

**Paulo and Saul visit the compounds: shared learning for community activists
across time and continents**

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Abstract

Two thinkers inspire this research: Paulo Freire (1921-1997), whose transformative analysis of colonising education and his alternative model is articulated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Secondly, Saul Alinsky (1909-1972), widely recognised as the "founder of American community organising", inspiring Bill McKibben, Cesar Chavez and others. Across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), there are good examples of communities pushing for fairer power sharing and change. Slum Dwellers International (SDI) works in 18 SSA countries to empower poor communities, giving them greater control over their own environments. It is "owned" by members, people living in poor communities (55,000 households in South Africa). This research seeks to bring together the contributions of Alinsky, Freire and SDI activists from Zambian compounds and South African townships in a way that avoids extractive research or a didactic transposition of Alinsky/Freire's ideas into the practices, context and realities of SSA activists. Issues of participation, identity, tensions between Western/Australian and indigenous research and recognition of indigenous knowledge systems are at the forefront. Despite these challenges, the desired outcome is a process which recognises the power, wisdom and skill of community activists, includes their learning priorities and generates narratives to guide the knowledge and skills of others seeking change.

Introduction

This research has a personal dimension. For the last thirty years I have worked in community and international development. From mid-2009 until 2013 I lived in Zambia, where I started thinking about "how change does or doesn't happen". As an outsider, I was intrigued. Zambia is a peaceful, stable country. Zambians were generally confident, self-assured and had a great zest of life and sense of humour. Yet they seemed unwilling to challenge unhealthy authority, ranging from political to religious power, bad service from businesses (banks were the worst) and dismissive authoritarianism from education institutions. By and large, Zambians deserved much better as citizens, customers and participants.

This made me think about how change happens in communities and societies. I recognised I was a newcomer and outsider and I also recognised that sometimes change happened in ways hidden or unobservable to me. Yet many Zambians agreed that they found it hard to confront authority, accepted the status-quo as "part of their lot" and often bemoaned society's inability to challenge corporate, bureaucratic or civic power. Challenging power seemed to be a secret ingredient for how change happens and this line of thinking encouraged me to do more reading on politics, change, community and organising, particularly the writings of Paulo Freire and Saul Alinsky, who had inspired me many years before.

A comprehensive summary on either is beyond this paper's scope, however, a basic outline is important. Freire's writing, as an educational philosopher was prodigious and hugely influential across education, international development and politics. He analysed the position of poor, illiterate Brazilians and saw their exclusion as related to colonial educational practices; a "banking model" involving depositing of information by teachers into the minds of learners. Teachers had all authority and could not be questioned and learners were passive, empty vessels, whose role was to accept and absorb the information received. In his analysis, this educational approach allowed colonisers across the globe to maintain control over indigenous populations, raising docile generations who would not challenge teachers or colonisers, but enable learners to become functionaries in the system. It was this education system that I saw operating in Zambia and many other African countries, often supported unfortunately by international NGO programmes.

Some writers (see Harber, 1997; Jackson & Rosberg, 1982, 1984) point out that most post-independence regimes had a vested interest in maintaining this educational approach. As new leaders, they wanted to maintain a system which discourages people from challenging authority, particularly when change would require an overhaul of the system which eventually gave them power.

Freire posited a different pedagogical approach, one he piloted with illiterate cane-sugar workers and others. Teachers and learners work together in a process of "problem posing" education (Freire, 1970), students learn to read the *Word and the World* (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Freire, 2005), they engage in *praxis* (action and reflection) and develop critical consciousness. Learning is a radical, political process because learners comprehend their context and the processes contributing to their silence and docility. They learn to speak out and claim their place as historical subjects. For groups like the cane-workers, they are now able to vote, thus claiming political power. Unsurprisingly, Freire's ideas resulted in his exile from Brazil for 15 years.

After the English publication of his most famous work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), his ideas were widely taught and debated across the world, including newly independent African states. He visited Africa a number of times and was involved in conferences in Angola, Mozambique and Tanzania. He was heavily involved in the state-led approach to education in Guinea-Bissau, which was the subject of his book *Pedagogies in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau* (Freire, 1978).

Freire has had a significant influence in educational philosophy, social work and international development, including on Robert Chambers and the Participatory Rural Appraisal approach (e.g. Chambers, 1994), the writings of Steve Biko (Khoapa, 1984), as well as such approaches as ActionAid's REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) approach to adult-literacy (ActionAid, 2009).

The other person to whom I was drawn was Saul Alinsky. Largely forgotten these days, he was a national figure in the USA in the 1960s. Known as the "founder of community organising" his work supported poor, usually black communities in inner-cities, helping them to come together, form local membership associations and take a stance against local

discrimination and oppression, including landlords, City Halls and employers. He was a brilliant tactician and liked nothing more than a high-profile confrontation, one in which he always seemed to outflank and frustrate his rich and formidable opponents. His book *Rules for Radicals* (Alinsky, 1971) is a great handbook of community organising. Although not well known these days, his writings are avidly read and used by organisers, even within the Tea Party (Kleefeld, 2009).

He did not have a formal influence on international development or African politics, however, he had a significant influence on one young Kenyan, who worked for three years as a community organiser in Chicago; Barack Obama. Many people credit the community organising approach used by Obama in his first Presidential campaign as the result of skills developed as a community organiser when he was an Alinsky employee (see Eversley, 2009; Lizza, 2007).

Alinsky is a reminder of the importance of tactics and the potential of well-managed conflict. In international development, we are wary and even ignorant of both tactics and conflict; believing change can happen by signing a petition, forming a committee, or printing a pamphlet. Alinsky is a reminder that change processes need to be contemplated, evaluated and pursued as a military operation, or as a massive chess game.

On reading Freire and Alinsky, I saw an opportunity to think about key lessons or approaches from both and examine the relevance of their ideas for contemporary Africa. I saw it might also be possible to examine organisations, social movements or communities which are currently leading the way on creating change and look for elements of Freirean or Alinsky-like approaches in their work.

However, there were three immediate ethical, philosophical and methodological problems. Firstly, for both writers, community organising requires the full partnership and ownership of local people. Alinsky was adamant; organising had to arise out of the real, articulated needs of the people themselves. It is impossible to enlist community members into an outsider's campaign, the campaign has to arise from the issues of communities themselves. Obama talks about this insight in his memoirs (2008). Freire, likewise, believed learning had to be centred on the learner engaging themselves in a process where both teacher and student are involved in mutual learning (and teaching). For me, this meant that any research on how communities effect change had to involve communities as co-researchers and had to be responsive to their research interests and priorities, without imposing my own.

Secondly, both men's work was undertaken in a time and context well removed from contemporary Africa. To paraphrase, do two white men who lived and wrote forty years ago, and whose context was dominated by the Cold War and the emerging place of civil rights in inner-city America have anything of value to say to the women and men who live and campaign in townships and settlements across post-colonial Africa? As noted, Freire was heavily involved in Guinea-Bissau immediately after independence, however, the political ideology of that time is vastly different from the context of most African countries in the 21st Century. The question could be asked, would it not be better to look at the legacy of the giants of African independence, such as Julius Nyerere, Amilcar Cabral or Kwame

Nkrumah? It became clear that Alinsky and Freire's ideas (which are somewhat dated) could not serve as a hermeneutical grid with which to examine current community organising, since this could severely limit the ability to interpret and learn from what was going on on-the-ground.

Thirdly, and more substantially, any research would need to arise from knowledge systems and wisdom traditions of communities themselves. Research which seeks to examine and learn from how communities in Africa effect change needs to start with the knowledge systems in the culture, tradition and fabric of those communities themselves. Anything less would preference imported learning and only reinforce the very nature of neo-colonial impositions of Western rationality. This is not to completely denigrate knowledge developed from Western, scientific/rationalistic traditions, but to recognise that these systems are incomplete, come from a particular cultural tradition and that they systematically devalue and exclude other forms of learning.

Botswanan academic, Bagele Chilisa has been forthright about the importance of post-colonial research approaches and the need to reclaim space for indigenous knowledge systems. For her, "indigenous research" means a focus on a 'cultural group's ways of perceiving reality, ways of knowing, and the value systems that inform research processes' (Chilisa, 2012, p. 13). It is necessary to ask about *reality* for the groups being researched, how this reality might be studied and how 'indigenous peoples, women, and marginalized communities define their reality and ways of knowing?' (Chilisa, 2012, p. 13), noting that this perception of reality is shaped by indigenous knowledge systems and their attempts to resist and survive.

Embracing this research approach is to acknowledge that 'research methods of the so-called First World privilege the First World and subjugate the various knowledge formations from former colonies' (Chilisa, 2005, p. 663). In decolonising research approaches, she sees the move towards indigenous research as part of an African Renaissance (noting this Conference's theme) and as such, powerfully recognises how traditional, Western research emphasises an "epistemological single-mindedness", borrowing Pallas's phrase (1998), ignores or actively devalues indigenous ways of knowing and as a result fails to arrive at research results capable of improving the quality of life of researched communities (Chilisa, 2005). The move (back) towards indigenous research then is a reclaiming of knowledge and an assertion of the validity and value of that which is often ignored or discarded by formal, Western research processes.

Specifically, Chilisa forces me to ask, 'Where is the center of knowledge and information about a people or community located?' (2012, p. 10), where clearly the answer cannot be within in a Western University, an international NGO, or a UN Agency.

Linda Tuhiwai-Smith has also written extensively on this and adds to the discussion on research with her own questions: 'Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated?' (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, p. 10).

These are unavoidable questions for me as initiator of research on change in Africa. Although I have worked hard to answer these questions, I acknowledge my attempts to embrace a more local, indigenous approach to research are incomplete and involve compromise.

Following Tuhiwai-Smith and Chilisa's analysis, I also recognise the irony of this research being presented at an academic conference, such as this, and being presented by only one party, the Western male outsider, speaking on behalf of communities and predominantly women activists in Africa. As Chilisa has noted (2005), even within collaborative research projects, it is often the Western academic who is profiled ahead of his/her indigenous co-researchers, the research serving as a key component in the development of an academic reputation, or, as in my case, the path towards a PhD.

Later, I will outline how Chilisa and others have influenced my research processes, however, I want to outline the process for identifying African communities and activists working on issues of change. If banking education leads to docility, where might I find active communities, with whom I could partner in appropriate research? Where are the communities which have gone beyond passivity to organise their own agenda and to stake a claim against power and authority, as a refusal against submissiveness and as a form of resistance? In these contexts, to quote Freire, what reading of the "Word and the World" is going on?

Furthermore, thinking about Alinsky, where are communities tackling issues of confrontation and conflict, and how do they approach the detail of organising and the place of tactics? What importance do they place on forming and supporting people's organisations, a topic of great importance and a significant part of Alinsky's approach (Alinsky, 1969)?

It seemed clear that case-studies provided the best approach for collecting the depth and richness of data that might emerge from the complex ways in which communities work. For me, the topic of how communities create change means looking for communities which have succeeded in making or influencing change, in one way or another. Furthermore, I wanted to avoid any process which graded communities as failures, as a result of being compared with others which had made further progress in creating change. To borrow from Flyvbjerg and Greer's typology of cases, I looked for communities or "cases" which could be considered 'extreme/deviant', in the sense of being 'especially good' and as a guide in developing 'new concepts', as well as 'Paradigmatic' in the sense that they would help to 'develop a metaphor' (Flyvbjerg & Greer, 2011, p. 307). Fortunately, Flyvbjerg's guidance about choosing paradigmatic cases is reassuring; he encourages the use of intuition (a form of knowledge that I think resonates with indigenous communities), noting that there are no strict rules for what constitutes a paradigm (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Using my intuition, I was attracted to Slum Dwellers International (SDI). As the name suggests, it is a movement of people living in informal settlements, townships, compounds and slums. Importantly, they are owners of the movement, its instigators and its members. SDI, as a global movement, arose from a collective of national organisations, including one

which started in India in the mid 1980s and where its membership is now over one million people. SDI is present in 18 SSA countries.

SDI's work can be summarised in three objectives: "to create solidarity and unity of the urban poor so that they are well organised and equipped with the skills, knowledge and scale needed to create meaningful change"; to build "a national urban network of the poor for learning and lobbying" and thirdly, "to change the way our cities are planned and developed and how public funds are used so that they are inclusive, and that ordinary people are involved" (SDI South African Alliance, 2012a). For me, SDI exemplifies a "bottom-up approach" and has a focus on learning, mobilisation and practical action that stretches from local to national level initiatives.

After approaching South Africa SDI, where the movement, or federation, comprises over 55,000 households across 750 communities (SDI South African Alliance, 2012b), I was able to add a second national federation, in Zambia, where there are 400 groups and 46,000 members in 260 settlements (SDI Alliance, 2013). It seemed to me that working with a few communities in each of two countries, which had a range of both shared and dissimilar characteristics, would provide an interesting and challenging research opportunity.

As can be seen, my approach to research has already been quite a journey. To go further, if Chilisa is correct about centring knowledge in the community and their knowledge systems, then the research also required a consideration of the forms that knowledge takes in researched (or co-researched) communities. Wisdom and learning are not necessarily expressed in formal theories, frameworks, matrices, or even sets of principles, which tend to be the way we code things from a Western, rationalistic or scientific perspective. Instead, as Chilisa points out, indigenous knowledge and wisdom might be bound up in dimensions of culture, such as stories, representations, songs, sayings, even dance. Knowledge is embedded in relationships (with both the living and the non-living), in a sense of spirituality and in a sense of place (Chilisa, 2012). The concept of *ubuntu* is also very important here, since as Chilisa writes,

'The *ubuntu* worldview, "I am because we are," is an example of a framework that calls on the researcher to see "self" as a reflection of the researched Other, to honor and respect the researched as one would wish for self, and to feel a belongingness to the researched community without feeling threatened or diminished.' (Chilisa, 2012, p. 22)

Ubuntu, for her, allows for a way of *knowing* in research, guidance to the researcher as to his/her responsibilities, a promotion of community well-being and an 'African-centred theoretical framework' (Chilisa, 2012, p. 22).

Clearly, in the spirit of *ubuntu*, honouring, listening and reflecting the knowledge and wisdom of communities requires research methods that go beyond a quantitative approach; multiple choice surveys and statistical comparisons are not going to provide insight into the knowledge that communities have themselves about how they have created and continue to create change.

It has been difficult to commit to one particularly set of data collection methods. To do so, it seems to me, is to again fall into the trap of defining the research process from within Western categories. Instead, I have attempted a range of different approaches which might highlight or uncover aspects of the wisdom held by community members about change. I have been collecting approaches almost as tools in a toolkit, to be used depending on the context. Or, to change the metaphor, as musical "licks", "scales" or sequences of notes that can be put together or offered to others when undertaking a collective performance or jamming session. Research becomes improvisation or even jazz music, a metaphor acknowledged by others (Brydon-Miller, Kral, Maguire, Noffke, & Sabhlok, 2011; Chambers, 2007; Yanow, 2009). Although this approach reduces certainty, it helps to reduce the temptation for me as an outsider to dictate the process (or control the melody, to keep using the music metaphor).

Arising from the desire to interact with and learn from the representational, narrative and visual elements of knowledge in communities, and after consultation with SDI, I introduced cameras as a photo-voice component of "data collection". The intention is that people in settlements could take photos of anything that spoke to them about change in their communities, particularly change with which they felt involved or that their group had precipitated in some way. This method has been used by SDI in South Africa, as well as in other indigenous settings for community based participatory research (e.g. Castleden & Garvin, 2008). Interestingly, it also links back to Freire and his use of images of peasant life in cultural circles, as a starting point for reflection (Freire, 1976).

In addition, and to facilitate other forms of community expression, I included diaries in which community members could record stories, songs and highlights of any change process. Although I recognise that community members may not be so familiar with writing as a form of expression and knowledge creation, it seemed that diaries could provide a complement to the photo-taking and allow some creativity (e.g. drawing or transcribing songs) beyond just narratives.

Other "tools" were drawn from Participatory Rapid Appraisal approaches (Chambers, 1992a, 1992b, 1994) and Appreciative Inquiry (see for example Bushe, 2011), which allows groups and individuals to consider "personal sources of pride" and then use this as a basis of considering future developments that would build on past achievements.

In designing the research, I was conscious of different dimensions of relationships. I wanted, as much as possible, to limit the constraints of me being an outsider, a *muzungu* researcher, based in Australia, flying in on a brief trip. Despite a commitment to co-research/co-learning and to shared ownership of the process and outcomes, there were physical, relational and power differentials. I do not claim to have overcome these, but I have sought to address them in different ways. Firstly, by having a longer process, rather than a brief fly-in, fly-out research trip. Hence, community members will use cameras and diaries for six months, bracketed by workshops and visits, which will hopefully give a longer-term, on-going dimension to the research. Secondly, in each country, I have engaged Field Assistants (FAs) - also as participants - who can partner with communities, provide support and deal with any logistical problems. They are intermediaries who also have diaries and cameras and have

the chance to contribute their thoughts and impressions about change. As an aside, it was interesting to see interactions between community members and the FAs in my visit in September. Allaying any concerns about them being another voice of control in a Western driven process, in Zambia, one community activists was very clear as to the relationship. She spoke to the FA with authority, charging her to follow through on her duties, "we have started very nicely, it is up to you to keep things going".

In September, I started the process, visiting Zambia and South Africa and spending time with SDI staff and community activists. Although I only spent one week in each country, in both places we spent time starting to get to know each other and sharing backgrounds. I spoke of my research interest and we discussed research questions of importance to their movement which could be incorporated into the overall project. This step seeks to respond to Tuhiwai-Smith's concern about the ownership and framing of research. It was clear that individual activists and SDI had important research priorities which dovetailed well into my interest and which can be incorporated into the six month programme.

Together we drew a representational timeline of the movement, including key milestones and dates when individuals first joined, we did an Appreciative Inquiry exercise ("What are you most proud of and how can the movement build on this?"), we charted forces (force field) for positive and negative change in communities, and they gave their advice for starting a community group in Australia. I was unsure about this exercise beforehand, but it was fascinating. Particularly in Zambia, the activists had a clear sense of the priorities and processes needed to mobilise and organise, "Invite me to your home, call your neighbours, I'll tell them what we did." "It's up to them!" "Go to the community, give photos so they believe – educate, sensitise, mobilise!" were some of the instructions. For me, these words and the confidence and authority which the activists – mainly women – used, was very instructive. People considered as powerless, those at the periphery of the global economy, women and men whom one might expect to be silent and passive, were speaking with authority and wisdom back into an Australian context. Not only was this a reversal of political and geographical power imbalances, their advice was sound and useful for any Australian community organisers.

I also visited groups in three Zambian compounds and four South African townships. I invited them to join the photo-voice and diaries project and to act as my co-researchers (in *Nyanga* in Zambia, this translates as *ku fufusa pamodzi*) and my teachers. Although I was hesitant about asking, since I thought this could be an imposition of my priorities and not of importance to them, the general response was one of interest and enthusiasm and they noted that it gave them the opportunity to reflect on their own experience and learning. The visits were an opportunity to talk individually with activists, visit their homes and spend time listening to their stories. They spoke with great pride about their achievements so far. I will return to both countries in April, when I hope to spend more time with the communities for other activities (from the toolbox) to highlight their learning and wisdom and to reflect on their photos and writings. In the meantime, the FAs are in regular contact with the groups and initial reports indicate lots of photo taking and a reasonable amount of diary writing is taking place. Enthusiasm and energy seems high.

When first conceptualised, I wanted to research the relevance and impact of Alinsky and Freire on current practice. I thought I could trace how modern practices linked back to historical ideas or how they could these two thinkers could offer fresh insight to contemporary activists. As noted, I thought Freire and Alinsky could be a hermeneutical key or interpretive grid for modern approaches. However, my ideas have changed. I have thought through issues of relevance, the pre-eminence of practitioners' wisdom and knowledge as against Alinsky and Freire ideas, and thought about how to immerse the research in practitioners' knowledge systems. In the process I have had to think about epistemological systems, including the relationship between culture, empire and knowledge and the relationship between theory and practice. My conclusion is that Freire and Alinsky cannot offer a hermeneutical "key" for modern activists' theory/practice, however, I am still working through a replacement metaphor. Rather than a "key", perhaps they are stepping stones, or historical reference points, starting places for engaging in a set of issues around practice, reflection and learning.

Which leads to the title for this paper. In my mind I now have this image of Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire visiting the settlements of Zambia and South Africa, sitting with activists and everyone sharing together experiences born out of struggle, action and reflection and hard-earned learning.

"Findings" then from the research will now include conclusions reached together, not just from the perspective of my analysis. Findings will include theory, not as objective, verifiable truth, more as Flyvbjerg puts it, 'input into the ongoing social dialogue and practice of society, rather than to generate ultimate, unequivocally verifiable knowledge' (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 139). Findings may mean reflections about the research process and conclusions about engaging more deliberately in indigenous research. I believe this aligns with the conference theme, since it is clear that "African" research has much to offer the rest of the world, including Australian academia. Beyond resisting the colonisation of research approaches from Western academia, in the spirit of renaissance, there is an opportunity to offer insights, approaches and benefits not necessarily available through Western research approaches.

I recognise my attempts to do indigenous research are halting. In the musical metaphor, I am a learner, not an accomplished performer. Despite this, I think the process is vital and worth sharing, including mistakes. I hope there will be others – including activists – who will adapt and more fully develop this approach to knowledge.

Finally, to build on this paper's title, it is not just Paulo and Saul who are visiting the compounds. Physically and metaphorically, I am also present. I bring my experiences and interests, as a reflexive researcher, as someone seeking to understand for myself, "how change happens". Hopefully, I am also someone who can make some contribution into the discussion and learn from the other, eminent people involved, both current activists and long-departed writers. There is no doubt in my mind that the compounds, townships and informal settlements are the right place for this important learning.

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