

## Community education in times of Covid-19

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There is an African proverb that says ‘a smooth sea doesn’t make a skilled sailor’. We are currently on a very rough sea and it feels like we are in a rubber dinghy that bobs up and down – not unlike those small blow-up boats that refugees use, sustained by a hope for survival and arriving in a better world. The pandemic of Covid-19 has rocked the world – and while we created the conditions for its thriving, we were blind to the way we ravaged the earth paving the way for environmental, economic and human emergencies and a climate crisis from which we may not recover. There were many warning signs which we ignored, and as Mike Davis says, ‘the long-anticipated monster is finally at the door’, and global capitalism totally impotent in the face of this biological crisis.

The huge disparities and inequalities that characterise South African society and daily life have come into stark relief: Apartheid geography dictates that most whites still live in some parts of the city, well-resourced in terms of internet access and infrastructure, and brown and black people in other parts, further away, in crowded conditions with unreliable and scant access to internet, food insecurity and often even without running water to wash their hands, nor the space to allow for physical distancing. But that is not all: the corona virus seeks out compromised immune systems and there is plenty of tuberculosis, HIV/Aids, diabetes, high blood pressure in the poor living conditions of townships. In a cruel reversal, the long-term unemployed who have created ways of coping, are almost better off than those who had employment and now lost it and find themselves without the means to feed the household. No wonder ‘fake news’ thrives – who would not want to believe the promise of free data, food, water supplies? Who, scared of infection and troubled by so many people around wearing facemasks so you cannot be sure of their identity but you know there are many thugs and druglords living in the area; who then would not fall for sensational stories? And when the army is unleashed to ‘protect our citizens’ – that same army and police force that people remember well, chasing and shooting at them, and they are told to cooperate although

they are bullied and threatened – how is that supposed to make people feel more protected and cared for?

As always (all over the world) it is the women who catch it most: already breadwinners and carers, parents and counsellors, teachers and housekeepers now have the additional tasks to make sure the children do not venture out of the house, do not demand to eat the scarce food resources, stay away from the infected uncle or grandfather, wash their hands every time they have been outside to go to the toilet or spaza shop; they wipe down all surfaces and objects with disinfectant that is hard to come by, fashion face-masks, keep themselves and the girls safe from domestic violence and sexual abuse, and organise food parcels, strategise for the distribution of donations, plan who might have a permit to deliver the parcels to the elderly, children-headed households, disabled people. Many of them have the skills needed to weather rough seas, as they organise and mobilise and strategise in the midst of multiple risks.

These are the women who usually come to our education workshops; they make up the bulk of participants. Right now, no one is allowed to leave the house, save for shopping or to go to the doctor. Thus, the women appear to be a captive audience (pun intended) as long as we switch from face-to-face workshops to phone-based education. However, with the tangible immediate danger of infection and the risk of hospitalisation, education may be far from their minds, irrespective of what we have to offer. Besides, I am technologically barely literate – I only just know the rudimentary workings of social messaging. The call for ‘physical distancing, social solidarity’ demands staying apart, yet having dialogue. I also realise, re-designing popular education workshops on current issues, socio-political analysis, or women’s health requires that we ensure participants will have enough data for the phone, food for the household (the meal provided at workshops often supplies a whole household), and distracting activities for the children so the mother can concentrate on her lesson even for short periods. And then there is the pressure to ensure this lesson is truly worthwhile, answers some real needs and questions, captures the imagination and offers some escape and pleasure! All via a telephone, where she remains isolated but crowded in, without the joys of human warmth and laughter?

The most important lessons now, surely, must be those that help us to watch that we do not fall back into the old normality, but ask ‘What can we, as activists, do to forge a more democratic, just and free future for all?’ The lockdown will no doubt be used for authoritarian purposes and to deepen top-down control with a particular swipe to the Left, hence women must be able to recognise authoritarianism, crude populism, militarisation, fake news, and how community activism used for survival can be employed to gain control. How do we use our various expertise so that women develop both insight into the workings of power and the voice to make leaders listen? How do we stimulate their future anticipation to embrace localisation of production and consumption, food security, energy generation and use? How do we promote the idea of debt moratoria and relief, of capital controls in developed countries to stop the bleeding, the recognition of the public good, like health and education?

We are in a conundrum: On the one hand, the expertise of on-the-ground survival, on the other, the challenge to capture imaginations for real transformation. It is time to be brave and forge new normalities, as they suit different communities and countries. Demanding and campaigning for a basic income grant would be a good start – but I fear the person who has stored kilograms of staples will be more concerned about how to sell those than to link arms with others, for a more just future for all.

As educators and community activists, we have to learn more about turning into skilled sailors. We know, ‘when the music changes, so does the dance’ – and our community activist/educator steps will have to follow a light tread and a swift swing, an inventive bend and a fiery rhythm. This dance shall not be the dance of death, nor the frivolous twirls of courtly entertainment – nor should it follow the thud of army boots. But, unless the music changes, this new dance will not happen