APPRECIATING CONTESTATION: INVESTIGATING THE VALUE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT FOR STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Adoné Kitching, Tristan Görgens, Pamela Masiko-Kambala and Mirjam van Donk - Isandla Institute

> Violent protests have taken place again around the country in the past few weeks. Also worrying is what appears to be premeditated violence, as is the case with the use of petrol bombs and other weapons during protests. The democratic government supports the right of the citizen to express themselves. The right to protest, peacefully and unarmed, is enshrined in the Constitution. However, when protests threaten lives and property and destroy valuable infrastructure intended to serve the community, they undermine the very democracy that upholds the right to protest.
>
> *(President Jacob Zuma, State of the Nation Address, 13 February 2014)*

IN RECENT YEARS South Africa has seen the proliferation of violent protests over service delivery and labour conditions. These protests are occurring at an alarming rate, with one protest taking place almost every two days (Municipal IQ 2014). Although protests are not new in South Africa, their frequency and intensity have increased. Citizens across the country now take to the streets with weapons, while the police have a tendency to respond to the unrest with violence and brutality of their own. The protests serve to illustrate the tumultuous relationship between local government and communities, with violence and unrest typifying the interactions between these two parties. They also signal the level of frustration of citizens, who doubt the government's ability to provide for their basic needs and feel that

they have no other means of making their voices heard. The proliferation of violence, therefore, also indicates the anger of citizens who are disappointed and disenchanted with local government and their elected representatives.

Furthermore, more subtle and often invisible forms of conflict add to the anger and frustration levels. While local government and development initiatives often represent or imagine communities as coherent and cohesive wholes, in reality they are heterogeneous spaces within which multiple views and identities exist. Too often policies based on the conception of 'the community' regard it as a homogenous, static and harmonious actor that has knowledge and opinions (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Guijt and Shah 1998; Mohan and Stokke 2000; Williams 2004). However, in practice, communities are dynamic, deeply unequal and heterogeneous. Indeed, there is growing evidence that in South Africa 'community-based organisations engaged in community governance fall under the rubric of civil society, yet the behaviour of stakeholders in these community-based organisations is a replica of the behaviour of politicians engaged in state politics' (Katsaura 2011: 340; Piper and von Lieres 2008; von Holdt et al. 2011).

Given the prevalence of contestation in South Africa – whether between communities and the state or within communities themselves – it is imperative that development practice begins to engage with conflict and contestation as a means through which to bolster the resilience of those who are most vulnerable. In a context characterised by poverty and scarcity, conflict exacerbates the vulnerability of the poor. Conflict can therefore be immensely destructive. However, conflict can be managed in a way that generates useful outcomes. The core assumption underpinning this paper is that processes of planning, decision-making, and development are inherently contested. Informed

by an 'agonistic' view of power and contestation as inescapable and generative (Mouffe 2000) but wary of the various ways in which power can be exerted 'invisibly' (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001), this paper will argue that the creation of participatory spaces, which allow communities to express disagreements, contest power and outcomes, and reach decisions, have a vital role to play in improving resilience. If structured in a manner that expands dialogue and enables new solutions to be created, contestation can contribute substantively to building the resilience of a community. Understanding the role of contestation in planning processes leads to a better understanding of how to develop people's capacity to build resilience through collective action. The paper will also examine the different methodological options for building these forms of resilience from the asset-based community development, participatory planning and conflict resolution literatures. Finally, it will conclude by briefly reviewing the possibilities for institutionalising such methodologies within the local government system in South Africa.

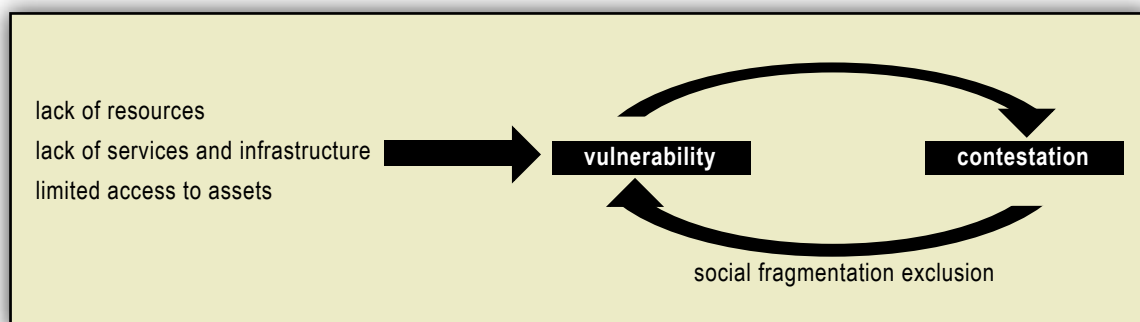## UNDERSTANDING CYCLES OF CONTESTATION AND VULNERABILITY IN POOR COMMUNITIES

Post-apartheid South Africa is facing up to the reality that community politics are complex and often intertwined with 'bigger politics' at national, provincial and local level (von Holdt 2011). Furthermore, service delivery provision is bound to be contentious and contested, when a large section of the population is weakened by a daily preoccupation with the struggle for survival, in the most unequal country in the world that is crippled by high levels of poverty and unemployment. Despite this reality, however, 'cookie cutter' interventions are often meted out when dealing with service delivery and development across these communities. A

general fault of development planning is its tendency to romanticise the coherence of communities and, in doing so, underestimate their complexity. This failure to recognise complexity often leads to inappropriate interventions and blowback from 'beneficiaries' (Guijt and Shah 1998), as the needs of communities are not adequately addressed. In South Africa, dissatisfaction with public housing provision is well-documented and often baffles government officials. In Braamfischerville in Soweto, residents were disgruntled over the quality of RDP houses, which lacked adequate bathroom and kitchen facilities (Moolla et al. 2011). In 1996, the first phases of housing provision were set in motion, and the upgrading plans were meant to provide residents with basic services and amenities. However, by 2002 very little infrastructure had been put in place, and research conducted in the settlement showed that roads were only paved in 2008 (Moolla 2011). Such ill-tailored development creates the illusion that 'people in a particular location, neighbourhood, ethnic group are necessarily cooperative, caring and inclusive ... whereas power differentials in gender, race and class relations may result in exclusion, and threaten the apparent cohesiveness of the group in question' (Mathie and Cunningham 2003: 475).

Communities are dynamic, deeply unequal and heterogeneous, and so recognising the danger of the 'vulnerability-contestation loop' is important, especially in poor communities that are vulnerable in a number

of different ways. In South Africa, poor communities are made vulnerable by a lack of infrastructure to support their livelihoods. In informal settlements across the country, basic services, such as the provision of water, sanitation and electricity, are outside of the reach of a large section of the population. The vulnerability of the poor heightens the possibility of contestation over scarce resources. Contestation (particularly when external resources are introduced) leads to fragmentation and fracturing in communities, as relationships take strain under conditions where conflict is prevalent. A case study of Matjhabeng in Johannesburg shows that conflict and contestation cannot be understood independently of the poverty that characterises these spaces (Molapo and Ngubeni 2011: 83). In 2008, a cement company doing work in the area evicted squatters in the settlement from privately owned land (Molapo and Ngubeni 2011: 85). The company wanted the shacks of non-employees to be demolished, while their employees, who were mostly foreign nationals, were allowed to continue living on the land. As a result, residents mobilised against local government and petitioned for the provision of emergency housing. Evicted residents also turned their frustrations towards foreign nationals and targeted not only spaza shops owned by foreigners, but also foreigners themselves. In a struggle over land and housing resources, foreign nationals became scapegoats for the anger and frustration over the lack

Figure 1: Vulnerability-contestation loop

lack of resources
lack of services and infrastructure
limited access to assets

vulnerability

contestation

social fragmentation exclusion

of security against sudden eviction. In communities where conflict over resources is sustained, resilience is eroded, and so these communities are less able to deal with new external shocks.

Figure 1 illustrates the interplay between vulnerability and contestation. Vulnerable communities are more likely to experience conflict over resources. In turn, contestation can intensify social fragmentation, which again increases the vulnerability of the community.

The designing, planning and decision-making process of external interventions creates an opportunity to foster a different kind of resilience in communities, particularly if targeted at improving the ways in which communities deal with conflict (thereby intervening in the negative feedback loop identified in Figure 1). This argument is grounded in Mouffe's view that contestation and conflict is part and parcel of democratic decision-making, and can result in positive change if allowed to 'surface' and addressed (Pernegger 2013: 5). Mouffe's agonistic model prefaces conflict (and contestation) as a necessary tenet of democracy. South Africa could apply a similar approach when dealing with development planning and service delivery provision. Participatory spaces should be designed in a way that allows communities to express disagreements, contest power and outcomes, and reach decisions, which in turn will go a long way to improving their resilience.

WHAT DOES RESILIENCE THINKING ADD TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF DEVELOPMENT?

Resilience describes the ability of a community to absorb shock and to respond to crisis (Berkes 2007, Folke 2006). As such, resilience thinking emphasises local resources and networks that may contribute to a community's survival in the face of devastating circumstances. This school of thought

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also acknowledges the value of re-organisation, so that a community's capacity to adapt to change – or its 'transformability' (Walker et al. 2004) – greatly contributes to its resilience. The community development and resilience literatures share a number of crucial commonalities. Both bodies of work take local assets as a point of departure, emphasise collaborative decision-making processes and advocate for a new kind of relationship between the state and the community. Despite these similarities, however, resilience thinking does offer a number of useful lessons for understanding of development. By drawing attention to specific factors that can contribute to reduced vulnerability, resilience thinking points the way for community development and sets out an agenda for future development initiatives.

Berkes (2005) draws on the work in Folke et al. (2003) when examining the ways in which vulnerability may be reduced through improved resilience. Four critical elements contribute to the bolstering of resilience: '(1) learning to live with change and uncertainty, (2) nurturing diversity in its various forms, (3) combining different types of knowledge for learning, and (4) creating opportunity for self-organization and cross-scale linkages' (Berkes 2007: 287–288). Thus, these factors would advance a community's ability to survive and adapt to changing realities. For participatory community development, these factors signal key areas of interest where resources must be targeted. Development will therefore improve the community's resilience (and in turn reduce its vulnerability), by improving the community's ability to learn to live with uncertainty, to cultivate diversity, to combine knowledge and to create opportunities for self-organisation.

However, as mentioned above, resilience is not only measured as the ability of a system to return to its original state after a disruption has occurred. Resilience thinking acknowledges that responses to a crisis may be complex and varied, and that each response may result in a situation that requires the system to be restructured and reorganised. As Berkes notes, the 'recognition of the pervasiveness of non-linear responses and threshold effects are part of the revolution in the current science of ecology. The traditional notions of stability ... have given way to the idea of non-equilibrium systems, multiple steady states and surprises' (2007: 286–287). Therefore, being resilient also means being able to evolve in a way that allows for adequate responses to the demands of a changing environment. In attempting to strengthen the resilience of communities, development must not only emphasise the ability to return to the status quo but rather, through mediation and processes of collaboration, enhance the 'transformability' of a community (Walker et al. 2004). Development that is geared towards buttressing resilience acknowledges that there are multiple conditions under which the wellbeing of a community could be sustained and that the relationships and networks making up these conditions are continuously in flux.

By acknowledging the possibility of multiple responses to disruption, resilience thinking also acknowledges the propensity for contestation and conflict inherent in planning and mediation processes. In South Africa, political contestation and factionalism

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often stifles the progress of these processes. In his examination of the often unexplored darker side of active citizenship, Mayson (2013) reflects on the work of Planact in an informal settlement in Johannesburg. In Eryka there was tension between the Landless People's Movement (LPM) and a particularly active member of the community (Doreen) who had become aligned with the Democratic Alliance. The LPM accused Doreen of corruption and mismanagement, and Planact was called in as a neutral arbiter to facilitate between the actors (Mayson 2013: 50). However, when Planact was later asked to facilitate an IDP proposal process for the community in Eryka, allegations from the LPM suggested that the organisation was working against the community and had no interest in its wellbeing. Mayson draws attention to the underlying tensions that influence the workings of development initiatives in communities in South Africa, showing that accusations and allegations were used as tools to secure resources or support and to exclude conflicting interests from power. Similarly, Bénit-Gbaffou (2011) illustrates the ways in which a particular interest group appropriates resources and distributes them to its members, using a case study of a low-income neighbourhood in Johannesburg where food parcels were to be given to the poor (2011: 454). Local government turned to the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) to distribute the parcels on their behalf, as the organisation was thought to have a better sense of the situation on the ground. Bénit-Gbaffou suggests that, rather than assessing the circumstances of all residents in the area, SANCO members were given preferential access to food parcels (2011: 454). Here, as in Eryka, political affiliation or alignment with a particular interest group is seen to influence development processes. As such, interventions become sites of contestation over who is given access and who is excluded from enjoying

the benefits of development. Similar realities are described in Diepsloot in the north of Johannesburg (Harber 2010).

The four elements identified in the resilience literature serve as key objectives for community development, and each hold the potential for tremendous tension and rivalry. In learning to live with precariousness, myriad responses to changing circumstances may emerge from a single community, and multiple stakeholders may contest one another in an attempt to assert the legitimacy of their response (Katsaura 2011). In South Africa, multiple stakeholders often struggle for political and economic legitimacy in a single area. Using a case study of Yeoville in Johannesburg, Katsaura considers how tensions play out between four community organisations and the varying interests that influence relationships between the organisations (2011). Here, the Yeoville Stakeholders Forum (YSF), the Community Policing Forum (CPF), the Ward Committee and the Yeoville Community Forum (YCF) each attempt to claim symbolic, cultural and economic capital. For example, in an effort to claim political legitimacy, the Ward Committee, YSF and CPF 'deploy their association with government structures', while the YCF (which is not government mandated) is discredited (Katsaura 2011). These kinds of struggle over legitimacy add a level of tension to planning and mediation processes and intensify already existing conflicts within communities. Furthermore, in attempting to nurture diversity, identity politics and struggles over belonging may stifle progress in strengthening resilience.

In community development, conflict management must therefore run as a parallel process, so that tension and contestation may be mediated in a way that contributes to the four elements of resilience. This can be done by: (1) systematically revealing the sources of contestation, the motivations behind different claims and the imbalances and inequalities between participants within communities – individual members, and the community as a whole, should be better equipped to collectively respond to change and uncertainty; (2) understanding that diversity within the community is a valuable aspect of community life, rather than as a threat or potential scapegoat; (3) understanding better the value offered by different voices and different approaches to issues, which should be cultivated, along with a better sense of how to mobilise and combine these; (4) employing these processes in development practice as a means to encourage clearer and more pragmatic alliances between groups within the community, as well as initiatives beyond the community.

Central to this paper's argument is the assumption that conflict permeates all levels of development practice, but this conflict need not compound the vulnerability of communities. In taking note of heterogeneity and revealing conflicts, development initiatives could contribute greatly to strengthening those four elements that together result in heightened resilience. Acknowledging and engaging with the potential generative power of conflict, and mediating effectively tensions and disputes, may lead to a deeper understanding of issues and to resilience generated through participation. The following section examines pragmatic ways of managing conflict constructively and imagines a new methodological approach for a new kind of practice in community development.

ENVISIONING A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is an approach to development that emphasises the assets and capabilities of a community (Mathie 2006; Mathie and Cunningham 2003; Mathie and Cunningham 2005). The ABCD approach starts with

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a community's existing strengths and builds capacity through recognising the community's own resources. With its focus on positive practices and relationships that strengthen the development process, ABCD is an alternative to needs-based approaches, which begin by taking stock of the needs and shortages of a community (Mathie and Cunningham 2003: 474). ABCD also advocates for an endogenous approach to development – where community members are at the heart of development strategies – rather than simply introducing exogenous strategies. The methods used aim to enable communities to better understand and mobilise around their own strengths, and to capitalise on opportunities. Essentially, the ABCD approach seeks to carve out a space for citizenship engagement in the development process by highlighting the significance of a community's existing strategies and networks. In South Africa, the ABCD approach to development is well established and advocated by organisations such as the Eastern Cape NGO Coalition (ECNGOC). In partnership with the Coady Institute – who offers technical support and training – organisations such as the CS Mott Foundation, the Ikhala Trust and the Gordon Institute of Business have contributed to the growth of an ABCD community in South Africa (Leading Change 2012).

ABCD's methods are geared to highlighting a community's assets and facilitating processes that take advantage of existing good practice. These methods are influenced by a range of ideas, of which appreciative enquiry and social capital are particularly useful. Appreciative enquiry refers to those techniques through which narratives of community successes are told (Mathie and Cunningham 2003; Mathie and Cunningham 2005) and relies heavily on experience and memory, as tools with which to identify prominent assets. The social capital concept focuses on the fundamental importance of social relationships for the wellbeing of a community (Mathie and Cunningham 2003); through relationships of trust, reciprocity and mutual recognition, communities build social networks that they can rely on in times of crisis. ABCD provides a valuable and comprehensive approach to development, and some of the practical techniques that can be used include: gathering narratives of community successes and analysing them for reasons for success, mapping assets, forming a steering group, building relationships among local assets, convening a representative planning group and leveraging investments from outside the community (Mathie and Cunningham 2003; Mathie and Cunningham 2005).

ABCD offers some useful insights for thinking about ways to manage conflict in the development process. The techniques used to implement the approach – and the underpinning theoretical work – draw attention to existing assets and local mechanisms. Conflict management and mediation processes must therefore take into account a community's capacity to deal with conflict in idiosyncratic ways. Furthermore, the ABCD literature emphasises the value of endogenous development that places communities at the centre of processes related to their daily lives, and so practitioners must be acutely aware of the role of residents in shaping strategies and solutions when dealing with contestation and conflict.

The insights offered by the ABCD approach for conflict management lie not only in its positive aspects, but also in its shortcomings. Although this approach steers development practices in the

right direction, channelling its energy towards the strengthening of existing community capacities and focusing on strategies generated from within, it (and its methods) takes community consensus for granted. Yet stories of community successes may serve to obscure contentious realities and marginalise a range of actors whose opinions were not considered in the making of these successes. The formation of steering groups also signals a potentially conflict-ridden process, as relationships between community members may be characterised by animosity and distrust. These processes also fall victim to a phenomenon that initiatives in South Africa are particularly prone to: 'elite capture', whereby resources are hijacked and channelled towards the benefit of a certain group or individual. Furthermore, the leveraging of external resources may inflict massive strain on a community, and decisions about which stakeholders to include in development processes cannot be made merely in terms of consensus. Indeed, development practitioners and local government officials must be aware of the dangers of processes that assume consensus, as these may result in silencing disparate views and concealing power differentials within a community (Agger and Larson 2007).

This is not to say that consensus-driven decision-making is inherently bad or misguided. Rather, the intention here is to draw attention to the ubiquity (and potential value) of conflict in the practice of development. A unilateral focus on consensus runs the risk of side-lining the views of particular groups within a community. Therefore, development needs to shift its attention to a deeper engagement with conflict and cultivate an attitude towards disagreement that allows for the excavation of its generative potential. Indeed, as Brand and Graffin (2007: 308) note:

while collaborative planning recognizes that there are different sites of knowledge production, including the tacit and experiential knowledge of community, agonistic approaches seek to validate the implications of this plurality by endorsing multiple forms of candid expression. Thus, instead of planners being in the business of advocacy and knowledge transfer, they can be in the business of knowledge exchange within the framework of smart pluralism, whereby each faction learns that its interest can be best advanced through persuasive engagement rather than coercive dominance.

> Conflict is mediated by reframing the issues that gave rise to the conflict: the mediator reframes the debate by taking the emphasis away from the personal and emotionally charged disagreements and directing it towards common goals and desired outcomes.

The question is, how can development practitioners and local government officials deal with conflict in a way that reinforces community resilience rather than plays into the destructive dimensions of conflict? One understanding of conflict management, from the experiences of planners and mediators, suggests that successful engagement with conflict can result in practical ends that serve multiple interests (Forester 2006). Conflict-mediation processes draw attention away from grievances and strengthen communities' ability to deal with future antagonisms. Conflict is mediated by reframing the issues that gave rise to the conflict: the mediator reframes the debate by taking the emphasis away from the personal and emotionally charged disagreements and directing it towards common goals and desired outcomes (Forester 2007: 451). In so doing, conflict mediation allows mutual vulnerability and common challenges to

be acknowledged, which contributes to stakeholders' understanding of one another. Furthermore, moving towards joint learning directs discussion towards mutual challenges and benefits, listening for (and analysing) underlying interests when stakeholders voice their grievances and desires, and valuing anger among participants in the planning process as a sign of energy – as opposed to apathy – for, and investment in, the outcomes of development and the wellbeing of their communities.

Finally, Forester (2007) highlights the important difference between the processes of mediation and moderation. Mediation allows participants to construct their own agreements and to work through issues in their own way. Therefore, the mediator who facilitates such a process simply guides an organic debate towards uncovering strategies for the future. In contrast, moderation refers to a process in which the reasons for conflict are faced head on. Here, a facilitator will ask parties to voice their grievances with one another in an open and straightforward manner. While this process can indeed be useful, it can also result in escalated antagonism and weakened relationships between parties (Forester 2007: 454).

Complementing Forester's thinking are the ideas emerging from the conflict resolution literature. Spangler (2003), drawing on Lederach (2003), outlines the need to create a new language with which to think about how to deal with conflict.

Lederach (2003) suggests an alternative understanding of conflict, which can result in a deeper knowledge of the elements contributing to conflict and a sustained understanding of how to harness the positive implications of conflict.

Concepts such as conflict resolution and conflict management are problematic, as they respectively imply the erasure and control of conflict. Lederach (2003) suggests an alternative understanding of conflict, which can result in a deeper knowledge of the elements contributing to conflict and a sustained understanding of how to harness the positive implications of conflict. Here, the term 'conflict resolution' is used to describe actions through which immediate problems caused by conflict may be addressed in conjunction with the underlying relationships that are at the origin of the conflict. The particular understanding of conflict, as an inevitable yet useful aspect of social life, guides the methods of conflict transformation. Therefore, in order to transform conflict, practitioners should cultivate a capacity to view immediate issues without becoming anxious about immediate solutions, to integrate short-term responses with long-term change, and to reframe debates to reflect the legitimacy of disparate views. Furthermore, practitioners should view complexity as a positive attribute and allow for identity to be articulated in relation, not reaction, to others.

Table 1 synthesises the lessons drawn from the ABCD, community planning and conflict resolution literatures. A number of attitudinal shifts need to occur in order to deal productively with conflict and contestation. Attitudes refer to crucial aspects that make up a conflict-sensitive approach to development, while approaches refer to the ways in which these aspects may be drawn out or strengthened. The table may be seen as the beginnings of a methodology for development that is aware of both the destructive and generative potential of conflict and contestation, and that mediates tensions in a way that contributes to the resilience of a community.

Table 1: Attitudes and approaches for a development practice to deal with conflict and contestation.

Attitude	Approach
The **experiences of community members** are valid and valuable for developing strategies for conflict management.	Through **appreciative enquiry**, practitioners can draw out these experiences and reflect on them with community members.
Social relationships are crucial aspects of resilience. Understanding these allows practitioners to make sense of existing assets as well as the places relationships are strained.	Practitioners must be aware of the **social capital** generated within communities and between community members.
Conflict focuses attention on the disagreements between parties, while the purpose of resilience-building development should be to highlight both **common struggles and opportunities for wellbeing that benefit all**.	By **reframing** debates between stakeholders, practitioners will be able to draw attention away from grievances. In order to reframe the discussion, practitioners must invite stakeholders to think over shared struggles and, together, to envision ideal outcomes.
Conflict is not something that is easily (if ever) resolved. Conflict remains a part of the interaction between individuals and groups, and must be transformed in a way that makes it useful to development processes, while ensuring that the rights of the most vulnerable are safeguarded.	Through **conflict transformation**, practitioners will be able to channel the destructive energy of conflict towards constructive processes. Conflict then becomes a generative tool, rather than a destructive hindrance.

CONCLUSION

In South Africa today, frustration with the state is being expressed through violent protests. Citizens are taking to the streets, armed with burning tyres and petrol bombs, in an attempt to make their voices heard. Although protests in general, and violent protests in particular, are by no means unfamiliar in South African history, in recent years the intensity and frequency of protests have increased. Furthermore, while development thinking often represents communities as coherent and cohesive wholes, the reality speaks of heterogeneity and communities as spaces of contestation within which multiple identities and views clash and mingle.

In South Africa, conflict and contestation occur at multiple levels. Conflicts between the state and communities, as well as those that persist within communities (and within the state), have immense destructive power, tearing away at both social and material resources. In poor communities, daily life is characterised by a struggle over available resources. Here, conflict fragments social relationships and, as such, heightens the vulnerability of the poor. In order to break this cycle, the resilience of a community needs to be strengthened through an active recognition of the origins of conflicts and disagreements. The purpose of this paper has been to argue for the emergence of a new kind of development practice – one that takes seriously the workings and consequences of conflict and contestation. In so doing, local government officials and development practitioners will be able to cultivate

spaces within which the generative, rather than destructive, dimensions of conflict may be extracted.

An examination of existing literature found that attitudinal shifts will have to occur, if a development practice that aims at a deeper engagement with multiple dimensions of conflict is to emerge. A number of suggestions (refer Table 1) may serve to guide practitioners in dealing with conflict. In a context where gross inequality and a lack of resources are the order of the day, conflict –and the potential exploitation of contestation and conflict by groups or individuals seeking personal gain –cannot be ignored. While apartheid-era politics left a modus operandi that prefers to sweep tensions and disagreements under the rug rather than face them head-on, the radicalisation of conflict over recent years proves the out-datedness and inefficiency of such an approach. By taking conflict seriously and institutionalising conflict management as an approach to development, local government and development initiatives will harness the generative power of contestation and, in doing so, contribute to the increased resilience of communities across the country.

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