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Youth leadership development in South Africa – are we stuck? A funder's perspective

by Janet Jobson

The DG Murray Trust is an independent, South African grant making foundation committed to developing the potential of people in South Africa. In January 2011, we embarked on a new funding strategy that included a specific focus on strengthening youth leadership as a strategy for developing a winning nation. Our understanding was that youth leadership development in South Africa has - historically - largely taken the form of elite programmes, which would spot talent in bright high school and university students or young professionals and seek to develop and direct these individuals. But, we were also aware that there have been many peer education and lifeskills programmes that, alongside a primary focus on skills, have tried to build leadership in the young people with which they work. As we entered the field, we asked how we could define a new space between these two approaches. Our vision was to develop a new national cohort of entrepreneurial young leaders committed to public innovation – a process of continuing improvement of policies, programmes, systems and institutions for public benefit. So, we sought to fund leadership development programmes that specifically supported and positioned young people as drivers of effective and innovative social change, rather than simply as a process of personal development.

What shaped our thinking?

One of the core theorists we engaged with in trying to carve our path, was Otto Scharmer. In a presentation to the World Bank, Scharmer asked: "How are the new generations of leaders in government, business, and civil society being prepared to deal with the profound economic, environmental and social disruptions of our time?"

What resources and connections will help them, when thrown into the eye of the storm, to respond in innovative ways rather than resorting to the reactive responses of the past?¹ In his diagnosis, one of the critical failures of traditional leadership development approaches has been their limited ability to build capacity for innovation. If we understand the social challenges of our time as complex, with multiple causes, symptoms and manifestations, then core to leading change must be the ability to deal with that complexity – something that requires collective, rather than singular leadership. He argues, "at the root of holding on to the outdated models of leadership development is the single-person-centric concept of leadership. Yet real leadership always takes place through collective, systemic, and distributed action."²

So what does this mean for South Africa's youth leadership development sector? In our interpretation, it requires a fundamental shift away from the primary intervention being a training programme that focusses primarily on the personal development of individuals. We began looking beyond the once-off camp-based programmes, beyond the 'filling a gap' (skills building) approach, and we began seeking new ways of connecting people across complex systems, strengthening relationships and building collective action. We, therefore, began to emphasize leadership as inherently focused on action, rather than simply personal development. But, we also knew that we needed to learn from organisations and to

¹ Scharmer, O. (2009). "Leadership development is not about filling a gap but about igniting a field of inspired connection and action: Ten propositions on transforming the current leadership development paradigm." Presentation to the Round Table Meeting on Leadership for Development Impact, The World Bank Institute, Sept 27-28 2009

² *ibid*

understand fully what work was already being done in this area. So we set out to bring our perspective to the table, while walking journeys of discovery with our partners.

This learning brief will unpack what we've learnt over the past three years on this journey. We ask whether the youth leadership development sector in South Africa is somewhat stuck – and whether a new clarity of vision and purpose is needed if young people in South Africa are to be supported to drive social change.



What have we learnt?

What stood out for us about the programmes that we gradually became aware of, was that very many tended to have the following features: i) they provide some kind of training, ii) the young people that they target need to run a community service project, and iii) they provide some form of follow-up support (which could be further training and mentoring) and, in some cases, tracking of the young people that they've previously worked with. In short, these programmes tended to focus on delivering an "experience" that – it was hoped – would translate into some form of (sustainable) action by young people.

We found it difficult to decide on whom to fund and, in differentiating between programmes, we gravitated towards particular methodologies: experiential rather than didactic training, a focus on engaging with young people's identity rather than only hard- or soft-skills, ongoing rather than once-off interventions. We were also interested in supporting innovations within existing programmes, such as: developing alumni spaces, improving monitoring and evaluation, and testing models. We noted that many organisations were using similar approaches, and we wondered whether this meant that the perfect ingredients had been found, or whether the sector was stuck and struggling to develop innovative or new ways of building young people as drivers of change.

As we began to engage with organisations, what struck us was that there was little clarity on the actual theory of change behind their

approaches. As a result, we noted that programmes struggled to clearly identify the mechanics of what they were doing and were unable to link their programme activities to some of their intended outcomes. Although many stated a key objective as developing young people's capacities to lead social change in the world, most programme activities tended to be focused towards developing internal aspects of participants such as resilience, social capital and problem-solving capacity. There was, therefore, an underlying assumption that these were the

qualities required to start or support social action projects in communities. We thought that few organisations were able to easily connect their activities to sustained, innovative and audacious youth-led responses to critical social issues.

How was our funding strategy affected?

The predominance of a training-based approach seemed to us to have limited the ability of the sector to imagine alternate ways of supporting the emergence of a powerful generation of leaders for the public good. And perhaps, entirely unintentionally, it meant that the sector was approaching young people as if they were in deficit – falling into the trap of trying to 'fill the gap' rather than supporting or igniting connections and action that show just how powerful young people can be.

We think there are a few reasons for this. Firstly, there *are* examples of high-quality training programmes that have achieved solid outcomes; indeed these should not be ignored. We saw this in the enke: Make Your Mark and Columba Leadership programmes – both have been able to show how a high-quality camp-based model, with sustained follow-up, can impact on participants in a way that inspires community action. In community-embedded programmes such as Oasis South Africa in Cosmo City or Bjatladi Youth Development Organisation in Haenertsburg, young people are supported to roll-out existing community development models very effectively. That these programmes do achieve significant outcomes, suggests that perhaps a far greater effort is needed to show how approaches that build successful

youth-led social activism might be re-imagined, without necessarily abandoning programmes that provide the valuable transformative personal experience.

Secondly, many organisations working with young people hold the individual's development as their primary concern. In many instances, we have seen that community development projects are seen as valuable for a young person's "learning by doing" experience. Community projects have thus become, unintentionally (though not necessarily problematically), primarily a mechanism through which to deepen and enrich the development experience of the young person, not an opportunity to seed ideas for effective social change strategies. In reviewing the projects run by young people through programmes that we've supported, we saw a narrow range of ideas – after-school tutoring clubs, school clean-up campaigns, and sports programmes were common. All these are of-course admirable, but we struggled to find real innovation, and audacity, in what young people had/were proposing.

Finally, and equally significantly, there are few examples of new approaches to draw on, and this makes it difficult for people to think beyond current frameworks. Almost everywhere, leadership development is equated with a training process or an outcome for the individual, rather than 'what can actually be achieved in the world'.

As we reflected on these issues, we wondered whether the 'any action is significant' approach was underestimating young people's capacity. We wondered what might happen if programmes changed their expectations, and worked more deliberately on building young people's capacity to drive audacious social change?

Setting a new leadership development agenda: two questions to move us forward

If we had previously focused too heavily on the development part of the equation, what would happen if we turned things on their head and focused on the leading social change outcome instead? As we began thinking through this, we knew that we could easily swing to another extreme and start funding programmes that achieve social change outcomes with little investment in the young people themselves. This would defeat the whole purpose of our funding strategy. We thus

formulated two questions to inform our new approach:

Firstly, could we set new expectations within traditional leadership programmes? If we are seeking to develop real leaders for public innovation, then programmes have to raise their expectations of young people's capacity. One of the ways we think programmes can do this is to move beyond the 'community project' model. If we ask young people to run a community service project in their school, most will come up with the same old ideas. But what would happen, we wonder, if instead of asking "what project can each of you run in your own school?" to 150 individuals, we asked "what can 150 young people do to change the state of education?" It seems to us that we need to shift the focus to collaboration; working with the ideas young people have and pushing them towards being able to show significant impact.

We are, therefore, looking for programmes that have already mastered the personal development side of the equation; programmes that help lift young people's eyes beyond the horizon, to unpack and identify leverage points and new tactics, to support them to be audacious in their ideas, and to deliver beyond the individual project. Here, we are reminded of Rage Against the Haze – an anti-smoking campaign in the United States of America – which was teen-led and run across various States. The programme invested in young leaders in schools and communities, and through their initiative focused on highlighting the profiteering and problematic advertising of big multinational tobacco companies rather than the old approach of moralistic 'smoking is bad for you' messaging to their peers. The message of Rage Against the Haze was that rebelling against the tobacco companies was cooler than rebelling by smoking, and it united young people across hundreds of schools to do it.

Their combined action resulted in halving the teen smoking rate in Florida in less than a decade. We are excited to explore what young people who have experienced high-quality leadership development training could do if they were challenged to go beyond the once-off, or small-scale, projects and move into bigger picture, more innovative action.

Our second question is focused on how we can bring a new leadership development approach into new spaces? Many civil society organisations utilise young volunteers to carry out their work.

Unfortunately, a common reality in civil society across the world is that the development of people within movements is subsumed by the causes themselves. We are interested in exploring whether it is possible to build the leadership of young people already involved in working towards social justice, and by doing so, influence the tactics and opportunities for innovation within these organisations.

In part, this reflects our diagnosis that civil society itself is experiencing a lack of innovation, and a reliance on old tactics in the face of new and/or enduring challenges. In gender-based violence issues, for example, we have seen organisations almost abandon prevention entirely in the face of the overwhelming needs of victims for support. There is a major opportunity here for young people to drive a prevention agenda, and to have their leadership developed in that process. We have also seen social justice become defined almost solely by protest and litigation demanding improved service delivery, and largely ignoring the social dynamics that underpin enduring social inequalities.

Without building the leadership capacities of young people, we may well see social justice organisations themselves becoming sites of problematic social dynamics. For example, in the Activate! programme we met an extraordinary young person who, having volunteered for a number of high-profile organisations, remains unemployed because there hadn't been investment in her personal development in these spaces. In building

leadership capacities within these spaces, we are specifically looking for the combination of building new capacities and opportunities for young people and exploring how these translate into more innovative sets of tactics, and ultimately the implementation of deeper forms of social justice.

Moving from leadership development for social change, to social change through leadership development

Without the opportunity to learn from our implementing partners over the past three years, we would have no basis from which to stretch our own imaginations and set our eyes on the next horizon in the field. Our new agenda is centred on the belief that young people are capable of leading innovative change, and setting a new agenda for civil society and social justice in South Africa. While, understandably, most programmes have had an inputs-based approach to leadership development, we want to flip things on their head and put the social change outcomes, driven by young people, at the heart of our strategy. We have seen that leadership development programmes - which we accept have shown an effect on the personal development outcomes of young people - are not resulting in particularly audacious or effective and sustained strategies for young people to drive social change. Part of the stake we want to put in the ground is that in a context of a struggling civil society sector, young people can and should be bringing new energy, ideas, vision and tactics to bear that fundamentally change the game.

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