REFLECTING ON RESEARCH PRACTICES AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY BENEFITS FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION PURPOSES IN THE EASTERN SEABOARD REGION OF SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

In this article we set out by problematising poverty, pointing out that poverty has been elaborately defined by people who do not find themselves in poverty situations. Given the complex and varied nature of poverty and socio-economic living conditions of people defined as indigenous and poor, we advocate for approaches that appreciate the complexities and are informed by extensive engagement with a studied people. We further debate the 'convenient connections' or 'myths of connectivity', which are conjured up and assumed to exist between poverty and indigenous communities – arguing that rural communities are not necessarily poor and indigenous in their cultural practices. We use the concept, indigenous community, with caution and are cognisant of the fact that not all the communities we have studied in the past fifteen years may necessarily define themselves as poor and rural, or essentially indigenous. Drawing out of this debate, the article discusses examples of various research projects within indigenous communities that brought forth varied results. Best research practices as well as practices that do not yield much success are discussed in the article.

Keywords: Sensitive research practices, indigenous community benefits, poverty complexities.

INTRODUCTION

Southern Africa is regarded as one of the poorest regions of the world. However, within the region, the popular image of South Africa is that of a distinct difference between the desperately poor and the rich, with the latter relishing in obscene prosperity. Concerned about the effects and misrepresentation of poverty, Nandy (2002) draws a sharp distinction between poverty and misery. She asserts that "(t)here is a basic distinction between poverty, which has always been with us, and destitution, which has become more pronounced only recently given the assault on traditional communities and their life-support system" (Nandy, 2002: 107). In line with Nandy's notion of the need to significantly make the lives of indigenous communities better, there has been an outcry about the need to conduct kinds of research that do not only benefit researchers but the communities within which research is conducted Makhubele (2008) and Agea *et al.* (2008). Nandy further notes that "the claims of economic development to wipe out the causes of these sufferings have been far from being kept … in the meantime, only new, modernized forms of poverty have been added to the old list" (Nandy, 2002: 111). She thus argues that reasons for the failure are mainly related to the societal structures.

Thus, conducting research in indigenous communities ought to be guided by such concerns and questions as the following:

- What do researchers need to and/or not do for benefits that go beyond those meant for their own research?

- Research practice ought to, where necessary, contribute towards making better the lives of the studied communities, some of which are in abject poverty.

The article seeks to make a contribution to the debate about research involving indigenous communities by offering insights derived from our experiences of researching on and working with Xhosa and Zulu speaking communities in the Eastern seaboard of South Africa. Without compromising ethical principles, it cites both successful and not-so-successful examples that indicate how poverty was dealt with in selected indigenous communities. Taking into consideration various paradigms that exist on what constitutes poverty, we pose a few related questions which seek to probe some definitions and implications of poverty i.e. what does poverty mean with respect to the existing reality versus constructed view. We further ask whether, given the meanings of poverty, is it possible to identify, with some degree of certainty, which community suffers the effects of poverty and what kind of research could best respond to such a challenge.

COMPLEXITIES INHERENT IN THE DEFINITIONS OF POVERTY

Poverty is defined differently depending on a variety of contexts and cultural settings. The manner in which poverty is defined by both researchers and intended beneficiaries of their research is essential at the beginning of any programmatic intervention or – form of research endeavour – if that intervention is to achieve or realise the desired or intended effect. Poverty is defined more often by those that do not live in poverty. It is uncommon to hear people who live in what is perceived as extreme poverty confidently defining their socio-economic condition in the manner that outsiders define them. To this end, we concern ourselves in this section with such questions as, for example: who informs what constitute? What perceptions exist and what informs those perceptions? Hence, what gets done in relation to what is defined as poverty is important in influencing the extent and manner in which appropriate authorities are able to deal with poverty; similarly, the same definition and ensuing understanding influence the extent and manner in which researchers are able to conduct appropriate studies in order to offer relevant insights.

A number of scholars (Chaudhuri, 1993; Homan, 1994; Mammo, 1999 and Ramutsindela, 2006) are of the view that the poverty discourse is more intensely a problem at the national or central government rather than personal or household level and is in particular attached to national figures that are specified in line with per capita income ratings. Such descriptions fail to take into consideration how a community that is made reference to define itself or prioritises as its needs in relation to set poverty standards. Decrying existing definitions of poverty, Chaudhuri (1993: 312) points out that "defining poverty in relation to income or what people consume is limited as these kinds of definitions are a norm that

does not necessarily take into cognisance local, cultural and other dynamics that may only apply". For instance, the use of the US dollar norm of $1 as poverty indicator assumes that everyone readily understands the value of the US dollar. In indigenous communities, the question to bear is: is poverty only defined along the lines of economic development? A clue to the manner in which indigenous communities are likely to benchmark poverty levels is found in oral texts, e.g. sayings and stories. The Nguni languages' use of the sayings *ikati lilala eziko* and *badla imbuya ngothi,* respectively meaning 'the cat uses the fire-place as its permanent sleeping place' and 'they use a stick to eat greens' are indicative of a kind of poverty that is related specifically to the food insecurity brought about by failure of a family to integrate with other people and make use of a community's communal values. It thus becomes essential for community development workers and/or researchers to pose questions that will determine the kind and level of poverty for which an intervention is required. This will in turn engender insights into any lessons that can be learnt from an indigenous community's daily living life-style as well as its oral texts. We thus argue against popular beliefs which propagate that poverty and means of alleviating it are linear and, in turn, call for much more involvement with an indigenous community which is studied or earmarked for development in order to alleviate poverty. When we, as researchers and community development workers, ignore the fact that poverty is not a linear phenomenon, it is evident that the frame of reference we use and have in mind does not put the indigenous community in the forefront? A question to pose is: whose interest is prioritised in philosophies of poverty that ignore realities and cultural lifestyles of an indigenous community?

Although we all make reference to the term 'poor', there are distinct meanings and understanding of who is poor. Reference must here be made to Ashis Nandy's study of developing societies and, specifically in that study, to an excerpt by a development expert from Guyana, who works for the United Nations, about the world's poorest region, sub-Saharan Africa. For an appreciation of distinct understandings of poverty, we provide a *verbatim* quotation from Nandy's paper entitled, 'The Beautiful, Expanding Future of Poverty: Popular Economics as a Psychological Defence':

> While I knew that I did not grow up in a 'rich' family, I never knew that I was very poor until I learned the definitions of poverty put forth by economists such as the World Bank. I got the same reaction from many agropastoralists with whom I worked in Africa. Local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have said the same thing: many communities did not know that they were poor until development agencies told them so. For more than fifty years, one of the main activities of the development enterprise has been to assess, analyse and make prescriptions to meet the needs (basic or otherwise) of those considered 'poor'. It was an enterprise stimulated by the Cold War.... Ever since US President Truman announced in 1949 that non-aligned countries were 'underdeveloped' and that the US would give them aid so that they can become more like America..., intense research in the name of development has flourished. Attention has been focussed on countries' deficiencies and needs; at the same time, the strengths, gifts and successful strategies of the 'poor' diminished in importance (Nandy, 2002: 116).

The above testimony, as well as evidence from the works of Chaudhuri, Homan, Mammo and Ramutsindela (Chaudhuri, 1993; Homan, 1994; Mammo, 1999 and Ramutsindela, 2006) demonstrate that a number of approaches fail to take into consideration that rural and indigenous communities have a different way of defining poverty which, in most cultural communities is not entirely tied to material essentials or monetary value. In addition to the preceding, Michelle Cocks (2006) study on indigenous peoples' biocultural diversity and Goran Hyden's (2007) reflections in an article entitled, 'Governance and Poverty Reduction in Africa' seem to indicate that, notwithstanding all the good intentions and number-less activities earmarked at alleviating poverty, the misconceptions and ensuing distorting related to the concept and/or understanding of poverty does not seem set for a decline. Failure is attributable to existing developmental philosophies which are, for all good intents and purposes, intended to be the basis of the effectiveness and relevance of the policies adopted to tackle poverty. Hence, appropriate formative past and existing attitudes including perceptions of what constitute poverty are crucial in being able to facilitate processes towards a better life for indigenous people. Pointing out gaps in current approaches, Chaudhuri (1993: 311) notes that "Governments throughout have remained particularly sensitive to the charge that their policies have done little for the poor or have made poverty worse, irrespective of how much or how little their policies helped the poor".

GAPS IN CURRENT APPROACHES

The above discussion has sought to elucidate the fact that the meaning of poverty and the manner in which it presents itself is more complex than what Socialat has been previously presented. Social intervention programmes in indigenous and developing communities had and continue to have serious shortcomings. On 4 November 2010, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) launched the United Nations Human Development Report in which it states that there has been a composite measure of country progress. Significantly, the report notes that progress is not entirely attached to income gains but is diverse, ranging from education, to gender and education. What is crucial about the report is acknowledgement that development cannot be explained with the employ of a common definition, and in particular highlights that poverty is multidimensional. Accordingly, poverty alleviation studies and interventions need to be cognisant of this factor as a phenomenon that exists at both global and country level.

Whilst on one hand, researchers approach communities on which they undertake research mainly for the purpose of collecting data and, ultimately, increase knowledge bases; on the other hand, it is essential to think about the actual concerns of indigenous communities. Most funders would, rightly so, insist on following certain stringent research protocols, but in reality researchers' experiences have been that a stipulated protocol seems to favour those who are in power, either as funders or researchers with intentions of publishing their work, get more funding and sustain their lives. Practices that transpire in the research field

seem to contradict reality on the ground. Although the UN Human Development Report (2010) accounts for progress in country development trends, the cited statistics does not reflect the status quo of indigenous communities.

Recent development evaluative studies by Grasso (2010) and Thomas (2010) point out failures in carrying out ethical evaluations. They maintain that processes that continue to implement faulty development activities are underway in developing countries – and specifically cite under-investing or under-allocation of resources in successful programmes as having a negative impact on intended beneficiaries. Grasso and Thomas' studies echo Nandy (2002) who decried failure of a series of developmental projects to decisively deal with poverty, dubbing it a myth from which many have not woken up. Concerns of almost a decade ago somehow persist as indicated in recent studies. They were expressed by Nandy thus:

> "the undying myth of development, that it will remove all poverty forever from all corners of the world, now lies shattered. It is surprising that so many people believed it for so many years with such admirable innocence. For even societies that have witnessed unprecedented prosperity during the last five decades, such as the United States of America, have not been able to exile either poverty or destitution from within their borders" (Nandy, 2002: 108).

Nandy's assertions call for a significant change. We argue, that change ought to start with a paradigm shift in the manner in which poverty is defined, understood and treated. Radical changes in research and development practices are necessary in order to realise a better life for indigenous poor communities.

It is clear that current approaches are not helping. Thus, partners – national government agencies, aid agencies and researchers – should not be shy to learn from more successful examples as well as from failure. It is thus essential for the partners in development to gather enough knowledge that will positively benefit targeted communities. In the next session of the article we discuss such examples.

RESEARCHING THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

We have found that researching indigenous communities is, though challenging, equally enlightening. The challenge lies in the fact that such communities are faced with a number of challenges due to their wounded histories on the political and economic front.

Although the communities we have engaged with over the years have never defined themselves as living in abject poverty, researching them does not only bring new insights and generate substantial knowledge base for our research, we have also found that they are a people that are extremely passionate and enthusiastically generous about sharing their knowledge. This attitude is an indication of the depth of richness that is ingrained within these communities. Nguni sayings, *unesandla esifudumele* or *banesandla esiphayo* which means and refers to a community that is not cast in 'poverty'. This is an outlook that we have found in most indigenous communities. Most people offer to help take us to

cultural, religious and historical sites relevant for our research, spend lengthy hours with us as information providers, seek information on our behalf and refer us to people regarded knowledgeable. (See Magwaza, 2004 and 2006 where reference is made to some of the projects in which Meyiwa (formerly Magwaza) was involved.)

In this article, we reflect on the practicalities that often go into our projects, that is, what and how we have over the years carried out our research assignments within indigenous communities. Attempt has often been made to ensure that a substantial amount of time goes into discussing and gaining common understanding of tasks to be carried out, search of various kinds of available literature (including non-academic), the daily life-patterns of an indigenous community, its socio-cultural structures and the cultures thereof. It thus becomes essential to dedicate time and set scheduled sessions with an intention of developing better insights into the culture of a studied community. This process is crucial as one of the endeavours in our research has been to capture not just the different voices and forms of expression of the community but efforts towards understanding processes and thought frameworks within which their stories occur. Such devotion, we hold, contribute in developing and presenting knowledge that is a fair representation of the data extrapolated from indigenous communities. More insight into the people and the event is gained both from the conversations we have had and active participation in community activities like cultural ceremonies and rituals. Such involvement yields varied materials from research projects, ranging from pictorial, video to audio recorded formats. These materials best feature the authentic voices of indigenous communities and have served as a base from which communities' descriptions are formulated. Such data is referred to by Magwaza (2006: 17) as a resource that demonstrates the manner in which an indigenous community "have 'written' and interpreted their history". It is to this end that we refer to the communities we study, and in particular the people who provide us research data, not simply as respondents or informants but as sources of information.

Prior to formally accessing an indigenous community, it is crucial to have meetings with a community – aimed at understanding who they are and how they refer to themselves. At this meeting, we would discuss main research plans and contingency activities. At the core of this practice is the aim of ensuring that we identify research gaps as well as explore forms of carrying out research that is mostly beneficial to the community. At the heart of this approach is an intention to go beyond just being 'active participants as qualitative research demands of researchers who engage in this kind of research' (Clifford and Marcus, 1985), but engage with an open mind both our research approach and main subject of the project.

To gain a better understanding of a community, we have endeavoured to engage with the community with open minds, accept all presented stories or interpretations and, for validation purposes later evaluate them against those that prove common. Considering that information changes as it gets passed on from one generation to the next, it is crucial to validate all collected data (Magwaza, 2006) and do so, cautious that indigenous knowledge is not to be handed down in stereotypical and unaltered forms from generation to generation. It is in this

vein that Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack (1987: 2) state that there is a need for a "realization that the interview is a linguistic, as well as a social and psychological, event, one that can be better understood by taking into account the specific characteristics and styles of the group and individuals studied". We have maintained that it is crucial to accommodate divergent interpretations to a single event or folk story. Further, we hold that as IK researchers it is important that we present, in written form, data interpretations as closely as possible to the manner in which they were verbally related to us. Magwaza, Seleti and Sithole (2006) argue that researchers need not make unprecedented efforts of trying to put the views and interpretation of respondents in a coherent and complementary manner. Notwithstanding the communal nature of indigenous communities and their popular views, and in line with these authors' advice, we assert that each source of information (respondent) and his or her views should be respected and consequently fore-grounded in the research discourse. Alfred Shultz in Mutena (2003: 84) 'identifies the individual actor as the starting point in any attempt to understand indigenous knowledge'.

SENSITIVE RESEARCH APPROACHES

Whilst cognisant of giving appropriate respect to individual sources of information, challenging that knowledge against our knowledge as researcher is equally important. This is a form of maintaining an open research mind. In this way, we affirm that a platform for generating new knowledge, which is inclusive and embracive of different thought frameworks, is necessary. This inclusive approach, which is sensitive, has a bias towards 'giving a forum to a people that have been silenced for long' (Blauner and Wellman, 1973: 38) as literature on indigenous communities is limited. However, it is essential to go into a community intending to learn in order to generate in this field, rather than to present and engage the people with existing written versions.

In our research we have also thrived to challenge the fact that there is a single methodology of gathering data from an indigenous people and are open to the fact that there may be other ways of gathering the data we collected and equally other interpretation models than the ones we adopt. However, whatever approach is adopted, we assert that it should first and foremost respect, consult, verify and work in close collaboration with indigenous people with an intention of presenting a research product that is representative and respectful of the people's stories and values. The indigenous people's own terms and definitions of what their life style is as well as what constitutes a respectful manner of presenting their stories ought to be prioritised. It is to this end that our data collection and presentation approaches strive not only to abide by this generic principle but ensures that the product presented to a wider readership has been authenticated with an indigenous community. Thus, it is crucial to dedicate a significant amount of time re-validating collected data, seek permission to use data including images and/or artefacts. We are confident that this is one form of putting an indigenous community at the centre of IK scholarship. Such an approach argues Magwaza (2006: 21), compels researchers "to shift our goals, change some of our planned actions and allow our sources to be in charge".

An approach adopted towards the interpretation and presentation of collected data is equally crucial in affording indigenous communities a sense of 'being in charge'. In our research practice we have strived that during interview sessions we are careful to get clarification on the details, meaning and implications of the information provided by our sources. This approach ensures that data is, first and foremost, interpreted with the sources before being recorded in the written form. This practice has formed the basis of our data collection practices and gets repeated at the end of interview sessions, during follow-up interview visits, at community wide data validation meeting sessions, as well as at individual and group validation sessions conducted with oral sources. We have found that suggestions received at both individual and group meeting sessions, provides an opportunity to revisit certain pieces of information, sites and individuals to further validate and collect more data. These processes demonstrate the value of constant involvement with indigenous communities in order to arrive at the best form of understanding their life and thus be better equipped to advance (with their consent and participation) programmes for their wellbeing.

Having reflected and cited favourable research methodologies, we acknowledge lessons learnt from research practices that did not produce a good result. In retrospect, it is through these projects that we derived maximum lessons that have led to engaging in practices that are more participatory and put indigenous communities at the heart of IK research. Two projects that failed were business projects, namely, bees and mushroom farming. Minimal consultation with the beneficiaries led to the failure as well as lack of a consideration of the socio-cultural make-up of the targeted communities. The products honey and mush-rooms were not only the least needed kinds of food within the communities, but markets earmarked for the products were equally unenthusiastic. Consequently, the said projects, in essence, failed to alleviate poverty that had been earlier identified by researchers and development workers.

Table 1: Correlations between worldview and subjects' willingness to receive services from helping practitioners, means and standard deviations.

Practitioner	Corr.	Mean	SD
Medical doctor	.06	4.45	.76
Massage therapist	.04	4.39	.84
Registered dietician	.06	4.02	.96
Reflexologist	.14*	3.77	1.02
Chiropractor	-.02	3.77	1.15
Clin./couns. Psychologist	.13*	3.69	1.03
Religious minister	-.06	3.60	1.29
Herbalist	.17*	3.46	1.12
Social worker	.07	3.41	1.11
Aromatherapist	.19*	3.26	1.14
Homeopath	.14*	3.18	1.12
Faith healer	.06	2.82	1.31
Acupuncturist	.03	2.60	1.30

CONCLUSION

The discussion of this article has sought to demonstrate that extensive consultation with indigenous communities is of vital importance in efforts of defining the nature and level of a social standing. A number of indigenous communities can still be regarded as a source for different knowledges despite their poverty status quo and impact of urbanization on their lives. Over time a number of scholars, from anthropologists to hard scientists and development workers have used indigenous communities as a resource for their work without a full understanding of their needs and ploughing back to the studied communities. Once 'harvested' the communities "have suffered, and still suffer, gross neglect in the areas of basic infrastructure and social support in the hands of successive governments" (Dasylva, 2006: 338).

The earlier discussion of the article lists sensitive and good practice within indigenous communities. From such practices some indigenous communities of the Eastern seaboard region benefited in tangible forms – as remunerated research assistants, photographers, data capturers as well as cultural and historical site guides.

One area to be explored by researchers is that of facilitating an easier life for indigenous communities. For example, they must be given their status and better means to access authorities and funders. The latter must develop a process of bringing to indigenous communities they work with, infrastructure that will maximise economic activities. This would help, as many indigenous communities are generally poor due to the fact that they reside in areas with poor roads and are therefore hard to trace as they often do not have easily identifiable physical addresses.

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