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The culture of management or the management of culture?

A case study of the Rural Women's Association, South Africa

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Introduction to the RWA

In 1992, 43 women who considered themselves to be the 'poorest of the poor' began working together to grow food for themselves and their families, in a remote rural village called Apel (Limpopo Province, South Africa). By 2003, the original 43 had grown to a group of almost 3,500 women working together under a nationally registered, not-for-profit organisation known as the Rural Women's Association (RWA). This article explores the origins and development of the RWA as an organisation that now fosters a broad portfolio of activities, offering a sustainable livelihood to the women involved.

The Sekhukhune area in which Apel is located suffered particular hardship during the past decades, because it was a politically active rural area, opposing the Apartheid regime. 1992 statistics show, for instance, one of the highest child mortality rates in South Africa (192/1000), associated primarily with TB, malnutrition, infectious diseases and diarrhoea (Pardeller et al 1999). Despite the democratic changes in 1994, the area continues to be dogged by challenges.

> *Sekhukhuneland has suffered years of neglect, inadequate investment, maldevelopment, mismanagement, corruption and apartheid policy. The area is characterised by extreme poverty with the highest unemployment rate in the country (estimated at around 70%). It has a migrant labour force (a remnant from the apartheid era) with the majority of men absent from the village but remitting paltry wages back to their families. The area has the highest infant mortality rate in SA and is a drought area. The task of improving the quality of life falls mainly on the shoulders of the women who remain resident in the Apel area.* (Rhodes 2000*)*

It is in this incontestably harsh socio-environmental landscape that the RWA has flourished. One concrete success indicator is that members now celebrate that they are 'no longer burying babies' (Pardeller et al 1999): through improved livelihoods, women have better access to adequate nutrition; knowledge sharing amongst RWA members has increased awareness of health risks – and subsequently, the infant mortality rate has dropped

In the early days of the RWA, the women were a closely-knit group with a strong sense of identity, sharing a common vision and common goals.[1] The group developed into an active Community of Practice (CoP) soon after the arrival of Sister Lydia Pardeller in 1992, a Franciscan nun bound by a mandate to assist rural women in

development programs. She came with 30 years of experience working with grassroots organisations in Africa.

Setting up the organisation: first harvests

Upon her arrival in Apel, Sister Lydia was soon introduced to 43 women who had carefully started exploring how to escape their dismal predicament. Under the guidance of Sister Lydia, these women became the first members of the RWA, welcoming an opportunity to work, instead of 'just sitting at home doing nothing, and without enough to eat' (RWA member, cited in Burman 2004). Alongside her organisational skills, Sister Lydia brought further capabilities with her: some agricultural insights, a small amount of financial support for agricultural inputs and a conviction that positive change was within reach for these women. With this in mind, she approached the local Catholic mission and persuaded them to lend her a piece of land, divided it into 43 plots and the women began to prepare the soil for agricultural development. Much to the surprise of the community, within the first year, the land procured a substantial harvest. News of these first harvests prompted requests from other women, sometimes from distant villages, to join with the RWA. At this time, the RWA focused primarily on improving their household diet through autonomous, self-sufficient gardening schemes.

As the organisation developed, so did its ambitions. Today the gardens are more sophisticated and the livelihood activities extend across a broad portfolio of cottage industries. The RWA has supported this expansion by encouraging its members to participate in a broad array of capacity building schemes, knowledge sharing amongst peers and by securing its financial sustainability through strong relationships with both domestic and international donors (Burman 2004, Rhodes 2000). This expansion was supported by the expanding RWA network, but a strong work ethic and sense of ownership over the projects was the glue that held the internal relations of the organisation together.

The RWA Ethos

The essence of the early RWA's vision was clusters of semi-autonomous gardening groups, managed by women who were ambitious as individuals, but simultaneously responsible – in conjunction with their peers – for the longer-term viability of the organisation. For this vision to become a sustainable reality, the women were encouraged to develop a culture of joint ownership of the scheme and shoulder the lion's share of the responsibility for their gardens.

> *Everyone has something to contribute and poverty is no excuse for helplessness. The contribution is both financial and in terms of sweat equity (time and effort). Members pay a substantial amount (in their terms) towards the initial capital costs and they pay all the operational and maintenance costs. Thus, every project initiated by women of the RWA is owned and managed by the women.*
>
> *The RWA stimulates members to be creative and productive and to take their own decisions. They create the success themselves and own it. The women of the RWA organise, manage, and run their organisation.* (Pardeller et al 1999)

Managing the RWA

As its membership increased, the RWA developed a management structure consisting of a Central Coordinating Body (CCB). The CCB comprised eight, democratically elected women, responsible for brokering relationships with external stakeholders (such as donors) and assisting with intra-gardening group crises, yet allowing each gardening group significant autonomy to manage their day to day activities. The CCB is also largely responsible for securing capacity building opportunities for RWA members; this includes maintenance of the enabling environment or *creative space* for members to manage their own projects. The CCB meets on a quarterly basis with project group committees comprising representatives from each gardening group; and further, the CCB can be called upon by the membership at any time for specific extraordinary reasons. In this sense, the CCB acts as a conduit between extra-local linkages and the membership, while simultaneously protecting the institutional culture that they believe will best sustain the women's attempts to make change for themselves and their families.

For many years this approach reflected a 'legitimate peripheral participation' model of communities of practitioners. In this model, sharing of knowledge and skills enabled 'newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practice of the community' (Lave and Wenger 1991). In this case, the centre ground was well defined by the CCB and the peripheral learners comprised the gardening groups.

However, as the RWA expanded, the reasonably tight-knit identity was challenged. As is often the case in situations of incremental growth, maintaining a clear organisational culture amongst all members can be difficult, especially when external influencesbegin to be articulated within the organisation and the distance between 'centre' and 'periphery' widens. As such, internal pressures accumulated, seriously threatening the cohesion of the RWA with the situation coming to a climax in the period 2002-2003. Although the contradictions encountered between management, external stakeholders and members were conceptual, their combined force very nearly resulted in the total collapse of the RWA. What were these issues and how did they come to that jeopardise the gains made over the previous 10 years?

Knowledge and the RWA

Sister Lydia was determined that the women solve their own problems, rather than expecting her to think and do things on their behalf (Pardeller et al 1999). This approach required a facilitative rather than a prescriptive environment, enabling home-grown creativity within the RWA vision from which the women would have the opportunity to learn how to administer themselves and their projects. In the early days, there was no shortageof expertise from within the RWA corpus about how to grow vegetables; however, most of the RWA gardening groups did experience difficulties managing themselves in their new context of intensive horticultural production.

In order to counter this lack of management skills, Sister Lydia argued her case with the membership that autonomous problem solving, combined with an environment that facilitated knowledge sharing, was the essential combination that would to enable home-grown management capabilities to emerge; in turn making the RWA a

sustainable entity. The women gradually acceded to this argument and a process of experiential learning began to gain momentum.

> *The possibility that something was actually changing … was more than we had thought would ever be possible. It was only after – when we had to overcome problems - that we began to think about what we were doing.*
> RWA member's comment (Burman 2004)

What this 'experiential learning' meant in practice for the RWA members is illustrated by the following examples.

In the early days, one large gardening group of about 80 women found that some members were not meeting their obligation to participate in collective efforts of garden maintenance, such as general weeding, fence repairs, irrigation system maintenance, etc. In response, under guidance of the project group committee the women imported a pre-existing, local cultural norm used to police funeral contributions and adapted it slightly as a method of imposing a penalty system whereby anyone who shirked their responsibilities would be liable to pay a fine, with non-payment resulting in expulsion from the gardening group (although this rarely happens). The rule is not applied dogmatically; for example, a member with responsibilities for a young family is not expected to contribute as much 'sweat equity' as somebody with more time on their hands. Nevertheless the agreement reflects a clear message to members that group benefits can be reaped if problematic issues are approached democratically and creatively.

Another group, having secured funding for hosepipes to reduce the burden of irrigating with buckets, found that the hosepipes were being used so intensively that the local water supply could not keep up with demand. This created a situation whereby some members tended to monopolise the taps for considerable periods of time, leading to imbalanced distribution and inefficient use of water resources, as well as being the source of many disputes. In this instance, after much debate, somebody proposed that the members reject the use of hosepipes in their gardens; this was accepted by the group, and the women returned to using buckets for their irrigation needs. The critical point here being that technology never falls into a neutral context, yet – in this instance – the context was one that was able to facilitate, and be responsive to, democratic demands – rather than tripping headlong down an avenue of trying to persuade the women that they ought to adapt to the technology.

As such, in the early days the RWA management scheme facilitated creative, democratic, intra-gardening group decision making by members. These examples serve to illustrate that it is not so much the specific chunk of knowledge that emerges, but rather that a democratic, facilitative environment increases the potential for people to tackle their problems without recourse to some outside 'expert' body. Such a notion of participatory, autonomous problem solving represents a cornerstone of the RWA's development; as one member commented: 'our voices are heard' (Burman 2004).

The RWA management approach initiated a process that encouraged independent problem solving, in turn facilitating much needed confidence building and a sense of ownership over the project by the membership. Furthermore, the RWA encouraged different gardening groups to share their ideas, so that gradually a very substantial

web of knowledge, with a cross-disciplinary spectrum of expertise, was consolidated. This multi-layered web of knowledge is used to this day by the RWA membership as an informal ideas repository for future problem solving. This ideas repository is used both formally and informally by the RWA membership – running both vertically and horizontally throughout the organisation. Through this approach, the RWA facilitated the development of not just a farming organisation but also an energized Community of Practice that nurtured members' capabilities to produce and share ideas that allowed peers to improve their skill-sets by discussing discoveries or problems as they endeavoured to identify appropriate responses to these challenges.

Emergent contradictions within the RWA

> *The RWA has been very careful about the conditions under which they would accept donor funding. In some instances, funding was seen to interfere with the way women wanted to run their organisation and the women refused to accept the funding. … This means that the organisation has not been tempted to shift from its original objectives. … In fact, there have been some difficulties with individuals and even groups offering assistance to the RWA (whereby) their aim was to use the RWA's successes to generate income for their own purposes.*
>
> (Pardeller et al 1999)

One of the principal problems the CCB had to confront is how to mediate between the need for outside assistance without jeopardising the CCB's vision of the most appropriate enabling environment for the membership. This issue of how to protect the organisation from external institutional biases was a pragmatic dilemma. On the one hand, the group had made incredible steps in improving the diets of thousands of people in the area, but on the other hand, funding was required – and the conditions attached to this sometimes presented challenges that jeopardised the organisation's original mission.

Initially, Sister Lydia was able to fund the organisation through her own network in Italy which donated money without attaching restrictive conditions. However, as the organisation expanded she was forced to seek other sources of funding and she did so in ways that she believed would not impinge upon the CCB's preferred vision of the RWA, by filtering out donors whom she felt might introduce destabilising influences into the organisation.

Initially, this pragmatic response was a technical reaction by the management which was designed to foster a strong sense of ownership over the projects, as well as to try to and sustain their preferred type of enabling environment within which the members could develop home-grown capabilities. They felt this approach would ensure the long-term viability of both the women's attempts at change and the RWA's institutionalised ambitions for the future. It was, in this sense, an attempt to construct and maintain a barrier between the organisation, filtering out what were perceived as potentially 'harmful' influences from the outside world, and allowing only 'useful' influences to seep through into the membership's consciousness (see Figure 1).

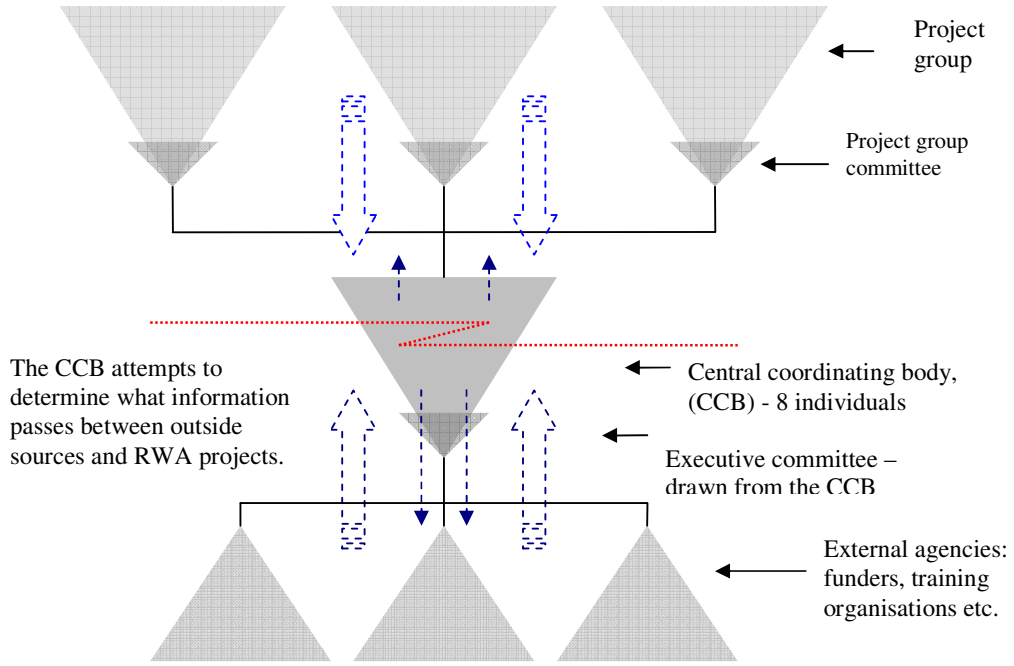

Figure 1. Organogram representing the RWA structure, external agencies and information flows. The blue arrows indicate information flows; the red fault line represents the CCB's deliberate attempts to censor influences that would be received by the membership as the CCB tried to maintain a particular vision of the appropriate enabling environment which they believed would best serve the membership's attempts at developing particular capabilities.

However, while encouraging an open and sharing environment amongst the membership, the CCB gradually became acculturated into a dogmatic, custodial management body, determining, in accordance with their vision of the RWA's future, which influence was deemed good and which bad for the members. In other words, the CCB began to focus its attentions on maintaining this particular enabling environment of its own, rather than responding to the empirical demands of the membership. This approach was largely based upon an implicit assumption that the membership would adapt to the CCB's plan, as it had when the organisation was smaller and more transparent. Nevertheless, such an environment had served the membership well for many years, enabling them to negotiate difficult challenges, but now this decision-making process was undemocratically imposed by the CCB, which was having the unintentional 'straightjacket' effect of constraining the very creativity that the original facilitative environment was designed to support. Thus, a threatening contradiction within the RWA corpus emerged.

Another internal problematic dimension in this attempt to sustain the RWA as an isolated Community of Practice was the success of the RWA itself. Initially, the women's binding motive was to become self-sufficient in vegetable production as a means of improving their household diet. However, thanks to capacity building facilitated by the RWA, combined with the experiential learning activities that accompanied this process, the community's confidence grew, and, combined with surplus produce, this encouraged the women to start expanding their ambitions for the future. A number of the members moved away from the original idiom of self-

sufficiency towards a market-based developmental strategy. This transition was a gradual process, gathering such momentum that by 2002 it represented a dominant consensus by the membership.[2]

> *…If there are a lot of jobs to do in the projects … it means that we are going to be job creators, because we can hire other people who are poor to come and assist us in our projects of sewing, catering and gardening … and we can also hire people to assist us in our homes.*
>
> RWA member's comment (Burman 2004)

In 2000, Sister Lydia felt it was time to leave the organisation and allow it to develop further independently. Despite the positive opportunities the organisation had generated for its members, the CCB had developed into a fairly rigid management group that, in terms of their vision for the organisation's future, was not prepared for this change from self-sufficiency to a market-based idiom.[3] The result of this was that the RWA corpus changed from being a well-aligned organisation – focusing on self-sufficiency and household diet – into a group of people with divergent ambitions for the future.

Subsequently, during the period 2002–2003 the RWA went through a critical and particularly destabilising period wherein the CCB representatives had to reorient themselves to this new reality. The CCB found this difficult because it involved a cultural readjustment of their vision, the referent of which was their belief concerning what was the most appropriate enabling environment for the membership. This was a qualitatively different belief to that of the membership. Unlearning this vision and contemplating an alternative was a very demanding, traumatic process for the CCB. Nevertheless, after much intense dialogue the CCB did begin to accommodate the pressure for change from the membership.

Without doubt, the departure of Sister Lydia did mark the moment when the challenge to the CCB's vision could be undertaken, because she represented a 'disciplinary symbol' within the organisation. In her absence this restraining force was lifted and, despite the facilitative environment she had succeeded in developing in the early days, both management and members found it difficult to enter into dialogue in ways that enabled them to critically reappraise the direction in which the RWA was to be taken because not only was the emergent leadership without the disciplinary forces associated with Sister Lydia but so too was the RWA divided by competing visions of where the future lay – despite the management's attempts at isolating the membership from such influences. Sister Lydia's departure became the fissure from which a tense learning experience began.

> *Now [that Sister Lydia is gone] we just have to try and carry on with what she taught us, because we learned a lot from her and she also helped us financially.*
>
> CCB member's comment (Burman, 2004)

Almost paradoxically, the consistent belief promoted by Sister Lydia that confident, creative thinkers have a greater likelihood of successfully dealing with fresh challenges, appears to be the critical factor that held the RWA together at the moment of extreme stress.[4]

Conclusion

> *For the whole truth is known to none of us; we may have found out a new part of it, but we must not assume more.* (Julius K. Nyerere 1968)

Since the RWA's inception in 1992, Sekhukhuneland has almost continuously been in the grip of severe droughts, many jobs have been lost and state-sponsored development has been slow to deliver all that was promised in 1994. Despite these harsh realities, the RWA has achieved incredible accomplishments: the infant mortality rate has been reduced, women are confident that they can face their future independently and, perhaps most significantly, their home-grown learning strategies and knowledge sharing skills allow them the space to develop – and achieve – ambitions beyond the confines of their immediate realities. The RWA has managed to stand as a dynamic organisation, fostering learning, development and growth, both amongst its members as well as within the community.

One of the biggest stresses that the RWA management body has had to deal with was whether or not to stick to the original culture promoted within the organisation. The question of the most appropriate enabling environment for the membership emerged as a critical internal conflict within the RWA corpus. It heralded the difficult choice of whether to try and maintain the organisation as a controllable but rather closed community of practice, or whether to open its doors to outside influences. The former option was increasingly perceived by the members as management protectionism and dogmatic control, while the latter course held the risk of weakening the women's sense of identity and ownership over their projects as their ambitions diversified.

Ironically, it was precisely for fear of their strong organisational culture being disrupted by external stakeholders that made the CCB so wary of outside influences, but at the same time these influences fuelled the hearts and minds of the membership, enabling them to invent new opportunities for development, framed within a changing broader national idiom of development.

It has been argued that this destabilising moment erupted because the CCB had gradually become acculturated into the habit of asking closed, single-loop 'how' questions. Despite the vision of a self-strengthening Community of Practice, the CCB drew responses only from within the community, which at the same time it tried to restrain and control. This restricted the possibility for innovative responses and insights, and served to maintain and reinforce the culture and vision that the CCB believed would best serve the membership. Simultaneously, the experiential learning skills that emerged through participating in the facilitative environments and capacity development schemes provided by the CCB contributed towards the membership gaining the confidence that enabled them to ask more open, double-loop questions about where they imagined themselves in the future. The CCB found itself at a loss in terms of how to deal with this change.

By 2003, the developmental idiom of progress mediated by market-based strategies represented a preferential consensus within the RWA corpus and the CCB was forced to enter into dialogue with its members in order to accommodate this groundswell. Whilst the CCB still implicitly adhered to a belief that the membership should adapt

to its vision as it had done in the past, the membership had conceptually stepped beyond those parameters and was striving towards a qualitatively different ambition for the future, thereby undermining one cornerstone of the RWA's cultural foundations.

Despite the democratic, participatory foundations of the organisation, a moment of disarticulation surfaced between the membership and the CCB when a cultural divergence emerged in response to the question of '*where* are we going with the RWA?' Sister Lydia's departure from the RWA marked the moment whereby this reality had to be confronted. Overcoming this crisis almost destroyed the RWA and many of the socio-economical achievements they had developed over the previous decade. To the credit of the CCB, it did eventually respond to and accommodate the momentum for change that the membership demanded, but doing so was an unexpected, traumatic experience.

In this case study, the CCB – for a while – was frenetically focused on managing and sustaining a Community of Practice, inspired by the model imported by Sister Lydia. The CCB became overly focused on maintaining a particular vision of the *type* of community they felt was most likely to sustain the institution into the future, rather than dealing with the empirical demands of the membership and this internal contradiction temporarily jeopardised the gains made in the previous ten years.

Lave and Wenger's insights into Communities of Practice are useful in multiple ways but it is important to note that these insights were gleaned from master / apprentice relationships amongst a particular community, not necessarily replicable in other situations. The essential aspect of Lave and Wenger's data is that there was clear motivational alignment between the players with respect to the basis for their relationship and reasons to reproduce that relationship. As the RWA story serves to illustrate, there is no certainty that such clear alignment will be reproduced in other communities and so to objectify the model over an empirical reality is a risky developmental strategy.

Maintaining a model in this manner over the empirical demands of people involves a management strategy of power and discipline not compatible with creativity and open development. In this study, disciplinary forces were exploited in an attempt to limit the membership's home-grown creativity to within their intra-gardening group activities. This ultimately led to an inflexible management structure – one that became preoccupied with maintaining an imported, culturally biased model for development that temporarily ceased responding to the demands of its membership until faced with an unexpected cultural counter-flow that had been internalised by the membership.

This case study acts as a reminder that other peoples' knowledge generation is interdependent with biased, cultural influences and as such is an open-ended, dynamic process that may be respectfully inquired into, but can rarely be fully captured or controlled. An enabling culture for knowledge development can be fostered by focusing on people, while using models as an aid to development, rather than the foundation of development.[5]

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Abstract

In 1992, 43 women who considered themselves to be the 'poorest of the poor' began working together to grow food for themselves and their families, in a remote rural village called Apel (Limpopo Province, South Africa). By 2003, the original 43 had grown to a group of almost 3,500 women working together under a nationally registered, not-for-profit organisation known as the Rural Women's Association (RWA). The RWA now fosters a broad portfolio of activities, offering a sustainable livelihood to the women involved. This article presents a brief mapping of their journey, highlighting a moment of cultural change that jeopardised the gains made after a decade of community development, partially framed within a critical view of the Community of Practice model.

About the author

Chris Burman spent a number of years working in Africa in the tourist industry before attending the University of East Anglia to read Development Studies as a mature student. He recently completed a PhD with the Faculty of Management Sciences and Law at the University of the North, South Africa and is currently employed by the Development Training and Facilitation Institute (DevFTI) at the Turfloop Graduate School of Leadership, University of Limpopo, to coordinate their existing portfolio of community based outreach programs and to develop innovative grassroots programs for the future. DevFTI's primary geographical focus is Limpopo Province but the work of the department also extends into the broader SADC region.

Endnotes

[1] The RWA membership's sense of identity was particularly strong because Apel is just outside of the boundary for the Arabie-Olifants irrigation scheme. Discussions with the women indicate that they felt a strong sense of injustice at being excluded from the scheme – which simultaneously served to mark their identity against those included in the scheme (Burman, 2004: 408).

[2] The emergent market based strategies as the referent of development is a widely held consensus within South Africa – so it is fair to claim that the emergence of this grassroots idiom was generated by influences from within, as well as from without, the RWA membership.

[3] Further to this, a local Chief sided with the pro-market thinkers and nearly managed to expropriate the RWA achievements by promising his supporters that he would find new markets for their surplus, if they assisted him in taking control over the organisation's resources. The role of the Chief was perceived by the CCB as the source of the tension that had emerged within the organisation. It is likely that this emphasis was more symbolic than deserved, because the Chief could never have gained the power attributed to him by the CCB without the support (albeit tacit at times) from the membership. In fact, the support from the membership emerged through their preferred tendency to move the organisation towards a market-based strategy. In other words, the Chief's power came through the members' social consensus surrounding the market-based idiom of development, versus the CCB's belief that the Chief was the primary catalyst for change that underwrote the RWA split.

[4] During a return visit to Apel at the end of 2004, the ultimate resolution of the stress became evident. A small number of the CCB had split from the RWA corpus and have started a new organisation which will focus primarily on self-sufficiency, while the original RWA group will now move towards improving the livelihood capacities, mediated by the market-based idiom, of the broader membership.

[5] By way of a postscript: in 2003 the RWA was contracted by the University of the North's Development, Facilitation and Training Institute (DevFTI) to act as facilitators in a horizontal knowledge exchange scheme that was intended to generate development-related ideas for people in a community known as Mohlanatsi. The RWA responded to the challenge with extraordinary dexterity and professionalism. Considerable numbers of RWA personnel helped to facilitate a knowledge agitating experience that went beyond the expectations of the university. Rather than delve into this in any depth I would simply like to note that despite the trauma of the previous few years, the participating RWA-members were extremely dynamic facilitators and should be proud that they can now add the title of 'consultant' to their portfolio of livelihood activities.