



South Africa

Motivating in challenging contexts

Freda Brock

The Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU), was established with Foundation support in 1978 and became one of the most prominent agencies in early childhood development (ECD) in South Africa. Its principal target groups are parents, caregivers, trainers and non formal pre-school teachers in townships and informal settlements; and ELRU aims to support initiatives that are created by the people themselves. However, it recognised that its approaches and programmes were not working well in some poor, violent, multiracial communities.

Since the early eighties it has therefore been developing an idea that is wholly relevant to such contexts – in fact one that has

been fashioned specially for these communities. It is called the Community Motivators programme. Community Motivators are people from the communities who start from whatever is there – which often means almost nothing in the way of development structures and resources. They give direct support to families, often on a one-to-one basis; and are also trained to network and link people with the fragmented services and resources that exist for children and families.

Freda Brock joined ELRU in November 1994 as Director, with overall responsibility for ELRU's programmes, and special responsibility for team building and fundraising.

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The communities and their characteristics

In developing the Community Motivators programmes, we chose to work in four communities that were particularly challenging. Three are informal settlements with predominantly 'African' populations; while one is a sub economic housing estate with a 'Coloured' population.* There's a mix of people in the informal settlements – mostly South Africans, with many migrating to the region from the Transkei and Ciskei in search of work and a better life. Many come from other African countries.

Different kinds of dynamics prevail in each, including political conflicts and conflicts about resources. For example NGOs are generally perceived by people in those areas as being financed by international funders, by the government or local companies. Certain people set themselves up as the gatekeepers, and there are issues about turf (territory). You might find a civic organisation in an area that said 'We know what the needs are in this community; why are you using the

money to benefit this particular group? And who gave permission for your organisation to work in this area?' The process of negotiating and renegotiating the right to be in a community is a sensitive and time-consuming one.

Violence is a huge factor. Powerful political, civic, gang or economically driven groupings and structures within communities are often in conflict with one another. There is also a high rate of domestic violence. So violence is very much a feature and it is why a very high level of trauma exists within communities.

But there are positive elements as well. For example, despite the fact that families have been displaced, with the father living in one place and the mother in another, the sense of family is still very strong. In most cases the family is an extended one, involving a number of relatives who live far apart and who can be involved in rearing a child. There are, however, other problems for the child who is moved about to different caregivers, often missing out on key supports such as the immunisation programmes or school enrolment.

Another very positive factor is that possibilities for income-generation and gainful employment are developing. People also take the initiative to make a living. But there are limits to the resources and to the strength that is there: great numbers of people are struggling to survive poverty.

The Community Motivators

To offer support or to bring about change in these complex environments and circumstances is very difficult. Whatever you do has to be accepted by the community. It also has to make sense to the other formal and informal structures that exist there – that means either working with them to maximise the benefit, or at least working with their understanding. There is also the question of who is most qualified or most appropriate to work in these communities; who will be accepted and trusted. For us, it has to be local people, the sort of people who we call Community Motivators.

But you don't just come across people like these. There needs to be a lot of groundwork in each community. We



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Community Motivator at work, Brown's Farm

work with existing local organisations to help people carry out a kind of survey, produce a profile of the area, canvas opinions, and spread awareness of the need for, and options for ECD. This includes looking at what exists already and looking at points that can be strengthened. One approach is through organising a series of talks about nutrition and health; another is through door to door visiting. It's a matter of getting people's interest and then beginning to identify those people who are interested in developing some sort of work with children. After this, at a public meeting, criteria are developed for Community Motivators and names are put forward. Some people may have volunteered or have been identified by

the community, and there is an election at the meeting and the chosen person comes to ELRU for training.

However, Community Motivators are employed by local organisations that supervise them and ultimately take responsibility for the project. These organisations vary in nature. One of the projects is overseen by an organisation that specialises in child welfare. Another ECD organisation saw this initiative as an extension of its own work and took responsibility for Community Motivators in its area. In another community, a church organisation put up a committee with a group of parents to supervise and administer the funds and to give

Working in the Nyanga Hostels

These hostels were originally meant for single men but whole families live here in extremely overcrowded and poverty-stricken conditions. Working in the passages, Zoleka and Bulelwa the home visitors, working with Sisi Baba, the Community Motivator, first informed the people who live there about the activities that they intended to do with their children during home visiting.

They also taught the parents about learning opportunities for children in the home setting; and showed them other things that are available in homes that parents can use to help their children develop. The parents do not need to buy toys but instead can involve the children in their housework and teach them the names of things. They also mentioned that the children could develop through this involvement by identifying colours, shapes and sizes and also learn to follow instructions. The mothers showed interest and went on to learn about making toys out of scraps.

The children could also hear the Community Motivators when they were visiting other homes and would call out – 'Here is our Sisi (auntie) and we are going to play and she is going to show us how to write'. Activities with blocks, cutting and pasting and also outdoor activities followed. One mother informed them that 'Since you have started this programme of visiting us, life became so easy in this house. My children pick up things like old tins, papers, and sponges that they see in the yard and they ask me to keep it for Sisi when she comes to play with us so that we can have more toys to play with. This also keeps my yard clean.'

During these visits they gave some mothers homework to do with their children so that the next time when they come to visit, the mother would give a report of how she helped her child with the homework. One of the parents in the hostel wanted to stop her child from joining the group. But her child told her that she wanted to join in because she had never gone to crèche. The mother allowed her to go, and also started to gain interest herself.

Mobilising talent

Themba is a young man in his middle twenties. He came into contact with Doris (the Community Motivator) when she was doing her work in the community. He came as someone who was going to help as a handy man. His contact with the children revives the other side of him. He started coming in more often, and involving himself with the children when they were doing activities. He started sharing his experiences with his friends in their youth group. They responded by writing three plays for the children with him – and they then presented them. Themba's friends in his youth group admire what he does. Children from different homes, parents and the entire community were invited. The plays were about different things – comedy, road safety and caring for animals at home. It was a good experience for parents and children.

Themba says he enjoys coming to the centre and getting involved during activities and the children also enjoy his presence. People in the community do not understand, some even make nasty remarks about him because of what he is doing. But times are changing and, after all, children belong to all of us: 'We are fathers of these children that we think it is the responsibility of women to look after.'

Themba's concern about the community is that many women with young children are drinking and they take their children with them to the *shebeens* (drinking houses). *Shebeens* are not good for children. He and his group have decided to write a short play about that, although they feel demotivated because of small attendances at previous performances. But there are ways of encouraging them.



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Making use of Granny's skills and knowledge

support to the Community Motivator as well. In the fourth community, where there was less structure, interested people formed a small committee.

Training needs

The training is akin to community worker training: how to gain entry to a community; draw up a profile; do networking; use resources; refer people with specific needs to the right facilities; and so on. Child development is an important component, as is adult education and training in techniques relating to home visiting, or in operating parent awareness programmes. Working in people's homes, with mothers, requires particular skills. Various options such as playgroups are possible depending on the needs identified by the Community Motivators and the areas in which they are

working. There is also some training in management where relevant.

Coping with violence is an important area that also requires preparation and training for the Community Motivators. They have to learn skills in helping people to deal with trauma, and in building resilience more broadly than at the personal level. They also need to develop strategies to help people make progress at community level. This might mean facilitating a collective consciousness of what their rights to security are, and what children's rights are. This could lead to helping people develop and use links to other resource organisations.

ELRU trains people from all parts of the country to be Community Motivators in their own areas. Some have come from other countries in Southern Africa. We offer them a

support and monitoring programme afterwards, keep in touch with them and help them develop networks for support. The strategy that we have developed has worked very well in some areas, but in others work has been difficult, often because of violence and political strife, but also because more intensive support is needed than we are able to give at present. We are working on ways to increase our capacity in this regard.

How Community Motivators are perceived and received

As for the kind of reception that Community Motivators get when they approach families, we have case studies from the four areas and these include what families think about them. They included comments that showed that some people are much more concerned with having food on the table for their child; while others seized the opportunity to play a part in their children's education and welcomed the resultant opportunities for personal development.

Gauging impact

The Community Motivators took part in an assessment to try to get some idea of the impact of the Community Motivators programme. None of them had been involved in this kind of exercise before. This is what they felt about the data collection experience.

'It was worthwhile – we didn't know we could do such a job.'

'We realised that we had done something to those families but we didn't know how to go back and see what we did and what they had got.'

'We got a light and will carry on with this.'

And this is what the survey revealed:

Eighteen of the random sample of 20 principle caregivers were mothers, mostly in their 20s and 30s. Schooling ranged from none at all to Standard 9 but Standard 6 or 7 (8 to 9 years schooling) was most common. Twelve mothers were engaged in some way in generating

income for the household – three as domestic workers and nine were self-employed: recycling; brewing beer; or selling food or supplies in the settlement. Seven of the households were made up of single women and their children.

More than half of all responses referred to the help the programme provided in freeing up their time for other pressing tasks such as income generation, caring for other family members or creating time for them to spend on themselves. Life in the informal settlement involves numerous time-consuming duties such as the gathering of fuel and fetching water, as well as numerous domestic tasks. Skills and knowledge were valued (approximately one quarter of responses) and there were a number of women who found it worthwhile at the personal level because of an increase in self-esteem, sharing with others, and so on. Staff has mentioned the extreme isolation of many women living in this community and the role that the weekly discussion groups played in breaking this down.

Mothers' perceptions of the programme's aims are very child-related with a focus on educating the children, helping them play with

others, feeding them and keeping them safe. Half of all responses mentioned education as an aim. There did not appear to be much understanding of the programme's objective of involving parents in this process. More than half felt that their family had a better understanding of how children develop and learn, with a particular emphasis on nutrition and health.

Families also focused on the programme's aims of educating, feeding and protecting children to the exclusion of other goals, and they report a positive impact. In response to the question of what parents would want the programme to do, apart from childcare directed comments, nearly half of all responses reflect a desire for skills development and income generation.

ELRU staff considered that caregivers were definitely interested in this programme although they were not physically present on a regular basis. They were happy to undertake tasks but not to waste time if they were unclear what was expected of them. A roster had been developed and there had been some expectation of payment because the cooks and regular playleaders received a stipend.

I've also seen the sort of work that a Community Motivator does. Perhaps I have only seen responsive parents in the projects, but there does seem to be quite a level of anticipation and excitement on receiving a visit at home. Not everything always works well. In one of the settlements we are presently involved in a process of changing the basic approach. Instead of having one Community Motivator, the people have decided to have a group of women who

are going to take on the role. This is a positive step toward developing a model more appropriate to local needs. The original Community Motivator has left to take another job but continues to serve on the support committee.

Where we are and the ways ahead

There is a great deal of overlap between women's and children's issues.

Discrimination is one area. So we have put much emphasis on anti-bias work which looks at strengthening the abilities of children and caregivers to deal with the long-term effects of discrimination. The anti-bias work feeds in through the Community Motivator training programmes and ongoing workshops. But the negative forces are very strong and they persist, and it sometimes seems they are getting worse.

responsiveness, and in the will to work and share more broadly. It's very encouraging to see the light going on like that. You see a person who is neglecting herself or has been neglected suddenly begin to take more care of herself. You see a person who didn't appear to think further than the next meal, start going to meetings, start being interested, start speaking to other people. Those are the small indicators that mean a lot: they are achievements, steps to empowerment.

What we have also seen is that the secret of success is to plan small, realisable steps. If you take on too much and fail, it is much harder to try again – you become demoralised, or people lose their confidence in you. ○

* In South Africa 'Coloured' refers to South Africans of mixed racial descent; the term 'African' in this article refers to people of African origin.

People do care about their children but tend to put greater value on their ability to clothe, feed and shelter them than anything else. In these areas and under such adverse conditions, the emphasis is on getting work, and rather less on childminding and child stimulation. However, we have found that once a person – traditionally a woman – has recognised the extent of the role she can play in shaping her child's life, there is quite a marked change in demeanour, in



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Playgroup in Maipai squatter settlement