless People’s Federation (SAHPF or Federation). Formalized soon after the transition to democracy in 1994, the South African Homeless People’s Federation in collaboration with the People’s Dialogue chose a community-based approach to housing by the poor rather than service delivery to the poor.

Much has been written on this dynamic alliance, as their success in building housing in the townships has attracted both media and academic attention. Millstein, Oldfield, and Stokke (2003) have provided an analysis of the organizations’ influence on the state. Mitlin (2000) focuses on the ability of the alliance to harness the power of local capacity and knowledge. Huchzermeyer (2001) and Miraftab (2003) both hold up the alliance as a striking example of successful community-based housing provision, Huchzermeyer citing the Federation’s savings schemes as an important component of that success and Miraftab optimistically pointing to the Federation’s methodology of community mobilization and empowerment as bearing important lessons for policy makers.

Our purpose is not to cover the ground already explored by these authors, but to focus on the group process used by the Federation with community members and the partnership between the Federation and the People’s Dialogue. It is at the level of group process and

*Figure 2. Typical houses in one of Cape Town’s informal settlements.*
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relationship-building that the foundations of deep democracy can be found. For those of us who work in community development, it is particularly useful to learn from rich examples of the skills, values, and attitudes that help forge horizontal partnerships between grassroots organizations and professional non-profits (or non-governmental organizations—NGOs—as they are called internationally).

We tell the story first from the perspective of two individuals—one a professional organizer, founder, and former director of the People’s Dialogue; the other a former shack dweller who became a regional leader of the South African Homeless People’s Federation in the Western Cape. The stories are based on interviews by the authors with each of them in May, 2002. Subsequently, we relate our own observations about group process from attending meetings of the two organizations in Cape Town and interviewing members and staff over a three-week period in May, 2002. We conclude with the lessons learned from the experience of the People’s Dialogue and the Homeless People’s Federation about how to build deep democracy, and the implications for community development professionals.

The Conceptual Guide: Deep Democracy

The theory of liberal democracy emphasizes the rights and interests of the individual using the values of justice, tolerance, and equality before the law. The individual is seen as an autonomous agent seeking to defend and expand his or her own piece of the pie against other autonomous interests, mediated by government structures to reduce conflict.

In contrast, we wish to posit the idea of deep democracy, in order to emphasize the social nature of the human—the idea that a person’s identity is derived from his or her relationships with others. The image of the autonomous self-interested individual gives way in this alternative view to the image of the network, the interconnected web of existence that defines individuals in relationship to each other and defines institutions as an expression of the nature of the connections in the web.

Deep democracy, as we see it, does not privilege the concept of community by reifying it into a single set of values and norms to which the individual must subordinate him or herself. Rather deep democracy describes an open dynamic system springing from the diverse points of engagement where individuals and community come together. Deep democracy is a transformative process in which the individual learns to think and act from the perspective of the whole. In deep democracy, citizenship is conferred by personal engagement—not just by revealing individual preferences through voting and rational choice, but by exercising the democratic arts of participation. It is based on public conversation, where one begins to listen to and know the “other.” It becomes the enfranchisement of the self in daily life, transforming one’s self identity into one of inclusion in, and responsibility for, an expanding circle of community.

Many intellectual threads contribute to our understanding of deep democracy and its practical implications. Three formative roots are social learning, which traces its origins to John Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy of learning from action for the betterment of all; organizational development, which focuses on the transformational nature of participation in groups; and whole systems theory, which puts forth the organizing principle of the interconnected web of social actors. On a more applied level, the prominent concepts behind deep democracy include social capital, interpersonal communication (especially dialogue, deep listening, and non-violent communication), negotiation and conflict resolution (including mutual gains and “third-sider” approaches—i.e. not right and wrong, but “both-and”), appreciative inquiry, community participation (including the Intermediate Technology literature on “scaling up”), communitarian thought, and the literature on learning organizations.
Also relevant here is the literature on women’s ways of knowing, indigenous ways of knowing and decision making, and education for participation.

Some of the citizenship, third sector, and state/civil society literature also weaves into the understanding of deep democracy. Drawing on his own grassroots work with homeless organizations in India, University of Chicago anthropologist Arjun Appadurai uses the term deep democracy to mean “the effort to reconstitute citizenship.” He identifies three distinct means for disenfranchised individuals and groups (here, referring to the poor) to build deep democracy: 1) the poor themselves direct their own development initiatives and organizations through active internal debate and the commitment to transparency and inclusion; 2) the poor themselves engage with key actors, notably in the state and local administrations; and 3) individuals and communities achieve solidarity and are empowered through horizontal connections to other individuals and local groups (Appadurai 2001).

Philosophy professor, Judith Green (1999), drawing on her experiences in community planning in multicultural neighborhoods in the U.S., uses the term deep democracy to describe that which goes beyond the formal institutional framework that governs a society. She sees it as a set of concepts, structures, and practices that extend to the level of the community and to the very core of individuals. Benjamin Barber, professor of social and political philosophy at Rutgers, uses the phrase “strong democracy” to create an epistemological and theoretical argument for participatory citizenship as a way of life (1984).

Joel’s Story of Deep Democracy

No one called it deep democracy then, but Joel Bolnick (see Figure 3) learned about three of its basic building blocks in 1989 from a Jesuit priest from Argentina whose work on housing issues in Asia helped foster the creation of the grassroots Asian Coalition for Housing Rights. “Create a space where the people can learn from each other and make their own changes, Father George (Jorge Anzorena) told me.” This first concept resonated with Joel, as he recalled the tough lessons he had learned as a white social activist in apartheid South Africa. When the Black Consciousness movement, inspired by Steve Biko, took hold in the 1970s, his black activist friends told him that all whites had a role in the repression of blacks; white social activists were disempowering blacks by articulating their aspirations for them. “The only legitimate role for educated white activists, they told me, is to create a space for social transformation, not to lead it.” Letting go of the idea that socially conscious whites could be the vanguard of social change for the blacks, Joel left South Africa and went to the U.S. for eight years, from 1980 to 1988, where he worked in the divestiture movement to stop corporate investment in apartheid South Africa, and became the first South African to be granted political asylum in the U.S. Joel worked at the international level to create a political and economic space that would be propitious for social change in South Africa.

The second concept was a challenge for Joel to accept, but Father George’s on-the-ground experience with it was convincing: “He insisted I give up any ideas about using my professional expertise to solve the problems of the poor (I had been working on a low-cost building technology for popular housing); instead, he said, let them learn from each other through dialogue among themselves about what works and doesn’t work.” Father George recounted his own experience with dialogue in Asia. As he traveled from one country to another, he put community-based groups involved in housing in touch with each other and helped them organize encounters where they could hear about each other’s experiences.
These horizontal exchanges proved to be not only valuable learning experiences, but also the basis for growing solidarity among shack and slum dweller organizations within and between countries.

The third concept was the most challenging. Joel could see that Father George had *no investment in outcome*. He simply helped to create a space where similar grassroots groups could network and learn from each other through dialogue. Father George trusted the process. Whatever emerged from the dialogues belonged to the participants and, therefore, was the only possible outcome. The contribution or value of the NGO, Father George said, was to help connect and scale up grassroots efforts through networking and dialogue.

Joel was about to have an opportunity to test his own willingness to let go of outcome. Having returned to South Africa in 1989, when the prospects of a democratic transition had become more of a possibility, Joel was working with Peter Templeton of the South African Catholic Development Agency (SACDA). Both recognized that it was important to build a grassroots capacity for development, because no political party—not even the African National Congress—would be able to meet all their needs. After the encounters with Father George, Peter asked Joel to organize a housing conference for slum and shackdweller organizations in South Africa along the lines that Father George had advocated.

Joel organized the event as a dialogue where shack dweller organizations in South Africa could listen to each other’s experiences and decide whether or not to continue to collaborate. To ensure that the meeting was managed by the community-based organizations themselves, rather than the NGOs, Joel allowed NGOs to attend only if they each brought five shack dwellers with them. None of the NGOs—not even the well known international NGOs in housing—would have a speaking role. They would be recorders!

In March 1991 in Broederstroom, South Africa, 140 community people representing shack dweller associations around the country gathered together to dialogue, along with ten to twelve national and international NGO and shack dweller representatives. As the dialogue turned to decision-making about future steps, the group polarized into two camps: those that thought the ANC would give them the housing they needed, and those who said we need to come together ourselves so that we can address our own needs. As the division split the room, one of the slum dwellers from India stood up and shouted slogans of affirmation for both sides and then gave a powerful talk urging the group not to commit the same mistake they had made in India forty years ago when they decided to sit back and wait for the newly independent democratic government to meet their needs. The final vote was fifty-five to forty-five to do it themselves, together. The seeds of the South African Homeless People’s Federation were planted.

Following Father George’s advice, Joel had helped create a space for dialogue and had let go of outcome. The people had decided to go forward. SACDA created a new NGO, the People’s Dialogue on Land and Housing, with a small staff to keep the initiative alive. As the first director of People’s Dialogue, Joel aimed to get the network off the ground and help build connections between communities, but not to run the network or make decisions for its members (Bolnick 1993, 1996; Mitlin 2000). By 1994, more than 200 community groups had joined the network and *uMfelandaWonye WaBantu BaseMjondolo*, the South African Homeless People’s Federation, became official.

Joel divides the relationship between the People’s Dialogue and the Federation into three phases. All three phases represent important elements of building deep democracy. In the start up phase, the People’s Dialogue played the role of *facilitator*—opening spaces, creating conditions, and, most important, letting go of outcome. “If you screw up,” said Joel, referring to the Federation in his characteristically unminced words, “it’s your problem.”
Perhaps not the same words that Father George would have used, but the exact same idea of non-attachment—i.e. trust in the right outworking of events, given right intention at the outset—now spoken convincingly by Joel from his own experience!

The first phase was an intense learning experience for Joel as well as for the nascent Federation. Joel spent the first seven or eight months visiting squatting groups throughout the country, learning about the parts of the network. He also spent six pivotal weeks visiting Asian slum dweller groups. One Indian housing NGO, the Society for Protection of Area Resource Centers (SPARC), became a role model for him: “SPARC avoided the typical NGO dependency by being a partner organization with its grassroots federation, Mahila Milan. That’s not to say they didn’t have their tensions or the occasional vertical intervention….SPARC knew how to identify elements of value and adapt to each local situation.”

Joel and the People’s Dialogue helped set up numerous exchanges among the thirty squatting and landless groups within the Federation, and from 1992 to 1994 organized eight to twelve exchanges for Federation members each year with Mahila Milan in India. “We were travel agents for the poor,” quipped Joel. “We knew the parts of the network. We set itineraries; and we linked the South Africans to their counterparts in India. We created the conditions (for learning) through exchanges.” Relating what they learned to their own reality, Federation members decided to build around their own capacities and resources. Like Mahila Milan, they decided to focus on small savings groups as a way to mobilize people and acquire resources for land and construction materials.

The second phase witnessed the formalization of the Federation, the consolidation of the partnership between the People’s Dialogue (PD) and the Federation, and the emergence of a core leadership group, consisting of five Federation leaders and three PD professionals. The Federation membership, explained Joel using his radical activist language, consisted of “anarchist cells” with a high level of participation, but always following the direction of the core group. Every four to six saving schemes (groups of ten to fifty individual savers) have a network with participatory mechanisms in place at both the local and regional levels.

The main challenge facing the core leadership group was the conflict between two competing visions: the pursuit of outside resources versus building on internal strengths. The adherents of the former vision, increasingly confident from their self-help experiences in the first phase, advocated fighting for state resources and influencing state budgets to help the poor, including the Federation membership. The advocates of the latter vision wanted to stick to the original premise of the Federation—building on their own resources first, and later entering into partnership with the state as stakeholders with their own resources. After much discussion the former vision became the dominant approach. Despite reservations about the lack of capacity of the Federation to manage large infusions of government funding, the People’s Dialogue supported the decision and did everything possible to assist the Federation in this new direction.

While Joel did not use these words to describe the critical decision to support the Federation in this new direction, the decision reflects a profound understanding of the process of building deep democracy: the NGO can create conditions for learning, bring up questions for consideration, suggest options, and share experiences, but the decisions belong to the community. The learning process requires a continuous loop from reflection to decision to action and back again to reflection on action. This is how a learning organization is built. This is how deep democracy takes root.

The actual unfolding of the events in this second stage is well documented (Anzorena et al. 1998; People’s Dialogue no date a; Huchzermeyer 2001, Miraftab 2003; Mitlin 2000;
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Bolnick 1993, 1996; Millstein, Oldfield, and Stokke 2003; Bond 2000). Because existing government housing subsidies were very difficult for community groups and individuals to access (Lalloo 1999; Mackay 1999; Jenkins 1999; SAHPF 1996), the Federation came up with the idea for a revolving fund, capitalized by foreign donors and a government grant, that would provide bridge loans to its members—all who were too poor to be deemed good risks by financial institutions. (Mitlin 2000; Center for Urban Development Studies 2000). The bridge loans would give members access to the resources they needed to build their homes and would later be retired by government subsidy funds. The Utshani Fund began operations in 1995 and was soon touted as the “the most innovative and ambitious element of the Homeless People’s Federation’s activities” (Bolnick 1996).

Membership in the Federation exploded in this second phase, as a result of its proven ability to get money in the hands of members and to help those members get themselves into houses (People’s Dialogue 1996). With 11,000 new houses in just a few years and field offices in different parts of the country, the Federation grew in prestige and influence. In 1998 the government launched a new program, called the People’s Housing Process, that would provide more funds to Utshani and similar efforts. At the time, the new program seemed an important victory for the Federation and other advocates of people-centered development.

But the growth and attention came at a high cost, Joel said. Members and leaders alike became distracted from their original mission—empowering individuals and communities through savings groups, horizontal exchanges between communities, and participation—and instead focused on gaining access to the Utshani loans and, ultimately, to the end goal of a finished house.

Besides the philosophical crisis of eroding goals and vision, the PD/Federation alliance reached a financial crisis. The Utshani fund operated under the assumption that government subsidy funds would retire individual loans. Yet the promised money did not always arrive. The fund thus found itself in an increasingly tenuous situation as the “de facto creditor to a large group of very poor South Africans who could not be expected to repay large housing loans and who did not believe that this was what they had agreed to do” (People’s Dialogue no date b).

Together, the People’s Dialogue and the Federation decided they needed to pause and reassess their mission, their long- and short-term goals, the organizational structures of each organization, their practices, their journey to date, and their future path. This soul searching marks the start of their third phase. Joel calls it the maturation phase: learning from practice. The result is a significant review and restructuring process begun in 2002 by both the People’s Dialogue and the Federation.

“We have successfully demystified the value of professional expertise.” Joel said, recounting their achievements. “Yes, it is sometimes frustrating or disappointing when the community decides to replicate the urban environment of single family detached homes that they are familiar with. And it is hard to introduce new ideas—like higher density neighborhoods—when they have been so successful doing the detached housing. But the idea is to move from A to B, not to the professional’s vision. Our role is “value added” professional help—doing that which would be far too time consuming for the Federation members to learn…. The field staff help to close deals with local governments, offer options for acquiring land and designing housing, and respond to community requests for training on issues of land acquisition, neighborhood planning and design, or housing construction.”

“We have proven our partnership model to be more efficient than the old urban services delivery paradigm—we (the PD/Federation alliance) deliver far more housing for the amount of government funding we receive than do the NGOs in the urban services umbrella network,“
Joel added, referring to the approach of building houses for the people, rather than by the people. “But we went for scale and breadth,” he said, “at the cost of depth. … SPARC works in one city for fifteen years, until the community is saturated in development rituals of participation and partnership. Like a potent vaccine, SPARC then takes this experience to replicate in another place.”

“Our Federation’s membership has become very results-oriented—lots of delivery pressure. The focus now is on efficiency and management, not horizontal participatory learning. We (People’s Dialogue) are mainly bookkeepers now—running costs, fundraising, and treasury. The national leadership of the Federation allocates resources; we disburse funds and handle the accounts. Each passing crisis around resource struggles, self-interest, non-payment and defaults, or mismanagement reaffirms the horizontal learning model. Now we need to go back to Father George’s principles, reflect on our links to the community-based organizations we aim to serve, and see what we can learn from experience without being tied to any particular position or self-interest.”

With these words, Joel described another important tenet of deep democracy: the ability to become a learning organization by reflecting on action from a whole systems perspective—i.e. with the needs of the whole in mind, rather than individual interests or positions. The People’s Dialogue and the Federation had encountered the limits to growth. Rather than taking the frequently used response of simply trying harder, the core leadership group reviewed the entire system to find the points of intervention with greatest leverage for the long run. They found that the greatest need for change was the leadership itself! The key issue identified for the Federation was the distancing between the leadership and the community base, both at the national level and the regional level. Leadership had always emerged in the Federation through self-selection based on degree of active involvement; as a result, there were no strict lines of accountability to the communities they served.

In June, 2002, a national meeting of the Federation took place to consider restructuring proposals for both the Federation and the People’s Dialogue. Regional, local, and neighborhood organizations selected representatives to attend the national meeting. The core leadership group of the Federation voluntarily stepped down. The delegates overwhelmingly approved a restructuring plan to make elected leaders fully accountable to the members and to refocus on the core strength of the Federation in building pro-active communities through mobilizing savings. The restructuring congress exemplifies some important aspects of the grassroots learning organization: the ability to listen, reflect on experience, and think of the needs of the whole; to avoid blaming and defending; to accept responsibility and make corrections. Grassroots learning organizations are the seedbed of an engaged citizenry, the roots of deep democracy.

**Charlotte’s Story of Deep Democracy**

To understand the process of engagement from the grassroots perspective, we relate the story of Charlotte Adams, once a landless shack dweller like those in Figure 1. Like millions of other black and colored South Africans, she had been told for decades she had no rights–to homes, jobs, education, or opportunity. Charlotte’s story of transformation is personal, but at the same time emblematic of the journey from isolation and powerlessness to engagement and voice that many members of the South African Homeless People’s Federation have experienced.

When Charlotte first encountered the South African Homeless People’s Federation in 1999, she was not looking to embark on a crusade for her rights as a citizen of South Africa. She was looking for a house—a house with more than one room, walls that would keep the
wind out, running water, a toilet, a roof that did not leak with every notorious Cape storm, and that would provide security and stability for her children. At the time, Charlotte, her husband, and her two children were living in a backyard shack—an improvised, one-room structure in the backyard of a “real house.” Backyard shacks, like shacks in South Africa’s massive shantytowns, are cobbled together from scraps of metal, mismatched planks of wood, old signs, cardboard, and other found and recycled materials. The thousands of people living in these shacks, like Charlotte, have no running water, no sewage, sometimes no electricity, and certainly no privacy.

Living in a backyard shack, Charlotte recalls, was supposed to be a temporary situation. She was convinced she would be in a “real house” within a few months. But eight years after she moved in, she was still there. She believed the solutions to her increasingly frustrating living situation were “out there” somewhere. If only she could attract the attention of the proper government agency or get her name on the right list, she was certain the government would fix her problems. She was isolated, voiceless, and, in her estimation, powerless to effect change.

As the months and years passed, her children grew, space became more cramped, and Charlotte became more desperate. She finally made the decision to act—to do something herself to change her situation. The moment Charlotte engaged herself to find a solution was a key turning point—a sign that she was breaking out of her powerlessness. Her first step was to go with a friend from housing project to housing project, trying to find that magic list or the one vacancy. But at each one, she heard the same refrain—“no houses available,” “these are all taken,” “you must wait,” “try down the road.”

Disheartened and exhausted after days of these responses, she and her friend began the drive home. They passed vast settlements of the small, boxy government houses and the massive seas of shantytowns where thousands lived, many in situations much worse than hers. That afternoon, her dream of a house of her own seemed increasingly illusory—there were hundreds of thousands in need and very few houses to go around. But as she and her friend crested a hill, she saw a community off to one side of the road and noticed the houses were quite large. And as she looked closer, details emerged. One had dark wooden window frames, another a distinctive wood door, another a retaining wall that created an enclosed front yard. Some of them were finished but many were half constructed with people busily stacking concrete blocks, plastering and installing windows and doors (see Figure 4).

Figuring she had nothing to lose and hoping maybe someone there would give her the answer, she and her friend stopped in to see if there were any plots of land or houses available. The answers she got were far from what she expected and were, she thought, down
right bizarre. One of the women told her that this settlement, called Victoria Mxenge, was not just about housing; it was about helping poor people band together to help themselves. It was about saving money, learning from and supporting others, and, in the process, learning how to be in control of their own lives. The woman explained that Charlotte couldn’t just sign up for a plot or a house but, like the rest of the Federation members (96 percent of whom are women), had to begin a process of saving money with a group of people and had to join their organization, uMfelandawonye waBantu BaseMjondolo, The South African Homeless People’s Federation. The woman encouraged her to go back to her neighborhood, organize a savings group, and to return the following Saturday for a meeting.

As she drove away, she thought, “These crazy people, they want me to go back and tell people they have to give me money, week after week, and they have to attend a lot of meetings. They’ll think I’m trying to trick them or steal from them.”3 Still skeptical, she stopped up the road to ask someone else who lived in another of these large, self-built homes. This woman repeated everything the first had said and, again, encouraged her to go back to her community, organize people into a savings group, and return for the next Saturday meeting. Charlotte got back in her friend’s car and felt no better than she had before. After all, how would she ever convince people to trust her with their money? Even if she could, from what she could tell, this process was not going to get her in a house anytime soon.

But her friend encouraged her to try it. Charlotte’s friend suggested starting with the two families that lived in shacks in her own backyard and see if they might be interested. When they got back to the friend’s house, she invited her tenants in for tea to talk about the idea. They all agreed to tell some other people about it and meet the next Saturday at the bus stop to go back to Victoria Mxenge for the meeting.

On Saturday morning, Charlotte made her way to the bus stop, wondering if anyone else would show up. When she got there, she was shocked to see ten other people waiting—all ready and eager to learn more about this odd sounding organization. That morning at the bus stop marked a second turning point, the realization that “I can”—I have the power and capability to create change. Standing at the bus stop that morning, Charlotte felt the first inklings of empowerment—a feeling that would blossom over the next weeks and months.

When they arrived at the Federation meeting hall, Charlotte asked someone to explain to the rest of the women what had already been explained to her. Once again, a fellow member explained that the goal of the organization was not just housing—it was saving money and learning from each other. The first step, she explained, was to form a savings group in which every member was to contribute something every day, no matter how small the amount. The money contributed would be put in a bank account to which three elected treasurers of the group would have access. Each person would have a savings book in which her contribution would be recorded and the group would have a savings book in which the group’s account transactions would be recorded. All other responsibilities—chairing meetings, taking down minutes, organizing the group—were to be shared and rotated. The Federation considers the sharing of roles and responsibilities to be central to their mission. It builds self confidence
and teaches new skills; it serves to empower all individuals in the group, not just a few; and it promotes transparency and collective understanding, as no one person is to be relied on to have all the answers. Individuals learn that each has, within themselves, the power to learn new skills, to save, to lead meetings, to record minutes, to discuss problems, to make decisions, and ultimately to take control of their own lives (see Figures 5). For Charlotte and others, this was a revolutionary experience.

Inspired by the meeting, Charlotte’s group went back to their neighborhood and began to save. Every day a collector would go door to door, collecting money from each member, recording how much each person contributed on that particular day (which the individual would also record in her personal savings book). Charlotte later pointed out that these collectors were essential not just to encourage members to save every day, but as eyes that saw into the lives of the members and ears that listened to their stories and their problems. This daily collection, in addition to the weekly group meetings, built up the savings of the group, but more importantly forged strong connections between its members. Patricia Matolengwe, the leader of the Federation in the Western Cape, says the Federation used savings and loans “as a way to build unity and trust.” As more and more people learned about Charlotte’s savings group, it grew rapidly. Only 11 at the start, within a year, the group numbered 177 individuals.

The process of forging connections with others led to the next turning point for Charlotte—a fundamental shift from an “I”-focus to a “we”-focus. Each member of Charlotte’s group joined the Federation to better her own life, motivated by her own interests and goals. But in the process of working together, making decisions as a group, learning new skills, and succeeding as a group, the individuals began to create a community of caring for the wellbeing of each other.

This principle is illustrated in a particular story from Charlotte’s savings group. One member lost her job, stopped saving, and did not attend meetings–she, in effect, stepped back to the initial stage of isolation and powerlessness. The other members were determined...
to bring her back to the group, to stay connected, and help her get through her difficult time. They proposed that she borrow from her own savings in order to get herself back on her feet. They helped her devise a plan to buy potatoes and other vegetables and sell them as a street vendor. The members agreed that whenever any of them needed any items she carried, they would buy from her and not from the local market. The jobless woman successfully paid back her loan plus interest at the end of three months and began saving again. “It was wonderful—it was like a family,” Charlotte reflected, “We have the same pain, we want the same things and we’re working together as a team. We were not only gathering money, we were trying to gather each other.”

From this sense of caring and responsibility for the whole, Charlotte’s next turning point emerged: she and her savings group learned the power of collaborative action (Wilson 1996). The members of Charlotte’s group saw not only that each individual had strengths, skills, and power, but that when those capabilities are shared and brought together the power of the group multiplies. After two years, Charlotte’s group was ready to start looking for land for their houses. Federation members that had already gone through the land acquisition process helped them devise a plan and strategize their negotiations with local authorities and landowners. But in the end, it was the members themselves who engaged the power structures “out there,” worked out the deal, and bought the land. “This was something totally new for us. We were able to sit down and have conversation with them [the owners]. You always think it must be someone educated….we didn’t know we could do it.” Charlotte’s group had exercised its citizenship.

Guided by other groups who had already designed and built houses, Charlotte’s group went on to construct cardboard model houses and draw their house plans (see Figures 6 and 7). They also learned how to plat their neighborhood (as the landless group in Figure 1 are doing), hook up water and sewer pipes, stack concrete blocks to form a strong wall, plaster, and build a sturdy roof, to name a few of the technical skills they learned from other Federation members.

In December, 2001, just two days before Christmas, Charlotte moved into her new house (see Figure 8). “On Christmas day, I couldn’t believe I woke up in my house. If you
want to close the door you close it. If you want to open a door, you open it. You are free. It is such a joy. I knew that day that if I were to die tomorrow that at least my children were in a house.” It was not just the pride of ownership that shone in her eyes, she said, but the pride in her own accomplishment and the pride in her group. They had found voice and power, individually and together. They had become engaged citizens.

But the story does not stop with the houses. Charlotte believes that “people who stop after the house, they don’t know what they’re missing.” Her circle of caring went far beyond her savings group. Charlotte became a regional leader in the Federation and is now the head of a savings group in the western Cape region, and is also working with other Federation members to build an HIV/AIDS clinic. Her motto is “we learn until we die.” She is helping others in the Federation with their housing and broader life goals—employment, education, stability, and well-being for themselves and their families. In the Federation, Charlotte says, “you can learn a lot and you can achieve a lot. But you must share what you learn with others, not just keep it for yourself.” After years of practice, Charlotte had learned a tremendous amount—about how to organize and inspire people, how to deal with the financial logistics and bookkeeping, how to negotiate with bank and government officials, and how to make group decisions and deal with conflict. But she decided that other people needed to learn these skills and have these experiences as well. At the Federation congress in June, 2002, she stepped down from her leadership role, creating the space for someone else to learn by doing, just as she had.

Although the South African Homeless People’s Federation became widely known and lauded for its success in building houses, the real success story, in our opinion, lies in transformations like Charlotte’s. Her experience and thousands like it show that the Federation is doing more than building houses, it is building deep democracy.

Stepping toward Self-Governance: Views from the Field

The moment where the skills of deep democracy are most visible is in the meetings. Federation members attend countless meetings—they meet in their savings groups on at least a weekly basis; representatives of the savings groups meet weekly to plan land acquisition and layouts and organize learning exchanges with other groups; regional Federation leaders hold open meetings with members every week to discuss problems and progress; regional leaders hold special meetings in communities that are experiencing problems. Regional leaders meet with People’s Dialogue staff on a monthly basis. We attended eight meetings, including at least one of each type of meeting. At each meeting an interpreter gave us a running translation of the interactions that were in Xhosa. We did extensive note-taking, videotaping, and interaction diagramming, as well as one-on-one interviews with participants.

What we found was a conscious attention to process. Learning the skills of democratic self-governance was an important element of each meeting, visible for example in the conscious decision to rotate facilitators at each meeting. “Look,” said one member to us at the weekly regional membership meeting, “it’s a man facilitating today. This is his first time to facilitate—he is learning how.” Every meeting started with a prayer, an invocation—sometimes led by a Christian, sometimes by a Muslim—to align intention and purpose around a shared vision. Most meetings also started with a song—the Federation song—to raise spirits. These opening rituals, adapted from long-held traditions, had a sense of sacredness about them, and latecomers were asked to wait outside until they were finished. Meetings almost always ended in song, as well, and sometimes dance or shouts of “viva,” to express spirit, joy, hope, and connectedness (see Figure 9).
Individual levels of self-confidence and mastery of the democratic arts varied, reflecting the continuing process of learning. In a meeting of landless savings group representatives, a discussion of whether or why to keep minutes reflected a range of attitudes, from authoritarian (“We should take minutes because Cathy [PD staff person who was absent that day] would expect it.”), to group identification (“We should take minutes because that’s the way we do it in the Federation”), to an internalized sense of self-efficacy and service (“We should take minutes in order to remember clearly what we accomplish today and so that those who aren’t at the meeting today can find out.”).

Attention is given to creating a safe space, where people can feel free, and are encouraged, to speak their truth without fear of criticism. For example, in the discussion at the landless meeting about setting a date for their first learning exchange with another community that had already gone through site acquisition and layout, one quiet woman finally spoke up with her concerns about the exchange: “What does it mean to work all day and all night for five days at the exchange?” Someone answered her question clearly: “That means 9AM to 9PM with no going home.” She responded, with an air of relief, “Thanks for what I’ve gained from this meeting. I am thankful that everyone who has a question can ask it, and for every question there is an answer.” Another observed, “Not everyone is speaking; perhaps some of us have a problem with the proposed date.” These statements emboldened another woman to voice her concern: “I don’t think my husband will agree to let me sleep out because he will think I am sleeping around.”

The sense of safety applies to the expression of anger, as well. At a weekly meeting of the regional Cape Town Federation, one savings group representative expressed her anger about the backlog of bricks promised by the brick company run by several Federation members. Her savings group members were accusing her of dragging her feet (or pocketing the brick money) because she already had her house. After her vociferous intervention, one attendee leaned over to us and said compassionately, “She is filled with the anger of her people.”

Another instance of dealing with anger occurred at one of the special meetings (called “revivals”) with over two hundred people from a community that was very upset about the delays in getting reimbursed by the government subsidies and were making accusations of corruption against the leadership. The President of the Federation, Patricia Matolengwe, was there along with the regional leader who facilitated the meeting. The two patiently and eloquently responded to the concerns of each person who spoke. One angry woman would not be placated and jumped up again to speak. The third time she did that the crowd heckled her to sit down, that she had been heard already. Patricia rose and quieted the crowd, “I want to hear her. It is important for every one to get all their anger out.”

Conclusions: Deepening the Lessons

From the experience of the People’s Dialogue and the South African Homeless People’s Federation, we can see some of the important lessons of how to build deep democracy. For
the NGO, these five steps stand out: 1) Create the conditions for change—a safe space that allows the grassroots organization to make the changes; 2) Facilitate horizontal learning so grassroots groups can learn from each other’s experiences, rather than depend on the experts; 3) Let go of outcome, let go of control, and let whatever emerges from the process belong to the participants; 4) Add value by doing only what would be too difficult or time consuming for the grassroots organization to learn to do; and 5) Learn from practice through reflection on action and thinking from the whole.

From the point of view of the community, building deep democracy is a personal process as well as a group process. Four turning points in the process of transformation can be identified: 1) “I can”—the awareness that I can do something to change my situation, that I am not powerless and isolated; 2) “I care”—the awareness that I am part of an ever widening circle of community and that I feel a sense of responsibility for that widening circle; 3) “We can”—the realization that together we can find our voice and engage the powers “out there” to make big changes for our community; and ultimately 4) “We care”—we feel a sense of solidarity and stewardship not just for our own community, or even other communities like ours, but for those communities and institutions that we used to perceive as “other.”

The people in the photograph (Figure 1) are engaged in important work. Not only are they platting their new neighborhood, they are learning the skills of deep listening, appreciative inquiry, compassionate communication, dialogue, and thinking from the whole. From the meetings of the Federation and the People’s Dialogue, we see the importance of moving beyond majoritarian decision-making to third-sider thinking (“both-and”) and consensus-building based on shared understanding. We also see how the learning of these skills is a process that can be deepened. That, we posit, is the challenge to those of us who work in or with NGOs—to take a conscious approach to learning, modeling, and spreading the interactive and holistic skills for building deep democracy.

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Notes

1 During the apartheid years, the term black was used to identify indigenous Africans and colored to identify those of mixed race.
Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this section are from Bolnick 2002.

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