

Talk less – listen more: the Community Foundation of the Western Cape re-learns the practice of listening to communities



Community
Development
Foundation
Western Cape
IT 618/2004
NPO 036 783
PBO 550 017 136

In 2016 CDF WCape went back to its roots. We reconnected with communities and started talking about real issues. We learned how to listen again– a practice we had “unlearned” when distracted by issues of organisational sustainability, staffing and grantmaking. CDF WCape is back. We have reclaimed the “listening space”. This is changing how we see our role and what we do.

Introduction

The Community Development Foundation Western Cape, South Africa, started working in 2008 with contested and broken communities –severely affected by the shadow and ghosts of Apartheid. Violence, rape, killings and hopelessness bore witness to their wounds. The Foundation gained entry by talking with communities to understand their problems. But over time we got distracted by organisational survival, the service delivery mindset and the myriad compliance issues faced by NPOs. Our ear was no longer close enough to the ground. We did not know enough about what was really going on to understand why communities behaved the way they did.

In March 2016, there was a massive outcry of rage and outpouring of giving, solidarity and talk radio discussion around the rape and killing of young women in the Western Cape. The Foundation had a rude awakening: we were not the first port of call for communities. In fact, we were nowhere to be seen. We were off the community radar!

In June to October, 2016 we went back to our roots to “re-learn” the discipline and practice of listening. We did this in four communities – a black township, a largely coloured formal settlement, a rural hamlet and an affluent and predominately white suburb.

Methods

Our approach was simple. We created “listening spaces” where ordinary people talked about “regular things”: the day to day issues that affect them. We listened with intention to understand rather than reply. Our job was to grasp their burning issues: what kept people awake at night; the issues they mobilised around and what action they want to take. Our goal was to share what they are going through. We went into these conversations without answers.

Implications /conclusions

Through listening the role of the Foundation is becoming clearer:

- Use convening power to surface and highlight local issues: create spaces and platforms
- Facilitate the community capacity to hold duty bearers to account
- Use convening and coordinating as a pathway to stimulate the community spirit of giving and self help
- Hold onto the role of facilitating conversations – don’t give it away to those (often gatekeepers) who assisted with entry. They should participate in the conversation but not lead it.

Findings/ Results

As people talked they discovered that they have the solutions themselves – the answers are within the community.

By listening we have learned about community dynamics:

- **Our starting assumptions were wrong:** violence, rape and personal security (what was reported in the media/ radio) were not the real worries of communities
- **Community issues are very present and public (normal) yet hidden and silent:** *“You can rape in the open and walk with your gun in full view – yet the community is behind closed doors. There is secretly, shame and fear for one’s life”. “The drug lord is in the community (out free) yet the community is in jail”*
- **What brings communities together is a concern for what divides them** (fear, racial tension, power struggles, gangsters in charge, domestic and sexual violence, mistrust, prejudice, corruption and collusion, substance abuse, poor or lack of service delivery, housing shortages and living conditions, unemployment, absent fathers) **and what can unite them** (sports, a cleaner environment, neighbourhood watch, silent protests, faith).
- **What gives community members strength in times of hardship is resilience:** women move from “from pain to purpose and power”. *“There is energy in the room” – “women affirm one another”.*
- **Communities filter their issues:** determining what to touch, when and what to best leave alone... at least for now. Communities create “stepping stones” to hope and a better future.
- **Communities adopt a holistic and systems approach to problems:** they recognise complexity, interconnected and multiple entry points.
- **Readiness and perceptions:** Community conversations in Constantia (the affluent predominantly white suburb) were unsuccessful. The key finding is that people are busy taking up social initiatives as individuals; they give money, time and talent and thus are “doing good”. Yet their actions are outward looking - they do this to benefit problems in other communities. Members of Constantia as individuals mobilise resources and in doing so engage in *philanthropy for community* (PfC). But what about *philanthropy of community* (PoC) – what are members of Constantia doing to address challenges within their own communities?
- **Collective vs Individual action** All communities have issues that can be addressed collectively through citizen engagement as opposed to individuals acting alone.

Talk less Listen more

By listening we have learned about action and entry points:

- National and government discussions are completely disconnected from what people struggle with where they live.
- Youth have had enough and are starting to convene.

- YouthBanks provide an opportunity for young people to engage in community philanthropy.: *“YouthBanks are an end in themselves and a means to an end”.*

By listening we are learning about good practice – what works:

- Listen more and talk less: refrain from jumping in
- Help communities find their own answers and solution merely through listening – bear witness to their struggles and their action.

- Watch for “sectors and silos” by looking for interconnectedness between issues and actors
- Continually learn about managing and navigating community gatekeepers: get an invitation to enter
- Pause more: give space and time, work to the community’s own rhythm
- Accept “false starts” - pull back and switch gear - learn to pivot like an entrepreneur
- Be visible on the ground so that people feel free to approach you and come to the office
- Shift and share power between CDF WCape and the community and within the Foundation
- Take time to chat – “have a cup of tea”
- Provide transport money it facilitates attendance and diverse voices

HOPE