

# Transforming informal settlements in 21st Century Southern Africa

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## Abstract:

This paper presents findings from a research project conducted with informal settlement dwellers in Southern Africa. The research focused on the experience of people living in seven different settlements in Zambia and South Africa and their efforts to mobilise for positive changes in their own situation: at individual, household, community and – through a network of similar people – at a national level.

Western academic research has a problematic legacy in Africa (and other parts of the world) in that it often aided and abetted the project of colonisation and contributed to the devaluing of indigenous knowledge systems and to the subjugation of colonised people. By seeking to operate out of a post-colonial, indigenous paradigm, this project explored a different research approach. This meant looking for both research methods and knowledge forms that derive from the researched communities' cultures and contexts and to engage researched communities as subjects and as co-researchers.

The research invited communities to define, teach, engage with and learn from the research topic of "how change happens". A focus of this paper is the communities' use of learning exchanges, in which informal settlement dwellers visit other settlements and also receive colleagues from within their movement. In this process they became teachers and co-learners in a peer-to-peer environment. Exchanges can involve international travel and learning from very diverse circumstances, highlighting the contemporary, global nature of this practice.

I argue that this approach is a radical reversal of colonial education systems, so criticised by Paulo Freire and others (Freire, 1970). In contrast to the colonists' "banking model of education", exchanges and other learning processes within the movement offer practical skills, propagation of ideas and a sense of solidarity which acts as a counter-hegemony within a globalised, neo-liberal world.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how the social movement organisation Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) establishes rituals that assist its members in their efforts to transform their settlements. I particularly focus on the experience of slum dwellers' participation in exchanges to other settlements and how these exchanges allow for a radically different learning paradigm.

SDI's approaches to exchanges and learning resonate with Paulo Freire's educational theories, which I will outline later in more detail, particularly his articulation of problem-posing education and conscientisation as new approaches to learning. For Freire, these educational practices allow learners to establish their own freedom and place in history and also counteract earlier models of colonial education.

Yet SDI's learning approach is more than just a modern manifestation of Freirean theory, it is a pedagogical approach in its own right. In this respect, it embraces principles of embodied learning and has a clear heritage that derives from an indigenous and post-colonial approach to knowledge. This heritage includes a focus on further action, an acknowledgement that learning is not to be hoarded, but shared and offered to other individuals and communities in their attempts to also create their own change.

I begin with an introduction to the context of the research, which was focused on and in informal settlements in Southern Africa and the work of SDI, a social movement organisation whose members participated in the research project between September 2013 and June 2014. I highlight some of the complex realities of informal settlements, in terms of their history in colonising and post-independence times and how informal settlements act as both contexts of oppression and disadvantage but more importantly, places of hope and proactivity. I briefly outline my research methodology, which was an attempt both to recognise the authority and expertise of my co-researchers in informal settlements as well as to acknowledge the importance of indigenous and post-colonial knowledge systems.

From the research, I draw on comments from community members about their experiences on exchange, particularly focusing on how exchanges allow for a deepening sense of solidarity within a global movement and can act as a catalyst for personal transformation. Exchanges also allow for a different configuration of power relations between settlement dwellers and local government officials.

Finally, I highlight how settlement dwellers, in keeping with models of indigenous knowledge, freely share new knowledge and insights gained. What is learned on exchange is also offered to others seeking change, in what is a continuing cycle of action and reflection.

## INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

The starting point for this paper is an examination of the research context, namely informal settlements in South Africa (SA) and Zambia. In this paper, I use the terms slums and informal settlements interchangeably, however, the term *slum* is more common in Asia and *shack or informal settlement* more widely used in Africa (Patel, Burra, & D'Cruz, 2001). As an indication of their prevalence, in Zambia, there are forty three informal settlements in the capital Lusaka alone, representing approximately 70% of Lusaka's population, or 1.3 million

people (Nchito, 2007). In SA, 23% of the urban population, approximately 7 million people, live in slums (UN-Habitat, 2013).

The history of informal settlements in Southern Africa needs to be seen within the pattern of colonisation. UN-Habitat notes that their presence reflects a standard pattern of colonial establishment, involving "a well-built formal core, surrounded by large areas of informal settlements", in which "[T]he inner-city area was protected by the colonial powers from encroachment. The design resembles the feudal European design of a castle or walled city with the poor beyond the walls." (UN-Habitat, 2003, p. 22)

However, contemporary informal settlements are more than a legacy of colonialism. Their presence and growth are related to multiple factors including global politics, a weakening of the nation-state (Patel et al., 2001) and an emphasis on middle-class welfare to the exclusion of the poor (Ballard, 2012). There is now a global regime, similar "to that which existed in the mercantilist period of the 19th century ... when slums were at their worst in Western cities and colonialism held global sway" (UN-Habitat, 2003), in other words the pattern of cities in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe is still being replicated in developing countries today.

For many countries including Zambia, impositions such as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) have led to "user-pay" policies, a lack of support for progressive taxation (Davis, 2006), and removals of tariffs and privatisation of state-owned instrumentalities (Green, 2008). As a result, the "retreat of the state from direct production and service provision" (UN-Habitat, 2003, p. 179) creates *inter alia* reduced funds and policy frameworks unable to support poor people coming to urban centres.

In addition, post-colonial African governments, both by neglect and choice, have worsened conditions for poor people and contributed to growing informality and societal inequality. Governments have continued colonial policies which exclude the poor, encourage patterns of patronage and focus economic benefits away from those in need (de Waal & Ibreck, 2013; Jackson & Rosberg, 1984; Meth, 2013). In this analysis, "post-colonial elites have inherited and greedily reproduced the physical footprints of segregated colonial cities." (Davis, 2006, p.96)

Clearly, informal settlements in Zambia and SA are places of inequality. Poverty and disadvantage are pronounced, affecting income, access to education, clean water and sanitation and other health services. However, this language and the objectification of settlement conditions can easily become confrontational and patronising (Teppo & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2013). Slums then become places to be overcome, "blights" on an urban landscape or sources of urban crime and disease and in this analysis, a process of *othering* takes place (Meth, 2013).

Despite the negativity shaping the discourse, these views do not totally define informal settlements. Informal settlements are also locations of emerging change, where there are signs of mobilisation and empowerment. Informal settlements in Southern Africa can be "subaltern spaces: spaces in which black workers carve out hidden domains of social intercourse, experience, and activity which are beyond the powers and comprehension of white compound architects and managers." (Crush, 1994). From this perspective, they are not just the passive objects of policies and history, or victims of planning wars but they may also be places where communities have established "an economy of resistance" (Davis, 2006). In the face of injustice and exclusion, people in settlements survive and resist.

Evidence of this agency and this economy of resistance is apparent in the work of the social movement organisation SDI. SDI arose from a movement of *pavement dwellers* in Mumbai and has now spread to 33 countries globally, including SA and Zambia. SDI is a membership organisation, owned and constituted by informal settlement dwellers, who form settlement groups but also participate at regional, national and even international levels. SDI's mission is to "link urban poor communities from cities across the South that have developed successful mobilisation, advocacy, and problem solving strategies." (Shack/Slum Dwellers International, 2013)

SDI's work focuses on six key practices, or *rituals*<sup>1</sup>, seen as means by which poor people can help themselves rather than just receive assistance (Bolnick, Phyfer, Govender, & Bean, 2008). The ritual of exchanges between settlements is the focus of this paper.

## RESEARCHING IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

Before examining how SDI uses settlement exchanges and the connection between these exchanges, learning and transformation, I want to briefly discuss my research approach. The activities and structure of SDI are of interest to me as an international development worker who has spent time in Zambia. I am attracted both to the inverted organisational structure, which offers informal settlement dwellers agency, control and ownership as well as the apparent ability of the movement to mobilise people in difficult and marginalised contexts. I am particularly interested in how the movement mobilises around change and transformation and what learning processes are contributing to their knowledge of mobilisation and change.

In Africa, the relationship between academic research and colonisation is problematic, since the continent's colonisation did not occur away from research traditions and the academy. Academic institutions provided a theoretical grounding for colonialists and were often enlisted in justifying military, bureaucratic, and economic interventions. In the process, Western researchers established themselves as authorities on African people and highlighted Africans' *need for civilisation* (Chilisa, 2012). As Chilisa writes, researchers contributed to imperialism when they participated in the "Othering of the researched through deficit discourses and theories or literature that construct the researched as the problem." (Chilisa, 2012, p. 192).

This process of othering continued post-independence and its legacy continues to impact on how Western academic institutions plan and conduct research. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) reiterates the ongoing failure and complicity of Western academic research. Her criticisms of Western/dominant research approaches include: their links to European imperialism and colonialism; the tendency of Western researchers to extract data and then claim authority and expertise about and over the researched; and the tendency to "privilege text" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 48) as part of a foreign conception of the rules of evidence that devalues other knowledge forms.

My research project sought to explore alternative research approaches. I sought to preference indigenous knowledge systems, where indigeneity is "a cultural group's way of

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<sup>1</sup> The six rituals are: focusing on the participation of women; savings and finance; enumeration and mapping; partnerships with government; slum upgrading; exchanges ([www.sdinet.org](http://www.sdinet.org))

knowing and the value system that informs their lives” (Cram, Chilisa, & Mertens, 2013: p. 15). I sought an approach which acknowledged the context of, and was relevant to, people in informal settlements, noting that this context arises from historical aspects of imperialism, current local and global realities, as well as the rich history of indigenous knowledge forms and means of transmission still vibrant in communities.

A more detailed examination of the research methods used in this project is beyond the scope of the paper, however, in summary, it involved researching with seven informal settlements across SA and Zambia, a year-long process which involved photo-voice and photo elicitation, personal diaries, interviews and community based discussions on a range of topics around change. As much as possible, I sought to engage community members as both co-researchers and teachers, since they had an evident authority, experience and expertise around transforming their communities. The insights they offered to me about change and transformation were also reflected back to them (and to the wider movement), prompting some of them to comment on how much they knew (and perhaps didn't realise) and what else they might be able to do with this knowledge.

## THE RITUAL OF SETTLEMENT EXCHANGES

As noted, SDI uses rituals, or key practices, to mobilise for positive transformation in informal settlements. In the research, community members commented particularly on the ritual of settlement exchanges and their impact on change and transformation in communities. For the remainder of this paper, I will examine the data on exchanges and draw conclusions about exchanges as a form of learning practice.

Exchanges take place across and between cities and countries and for SDI, they “develop the capacity within each community to plan, manage and develop their development agendas” (Bolnick et al., 2008). Exchanges establish community members rather than professionals as agents of change enabling urban poor people to “articulate and develop their knowledge and understanding of their situation”, with the new knowledge a “collective asset” of the federation (Bolnick et al., 2008).

Exchanges could involve receiving other settlement representatives as teachers of a particular skill or to teach them skills, or demonstrate a ritual or technology which may have application for their community. One Zambian woman talked of visiting two countries to learn construction skills. Now she comments on local builders' workmanship and reacts to any negative response with, “Yes I know, because I have got something (skills) which have helped me. So, I know everything!”

However, exchanges are more than skill acquisition and may be used strategically to broaden the outlook of members and partners. One male federation member quoted a popular Bemba tribal saying, “Umwana ashenda atasha nyina ukunyaya”, or “if you've never left home you think your mother is the world's best cook”. He explained this:

Now if you are just stationed where you are, you don't move and interact with other people, you're saying “you are the best”, but after interacting, talking to different people, sharing with other people, you would definitely know even your deficiencies.

This broadening of outlook extends to developing a sense of shared struggle, as noted in Zambia:

[I]t also helps them to see other communities ... (For them) to say “okay it’s not just us here who are struggling to get something done in our communities, there are even other community members somewhere in other countries who are also doing the same.”

Exchanges were also used to influence (or teach) government officials, who go on exchange with informal settlement dwellers. This involvement reverses what can be typical power dynamics between municipal officials and settlement dwellers, as someone noted:

So, it has helped us in some way, in terms of [City 1] or [City 2] to some extent, even Lusaka, they have gone to learn from other countries, but when they came back we have signed MoUs<sup>2</sup> because they have understood the whole process from the other countries.

Exchanges also have significant personal impact, as illustrated in comments from federation members, particularly women, who form the majority on exchange. ‘K’ from SA spoke about her experience:

In 2001, I did an exchange to India and it was a totally, mind-changing experience, totally, totally ... in the sense that me as a person have taken everything for granted. And seeing how the people are living in India ... they’re accountable, they’re responsible. Makes me realise, “no K, I need to take some of these values with you back home.” So I came back... And as I opened my door I was crying, and my eldest son was asking “Mummy why are you crying?” I said “Child it is a privilege to open a door and walk into a house, even it is a shack, it’s a privilege”. There are people staying on the street, they are staying on the railway lines, they are staying under trees, babies are being born on the streets, children are going to school from the streets. “And if I must stay in this position where I was, the same thing could have happened to you. I want to change that.”

For K, spending time with pavement dwellers permitted a sense of connection with her hosts, including common obstacles, the difficulties of life in an informal settlement, and a shared desire for personal change. The sense of connection also seemed to arise from being federation members together, of belonging to a global community. They were connected through the movement.

K’s story is also one of personal transformation. Her visit to India - and meeting people living on the streets - was a catalyst in taking on a greater leadership in SDI. The visit prompted her to influence how the SA organisation self-organised, based on what she saw on exchange. Coming back, she told her federation, “The way you think of development, that’s not the way and I am going to mobilise the communities on the same basis as the Indian federation. In India, the first thing that I saw was the structure. It was and still is the movement run by the women”. She also noted:

I saw ... the trust that was outstanding for me and how the women and men took initiative to push their development... So I brought back those ideas and I said “I want to change the methodology, just give it a boost” and I did so.

It seems that the approach used by the SA federation was overhauled radically by K as a result of her experience in India. Space prohibits outlining other examples, however, this

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<sup>2</sup> Memoranda of Understanding

particular story highlights how exchanges contribute to personal learning and transformation and then how this learning experience led to India's activism approach being adapted to SA. Note that this process was led by an SDI member, an informal settlement dweller who was inspired and personally transformed by her exchange experience and was able to convince the SA federation to change its approach on the basis of her learning.

## EXCHANGES AND FREIREAN LEARNING

Arising from these comments, there are two broad conclusions about approaches to learning and approaches to transformation in informal settlements. Firstly, in relation to insights from the work of Paulo Freire and secondly, and more substantially, how settlement exchanges represent a learning paradigm which brings together many different strands, including indigenous knowledge systems.

Firstly it is important to note the resonance of the practice of exchanges with the writings of educational philosopher, Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), Freire writes how colonial regimes (including those in Africa) used education systems to oppress. *Banking education* is a colonial education model in which learning "becomes an act of depositing" from teachers and "the scope of action allowed to the students extends only to receiving, filing and storing the deposits". The teacher is narrator and "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1970, p. 53).

For Freire, banking education removes oppressed people's ability to be *subjects* of their reality, instead designating them as *objects*, spectators, rather than re-creators (Freire, 1970). Banking education arises in a context of dehumanisation, and in response, oppressed people must find their true vocation of "becoming more fully human" (Freire, 1970, p. 26). For these people, liberation requires a "recognition of the necessity to fight for it" (Freire, 1970, p. 27).

Freire posits "problem posing" education as an alternative, in which the learner and the teacher create knowledge together and unveil a reality as they consider problems related to themselves and the world. Problem posing education requires action and reflection (*praxis*) and dialogue, whereby the dialoguers' action and reflection is directed towards a "transformed and humanized" world (Freire, 1970, p. 70). Problem posing takes "people's historicity as their starting point" and affirms "men and women as beings in the process of becoming" (Freire, 1970, p. 65), highlighting personal incompleteness and the mutability of history. Freire also positions education as beyond the classroom, highlighting the connection between pedagogy and sociology, politics and class struggle.

Conscientisation, or critical consciousness, is crucial (Freire, 1970, p. 49). This is self-affirmation, engaging in history as responsible subjects who know and act, of recognising that liberation is not a gift from leaders, but the result of a fight.

Scholars note how the banking education model was introduced into colonial sub-Saharan Africa to deliberately devalue African cultures and approaches to knowledge, (Harber, 1997; Mulenga, 2001; Nyerere, 1968; Nyirenda, 1996; Okigbo, 1996; Serpell, Mumba, & Chansakabali, 2011). Furthermore, this education model remains in place, hence "existing education systems are designed by the elite and attempt to adjust people to given societies.

People are treated as objects into which superior beings, that is the elite, pour knowledge” (Nyirenda, 1996, p. 12). This allows societies to remain unjust, with “patterns of dominance and subordination which are constituted and reproduced through the existing educational practices of the elite” (Nyirenda, 1996, p. 12); unequal power arrangements are perpetuated through educational practices.

Freire’s analysis of the banking model of education speaks to current approaches in Southern Africa, including any schooling experiences of informal settlement dwellers. However, his analysis also provides a (more positive) insight into SDI rituals, including exchanges. Unlike banking education, on exchange, informal settlement dwellers are not passive recipients but active subjects involved in dialogue with other settlement dwellers as well as government officials. This is problem posing education. Information gained on exchange is not accumulated, but shared and new ideas instigated as a form of *praxis*.

The unquestionable authority of a teacher, pre-eminent in banking education, is absent on an exchange. Instead, there is peer-to-peer learning, in which all members are teachers; sharing their experience and insight and also sharing in a common identity as informal settlement dwellers learning together. The impact can be seen in K’s experience. Her transformation and subsequent work as a federation leader arises from her experience on exchange. Hence K sees the context of SDI members in Mumbai and draws conclusions about her life priorities. Her experience is evidence of conscientisation, resulting in self-affirmation, an engagement with history, a personal struggle and liberation. As Freire notes, the “conviction of the necessity for struggle ... was not given to them by anyone else. This conviction cannot be packaged and sold; it is reached, rather, by means of a totality of reflection and action.” (Freire, 1970, p. 49).

Exchanges are also counter-hegemonic. Freire argues that oppressors maintain hegemony through subordination, bureaucratic repression and through efforts to portray problems as localised, in other words as a feature of a specific community rather than a part of a greater totality (Freire, 1970). However, SDI members refuse to be dismissed as just localised problems. Instead they connect up and create space for solidarity, indeed the movement presents “a serious threat” to those in power, to the “greater totality” (Freire, 1970, p.122), with their own model of praxis, their own approach to learning, and a sense of unity that stretches across continents.

SDI’s approach highlights the possibility of a different power relationship, one in which slum dwellers are not dependent on largesse, but claim their own power. These claims include their rights to *place*, even a place such as a slum, otherwise considered informal and outside the centre. In organising and embarking on their own struggle, they speak from the periphery to the centre and present an alternative reality. The federation threatens bureaucratic control, with an alternative model to established models of class interactions and to the hegemonic understanding of informal settlement dwellers’ place in society.

## **CONCLUSION: EXCHANGES AND NEW PARADIGMS**

The parallels and resonance of settlement exchanges and Freirean theory is clear. However, the analysis should not stop here, since the learning processes of settlement exchanges are more than just manifestations of Freirean approaches to education and liberation. To leave it here runs the risk of again seeing the practice of African communities only through the

lens of a foreign theoretician (even the Marxian Freire) and might again impose imported theoretical approaches on African practices.

Hence, in my research I have sought to understand the work of SDI not just through Freire but through the theoretical frameworks and knowledge systems of the practitioners themselves, including people like K, whose words I have noted above. This is not to ignore any link to Freire, but to look for complementary insights from different epistemologies and to acknowledge the agency of individuals and communities, not only in their activism but also in their creation and transmission of knowledge. From this perspective, the communities are not just implementing and refining Freirean education but are creating and developing their own learning paradigm, one based on many strands, including post-colonial and indigenous knowledge systems.

The learning approach of exchanges demonstrates this creation of a new paradigm in four different ways. Firstly, it can be seen in the democratic and peer-to-peer approaches to learning and in the willingness to share knowledge freely (both between settlements and with partners such as municipalities). New knowledge is not hoarded or accumulated by one person but is passed on willingly and freely; a process of cascading happening within and beyond communities. This is an economy of abundance; learning is not privatised, but is in the public domain, something to be shared within the context of a relationship of belonging.

Secondly, the learning paradigm of exchanges draws on the heritage of indigenous knowledge systems through their use of different knowledge forms. Hence, stories, songs and catchphrases learnt in one country become rallying points or encouragements in settlements elsewhere. Learning becomes encapsulated in cultural media rather than captured on a page. Ideas and approaches learnt on exchange are not typically developed as theories, or rules, and are rarely written down, instead the essence of an idea is expressed orally (sometimes complemented by photographs) and then shared with other community members with an invitation for further, collective action.

Thirdly, SDI's designation of a settlement exchange as a *ritual* is pivotal. Rituals have been identified by indigenous scholars as important avenues for knowledge transmission and celebrations of a common heritage (Pitts, 2012). Likewise, rituals contain important nuances which are not always obvious to outsiders (Louis, 2007) and also contribute to transformational change (Bushe, 2011). For SDI, the ritual of exchange provides a structured experience in which shared identity can lead to an opening up of new opportunities and personal change, as demonstrated by K's experience.

Fourthly, the practice of exchange incorporates principles of *embodied learning*, an understanding of learning also aligned to indigenous knowledge systems. Learning exchanges involve the physical experience of travel and the whole-body processes involved in experiencing, discussing, and trying new approaches. On exchange, participants undergo a "physical, neurological, perceptual, and behavioural change" (Downey, 2010) in order to develop skills and take on tasks that might previously have been seen as impossible.

Ideas about embodied learning are not the sole domain of African informal settlements or post-colonial theory, however, in the federation's approach one can see the development of a culture of learning which draws together strands from local and indigenous traditions as well as adapting practices from other locations. It cannot be classified as solely indigenous or African, but seems multi-faceted; incorporating a diversity of influences and approaches.

The federation's ability to combine Freirean ideas with indigenous and post-colonial knowledge highlights the movement's strength. It is creative, resourceful, draws on local experience, and results in a powerful learning paradigm that creates a platform for personal and communal transformation. The exchanges not only echo Freire's approach to education and conscientisation, they speak of counter-hegemonic activism, they exemplify embodied learning, and they also seem to be rooted in indigenous approaches to knowledge creation.

As a final note, this is more than just research about a learning approach, for as indigenous scholars note (Chilisa, 2012; Mertens & Wilson, 2012; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) all research should contribute to social justice; learning should make a difference to issues of equality and empowerment.

In this research, I have outlined the example of SDI, the ritual of exchanges and their impact on community transformations. Hopefully, this outline of the process of exchanges provides an opportunity for others to study and adapt these practices, within a continuing cycle of action and reflection. If this does happen, ideally, the communities' authority might be recognised. They are not research objects whose practices provide an example of others' theories, they are knowledge creators, teachers, theoreticians and authorities in their own right, people whose stories and "theory in practice" (Cunliffe, 2004) have relevance to others on the periphery who are also seeking to develop their own counter-hegemonic and transformative practices.

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