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# Investing in community-driven development: The case of the Woodford Library

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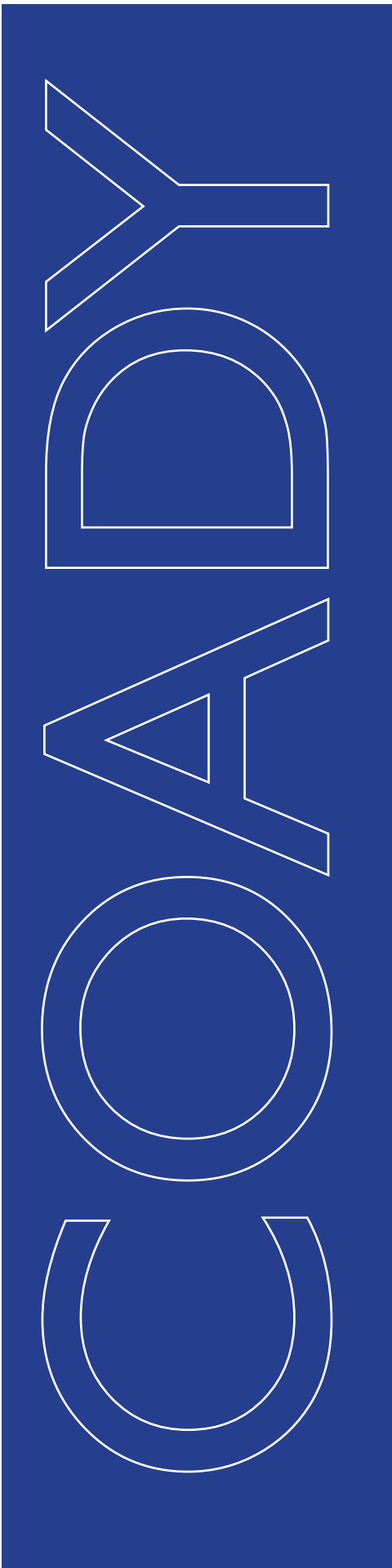
## Background

There are many people from government offices, non-profit organizations, and donor circles who are talking about asset-based, community-driven and citizen-led development. These have become buzzwords in South Africa. However, very little has been documented about what these kinds of approaches look like on the ground. The purpose of this case study is to document a deliberate effort to stimulate, support and invest in asset-based and community-driven development in South Africa and to discuss what can be learned from this experience. Thank you to the Ekwaluseni High School Library Committee, the Philakahle Well-Being Centre and LegalWise for taking a risk and being open about sharing their experiences with a broader audience.

## Introduction

Children's education is an important priority for families living in the village of Woodford, a community of several hundred residents located 10km outside the small town of Bergville, KZN, South Africa. Although there are a number of informal businesses in the area, 18% of the population is unemployed, 40% of the population is "economically inactive", and 36% of households have no source of income (Statistics South Africa, 2007). This is one reason parents attach strong importance to quality education, hoping that their children will gain critical knowledge and skills to prepare them for the future. When asked to reflect on the proudest moments in their history, the construction of the primary school in 1974 and high school in 1989 were vividly described by residents. In these instances, each family raised enough money to pay local labourers to build these schools on land donated by local land owners.

Years from now, the library organizers hope that Woodford residents will remember the construction of the Ekwaluseni Library on these very same school grounds as another proud moment in their history. Formally inaugurated in November 2013, the beautiful library is equipped with fifteen computers, a few thousand books, and two librarians – a far cry from the cabinet filled with 100 books that served as the library previously. The structure is not typical of other rural libraries across South Africa: it has more colour and style, and is nearly three times the size of the standard metal shipping containers that donors and government agencies have tended to deliver to communities for libraries in recent years.



The physical presence of this unique and attractive library, however, masks the considerable challenges that this community, and everyone who supported them, have endured over the past two years to make this library a reality...so much so that not everyone agrees it was worth the effort. The intention of this case study is not to



*The Ekwaluseni Library*

dwell on these challenges, but to learn from them, so that donors looking to invest in, and respond to, citizen-led development will have a clearer idea of what is possible; so that non-profit organizations can best straddle the gap between donors and communities; and communities themselves have a better idea of the potential and limitations of volunteerism.

## Mobilizing Assets for Community-Driven Development: South Africans come to Canada

In September 2011, six volunteers from the Philakahle Well-Being Centre were selected from the Bergville area to attend a course called Mobilizing Assets for Community-Driven Development at the Coady International Institute in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada. The course was designed based on the lessons learned from communities around the world that have managed to drive their own development using their own resources, at least initially. Later, these communities were able to negotiate with outside supporters on their own terms, inviting investment that complemented their own efforts. The course moves away from a sole focus on needs, problems and externally-driven agendas that have tended to dominate the development discourse in South Africa; and helps communities to also identify assets and opportunities, first focusing on small activities and gradually expanding to more ambitious ones over time.

This course seemed to resonate with a number of South Africans at that time, where debates about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship were at the forefront of political debate. Five other South Africans took the course along with the “*Bergvillians*” (as they affectionately became known), which is the largest contingent of South Africans the course has ever had in Canada.

Lesley Haynes, Corporate Social Investment Manager at LegalWise (a private insurance company), was one of these participants. She decided to take this course because she was starting to question her organization’s way of approaching community development – and really the development sector as a whole. She, along with her colleague Helen Cloete, who later took this course in South Africa, decided to take time-out and re-evaluate their corporate social investment strategy.

## Mobilizing Assets in South Africa?

Upon graduation, Lesley and Helen became something of a trail-blazing duo, outspoken and frank, asking the tough questions of their colleagues and of other donors: Why are so many projects unsustainable? Why can’t we be more appreciative and responsive to what communities are already doing, and build on that? Are we really relevant? Are we causing more harm than good? Why don’t donors ever shut up and listen to their NGO partners, and they in turn to the communities they work with?

Albeit on a short leash, their managers allowed them to test out a new way of engaging with non-profits and the communities they worked with to see if they could start to discuss some of these critical questions. Lesley and Helen thought a logical starting place would be to approach their fellow graduates, the *Bergvillians*, at the Philakahle Well-Being Centre to see if there was interest in a learning partnership. Everyone agreed that Lesley and Helen would come to Bergville later that year.

Typically, Lesley and Helen did not spend much time “mucking around” at the community level. It was time-consuming and costly and their NGO counterparts were in a better position to understand the context and to follow up on community activities. But this kind of faceless investing was starting to bother them. Not only because they felt like their relationships were a bit shallow, but also because they felt like their skills and talents as people were being undervalued. They wanted to be treated like a true “partner,” a word that they had started to resent for its overuse and empty meaning. “We wanted to stop the

one-offs, the hit and runs, and we wanted to learn with communities for a change.”

And so it was in February 2012 that they first made their way to Bergville to meet with staff from Philakahle, a burgeoning organization of young and energetic staff members and volunteers. Along with a previous graduate of the Mobilizing Assets course from 2009, the *Bergvillians* had been working hard for a number of months since they returned from Canada, trying to identify some communities with some energy for creating their own change. In each community, they facilitated a process whereby groups mapped their individual skills, associations, natural and physical infrastructure and financial resources, and came up with some ideas of things they could do without having to wait for NGO, donor, or government support. The *Bergvillians* named this initiative Masisukume Sakhe, or MSP for short, which translated to “Let us get up and build.”<sup>1</sup>



*The Bergvillians in action in Woodford, KZN*

It was not easy. And not everyone was receptive. NGOs in the area typically paid stipends to people who participated in their projects. Not only did the *Bergvillians* not pay stipends, they rather asked what kinds of things people were already doing and wanted to build on that. Sometimes community members refused to engage altogether. They were accustomed to development activities being largely about service delivery or training. And when they did take on new initiatives, government officials would become suspicious and tell people that the government would do it for them if they waited. “We just decided to stop trying to force it,” explained one staff member. “This way of thinking doesn’t resonate with everyone. If people weren’t receptive, then we’d move on, finding and following people who were already organizing around

local resources and were looking for someone to support their ideas.”

## Meeting in Woodford, KZN

One such place was in Woodford, where the *Bergvillians* had been working with some spirited students and teachers for a number of years. When asked to map out what they wanted the future of Woodford to look like, they drew a library fully equipped with books and computers and discussed what they could contribute to make it happen.

It was in this context that LegalWise met the students and teachers of the Ekwaluseni High School. It was a sunny day and the students had clearly been expecting visitors. They prepared a magnificent drama with singing, poetry and dance. It was easy to see that these children were proud: Who wouldn’t want to invest in them? So when Lesley ultimately asked, “What would you like to see in the future”, one young girl stood up and described the library they had discussed earlier. A teacher also chimed in, whispering into the little girl’s ear “...and a science lab.”

## The Library

Community-driven? Maybe not entirely, but definitely student or school-driven. One of the conditions for LegalWise’s investment was that the community would raise and contribute the first 20,000 Rand (roughly \$1,800USD) towards the library. This was a new move for them.... and for the community. This community donation, they thought, would be an indication of their commitment. MSP staff initially took the lead on the plan of action and organized some fundraisers. While the children organized car washes and sold candy and ribbons to raise money, they fell short of the goal.

MSP staff decided to take a step back, wondering if this was something that people in Woodford really wanted, and suggested that the community needed to take a more active role in fundraising. “This was not MSP’s library. This was the school’s library. We told them we were here to support them at any time and to come see us when they were ready.” Faced with the fear of losing LegalWise’s investment, each of the 450 families that sent children to the school contributed 50 Rand. Five months later, they came to the MSP office with the 20,000 Rand and established a 12-member committee of teachers, parents, students and elders to manage the construction of the library.

<sup>1</sup> MSP is an initiative of Philakahle Well-Being Centre

## A Different Kind of Partnership

In ways that are not typical of corporate donors, Lesley and Helen wanted to be equal partners, engaged in the regular ups and downs, learning about how to work with non-profits and communities in a way that respected what each actor brings to the table. They explained, “We wanted to learn about investment that is more responsive to communities so we could share our learning with others in the CSI sector.”

Based in Johannesburg, Lesley and Helen spoke with MSP staff regularly over the phone, by email, or in person. Soon thereafter they signed an MoU detailing each party’s responsibilities. Since MSP staff already had established relationships with Woodford residents, it was agreed that they would act as an intermediary between LegalWise and the library committee, but Lesley and Helen would be invited to participate in key decision-making moments.

On a rainy day in September 2012, MSP staff invited Lesley and Helen to Woodford to discuss how the library committee wanted to spend the 20,000 Rand they had raised. Lesley explained that these negotiations were a “real test of patience...they were slow and messy and we were starting to think we would never reach a decision. We had to hold ourselves back from taking control and trust that people would organize themselves in their own way.”



*Lesley and MSP staff discussing how to spend library funds*

The heavy downpour on the corrugated iron roof did not make matters any easier. It was almost impossible to hear anything anybody was saying. Awkwardly, people spent most of the day shouting at one another (mostly because of the noise, but admittedly also because of the mild irritation that everyone in the room was feeling). When it

was all said and done, community members prioritized buying books followed by tables, chairs, computers and carpets.

The dialogue then moved on to construction. And this is where expectations diverged. Helen and Lesley assumed the committee would be more focused on sustainability: If this was something parents, students and teachers really wanted, wouldn’t they be willing to provide an in-kind contribution of community labour? The committee was confused at this suggestion: They didn’t think they would have to physically build the library. Isn’t that what LegalWise’s investment was supposed to help pay for? And if they had to build the library themselves, who would provide them with food?

It was almost impossible for Lesley and Helen to compromise on this point on principle. They explained that this was not a hand-out. They wanted a genuine partnership where each party contributed the assets and the resources that they could – in this case, it was the community’s sweat equity.

## Reluctant Acceptance

In the end, MSP staff and the committee agreed that they would work with the community to donate their labour and provide food, while LegalWise would pay for any technical assistance and materials that they required so long as they were consulted before the purchase. This “reluctance” played out in some bizarre and complicated twists over the following months. Community members, accustomed to being paid for their labour through government public works programs, refused to engage, arguing that it was the government’s responsibility to provide them with (or at least pay them to construct) a library. It didn’t help that there was a rumour (untrue) that 250,000 Rand had been transferred from LegalWise for this purpose. The few people who did engage intensively ended up forgoing other opportunities to earn income. The students, who originally dreamed of having the library, could not very well give their labour as it was against the national child labour laws. The original committee had experienced turnover, and apart from a very committed teacher who helped motivate people throughout the process, the original vision for the library was gone. Things were at a standstill.

This was a difficult time for the *Bergvillians*, who had resolved from the beginning to respect the pace of change and the capacities of Woodford residents. They explained:

*Sometimes change happens slowly, and sometimes we need to make quick decisions. If momentum has stalled, do we not also have to respect that? Do we step back and let the committee fail? Or do we take over and undermine their ownership?*

It was also a difficult time for Lesley and Helen, who had taken a leap of faith and were feeling similarly disillusioned:

*Were we misguided in our understanding of community-driven development? Were our expectations too high? Is it wrong to expect the same return on investment in our CSI initiatives as in our insurance programs?*

Equally concerning was the slow pace of the construction. Lesley and Helen had presented their investment in Woodford as something of a test case to their managers: would this new way of working result in more sustainable projects while still meeting the bottom line? If the library was not constructed on time and on budget, would they be allowed to continue? How could they still deliver while staying true to the principles of community-driven development?

## A Hopeful Turn

At this point, an entrepreneurial young brick-maker who had moved to Woodford about 10 years ago from Johannesburg emerged to move things along. LegalWise agreed to pay him 8 Rand per brick and he agreed that he and his team would provide the labour to build the library. The team preferred to make their own food so they made the condition that they should get 5000 Rand (roughly \$400US) to cover this cost. The committee was initially reluctant to pay these costs as it compromised the original arrangement for the library, but eventually agreed that this would be the most expedient way to get it done. The committee relayed that they would pay him from the 20,000 Rand they had raised once he submitted the receipts. The committee also made the condition that if additional people wanted to help, the young man would accept them, imparting valuable construction skills.

What everyone hoped would be a smooth ride turned sour. The young man allegedly asked for the money for food up front and he refused to supply receipts. Since this was not what they agreed to, the committee rejected his

request. He continued to work and made an executive decision to move the original building site that had been agreed upon with the engineers to a site further from the school. The new slanted ground meant that water could flood parts of the library when it rained. The library's distance from the school meant they would likely need to hire a security guard to safe guard the building. A great deal of excavation also had to be done and a backhoe had to be hired. None of these costs were budgeted for and the committee mistakenly assumed LegalWise would pay. Since LegalWise was not consulted in these decisions, the committee covered the costs from the now dwindling funds they had raised.



Local brick-makers building the walls of the library

Additional "volunteers", either inspired by seeing the beginning of the construction or hearing the misinformation that they would be paid, eventually decided to join in on the construction. Apparently, this assistance was not welcomed by the young man on the grounds that they didn't have the right expertise. This caused a lot of tension within the community.

The young man eventually withdrew and other community members took over, not expecting payment or stipends, but rather what they called "soap money," referring to token payments made not because they are expected, but as a nice gesture. They also insisted on being fed while they worked. The committee agreed to pay 5000 Rand for the "soap" and a tourist in the area raised 6000 Rand through an appeal to social media for the food.

The outside structure was eventually finished thanks to a labour provided by a variety of people: community volunteers, the Bergvillians, prisoners from a Government Works program, and an intern who was placed at Philakahle for six months.

## Lowering Expectations

By the time the library was ready enough on the outside to start thinking about the inside, it was already late. Everyone was frustrated. It became apparent that if the library was to be finished, MSP staff and LegalWise would have to take a more central role. To this end, LegalWise donated a truck full of furniture to the library after two of their offices were renovated. MSP took over the arduous procurement process for shelves, flooring, doors, and windows. Since many of the required materials were not available locally, attaining three quotes for the materials (a policy requirement of LegalWise) often took an inordinate amount of time, which slowed momentum once again. It also took staff away from other daily activities that they were expected to perform.



*MSP staff and volunteers painting the inside walls*

Eventually, LegalWise pushed for an inauguration date in November 2013. Afraid that they would not meet the deadline, the library committee asked LegalWise and community members if they could spend the remaining money that they had raised to pay some skilled labourers outside of Woodford to finish the final touches. This was duly accomplished, but again, incurred additional costs that were not budgeted for. On the morning of the inauguration, there were still some last minute jobs to do, but in the end, the library was ready just in time.

## The Inauguration

Despite the onerous process that weighed heavily on everyone's shoulders, the library by all accounts was beautiful. There seemed to be a collective sigh among all involved and a closeness looking back at all of the rela-



*Students celebrating at the inauguration*

tionships that had been built to make the library a reality over the two-year period. "We can't believe it, but we did it," explained one teacher. "It reminds us of the times we built the schools and we realize again that it is possible for us to do positive things together."

The students were thrilled and they danced and sang energetically as they had when they met Lesley and Helen for the first time, but this time with far more gusto. Parents and teachers were relieved that their children would have more opportunities to learn from literature that reinforced classroom concepts, and to use a computer in their home community rather than going into town. MSP staff members were happy to get back to their other responsibilities. And government officials, who had not been involved in the construction process, ironically praised the outside agencies and foreigners for "saving this poor community." This made everyone involved chuckle just a little bit given that this statement could not have been further from the intention behind this partnership.

## Epilogue

Today, the library is used daily by students for reading, writing, public speaking, debates and drama. These programs are run by two librarians who are supported by a stipend from LegalWise for one year. The *Bergvillians* have made connections with a local IT company that is now offering computer courses in the library for students for a small fee. Once this program is fully operational, the proceeds will replace LegalWise's support.

# Questions

1. What do you think each actor learned in this case study: the library committee, MSP staff, LegalWise?
2. In hindsight, what could have been done differently?
3. This case raises the issue of how to balance the different ways of working between:
  - paid employees of a business accountable to their managers and needing to meet the “bottom-line”
  - paid employees of an NGO that straddle the gap between donors and the communities where they work and live
  - unpaid volunteers with multiple responsibilities acting to improve their communityHow do you think this balance can be achieved, based on your experience?
4. What guidelines can be drawn up about "community-driven development" and "responsive investment" based on this story?

