'Imali Nolwazi' ('we need money and knowledge)' –
a rallying cry from the South African Homeless Peoples Federation

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Abstract

This article tracks the history of the Victoria Mxenge Housing Project (1994-2013), from its start as a development organisation to its evolution into a social movement, then as a service provider and currently as an independent organisation. I discuss these developments against the political context in which there is rapid urbanisation in a country with a history of violent land dispossession. Post-apartheid, the state has built many houses, provided sanitation and electricity to thousands of poor people but it did not live up to the promises presented in the South African Constitution that was mapped out in 1994. Against this background, the article tells the story of poor, homeless African women in the Victoria Mxenge Project (VM), an affiliate of the South African Homeless People's Federation linked to International social movements such as Indian Slum dwellers International. The women, through a process of learning, acquired the skills to save, secure land, build more than 5000 houses and become leaders of a housing social movement which later became a service provider to the state. It describes the choices they faced in an ever-changing social movement caught up in a struggle to mobilise for land and housing. This story further explores the creative and critical role that radical adult education played in a development context. It illustrates how South African poor citizens learned through social activism and community development. It explores the current context in which the housing movement has become fractured and more radical organisations enter the struggle, Finally, it discusses the different and more complex interactions between social movements, NGOs and the state and how knowledge is produced in informal sites which can lead to social transformation.

Introduction

This article presents a historical account of the Victoria Mxenge (hereafter, VM) self-help housing project. The key themes of the journal are explored through practices and theories of organising around housing in the period dating 1994-2013. The Victoria Mxenge Project (VM), an affiliate of the South African Homeless People's Federation (Federation) is linked to International social movements such as Indian Slum Dwellers International (SDI). The VM women, through a process of learning, acquired the skills to save, secure land, build more than 5000 houses and become leaders of a housing social movement which later became a service provider to the state. In what follows, I describe the choices faced by women in an ever-changing social movement caught up in a struggle to mobilise for land and housing. The article is based upon research that took place over more than ten years from (1994-2013) when the author tracked the history of the VM Housing Project over four phases: from its start as a development organisation to its evolution into a social movement, then as a service provider and currently as an independent non-profit organisation The analysis here points out the nuances and limitations of social movements for social justice and helps to interrupt the sometimes naïve and romanticised ideas about what change is possible through such movements.

The VM story highlights the creative and critical role that radical adult education played in a development context in South Africa post-1994, after the election of a democratic government. I discuss VM's history and development against the political context of rapid urbanisation in a country with a history of violent land dispossession. The expectations of the South African black majority for redress in 1994 were tangible as demands were made by Pan African leaders to redistribute land without compensation and to end apartheid-style housing. It illustrates how poor citizens learn through social activism and community development in South Africa and why this is important. Post-apartheid, while the state has built many houses and provided sanitation and electricity to thousands, it did not live up to the promises presented in the South African Constitution that was mapped out in 1994. There were promises of one million houses to be built in the first years of democracy, and the release of land as well as financial assistance and technical support for social housing.

Figure 1

The author with some of the founders of the Victoria Mxenge Housing Project in 2014. (Left to right) Salma Ismail, Nokhangelani Roji, Veliswa Mbeki, Patricia Matolengwe and Nolulamile Nqnbeni.
Source: Author

The state has fallen far short of its own targets and not met the needs of poor communities. Bond (2000) and Greenberg (2004) argue that it is the macro-economic policy of redistribution through growth that is problematic. Others such as the leadership in social movements (Bolnick, 1993) say that a key reason is the exclusion of peoples' participation and ownership in the process.

1. Situating the case study

Characterised by waves of land hunger, dispossession (Natives Land Act of 1913 and Native Trust and Land Act of 1936), forced removals (Group Areas Act of 1950) and the growth of informal settlements, South Africa's history has led to poverty, inequity and a host of other socio-political and spatial problems. Women, in particular, suffered a lack of access to land, housing and finance, especially African women who were penalised under both apartheid and customary laws. Land and housing were allocated to families via male 'heads of households' and African women were considered minors under the law and therefore could not own property or access finances. This situation created racialized and gendered patterns of poverty and inequity (Ismail, 2015, 1-2). Under the national democratic government since 1994 there have been continuous reforms to land restitution and housing reform. Under new housing legislation African women can own land and houses and there is a housing subsidy to assist the poor. However, in 2019 the struggle to obtain land from the state to build houses for the poor persists and reflects the colonial and apartheid legacy of ghettoizing South Africa's poor.

2. Methodology

In 1994, I met Patricia Matolengwe, the leader of the VM project, who came as a student to my adult education class at the University of the Western Cape. Patricia wanted me to help her hone her facilitation skills in order for people to sign up for the savings scheme in the informal settlement known as Site C. During 1994, I went to Site C often and attended community meetings she set up. Since then, I was a regular visitor to the project and started to research the project as I was interested in how people learn in social movements and in new gender dynamics generated as women consciously took leadership roles and owned both the educational process and the building of houses.

Permission for my research was negotiated in an organisational meeting of about 100 women. I have worked in a principled way with great respect for the community throughout this time, hoping to have represented them accurately and truthfully. The names of individuals and of the organisations are used in this study with their permission. I have not used the names of those who sought confidentiality. I published a book (Ismail, 2015) and based my doctoral thesis on this project, both of which I shared with the women.

2.1 Research design

The research design was planned but I had to be flexible to accommodate the ever-changing situation. I had to be responsive to a community which was in a continuous process of change and learning; the women learnt from crisis and also in crisis, for example when there were floods, violence or political changes which destabilized the community (Ismail, 2009, p.282). The research methodology included a combination of in-depth qualitative, quantitative and archival research. The qualitative research includes 20 individual and five focus group interviews. I interviewed the leaders of: VM, Peoples Dialogue (PD) the supporting organisation, two sister organisations, the Landless Committee, a Coloured savings group and a leader of an NGO with a different approach to low cost housing as well as the technical advisors of Peoples' Dialogue (PD) and VM. I observed and recorded six public meetings, eight organisational meetings and made six on-site visits to observe the building of model houses and their own homes. I also video-recorded a mass meeting and a model house display. There were numerous informal conversations with VM members and casual visits over weekends to observe how the general VM community 'lives' (Ismail, 2009, p.282; 2015, p.130).

Quantitative data was gathered from a number of surveys conducted by PD and the Federation. This provided background information such as a socio-economic profile of the community in terms of employment, income, skill level, the number and quality of houses built, increase in membership, savings recorded, land gained and subsidies received. Archival documentation from PD and the Federation was studied to provide VM's historical background and to give an account of the organizations' development praxis, achievements, problems and solutions.

3. Theoretical and conceptual framework for analysis

The study used critical, feminist and Marxist critiques of popular education to explain the challenges, the impact and the contradictions which emerged in the VM project. The literature reviewed for this study was underpinned by Gramsci's (1971) theories of hegemony and the role of intellectuals in political struggle and Freire's (1983) concerns with the political role of education for social justice and transformation . The framework includes Marxist, feminist and critical social theorists (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997; Foley, 1999; Kane, 2005; Tarrow 1994; Thompson, 2000; Walters, 1998; Youngman, 2000) -- in particular those which analyse the micro-level of learning in a broader socio-political context.

Social movements in this case study are conceptualised as responses to the crisis in society which create new knowledge by questioning dominant assumptions. In this case the social movement's vision is based on a philosophy that poor people can build their own homes given their existing resources and skills. It is a bottom-up approach to development with a people-centred paradigm which is concerned with the overall improvement of people's lives and the ability to control resources and their lives. The movements' goals was to shift the state into a more favourable position and its concern is access to land, houses and basic services. The aims of popular education as inspired by Freire (1983) is to challenge

injustices and oppression. The analytic methods used are linked to democratic values, are participatory and start from the experiential knowledge of the learner. The focus on learning in the struggle for social good and transformation involves a process of analysing adult education that takes account of both macro (the state), organizational and micro-factors (institutional context) (Ismail, 2009, 282). Political opportunity occurs in the interaction between the macro, organisational and micro contexts, when spaces open up for collective action (Tarrow, 1994) (See Figure 2). Therefore the framework includes the interaction of the macro and organisational contexts and illustrates the complexity of learning and consciousness-raising. Because of South Africa's particular history of racial capitalism, other dimensions such as class, gender, race, socialisation and poverty, which determine the nature of social change, also required attention (Ismail, 2009; 2015).

Figure 2

Diagrammatic representation of the conceptual framework.Conceptual approach to analysing learning in social struggle, showing the interaction of the macro-context, organisational context and the micro-context.
Source: Author

3.1 Macro-context

The macro-context consists of the South African state, in the context of globalisation, and includes the national policy context. The housing policy of the state was framed in the political context of the Reconstruction and Development Programme and the Masakhane (self-help) campaign. The state favours a top down approach to the housing crisis and includes the poor through its campaign called Masakhane which argues that additional resources from poor people be gained to supplement the subsidy such as savings and people's labour, colloquially known as sweat equity. The housing subsidy is an entitlement under the law based on the Constitution. It is a once off payment about R16 000 ($160) to households earning less than R3500 per month ($30 exchange rate 2018) paid on a sliding scale in relation to income and has increased annually.

3.2 Institutional context

Peoples' Dialogue was a small non-governmental organisation, the staff was largely white and male and employed architects and technical support for The South African Homeless People's Federation (Federation). PD raises funds from external donors to provide technical support for the Federation, financial support for exchange meetings, bridging finance in lieu of government housing subsidies, and pays a stipend to Federation regional leaders. These funds are kept in the Utshani Fund (means grassroots). It does not receive money from the savings schemes. Any housing savings scheme can apply for a loan from the fund. A governing body firmly rooted in the Federation, the Ufundu Zufes, makes decisions on loans and determines the amount that can be borrowed. As was evident from the interviews, the relationships between PD staff and Federation members who are largely poor black women are complex with gender and race continuously impacting their evolution (see PD's philosophy is people –centred and the focus is on the empowerment of poor people, and is in favour of decentralised, self-managed modes of organisation. Their rationale to organise mainly poor women is that they constitute a majority of the poor, suffer additional burdens due to gendered hierarchies, like responsibility for childcare, and have a higher repayment rate on loans than men. Both the state and PD have poor women as their target and both applaud self-help. Thus self–help is the dominant ideology amongst the members of the movement.

Figure 3

View of the VM Housing Project from the Community Centre.
Source: Author

The Federation supports the formation of savings schemes and is based on the SDI model. The savings schemes are organised into an informal national federation of autonomous housing schemes. The Federation and PD formed an Alliance and is committed to using the formal political route to advocate for land and housing, and argues for a critical engagement with government. This distinguishes it from other social movements like the Landless Peoples Movement who use mass mobilisation strategies against the state to secure gains and resources.

The Federation formed part of an international social network with similar organisations such as the SDI based in India. The SDI was initiated from a network of pavement dwellers who formed a women's savings collective, Mahila Milan (Patel, 1996). The SDI and the PD planned and coordinated international links and exchanges between Mahila Milan and the VM women. These organisations believed that international exchanges were important horizontal learning events where poor women could build solidarity across continents and learn both technical and political knowledge from each other through a retelling of experiences. Through these activities, they learn how to mobilise poor communities and to pressurise governments for more resources (Bolnick, 1993).

3.3 The micro-context – VM project

VM is one of the flagship projects of the Federation and played a leading role in advocating for the Federation's approach to housing delivery which is people centred and people controlled. The development is not considered to be a project but a process, and learning is seen as the key towards empowerment. VM chose self-consciously to be a women's only organisation. Their shared experience of coming from rural areas and constantly fighting forced removals, a commonality that helped women form a tight knit community. They felt that men related differently to power and resolved conflict through violence.

The survey data gathered in 1993 of 133 households revealed that many of the families were supported by government grants, the majority of the VM community were unskilled, a small group were semi-skilled and only a minority were skilled. In the, 80 were headed by women and 57 women were employed as domestic workers.

4. First phase - An emerging social movement 1992-1998

Patricia Matolengwe who was the founding member of the VM project lived in Site C, an informal settlement in Khayelitsha. She and other women who had migrated from rural areas were constantly looking for ways to improve their housing needs. She had been active in the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) and in 1991 was chosen to go to a meeting as an ANC Women's League representative in Broederstroom, in what was then the province of Transvaal (now Gauteng). This meeting was facilitated by PD and SDI who presented their solution for the housing crisis in South Africa at this meeting.

On Patricia's return from the historic meeting, she was inspired to start a savings scheme along the lines presented by the Federation, the PD and the Indian SDI. At the beginning, eight, then 12 women joined Patricia in 1992 in Site C to start a savings scheme for housing which they named the Victoria Mxenge Housing Savings Scheme (VMHSS). They named it in honour of Victoria Mxenge, a Durban-based political activist and human rights lawyer who was assassinated on 5 August 1985, along with her husband Griffiths Mxenge. In 1992 they agreed that their umbrella body would be the PD and they joined the Federation as what they felt was a viable solution to their housing needs.

In the period between 1992 and 1998 the optimism of a new democracy combined with a state ideology of Masakhane (self-help), and PD's own versions of self-help provided the political opportunity to mobilise women. PD leadership acted as the catalyst to motivate poor women living in informal settlements to build houses, encouraged them to seek goals beyond housing, and to build a community and a social movement. Embedded within their vision was a learning community. The PD leadership believed that learning was the key to accessing social goods from the state.

Thus self-help ideology together with accountability and the discourse of responsibility (as mothers, caregivers and nurturers of the family) successfully mobilised VMs women. This is indicated by the amount of time, savings and labour (sweat equity-own labour) put in, the amount of commitment and trust developed, as well as the rate of payment and complete repayment of loans to PD.

The main vehicle in forming a learning community was through the practice of savings. Small groups of about twenty women formed a housing savings scheme, with individual members of the group having the responsibility to save any amount on a daily basis and one member being nominated to keep records which the women then scrutinised once a week. The savings were deposited with the regional federation bookkeeper. In this way, women learnt to save, to keep a records of their savings, and to trust the group effort. Veliswa (VM member) describes her understanding of savings in the following way:

> "Savings schemes collect people, and they collect resources, so when we negotiate with government we come with resources in our hands" (Focus group interview 1996).

In addition, the VM women successfully combined learning and a people-centred development philosophy to build a VM community. The Federation believed very strongly that learning needed to be supported; therefore training was done in a collective. Learning was a social process, and included knowledge which became a communal asset. Hence the slogan 'Power is money and knowledge'. The PD valued horizontal exchanges as it fostered direct learning experiences from peers as opposed to expert-driven methods of formal training.

One of the most valuable forms of learning for the VM women was learning from experience. Experiential learning included knowledge gained from traditional practices, schooling, political and life experiences. Valuing and combining their own knowledge with expert knowledge developed a sense of pride amongst the women. For example, in the first workshop with the architect from PD who understood that the women built their own

shelters or homes in the rural areas, and had some basic concept of a modern house. He would therefore start by demystifying the process of building it. Usually the collaborative process involved a practical exercise, in which the women were allowed to dream their imaginary house then brought these to life with cardboard models.

> We make the cardboard houses and then the technical adviser [the architect] improves them. After we designed these cardboard houses we cost them. We look at how much concrete would be needed, how much sand, cement and how many bricks needed. In terms of dividing the house, it was collective thinking; everybody had to say where we should have a kitchen, bedrooms and the lounge. People built according to the size of the family and the amount of money they have. (Focus group interview: Rose Maso and Nokhangelani Roji, 12 February 2001).

Thus, when they started the development process within another community, they started from people's experiences and did not undermine the significance of it as a methodology that 'builds people and communities'. Experience gained through development projects, but also through their previous and present political struggles and battles fought against the the apartheid government were all critical in the way that they related to government structures and outside agencies. They interacted with knowledge as a political weapon and used it as a way to challenge power structures and to transform their social conditions.

They also used personal knowledge of traditional gender patterns to their advantage, to persuade men to allow them to join the Federation as they argue that women were responsible for the home, Mama Rosa said:

> 'We are not born in Cape Town, we are from the Transkei, this makes us strong, as women from the rural areas are used to stand up on their own for their household and are used to plan for their household'. (Focus group interview: Rose Maso, 11 November 1996).

The VM women's initial practical motivations for their activism resulted in them taking up the housing issue in a strategic way. In the first phase, the process of learning to dream, save, keep records and then to build 135 houses gave women a sense of empowerment and confidence. Gains made during this phase, such as learning office management, building and buying skills, negotiating with government gave them a sense of pride.

Finally, the VM women learned from many exchanges within South Africa, and from the networks in India and Brazil. For these women there was a qualitative difference between learning from peers and formal training. As one member of the collective said, 'When you see ideas being put into practice by people as poor as you, it's powerful; you see possibilities that did not come from a textbook or an expert' (Asian Coalition for Housing Rights, 2000, p.6). Another impact of the transnational exchanges was that homelessness moved up in the international policy agenda and was represented by social movements on global platforms such as the United Nations. Through these methodologies VM women were able to access land and the housing subsidy, save for and design, cost and build their own homes; they became the innovators and advocators for an alternative development process which included poor people (Ismail, 2015).

Figure 4

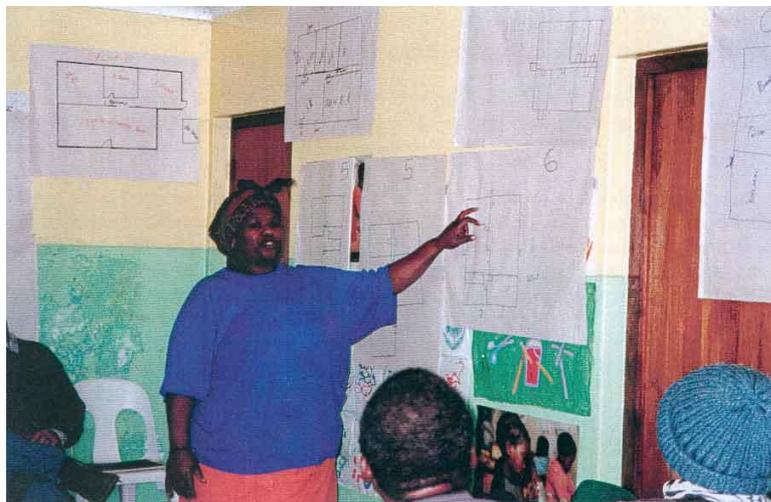'Building is an arduous task' says
this young woman.
Source: Author

Figure 5

Women digging the first
foundations.
Source: Author

Figure 6

VM women sharing their
house designs.
Source: Author

5. Second Phase – a social movement 1998-2001

In 1998, the state had moved from a policy of reconstruction and development to a macro-economic policy, which favoured development through growth and sought to deal with poverty through a pro-poor policy, named (GEAR). On the one hand the state passed legislation, which promised various entitlements but on the other hand it embarked on privatising basic services, not increasing employment and obfuscating the issue of the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS pandemic. In such a situation, the state became a fulcrum for its citizens to seize a political opportunity and to advance their claims.

During the period 1998 to 2001, PD leadership built on the success of the VM model. The VM women were confident, in powerful leadership positions at both national and regional levels, were working closely with PD and were put forward as leaders in the housing movement. The VM women became, in Gramsci's term, organic intellectuals, who were 'spreading the word' (Federation slogan) by playing a leading role in counter consciousness and engaging in social movement activism. This activity entailed mobilising poor people to form saving groups, taking the savings groups through the development process, organising model house displays and mass meetings, lobbying for more resources from the state and advocating for a people-centred approach to development. VM invited state officials to new housing developments so that the state can witness their achievements and to secure more resources from the state. In this period VM women were the advocators and adult educators for the Western Cape Federation and helped build more than 5000 houses. As adult educators, they taught in the same way as they had learnt. The quote below from a sister organisation illustrates their influence on the surrounding communities:

> 'We used to come to VM every day, for support and advice and to learn about building houses. From the meetings we got to know one another, how to come together, how to raise ideas, what are the best available systems to build our savings scheme. All those discussions are built from people's ideas.' (Individual interview: Leader of sister savings group, anonymous, 19 December 2001)

A Federation member said that the emphasis in the learning process was on sharing, seeing what others could do and copying and gaining confidence from that. She said that she learned every step from the VM women and passed this knowledge onto her group (Individual interview: Leader of sister savings group, Lizzie Mgedezi, 17 May 2001). These statements illustrate the supportive relationships that VM women formed with other savings groups and that these relationships enabled the transfer of knowledge for development and learning in social movements, which extended beyond housing to 'building people and communities' (Federation slogan).

Figure 7

Patricia Matolengwe on street
named after her.
Source: Author

6. Third phase - an NGO and service provider 2001-2003

In this period the effects and dissatisfaction with the slow pace of delivery from the state led to a number of land invasions. People began to express concern about the temporality of the Alliance's self–help model and to ask for entitlements such as subsidies. These factors put pressure on PD to change its relationship to the state from critical engagement to a partnership model as developer.

The terms of the partnership were that PD would provide bridging funds (proxy subsidies) from the Utshani fund to its members in lieu of the subsidy, oversee the subsidy application process and the construction of houses. PD rationalised that in the process of 'scaling up' (increasing its operation) it has to hasten the process of development and looked to VM as a model of good practice to take a lead role in this expansive vision. The VM women were very self-confident, they owned their homes, were experienced in working with communities, and served in regional and national leadership positions.

During this period PD worked like many emerging contractors, managing the development process by using building teams, mostly men trained by the Federation. Fewer members participated in the actual building process, design and subsidy application process, therefore the learning, knowledge and skills gained were not as evenly spread as before, causing frustration. There were instances where VM women were criticised for 'behaving like bosses' (Field notes: Federation members, 2001) and not having the time and capacity to train others, or their teaching methods came under scrutiny. A member from a sister savings scheme who assisted in the VM regional office expressed her disillusionment in this way:

 'Mxenge (i.e., VM) were the first one, they would like to own everybody. The way that they preach the gospel of Federation is not the way they act. They are not implementing what they are preaching. They have become very possessive' (Individual interview: Leader of sister savings group, anonymous, 19 December 2001).

She complained that leadership were not upholding their principles of rotation and finding it difficult to give up their positions of power. Cleavages between the PD leadership and the VM women were beginning to surface and PD criticised the VM leaders because of their leadership style. VM women felt that they had worked hard for many years and did not want to give up their leadership positions as this was a source of income. There were also concerns about the mismanagement of funds and nepotism.

Learning became more formalised through workshops and young members participated if the learning led to certification. In addition, PD's professional intervention was undermined in the move to 'scale up' as professionals required faster movement on the ground. However, it was difficult to 'scale up' with speed as most members learnt mainly through informal processes, which required time and dialogue. Thus, the technical experts were faced with a difficult dilemma: how to build learning communities who were self-aware and self–reliant while scaling up. The changed pedagogical practices undermined ownership of the process and the impact on the institutional context was that Federation membership had less confidence in the knowledge gained through this process.

Whereas the Federation's initial vehicle to gather people was to save for housing, this changed to saving to repay loans to the Utshani Fund. PD, which had provided proxy subsidies for the state, had to close down due to bankruptcy. The state was the PD's biggest debtor, owing them R32 billion. The partnership was therefore ineffective as it did not deliver on its promises, and its inefficiency actively undermined PD's work. The objectives enshrined in PD's partnership with government were barely realised and the Federation slowly began to let go of their empowerment goals, becoming instead deliverers of services and subsumed into the state's bureaucratic processes. As SDI had previously pointed out as a potential danger, the government saw PD and VM as a conduit for state provision of houses and subsidies but did not honour its social contract, making the agreement counterproductive for the VM women and the PD leadership (Ismail, 2015, 105-107).

This changing relationship between PD and the VM women and the discontent of the members gave PD the opportunity to restructure the organisation.

7. Fourth Phase – an independent organisation 2003-2018

Following a struggle for greater autonomy from PD and SDI, Patricia and another leader registered the Federation in 2005 as a non-profit Section 21 company with a new structure. This act led to a split in the Federation into two organisations in 2006 (Huchzermeyer, 2011; Podlashuc, 2011; Individual Interviews: Patricia Matolengwe and Veliswa Mbeki, 12 October 2011): The Federation for the Urban Poor and the South African Homeless People's Federation After this rupture, the VM women who were left with a small group of savings schemes kept the old name—the South African Homeless People's Federation (the Federation) and used some of the same strategies as the old Federation to obtain land and houses. The Federation for the Urban Poor used the acronym FEDUP to signal that it had embarked on a more radical programme of gaining basic services.

The Federation also split up because of accusations against the VM leadership mentioned before, which included mismanagement of the Utshani Fund, a lack of transparency, authoritarianism and the formation of the Section 21 company which gave VM more independence and allowed them to use any profit towards salaries and expenses. The VM leadership of the new Federation lost all access to funding from the Utshani Fund and external donors, and used their savings to continue their work. They also lost access to professional technical support and relied on their prior experience and knowledge to continue to collect people and to build houses and communities. The Landless People's Movement remained with the Federation.

I asked the VM women what effect these new developments have had on them. Each said emphatically that their biggest gains have been in forming their own organisation and having their independence: 'We can follow our own direction and have moved from dependence to independence' and Patricia added that 'we operate with nothing except the heart'. (Individual interview: Patricia Matolengwe, 12 October 2011). Podlaschu (2011, p. 27) confirms this view and added that because they were democratically elected, they were also more responsive to community needs.

After the PD closed down, its director joined the SDI-affiliated Community Organisation Resource Centre (CORC), which took over support functions and maintained strong relationships with FEDUP. FEDUP formed strong links with the state, with the support of NGOs such as SDI and the CORC. As before, FEDUP tried to lever promises of subsidies and land from the state for its members. The solutions they presented followed much the same approach as the standard SDI and Federation alternatives, namely enumerations, savings, engaging government to release subsidies and land, and fighting for security of tenure (Huchzermeyer, 2011, 184–6).

The new Federation had to re-establish themselves, as the leadership's good reputation had been tarnished because of the scandals over financial mismanagement. Their standing for delivery was also in question as they did not have the same access to technical support as they had had previously when they were in partnership with the PD. The Federation's system of collecting people had also changed. Previously, the members were organised through savings. Now, the new membership still practised savings but they had to pay an annual

Figure 8

Women march through the community to advocate for their model of development in Imizamo Yethu.
Source: Author

membership fee of R100. In exchange, members received assistance with securing land, subsidies and the building of houses. Private providers drew up the housing plans for a fee.

To add further to the complexity and divisions within the housing movement was the changed process in applying for subsidies. NPOs, NGOs, municipalities, contractors and other civil organisations could all offer housing delivery and compete for contracts with local and provincial governments. So now it was not just the two Federations which were in competition for state funding but to compound the problem the law changed to accommodate more housing developers to apply for state housing subsidies. This meant, in effect, that the state was successful in splitting the housing movement (Ismail, 2015).

Another more radical organisation, Abahlali baseMjondolo, which represented the homeless from some of the informal settlements in KwaZulu-Natal, formed a branch in the Western Cape. Their oppositional politics and rights-based approach, which demands that the state take full responsibility for delivering services for in situ upgrading (adding better services in the informal settlements, upgrading the shacks were preferred to formal housing), were not welcomed by either the Federation or FEDUP, as they were seen 'as just sitting and protesting and not doing anything for themselves' (Individual Interview: Patricia Matolengwe, 12 October 2011). This statement indicates how deeply ingrained the philosophy of self-help and self-reliance was in the Federation.

Also, in situ upgrading meant a loss of membership for both the Federation and FEDUP, which used membership numbers to argue for resources from the state, and the Federation used membership fees to pay for overhead costs. Together with these changes were the ongoing protests for housing from backyard shack dwellers (people renting shacks in backyards) and those on the waiting list, as well as rising unemployment, increased migration to the cities, the slow release of land, and widespread corruption in state institutions. These unresolved issues heighten the tensions between organisations and the government.

The VM women outlined some of these tensions and assessed how these impacts on their vision and struggle for a sustainable livelihood. Specifically, they had become disillusioned with the two recent Ministers of Housing who they felt had spent an endless amount of time in office revising policy instead of taking action. As a result, their support for the ANC and the ANCWL also waivered. The women also complained that the state's policies restricted them as they had to follow the housing plans set out by the state and they could no longer 'dream their own houses'. What's more, without the PD's technical support, they had to constantly prove to the state that they were capable of housing delivery. They said that when the PD supported them, this had brought them status and racialized forms of respectability (as they inferred this was partly because the PD staff were mainly white and professional) and gave local developers and the state more confidence that they would complete the housing projects. They had to work much harder now to convince government to give them contracts (Individual Interviews: Veliswa Mbeki and Patricia Matolengwe, 12 October 2011). A critical step in this direction was in 2007 when they built 136 houses in Site C helping them re-establish links with housing authorities (Podlashuc, 2011, 26–7). The VM women have turned their attention once more to organising housing for the homeless

and disabled people. The latter required that they learn how to design and build different toilets, ramps and doors. In 2011, the Federation won a contract to build 71 houses for the disabled (Ismail, 2015).

Against this background new urban housing organisations enter this struggle in Cape Town since 2015. One example is Ndifuna Ukwazi, an NGO and activist organisation and law centre that brings together movement building and research and litigation campaigns to advance land justice in Cape Town. It acts as a supportive organisation for Reclaim the City, a social movement of tenants and workers struggling for access to land and affordable housing, who believe it is time to take on powerful landlords and the city. With the slogan 'land for people not for profit'**,** their activism is directed to fight against evictions in urban areas close to the city centre, against gentrification and for affordable social houses in the city and in formerly white areas. They argue that this will also narrow the racial divide and change the apartheid racial arrangements of housing in the inner city and along the coastline.

The Reclaim the City movement, Ndifuna Ukwazi and the Social Justice Coalition have linked up to provide solidarity to one another's struggles but so far have not joined the informal housing sector such as the Federation and Fed Up. This is similar to the land and urban struggles in Brazil where the Landless Peoples' Movement and the urban struggles have not joined forces. This points to the weakness of issue based politics – where each movement is narrowly focussed on its own problems and when the issue is won then the movement starts to dissipate. One exception is The Housing Assembly, an organisation with a leftist ideology which tries to link up the urban, informal as well as immigrant communities' housing struggles. These new urban organisations are not interested in a self-help approach to the housing question. Instead, they organise against the state using anti-apartheid modes of protest such as marches, sit-ins, engaging with the Rates Payers Associations which are voluntary organisations representing the interests of residents living in the area, as well as using the courts to ensure their constitutional rights.

8. Discussion

In seeking to understand whether popular education and social movement activism could alleviate poverty and contribute to social change, responses from this study provide some important insights. In the first two phases, VM used the political opportunity provided by spaces which opened post-apartheid for social action. In this period, various conceptualisations of agency facilitated the attainment of social goods and led to forms of empowerment in the home and community. Popular education also made significant inroads to change poor women's living conditions. However, in the third phase they were not able to sustain the movement towards the eventual goal of independent and self-reliant communities (Ismail. 2009).

Arguments put forward by Bond (2000) for this failure are that no structural analysis of poverty, or history, or gender is mad by the leadership of social movements and there is no reconfiguration of power and structures. Therefore the leaders of social movements have an inadequate understanding of the barriers facing these social movements, and social

movements become limited vehicles for change. Third World postcolonial feminists Alexander and Mohanty (1997) develop this argument further and argue that geography, genealogy and colonial histories are important factors which impact on agency and interpersonal relationships. This is reflected in the growing disjuncture between VM women and PD staff and in VM women's changing conceptualisation of their agency and identity as 'rural', mother, citizen, global actor and urban homeowner.

Kane (2005), who has sought to analyse learning and education practices in the Brazilian landless movement (MST), concludes that the work of education was powerful because it was tied to tangible benefits like a plot of land, which led to questioning wider political realities and increased the motivation to learn. Theorists Youngman (2000) and Thompson (2000) argued that education practice was but one factor contributing towards change and Walters highlights the tension of using education as a strategy for political change, concluding that popular education can mobilize people to act but cannot change society, 'this contradiction is at the heart of radical educational practice' (Walters, 1989, p. 294).

The strategies of self-reliance and savings to mobilise women for development have also come under scrutiny. Feminist critics (e.g. Dolhinow, 2005) argue that in this development paradigm women bear the brunt of development by taking on greater responsibility for basic needs and that these elements reinforce dominant ideologies. Sonia Alvarez (cited in Foley, 1999, 88–108) concludes from her study of Brazilian women organisations that there was no automatic relationship between changes in women's consciousness and political change. She argues that although these movements interacted in complex ways with micro-political factors, such as male domination, they had very little impact on changing patriarchal values and domination.

The VM case supports these feminist arguments and illustrates that under certain political, contextual and conditions, Popular Education work can have powerful effects, or those conditions can inhibit its capacity to be powerful. In the VM case study, the women did analyse their oppressive situation and challenged some oppressive structures such as male ownership of the homes which they built. The choices women made in these instances may be strategic and not based on their level of conscientization (Ismail, 2015). The VM study challenges the theory of praxis (Gramsci and Freire) and questions whether knowledge, understanding and critical consciousness are sufficient for social change. Gramsci emphasised theoretical study which would allow for deepening political analysis. Theoretical study was minimal in the Federation and the VM women had evolved their own version of praxis.

Conclusion

The response of the VM women to the housing crises has gone through many iterations with the state: from critical engagement to partnership to becoming an independent housing contractor, and they have shown time and time again that they can learn and build capacity to carry out development. VM women built 165 houses in the VM community and another 5000 in other communities in the first two phases and another 136 houses as well as 71

houses for the disabled in the fourth phase. The houses were of better quality and larger than the states' low cost houses and built within the subsidy amount. They secured land for themselves and other communities, learnt a number of building and political skills, laid the foundation for a secure community.

The state, however, has not shared their vision. In fact, the ineffective state has fragmented the housing movement and betrayed its promises to the poor. The state's policy and the framing of the development paradigm has forced social movements into competing for resources, and to not seek other alternatives which would allow for more inclusionary approaches. Mitlin and Mogaladi (2013) support this argument and argue that both the state and the alternatives raised by social movements are constrained by the present policy frameworks 'which are underpinned by modernisation of the market', meaning dismantling outdated forms of economic structures, reshaping the economy that permit capital flows and technological advances (Greenberg, 2004, p. 2). In thinking about future resistances, solidarity action to raise consciousness against housing commodification holds the possibility of a new vision for both the social movements in the informal settlements and current urban housing social movements.

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