



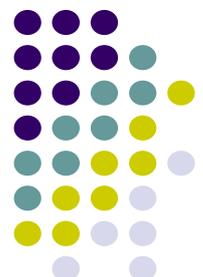
# Looking Back to the Future: Conversations on Unbounded Organisation

Gavin Andersson

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# **Looking Back to the Future: Conversations on Unbounded Organisation**

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## **Abstract**

It is the year 2024, thirty years after the first democratic elections were held in South Africa. A young development anthropologist researcher meets up with a veteran civil society activist and discusses the nature of development organisations that emerged in the first decade of South Africa's democratic dispensation. The result is a fascinating reflection on what is, what has been and what could be.

## **About the author**

Gavin Andersson has worked in various capacities to strengthen civil society across Southern Africa. Until recently, he was the CEO and, subsequently, Community Leadership Programme Director of the Leadership Regional Network for Southern Africa (LeaRN). Prior to his involvement with LeaRN, he was the Executive Director of Development Resource Centre (DRC) in Johannesburg. Gavin is currently working on his PhD (Open University, London), which is on 'Popular Development Organisation'. His interests include activity theory, development practice and societal learning.

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# Looking Back to the Future: Conversations on Unbounded Organisation<sup>1</sup>

Gavin Andersson

*Interior of a Café, Times Square Yeoville. This cafe has remained unscathed through the shifts of decades, and reflects wild diversity in popular culture in much the same way it did at the turn of the century. A young development anthropologist researcher, Odo, interviews m’Keneke, struggle veteran and prominent civil society activist in the first decade of South African independence. It is a sweltering late afternoon in 2024.*

**Odo:** I’m reading from an article you wrote: ‘In the second decade of democracy – contrary to all patterns through the first decade – there was a marked quickening of unbounded development organisation with unprecedented numbers of people from all walks of life engaging in activity for social transformation. This strengthened the social fabric and enhanced economic vitality.’ There’s a lot I’d like to ask about this. You seem to suggest that this was not common in the first democratic decade, and I’m curious about this. Surely it flowed naturally from the liberation era?

**m’Keneke:** No, after 10 years of democracy it didn’t look like we were going anywhere in terms of really popular development organisation, if you think of popular as referring to something that people want to do and which involves very many people. There were two major problems. First, the representative hierarchies that were so useful to take

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper is forthcoming in: Pieterse, E. and Meintjies, F. (eds) 2004. *Voices of the Transition: The Politics, Poetics and Practices of Development*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.

forward the liberation struggle became the instinctive mode of organizing for development but they were completely inadequate in the new epoch. I'd say that the strength of the 1980s became a weakness in the 1990s when we needed to find new ways to organize. The second problem was that our theory of organisation was restricted to an enterprise model, which was completely inappropriate for social transformation, and this caged our thinking.

**Odo:** OK, let's take this a bit more slowly. Explain 'enterprise model'.

**m'Keneke:** All of our understanding about organisations at that time really came out of private sector thinking from the middle of the previous century. We were good at thinking about individual organisations' competitive advantages and niche roles and in creating a business plan to take the enterprise into the future. But in the process all the issues that the individual organisation or enterprise was not concerned about simply fell through the cracks, and by default were regarded as the responsibility of Government. Our enterprise-based theory of organisation meant we weren't able to see that the key issue is how we work *across* organisations throughout society. Each organisation saw itself as the centre of the world and all its strategic plans were formulated in an auto-centric fashion. This is what I call 'bounded organisation', with implicit boundaries on activity created by the organisation's identity. We had to transform our thinking so that organisations saw themselves as part of a family of organisations, and interlinked. Once we acknowledged the need for those links, we had to find new methodologies to facilitate inter-organisational dialogue and agreed activity.

**Odo:** So how did you and your sister development activists help people understand they needed to shift their thinking?

**m'Keneke:** Actually, no one was able to imagine new theories, which is not to say there weren't theorists providing exciting, different insights. When you're steeped in a way of thinking it's impossible to imagine a different way of doing things. By 2004 I'd say we were really stuck. The economy was seen as somehow separate from the rest of society. People mostly organised according to government, private sector or civil society blocks, each with their own role. But then in about 2006/7, a variety of small initiatives began to

work differently and to overcome the constraints and limitations of their micro-situations. Together they had a reach and influence they had not anticipated.

**Odo:** Why did they begin to work differently? Were they now taking note of those theories they'd ignored earlier?

**m'Keneke:** It doesn't happen like that. People in organisations don't just decide to shift their paradigm overnight. Your psychological reflection is influenced very much by your activity. When a different way of working on a small scale suggests or gives a theoretical insight, that's when the "Aha!" comes ... it's in the practice that people come to recognise the possibilities for change.

**Odo:** You say people didn't know how to work across sectors. But what about in the UDF period? I've read a ton of publications suggesting that the UDF did embody that approach but it seems this was all lost in the first decade. Is this correct? Why was civil society so incompetent after 1994 in terms of leading reconstruction and development?

**m'Keneke:** That's a very good question. And you are correct: there *was* a co-ordinated and cross-sectoral opposition to apartheid in the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. But when you look at the major anti-apartheid organisations, whether they were trade unions, civics, youth, women or faith-based organisations, they were all organised in these 'representative hierarchies' with rigorous systems of mandate and democratic accountability. Each of these organisations had a common cause and absolute unity of purpose in opposition to apartheid. There was no difficulty in finding coherence of vision when they worked together, when they went outside the boundary of their own organisations. So you're right. There was a vibrant civil society and cross-organisational collaboration. But once formal apartheid has been dismantled, two immediate problems emerged, one the result of the very strength of the previous period.

**Odo:** What were the problems?

**m'Keneke:** The first has to do with an agreement of where we're going and what development means. 'Development' itself is a contested term, vague and woolly. Ten of us describing the society we would like to live in fifteen years' time would have as many as ten different proposals when it came down to the detail, and as for finding consensus about how to get there, well that becomes even more difficult. Once you start looking at the different views of trade unions, the new business elite, youth organisations, you start to appreciate the elusiveness of a common vision.

**Odo:** That sounds familiar. I can relate to that and I'm glad we're more interested in process these days than destination. Can we look at the other problem, around the strength, I think you said, of what went before.

**m'Keneke:** Well the thing about all those mass formations is that they instilled a certain 'model' of organisation in people's minds. They were organised as representative hierarchies, as I said just now. Immediately after 1994 people instinctively tried to organise the same way for development. A burst of energy went into the creation of 'development forums', or RDP Committees, or Community Forums, which reproduced the (hierarchical) patterns and rules of organisation in the previous epoch. Instead of facilitating initiative at grassroots level, this tended to stifle it because now grassroots projects were deemed accountable to the development forums. And these forums were seen as responsible for raising funds, organising technical support and interfacing with policy makers on the basis of 'business-plans'. Apart from anything else you can see that this promoted an image of development as primarily an externally-stimulated process, rather than fostering an asset-based development culture, where people started with what they had and then tried to draw down further resources to augment it. But the worst thing is that the Organisation itself became the focus of people's organizing efforts. The best people at local level were skimmed off to higher representative levels so that they started to negotiate and discuss development rather than doing it. Dialogue rather than action became the focus, with civil society organised as a mirror of the way government was organised. When I said a problem had arisen from an earlier strength, I was referring to the way organisational structure can inhibit creativity, diversity and the realisation of potential synergies. This tendency to create 'intermediaries' for grassroots organisation was strengthened by government and various donor agencies that found it easier to speak to one body – or at best a few intermediary organisations – rather than multiple grassroots initiatives. We know now that if democracy means letting a thousand flowers bloom, then equitable social development requires a veritable rain forest. But in those days the very language of development constrained people and it took years for grassroots organisations to become literate in the dynamics of unbounded organisation.

**Odo:** We now use the term 'unbounded organisation' to refer to inter-sectoral collaboration, individuals linking between their 'own' organisations, coalition-building, cross-cultural activities and involvement by all segments of society. I realize as you're speaking that people might not have been thinking in this way at the time. What I'm hearing is that the language of organisations with individual mission statements and strategies towards realising them also restricted the imagination. I guess bounded organisations were in harmony with the neo-liberal economics of that time?

**M’Keneke:** Sure. Individuals focused on the immediate goals of their organisations rather than what was needed to improve society. There was an assumption that if each organisation did well then this would add up to society doing well. This harmonizes with the idea that we could rely on the unseen hand of the market to sort out our societal problems. A stupidity that was very difficult to dislodge.

**Odo:** This makes me wonder about the attitude of the business sector at that time. I’m aware that with democracy there was also an opening to the wider world economy and hence the full effects of globalization, so I guess that required business to be quite alert to the need for change?

**m’Keneke:** To start with let me remind you about two things. First, bear in mind that at that time the economy was somehow seen as separate from the rest of society! Second, remember that this was well before the crisis of globalization in 2009, which finally led to the international agreements on a *Framework for Sustained Development in the New Economy* that replaced the Bretton Woods accords from the previous century.

*The background music swells suddenly in volume and across the room people are on their feet and dancing. M’Keneke and Odo find themselves in a group getting down to the beat and sharing smiles. As the song subsides they sit down again, now joined by Alara, poet, pool maestro and renowned dancer.*

**m’Keneke:** Ola Alara! We were just talking about the changes that happened from the first decade of democracy to the second, and I was just going to give my views on what happened in business. But I remember that you performed some powerful poetry at that time that had a big impact, partly because you were so young. Do you mind sharing some of that stuff with Odo?

**Alara** (smiling): Aysh! Yeah when I look back on my teenage years it always feels like the time we saw things clearest. I guess we were just lucky to be the ones living the big shift!

**Odo:** By the big shift do you mean the thing that m’Keneke was just telling me about – the way we started to discover unbounded organisation?

**Alara:** Well, that’s one of the outcomes of the shift. I reckon that the big change came from addressing the poverty of the spirit that was around at the start of the century.

**Odo:** Poverty of the spirit?

**Alara:** Yes man! This thing kind of started at the top of society, and became infectious at other levels – sometimes as would-be ‘uppers’ copied that behaviour, and sometimes as those at society’s base reacted in anger or out of a sense of alienation.

**Odo:** Whoa! Back up! First of all, what do you mean the ‘top of society’ kind of started a ‘poverty of the spirit’? And what do you mean by it exactly?

**m’Keneke:** Let me come in for a moment, and I must say it’s good Alara brings in this issue. After 1994, ‘Old Money’ – the accumulated wealth from more than a hundred years of mining, industrialisation and ‘modernisation’ of southern Africa moved steadily out of the continent to invest in ‘offshore markets’. The biggest corporations moved their base out of the country, listing on the London Stock Exchange. Graduates and other skilled people looked for jobs in the ‘hard currency’ zones of the international economy. Together these three moves created a kind of extractive vortex through the first decade of democracy that continued or even accelerated the 500 year-old pattern of extraction from Africa.

**Odo:** Yes this is well documented now. But how does this link with what Alara is talking about?

**Alara:** Well, the ‘uppers’ – and others, even my generation – started to focus on an abstract global landscape rather than the immediate task of dealing with the issues in their locality.

**m’Keneke:** Yeah this strengthened a belief that it was natural to remain aloof from social issues inside South Africa. And there was no daily experience that helped people encounter each other across social divides, because the spatial separations between social classes that derived initially from apartheid planning meant that most professionals – especially the white folks – never came into daily contact with those experiencing material hardship.

**Odo:** Okay, so what about the *spiritual* poverty stuff?

**Alara:** Well there’s a funny dynamic: when you behave as if you don’t have any responsibility to your fellow citizens, but you ‘know’ deep down that you should be doing something to help things get better, then you get into some weird mind games. You start to blame those people who face problems, or argue that there is not really a problem, or else blame the Government for the problem. Above all you refuse to accept that you need to shift radically in your lifestyle and your behaviour, because you fear that the ‘pay-back’ that will be demanded once you accept your role is too huge to agree to.

But since you are denying your own humanity by doing all this you only survive by reducing (or making more abstract) your ‘commitment space’; you get into a cycle where you are less and less generous in the everyday, more and more afraid to engage with others – especially those different from you! This is what I mean by poverty of the spirit. It’s not pretty, but I saw a lot of it in my early teens. Some people drew strength from bluster and blame and arrogance, stoked by complaints about falling standards and poor governance. They justified their failure to become active members of society by portraying it as somehow not worthy of them.

**Odo:** Yeah, I can imagine that, and it reminds me of that novel describing the Zimbabwean whites in the 1980s: carrying on with their colonial lifestyles and ignoring the need to provide space for those excluded from an economic stake, and resisting the embrace of African cultures and spirituality. We of course know where that led. But the difference in South Africa was surely the emergence of a new black elite in the first years of our democracy? I can’t imagine, when I think of the big names involved, and their histories, that these people got into the same game of focusing on the global picture and ignoring those in material poverty?

**m’Keneke:** Hey, that’s a whole new discussion, but you’re right to raise it. Basically you must remember that many of those folks were brought to the table through ‘special purpose vehicles’, i.e., loaned shares that were supposed to be paid for out of future dividends. With an unexpectedly slow growth rate with the exposure to the competitive international economy, the forecast dividends didn’t come in the first years. Many ‘new entrepreneurs’ therefore learnt their trade under conditions of mortgage. They were then hardly keen on challenging the old corporate culture, to which they were more or less beholden. Even when companies internationally were forced to pay attention to ‘corporate social responsibility’ this seemed relevant in South Africa only for old capital. It was as if society was willing to extend a grace period for untrammelled accumulation to the new entrepreneurs!

**Odo:** This sounds a bit harsh, when you consider that the principles underpinning the 2009 *Framework for Sustained Development in the New Economy* are derived from the idea of African Capitalism, and this notion is usually traced to the discussion about Business that started early this century across southern Africa.

**m’Keneke:** No not at all. I was referring to the first decade of democracy and the ‘first wave’ of black economic empowerment. In 2004 you would not have been able to imagine the shifts of the next 5 years, when many of these individuals emerged as powerful advocates – and practitioners – of a new way of doing business. In the first years, some folks in fact described them as a ‘buffer class’ and as having neglected their roots, and it’s true that desperate poverty co-existed at that time with frivolous

consumption habits, while many new entrepreneurs only made the headlines because of some scandal or other. But let me also say, since you raise a question about harshness (or fairness), that the broad brush we've used should not be seen as painting the full picture. A fact you no doubt understand, given your ethnographic training. There were also some remarkable initiatives by individuals and companies within the business community and a steady manifestation of what became known as active corporate citizenship. The King Report on corporate governance became a benchmark internationally; the African Institute of Corporate Citizenship started to flourish by the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of democracy, the National Business Initiative and Letsema Foundation emerged as powerful examples of business-funded development organisations. So certainly not all segments of business – and even not all of the old elite – followed the trend legitimated and stimulated by the extractive vortex in the global economy. Similarly, we talked about the problems in development organisation, but it's also true that some development practitioners innovated quietly and achieved wonders. Without their insurgent efforts, the bigger shifts would not have emerged.

**Alara:** True. And outside all these formal organisations you've mentioned, there were real achievements in doing away with racism, daily working and dancing realities that showed the *possibility* of societal transformation.

**M'Keneke:** Yeah, even though I've focused on the tough stuff, some exciting things were happening. And it's important to bear in mind that the demographics were shifting steadily. By 2005 people younger than 25 formed well over 75% of the population, and these young people had no learnt models of organisation to constrain them, and were unwilling to accept as hand-me-downs the prejudices of a previous time. They were ready and capable to respond to any emergent developmental activity.

**Odo:** Okay, so I need to pull this all together. Let's just summarize what we've covered so far. m'Keneke, you've suggested that our models of organisation caged our imagination of what was possible, and Alara has made the point that the important shift needed in society was a change in attitude. You've talked about a 'stuck' situation, but also the existence of some catalysts for change. Can we talk about what actually happened? And what caused the shifts?

**m'Keneke:** The changes came with a speed none of us anticipated. But I can't see a chain of causality as your question suggests. It's rather like there was simultaneous emergence of a range of new activities that came to interlink and build upon each other and form new patterns of organisation. I think we can therefore start almost anywhere in describing the initiatives that contributed to change. Alara, how do you see it?

**Alara:** I agree with what you say. For me it all started in the Campaign Against Sexism and Racism (CARAS) in the Eastern Cape. We decided that understanding racism and sexism and developing good practice meant going beyond discussion in a ‘workshop’: we launched a War on Poverty that brought all kinds of people together to support community initiatives. Although the focus was work to eradicate material poverty I found that the vibrancy and excitement of the experience came from the fact that there were individuals from every ethnic and race group and all social classes, and there were so many different kinds of small practical activities that there was something for everyone to do. That first campaign drew intense interest from other parts of the country and I found myself coming up to Gauteng to participate in some of the copycat experiences. That’s also when I got into dance in a big way. There was a real buzz in the air at that time, we were all starting to talk about how the kind of society we wanted. Hey! The language we used, it was something! And there was an explosion of poetry too...

**m’Keneke:** Were you one of the ones who went to Angola at that time?

**Alara:** No but a friend told me about that. She was involved in an Umsobomvu co-operatives programme, and in Angola they learnt for the first time about the method that was used earlier by *Movimento Sem Terra* (that’s the Landless People’s Movement, yeah?) in Brazil. When they came back they started a rolling wave of Organisation Workshops, and it’s like success built upon success. That’s when the huge waste recycling enterprises next to the cities got started, and co-operatives in agriculture and agro-processing in the rural areas. That’s also the time we saw this incredible urban agriculture take off.

**m’Keneke:** What excited me most was the start of the Young Teens movement. Overnight schoolyards became spaces for education with production, and we saw youngsters emerging with high levels of economic literacy, as well as commitment to active citizenship, and an awareness of sexual and reproductive health issues.

**Odo:** How did all of this affect the corporate sector?

**m’Keneke:** This coincided with by a breakthrough by the ethics practitioners in the corporate sector. There was sea-change in the attitude towards non-financial impacts of the corporation, and we saw a quality to the multi-stakeholder dialogue process that had simply not been there before. Companies began to represent value-based webs that brought stakeholders into productive networks with each other. That’s when you also heard the first discussions about African Capitalism, with its prioritisation of social capital, and different patterns of accumulation and investment. There was a vibrant discourse amongst the new entrepreneurs, and the second wave of black economic empowerment placed business social responsibility as central to business success.

**Odo:** And what about the development organisations that you mentioned earlier, who were trapped in the ‘bounded’ model of organisation?

**m’Keneke:** Well you might have imagined they would dissolve, but something much more interesting happened. The new ACCESS system kicked in, modelled on the principle of a stock exchange. This established a rating system based on feedback from a wide range of stakeholders about an organisation’s progress in its development activity in pursuit of a stated mission. It also gave opportunity for the organisation to adjust its plans and process accordingly. Suddenly the work of development organisations became transparent and they became accountable to multiple stakeholders. This changed the pattern of development finance, for the first time since the 1950s; it became possible to create development stock listings, where social investors placed financial support behind the organisation of their choice. Development organisation became interesting for a large portion of humanity that had hitherto regarded it as an unknown continent, and each individual and institution across the world were able to contribute to the level that was feasible for them. You can imagine how this accelerated good practice.

**Odo:** Yes, I’ve studied this system and I’m amazed at how nuanced a picture it gives, and how easy it’s been to implement. Look it’s getting hard to hear above the music, and I can see you two are ready for more dancing, or as you ‘*toppies*’ used to say, *jiving!* Thanks so much for this, it’s really helped me make sense of all the books and journals I’ve read, and the weeks of data-streaming I’ve been through. Once I write it up I’ll pass it by you for comment if you don’t mind.

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*The three join in with others in the café. Odo’s piece appears later that month in Africa Perspective. Its conclusion, titled ‘Lessons for Today: Celebrating the unbounded’ is reprinted below:*

There are indelible lessons from this brief review of the first ten years of democracy in South Africa and the changes that flowed from it in the first decades of this century. The first of these is undoubtedly the recognition that an organisational imagination can only flourish through activity. This is an old lesson, as is witnessed by the saying *we learn to walk by walking*, but it is worth reflecting on anew. For underpinning the will to engage in activity, to learn to do by doing, lies an element of societal fantasy – a dancing and continually changing possibility of future underpinned by a deep confidence in humanity. The reverse of this is also true: our models, patterns and habits of organisation significantly affect what we think. This is worth our bearing

in mind when considering the growing sense of disquiet about our present societal organisation. We would do well to reflect on the kinds of learnt disabilities we have acquired at this stage of our development.

A second insight is around the degree in which it is possible to forge a common aspiration through popular development organisation. Whereas the social psychology of the last half of the 20th century focused on small groups of people in bounded organisations – with some of the consequences mentioned in this essay – the gains of the early 21st century allow us to contemplate a far vaster canvas.

Finally there is a living lesson about human potential, in an unfinished work that started midway through the first decade of this century: the vast agricultural infrastructure of Mozambique, based on its networks of small dams and canals, which harvested and channelled those waters that at the turn of the century flooded the country's plains. The annual intake of youth from across the region to participate in creating another terraced field and further work on the canals has become one of the region's great rituals, providing the occasion for transition to adulthood for our youth. It speaks of the immense self-confidence of our people, and an awareness of time's flow, for this work will not finish in our lifetimes, though it celebrates our existence.