

Searching for that critical edge

A reading of *Conversations* inspires a South African activist to seek new ways of sharing insights and lessons with co-workers and comrades

As a participant in *Empowerment through Information*, the training programme for fishworkers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) held in August 2003 at Chennai, India, by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), I was introduced to *Conversations* as one of the many resources produced by ICSF to facilitate the sharing of lessons and strategies amongst activists, researchers and others working with fishworkers. I started reading *Conversations* in the evenings and in between workshop sessions, initially in Chennai and then on the train across the country to Trivandrum, where the group participated in a week-long field trip to the fishing villages and societies often referred to by Nalini Nayak, one of the co-authors of the book.

For me, this reading of *Conversations* began a parallel process of profound personal and professional reflection, and the acute feelings of relief and comfort that I had on my first reading of this remarkable text remain with me now, several months after the training programme. The fishing history and terrain that we traversed externally in those few days, through challenging and exciting exchanges amongst the representatives from the seven countries and the fishers who hosted us, is also mapped out within me, with specific sites of recognition through the pages of *Conversations*.

I have tried to understand this feeling of relief—and to convey it to colleagues. In part, I think it came from a sense of recognition of shared concerns, of relief from the loneliness of censored thoughts, unarticulated frustrations and deep doubts about the ethics and values of the current fishing context in which we are working, but with little or no space to

share this concern with anyone. Most significantly, I think it comes from the way in which the conversation reminded me that the personal is political and my own politics does shape the way I work and who I am. The way the discussants reassert this old familiar notion but in a new way, infusing insights from their own activism, from socio-psychological theory, old political-economic theory and observations of the global context, brings a new understanding, albeit not necessarily stated as explicitly, to what is required of us if we want to challenge the subtle and insidious ways in which the current dominant world order is consuming us.

I think that the strength of this book lies in the space where the discussants' ideas meet, where common, shared issues in the fish sector resonate, initially amongst the three of the authors and then with the reader. For me, as a white, urban-based, middle-class South African woman, working in an NGO in the fishing sector, I was surprised at the extent to which they articulated concerns that I had imagined were limited to a particular post-apartheid political and social context. It was strangely comforting, while simultaneously unsettling, to realize that the conditions we are experiencing here in South Africa, along the coasts, within our organizations and nationally, are reflected in three other diverse contexts, and this, in itself, would seem to support one theme touched on in the book, namely, the way in which globalization is impacting in similar ways, raising the question of a need for shared responses.

Own motivations

The way in which the discussants raise the importance of recognizing that the personal is political is through their

reflections on their own motivations for doing what they do, their courage in naming the perhaps often unconscious aspects that drive us, the mythologies that we hold regarding the anthropology of fishing and the unconscious pulls that each of us is responding to in seeking to work in this sector.

What struck me was their ability to open up the contradictions in their own work, especially within the roles of 'interveners' and 'supporters'. Perhaps this struck me more forcefully coming from a context in South Africa where, following the election of the new democratic government, there has been enormous pressure to not criticize the new order, but rather, as a loyal 'comrade', to fall in line and support the African National Congress-led government. Increasingly, there is a fear of criticism.

Those organizations and individuals that do so have been accused of undermining the government—of being 'ultra-leftist'. There is now very little real reflection on values, strategy and tactics. We talk nostalgically of the old 'struggle' days when many of us sat up late into the night in reading groups, debating strategy and revolutionary theory. The references to Freirean methodology in *Conversations* and the way in which development workers sought new paradigms is familiar. However, since 1994, much of that critical reflection has disappeared and has been replaced by a technocratic pragmatism. The emphasis on the importance of process, and seeing this reflected in practice in India was most refreshing. We seem to have lost that critical edge in my organization. Reading the book and seeing the enormous value of this type of reflection got me thinking about how to create a reflective, mindful organization. What are, and were, the critical ingredients for that conversation and how can one promote that type of organizational space?

Very few of the new, university-educated development workers have been part of a political consciousness-raising process or were part of the anti-apartheid struggle. Training for transformation, and developing the skill and consciousness of political enquiry are needed now more

than ever, and yet, despite shelves full of old texts on methodology and strategies, we seem to be failing to create these conditions through the organization.

The ICSF training programme schedule was so full that we seldom had time to touch on these aspects of organizational work in the fishing sector. However, in retrospect, I think it was an underlying, latent theme in the ongoing contested discussions about gender strategies and also whether or not to work with the State in implementing models of co-management.

What struck me was that a 'sufficient' level of trust appeared to be a prerequisite for the three discussants in *Conversations*. Inspired by Michael Belliveau's reference to Winnicott, but shaped by my own feminist psychology, the concept of 'good enough parenting' came to mind. How do we create the conditions within our organizations in which individuals feel secure enough to test out ideas, without fear of rejection? How do we equip workers with the skills, attitudes and values that help to develop a reflexive praxis? *Conversations* does not answer this question directly but it models a response through the posing of questions and the reflection that is ongoing throughout the book. It is also apparent that all the three individuals in *Conversations* are highly experienced and skilled, and, to an extent, had reached a point where they could reflect with a degree of compassionate detachment on their own work and that of the organizations that they had previously been so intimately involved with.

Little theory

The questions that *Conversations* raises about how we understand the site of struggle in the fishing context is most pertinent. In South Africa, to date, there has been relatively little theoretical work done on the way in which the industry developed around a particular constellation of race, class and gendered relations. Our analysis has tended to focus on the prior history of racial inequality and sees this as the focus of our work, however increasingly it is towards the class interests that we need to turn and to the role of monopoly and global capital in squeezing small-scale fishers. The discussion on the difficulty of defining

fishers as producers and independent contractors, and the distinctive process of the proletarianization of fishers, while unique in each context, points to some of the common difficulties and challenges of organizing in this sector. In the struggle for freedom and democracy in South Africa, the urban working class was regarded as the vanguard of the struggle, and the rural coastal areas were on the periphery of political resistance. This legacy remains, with relatively little political consciousness and few organized structures in these areas. The isolation of many small-scale fishers through the nature of the production process only compounds this marginalization.

What does this mean for organizations like Masifundise, an urban-based, black NGO that receives funding from international donors? How does Masifundise act as catalyst and supporter while allowing the fishers to determine which issues to act on, if at all to act? This question is raised by Aliou Sall in *Conversations* when he notes the contradiction that it is also difficult to know whether the fishworkers we work with are as concerned as the supporters about such things as the sustainability of the organization. In my experience, these issues have never been raised within the organization; they have come from outside or from ideological thinkers. One wonders whether sustainability is a priority for fishermen.

The use of the term 'transitional organization' is most helpful in beginning to conceptualize a strategy for organizing in the context in which Masifundise works in South Africa. Currently, there are very few community-based fisher organizations. The institutional arrangements promoted by the new fishing policy brought about a change in the identity of traditional fishers who do not have a lengthy history of organizing. This policy forces small-scale and artisanal fishers to form legal entities and submit business plans in order to apply for commercial fishing rights. I think that in the early days of implementation of this policy, Masifundise made the mistake of confusing economic organizations and political organizations among small-scale fishers. Eager to facilitate fishers getting access to these rights (which have to be

accessed in the form of quotas), the organization set about building the capacity of fishing associations that, in many instances, were the legal bodies that had applied for a fishing quota. Their identity as a 'fisher organization' and the priorities of the members have thus been on the economic aspects of their organizations. As these associations battle to get access to rights and are marginalized by the fisheries management authority, the need for them to develop a political understanding of their positions becomes more apparent. Masifundise is now at this juncture, exploring what sort of organizational structure will best facilitate the emergence of such a fisher movement and what role Masifundise will have to play in this process.

People's movements

The delicacy of this issue was reflected by the *Conversations* discussants in their tackling of the role of funded organizations *vis-à-vis* people's movements. In the light of current developments within the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and in anticipation of the World Social Forum, it appears likely that the role of people's movements within the fishing sector and their relationships with other 'supporter' organizations will come under the spotlight. In *Conversations*, Michael Belliveau of the Maritime Fishermen's Union (MFU) highlights the dilemma of an

organization that has chosen to focus on a particular target group which, within the current social relations and division of labour, is male. He implies, however, that the issue of focusing on women is a strategic choice, justifying the MFU's focus by stating that the MFU is already biting off its portion of the global struggle simply by addressing the issues its members face.

This avoids the issue that the MFU and all aspects of the global struggle are gendered anyway and hence we cannot ignore the gendered relations that arise in every aspect of our work. Rather, if we feel that we cannot tackle all of the levels at which gender oppression occurs (within the household, within the labour process itself, and within the market and our organizations), then we need to select very strategically which aspect or site might maximize the benefits for women and have the most impact on gender relations within the context of the fishing industry more broadly.

In South Africa, the bulk of the processing and marketing of fish has been industrialized for many years, and women, even in the rural fishing villages, have been drawn into the labour market primarily as seasonal workers in the processing factories. Masifundise has focused its efforts on the small-scale and artisanal sector, which is dominated by men. While women perform the reproductive labour and undertake numerous tasks in support of men's fishwork, much of this remains hidden.

As an organization, we have not yet been successful in either highlighting the gendered nature of fishwork, raising awareness of women's roles or their right to assets, whether these be joint or independent title in land, boats, equipment and so on. An additional challenge facing coastal communities in South Africa is the extremely high levels of gender violence, often exacerbated by the consumption of alcohol and drugs in many fishing communities. The high rate of HIV/AIDS infection in this country places women who are survivors of sexual violence at additional risk. We have yet to find a way of supporting women in placing these hidden issues on

the agenda within local fishworker organizations.

Perhaps one of the most important themes raised by the discussants and that runs throughout *Conversations* is the question of identity politics. Given the way in which the policy discourse has shaped notions of 'traditional', 'subsistence', and 'artisanal', is there any common ground left around which 'small-scale' fishers can organize?

In South Africa, an export-driven, individual transferable quota (ITQ) allocation policy, biased towards large-scale commercial companies, has created enormous fissure lines within traditional fishing communities, as individuals compete with former crew members and family to get access to the limited rights available. In many traditional fishing villages along the coast, fishers are being forced to seek work in the construction industry and move away from their traditional livelihoods. In the face of coastal tourist initiatives, Masifundise has to identify the most appropriate and strategic entry points in a rapidly shifting development discourse of 'economic growth'.

More importantly, the organization faces the challenge of assisting fishers and coastal dwellers in accessing and defending their rights to marine resources in the face of the increasing number of claims made on these resources. *Conversations* highlights the danger of doing this on the basis of false assumptions about the commonality of issues and identities within the fishing sector. Yet, despite exposing the fissures in the notion of a common cause as activists and workers in fisheries, *Conversations* inspires me to not only continue to work in this sector, but also to seek new ways of sharing insights and lessons with co-workers and comrades. ♣

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