

## The 'Planact Way': Reflections on Planact's exploration of its history

By Becky Himlin, November 2007 (published in Planact Annual Report, 2007)

We have nearly concluded quite a long process of looking into Planact's past as a way of understanding the principles, ideas and practices that have shaped the identity of the organisation—loosely termed the 'Planact Way'-- and finding out what wisdom we could gather for strengthening the organisation today. The following is a brief reflection on the value of this exercise and some of the key learnings.

It was clear that Planact had faced a number of changes, both internally and externally, since its founding in 1985. It had also been 'home' for a number of different types of people with different motivations and views of the world. Planact in a pre- 1994 period was radically different from Planact in the post- 1994 period. It had started as a collective, as a way for progressive professionals, mainly from the built environment subjects, to make a contribution to the struggle against apartheid and to be a place where people could start to envisage what a post-apartheid society could look like. As a progressive organisation associated with the Mass Democratic Movement, funding streams from outside the country were initially profuse, allowing the organisation to grow a staff of between 30 and 40 members. The grassroots approach of Planact was unstructured and involved creating a series of relationships with communities and getting on-the-ground information about the challenges they were facing, helping them to voice their demands to the then-apartheid authorities and occasionally getting some concessions that would improve the lives of the people. The organisation was then positioned to move quickly into negotiation-mode in the run-up to the first democratic elections, as it assisted various civic structures and SANCO to articulate policy positions meant to address the inequities of the past.

The elections of 1994 signified a new era and there were rapid changes—many Planact staff went into government positions, and foreign funding streams began to move quickly to the government, creating a funding crisis for Planact in 1995 (and precipitating the closure of many other organisations). There was serious divergence of opinion on the place and function of NGOs (then called 'service organisations') in a post-apartheid society, part of the larger debate on whether formations of civil society were still relevant—according to some views, now the government was supposed to take over where these organisations had left off. This ambivalence towards civil society and NGOs on the part of those in government is still in evidence today. Many communities have, ironically, felt disempowered in the era of democracy, at least partly because of confusion about the role of their organisations in a post-apartheid society. In 1994, Planact 'professionalised' its operations by registering as a Section 21 company, to remain attractive to those donors who were still funding civil society, and also to attract funding from the new government for policy development and capacity-building activities. Planact survived by being able to bring in such contracts to replace the sudden loss in donor funds.

In the post-apartheid period, Planact was intensely involved in policy development on the White Paper for Local Government, which laid the foundation for permanent local government structures in South Africa. Planact's involvement, amongst others, helped ensure the ideas of developmental local government, integrated development planning and participatory approaches to planning were introduced in the White Paper, and these principles also guided Planact's intervention strategy in

communities and in its capacity-building work with the fledging democratically-elected local government structures. Planact was instrumental in developing training material and delivering training programmes for the new councillors, inducting them into an understanding of these concepts and how they were expected to help address the imbalances of apartheid underdevelopment. At the same time, Planact offered similar training at community level, and direct support to building organizations in poor communities that could engage with local government to bring about development in line with community priorities. When ward committees were established by legislation to act as a link between communities and government, Planact also included these structures in its training and capacity-building efforts.

Despite all of these changes, and the different terminology used to describe Planact's programmes in the different periods, there is a surprising amount of continuity in the work it has done, focusing on two main thematic programme areas that remain today—the community-level, human settlement planning focus, and the democracy-building, participatory governance focus. In this, the *combination* of participatory governance and *integrated* community development are seen as critical to Planact's mission, with research and advocacy seen as necessary to provide a space for reflection and analysis and achieve some voice or impact in society.

A key principle that has continued to have relevance for Planact has been the commitment to work through direct engagement with 'people on the ground,' stemming from a belief that people can develop the solutions to their developmental challenges. Planact has worked as an intermediary, helping to break down complex information in ways that people can understand, trying to keep community organisations vibrant, relevant, and legitimate in their communities, and trying to keep government close to the ground as well, through continually reinforcing these values in the training it has undertaken with councillors, officials, and ward committee members. As a result, Planact has remained a place for experimentation, learning by listening and by doing, translating lessons into policy recommendations that insist on flexibility and choice. And Planact as well attempts to adapt to local level needs and expressed aspirations, not trying to impose one kind of model, but making use of tools and models as appropriate to the situation. If anything, that seems to be the 'Planact way.' It is not a neat package, but it is a critical offering to disadvantaged communities working to improve their situation.

In general, this project has affirmed that Planact does have some articulation of common values and an identity, though it has responded to radically different circumstances throughout its history. That is at least one reason why the organisation continues to exist today, although it has not been immune to the difficulties facing civil society—we have a smaller staff and we face the continual challenge of raising funds to sustain the organisation. But the project has also unearthed a healthy degree of controversy over the stance and strategy that the organisation should be adopting in the current environment, characterised by a fair degree of social conflict--due to the serious deprivation still evident in poor communities for whom government has not yet 'delivered' and the debates over some of the key policy positions taken by government that have been less than progressive or pro-poor in nature.

While we have not been able to answer all the questions the exercise has provoked, the value of the project, I think, has been to deepen our perspective on Planact's role and its practice, and to renew our commitment to remain creative and responsive, while we continue to look for good practices and successful ways to create development opportunities that work for the poor. We

hope that the various reflections on Planact's work and the development issues in which Planact has been involved, that have been gathered in the course of the project, will help to extend the conversation and the search for alternative solutions to many others that are grappling with similar issues. A collection of articles have been brought together in a manuscript, soon to be launched as a book. We offer it, not as a comprehensive analysis of Planact's entire history, but as an overview of the organisation's experience, with a smattering of interesting stories and ideas by the people who have been associated with Planact over the years, that together creates a narrative that somehow puts the 'Planact Way'-- as in, 'Planact journey'...into perspective.