

Through the barrel of a lens

By Lisa-Anne Julien
November 2014

Lisa-Anne, a development writer and consultant in the areas of gender, HIV/AIDS, philanthropy and access to social justice, has written reports, research, policy briefs and development-related articles for international development agencies and civil society organisations. She is currently a writer at SGS Consulting and has also written for commercial magazines, newspapers and peer-reviewed journals. Lisa-Anne was commissioned by LegalWise to tell the story of Paradigm Lens.

Paradigm Lens combines photography and entrepreneurship to respond to social challenges. Lisa-Anne Julien learns more about this youth-centred programme that encourages an assets-orientation to development.

Too often townships in South Africa are viewed only through the prism of hardship and deprivation. While acknowledging social ills are a reality and steering clear of romanticising the struggles within communities, there are valiant efforts by individuals and communities to retaliate against these challenges. In the Western Cape, a photography and entrepreneurship programme, Paradigm Lens, offers young people an opportunity to tell a different story about their communities. The programme champions the reflection and harnessing of internal resources or assets as a core aspect of sustainable development. This thinking and practice is known as Asset-Based Community-led Development or ABCD, an approach that places a community's financial and non-financial assets at the heart of sustained community development. Its principles and attributes can be found almost anywhere.

The five members of Paradigm Lens hail from Delft, Khayelitsha, Ottery, and Westlake, all vibrant yet complicated communities. The programme is run by Community Development Foundation (CDF) Western Cape, an NGO working in the areas of community development and youth philanthropy. Paradigm Lens is one of the pillars of CDF's Youth Civic Engagement Programmes, the others being Youth Banks, WELD News, Board

Succession (Youth Committees) and Peer Learning.



"ABCD is an example of responsive investing," says Lesley Haynes, CSI Manager at LegalWise. "We are interested in building on what already exists and we found a common language with CDF and their Paradigm Lens programme." Group members were exposed to the fundamentals of ABCD through a workshop facilitated by Ninnette Eliasov of Elamanzi. Consciousness shifting is an integral part of ABCD and relates to the moment of truth and revelation when a group or community realizes they have the power to make desired changes. "The ABCD training taught me to 'use what you have and build on what you know,'" says Caryne Adams, a 24-year-old Paradigm Lens member from Ottery. "This has changed the way I view my community, the way I view my life. I now appreciate what's there."

Through ABCD and photography training, members of Paradigm Lens now view their communities through an entirely different lens, quite literally. "I am constantly reminding them to be aware of everything around them and try to see things differently," said Ursula Jephtha, CDF's Paradigm Lens coordinator. "Through the camera this becomes natural and obvious."

Thus, when Paradigm Lens member Jerome van der Westhuizen, 24, looks through his 55mm lens chances are he no longer sees multiple-storied, graffiti-laced flats that loom over barren landscapes in Ottery, or the weather-beaten faces of those idly lining the pavements in his hometown of Westlake. He may see, against all environmental realities, lavender bushes sprouting in the gang-infested community of Lavender Hill. "Looking at a tree with my eyes, I think 'that's just a tree,'" says Caryne. "But when I look through my lens I see the different dimensions of the tree. I see how the leaves are moving in the wind. There are suddenly new meanings, better meanings to things."



This is "appreciative enquiry" (a core component of ABCD) at its best and most creative. It is an approach that acknowledges the elements present within a community or group as opposed to only its absences or needs. Recognising the richness of "what is" gives rise to the realisation and excitement of possibility. Often with a camera slung around his neck, and capturing the beauty and harshness of his piece of the Cape Flats, Christo Williams, 26 and also from Ottery, enjoys

the vantage point that ABCD and photography allow. "Our ABCD training helped me to use my camera to show what's there," he says. "One pixel alone doesn't look like anything, it doesn't make sense. But all of them together, and standing back, you see the full picture."

Paradigm Lens: the early years

Paradigm Lens can be viewed as an enhanced version of CDF's earlier community photography programme, Photospeak, although the latter still exists. Photospeak was initiated in 2008 and involves equipping young people with cameras and training them to capture images that characterise their community. The idea for Photospeak emerged when CDF's Executive Director, Beulah Fredericks, travelled to Arizona, USA. There she visited an innovative youth photography programme, and encountered similarities between those communities and the ones in the Western Cape that were hard to ignore. "There was a township vibe there," Beulah recalled. "I went into a community hall and felt like I was back in Lavender Hill or Ottery." Despite the similarities, it was necessary to take into consideration the particularities of communities in the Western Cape and tailor a programme that would appreciate these characteristics and mitigate potential risks.

Realising that 9-12 year olds were at a particular risk for being recruited by gangs in low-income communities, CDF decided to embark on a photography programme that simply invited young people to "tell us about your community." Thirty digital cameras were purchased and although the CDF Board initially expressed major concern over the risk, given the nature of the communities within which these cameras would be circulating, they granted their approval. CDF's ability to implement this project in diverse communities was largely due to the participation of community-based organisations that held the cameras in "camera libraries" located within the organisations.

right group to work with was proving very difficult. "We were very happy to transfer the cameras to CDF in a mutually beneficial exchange," Lesley said. "LegalWise was able to fulfil an intent to equip photographers and CDF was able to assist their photographers with upscaling."



Paradigm Lens differs from Photospeak in very distinct ways, namely the leadership, entrepreneurial and career-building components. Members have received training on photography, Photoshop, advanced photography, finance, business writing, journalism and marketing. From time to time they also shadow professional photographers.

Photography's strongest pull for many young people is undoubtedly the idea of using a camera, the creative potential of the device and the excitement within the experimentation of the art form. There is also the social and financial potential of photography. "Creativity makes you aware of yourself," says Keith Van der Scholtz, the group's photography instructor. "There is an awareness of the person taking the photo, as well as of the community that is the subject of the photography."

A full-time lecturer in electronics and computer science, but nursing a passion for photography and working with young people, Keith offers his services to the group for free. His relationship with CDF dates back many years and Beulah, consistently actualising the principles of ABCD, called upon assets within her own circles and communities and formalised the

partnership. To date, Keith remains very impressed with members of Paradigm Lens. "They all come from difficult communities so they saw this as a real opportunity," he said. "They are very keen to learn more and they work hard." He feels invigorated and rewarded when one of them has managed to capture an image, (or part thereof) that the eye would fall on immediately, such as a piece of refracted light, an unintended reflection or the revealing facial expressions of a person.

Bringing talents, skills and time

An asset-based approach recognises the skills, talents and time present within a group or community as key ingredients in any development strategy. The majority of Paradigm Lens members came into the programme with some knowledge of photography. One of these was Thabiso, who, during his time with Photospeak was one of the exceptional amateur photographers that received a free camera by CDF as an incentive. Unfortunately, this camera was stolen during one of his sojourns through his home township of Khayelitsha. "Khayelitsha is a dangerous place. There is gangsterism, you can't walk freely," he said. "A lot of people say mind your business and they shut their doors." But Thabiso doesn't want to close his eyes to Khayelitsha, a maze of streets and countless subdivisions of backyards that become homes for extended families; a place bursting with life on every corner. His determination to change the perception of his community fits well into his work at Paradigm Lens. "I wish people could see my community the other way around," he said. "I wish they could see it in a positive way, to open up their minds." His involvement in Paradigm Lens is able to do just this, not only by the dialogue that his photos elicit but by the fact that he teaches photography and life skills to young people in various peer learning camps across the province.

As with Thabiso, all Paradigm Lens members come to the group with a wealth of knowledge and skills in voluntary

community work. Jerome brings his artistic experience to the group and this greatly compliments his work in photography. "I'm a person who loves art," he said. "I have a passion to work in art therapy. I wanted to go further but I don't have papers and I'm not qualified. But with Photospeak you tell a story through a picture, which is similar to art therapy." It was one of Jerome's photos that some years ago, incited advocacy for improvements to the relatively quiet but struggling community of Westlake.

The Rands and sense of it

Ursula concentrates on helping the group to apply and implement ABCD knowledge within the context of entrepreneurship, helping them walk that fine line between dreams and reality. She is as passionate about developing the entrepreneurial aspect of the programme as she is about ensuring that the philanthropic elements remain. "They can't just see this as income-generation," she said. "They need to pay it forward with and to other youth in their communities". Ursula encourages them to seek out income-generation opportunities such as family weddings and portraits, community events, postcards and calendars.

Ursula has also brought some formality to the programme. "Sometimes young people see planning and structure as controlling," she said. "But eventually they came to understand that they needed a foundation and that creativity can still be grown within this."



The principles of ABCD take root where there is motivation to make a change. This is evident in the community work members have been involved in for many years, and their commitment to giving time to roll-out Photospeak and other youth-related projects in their communities. In addition, members agree to give 10% of their Paradigm Lens-related earnings to the CDF Youth Fund which, in the near future, will be used for implementing community-led development projects.

Towards self-determination

A move towards self-determination is indicative of ABCD tendencies within a community or group. While Paradigm Lens is currently incubated within CDF, there is some evidence that, within the walls of their studio they are making their own rules and systems and are thus forging their own identity.

Agreeing on their vision, unique selling point and the group's character is understandably a work in progress. They decided on their own to re-name the group Paradigm Lens as opposed to the externally suggested "Photospeak Upscale". "Our aim was to look for a synonym which has the same meaning as 'thinking out of the box', looking beyond what your eyes can see, viewing things in a different aspect, such as a 'paradigm shift,'" said Jerome.

Although having the lone female voice allows Caryne to enjoy a unique position within the group, it has its fair share of challenges. "I have a strong personality and I'm very direct," Caryne said. "The guys don't always appreciate this. They think I'm always contradicting them." Healthy conflict is, as far as the group is concerned, a necessary ingredient in their daily work. As art is open to interpretation, their discussions can sometimes be loud, heated and lengthy. "I feel like I am surrounded by leaders," Christo said. "They have passion and drive but we always think the way we think is the right way. Being in a creative space is not easy. We are like clay, mashed up together. But we need to

mould something out of it." Bradley referred to the group's vision board, a large poster board peppered with drawings, magazine clippings, and worded commitments. "It was the product of a lot of heated exchanges, a lot of conflict," he said. "But in the end it is beautiful."

Their relationship with CDF has also deepened over time. "They push us to think outside the box," said Bradley. "There is a nurturing, mothering type of atmosphere but we are given the room to experiment and explore. We've been able to discover ourselves differently."

This journey to cohesiveness was interrupted with the departure of one of the members. Originally, six, the team would divide tasks equally to ensure easier workflow. However, this did not happen. "That member didn't do her part and this meant shifting tasks; some had to do more," says Thabiso. "We never disrespected the peer, but we did share our emotions towards the neglecting of team work." Although the team believed they made room for their colleague to share her feelings this was not enough to prevent her eventual departure as there were other factors at play. "Emotionally it has affected the team because we didn't just lose a college but also a friend," said Jerome.

Appreciating the "other"

Christo doesn't appear hardened by the social realities in Ottery, although while in Grade 7, he saw the body of his murdered classmate on his way to school and also recalls in chilling detail a boy shot whilst riding a bicycle, still in his school uniform. "Kids play where bodies have fallen," Christo said, whose father, a pastor, has gained a curious admiration from the community as being the only pastor that would offer prayers and last rites to slain gang leaders. "They throw sand onto fresh blood and continue playing. They've become immune. Growing up my parents always reminded us that what we saw was not normal, that this was not how things were supposed to be."



ABCD attitudes have the potential to put people on the same level of appreciation for their environments and the potential for social cohesion is therefore significantly increased. This was reflected during Christo's work with Photospeak. "The gang saw me with a group of young people equipped with cameras and this set off suspicions," he recalled. "I had to approach the local gang lord directly as I knew the young people were at risk. He is a leader but so am I. I assured him that we were not interfering with his business but stated that he should not interfere with ours either."

Caryne, who lives in a quieter area of Ottery is also inspired by the blend of concrete, vulnerability and vibrancy the flats emit. Paradigm Lens has allowed her to positively reflect on elements in her community, through an appreciative lens. "When people hear the name 'Ottery' they immediately think of the gangs," she said. "But in the flats the people are friendly, they know each other. Not like in my part of Ottery where I don't even know my neighbours. People in the flats get excited when they see my camera. When this happens I become one with my community, one with my camera." This also means that Caryne has had to quiet her internal voice to truly appreciate what her camera picks up. "I'm very loud, outspoken," she admitted. "But being behind the lens brings me to a place of quiet in order to look at things from a different perspective."

Growing pains

Like all new ventures Paradigm Lens has experienced its growing pains. Ensuring the procedures and plans were in place in order for the group to have a sense of structured guidance and training took time.

By far it appears the lack of stipend in the first six months of the programme was the hardest pill for the members to swallow. Notwithstanding the artistic and social potential of photography, members, as young adults still living with their families, are expected to be contributing to family income. "The thought of not getting paid, not being able to buy deodorant for six months was too much," Thabiso said, referring to his initial thoughts when he first entered the programme. "But my cousin told me to persevere. Then we got a name, a logo and the ideas and energy began to flow." His sister is thrilled about the programme and the role Paradigm Lens has played in Thabiso's life, particularly because of the difficult time the family experienced following their mother's death. "It was hard for all of us," she said. "But now I see that things are going well for him. I see his name in the papers and I think he is famous now. I am very proud of him."

Both Bradley and Jerome left paid employment to get involved in Paradigm Lens, a testament to their commitment to seeing the potential of the programme and the opportunity to enhance their work as community leaders. "At first my mom was not happy about me leaving my job to come onto a programme that didn't pay," Bradley said. "She was expecting me to support her." She has come to understand his decision to move to Paradigm Lens. "I encouraged him to stay in school and repeat his Matric exams," she said. "I want him to be an example. I am happy he is in the photography programme. I hope he will make a business of it. I am a single mom and happy that he is now contributing to putting food on the table."

As a mother to a young son Caryne needed to explain the benefits of Paradigm Lens to her parents, who were initially sceptical and worried about her financial situation. "Now they see how I've grown as a photographer and that I've taken a step in the right direction," she said. The initial displeasure with the lack of income within the programme underscored the need for a high level of parental involvement. Parents need to understand the benefits (particularly the non-financial ones) of the programme. In addition, the exceptional risks involved in the programme, given the costly assets involved, requires the involvement and commitment of parents to ensure cameras, scooters and other assets are well-looked after.

Riding high

The introduction of scooters to the programme through a sponsorship from LegalWise brought an equal amount of excitement and fear. "One of the lessons we learned in Photospeak was the way in which a lack of transport inhibited the young people from maximising this opportunity to the fullest," Beulah said. "From that perspective we welcomed the introduction of the scooters into the programme. But I was nervous. I worried about injuries, even death, and also theft of the bikes."

Lynne Scullard of Scully Scooters, who has a long relationship with LegalWise through an enterprise development programme, provided members of Paradigm Lens with a 3-day training programme, beginning with the GSAM (Get South Africa Moving) training. This involved road safety,



defensive driving, customer service and financial training. "Bikes are very safe, its people that are dangerous," Lynne said. "I taught the young people that they must be 100% accountable for their actions. Being aware of the road and other drivers is critical." Members learnt the difference between awareness and fear. The latter often creates a partition between oneself and others. "Fear attracts fear. In a car it's easy to turn up the window," she said. "But on a bike you can't pretend that people aren't there. They must put up their visor and make eye contact. This forces us to have a more collaborative approach to dealing with our communities."

Members studied for and passed their learners' test within one month. This was a huge achievement and showed the level of commitment, given the level of difficulty of the test. Slowly the group members are increasing in their confidence to use the bikes more frequently. "I was very cautious on the road in the beginning," said Caryne. "I am not a driver, so it was scary but also exciting. Now being able to go certain places on my own gives me a great sense of achievement and independence. If I can drive a scooter, I can drive anything."



The group receives additional mentoring from Keith, also a biker. He uses this fact to connect even further with the group and reinforce the training received from Scully Scooters. Lynne is impressed and moved by the group's commitment and development. "For people who are perceived to have so little, they have so much to offer," she said. "They were so

engaged. There was such a high level of learning. They grabbed this opportunity with both hands."

Picturing the future

The group continues to work hard to be deemed worthy to take possession of their cameras and scooters (they will need to pay half the amount for the scooters) at the end of their formal participation in the programme in 2015. They continue to be busy shooting, writing, critiquing, shadowing and laughing while marketing the group on various platforms including social media.

There is still much to learn, even from each other. None of the Paradigm Lens members with the exception of Jerome, have ever visited Thabiso in Khayelitsha. Similarly Thabiso has never visited Lavender Hill because of its perception. This reality has prompted the idea of a "community hop," where the members will make time to visit, photograph and better understand each other's communities.

Taking Paradigm Lens into the future would mean building on successes and taking into account the hard lessons learned. "I would definitely bring in the business acumen earlier," Beulah admitted. "They are young and understandably get very excited about using the camera and tend to focus only on that." Ensuring regular parental involvement and updates to get (and keep) the buy-in and manage risks would also be necessary. "Seeing the way they have embraced ABCD, I would ensure this training is introduced at an earlier stage," said Beulah.

The relationship between CDF and LegalWise continues to grow from strength to strength. Like all good partnerships there is a consistent need to find the balance between funder and recipient, empowerment and humility, leading and learning. Both organisations, while both needing to assert their respective goals and objectives, are always mindful of those of the other.

"We have been excited about this programme from the beginning," Lesley said. "It was easy for LegalWise to invest in the photographers as there was clear evidence that they had embraced the principles of ABCD.

We worked with other young people in Cape Town on another initiative and more than 50% have dropped out. One of the main differences is that they have not been exposed to ABCD." ABCD continues to be the common language facilitating the growth of the partnership.

With new and continuously emerging learning about the approach, methods for applying ABCD to programmes are varied and exciting. This presents a myriad of opportunities for Paradigm Lens as it moves into the future, taking with it important lessons from its pilot experience.

