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An experiment in living and learning in the Boland

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Storytellers and Development Workers

In *The Stories of Eva Luna*, Isabelle Allende tells the story of Belisa Crepusculario who is a beautiful young woman whose storytelling powers are so great that a Captain aspiring to become President of the country asks: “Can you sell me the words for a speech?” The woman agrees, and he wins the election.¹ Allende’s message is ambiguous: on the one hand she belittles the conduct of politics by reducing its significance to mere storytelling, on the other she celebrates the abilities of the storyteller as the person who holds the real power to shape imaginations and perceptions of reality. Both hold true simultaneously: the story as widely believed myth (all too frequently suggestive of falsehood), and the storyteller as imager of meaning – the sense-maker.

In many ways, every development worker is a storyteller. Stories must be constructed for a wide range of people – funders, users of the service (“clients”), authorities, the general public, policy-makers, and staff. The mediums used vary widely, from funding proposals formatted by the dead hand of “logframe”, through to manuals, annual reports, creative writing, propaganda, and training workshops – even emails have their place in this cacophony of signs. In every case, the development worker is constructing a story for the purpose of mobilising resources and/or people. Invariably, the dual function of myth-making and the creation of meaning results in targeted messages that often engage the mindsets of the targets with highly unpredictable consequences. But the key difference between the real storyteller and a development worker is that the former anticipates – and even intentionally fosters – these unanticipated reactions (the quintessence of making complex cultures), while the development worker requires tightly controlled “outputs” and “outcomes” for the sake of development (too often reduced to simplistic “measurables”, especially now that the “balanced scorecard” has ascended to the apex of managerial hegemony). Unfortunately, development practice is often in reality like culture: it is patterned by complex dynamics that often defy the rational logics of development management theory.

Our experience of development work in one locality over the past five years has led us to the conclusion that if development workers are indeed storytellers, they might need to become more self-consciously aware of the stories they tell, and to realise that they have far less control over the consequences of their stories than they often assume. At the same time, they might also realise that the strength that lies in dialogical infrastructure may be more reliable than ticks in the logframe report or balanced scorecard. They might, therefore, learn something from storytellers and in so doing they might develop a new appreciation for development work as a form of cultural art. For some, this kind of thinking is dangerous because it could lead down the slippery slope of seeing development practice as the construction of falsehoods and thus degrade what the act of changing – and controlling – some harsh realities is all about. There is some validity in this fear given the well known capacity of rampant (often corrupt) opportunism to subvert any development process, but the mistake is to assume that control rather than dialogue is best able to counter these forces.

Telling the Story

This is how we opened a marketing-type story in a new age magazine called *Odyssey*: “Close your eyes and imagine, for just a moment, building a community around a learning precinct. And

¹ . Allende, I., *The Stories of Eva Luna*, New York: Bantam, 1991.

imagine that this is a community made up of people from all backgrounds, and that it has been designed using state-of-the-art ecological design technologies. Also imagine that you are surrounded by towering majestic mountain ranges and cultivated vineyards.”

And contrast this with the following story, told most often to shock visitors into emotional identification with the project: *A grade 5 girl-child watches her mother burn, set alight by her drunken partner. He then sets himself on fire. Both take two days to die. The biological father arrives at the school to collect the girl-child. He is accompanied by two police constables and an order of the court. When she sees him she runs, and tries to hide. Screaming she asks to stay in her school. And to continue living with her ‘auntie’. She is physically removed into his custody. She never returns. He is a convicted abuser of his older children.*

A funding proposal written for Danish Aid continues: “The Lynedoch EcoVillage is the first ecologically designed socially mixed intentional community in South Africa. It can be found where the old Drie Gewels Hotel used to be, ten metres away from Lynedoch Station on the line to Stellenbosch, and fifteen kilometres by road to the centre of Stellenbosch.”

Stellenbosch is the heart of the Winelands - tourist destination of note, generator of millions of rands from massive white-owned farms, export-quality wines, and large-scale direct and indirect employer. Shortly before the founding general election in 1994 vast tracts of local authority land were tied up in long-term, cheap leases with established white farmers, effectively preventing land reform for a generation. This is a story that hits home with funders because it is all there – injustice, history, wasted opportunities that can be put right, and great places to stay during project visits!

But in case it all looks too easy as the lure of tangibles masks the intangible, it needs to be recalled that *approximately four children from each of the classes in the school suffer from foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). Born alcoholics, they carry today the scars of yesterdays’ ‘dop system’. The increase in cash on hand as wage levels have gone up has seen an increase in FAS, not the expected decrease after the dop system was outlawed.*

This dance between a miniaturized utopian vision and relentlessly persistent horrors that have refused to die with apartheid triggers an emotional tension for the listener that quickly connects them to the process of “making it happen”. In other words, it creates the myth of a possible (hopefully better) future, and gives meaning to what is emerging. It also creates a space for participation, or put differently – a space for others to make their own stories as they choose to live and work within this space. A space, in short, for culture-in-the-making – as opposed to “making a culture”.

Lynedoch is not just a dream, it really has started to happen. What used to be a huge ugly corrugated iron farm shed, has been renovated to accommodate the Lynedoch Primary School for 360 children (a government school), a large all-purpose hall, and the Sustainability Institute. There is also a Montessori pre-school which, like the primary school, is attended mainly by the children from families who live on the surrounding farms. An old run down Cape Dutch-style Country Hotel has been renovated into a residence, and the building of the first house commenced in July 2003. There is a local community bank that mobilizes savings, and Usiko – an NGO that uses “wilderness therapy” to reconstitute masculinity amongst young township men caught up in gang cultures. Every morning thirty African women from Khayelitsha saunter up the driveway heading towards the house that has been renovated into a factory where they work all day making beautiful tapestries for sale at the Spier Wine Estate and the Waterfront. Add to this the Masters students who arrive every morning to attend classes at the Sustainability Institute starting with an hour of community work on the farm or in the gardens, and you have the beginnings of a new mix of experiences across a diversity of social worlds that are rarely connected together in a single space.

Making spaces for stories

As one traverses contemporary South Africa, one is struck by the hectic pace of construction: the cranes that preside so haughtily over transforming inner cities, the death-making detours around road constructions on the infamous Transkei roads, the beehives of activity in the people's housing processes in poor communities, and the mechanized routines that throw up the new middle class security villages. At the centre of all this is "the developer" – in the end, a single individual who "packages the project" and "makes it happen". By the time implementation commences, all the design work, engineering detail, financing deals and (where applicable) social inputs gets filtered through the judgements made by the developer. He or she "makes the story" that transforms a given space into another space. These are the people that are imprinting myths and meanings on the new post-apartheid landscape. From the cynical anti-South African self-denial architectures of the new Casinos, to the eclectic and therefore more authentic mix of a Newtown Precinct, through to the emerging low-income housing settlements with their bizarre mix of suburban sprawl and miniature living spaces, these cityscapes become the new arenas for cultural transformation and social interaction. But who are these developers that have this power? No biographies are reported. What are they up to?

We have learnt what it means to be a developer. We have learnt what it means to take a space – in this case a 7ha property – and transform it. However, the key difference between most developers and ourselves is that across South Africa, most developers transform spaces to make a profit. The extraordinary creative energy they mobilize to design and fund a development is driven by sophisticated computer models and basic instinct. They arrive, see, imagine, build, sell and leave. Those left behind have contracted into the story, and live it out – the developer moves on to the next project where the story is different. In some ways the detachment of the developer allows the buyers to recreate the vision after he or she moves on, especially if the story of the development is skin deep – a mere construction to mobilize the funds and approvals. But quite often the end result is a meaningless urban charade where the old divisions remain unchallenged. What happens if a developer has a social mission like us, where we created a story to initiate the transformation, but then as others move in, the founding story is contested and reconstituted? At the start the story was simple, but as it succeeds more layers of complexity are added resulting in a loss of control over the story. Is there anything to learn from this transition from a simple story that the developer tells and controls, to a more complex story that swallows the developer into a cultural mix that no-one controls? In many ways, the detachment of the traditional developer is healthy – s/he moves on, gets out the way. But when the non-profit developer stays, either the founding story is codified and therefore excludes resulting in the end in another dead space, or it becomes an inspirational core with increasingly soft boundaries that allows for absorption, expansion, complexification, recomposition and even eventually implosion and replacement if a different centre emerges from the mix.

The developer, Lynedoch Development (LyneDev), was set up in 1999 as a Section 21 (non-profit) company. A Board came together made up of local community leaders and ourselves. This group was inspired by the possibility of building an inclusive living and learning community that would demonstrate in practice what it means to live in sustainable ways. Although not explicit from the start, sustainability gradually came to mean both social justice *and* ecological equity.

Inspired by this commitment, three goals were formulated to guide the various aspects of the planning and implementation of the project. The goals are that the Lynedoch EcoVillage:

- must be a mixed community organized around a child-centred learning precinct;
- should strive to be a working example of a livable ecologically designed urban system;
- will be a financially and economically viable community that will not require external funding to sustain itself.

The key features of the Lynedoch EcoVillage are as follows:

- a primary school for 400 children drawn mainly from the families of local farmworkers (completed December 2001);
- a pre-school for 40 children (completed in February 2002);

- a large multi-purpose hall (completed in December 2001);
- offices and classrooms for the Sustainability Institute (completed in December 2001);
- 40 residences that will provide accommodation for participants in the programmes of the Sustainability Institute, with 20 completed in January 2003;
- 110 housing units ranging in price from R90 000 to R480 000 per unit, starting with Phase 1 consisting of 42 new housing units (to be completed by December 2003);
- commercial space for offices or small manufacturers and crafters;
- a village green and landscaped areas laid out in accordance with permaculture principles;
- limited traffic and secure environment for children and pedestrians.

The vision that inspires the Board can best be expressed in a brochure that it approved for marketing the houses: *Above all else, the Lynedoch EcoVillage must provide a safe space where South Africans from all backgrounds can live in peace with each other and in harmony with nature. It must also be a place where people from all over the world can come and share in the life of the community while they learn, think, and create works of art and knowledge that will contribute to the making of a better world. It must, above all else, be a place where all life is celebrated and beauty in all its forms treasured for this and future generations.*

In this statement, hope is expressed in terms of equity and ecology – or as the slogan goes, sustainability is about “soil, soul and society”. This replaces the liberal focus on “liberty, equality and fraternity”. It also goes beyond the “new age” individualist obsession with “mind-body-spirit”, and beyond the ecologically blind vision of most cooperative and socialist approaches. But constituting and making it happen requires governance structures, codes of conduct, contracts, and above all else, a basic consensus amongst the founding group. But as one community activist and head of the crèche recently commented after reading the first draft of the constitution of the Home Owner’s Association: “Dit is a gemeenskap, maar gaan ek in a tronk bly?” (“It looks like a community, but am I going to live in a prison?”)

History and Background

Stellenbosch is a small University town some thirty five minutes drive inland from Cape Town. Surrounded by the Helderberg, Simonsig and Stellenbosch mountain ranges, it has also been the historic commercial center of a wealthy white-owned agricultural community dominated by the winemaking industry. Black people have not only suffered from exclusion from economic ownership in this region since agriculture began in the late 1600s, but also from housing, education and higher learning. The infamous “dop system” (paying labour in alcohol) has caused profound social damage that will take at least a generation to heal, with children as the key to a better safer future for this region.

LyneDev submitted a development application to the authorities for approval in June 2000. Approval was finally secured in May 2002. The delay was caused by objections from white (largely racist) neighbours which made it necessary to obtain approval from the Western Cape Provincial Government.

The beginning of the Lynedoch Ecological Development process was accompanied by death threats issued by existing shebeen owners who inhabited the property and opposed the vision expressed by the Board. Plans to begin a prostitutes’ ring made up of 10 and 11 year old girls were under way and the three illegal shebeens were doing well.

The white neighbours objected to housing for farmworkers.hovels on farmers’ properties seemed preferable to people of colour living in any semblance of dignity. Objections were written in the language of environmental conservation, with urban development associated with destruction of farming and an “agricultural life style”. Even people supportive of the development said that “the rich and the poor” will never find a way to live together.

During the participatory planning process, it became clear that a more mixed community with a diverse range of activities and incomes had a greater chance of being economically self-sustaining

than a community that was entirely dependent on returns from workers earning very low wages. Whereas the initial development plan presumed that deals would get made with farmers to relocate entire groups of workers off the farms and into Lynedoch, the Board decided that it would not like to be party to this because the end result will be another dumping ground for disgruntled workers who may have preferred to remain living where they have lived for generations. Furthermore, as farmers started to demolish on-farm housing, it soon became apparent that no net gains in housing stock would be achieved – just a relocation of people to increase the value of farm properties and reduce the farmer's responsibility for the management of leisure time on his/her farm. All this was embedded in the changing political economy of the winelands: massive investment by local and off-shore capital, consolidation of major liquor production companies, reduction in the number of family farms, skyrocketing real estate prices fueled by the romantic lure of tourism destinations within a winelands setting. This was good news for farmworkers who never lost their jobs during rationalizations and were often rewarded with wage increases, but bad news for the thousands that have become redundant. It is the redundant ones that become targets for removal from ancestral homesteads on the farms.

Funding of various kinds (grant and low cost loans) have been secured from a range of parties, including the Spier Estate, Danish Government Aid, Winemakers Guild, Enthoven Family Trust, United States Agency for International Development, and the Ford Foundation. A commercial loan at prime rates was secured from BOE and the Development Bank of Southern Africa has provided a low cost loan to fund phase 1 of the housing development.

It is worth noting that the work done to date has already won recognition for Lynedoch. The South African Government, with funding from USAID, ran a national competition for best practice projects in order to select model projects for display at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). The Lynedoch Development was one of eighteen projects selected from well over 100 applicants. The development also got the Best Environmental Project for 2002 Award, awarded by the South African Planning Institution. The Main Building (that houses the school, community hall and Sustainability Institute) received a merit award from the Cape Institute of Architects in 2003.

Living and Learning: Building the Sustainability Institute

The grit of a late Tuesday afternoon on one of the 6-day modules of the MPhil in Sustainable Development Planning and Management, accredited by the University of Stellenbosch, is starting to show. Participants are struggling. Not only is their 25-odd class made up of a widely diverse group (roughly one-third each from the private, public and ngo sectors), but the learning approach draws strands together of planting trees, hard physical digging, housecleaning, meditation, intellectual rigour, intense small-group assignments for presentation - all process-oriented within a holding space combining practice, theory and critical reflection. The complexity surfaces discomfort, irritation with no recipe-like answers and deep intensity.

The African focus of the Sustainability Institute, drawing on experience from the Schumacher College in the United Kingdom, (and similar to a centre set up by Vandana Shiva in India) combines learning within a living space. Studies and experience in ecology, community and spirit hold no rosy glow. The space for retreat and contemplation seems to surface more the contradictions, pain and tensions for participants seeking ways to make sense of their realities. Ever present is the paradoxically silent energy of Lynedoch Development. The simple sense of place, the power of practice and the glee of young children hold our participants in a way that seems to hold steady their gaze towards creating their own alternative futures.

The Sustainability Institute combines writing, teaching and on-the-ground project work. Programmes and projects emerge through the relationships that develop between diverse and creative individuals working in ways that energise a multiplicity of networks. Above all it seems to have developed a liberating sense of responsibility – for joy, alternative realities and for uncovering possibilities through seamless and fragmented conversations that knit together in ways that are unique to each individual.

Development Context at the Global, National and Local Levels

Although mired in controversy and compromised by a world dominated by the Bush Administration, in essence the World Summit on Sustainable Development that was held in Johannesburg in 2002 was motivated by the realization that in order to restore the balance between the environment and human society, something needs to be done. Although many versions of sustainability exist, a progressive framework would emphasize the following four drivers of human footprint reduction:

- the total quantity of materials and energy extracted from the natural system for use by society must be drastically reduced, including replacement of non-renewable (e.g. fossil fuels) with renewable resources (e.g. solar or hydrogen power);
- the total quantity of waste deposited by human society into the environment needs to be reduced by converting wastes into productive inputs and by reducing the absolute quantity of waste outputs;
- a massive redistribution of resources needs to take place in order to eliminate worldwide poverty;
- the vast but rapidly disappearing natural systems that sustain life (e.g. forests, soils, aquifers, air and living seas) must be protected.

When reference is made to reducing the “footprint” of development, it means defining and implementing development in a way that is consistent with these four dimensions of sustainability. In particular, it means realizing that social justice (the third principle) cannot be achieved without the achievement of the other three. This effectively means transcending modernization paradigms and redefining the technical and economic infrastructure of the development process so that resource and material flows can be reconstituted. The technology exists, it is just imaginative power energized by courage that is required to make it happen.

Out of a total world population of six billion, two billion live in absolute poverty, three billion enjoy the basic necessities of life in various forms, and the remainder lives in relatively industrialized urban conditions. Small minorities enjoy excessive lifestyles that depend on the unsustainable consumption of resources and related destructive wastage. Although there is still no evidence of a worldwide commitment to sustainable living, small projects around the world are leading the way. These projects can be initiated by many different types of actors, including governments, businesses and non-governmental organizations. The Lynedoch EcoVillage development is one of these pioneering initiatives.

The South African Government has committed itself to sustainable development. By this it means combining the need for economic development with a commitment to social equity (poverty elimination) and environmental protection (via measures such as increased use of renewable energy, and decreased use of waste outputs). Although there is much that is moving in an unsustainable direction (e.g. rising unemployment, service cut-offs, clumsy privatization, promotion of GMOs, another pebble-bed reactor, and rising pollution of air, land and water), there are policy frameworks in place in South Africa that support and encourage developments such as the Lynedoch EcoVillage development. The National Environmental Management Act, plus policies on water conservation, waste reduction, housing provision for the poor and poverty elimination are examples.

Under the leadership of the old Winelands District Council and more recently the Stellenbosch Municipality, an Integrated Development Plan for the local region has been formulated which is based on sustainable development principles. It is this Plan that makes provision for the establishment of contained high density “hamlets” across the Winelands region as a means of managing urban growth over the next 25 years without triggering massive urban sprawl and related environmental destruction. This plan refers specifically to the Lynedoch Hamlet as a pilot development that could lead the way. The Board of Lynedoch Development has been inspired by this plan and has decided that its greatest contribution to realizing the aims of this plan would be to

demonstrate that it is possible to build a socially mixed community that has a much reduced ecological footprint and contributes significantly to poverty elimination.

Ecological Design

The existing building works that resulted in the renovation of the old rave hall, plus all future construction work, will reduce the footprint of the development by integrating the following ecological design approaches

- building materials selection will be based not just on financial cost reduction, but also footprint reduction – examples include using unfired clay brick made on site using a low skill rammed earth machine supplied by Hydraform, long life and low maintenance materials for roofing and window/door frames, etc;
- reduction of coal generated Eskom energy by 60% via the replacement of electric geysers with a centralized solar water heating system for each street;
- on-site vermiculture-based waste treatment system supplied by Biolytix which makes it possible to treat on site all liquid and organic wastes so that they can be beneficially re-used for irrigating gardens and food lots;
- use of gas-fired stoves and the new low energy fluorescent light bulbs to reduce electricity consumption;
- 40% water saving via water harvesting and re-use mechanisms;
- installation of passive heating and cooling systems via north facing perspectives, carefully planned roof overhands related to window sizes, and the use of wind chimneys and under-floor rock storage systems for channeling and managing wind and heat for summer cooling and winter warming;
- use of non-toxic products for painting, wood treatments and cleansing;
- landscaping using permaculture principles; and
- strong connections to the land reform project across the road for supplies of local low cost food.

Eskom has proposed that LyneDev become a pilot site for testing a hydrogen energy system that could use wind and solar power to drive an electrolysis system that will make hydrogen gas which will then be used to power a fuel cell for generating electricity. Funded by the World Bank-managed Global Environmental Facility (GEF), this could contribute significantly to the Lynedoch model. It could also prove that renewable energy works for the poor.

A key objective has been to demonstrate that eco-design can reduce both construction costs and post-construction costs of services. Although the former has not been fully achieved, the latter has been successful. In particular, the cost of water for low-income households will be reduced by 90% and by 75% for middle class households. All liquid wastes will be treated on site and re-used – half the treated effluent will go into irrigation of gardens and food lots, and the other half will be re-used in the households to flush toilets and irrigate gardens. This effectively makes the inflow of nutrients a resource to be re-used, rather than a waste to be disposed of. Electricity bills will be reduced by 50%. In other words, eco-design can benefit the poor. If this story cannot be told, there is no use chasing the grail of sustainability.

All of the above sounds neat and simple. But it is the end result of three years of intensive work with a group of professionals who had very little prior technical knowledge in this field of expertise to draw on. The design professions are inherently conservative. Trapped inside the mutually reinforcing strictures of professional indemnities, membership of professional associations, and dependence on chargeable consulting hours, it is virtually impossible for them to invest in innovation. The safest and profitable professional practice is one that delivers standard off-the-shelf approved products in the shortest possible time. This Taylorisation of professional practice is why so many struggle to get out of what should be the most creative work in the world. If all professionals operated this way, innovation would die. To solve this problem, grant funding had to

be raised to buy the time of professionals prepared to take risks so that prolonged interactive design processes could take place which could also include inputs from non-South African professionals with experience in eco-design. Ironically, it was the International Finance Corporation that made this grant funding available. In the end it was possible to craft a complex model that clicked together the design of the urban layout, architectural drawings, engineering designs, social interactions, governance structures and a comprehensive financial planning model. For this it was necessary to get the architect, engineer and builder to work together within a pre-determined financial model and not the other way round. The traditional approach of design followed by costing followed by tendering would not have worked. The process has been conflictual and creative, with some original members of the team falling by the wayside. None of what happened conformed to the linear prescriptions of Project Management disciplines. With hindsight, much could have been done differently, but that is another story.

A story, to stories

There are very few countries in the world where the conditions for innovation and creativity are more favorable than those that exist in South Africa. It is so easy blame the inaction of others (or worse, an “unfavourable balance of forces”) for the worsening plight of the poor, but as realism about the limits of state action sets in there are more and more local initiatives that are grabbing the space and making it happen. Of course, capacity is a prerequisite – but even a small modicum of capacity quickly triggers momentum. We have seen it happen in the Lynedoch Development. Over time, these local initiatives will incubate new visions, new leaders, new networks and eventually new multi-class social movements that will simultaneously challenge and complement state action, and articulate the linkages to similar processes elsewhere in the world. Complex cleavages will arise that will rarely follow the simplistic dualisms that the “state-civil society” or “capital-labour” images imply. Instead, South Africans will continue to live in complex ways: we will build networks that cross-cut the formal hierarchies, we will weave a formal institutional tapestry by day in one role and unravel it by night in another, we will verbally castigate opponents so that they get strong enough to pressurize limp wristed allies who refuse to change quickly enough, we will build up knowledge systems via policy networks that will question self-serving truisms, and we will mobilize energies and alliances that link multiple nodes of power that will reinforce expressions of hope in practice. At the centre of all this activity will be our ability to tell and hear the stories of our changing times. In his *Astonishing the Gods*, Ben Okri tells the story of a man who thought he was invisible because all the stories around him were not about him. An extraordinary and surprising South Africa is becoming increasingly visible as the vast array of local stories get told. The challenge will be to defend the space for these stories, or live with the consequences of codifying a single official story. For us, building the story of Lynedoch has been an experience of becoming visible not because others believed our story, but because our story has created the space for other stories to emerge.