

#5 BASIC ORGANISING AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

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Page | 1

A good active citizen is an informed and organised citizen. Drawing from its work, Afesis-corplan concludes that if a community or group of citizens is not organised, it is far harder for that community to achieve the goal it has set itself. Having a community with at least some basic level of organisation is the base upon which development occurs. This learning brief aims to unpack the concept of 'basic organising' and calls on Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and others to put more emphasis on promoting basic organising as an important component of development.

'Organising' can be defined as the ability to get something done. It is an action word (a verb) that refers to the action of organising something. Organisation on the other hand is a noun referring to an entity or thing. The business dictionary¹ defines organisation as a social unit (an entity), a coming together of people in a structured way to pursue collective goals. Key words to note in this definition are *structure* and *common goal*. This is the bedrock in which all organised groups stand on, a clearly defined structure and well communicated and understood common goals. Once structured in this way, this group of people get something done.



History shows that human beings have a natural ability to self-organise. Self-organisation is a process in which some form of an organised order arises from interaction between people who were initially disorganised. This process is spontaneous, does not need any form of intervention, support or input from external agents.

When development organisations (including state actors) design and implement development interventions, they influence the self-organising process of human systems. Effective development interventions should ideally increase the coherence of human systems and decrease the unproductive conflict of incoherent and disruptive system-wide patterns.

¹ <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/organization.html>

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In its National Development Plan (2012), the South African Planning Commission advised that “the state must actively support and incentivise citizen engagement and citizens should ... work together with others in the community to advance development, resolve problems and raise the concerns of the voiceless and marginalised ...” But history shows that citizens have been able to actively pursue their common goals for centuries and millennia without any incentives from the state or other actors. What happened that brought us to this place, where the emergence of an active citizenry depends on state incentives?

The unresponsive, uncaring, callous, intolerant and aggressive manner in which the state has engaged its citizens over the years is something that has been written about in detail in South African literature. Many scholars attribute this attitude and behaviour of the state to the rise of protests in South Africa in the recent years. However, it cannot be true that government alone contributed to disorganising and disempowering citizens. The role of civil society has to be explored with greater detail as civil society had shifted from its intended role of acting as catalysts for development, ‘coming alongside’ communities in their struggles into a role in which they speak and act on behalf of and for communities. Their overpowering presence has tampered with the ability of people to self-organise.

How can we reverse this?



We argue that the notion of a 'learning organisation' or group is one worth pursuing as a corrective measure. A learning group is one “that facilitates the learning of its members and continuously transforms itself.”² A learning organisation or group in our view is one where the ability of the organising group to get something done improves over time; where one starts as an un-organised (or disorganised) group that over time becomes more organised³. A learning group is one that once it

² Pedler, M., Burgogyne, J. and Boydell, T. 1997. *The Learning Company: A strategy for sustainable development*. 2nd Ed. London; McGraw-Hill.

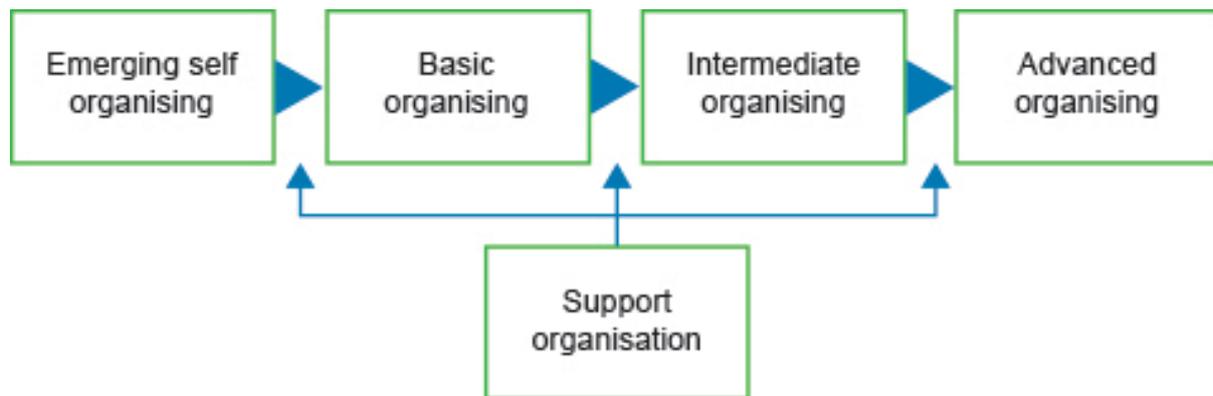
³ For an introduction to the concept of learning organisations see: <http://www.knowledge-management-tools.net/leadership-and-the-learning-organization.html>

starts to do something it has mechanisms in place to learn from this experience and modify and adapt subsequent interventions in a way that improves on what the group has done before. In order to facilitate learning, one needs to understand to some extent the environment within which they operate. The group also needs to have at least a broad vision of where it wants to move towards in future. This broad vision should provide guidance as to what the immediate next steps are that they need to take in moving towards this vision, and they need to be able to regularly reflect on and steer their ongoing actions in a way that helps the collective take the next step; always finding ways to improve how the group is moving forward. At some stage the group will need to be able to evaluate on a regular basis whether the broad vision is still relevant.

The concept of 'basic organising', within this broader concept of a learning organisation, is a concept that Afesis-corplan has been using within its work on incremental settlement.⁴ Incremental settlement is the process of incrementally (step by step) building human settlements over time. The concept of basic organisation was recognised as an important component alongside other elements of an incremental approach to settlement development that included basic planning, basic tenure, basic services and basic housing. However the concept of basic organisation or basic organising was not unpacked as much as these other basic elements were unpacked.

This learning brief starts to unpack and explore in more detail what the elements of basic organising are. How does one move from an emerging self organising group to a basic through intermediate to a more established or advanced organised group? (see diagram 1) What is the role of support organisations like Afesis-corplan in supporting communities to achieve a basic level of organisation and move along the incremental path towards becoming a more organised group?

Diagram 1: The organising path



Drawing from the work of Afesis-corplan the following are some of the issues that need to be considered when unpacking the concept of basic organisation.

In the more recent work of Afesis-corplan involving Civil Society Action Groups⁵ and work around land access, it has been noted that if the community is not organised it is hard for the community to:

- keep their leadership structures operating effectively;
- adequately get mandates from and report back to their members, and motivate members to continue to undertake savings or attend meetings or any other activities that members are expected to do to keep the organised group operating effectively;
- engage with the municipality and others who are able to help the group achieve its goals and objectives; and
- work with development support organisations like Afesis-corplan in trying to address their development needs.

⁴ see <http://www.incrementalsettlement.org.za/>

⁵ Civil Society Action Groups were part of a programme of Afesis-corplan where Afesis-corplan built the capacity of Community Based Organisations in particular communities to collaborate with each other so as to engage government so government could help them address their development needs.

The following provides a summary of most of the organising elements that Afesis-corplan has identified that needs to be in place for a group to be operating effectively.

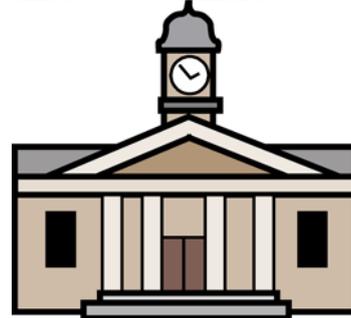
1. Organising to administer the affairs of the group involves establishing committees, keeping records, managing finances, making decisions and managing projects.



2. Organising to engage members involves calling meetings, getting mandates, reporting back to members, dealing with disputes between different members, and dealing with disputes between members and leadership.



3. Organising to engage government involves drawing on negotiation skills and relationship management skills.



4. Organising to get support and to work with others involves entering into and managing contracts, determining what topics or issues the group needs to find partners to work with, and knowing when and how to join and leave any partnership.



5. Organising to understand the content (of what one is organising around) involves understanding more about land and housing, local economic development, agricultural and rural development, or any other sector or topic that one is organising on.



Obstacles to successfully organising include the lack of motivation of members to continue with the organising due to failure to make progress in previous organising attempts; the group not having a clear common interest or focus to organise around; outsiders interfering in the affairs of the organisation and derailing the development efforts of the members; conflicts emerging as a result of power struggles and changing leadership over time; and the inability to access the necessary finance and other resources to pay for and undertake the necessary activities required to successfully organise.

There are however some opportunities that can be built on for successful organising. These include drawing in committed young people to help with the organising; drawing on the experience of older people who have been through organising initiatives in the past; and using emerging crises - where for example, the organising is breaking down - as an opportunity to pivot and make changes in the way that the organisation approaches future organising attempts.

Organisations like Afesis-corplan need to give more attention to the organisational capabilities of communities prior to engaging and supporting them in their development efforts. It is no use advising a community group to engage government around land and housing, for example, if that community has not yet achieved a basic level of organisational capacity to be able to keep its leadership structures in place and to engage with its members. In such instances more attention and resources may need to be directed towards getting the group to a basic level of organisation first.

Organised groups and the institutions that support these groups needs to conduct diagnostic analyses to determine where these group are falling short in relation to the organisational elements mentioned above. Attention then needs to be directed towards improving organisational capabilities within these areas.



This short learning brief has only touched the surface in unpacking what elements and features are needed in an organised group of people for them to be seen as having a basic level or organisational capabilities that enables them to solidly continue on the path of development. The concept of basic organising, as the foundation of a learning organisation, needs to be explored in more detail, drawing not only from existing literature and theory, but from practical experience of organisations working with communities on the ground.

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