



## Introduction

*When gold is in the mountains  
and we've ravaged the depths  
till we've given up digging,  
it will be brought forth into day  
by the river that mines  
the silences of stone.*

Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>1</sup>

**A**s development workers, our job is to help other people to develop. However, we may find that *we* are the ones who learn most from the process. This is not wrong – even though it may appear paradoxical – for it is out of our own learning that we best enable the learning of others.

Our intention, in its fullest sense, underpins everything we do.

Yet when pressure and difficulties overwhelm us, it is hard to put into practice the things that we know sustain us and our practice. When needs are pressing, and problems and crises abound, we invariably move into reactive, automatic mode. From there, it is only a small step to losing a sense of balance and being unable to be fully present or skilful with people and their struggles.

But how can we justify spending time and energy investing in our own development as practitioners, when the needs of others are so great?

The development world is littered with idealistic, committed, and exhausted practitioners, who care little about themselves, besides their passion to make a difference for others. Self-sacrifice and grinding toil have become habitual. It is easy to understand how patience and sympathetic understanding gets worn away.

We have all experienced this.

The quality of our learning and the depth of our personal awareness lie at the heart of our integrity with others. This does not imply that the goal should be to develop a perfect practice or find an ultimate development truth. There is no such thing. Indeed, even trying to get it right can be problematic.

Sometimes just by staying open to people in their uncertainty, we are most closely connected to what is true – for within precious moments of mutual learning and interconnection, there is immense possibility for change.

## Development Defined

Development supports people to be all that they are – enabling them to:

- establish and sustain their well-being
- experience their right to dignity and freedom
- express their capacity for creativity
- access power over decisions and resources that affect their lives

All too often, development is seen as an economic activity – a necessary response to poverty and exclusion. It is also viewed as a method for realising individual or collective potential – as a means of helping people overcome their problems. These development forms aim to raise people up, or improve them in some way – in relation to their health, education, livelihood, or some other area.

There is another way of seeing the function of development, which I have followed within this book. It is to consider people as already intrinsically whole, but who through circumstance or experience have become oppressed, excluded, and marginalised. This profoundly and adversely affects their ability to live dignified, free, healthy, and creative lives. The function of development then needs to include processes that support ordinary people to express who they are and put them at the centre of decisions and decision making that affect their lives.

*‘The tragedy of underdevelopment is not that ordinary people have remained poor – but that they have been inhibited from their authentic development as humans.’<sup>2</sup>*

## Purpose

The focus of this book is to explore the practice of development through the learning, awareness, and connection of the development practitioner and the local people involved in the development.

Writing in the spirit of congruence, my primary intention is to enable the learning of village people from the South to inform and enrich the development practice of people in the North (and the South). There is certainly much that I learnt from those who still have customs and ways of living that in the main, sustain connection and social networks – things that we, who live in affluent societies, have mostly lost. The picture is obviously a lot more complex than that, but it seems vital to me that we affirm our human interconnection in this age of globalisation, and respect and learn from those who have profound qualities we lack.

This started out as community development fieldwork research for a postgraduate degree. I chose to write a book, instead of a dissertation, in the belief that this would be more useful to me and my learning, and probably others and theirs. It is, in large part, a description of my own learning journey, written as a development story, intending to demonstrate that development practice is as much about the practitioner and her learning and the quality of relationships that she makes, as it is about the local people involved in development, whose communities are being ‘developed’. In this way, my purpose is to invite reflection and ask questions about the practice of development; about the relationships formed between development workers and those they work with; and about the personal and professional learning of the practitioner herself.

I seek to emphasise the importance of the development worker’s awareness of herself and her world as one of the key instruments of her practice. This is ambitious, seeking to encourage us to integrate our practice as development workers with the way we are in the world, both professionally and personally. Often, there can be a considerable gulf between who we are, and what we do and who we work with.

I also seek to celebrate and appreciate the skills, qualities, knowledge, and creativity of ordinary people. I believe that we easily diminish our own and others’ abilities to be creative and courageous. So much in our world is dictated by material greed, dry intellect, or power seeking political discourse. In contrast, I want to share the words and actions of these economically very disadvantaged people, who speak with simple clarity. I want to demonstrate that development can be powerful, when local people are at the heart of the process and ‘join hands’

to work together for their mutual benefit. I hope to uncover the qualities and values that are needed for a genuine process of creativity and engagement that has the potential to offer benefit to a wide community.

‘Community development, here in the North, has never been more important’ as David Robinson of Community Links, writes in his fine essay at the end of this book. The gap between affluence and poverty – whether inside communities or countries, or globally across continents – is widening, still. This is outrageous alongside the scale of affluence in the world. Sadly, it seems, as people experience increased prosperity, most too easily become more self-serving and less compassionate towards others – whilst those who live in poverty inevitably become more marginalised and excluded. It is a profoundly dismal picture.

Robert Sampson, a Chicago sociologist<sup>3</sup>, demonstrated a clear link between specific measures of ‘neighbourliness’ in communities and child health outcomes. The way people relate to each other affects both the basic measures of health and their own direct experience of well-being. We easily forget this in societies that value individual material acquisition much more than social cohesion and inter-connection.

Through this book, I wish to offer an example of community development that puts connection and relationship in front of the reader’s attention, and show that even in the poorest communities, with basic resources and workable conditions, it is possible to work positively in ways that enhance learning and responsible local leadership. I want to enable those who are unfamiliar with development work to learn more about what it is and what it could be.

The community development practice in this book fits more into the context and framework of development practice as known in the developing world. The contexts that we work in, in the North and the South, vary enormously of course, but the practice I suggest, in essence, is similar. I hope that this book will make a contribution to linking our practice together, in ways that encourage us to learn from each other and from different contexts.

Finally, as well as laying out the tools of development, I also want to ask questions of practice and explore whether what is described here is or is not, a different sort of development. Through the exploration of some of the fundamental principles, I want to look at the way in which practice enables people to experience themselves, as whole human beings, in the wider perspective of a ‘holistic’ and integrated view of development.

Overall, this book is written in order to share the learning that came from this particular experience, and be relevant to development workers and others, from

different contexts, who are interested in reflecting on their work and themselves. It might be a small and limited example of development, but the questions that are asked within it are relevant to wide application.

## Content

Interspersed throughout the book are photo portraits of local people from Mashabela, and short statements, which they explicitly chose to articulate, to share aspects of development that they decided were most important for them. Their words are simple and genuine. They speak directly, sharing their feelings, ideas and learning about developing their village.

Chapter 1 introduces Mashabela and describes the physical, social and cultural context of this South African village, situated in the former Lebowa Bantustan or 'homeland' in the province of Limpopo (formerly the Northern Province and before that known as the Northern Transvaal). I introduce myself as development practitioner and explain my background in community development in the UK, my research goals, and my introduction to the village.

Chapter 2 tells the development story and outlines the events that took place in the village between March and October 1997. Included in this description are extracts from my personal journal of some of the key events. There are also outlines of some of the training interventions and processes that we used and a brief description of what took place after I left the village and what outcomes endured from our work.

Chapter 3 shares the learning that emerged from the development by reflecting on what happened, evaluating and reviewing the development stages, exploring the qualities of love, power, and learning that framed the research, and interpreting the learning in the light of models and theories that influenced the practice.

Chapter 4 draws together the principles and values that guide my practice, as a result of my experience in Mashabela, both before and since.

Chapter 5 is a short conclusion that revisits the intervention, with the aim of drawing the threads together in closure.

At the back of the book in Chapter 6 are two very significant essays, describing the context of development in South Africa and the UK. They are written by two development workers, with long and fine experience of their fields, who are well placed to describe the different character and challenge of development in the South and the North.

Loretta van Schalkwyk has been working with the South African development sector for many years, investing passionate commitment in the learning and development of people and organisations. Until recently, she worked for the leading edge Durban-based NGO, OLIVE, Organisation Development and Training.

David Robinson was one of the founders of the highly innovative and successful Community Links in East London, which has been working locally in Newham for over 25 years, and has been at the forefront of community development practice in the UK for over a decade. Their two essays highlight the current issues and debates within development and share the writers' vision, dreams, and challenges for the future.

*Holding Up The Sky* builds towards Chapters 3 and 4, the learning and the principles. You may read it in the order it is printed, or you can choose to move from chapter to chapter entirely as you feel inclined. Each chapter is complete in itself so the choice is yours. Start from the back if you like!

## Background Issues

I have chosen to use the feminine form throughout the book whenever I refer to local people. In doing this, I am not intending to undermine the contribution of the village men to the intervention – but in wanting to use one gender throughout, it was an obvious choice to use the feminine 'she' and 'her'. This is a way of remembering the central but undervalued role of women in communities. It is also a reminder of the need to support and enable women to continue to open the doors of power, so that they can fully participate and share their special creativity and energy.

Soon after I started working in Mashabela, the village acting Chief gave me the African name of Manyaku. After this, most villagers took to calling me Manyaku – so I have used it throughout the book, as have local people in their sections when they refer to me.

I want to be clear that I do not seek to promote a specific practice model in this book. Indeed it is full of examples of practice and decisions that, in the light of hindsight and current learning, would probably not now be taken. However, it is, I believe, rich in reflection, and in examples of the natural creativity and courage of people who were open to learn from each other. It does not suggest that all ordinary people always behave in a way that is wise, trusting or good. But in the resonance of the intention to learn, there is always opportunity to transcend the ordinary.

Some of you reading these pages may question the values and practice of a white woman working in an African village. What sort of practice was this? Was she

there to evangelise and convert local people, like the white missionaries she lived with?

You may feel uneasy about reading about the experience of a white person, working on her own with black people. It might be tempting to condemn her as a Northern imperialist researching development that is, after all, historically rooted in a liberal, colonial, capitalist world.

While these questions are important, I hope to show that it is possible to be white and work with black people, who are very different from yourself, in a way that does *not* reinforce oppression and prejudice – if sufficiently aware and sensitive. My intention has been to both write and work in ways that are as congruent as possible, and function from a position of respect towards those I work with. In doing so, my intention is to support processes of learning, empowerment and connection between us. It is for you to judge whether I succeed.

I invite you, the reader, to make your own translations from the context of this book into whatever is current and familiar to you, in your own experience. As I have said, this is not because I want to promote a practice model that can be transposed elsewhere, but because I believe the issues that came up for us in Mashabela are relevant to practice anywhere. It is easy to imagine that just because these people from South Africa were dealing with basic rural poverty issues of water, sanitation, women's participation, and so on – that they do not have relevance to urban settings or Northern contexts. The development content might be different, but the dilemmas, issues, learning, potential, and challenges share similar threads. Having worked at both ends of the world, I found this to be strikingly so.

When I was a community worker in Greater Manchester, before I went out to South Africa, I read very little about development practice in other parts of the world. There were few bridges that spanned the continents to link us. Happily there are more now. This book is one example, which is written in the spirit of honouring ordinary people everywhere. May the sharing of this learning that came out of Mashabela, benefit development practice and connect people wherever they come from.

*'Most of us do not today believe that whatever the ups and downs of detail within our limited experience, the larger whole is primarily beautiful.'*<sup>4</sup>





## Delia Makola



My name is Delia Makola. I am 20 years old and training to be a teacher at Mokopane College of Education, near Potgietersrus. I am specialising in Maths, English and IT. I want to go on to do an honours degree, if I can.

I am the first born in my family and I have three younger sisters and one younger brother. My parents are called Nong and Segapi Makola. I was born in Mashabela and until I left for college, I have always lived here. I took my matric at Nkgonyeletse High School. I was one of the few in my year to get through.

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*When I was doing Standard 10, a lady, who was working for the sanitation project, came here and asked me to act in a drama to send a message to the people. We played it in three places. In the first place I was very afraid – the middle place was ok – but in the third place, I was very relaxed and playing freely. I knew that I was useful to my community. I felt great.*

*Now I am empowering the students who registered for part time study because they failed their matric. I called them together and talked about it and told them you have to do this and that – you have to read – and you are going to pass. That's what I told them. It is a beautiful small project for learning. What was in my mind was to advise them, to motivate them, because I know that they are no longer motivated. They think they are dull or something like that. So I called them and we sat together. I told them that they are good and intelligent.*

*At home by sitting down with me and telling me I am unique, I felt empowered by my father. I felt loved by him and considered special. If somebody's empowered, she does things wholeheartedly. She knows how important, how valuable things are. She feels recognised and valuable.*

*I am very proud of the work my father does in the village. He is an example to me. I am on the Boarding and Lodging Committee at the college. 'Why are you going to be on this committee?' he asked me. 'Father' I told him, 'I want to see what I have inherited from you. I want to prove myself'.*

*I think that empowerment helps people have visions. They start to think about other people.*

*Wherever I am, I usually compare it to my village. If I see something beautiful then I think ok, how can I do this in my village? If something is wrong, I say how are we doing this in my village? If it is the same way, I think how can we develop it?*

*We have a saying: 'Unity is the Power'. It is a vision that we will be fulfilled when we are together. We are going to make it. When the village is united there is no idea that gets lost. Every idea is useful. But if you propose an idea, you need to explain it so that everyone understands.*

*We are struggling to develop our villages. We need to be dedicated to the work we are doing. We need to be responsible and accountable.*

*In Africa we have Ubuntu, which means 'A human being is a human being because of other human beings'.*

*This makes sense to me. In everything that you do, you need inspiration from other people. Villages fail because people forget where their roots are. They are what they are because of the environment they grew up in.*

*I can say that my village is my treasure. It is the roots from which I grew. Yes. I am proud of it.*

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My message to people about development:

*'Empowerment helps people have visions. They start to think about other people'.*

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