



Making towns & cities work for people



Discovering and Celebrating our Shared Identity... The Planact Way!

Planact is 20 years old this year. To mark this occasion, we are undertaking a directed research project into the organization's history, to unearth both personal and intellectual perspectives on Planact's philosophy of development, its actual practice and its influence. In the process of looking backwards, we hope to contribute to charting a future for the organization and staking a claim for the permanent role of NGOs in the development of the country.

Who is Planact?

Planact is a non-governmental organization with a special place in the history of community development in South Africa, especially the Gauteng area where its activity has been concentrated. The organization was established in 1985 as a voluntary association of professionals who came together to assist community organizations to propose and advocate for alternative development plans to those of the apartheid regime, and then to facilitate a civic and trade union voice in policy development processes during the transition to democracy. In 1994, Planact was formally registered as a Section 21 company. Planact remained rooted in disadvantaged communities, and was heavily involved in policy development as the democratic government became established, but also extended its work into local government capacity-building. Planact continues its work today in the strong traditions it has established, in support of its mission: to support and mobilise community processes that enhance good governance at the local level to improve people's habitable environment in ways that alleviate poverty. Currently Planact's main activities are:

- Local governance capacity-building through training/workshops to CBOs and municipal officials
- Support to CBOs on housing provision and access to basic services
- Research and advocacy on related policy issues



HISTORY

An Exciting History...

Throughout its history, Planact has been both a resource for poor, marginalised communities--from Langa to Uitenhage, Lesotho to Duncan Village, Soweto to Wattville, Diepsloot to Vosloorus—all trying to collectively take charge of their own development; and a place for debate, experimentation, professional development, and the formation of life-long values for those who have worked for the organization. Many former employees have moved into influential positions within government and the development sector. Planact has played host to development practitioners from all over the world, attracting those inspired by South Africa's quest for democracy. All who have been involved with this dynamic organization have much to say about the impact of Planact's work and the evolution of Planact's identity through the many changes and challenges that have faced the country, and in particular the civil society sector, over the past 20 years.

Through all of these changes—from the idealistic days of the apartheid struggle, to the thrilling but tense transition to democracy, and the slow consolidation of a new state apparatus with drastically different priorities from the former regime—how has a community development NGO like Planact managed to survive, thrive, and remain relevant? And yet, what common values and practices have persisted throughout that turbulent history, defining the organization and the people who have been a part of it? What have we learned from Planact's work over the years—the mistakes and the successes--and how can we capture those lessons to be ever more intentional and effective in our community development practice?

Planact is perhaps a small organization, but like the proverbial ripples in a pond, its influence can be felt at many levels in South African society. Many national policies on housing, development planning and local government have had direct input from Planact staff, former staff and community leaders with whom Planact has worked, and many policies have also been indirectly influenced by Planact's practice. Planact has continued to be involved in putting those very policies into practice, and testing the conditions in which they can be made workable as well as stumbling upon the barriers that can make them unworkable.





WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Why is this important?

At this point in history, it is more relevant than ever to take stock of this experience. NGOs have faced an uncertain environment in the post-apartheid years-- moving from attempts to provide alternatives to the repressive policies of apartheid and exposing the inequities and injustices that have resulted, to negotiating a new role with the democratic state as advocates, innovators, and implementers in (sometimes uneasy) partnership with the state. Yet in our view NGOs such as Planact have played a critical role in transformation, a role which continues to be significant and which should be widely recognised.

It is unfortunate that the vast majority of this experience has gone undocumented and is therefore difficult to synthesize for purposes of contributing to debates around development within government, academic and professional circles, as well as to assist in producing new practitioners and policy-makers that are informed by prior practice. That is what this project, at least in part, seeks to remedy. We intend to use the information gathered to produce a publication for information-sharing in the sector, and to improve current organisational practices to meet future challenges.



The Project in Four Phases

We want to reflect on our history to inform our identity for the future. We can't do so alone as Planact's history lives in the memories of current and past staff, our "clients" of the past, our current partners, our funders and the range of people and organizations associated with Planact over the years. Planact's history is also a slice of a bigger history – the history of relationships between the state and civil society over two decades and how NGOs in our country responded. The following outlines the four phases of the project and associated objectives:

ACTIVITY PHASE	OBJECTIVES
<p>Phase 1: Secondary research: a review of existing documentation on Planact's activities and literature review on the NGO sector and relations between the state and civil society.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To document a case of institution-building in the civil society organization (CSO) sector within the context of historical change • To generate interest in, and appreciation for, the role of independent civil society organizations (CSOs) in community-building and development.
<p>Phase 2: The 'Planact Way' Convention: a three-day conference during which participants will share perspectives on Planact and the NGO sector</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide a venue for dialogue and critical reflection on the role of urban NGOs and those concerned about the future of South African towns and cities.
<p>Phase 3: Interviews with key individuals associated with Planact:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To allow an opportunity to follow-up on and deepen what comes out of the Convention. This additional information will add richness and detail to Planact's history.
<p>Phase 4: Production of document and ongoing interactions and partnerships: With the production of a manuscript documenting the information gathered from phases 1-3, we hope to have a period of dissemination and discussion.</p> <p>We see this phase as one which implements the "Planact Way." We hope to have re-invigorated ourselves and the sector with the clarity that comes from capturing memory and identity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To promote an understanding of participatory methods in the practice of community development. • To share project-level knowledge and experiences with the wider development community in a field where much is accomplished but too little is documented and shared. • To provide a reflection document for other CSOs in order to build a network of those advocating for the rights of the poor in SA cities and to strengthen their capacity to defend this space.

GET INVOLVED

How YOU can get involved!

Planact is working with Development Works to coordinate and document this process. We are looking for anyone with an interest in Planact and the broader NGO sector to offer ideas and energy to help guide the process and contribute to the research. We are also looking for funding to help make the 'Planact Way' Convention a success. If you would like to get involved, please contact:

Nellie Agingu or Becky Himlin; (011) 403-6291 or info@planact.org.za.

Also, please help us expand our database of Planact-affiliated persons who might be interested in participating in the convention or interview phase, and be sure you are on our mailing list for further updates on these events.

SHARE

Your Story is Our History: **Share your stories at the 'Planact Way' Convention**

Planact's history resides in the memories of those who made it. We hope that in taking it out of memory – in documenting it – we will recover Planact's institutional memory. We hope that this institutional memory can be recovered by those who made, and are making, Planact, and that this process will help grow Planact into a future which is held strong by its roots. That is why we are organizing a three-day Convention to bring together those who have been involved with Planact over the years.

The Convention is also an opportunity for individuals to revisit the past and reflect on and celebrate their collective achievement. We will be asking for papers and short "impression pieces" or vignettes for presentation at the Convention. The Convention will not only look backwards. The second half will be a look into the future, in which we will be asking the Planact body to provide us with their input on the 'Planact Way' in the current and future periods. Other NGOs are invited to learn from Planact's experiences and to offer their own experiences to provide context and richness to this process of discovery.

Contact Planact at (011) 403-6291 for more information or to express your interest in writing a paper.

* We have secured partial funding for this project but we are still fund-raising for the Convention.





planact

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