

# GROUP MEDIA JOURNAL

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20-26 Nov. 1988  
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## editorial

## contents

# Living the grassroots story in Lusaka

During breakfast on 22 November 1988 a hotel waiter handed me a small envelope marked 'Urgent'. He asked me to give it immediately to one of the South African participants at the conference. A short time later, at the beginning of our session, Professor Keyan Tomaselli told the plenary assembly what was in the telegram. Irvin Mlungisi Ngcobo, a member of the Lamontville Unity for Cultural Activities, with whom Professor Tomaselli had worked very closely and who had played a major part in the production of a video on mine-workers' culture in Lamontville, had been murdered on 19 November. We received the news in silence, deeply affected.

The day before, one of the participants had said, 'You can't talk about grassroots communication in a vacuum.' Indeed, this Symposium, held from 20 to 26 November last year in Lusaka, Zambia, organised by the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) and Sonolux, did not take place in a vacuum. In this instance, brutal political reality had caught up with us and provided clear evidence that concrete, active grassroots communication is never risk-free. It is aimed at change and calls for individuals to become personally involved and to be prepared to act.

Fr John Ndikaru told of his experience of communication within a small village in Kenya, where the whole village had worked together on a communication programme to tackle social and economic problems in their village in post independence Kenya.

The personal experiences shared in each of the many presentations were a starting point for further reflection. The Symposium's practical learning method came to the fore during two important events at the Symposium. The visit to Chipata Compound and Kaunda Square in Lusaka offered participants the chance to meet people in a grassroots community, and the one-day community theatre workshop involved all the participants in conveying their own message through theatre.

The 42 participants (including 15 women), from 14 countries studied not just the theory of the Symposium theme, 'Participation, Communication, Transformation', but learnt from live experience. As a result, concrete proposals have been put forward on how to continue this kind of communication work. A participant from each of the seven AMECEA countries declared themselves willing to work for the further development of a network of grassroots communicators. A committee will draw up a basic paper on grassroots communication.

The Symposium's aim was to gather experiences, provide inspiration and suggest practical steps for organisation. We are confident that the work started in Lusaka will be continued. The motivation came from the participants themselves. Ngugi wa Mirii emphasized the task facing us: 'I want us to see ourselves as communicators,' he said, 'but not just communicators waiting for the people to approach us. We all have an accountability and we can inspire change.' The documentation in this special issue of 'Group Media Journal' may serve to further this aim.

Klaus Müller

Editorial . . . . .	2
Church promotes local communication . . . . .	3
<i>Dennis De Jong</i>	
Grassroot action in South Africa . . . . .	5
<i>Keyan Tomaselli, Cecil Sols, Keromamang Maselwane</i>	
Theological reflections on communication, participation and transformation . . . . .	12
<i>Michael Fraber</i>	
Using theatre to communicate . . . . .	15
<i>Ngugi wa Mirii</i>	
Networking and change in grassroots communication . . . . .	17
<i>Robert White</i>	
Development communication in India . . . . .	21
<i>Myron Pereira</i>	
African language in liturgy . . . . .	23
<i>Alex Chima</i>	
Plan of support for African grassroots communication . . . . .	25
Communication guidelines . . . . .	27
Building Zimbabwe together . . . . .	29
Life in Chipata Compound . . . . .	31
Lusaka flashback through Indian eyes . . . . .	34
<i>Myron Pereira</i>	
Lusaka Symposium timetable . . . . .	36
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	
Please note! . . . . .	11
People's theatre in Kenya . . . . .	16
What is Training for Transformation? . . . . .	24
Community theatre wins applause . . . . .	28

Cover: (From top of page) Sylvia Kuimba, Zimbabwe; Children of Chipata Compound and Myron Pereira (right); St Francis Community in Chipata Compound. (Photos by Klaus Müller and Elfriede Bohn).

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# Grassroot action in South Africa

*The first presentations at the Lusaka Symposium were devoted to South Africa. By challenging apartheid and repression at a local level, grassroots communication is an effective way to oppose Government policy in South Africa. Keyan Tomaselli, director of the Contemporary Cultural Studies Unit at the University of Natal in Durban, looked at the rise of grassroots organisations and how they are preparing an alternative structure for a democratic South Africa. Cecil Mang Maselwane, director of the Soweto Media Project, a project of the Interchurch Media Programme, spoke about their involvement in media skills training in the Black township of Soweto.*

## The rise of grassroots communication

Keyan Tomaselli

South Africa's first community newspaper, set up in 1980, is called Grassroots, but the term 'grassroots' is not very widely used in South Africa. The term 'progressive press' is more frequent. Progressive press or progressive media originates from the broad progressive movements. Progressive organisations came together in August 1983 with the formation of the United Democratic Front. The UDF itself developed from processes set in motion after the 1976 Soweto uprising. It then became clear that to oppose the Government by protesting in the street was simply suicide — you were shot at. At the same time, the economy was shifting from agriculture and mining to commerce and manufacturing, which changed the structure of cities. Large numbers of black people were now considered permanent urban dwellers, even if they weren't allowed to buy the land or houses in which they lived.

With urbanisation comes greater literacy because workers have to be able to read instruction manuals. And once you have learnt to do that, you can read *Group Media Journal* or *Media Development*. So the different stages of economic development bring different opportunities for mobilisation, and for forging democracies, certainly at local level.

The term 'alternative media' is problematic because it has a negative

connotation. It is an alternative to the State and big business media, although in South Africa these are sometimes one and the same.

### Participation

At a conference in October 1987, a government spokesman said that more people had the vote in South Africa than two years previously. But what he refers to is a vote, not *the* vote. They have a vote for a candidate in an area demarcated by race.

When the Government talks about involving black leaders in democracy, it means black leaders it has chosen, rather than leaders that might have been chosen by the people.

As an individual, it is almost impossible to contest anything that the state does, so most individuals now work through organisations. For example, the UDF is constituted by some 700 different organisations throughout South Africa.

### Community

The term 'community' has also been hijacked by the South African state. The Government forces 'communities' together. The Indian community for example is not one community. There are Moslems, Hindus, Harikrishnas, Christians. But there are three or four group areas for 'Indians' in the country.

When the Government talks about community, it includes all the Indians in South Africa, whether they live in Natal or the Northern Transvaal, no matter what their differences.

Many of us here do not come from working class communities, or we have moved away from the working class in the process of becoming church workers, academics or community organisers. We tend to leave behind our class experiences. But it is important that we do not impose middle class values and solutions on working class conditions.

The working class has taken the lead in the attack against the state, against the Government and apartheid, through massive worker federations like the Congress of South African Trade Unions. They have a remarkable ability to communicate between themselves and to work with non-working class organisations, to develop national strategies to attack apartheid.

Since 1948 the South African Government has been very clever in the way that it has divided communities and people who speak the same languages, like the Zulu and the Xhosa. It has appropriated media, particularly mass media, to legitimise its own dominant political position.

The National Party is primarily composed of Afrikaners who derived from early Dutch settlers in the 16th century.

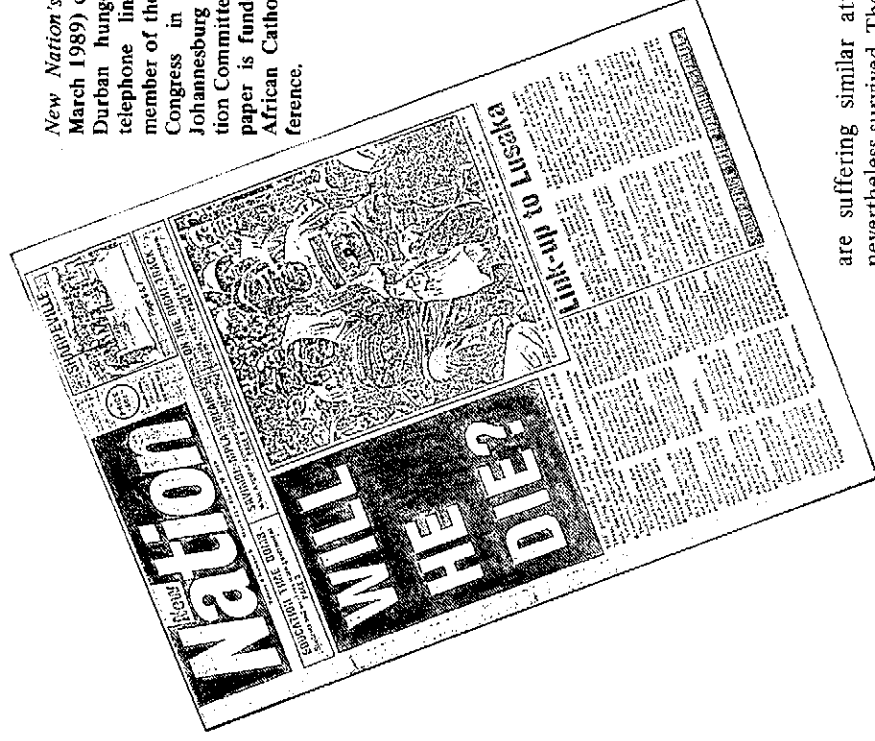
Afrikaans was the last modern language to develop, and was officially recognised in 1925. Afrikaners recognised the importance of the mass media in popularising and giving credibility to their language. Afrikaans would not have developed as it has without the print media, radio and film, and from 1976, television.

The South African Government understands the importance of media very well. I think it actually over-emphasizes the importance of media. That is why they have imposed such incredible curbs on what the press may or may not report, which in turn, has generated further resistance.

Black-oriented newspapers were set up from the 1830s onwards, usually as a result of mission education. These newspapers did not last long because of financial problems or because in the first half of this century, big capital bought them out and turned them into commercial concerns. Until recently, media and culture were not seen as a major part of the struggle by the opposition in South Africa. But if you do not have media, you do not have developed strategies of communication and then it is very difficult to mobilise people, either nationally or regionally.

In the early 1980s the development of small format video, personal computers and other cheap and easy to use printing technology enabled communities to challenge apartheid and repression at a local level.

*Grassroots* in the Western Cape arose from the Cape Action Housing League which was mobilising people against the state for raising rents. *Grassroots* began to encourage readers in its local area, about 200,000 altogether, to mobilise on similar kinds of grievances, such as the lack of water taps and bus fare rises. By 1984, four years after *Grassroots* started, there were some 80 community organisations represented on its production. Each organisation held meetings and agreed that information should be provided on what the people wanted to know, not what journalists or communicators wanted to see in newspapers. The newspaper was finally put together by a group of four permanently employed organisers in the newsroom, and the paper was distributed by community representatives. So the community was involved in the conception, planning, production and distribution cycles of the newspaper.



*New Nation's* front page (30 March 1989) carries stories of a Durban hunger striker and a telephone link-up between a member of the African National Congress in Lusaka and a Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee conference. The paper is funded by the South African Catholic Bishops' Conference.

are suffering similar attacks but have nevertheless survived. There is *Urn Afrika* in Natal and at national level, *New Nation*. All these newspapers are experimenting and developing structures for the future, so that if and when fundamental change comes, those structures will be in place. Hopefully, the people will retain control over the newspapers. (When I watched Zambian television last night it was like watching South African television, with only the State President and various other ministers speaking). After a revolution, left-wing contents take the place of right-wing contents, but the communications structures themselves often remain inaccessible to the people. They stay as authoritarian and centralised as before.

If there is one positive thing coming out of the Government's hanging onto power in South Africa at the moment, it is that this is giving us time to theorise and develop alternative structures.

At the national level, the Association of Democratic Journalists (ADJ) has been set up as an alternative to the South African Society of Journalists (SASJ), which is primarily a white trade union. The SASJ recently became multiracial, but is composed of fairly apolitical journalists. The ADJ explicitly works for democratic change and has worked with the SASJ in contact with the Media Workers Association of South

Those permanently employed in the newsroom did not see themselves primarily as journalists or communicators, but as community organisers. Media in this case was secondary to the need for political organisation.

*Grassroots* is one of a number of initiatives across South Africa. Some did not survive for reasons of finance, illiteracy, state repression or lack of organisation. *The Eye* (Pretoria) did not last long, partly because Pretoria is in the heartland of the National Party constituency and it is very difficult for the black communities to organise there.

*Grassroots* has survived bombings, detentions, and shootings. But it can no longer operate in the originally democratic way. It is now published clandestinely by a small group of people who are no longer able to keep in contact with the original organisations which contributed to its production. This shows how the state, which talks about broadening democracy, is in fact smashing democracy. It does not want it because it endangers the Government's position.

Since 1980, other papers have been set up. There is *Saamstaan* (Stand Together) which is an affiliate of *Grassroots* in the Eastern Cape. The organisers

Africa (MWASA), a Black Consciousness trade union, on the national 'Save the Press' campaign.

So by putting pressure on alternative news agencies, by making them register with the Government in July (1988), the Government has brought the ADJ, SASJ and MWASA together to work out a strategy to protect the press. So successful was this campaign that the Government cancelled its demand for registration of journalists.

### Video

The Film and Allied Workers Organisation was set up earlier this year to mobilise progressive film and video makers to develop regional structures, so that film makers will be able to control what films are made in the new society and ensure that power is not centralised. It also aims to protect different regions from being portrayed solely by film makers from other regions who presume to speak on their behalf.

However, local strategies might require a different initiative in Natal, to say, the Western Cape. The National Media Training Association was formed in 1988 so that instead of different organisations and universities having their own alternative journalism workshops or video workshops, they can all now be coordinated through a national body.

### New forms of expression

There has been a huge development of 'worker performances', where trade unionists work with teachers to develop plays around worker issues on the factory floor. The workers are the actors. Their audience is composed of the other workers. These performances lead to vibrant and energetic discussions of the problems by the audience. There is no

set script; the performance changes daily. They become powerful means to conscientise workers on exploitation, repression and to mobilise people on certain issues.

Funerals have become an important issue in South Africa. Mass meetings are banned under the Riotous Assembly Act. Any meeting of more than two people on a street corner could be considered a riotous assembly. The one area which remained open for politicisation was a funeral, particularly of an activist who had been killed while involved in working for the community. The state began to limit the number of people attending a funeral and to ban certain people from speaking at funerals. But the state has not been able to gain total control over the numbers attending funerals, which have become a major element in resistance communication.

### Local and national strategies

All local strategies should be conducted in the context of a national strategy. One of the tasks of progressive organisations is to transform the less progressive organisations. For example, when the *Weekly Mail* was banned for a month (November 1988), its editors published a statement calling for the alternative press to develop a common strategy with the anti-apartheid English language press, to cope with the Government attack on press freedom. While the two presses are different in terms of politics and methods of production, a tactical alliance does need to be established. That requires a tremendous amount of negotiation.

In addition to facilitating transformation among the repressed communities, we also need to educate the people who

have voted the Government into power, about the need for change.

### The Church

The Church has played a fundamental role in the development of South Africa's progressive media. Churches have been involved in the struggle for a long time, and will play an even greater role as the state bans more and more people's organisations. It is more difficult to ban churches because then the Government would have to face international protest. However, the Government condemns the *New Nation* as a communist newspaper, in an attempt to taint the image of the Catholic Bishops' Conference which supports the newspaper.

### Structures for the future

It is important that we maintain regional and national communication structures which are developing from grassroots communication. Even if they are smashed, the theory which has grown up will still be there when change eventually comes to South Africa.

We are developing something unique in South Africa: a true democracy, and an alternative set of structures which nestle within the dominant structures. There are now two societies in South Africa: one is the dominant ruling power, which is crumbling and the other is the alternative developing leadership which represents the majority of the people. ■

*The above text was edited from a recording made at the Symposium, and was not a specially prepared article.*

## Township experiences

Dynamic Images aims to serve underprivileged and oppressed people, for whom it is not easy to acquire skills, and who are forced or choose to remain outside commercial or state subsidised enterprise. It is committed to sharing skills to produce documentary video

and photography, using a language appropriate to our situation.

There is very little training for black people in our country. Our universities mainly cater for the white community. There is an unfair situation in which you find that nearly 80 per cent of

## Video and photography

### Cecil Sols

Dynamic Images started with a team of four coordinators in 1984. It was formed from two projects with similar objectives. One was concerned with photographic documentation and the other with video training. Both had similar problems of resources.

black journalists in South Africa have to learn journalism through actually doing it. Even universities which are said to be liberal or open, only cater for a small percentage of black people. Most education institutes are created to serve the white community. This leaves the majority of our people untrained and illiterate.

We feel that media plays a role of paramount importance in building a nation, which now, more than ever is subjugated to capitalist values. The State and big business control the mass media in South Africa. We have only one television station, the South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which is predominantly controlled by the Government. So any news on what is happening around the country, and which comes to us through electronic media, is controlled by the State. The major newspapers are controlled by big business. So you find that news is conveyed in order to make profit, rather than to actually inform the people.

In the past four years we have seen a new development in grassroots publications from community organisations. Our project works closely with alternative democratic newspapers which represent the people's interests. Our project is oriented towards social documentary in video and photographic format. The project sees its role as documenting day to day suffering of oppressed communities.

The modern world tends to ignore the historical existence of ordinary people who have to toil to survive under economic exploitation. Most school history books are written by people who have been through a form of education designed to shape people to see our society in terms of the western world. So we read about western heroes rather than people from our own country. Our role is to write history in a new way, reflecting the struggles waged in different communities, as seen through the eyes of the oppressed people.

Every year we have an intake of 20 to 40 students for a practical and theoretical course on photography and video. The course lasts 10 months. In the first five months they learn photographic skills, camera technique, darkroom work and printing. But we try to avoid being classical in our training, because people can go to a commercial school to learn traditional photography. We emphasize the social documentary project, integrating the skill of camera technique with the relationship with the subject.

### Documenting exploitation

Last year one of our students did a project on migrant workers. These workers come from neighbouring countries and states to work in South Africa. They live in a compound, in hostels. The pictures were taken at a hostel in Soweto. The student wanted to document

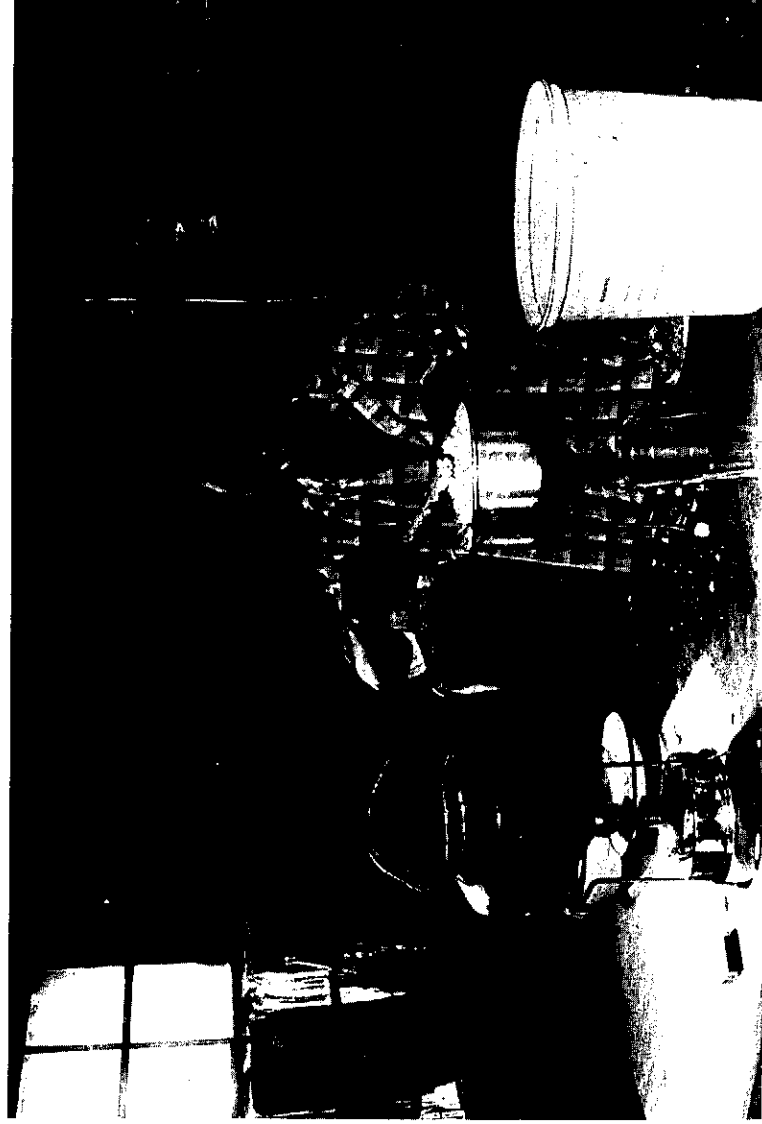
the lives of these people, showing how they spend their time and what their main preoccupations are. The migrants form a large section of South Africa's workforce. Many of the miners come from Mozambique, Zambia, Lesotho and Botswana. Our economy is based on mining and these people are heavily exploited. They live under terrible conditions.

During the three months that the photographer worked on the project, he built up a relationship with the community. He researched how migrant workers spend their time. At weekends they do 'Gumboot dancing' and organise themselves into traditional music groups. Some of these traditional groups were invited to perform at the exhibition of photographs.

### Conscientisation

When people came to see the photographs they understood how they could be used to inform the wider Soweto community about the plight of the migrant workers. A speaker from the Trade Union movement came to speak about the importance of organisation among the migrant workers, in order to resist economic exploitation and improve their living conditions.

When the men who live in the Dube hostel came to see the photographs, they laughed at first. 'That is just how this place looks,' they said. They had accepted that was how they had to live.



A scene from everyday life in Dube Hostel, Soweto. (Cyril Jali, Dynamic Images)

But seeing the photographs made them think. They could see how inhuman it was. We got them into small groups and asked questions like: 'What do you think of your living environment?' 'How would you like it to be improved?' 'Who are the people you need to work through in order to change those conditions?' So the photographs had an impact on that community.

**Working with the alternative press**  
We work very closely with alternative newspapers. When people finish the course we help them to get employment with such newspapers.

The greatest struggle in our country is to inform the community. South Africa has strict media restrictions that make it an offence to disseminate information on issues that the Government feels could endanger so-called law and order. We are based in the township, the scene of battlegrounds and struggle, so that we can document the history of resistance there. In the past we have just had multinational agencies who come into a situation of conflict and document what is happening. All that material then goes into the files in London and New York, so that the people inside South Africa never have access to it.

We are trying to build up a resource centre, where we keep all the originals of our material. In this way we can help in the process of nation building and getting people to think about a post-apartheid society. We also have a collection of videos on Latin American countries, with which we find many similarities in terms of struggle and repression.

People need the skills to resist the racist propaganda in the media. By documenting what is happening in their own community, people can tell others what is really happening, for example, in the townships.

The alternative press represents our communities and yet it has limited resources. Much of our output, in terms of photographs, would go to papers such as the *New Nation* or *Grassroots*.

### Repression

The repression in our country makes our work very difficult. But there are loopholes. Our video productions are mainly used by community organisations. We do not sell our work to television stations or outside South Africa.



A migrant worker sews his own clothes at Dube Hostel, Soweto. (Cyril Jali, Dynamic Images)

We use VHS format for community use. However, the security police have been interested in the content of our course, particularly with regard to video. Their main concern is news coverage. But if you do something else they allow you to exist. If you are mainly covering news and are based in the township they get worried that you might have access to information that they would not want another community to know about. So at the moment the project just works very closely with community organisations.

### Using the right language

The object of social documentary is to present the situation as an ongoing struggle, not just to present the drama. For example, if we go into a community or compound, we try to get the people to tell their story, even if the tape has to run for three hours. For example, if they are in a hostel, how did they come to be there, what kind of life have they left behind? The viewer will then get a comprehensive story, not just shots. We also let them speak in their own

language. Working class people might not be able to speak fluent English. It is important for people to have confidence in themselves.

We try to keep up our relationship with these people, by building up a network. In each community organisation we have two people whom we have trained in media and who can tell us about the needs of those organisations. If an organisation has a conference, they may demand that the whole conference be filmed, so that they can reflect on the conference input and decisions taken.

The struggle should not only be presented in terms of high profile personalities such as Alan Boesak and Bishop Tutu. It is also important to speak to communities and let them speak at the level they understand.

### Lack of resources

People in the townships do not have access to our country's resources. South Africa is a very rich country, but its wealth is not fairly distributed. Operating a media project, with video cameras



**'That is just what this place looks like!' The men of Dube Hostel in Soweto were shocked by the reality of their living conditions as reflected in this photograph. (Cyril Jali, Dynamic Images)**

and cassettes is expensive. So we have to struggle to find the resources and advance our training. But we feel that lack of resources should never hinder action. The limited resources we have are enough to start something. Together we can learn how to work with very little.

## Basic media skills

### Keromamang Maselwane

I have been working for the Inter-church Media Programme since 1981 and am now based in Soweto, the black township of Johannesburg. The township houses the workers, which means, the black people. When I was with Inter-church Media in Johannesburg, I discovered that most of the people who used our programmes were white people, precisely because the office was based in Johannesburg. Most of these people

already had skills in communication. But our people could not come to our programmes. So those who came just used the programmes to further their skills. We could not reach the grassroots people in the townships, so I suggested that we have an office in Soweto. The office was opened in 1986. So I moved from Johannesburg to the township, to start working at grassroots level.

We try to break with classical roles, where one person specialises as director and another in sound. We believe that everyone must have all the skills. Together they participate as equals, no matter what their educational qualifications are. ■

It was very difficult to start the programme of communication with black people in the township, because our education does not have anything to do with communication. Our education is modelled to rush us into the working class, nothing more than that.

I was alone for the first year, and then in 1987 someone came to help me, so that we could move around the township. The township is very big.



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### Migrant workers

Last year we were busy with the migrant women workers who live in a hostel.

At first we had a few problems with the migrant workers' project. But these problems came from within ourselves. I myself am a migrant worker. We wanted to show how this migration is ruining our family lives. We tried to call meetings to discuss this, but it did not work. I did not want to impose things on them, just because I know about media.

Eventually, some women asked me to help them. 'How can we educate our people about the situation?' they asked. I said that the best thing would be for the committee to go through what they wanted to produce, because they would be running the workshop.

We gave them the skills to produce their own slide and tape presentation. They had their own ideas on what they wanted to say, but not the skills to do it. They wanted to show other women migrant workers what their life is like, what migration is doing to them and how their families are being neglected because of their separation from them. They use the slide and tape presentation for workshops and educational programmes.

They then invited us to evaluate their work. We took other people from the township with us to see what impression it made on them too.

### Youth organisation

It is not easy to organise people. The first course we ran this year was for young people. When a group of young people comes to our office, they are usually brought along by one person who comes to see what we are doing and then goes home to get more people, without telling us.

to communicate better with each other. Then we discuss how to produce a slide and tape on their organisation.

### Long struggle

It is very difficult to start a communication programme in a township because our people have been struggling for a long time and they are not sure what can help them out of that struggle. So they need time to understand what they really need. ■

### PLEASE NOTE!

This issue of *Group Media Journal* is not a verbatim report of the Lusaka Symposium. Our aim has been to provide an insight into the experiences, events, thoughts and atmosphere of the Sympos-