Finding Voice

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Conclusion

Renovating Democracy: Voice and Resilience

The common elements running through each of the narratives and case studies in this book show that each intervention is based on the democratic values of human rights and equity. Further, the methodology throughout is dialogical, consultative, and designed to facilitate participants in recognizing their own voices. The idea that practice leads to understanding stems from a fundamental ethical principle that human beings have the capacity to realize their own potential. Each intervention described is aimed at encouraging individuals and their communities to believe in themselves and to take steps toward self-actualization. This approach requires individuals to constantly address conflict and difficulty and find ways to shift lethargy, despair, and denial.

Some of the insights that recur throughout the narratives reveal the significance of the values and capacities that emerge from integrating engaged, multimodal, and collaborative learning as viable methods for creating new knowledge. I have proposed that the processes that underpin arts-based community interventions can shape transformative possibilities of both individual and public creativity. Rike Sitas and Edgar Pieterse call cultural interventions that engage and organize public participation “democratic renovations.” This concept is an apt descriptor of culturally grounded developmental interventions, as it interrogates an understanding of democracy as a renewable and evolving practice. All arts-based interventions are complex, adaptive, experimental, and innovative and can deepen an understanding of self through its integration in democratic participation. Renovating the understanding of democracy links to the notion of a resilient system that continually updates itself in addressing the stresses that it faces. Indeed, resilience is a key theme
throughout this book, and its meaning can be understood through the metaphor of a journey.

The American Psychological Association aptly uses the metaphor of a river trip to describe resilience.

Think of resilience as similar to taking a raft trip down a river. On a river, you may encounter rapids, turns, slow water and shallows. As in life, the changes you experience affect you differently along the way. In traveling the river, it helps to have knowledge about it and past experience in dealing with it. Your journey should be guided by a plan, a strategy that you consider likely to work well for you. Perseverance and trust in your ability to work your way around boulders and other obstacles are important. You can gain courage and insight by successfully navigating your way through white water. Trusted companions who accompany you on the journey can be especially helpful for dealing with rapids, upstream currents and other difficult stretches of the river. You can climb out to rest alongside the river. But to get to the end of your journey, you need to get back in the raft and continue.²

The kinds of challenges encountered by the traveler on the journey reveal the importance of the processes of both navigation and negotiation. In this anecdote of the river trip, the path of the raft is strengthened when all its occupants are working together to navigate the currents and move forward in a positive way. In this respect, as evident in all the narratives in this book, the notion of working together goes further than just cooperation but confirms that our well-being and the well-being of others are integrally connected.

**Capacities for Renovating Democracy**

In reflecting on the various themes in this book—such as resilience, agency and purpose, hope and imagination—it is helpful to consider what Pieterse calls “sensibilities for practice.” Pieterse advocates five different sensibilities that are required to achieve “human flourishing.” He confirms the idea that it is the “way of being that counts.” He proposes that the development practitioner must be able to practice “code-switching” between knowledge systems, adopt a “multi-focal perspective” in reading the political situation, and employ “self-reflexivity” and “empirically informed and symbolically attuned” knowledge. Lastly, Pieterse emphasizes the importance of having “curiosity” about what is going on.³ I agree that the practice in pursuit of human flour-
ishing must be constructed as a meaningful dialogue that is not about finding truths but, rather, about constructing “a new grammar of thinking and doing development.”

The sensibilities that Pieterse identifies are capacities familiar to art-making practice, and the case studies presented here endorse this recognition of the value of complex systems. John Paul Lederach refers to the “moral imagination,” which echoes the recognition of interconnectedness, curiosity, creativity, and risk taking to develop the “human capacity to imagine and generate constructive processes that are rooted in the day-to-day challenges of violence and yet transcend these destructive patterns.” Systems that are emergent, dynamic, uncertain, and adaptive continually renew themselves through innovation. This way of becoming is generative in the quest of using the arts to “renovate democracy.” The arts contribute to social transformation and resilience because of their abilities to “code-switch” between multiple sensibilities. They provide the practitioner with the possibilities for multiple ways of seeing and reflecting, of generating curiosity, and of being what Pieterse calls “symbolically attuned.”

Such insights reveal a number of implications for development policy. It is necessary to redefine the way poverty is understood and to clarify the steps required to navigate new possibilities arising from this new understanding. The case studies in this book suggest that visual voices expressed through PhotoVoice, Paper Prayers art-making, and visual mapping, together with personal narratives, are tools to assist that process. Participatory, collaborative, and multimodal research practice is therefore effective as a methodology for action, assessment, and generating new knowledge. The interventions presented here offer a range of insights for participatory practice and the co-creation of knowledge with participants.

The overall challenges that confront any project are those of finding ways to listen and to integrate this knowledge in a nonprescriptive way. It is necessary to evolve fluid, creative, dialogical, and reflective intervention tools. In addition, it is important to discover ways of reclaiming such terms as empowerment and agency—overused and jargonized in the academy—both in the practice of development and in government and international NGO rhetoric. It is also essential to recognize that beneficiaries are not inert units within a collective and that this misconception is one of the primary reasons why development projects fail. An important antidote for it is the notion of imagining and making something that is not there appear and become possible.

I suggest that artists understand the importance of imagination and therefore can support others to visualize or dream an alternative future. In
this way, the capacity to aspire becomes key to sustainability in development projects. The creative process is generative rather than definitive. One can learn about organizations and transformative processes from art-making. An artist always acts in the absence of certainty and clarity, and profound possibilities emerge. A conversation by William Kentridge on drawing may extend this understanding:

What prods an imaginative leap?
I make a drawing for which you see a foundation or a ground . . . and the interest for me is not only the foundation or ground, but what it suggests.
I’m interested at the end, in arriving at one, even if it is an incorrect one . . . it’s in a way, a leap out of indeterminacy.
Indeterminacy suggests paralysis if you stay there. I’m interested in indeterminacy as a starting point but not an end point.  

Art-making also supports the process of integrating life skills. The Phumaní Paper groups were initiated as part of government’s promise for “a better life” for the poor. Ironically, participants demonstrated that the successes achieved from their groups occurred not simply as a result of promised government funding but despite those promises not being entirely fulfilled. This implies that the earlier paternalistic approach to relieving poverty through government funding, in which members received a monthly stipend, did little to encourage self-reliance. It appears that this situation is not unique to South Africa. Referring to a situation in India of “waiting for” government to deliver, Arjun Appadurai emphasizes the importance of hope.

We may say that hope in this context is the force that converts the passive condition of “waiting for” to the active condition of “waiting to”: waiting to move, waiting to claim full rights, waiting to make the next move in the process that will assure that the queue keeps moving and that the end of rainbow is not a broken promise.

I propose that art-making has inspired methodologies that were developed and tested in the various projects discussed and are able to convert this passive condition of “waiting for” into the agency of doing for oneself.

Alan Kaplan and Michael Quinn Patton (2011) take this concept further and propose that development contexts should be treated as a “living process,” which means that it is important to anticipate nonlinearity, surprise,
multidimensionality, and especially preexisting agency, as well as to “facilitate processes that are already in motion.” One of the core themes in each of the projects detailed in this book is the valuing of complex systems and chaos in order to provide a new language and an unfamiliar paradigm with which to approach engaged development. Art is a mode of knowledge that welcomes diversity and the unexpected. It allows for the interpretation of elements that do not fit into dominant theories or codes or a positivist perspective of the world. The methods explored in this book are “living processes”. They include participatory practice and dialogue, creative and art practice as alternative modes of knowledge making, assessment methods that use interactive and multimodal processes to engage and mobilize communities rather than measuring business efficiency, and the value of hope and imagination in transforming aspirations into goals for change. These methods support the argument that social transformation requires creativity in order to enhance agency and develop voice and that artists can add an important dimension to development practice that focuses on building resilience.

My approach involves incorporating these foundational principles and linking them to existing participatory community-based approaches that support the values of social justice. In discussing the limitations of fixed methodologies, I have proposed extending the accepted participatory action research and community-based methodologies by incorporating additional capacities and sensibilities that are particular to the arts. These can open the field through “giving voice and telling stories,” “creating new visions,” and inspiring imaginations that activate processes of becoming. Collaborative art-making can contribute additional capacities, such as respectful and responsive co-creation, experimentation and risk taking, complex metaphors and meaning making through story telling in various forms, awareness of aesthetics that lift representation to a new level, and the consideration of the presence of the other and co-creating visions and aspirations. These capacities can be achieved by offering convincing experiences that transform aspirations into practical and creative possibilities, celebrating commonalities and differences. The methods of development practice that incorporate artistic sensibilities have succeeded in nurturing and supporting individuals and communities and are revealed in the range of narratives and case studies presented here.

A fundamental purpose common across Artist Proof Studio (APS), Paper Prayers, and Phumani Paper projects is to give expression to the dreams and aspirations of participants who had been silenced or excluded from social empowerment. To understand creative expression of self, we need to be able to aspire to and dream of different possibilities for our future. Appadurai
stresses the value of “futurity” as a cultural capacity, in his recognition that “by bringing the future back in . . . we are surely in a better position to understand how people actually navigate their social spaces.” In this context, futurity is the ability to continually grow and change and is thus essentially about sustainability as a practical outcome of aspiration. Through this journey, we have found that sustainability requires citizens to take responsibility for their own futures through collaboration and co-creation. But key to enacting this is the way that the arts can assist to generate hopefulness. Ganz talks about hope as “audacious and substantial.” Hope also allows us to deal with problems creatively and is a gift we can give each other to make change.

The process of discovering voice through creative and narrative expression deepens the work of democracy and encourages people to participate in the civic and public arena through exhibitions, social actions, or markets, thereby creating their own economic and social engagement. The type of learning experience advocated here is multimodal and multidimensional. It not only enhances the quality of skills training but also deepens an understanding of each participant’s own strengths and agency in ways that expand each individual’s expressive voice.

The position I present throughout this book is that creative practice is a core component of self-actualization and is one of the fundamental purposes and outcomes of freedom and democracy. South Africa is a young democracy. It is pushing the limits and experiencing moments of chaos and threat. According to systems theory, this is an optimal time for change and adaptability, as long as communication and networks remain open and porous. The different stories presented here reveal various methods for internalizing and owning that agency as part of a sense of self. If meaningful change is to be sustained in order to achieve full expression of human rights and freedom, members of our society require complete participation in that freedom of expression.

As has been indicated previously, the idea of “developing the poor” is likely to fail because it starts with the wrong premise. While applying theoretical and mechanical developmental tools may introduce programs and opportunities, these are seldom sustained after the funding runs out, and many initiatives and organizations collapse. The government’s indicators of success are job creation, good business practice, efficiency, and profitability. I suggest that present definitions of successful development initiatives should be reevaluated. Rather, success should be measured in terms of survival and resilience. Specifically, I propose a change of the hierarchy of the goals of
development—that the focus on economic achievement as the primary or sole goal of a development intervention be replaced by the facilitation of empowerment through self-reliance, resilience, and agency. While an important part of achieving empowerment and resilience is through skills development, I believe that being able to embark on creative practice and aspiring toward change constitute more fundamental and long-lasting goals.

Artist Proof Studio, Paper Prayers, and Phumani Paper can offer development organizations lessons from their relative longevity. APS has survived and adapted itself since 1991, and the Paper Prayers and Phumani Paper programs have each operated for over 17 years. Despite inconsistency and instability in funding and, in many cases, having the odds of survival stacked against them, these organizations and projects have refused to collapse. As has been stated, when participatory and inclusive methods of art-making involve implicit recognition of shared humanity, creativity, and imagination, they offer alternative visions that accommodate mystery and spirituality—sensibilities that contribute to healing, empowerment, and self-esteem.

The Challenges of Transformative Citizenship

In pursuing the question of how development practitioners can arrive at renewed approaches to enhance democratic practice and civic agency, the concept of transformative citizenship can be helpful. This requires shifting the frame of reference from old ways of thinking to critical reassessment. According to Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, South Africans must deal with “stubborn ghosts that still haunt us” and undermine the attainment of our envisaged self: “To transform a racist, sexist and authoritarian culture into one that is aligned to the ideals of our national constitution entails a radical shift.”

This comment highlights the importance of our roles to remobilize ordinary citizens to participate actively, as agents in transformation. As citizens of a young democracy in South Africa, we all have the responsibility of stewardship. Educating for democracy is essential to help us toward a shared understanding of our Constitution. We can become agents of our own making.

I fear that the conflation of liberation politics with democratic practice poses a serious risk to our democracy. At present, South Africans seem to lack necessary courage, and the culture of fear seems to dominate the political and social fabric of our society. These fears are dominated by HIV/AIDS, poverty, crime, corruption, the devaluing of currency, xenophobia, and the credibility of a Zuma-led government (although there are many other vital issues that
Finding Voice

need to be dealt with in our society). Many South Africans seem to operate from a place of emptiness or scarcity rather than abundance. The case studies in this book have demonstrated how the visual arts have facilitated change in individuals, enabling them to overcome their fear (e.g., of HIV/AIDS) and to make positive choices (e.g., seeking counseling and testing). The problem that still needs to be addressed is whether, in the conditions of heightening inequalities and uncertainty, South Africa can remain on the path of transformation as a primary goal toward enhancing a democracy that would promote an ethos of inclusiveness, humanity, and freedom of expression.

Ramphele challenges:

The question each one of us must ask every day is whether we are giving the best we can to enable our society to transcend the present and become its envisaged self.¹⁴

As demonstrated in chapter 5 of the present study, the “measuring of impact of social change” remains a challenge. Agencies continue to fund short-term projects requiring measurable results. The academy continues to judge the quality of research on the basis that verifiable and scientific research procedures are being followed. I have argued for radical changes and innovation in assessment criteria and methodologies that embrace the co-creation approach to emergent complex systems. I maintain that these approaches promote values of agency and resilience to become priorities in community development practice. Arts-based approaches also support the notion of uncertainty and experimentation where not knowing can bring renewal and innovation.

In a political climate of intolerance and fear, the arts can be integrated to creatively and productively engage citizens to realize a future that productively engages democratic practice. Another recurrent theme in this book is the role of ubuntu as a pathway for resilience and changing practice to support communities, social justice, and sustainable lives. Complexity has been defined as those situations where uncertainty about what to do is high because knowledge is insufficient and because key stakeholders are in substantial conflict.¹⁵ Precisely this complexity of ubuntu as a way of humanizing can offer deeply rich and creative approaches for going forward. In a world in which our collective welfare is so integrally interconnected, the move toward models that recognize and support collective engagement in progressive change is important and timely.
Finding Voice in Stories

My conclusion to this book is intentionally open-ended. *Finding Voice* values the notion of voice as key to agency and the responsibility to act. I have used the mode of stories as a way to present case studies allowing different voices to be heard. In the introduction to this book, I presented a notion put forward by Marshall Ganz. In *Why Stories Matter*, he argues that when you do public work, you have a responsibility to offer a public account of who you are, why you do what you do, and where you hope to lead. Eve Annecke and Mark Swilling also highlight the value of storytelling and have found, as I have, that “the dialogical infrastructure” may be more reliable than “ticks in the log frame report.”

There are few countries in the world where the conditions for innovation and creativity are more favourable than those that exist in South Africa. It is easy to blame the inaction of others on the worsening plight of the poor, but as realism about the limits of state action sets in, there are more local initiatives that are grabbing the space and making it happen . . . Over time, these local initiatives will incubate new visions, new leaders, new networks and eventually new multi-class social movements that will simultaneously challenge and complement state action and articulate the linkages to similar processes elsewhere in the world . . .

At the centre of this activity will be our ability to tell and hear the stories of our changing times . . . An extraordinary and surprising South Africa is becoming increasingly visible as a vast array of stories are being told. The challenge will be to defend the space for these stories, or live with the consequence of codifying a single official story.

By retelling the stories of members of APS, Paper Prayers, Phumani Paper, and the community engagement projects of the University of Johannesburg, I hope that their visibility will generate spaces for many other stories and voices to emerge.