

Isandla Institute: A Retrospective

by Edgar Pieterse

on the occasion of Isandla Institute's 10th anniversary

In 2009, fifteen years after we won our political freedom, it is easy to forget just how incredible the transition was. Leading up to 1994, but especially afterwards when the Mandela government came into office, it was clear that we had an amazing opportunity to rethink everything. How many societies and communities have such an opportunity? Either societies are too wealthy and bureaucratised to think outside of the known box; or they are too mired in intractable conflicts, overlaid with weak states and capricious bureaucracies to even contemplate systematic developmental action. Inexplicably, South Africa got to avoid these normalised extremes and make a direct input in the remaking of democratic South Africa. It is a gift we often overlook and take for granted. (It is of course striking that in the face of the climate change imperatives, the whole world is being forced into a serious engagement of remaking the global economy and commons to avoid irrevocable destruction of contemporary ways of living.)

In this context, Frank Meintjies and I were both eager to find a niche where we could express our activist histories and commitments, but also get as close to the action – in terms of defining the new policy agendas – as possible without being swallowed by the transforming bureaucracies of the state. Interestingly, Frank and I shared very similar trajectories: political activists who grew up in the wake of the Black Conscious revival of street politics which gave birth to the United Democratic Front in the 1980s. Frank went the trade union route and I worked my way through student, youth and community-level structures to find our respective senses of purpose and politics. With the dramatic explosion of professional NGOs in the late 1980s, both Frank and I got swept up in that dynamic and the consequent enrolment of

those organisations in the policy development slog work of the early 1990s when the prospect of a negotiated democratic transition became a vaguely plausible prospect.

We met in the national NGO training network (or something of that sort) in 1991 and immediately recognised each other as brothers in arms. For one, we both shared a contradictory Christian-Marxist passageway to politics; we both enjoyed the irreverent and hilarious side of life and politics; and we both believed very deeply that at best politics is about exploration, learning and reflection and not dogmatic certainties. This chemistry stood us in good stead when our overlapping paths rejoined in 1998. By then we had both had a stint in government; found ways to complete Masters degrees in development in an overseas setting – exposing us to the relative ordinariness of South Africa – and tried our hand at various forms of professional development consultancy work for both government and NGO “clients”.

We were grappling with the same frustrations: the new cadre of progressive bureaucrats were astoundingly adept at becoming conventional bureaucrats and not change agents.

Over many beers we realised we were grappling with the same frustrations at that moment of South Africa's transition: the new cadre of progressive bureaucrats were astoundingly adept at becoming conventional bureaucrats and not change agents; the NGO community seemed largely at sea in terms of a relevance and sense of strategic focus; apolitical and development-blind international consultancy firms were becoming extraordinarily influential in shaping the implementation agenda of the state which often produced outcomes that

were diametrically opposite to the policy and legislative intention; and most importantly, a reading of power, strategy and tactics was being evacuated from the development landscape.

We then fantasised, what if we could create our own development vehicle, on our terms but also seek to influence development policy in some of the most strategic areas such as poverty reduction, democratic local governance and strengthening civil society formations by arming them with a more imaginative but realist development agenda to play their rightful role in the transition process. And thus, the concept of Isandla Institute came into being.

Given our inebriated states, we of course set off on a wildly ambitious agenda. We wanted to create a hybrid, postmodern organisational vehicle that had the value-base of a radical developmental NGO and combine that with the professional ethos and working methods of a high-end knowledge consultancy practice that worked with decision-makers. We also wanted an organisation that was able to plug into the universities and extract relevant people and knowledge for application in the real world. Finally, we wanted to achieve all of this conscious of the racial politics of knowledge production in South Africa. In other words, we knew from the get-go that Isandla Institute would be unique in the space it tried to occupy as a black-led entity.

Whilst all of these fantasies unspooled with abandon we were suddenly confronted with the opportunity to conduct a massive applied research project for the Department of Constitutional Development that was smack bang in the centre of the policy space we had imagined ourselves playing in. The assignment was to conduct a national study on the relationship between local economic development and poverty reduction in ten municipalities with an eye on generating policy lessons for the whole of local government. In 1998 we published the results in a two-volume set: *Case Studies on LED and Poverty* and *Linking Local Economic*

Development to Poverty Alleviation. Since these were distributed to the whole local government policy community, Isandla Institute was immediately and irrevocably on the map. We could not have dreamed for a more strategic positioning in our founding period.

Once we recovered from the intensity of this project, Frank and I had a long and hard reality-check. Frank was keen for us to co-direct but on condition we moved the operations to Johannesburg. As a conflicted but die-hard Capetonian, I was reluctant even though I knew that the epicentre of the development knowledge “business” was of course Gauteng. But I thought that it could feed into our idiosyncratic identity to locate marginally, but through our work, strike out at the centre. And so, we came to the conclusion that I would become the operational director and Frank would lead as Chairperson of the board but with an explicit mandate to be hands-on.

We knew from the get go that Isandla Institute would be unique in the space it tried to occupy.

In 1999, with a flurry of requests and engagements, it was clear that we needed to beef up with some high calibre core capacity. Then Peter Cranko entered the picture, to leave a profound imprint in terms of Isandla's reputation and methodologies. Peter had a similar activist background that snaked through Planact and the Gauteng government. But before joining Isandla Institute, he worked for the international consultancy firm, Monitor. He then transposed the rigorous evidence-based model of consultancy work into Isandla Institute which enabled us to continue doing a range of high profile consultancy assignments for various government departments, NGOs and social movements between 1999 and 2001. However, Peter's skills set and professional drive was brilliantly complemented by the encyclopaedic knowledge of Firoz Khan who joined us as senior researcher in 1999/2000. Between the two of them, they produced one of the

finest policy perspectives on partnerships that continue to carry more weight and insight than most of the now fashionable perspectives on partnerships. They published the *Community-Municipal Partnerships* in 2000 in service of work commissioned by the Department of Constitutional Development. This publication demonstrates Isandla's unique methodology and influence in stark terms. The mimeograph is based on empirical data, funnelled through a tailor-made conceptual framework and provides a number of practical suggestions for action. At the same time, it also points to what we do know and requires further research.

Parallel to the partnerships work, Isandla Institute produced a number of high impact public policy reports on poverty reduction for national and local government, as well as NGO coalitions such as SANGOCO around 2000. The then Cape Metropolitan Council adopted a policy model that explained how municipalities can simultaneously pursue poverty reduction and shared growth. This framework was subsequently studied by many other municipalities and international development agencies. DPLG adopted an indigents policy that was heavily informed by our work, impacting directly on millions of poor South Africans who had a right to systematic relief from the state. At the same time, since we positioned ourselves between government and often very critical NGOs, we were able to create shared concepts, discourses and spaces for actors on both sides to agree on what (local) poverty dynamics involved and what should be prioritised to address those, with reference to who should do what and how a larger democratic milieu can be sustained. Susan Parnell was pivotal to the local governance and poverty reduction work, whilst Firoz Khan and I took the lead on civil society perspectives on the problematique.

This work led into the study we undertook for Sedibeng in 2001/2002 which sought to develop an organisational development perspective on how the civil society system could be made more effective to impact on poverty reduction.

It was through this work that the current leader of Isandla Institute, Mirjam van Donk, made her imprint on the intellectual and professional ethos of the organisation for the first time. This study proved to be hugely influential as numerous organisations, networks and donors turned to it as a framework for funding, assessment, support and dialogue.

A constant across the life of Isandla Institute was a belief in the notion that ideas matter for good policy and implementation. From day one, Isandla Institute was in the business of drawing people together to debate, write, exchange and of course, vitally, disagree. Thus, Isandla Institute became known for its unusual workshops, public seminars and occasional papers.

A constant across the life of Isandla Institute was a belief in the notion that ideas matter for good policy and implementation.

• • • • •
Beyond this, there was also an active publications programme which, ambitiously, sought to produce new knowledge that would penetrate the institutions of higher learning as source materials in training the next generation of local development practitioners. Thus, the books of Isandla Institute remain widely read amongst undergraduate and postgraduate students and demonstrate that it is possible to bring rigour to the development policy landscape. The Isandla Institute books are:

- van Donk, M., M. Swilling, E. Pieterse & Parnell, S. (eds.) 2008. *Consolidating Developmental Local Government: Lessons from the South Africa Experiment*. Cape Town: UCT Press.
- Pieterse, E. and Meintjies, F. (eds.) 2004. *Voices of the Transition: The Politics, Poetics and Practices of Development in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers.
- Khan, F. and P. Thring (eds.) 2003. *Housing Policy and Practice in Post-Apartheid*

South Africa. Johannesburg: Heinemann Publishers.

- Parnell, S., E. Pieterse, M. Swilling & D. Wooldridge (eds.) 2002. *Democratising Local Government. The South African Experiment*. Cape Town: UCT Press.

For us, though, the books were important as an output but as important was the process that fed into the production of these volumes. In this regard, what stands out for me is a two-day workshop we organised with the potential authors of *Voices of the Transition*. At this occasion we gathered a diverse cross-section of South African development activists who were all deeply immersed in the anti-apartheid struggle, but ten years after 1994 were leading highly unforeseen (professional) lives. The question we wanted them to grapple with was: what was the meaning of the transition for them through the prism of their own trajectories. The idea was to surface a different set of registers and discourses, more affective, about the complexities of the South African story. Almost all of the participants commented about how challenged they felt by the process and how, in the busy-ness of their post-apartheid lives, they have very little room for reflection; and how important leading a reflective life is to be an effective development activist amidst the complexity of the South African condition.

I continue to marvel at how an organisation with such a small inner core can have such a large intellectual footprint.

• • • • •
A very similar dynamic was at work in one of the other more low-key interventions of Isandla Institute. Between 2004 and 2007, we ran a reading group for mainly black urban professionals in Cape Town who were all committed to the ideals of social integration, africentricity, sustainability and social vitality but isolated in their respective institutional contexts. The reading group was an open space committed to the exploration of ideas and attentiveness to the professional and personal

challenges of being an effective urbanist. It was the most important intellectual resource for me over this period and profoundly shaped my research, publications and praxis.

I cannot think of any other public interest research organisation that had the dexterity to both deliver and make room for effective empowering spaces to allow knowledge networks to emerge, consolidate and influence numerous sites of urban place making in highly subtle ways.

Since 2004 my role in Isandla Institute shifted from staff member to Associate and Board member. So, it is appropriate to conclude these brief reflections with an acknowledgement of the outstanding contribution the organisation is making in its current incarnation. Isandla Institute seems to have perfected the art of retaining a very small core, work smartly with various knowledge partners and still influence key decision-makers in government and civil society with cutting edge ideas about how to understand and realise just and democratic cities.

I continue to marvel at how an organisation with such a small inner core can have such a large intellectual footprint, which is a big part of why my commitment to the organisation's values and aspirations remain as firm as ever. I remain deeply grateful to the current Board and staff for the gift of our collective experiment.

On some days I am even convinced that maybe I'll awake from a drunken stupor, have Frank next to me with a quizzical look about where I wondered off to... And then to realise that the past ten years have not been a dream, has not just been a fantasy between two comrades, but in fact the lived reality we celebrate this year.

On this note, I toast to the legacy and future of the organisation, making its mark in the realisation of socially just and sustainable African cities.

Aluta Continua!