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Grassroots

From Washing Lines to Utopia

Ineke van Kessel

The revival of popular protest in the first half of the 1980s, with the emergence of hundreds of new community and youth organizations, was also marked by a proliferation of new mass media. The sophisticated use of media in addressing both inter-racial and international audiences was one of the distinct characteristics of this last generation of resistance against apartheid. *Grassroots*, a publication aimed at a Coloured and African readership in the Cape Peninsula, was a pioneering effort to forge a new genre of local community newspapers.¹ *Grassroots* formed part of the new alternative media that sprang up in the 1980s to contest the prevailing world view of the mainstream, white-controlled commercial newspapers.² While communication between mainstream newspapers and their publics is largely a one-way street, community newspapers aspired to interact with their readership and to help shape, rather than only report, events.

The commercial press was seen as upholder of the status quo, while nonprofit community media regarded themselves as part of the movement for political and social change. Launched

in 1980, *Grassroots* became a model for local publications. University towns in particular proved fertile ground for the planning of alternative newspapers and pamphlets. Many ventures were short lived, but *Grassroots* lasted a decade before it finally ceased publication in 1990.

Inspiration for the community newspapers was derived from experiments with popular mobilization in Latin America, from Leninist classics, and from the ANC. Faithful to Lenin's prescription for a newspaper as an organizing tool, producing a newspaper was not seen as a goal in itself but as a means to an end. *Grassroots* staff members were known as organizers—"news organizer" rather than "journalist" was the job title for the person in charge of news gathering and editing. The newspaper's ambitions were summed up in the acronym POEM: Popularize, Organize, Educate, and Mobilize.³

A tabloid with a five-week cycle of publication, *Grassroots* aimed to "articulate the views and aspirations of communities and workers."⁴ The frequency of five weeks rather than a month was a tactic used to avoid falling within the legal definition of a newspaper, and therefore *Grassroots* was not required to register and pay a security deposit of R40,000. In almost every issue, a bold headline exposing a scandalous deed by the government or celebrating a heroic victory by the people was featured under its bright red masthead: "They'll Starve Us to Death," exclaimed a story about a rise in the bread price. "Afdakkies to Stay," assured an article that explained how "the people" had forced the town council to give in to their demand that residents be allowed to build corrugated iron extensions to their houses. On the inside pages, *Grassroots* offered advice on pensions, divorce, unemployment benefits, and the prevention of nappie rash; celebrated Charterist heroes of the 1950s; and detailed the everyday struggles of ordinary people. Prominent themes were housing and rent struggles, labor issues, and the costs of living.

Community issues were the lifeblood of the newspaper, but addressing community issues was not an end in itself. *Grassroots* strategists initially went for low-threshold campaigns, on the assumption that it is easier to involve people in local issues that carry a low risk and a high chance of success than to plunge them into "high politics." A demand for more washing lines in the courtyard was nonconfrontational and could attract support from women who would normally stay aloof from politics. Once the battle for more washing lines had been won, *Grassroots* would introduce the message that people can improve their own situation through organizational efforts. Building confidence in the benefits of collective action was important to counter a history of disempowerment. Among Coloured people in the Cape it was widely believed that while Africans had a history of organized resistance, Coloured people lacked the confidence to stand together: "Kleurlinge kan nie saamstaam nie" (Coloureds cannot stand together).

As an organizing tool, *Grassroots* set itself the long-term goal of engaging local organizations in the struggle against the South African state. Bread-and-butter issues were a means to an end, stepping-stones in a process of mobilization against racial and class oppression. The *Grassroots* staff did not perceive themselves primarily as journalists. Notions like objectivity and separation of news and comment belonged to the realm of the "bourgeois" liberal press, which served the interests of the ruling class. *Grassroots* "organisers" were media workers with an unashamedly propaganda mission. While the commercial press presumably anesthetized its readership with "sex, sin, and soccer," the community media meant to conscientize their readers and to encourage them to promote change through collective action.

Grassroots defined its constituency as "the oppressed and exploited majority," a phrase that refers to the African, Coloured, and Indian population. Although these population groups could

all be considered oppressed, they were differentially affected by apartheid legislation. The use of the term *community* suggests a certain homogeneity and cohesiveness. In fact, the "community" that *Grassroots* meant to serve is one of the least homogeneous of South Africa. In terms of organizing and mobilizing people, the composition of the western Cape population posed obvious problems.

The Western Cape: A Fragmented "Community"

In apartheid terms, the western Cape was to be the unofficial "homeland" of the Coloured people. The introduction of the Coloured Labour Preference Policy in the mid-1950s aimed at reducing the size of the African population. Under this policy, which was only abolished in 1984, employers were obliged to give preference to Coloured labor. African workers could only be hired if no Coloureds were available. Africans were therefore relegated to the most poorly paid and unskilled jobs. As Cape Town was destined to be a "white" city, its Coloured and African inhabitants were forcibly resettled on the uninviting sandy plains of the Cape Flats, and the multiracial heart of the city, District Six, was destroyed. The Group Areas Act, designed to purge the white-designated cities of their black inhabitants, caused enormous social and psychological dislocation. The social fabric that held District Six together disintegrated when its inhabitants were scattered over the Cape Flats, where persistent high unemployment went hand in hand with a high crime rate. For the Cape Coloured people, the Group Areas Act was perhaps the most hated piece of apartheid legislation.

One consequence of the Coloured Labour Preference Policy was the lack of opportunities for African advancement. Most African workers were unskilled or semiskilled, and many were migrants. Apart from the three established African townships

of Langa, Nyanga, and Gugulethu, no housing was made available to Africans. Coloured people and African township residents with permits enjoyed secure residential rights. But most Africans in the western Cape were "illegals," who settled in sprawling squatter camps, continuously subjected to police raids and deportations to the Transkei and the Ciskei. While organizations in the African townships of the Transvaal could draw on a sizeable reservoir of professionals and an educated working-class leadership, the western Cape had only a limited potential for providing African leadership in trade unions, community organizations, and the umbrella structure of the United Democratic Front. The UDF western Cape was dominated by Coloureds—including many with university backgrounds—and some white intellectuals.

ANC traditions have generally been weak in the western Cape. The Coloured People's Congress, which represented the Coloureds in the Congress Alliance in the 1950s, was small in numbers and weak in organization, in contrast to the much more influential South African Indian Congress. A large part of the Coloured population kept aloof from politics. Social conservatism and the religious orthodoxy of the main Coloured church, the Nederduits Gereformeerde Sendingskerk, were more characteristic of large sections of the Coloured population than political radicalism or working-class consciousness. The Coloured Muslim population of the Cape also tended to be conservative. Radicals in both communities found outlets in the Trotskyite New Unity Movement and other smaller leftists movements. The African townships in the western Cape did have an ANC presence, which was to some extent carried over into sections of the trade union movement such as the African Food and Canning Workers' Union. But when young Coloured activists began "discovering" the ANC in the early 1980s, they were mostly discovering the ANC in exile rather than the ANC tradition that had survived in the townships.

The racial divide was not the only dividing line; the fracture pattern also ran along ideological, religious, linguistic, generational, and socioeconomic lines. Afrikaans is the language of the Coloured working class; Xhosa is most widely spoken in the African townships; English was the language of the anti-apartheid struggle and sections of the intellectual elite. The economy is dominated by light manufacturing, mainly textiles and food processing. Industrial strikes, a common phenomenon around Johannesburg and Durban, were a rare event in the western Cape. Most Coloured workers were organized in white-controlled "sweetheart" trade unions. A few radical black unions had emerged or reemerged in the late 1970s, but these had a mainly African membership.

In order to mount an effective opposition to the apartheid state, these divisions needed to be overcome. *Grassroots* had set itself the task of promoting the building of community-based organizations, raising political awareness and bridging the divide between Coloureds and Africans. What was to be done? Where to start?

Sources of Inspiration: Leninism, Charterism, Populism

The idea of launching a community newspaper in the Cape Town area was first mooted in May 1976, a month before the 16 June Soweto uprising, by a group of Coloured academics, professionals, businessmen, and community leaders who linked up with the Union of Black Journalists.⁵ But the wave of repression that followed the Soweto revolt led them to conclude that a large-circulation, independent black newspaper was not a realistic project. Government restrictions, however, could be circumvented by launching a newspaper that was inexpensive, would not require registration, and could be circulated through

a ready-made distribution channel provided by community organizations.

The repressive post-1976 years, when overt political activity was virtually impossible, forced activists into more reflective and strategizing sessions. This was also a period of ideological reorientation. The long suppressed tradition of Charterism, associated with the ANC, reemerged and began to supplant Black Consciousness as the dominant ideology of black resistance. Marxist analysis, which had gained prominence in the humanities and social science curricula at "liberal" English-language universities, became an essential part of the activist tool kit. Through activist networks, popular versions of Marxist and Leninist texts filtered first into the trade union movement and next into the newly emerging community organizations, youth movements, and social service organizations set up to provide legal advice or other assistance. The notion of a newspaper as an organizing tool was derived from Lenin's famous book *What Is to Be Done?* and from an article in Lenin's newspaper, *Iskra*, entitled "Where to Begin."

Here Lenin described how the urban workers and the "common people" in Russia were ready for battle, but the intellectuals were not fulfilling their role: there was a lack of revolutionary organization and guidance. A newspaper was needed to give direction to the waves of protest and to give meaning to the struggles of the people. The newspaper would not only serve to instill a socialist consciousness in the workers but also broaden the horizon of revolutionaries immersed in parochial concerns. A newspaper was needed as a catalyst to link local organizations to the common cause—a revolutionary vanguard to direct workers and infuse them with a socialist consciousness: "The paper is not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator, but also a collective organiser."⁶ Left to their own devices, workers would forsake their long-term socialist

aspirations for short-term pay increases, and local organizations would not relate their struggles to broader political struggles.

Reading these texts in the late 1970s, western Cape activist Johnny Issel argued that a newspaper could be a useful tool to get an organization started.⁸ Workers in the western Cape were manifesting an unprecedented militancy with a wave of strikes and boycotts. Students involved in school boycotts were receptive to Marxist-Leninist recipes prescribing a student-worker alliance. Student-parent committees, formed in response to the school boycotts, took up other issues, such as rent increases. But there was no organization to channel all these struggles into one coordinated attack.⁹ In early 1980, Issel, a former student at the University of the Western Cape, became the first full-time organizer at *Grassroots*. Because of a series of banning orders, Issel's public profile was not as prominent as that of some other western Cape activists. But throughout the 1980s he remained a key figure both at *Grassroots* and in the UDF.

The newspaper was launched in 1980 after an intensive process of consultation involving some fifty-four groups.¹⁰ Initial plans to rely solely on volunteers had to be dropped. Without a core of paid staff, it would be impossible to sustain a regular publication. Some money to subsidize the new publication was obtained from local church funds, but most funding came from overseas donors, notably the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) in London and the ICCO (Interchurch Organisation for Development Co-operation), an NGO run by Protestant churches in the Netherlands. It was expected that a takeoff subsidy would be sufficient to put *Grassroots* on its feet. After 1981, *Grassroots* expected to raise money from local sources.¹¹

The funding request fitted well with the priorities of the new projects officer on ICCO's southern Africa desk. He had a network of contacts with the liberation movements of south-

ern Africa, with whom he had worked in church and developmental projects. From a visit by Mac Maharaj, a member of the ANC executive and a prominent member of the South African Communist Party, ICCO learned in 1980 that the ANC backed the promotion of an above-ground, radical press inside South Africa. In a later conversation in 1982, Maharaj remarked that ANC people were involved in *Grassroots*. Most of the people in the *Grassroots* project, however, were unaware of this explicit ANC endorsement.

ICCO was to remain the project's most loyal funder. Initially, ICCO urged *Grassroots* to become self-sufficient but as resistance and repression escalated, funding alternative media became a regular part of antiapartheid funding channeled by NGOs to South Africa.¹² Advertising revenue and newspaper sales were never sufficient to cover the costs of publication. On average, two thirds of the costs were covered by ICCO, while the newspaper's own revenue accounted for one third. The first edition in 1980 had a print run of 5,000, and by 1982 circulation had increased to 20,000. Copies were sold for fifteen cents until 1984, when *Grassroots* apologized to readers for having to raise the cover price to twenty cents.

Western Cape activists deviated from Lenin's recipe in that they chose to set up a local newspaper rather than a nationwide newspaper. Recent experience in community organization had also shown that it was easier to organize people around concrete local issues like rents, bus fares, and labor conflicts. While the founders of *Grassroots* recognized the tactical advantages of mobilizing people around everyday grievances, they never lost sight of the long-term perspective: they were the ideologically trained vanguard called to lift community struggles to a higher political level. The link between local and national struggles was frequently emphasized: "Our local rent, electricity and factory floor struggles must not be an end in themselves. We must link our local problems with

the oppression and exploitation of our people in this country and the struggle for change."¹³

Apart from Leninism, another source of inspiration was the ANC. Early issues of *Grassroots* had no overtly political profile—Marxist and ANC perspectives could not be exposed to public scrutiny at the time—but soon the newspaper would play a role in establishing Charterist hegemony in the western Cape. As the ANC “unbanned itself” in the course of the 1980s, ANC slogans and leaders figured more prominently in its columns. For the Marxists on the *Grassroots* project, one central question was the extent to which the Freedom Charter entailed a socialist program. An editorial in 1985 stating that the Freedom Charter was the *minimum* demand of the people caused much internal debate. As *Grassroots* organizer Saleem Badat later put it, “Implicit in this argument is that you see the Freedom Charter as the national democratic revolution. It lays the foundations for the next step, which is socialism. Because that was part of the *Grassroots* project—building working-class unity.”¹⁴ But this code language was only intelligible to the ideological vanguard. Debates were limited to the circle of initiates and did not spill over into the newspaper columns.

Leninist vanguardism, emphasizing the role of a political elite, stands in stark contrast to another source of inspiration behind *Grassroots*—the participatory and egalitarian ethos of the 1980s. Everybody ought to be involved in everything. The ideal operation was represented by the Electricity Petition Campaign. A committee was formed in 1981 by some Coloured working-class residents in Mitchell’s Plain, who wanted to have the due date of electricity bills changed to the end of the month, when workers were paid. Initially the campaign was spearheaded by this Electricity Petition Committee, but the victory was presented as a “people’s victory” with “the people” taking the initiative themselves: “The campaign reached its peak when 200 Mitchell’s Plain residents—the people themselves

marched on [Cape Town’s] Civic Centre to present City Council with a memorandum containing their demands and a petition signed by 7,500.” The story of “People Power from Mitchell’s Plain,” in which “People” is consistently capitalized, explains that this campaign had produced a “new concept of leadership.” Should the petition to the city council be handed over by a delegation from Mitchell’s Plain? “No! The People would be their own leaders. They would ALL go to Cape Town and hand in copies of the memorandum. . . . Before they boarded the buses it was decided not to have a spokesperson or persons. The People would speak for themselves. Each and every one was fully acquainted with the issues at stake. It didn’t matter which individuals eventually spoke. The People were One.”¹⁵

The emphasis on collective leadership and the rejection of specialization that would exclude the uninitiated is typical of this concept of democracy. *Grassroots* is not bothered by the question—To what extent is this manifestation of People Power actually representative of the residents of Mitchell’s Plain? The 200 who demonstrated in the city hall are presented as “the people themselves,” although they numbered perhaps 0.1 percent of the inhabitants of Mitchell’s Plain. And the People were painted as uncompromising heroes, not to be intimidated by officials or security police. When a security policeman was spotted in the gallery during the discussion with the deputy town clerk, they objected to his presence: “Go! Go! Go!”, the People thundered. And the security police, in the gallery and in the doorway, left.”

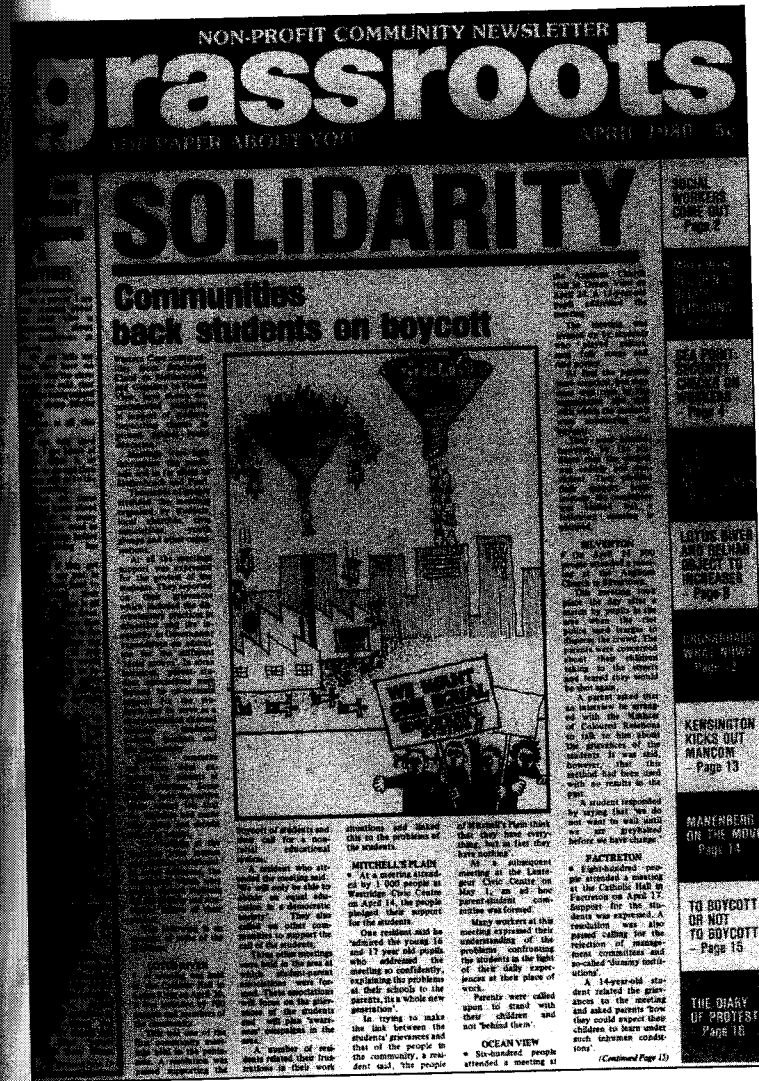
The role of *Grassroots* in promoting organization was not limited to the coverage of these events. Half a dozen members of the Electricity Petition Committee came together to write the story and devise a cartoon, which was then submitted to the full committee for approval. The Sunday morning after *Grassroots* came out, Mitchell’s Plain volunteers gathered as

usual to sell the newspaper door to door. They had been briefed beforehand about the electricity issue so that they could draw people's attention to the story and invite them to a meeting. In this way, some 3,000 copies of *Grassroots* were sold, and 1,000 people attended the meeting.

Running a People's Newspaper

The central principle behind the *Grassroots* operation in the early 1980s was "the paramountcy of democracy"—not only in terms of the news content but also in terms of structure, organization, and the production. An elaborate process of deciding on news content, collecting, and writing stories was aimed at involving as many people as possible. The production and distribution of *Grassroots* was also calculated to enhance participation. This model of direct democracy was less efficient, but for many it was an important learning experience. At *Grassroots*, people learned how to run a democratic organization, "how to take minutes, how to put up your hand if you wanted to speak, how to chair a meeting. Without *Grassroots*, there would not have been such a wide range of organisations."¹⁶

All aspects of the *Grassroots* project were geared to maximize popular participation. The decision-making body was the General Body of *Grassroots*, which set out the major policy lines at an Annual General Meeting (AGM). It was composed of member organizations such as local community groups (the "civics"), trade unions, women's organizations, youth clubs, and so forth. Apart from determining policy, member organizations also took part in making the newspaper. Out of the General Body, subcommittees were formed for news gathering and production, distribution, fund-raising, and workshops to train people in media skills. In content, format, and methods of



Grassroots was one of the flagships of the left-wing community press.

NON-PROFIT COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER

grassroots

THE PAPER ABOUT YOU

OCTOBER 1980 10c

Bad working conditions can affect your and your family's health - see centre pages (8 & 9)

MACASSAR: 'We have decided who will speak for us'

We are Mr and Mrs Rantsope. We have been living in Macassar for 4 years, since we were forced to leave Somerset West.

We did not want to leave Somerset West. It was cheap, and near where we worked.

At Macassar were many others who had had to leave their homes - some because of the National Boat that was built at Firgrove.

We were moved into a flat. It was very uncomfortable. For this we had to pay a rent of R30 in 1977. At the old scheme we had no grass and when it rains the water pools in.

There were many other costs. The council asked us to throw out our wood stoves.

Our electricity costs R40 to install. Our toilets have no running water. Now we hear that we have to pay R20 for water toilets.

Travelling to work is also very expensive.

With all these costs all of us here have problems with money. In 1979, the rates were trebled. Administration refused to speak to the rate payers.

Those who cannot pay are evicted. Like Mrs B, who has been living in a bakkie with her 5 children since she was evicted in June this year.

Mr R, who was wrongly accused of running a shebeen and was evicted despite the resident's protest.

What can be done about these problems? The management committee is no help. They are the council's puppets.

After Mr R's eviction, Macassar Residents formed the Management Committee as a mass meeting.

But we need some body to act as a mouth piece for us.

So we elected the Macassar Action Committee (MAC).

MACASSAR PROBLEMS

THE COUNCIL WILL NOT LISTEN TO US AS INDIVIDUALS

THE MAC IS OUR ORGANISATION. IT WILL HELP WITH OUR PROBLEMS

SUPPORT THE RESIDENTS' ACTION COMMITTEE

grassroots
The ones and
the others
to work
together
Page 2

grassroots
Patentmaster
workers
and factory
houses
Page 15

grassroots
Workers
We are
our own
bosses
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grassroots
Mitchell's
Plain -
the BIG
let down
Page 5

grassroots
Lavishtown
act out
their
problems
Page 10

Grassroots made excellent use of political cartoons to communicate the meaning of resistance.

Learn and Teach

NUMBER 3 1982

20c

Say goodbye to skin lightening creams
The man who makes time stand still
The boxer who never gives up

Learn and Teach, Learning Roots, and the Reader, launched by the Grassroots project, were informal educational supplements that circulated in many black townships.

production, *Grassroots* wanted to distinguish itself from the commercial newspapers, where "decisions are taken at the top and filtered to the bottom. At *Grassroots*, all decisions are taken democratically by all the community people and organisations involved."¹⁷

At the first news-gathering session, all worker and community organizations were invited to send representatives, so that "the new issue can grow from the very grassroots of the people." A list of stories for the next issue was discussed and approved, and the assignments parceled out among the participants. Three weeks were available to complete the stories, with another meeting in between to check on progress. If organizations were involved, the stories were submitted for their approval. On printing day, about fifty youth volunteers assembled for the folding and collating of the newspaper. Distribution was also seen as an important link in the operation. Civics were the most important outlet: civic activists used *Grassroots* to go house-to-house and to gain entry into houses by starting a discussion about local issues. But from this point, the media activists lost sight of the operation. "While *Grassroots* is reaching the communities, we still do not know whether the paper is being read."¹⁸

This way of producing a newspaper ensured wide participation, but it was still difficult to give everybody an active part and there was a considerable degree of uniformity in terms of content. "Our stories follow the same formula," noted the news-gathering committee in 1982: "a victory through community action is usually the thrust of the story. . . . we do not address ourselves to problems experienced and mistakes made by organisations. Instead we glorify their actions."¹⁹ By 1983 the AGM was still grappling with the overemphasis on victory. It was resolved that news content be more critical and educative, and stimulate debate. There were also calls for more

diversity, to broaden coverage to include sports and culture and other items with popular appeal.

It never happened. In common with many other alternative newspapers, *Grassroots* did not develop an editorial formula to deal with conflicts and crises *within* progressive organizations. Since the commercial press was blasted as divisive, the "People's Press" ought to project an image of "unity of the oppressed." Nonracialism was proclaimed as the accepted norm rather than as a learning process. Throughout the 1980s community organizations in the western Cape struggled with the gap between norm and practice. Civic organizations in the Coloured areas and in the African townships each maintained their own umbrella structures after plans for a merger had failed. Coloured and African youth organizations did merge in the Cape Youth Congress but only after a difficult start marked by bitter confrontations.

Within the Cape Housing Action Committee (CAHAC), the umbrella structure for the Coloured civics, for example, an ideological battle raged between the Charterist majority, which opted for the popular-front politics of the UDF, and left-wing civics, who argued that the interests of the working class could not be ensured in an alliance that included both workers' organizations and "the bosses and their agents."²⁰ The left-wing critics, claiming to represent the interests of worker-tenants, objected to CAHAC's "middle class" position on home ownership, which held that workers should also have the right to buy their houses. Within the Western Cape Civic Association, the umbrella for civics in the African townships, opposition mounted to the heavy-handed leadership of squatter leader Johnson Nxobongwana, who was regarded as corrupt and in collusion with the police in the battle for control over the Crossroads squatter camp. The readers of *Grassroots* were completely left in the dark about these developments, which were crucial both

for community organizations and for the wider arena of liberation politics.

Democracy Turning Democrazy

The newspaper did carry a discussion on the balance between democracy and efficiency, which originated in the civic movement. This debate provides some interesting insights in shifting notions of democracy, evolving from an emphasis on mass participation, with everybody being involved in everything, to a phase where specialization set in and the emphasis shifted to concepts of mandates and accountability.

A good example of the first phase is the story of how the people of Mitchell's Plain delivered their petition demanding a change in the due date for the electricity bill to the town clerk of the Cape Town city council. In this phase, the message driven home is the importance of organization, of standing together to achieve common goals. Conditions can be changed if people are properly organized. Repenting scabs regret that they have broken workers' unity and are welcomed to join the ranks of striking workers. The emphasis is on the importance of winnable goals and standing by your organization. Hence the focus on the battle for washing lines and more flexible rules for the payment of electricity bills. These were modest but achievable goals. Rent struggles proved more difficult to sustain, at least in Coloured areas. While people might be willing to take the risk of having their electricity cut off for a while, they were less likely to risk eviction.

Much space was devoted to explaining the general notions of democratic organization: how the elected officials are at all times responsible to the general membership, voting procedures, a quorum, motions and resolutions, making minutes, and so forth. Democracy meant, above all, popular participa-

tion. But when participation became an end in itself, it began to have a paralyzing effect on popular action.

At the *Grassroots* AGM in 1983 it was decided that the newspaper could also present the views of individuals, which were expressed independently of organizations. This led to a debate in the pages of *Grassroots* on the nature of democracy. "Are we all going democrazy?" asked an anonymous contributor to *Grassroots* in May 1983:

Democracy is running wild within our organisations. It is sweeping like a wind through all our subcommittees, leaving us all exhausted. When we are about to make a decision, it rears its head and reminds us that to be democratic, we have to ensure that more people participate in making that decision. We cannot decide and act upon that decision without further consultation. All members of our organisation must be party to the discussion. . . . But what does it matter? The struggle is still long. We have all the time in the world. Don't we?²¹

Responding to this issue in the next edition, *Grassroots* basically stuck to the notion of general involvement, avoiding a division of labor. The characteristics of democratic organization were contrasted with the way in which a factory is run. Interestingly, the defining feature that makes a factory "undemocratic" is not related to the boss being the owner of the means of production but to the managers, who monopolize knowledge and insight. The managers are the "thinkers," who plan, organize, and control the workers. Otherwise, the work is divided into specialized jobs, which means the workers only get familiar with their particular role in the production process: "People at the top of the factory have important information. They do not share it with the workers. In any organisation to make the right decisions all the information is needed." By contrast, in democratic organizations "all members are workers and managers. Everyone has a say in planning, organising and controlling what happens. All share in the *thinking* and

doing. Everyone in the organisation makes the rules. . . . People learn as much as possible about running the whole organisation. People who have special information share it with others. People are helped to get the skills so that they can do the whole job."²²

The focus on "the People" and "the Community" is illustrative of a populist approach in which class divisions are obscured in order to underline the joint effort for the common good. This "unity of the oppressed" is a constant theme in UDF discourse. But *Grassroots* staff were somewhat uneasy with this concept of a "community" newspaper. They not only aspired to promote popular struggles, they also made conscious efforts at building a workers' consciousness.

In a reappraisal of editorial policy in 1983—the year the UDF was launched—it was decided the time had come to adopt a more outspoken political profile. *Grassroots* organizer Leila Patel felt that the issue-oriented formula of the newspaper was getting out of touch with the now more politicized mood of "the People." The political content of the lessons of struggle needed to come out more clearly, "linking present struggles around rent, higher wages and so more directly to Apartheid and capitalism."²³ In the mind of the newspaper's core activists, the alternative media were important weapons in the battle for hegemony between two competing world-views: the dominant view versus the People's view. "Dominant media is there to maintain the status quo and alternative media is linked to the struggle for a free and democratic South Africa." While the state and capital used the mass media to instill a false consciousness in people, the alternative media made them aware that their troubles were caused not by fate but by apartheid and capitalism. The government, the bosses, and the mainstream media conspired in their propaganda, based on "lies and distortion," to make people accept the status

quo. Counterpropaganda by people's organizations, on the other hand, was based on the truth and aimed to expose the injustices of the system.²⁴

From Coloured Identity to Workers' Consciousness

Two elements occupied a central place in attempts by *Grassroots* to construct a counterhegemony—nonracialism in the tradition of the ANC and socialism. In addressing its readers, *Grassroots* used both a popular and a class appeal. Building working-class unity required instilling a workers' consciousness that would also serve to overcome the division between African and Coloured workers. If workers would identify with their position as workers in a capitalist economy, then the divisive legacy of apartheid could be overcome.

A graphic example of how *Grassroots* tried to guide its readers from Coloured consciousness to workers' consciousness is a comic strip featuring Mrs. Williams, a middle-aged clothing worker from Manenberg, as the heroine. Mrs. Williams is first introduced in the August 1984 issue, where she is watching Labour Party leader Allen Hendrickse giving his election talk on television. She is marveling how wonderful it is that "we Coloureds are getting the vote at last," until a UDF activist knocks on the door. The visitor explains that the new constitution, which extended voting rights to Coloureds and Indians but excluded the African majority, will only benefit a handful of sell-outs, while more hardship and oppression are in store for the majority of the people. Rents and prices will go up to pay for the newly privileged Coloured and Indian members of Parliament; the Group Areas Act will remain intact; Coloured sons will be conscripted into the army to be sent to the border in order to defend apartheid; Africans will become

more vulnerable to deportation to the homelands. At the end of part one, Mrs. Williams has decided not to vote in the tricameral elections.

Half a year later we find Mrs. Williams at her workplace, where the boss is giving her hell because she is fifteen minutes late. She is late because she stopped on the way to buy a *Grassroots* "with this 'Freedom Charter' thing in it." During the coffee break, an elderly African cleaner explains the origins of and the ideas behind the Freedom Charter. From a marginal nonperson, the old man suddenly becomes a fountain of wisdom, which he derives from his participation in the campaign in the 1950s to draw up the Freedom Charter. Bright pictures of the workers' paradise of Cuba appear in the strip while the old man relates that employment is not a privilege but a right: "in countries where workers make the laws, everybody has a job." At the end of the story, while the boss again yells at her for exceeding the break, Mrs. Williams has truly imbibed a proletarian consciousness. She is pondering a bright future, when "we'll make the laws one day, we'll control the factories. And your days of rudeness and bossing will be over."⁹⁵ This is a rather sudden conversion from Coloured compliance to worker militancy: it is doubtful whether a real-life Mrs. Williams from Manenberg could identify with the comic strip heroine.

The history of *Grassroots* itself provides a clear illustration of the problems encountered in attempts at bridging the divide between Coloureds and Africans. *Grassroots* had originated as a "Coloured" initiative without the active involvement of Africans from the townships. It never became solidly rooted in the townships, where it was perceived as a "Coloured paper." With assistance from *Grassroots*, some African UDF activists produced a newsletter in Xhosa, but this irregular publication, *Township News*, also did not have much impact. Some progress was made when *Grassroots* employed an African "township or-

ganiser," but both women hired to fill this position found it very difficult to involve township people in the production of *Grassroots*. Apart from the newspaper's image problem as a "Coloured" newspaper, media were apparently not a priority for African activists who relied more on word of mouth to organize meetings, boycotts, or demonstrations. Township activists did not believe that the newspaper was of much benefit to them.

Conversely, *Grassroots* lost touch with much of its Coloured constituency when the newspaper became overtly political and more militant. After the launch of the UDF in 1983, *Grassroots* gradually became a mouthpiece of the front. Organizations that had not affiliated to the UDF fell out of favor and were totally ignored in the newspaper. From the very beginning of *Grassroots*, coverage of local organizations had been limited to those in the Charterist fold. Organizations in the Black Consciousness tradition and the ultraleft movements peculiar to the western Cape had not been involved in the *Grassroots* project and were therefore completely disregarded in the newspaper's columns.

Grassroots was also a tool in the persistent factionalism, caused by ideological differences and personality clashes, that plagued the Charterist movement in the western Cape. *Grassroots* was perceived as "Johnny Issel's paper": if one did not belong to the Isselite faction, one had no access to the newspaper. Thus Women's Front, a UDF affiliate based in the African townships, was completely ignored by *Grassroots*, which only featured the rival, more sophisticated United Women's Organisation. From 1983 the cold shoulder was extended to progressive unions like the General Workers' Union, which had decided against affiliation to the UDF. Coverage of labor struggles was now largely limited to UDF affiliates, such as CLOWU (Clothing Workers' Union) and RAWU (Retail and Allied Workers' Union), even though these were not the leading organizations in the sphere

of trade unions. The newspaper thus deviated from its original mission to serve as a platform for antiapartheid resistance in a wider sense, as was frankly admitted by the chair of the *Grassroots* board: "It was always the policy of *Grassroots* Publications to serve as a broad forum—to give expression to progressive political views prevailing in the oppressed community. It is clear that this policy was not implemented in practice."²⁶

From 1985 the UDF leadership began to exercise direct control over editorial policy. Members of the UDF executive told the *Grassroots* staff what campaigns were planned and what coverage was required. At the time, this seemed a natural development. While *Grassroots* had initially promoted the growth of community organization, it could now serve as an organizing tool to help build the United Democratic Front. Community issues receded into the background as media were enlisted in the struggle for political power. With hindsight, however, several *Grassroots* activists identified this takeover by national politics as the fatal moment in the development of the community newspaper.²⁷ As popular mobilization escalated into a state of insurrection, *Grassroots* became increasingly irrelevant. It was of little use in the street battles fought by militant youth, and it was far too "political" for the taste of the average Coloured reader. In Coloured areas, *Grassroots* came to be seen as an "African paper."²⁸

In trying to guide its readership from Coloured consciousness to both nonracialism and a workers' consciousness, no concessions were made to accommodate Coloured identity. While Afrikaans is the language of the Coloured working class, *Grassroots* activists preferred to use English as the unifying language of the struggle. However, in its language policy, *Grassroots* was not as puritanical as in its politics. The newspaper did include stories in Afrikaans and Xhosa, but this did not really solve the language problem. The newspaper's rural editions were largely published in Afrikaans, as was *Saamstaan*, a community newspa-

per in Oudtshoorn that was launched with the help of *Grassroots*. Although these were not large-circulation newspapers, the fact that some of the titles of the resistance press opted for the use of Afrikaans, usually branded as "the language of the oppressor," was symbolic. Coloured activists reappropriated Afrikaans as a medium in which to articulate an alternative worldview, thus denying white Afrikaners the exclusive ownership of *Die Taal*. While *Grassroots* proved fairly flexible on the language issue, which was discussed at length over the years, in other respects media activists refused to take account of the popular culture of their target readership.

Many at the time would have been adamant that there was no such thing as Coloured identity. While the struggle against the apartheid state was being waged, no cracks could be allowed in the facade of nonracialism. Only in the more open political climate of the early 1990s could ethnicity be recognized as a relevant issue on the agenda of progressive organizations and publications.

In this respect, *Grassroots* mirrored the UDF western Cape at large: it offered a political home for Coloured people but at the price of denying or effacing their cultural baggage. Interviewed in 1991, Jonathan de Vries, publicity secretary on the UDF's regional executive in the western Cape, made a critical assessment of this one-dimensional view of people and politics. "We were all Marxists, then. We were building the workers' revolution: we were going to perform the socialist transformation of South Africa. People were important only insofar as they were useful in this process. There was an enormous lack of humility. People were a means to an end."²⁹ Looking back, de Vries acknowledged that for working-class people it was difficult to be involved in the UDF. Many never came to meetings, because they were not fluent in English. They could not follow the latest political or ideological argument; they were not well versed in the activist jargon. Their days were filled

with work, with considerable time spent on travel between home and work, on housework, looking after the children, and so on. "So the UDF became a playground for young people, many with a university education, many having cars so that they were mobile; they became the operators of the UDF."

In spite of this criticism, his overall judgment of the UDF remained positive. One of its most important achievements in the western Cape was that Coloureds were given a political home, "which they did not have before; it gave them a sense of belonging." But he was also acutely aware of the price that had to be paid for becoming part of mainstream resistance. In this political home, there was no place for Coloureds as such but only for "Blacks." To be accepted as "Black," Coloured identity had to be given up. Years later, de Vries still became emotional about the negation of Coloured identity, about the taboo that meant one could at best talk about "so-called coloureds" but not about "Coloureds."

I am not a very coloured Coloured. I have moved away from my background, I have travelled abroad, I make music with whites and Africans. But from this now somewhat more detached perspective, I do believe that there is "Coloured identity," and that the UDF should have tried to accommodate that identity, rather than denying it. But the liberation culture was an African culture; the songs were either military songs or church hymns. There was no incorporation of Coloured identity in the UDF. That could not even be discussed.

De Vries regretted that the UDF and *Grassroots* had not tapped the creativity of ordinary people but had rather sought to mold them into a unitary culture that would facilitate the imposition of a new hegemony. Coloured culture, he believed, requires a kind of carnival atmosphere. The military style alienated ordinary people.

Coloured identity, of course, is not shaped by carnivals only. Church and religion are other important ingredients. But the

young Marxists at the helm of the UDF and *Grassroots* were not inclined to cater to the religious sentiments of their basically conservative, churchgoing constituency. They were building a secular movement: the youth were seen as taking the lead in breaking the stranglehold of the church. Although he had secured a job with a western Cape church project in social work on the Cape Flats, Johnny Issel saw the churches as an obstacle rather than an ally: "The Youth . . . who have been bearing the frustrations within their denominational and ecumenical church youth groups very patiently for a long time broke with these and set out to build secular movements which would articulate, in no uncertain terms, there [*sic*] bottled-up political grievances."³⁰ Religious arguments and dignitaries were seen by the secular Marxists of *Grassroots* as most suited to mobilize the not-so-sophisticated Coloured people in the rural areas. The newspaper's rural editions and *Saamstaan* did indeed feature church leaders.

The Utopian Phase

Grassroots was instrumental in building a network of activists in the western Cape, thus laying the foundations for the UDF in this region. Nearly everybody who became involved in the UDF had at one time or another worked for *Grassroots*. While the newspaper was important in forging a "community of activists," the activists themselves tended to become intoxicated by an activist discourse that was distant from the discourse of ordinary people.

When we became activists, with our workshops in Marxism-Leninism and Gramsci, we lost touch with ordinary people; they would only get confused. Debates were for activists. The activist subculture was too remote from ordinary middle class and working people. We became a subculture. We all looked like Che

Guevaras. . . . We were into reggae, not disco. We called each other comrades, we embraced African comrades. And we took for granted that non-racialism, socialism and so on were accepted by "the people."³¹

Paradoxically, while popular interest declined, the utopian vision of popular participation reached new heights. At the peak of the insurrectionary phase, in 1985 and 1986, *Grassroots* and the UDF propagated the concept of People's Power as the embodiment of democracy. Civic organizations were now portrayed as organs of People's Power, the embryonic form of future local government, not as community organizations lobbying for lower rents and a more convenient date to pay electricity fees. The participatory ideal behind the slogans of People's Power was that people would take control of their own lives: "they were going to run the schools, the factories, the towns, everything."³²

People's Power had to manifest itself in all spheres of life, including the media: "The task of the People's Press is to challenge the power of the ruling class media, to minimize its influence and eventually to take over state media and commercial newspapers, and use their institutions to serve the interests of the people."³³ The ambition of media activists was no longer limited to providing an alternative worldview to the prevailing orthodoxy in the mainstream press. They were now going to supplant these bastions of the old order and establish a new hegemony. By now, *Grassroots* made it quite clear that this promised land could only materialize in a socialist order.

The Soviet Union, Cuba, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and Libya were paraded as models of people's power. The *Grassroots* ideal of popular democracy was quite remote from the traditional ideals of liberal democracy, with its emphasis on fundamental individual rights such as freedom of speech. Not pluralism but participation was considered the paramount principle of democracy.

While propagating workers' control over the economy, *Grassroots* had in reality become quite distant from the progressive trade union movement in the Cape. Before the launch of the UDF, the unions had participated in the newspaper and their victories featured prominently in its pages. But the unions kept their distance from "populist movements" such as the UDF, wary of being hijacked into campaigns over which they had no control. When leading progressive unions such as the General Workers' Union and the Food and Canning Workers' Union decided against affiliating with the UDF, they fell out of favor with *Grassroots*. The union's priority was to build strong unions controlled by the workers, and to work toward a national trade union federation. Union leaders were skeptical of radical student activists whose agenda was insurrection and revolution. Radical adventurism would put the hard-won gains of the young unions at risk. The largely African membership, acutely aware of their vulnerable position in the western Cape, was suspicious of student activists, who showed little understanding of the problems that shaped the lives of migrants and squatters.

Activists tended to mistake activists' consciousness for popular consciousness. While they aspired to build a working-class culture as part of the counterhegemonic project, more often than not they constructed a particular youth culture that posed as class culture. One graphic example of activist youth culture being equated with "People's culture" can be found in one of the 1985 issues of *Grassroots* that dealt with People's Power. Here, graffiti and break dancing are portrayed as "a form of culture originated by the people themselves, understood by them and appreciated by them."³⁴ In other stories, the Soviet Union is held up as a model of "People's culture." This sounds oddly out of tune with a basically conservative Coloured working-class constituency. Some people on the *Grassroots* project, like news organizer Ryland Fisher, who had a background

in journalism, favored a more popular formula in order to keep in touch with the readers. But these proposals were overruled by more puritanical activists. As Essa Moosa, chair of the *Grassroots* board, recalled, "It was difficult to reconcile the political aims with sports stories and horse racing. . . . Activists would criticise the 'gutter stories.' The activists won the day; in the end they were the only people reading the paper."⁵⁵

During the period of heightened politicization in 1985–86, *Grassroots* lost touch with ordinary Coloured people of the Cape Flats. The generation gap widened. Militant youth had now taken over the struggle. The unemployed manned the barricades, while student leadership attempted to provide ideological guidance. Parents in Coloured areas often sided with their children in their unequal battles with the police. Mothers became infuriated when they saw police beating up their children and opened their doors for youth on the run. But it did not follow that they were turning in great numbers toward the ANC, let alone the Communist Party. As repression became harsher and resistance increasingly violent, many simply became scared and preferred to stay out of politics.

Grassroots's coverage of events in these years reflected the concerns of the UDF's largest constituency: the focus was on student struggles in high schools and tertiary institutions. *Grassroots* came out strongly in support of school and exam boycotts. "You know why I am not going to write?" it quoted a boycotting student. "Because my friends were killed by the police and I cannot go on writing exams with a guilty conscience. I personally would feel like a traitor."⁵⁶ The argument that "all the organisations of the people" agreed that writing exams would be immoral under these conditions was unlikely to convince parents who had often gone to great lengths to give their children better educational opportunities than they themselves had enjoyed.

The ANC became increasingly prominent on the pages of

Grassroots. Popularizing the ANC was the natural thing to do for young Coloured activists who wanted to demonstrate their loyalty to their newfound political home. But *Grassroots* was losing touch with the community it was supposedly serving. News organizer Ryland Fisher reflected later that the activist frame of mind had become quite remote from the popular mood among ordinary Coloured people. "That heavy high profile political stuff put many people off. It became more an activist paper than a community paper. . . . You have to keep in mind the character of the western Cape; you have to start from people's consciousness. Activists assumed that ordinary people supported the ANC, violence, non-racialism, and all that."⁵⁷

The Decline of Popular Participation

Like everything associated with the UDF, *Grassroots* became a target of police raids. In 1985, *Grassroots* offices were raided twice by the security police. Staff members were repeatedly detained. In October 1985 the building that housed *Grassroots* and various other progressive organizations was gutted by fire. The following year, an unknown gunman shot Veliswa Mhlawuli, *Grassroots* organizer for the African townships. She was severely injured and lost the use of her right eye.

Nevertheless, staff managed to continue publication. The usual total of eleven issues was produced in 1985. The print run was doubled from 20,000 to 40,000. Selling the newspaper had become too difficult and risky, and the previous group of volunteer distributors had moved on to more militant activities. So from the mid-1980s *Grassroots* was distributed free. The overseas funders no longer insisted on financial self-sustainability. Producing the newspaper had become a goal in itself, an act of defiance in the midst of escalating repression. But the *Grassroots* staff could no longer rely on a network of organizations

to help produce and distribute the newspaper. The year 1985–86 was judged at the time to be the most difficult year in the newspaper's history. Member organizations had to be reminded that building "the People's Press was not only the responsibility of the already overburdened staff."³⁸

With the declaration of a national state of emergency in June 1986 (a partial state of emergency was imposed in July 1985), *Grassroots* could no longer continue as an above-ground operation. Staff members had to go into hiding, but by August 1986, *Grassroots* was on the streets again. Coordination and communication with the UDF leadership, however, became increasingly difficult. *Grassroots* workers were now largely on their own.

Activists at the beginning of the 1980s tended to interpret the newspaper's failure to politicize ordinary people as "false consciousness" instilled in them by the dominant forces in society. But with participation in the *Grassroots* project declining sharply toward the end of the 1980s, activists began questioning their own performance: "We need to question what is wrong with our ability to organise on a mass level and challenge our whole style of work. We need to channel our activists into organisations where the masses have always been based so that they can organise more effectively. Political activists have to keep in touch where the unpoliticised masses are at and not simply reject and be rejected by them."³⁹

While student activists mobilized political protest in the western Cape to unprecedented heights in the 1980s, the wave of militancy eventually ran out of steam and crumbled under the weight of repression. The students had built many organizations, but the foundations were fragile. Students often graduated from community organizations to national politics, for example, or took up professional positions and left a vacuum behind.

Participation in *Grassroots* also declined because activists were drawn into various other kinds of UDF activity. In its

early phase, the newspaper indeed functioned as a catalyst, but after 1983 the UDF provided more scope for political involvement. Both community organizations and *Grassroots* suffered from a brain drain into the UDF's umbrella structures. To some extent, *Grassroots* had fallen victim to its own success: the staff had assisted UDF member organizations in setting up their own newsletters, pamphlets, posters, and media workshops. By mid-1984 newsletters were being produced by fifteen civic associations, thirty branches of the Cape Youth Organisation, and nineteen branches of the United Women's Organisation.⁴⁰

Another factor that inhibited participation was foreign funding: "We became dependent, taking funds for granted. Before, we used to do our own fund-raising for *Grassroots*. We had a big annual fair where all kinds of organisations could have activities."⁴¹ Compared to many other alternative publications, *Grassroots* was fortunate in having a loyal funder who kept the financial lifeline going throughout the decade. One explanation for the newspaper's survival was the availability of funds to maintain a core of salaried staff. Running *Grassroots* with volunteers did not prove to be a viable option, but this decision may have contributed to a decline in popular support. As *Grassroots* was not financially dependent on its readership, activists could afford to take off toward utopia, leaving Mrs. Williams of Manenberg behind.

Under the state of emergency, most civic associations virtually collapsed. Youth organizations could more easily adapt to an underground existence, but they had lost interest in *Grassroots*. In view of the demise of these building blocks of People's Power, *Grassroots* reverted to its original goal of building community organizations while continuing to popularize the ANC. But the newspaper no longer managed to muster community involvement. "We had become a prisoner of the activists," acknowledged Fahdiel Manuel, the newspaper's last news organizer.⁴² "Basically, we were producing papers because the funders wanted to see a paper being produced."

In its campaign against radical elements in the media, the government instituted new restrictions, including temporary closure and the threat of cutting off foreign funding. *Grassroots* and its sister magazine, *New Era*, which aspired to develop more profound theoretical insights, were closed down for three months in 1989.

Staffers at *Grassroots* recognized that the newspaper's overt political profile had alienated the more conservative readership in Coloured areas. So after the ANC was unbanned in early 1990, they began to explore new ways to revamp the newspaper. *Grassroots* suspended publication in August 1990, and a feasibility study suggested there was a potential market for the newspaper as a free sheet focusing on community issues and run on advertising revenue. Advertisers showed an interest, provided the new *Grassroots* would not be overly political and would have a regular cycle of publication.⁴³

The staff, which now argued for professional journalism and commercial management, found that other activists were not as flexible in adjusting to the new realities of the 1990s. Distrust of privatization and commercialization dominated the ill-attended annual meeting in October 1991, which was called to discuss the newspaper's future. Going commercial and relying on professionalism was indeed a far cry from *Grassroots'* original mission, which called for it to be eventually taken over by the community organizations.⁴⁴ Efforts to transform the "struggle paper" into a commercial free sheet never took off, and in 1992 *Grassroots* ceased publication altogether.

The Legacy of Grassroots

Grassroots shared the fate of most of the alternative newspapers, which did not manage to evolve a new formula to survive in the new conditions. With overseas, antiapartheid funding

drying up, most publications did not succeed in finding other ways to maintain production. Readers in the 1990s wanted a more varied diet—a diet that included entertainment and news other than political news. As the alternative newspapers closed down, new glossy popular magazines targeted at a black readership appeared on the newsstands.

On balance, did *Grassroots* meet its objectives? Did it indeed function as an organizing tool, building local organizations? Had the divide between Coloureds and Africans been narrowed? Had Coloured people found a new home in the ANC fold? Was the ruling hegemony effectively challenged?

The relationship between the press and political organization was not as clear cut as the Leninist recipe had promised. In the first stage of organization building, *Grassroots* proved a useful tool, providing activists with a foot in the door to engage residents in a discussion. But once organizations got on their feet, *Grassroots* was increasingly felt as a burden. Many organizations developed their own media—as *Grassroots* encouraged them to do by providing training workshops—and many activists accumulated an increasing number of positions and duties. As noted at the many *Grassroots* assessment and evaluation meetings, the newspaper was as strong as the organizations were. When the organizations collapsed in the second half of the 1980s, *Grassroots* operated in a vacuum. Cut off from its community links, the newspaper became the tool of a limited and increasingly introverted circle of militants.

The defining characteristic of democracy in *Grassroots'*s terms was popular participation, not pluralism. The overriding concern for unity made it problematic that the newspaper could really accommodate diversity and discussion. Ideally, stimulating debate was part of the newspaper's educative function. In practice, conformity prevailed in order not to be "divisive."

In *Grassroots*, as in many community organizations, the tone was set by intellectuals, leaving ordinary working people with

a feeling of being excluded. Throughout the decade, letters to the editor complained about too much intellectual talk at *Grassroots* meetings: "'n onnodige rondgooi van groot woorde. . . Dit is meer soos 'n University lecture as 'n grassroots meeting. Hoekom praat hulle nie dat 'n mens kan verstaan nie?" (an unnecessary throwing around of big words. . . It is more like a University lecture than a grassroots meeting. Why don't they speak in a way that people can understand?).⁴⁵

The potential for realizing permanent mass participation in the political process proved an illusion. Short-term excitement did not result in sustained involvement. The new South Africa was not going to be built on People's Power, as activists had believed in the mid-1980s. Civics were revealed as weak structures that were not equipped to evolve into organs of local government. With hindsight, several key *Grassroots* activists shared the verdict of their critics—notably in the trade unions—that community organizations were basically organizations of activists. Issues that captured the imagination of activists were not necessarily the most pressing issues in the communities.

Nevertheless, *Grassroots* and the community organizations did provide an important learning experience for many people, student activists as well as a number of others with a working-class background. People learned to stand up for themselves, to speak up, to conduct meetings, to take things into their own hands.

The unbanning of the ANC had a demobilizing effect, pointedly underlining the limitations of the participatory ethos. When the ANC leadership returned home, ordinary folks thought that the struggle was over and now they could sit back while the leaders sorted out the problems. "Being involved in the struggle is not a natural thing for human beings," as *Grassroots* godfather Johnny Issel concluded.⁴⁶ Civic leader Willie Simmers in Mitchell's Plain expressed a similar sentiment: "In

coloured areas, people wait for the 'New South Africa' to come along. They don't realise that they have to build it."⁴⁷

How did *Grassroots*, and the UDF western Cape as a whole, fare in their attempt at bridging the divide between Africans and Coloureds by forging a common identity, either as "the oppressed" or as "workers"?

The UDF was more successful in vertical integration than in horizontal integration. Local activists became effectively linked to national organizations and nationwide campaigns. But contacts between African, Coloured, and white affiliates in the western Cape region remained limited. This is not to say that nothing was achieved. For example, working for *Grassroots* brought Coloured activists for the first time into the African townships. Folding *Grassroots* provided a meeting point for African and Coloured youth: here Coloured youngsters were initiated in the liberation culture of *toyi-toyi* dancing and freedom songs. But overall, the UDF western Cape had been dominated by Coloureds. When the ANC was set up in the western Cape, Africans seized upon it as "their" organization.

The first ANC executive elected at the regional conference in 1990 was strongly dominated by Africans. The role of whites in the ANC proved less contentious than the old African-Coloured divide. When Nelson Mandela addressed the next regional conference, in 1991, he berated local ANC members for having voted an executive into office which was heavily dominated by Africans. This would create the wrong impression that the ANC was an organization for Africans only. In spite of Mandela's efforts to make the regional ANC executive more representative of the western Cape's population, Congress here fared worse than anticipated in the 1994 elections. With the help of Coloured voters, the National Party achieved its one and only election victory in the provincial elections in the western Cape.

Grassroots, along with other media, certainly contributed to popularizing the ANC in the Coloured areas. While the ANC had been unmentionable at the beginning of the decade, toward the end of the 1980s ANC symbols and slogans had become commonplace. By "unbanning itself" before the legal lifting of the ban, the ANC could boast popular legitimacy. But *Grassroots* was not effective as an organizing tool across the racial divide, and probably it could not have been. A large part of the African population, notably those in the squatter camps, were illiterate and beyond the reach of newspapers. Africans in the townships were generally poorly educated, and educational standards lagged behind those in the Coloured schools. To be effective as an organizing tool, a newspaper needs to address a more or less homogeneous constituency.

Not only did the racial divide prove to be a barrier but so also were the generational, educational, linguistic, and socio-economic divides. Forging a "community of the oppressed" proved an unrealistic ambition. *Grassroots* did, however, play a key role in forging a community of young, educated activists, which subsequently became the backbone of the UDF western Cape.

Did *Grassroots*, as part of the arsenal of alternative newspapers, challenge the dominant ideologies and help construct a new hegemony? Especially in its early years, *Grassroots's* attempts to give "a voice to the voiceless" was an important innovation in the alternative press. But by choosing to remain an orthodox "struggle paper," *Grassroots* preserved its ideological purity only to miss the opportunity to develop a more popular appeal. The ideologues kept a firm grip on the newspaper, preventing activists with a more practical mind and greater journalistic skill from implementing the stated objective—"to start from where the people are." Whether it is false consciousness or human nature, after a long working day many ordinary folk preferred to be distracted by the capitalist seductions of the TV series *Dallas* than be educated about the workers' paradise in Mozambique.

Part of the legacy of *Grassroots*, such as the utopian concepts of People's Power and the blind adoration of socialist models outside South Africa, belong to the past, to the political culture of the 1980s. In style and content, *Grassroots* was so much the product of a particular youth culture that it could hardly have made a lasting imprint on the worldview of a broad section of people in the western Cape. Other elements of the inheritance, however, have survived the demise of the alternative press. In a more pragmatic form, ideals of popular participation have outlasted the utopian images of People's Power and continue to inspire a new breed of community media: the community radio stations of the 1990s.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on a case study from my Ph.D. dissertation, "Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa." A book version has been published in 2000 by the University of Virginia Press in cooperation with the University of Natal Press. Sources used for this case study include the newspaper itself, extensive correspondence, minutes, annual reports, and other material held by the main funder of *Grassroots*, ICCO in the Netherlands, interviews with activists who worked for *Grassroots* as staff members or volunteers, and interviews with activists in various community organizations in and around Cape Town. The interviews were conducted in 1991. I am grateful to *Grassroots* and ICCO for their generous cooperation and hospitality.
2. Keyan Tomaselli and P. Eric Louw, eds., *The Alternative Press in South Africa* (London: James Currey; Bellville: Anthropos, 1991).
3. Don Pinnock, "Popularise, Educate, and Mobilise: Culture and Communication in the 1980s," in Tomaselli and Louw, *Alternative Press*, 133–54.
4. *Grassroots* internal assessment paper, cited by Shaun Johnson, "Resistance in Print I: *Grassroots* and Alternative Publishing, 1980–1984," in Tomaselli and Louw, *Alternative Press*, 193.
5. In 1990 an editorial board was formed that included seven people who had been involved from the start of the project. Jakes

Gerwel, lecturer at the University of the Western Cape and chairman of the Community Action Trust, who subsequently became the vice-chancellor of UWC and a prominent member of the ANC; the reverend Moses Moletsane, a priest in the African township of Langa; Dr. Ramsey Karelse, a psychiatrist; Essa Moosa, an attorney; James Matthews, former executive member of the Union of Black Journalists (UBJ), writer, and poet; Qayoum Sayed, printer and publisher; Rashid Seria, journalist and ex-UBJ. In addition, three new people were included on the board: Dr. Allan Boesak, chaplain at UWC; Aneez Salie, journalist and chairman of the Writers Association of South Africa (WASA), the successor organization to the UBJ; Moegsien Williams, journalist, secretary of the WASA executive and later to become editor of *South*. The editorial board also acted as a board of trustees. Once the newspaper was on its feet, the board resigned to make place for a central committee in which the participating organizations were represented.

6. W. I. Lenin, "Where to Begin," *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 5:22.

7. W. I. Lenin, "What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement," in *Collected Works*, 5:375.

8. Johnny Issel, interview by author, 16 October 1991; Johnny Issel, "Setting up *Grassroots*: Background, Aims, and Process," paper presented at the conference A Century of the Resistance Press in South Africa, University of the Western Cape, 6-7 June 1991.

9. The buoyant mood of the time is well captured in Devan Pillay, "Trade Unions and Alliance Politics in Cape Town, 1979-1985" (Ph.D. diss., University of Essex, 1989); see also Wilmot G. James and Mary Simons, eds., *The Angry Divide: Social and Economic History of the Western Cape* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989).

10. Issel interview.

11. ICCO project notes, February 1981.

12. *Grassroots* was not the only publication funded from the Netherlands. ICCO also provided financial support to the *SASPU Newsletter* and *Ukusa* and later to *South. Saamstaan*, the rural offshoot of *Grassroots*, was funded by the Vastenaktie, a Catholic NGO in the Netherlands. Toward the end of the decade, the European Community set up a fairly substantial program of financial support for the alternative press in South Africa, which benefited newspapers like *New Nation*, *Vrye Weekblad* and *South*.

13. Kathy Lowe, *Opening Eyes and Ears: New Connections for Christian Communication* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 94.

14. Saleem Badat, *Grassroots* organizer 1983-86, interview by author, 2 October 1991.

15. *Grassroots*, June 1981.

16. Rehana Rossouw, *Grassroots* volunteer worker, interview by author, 11 October 1991.

17. *Grassroots*, March 1982.

18. Ibid.

19. *Grassroots* Newsgathering Committee report for AGM, March 1982.

20. Statement by the Manenberg Civic Association, Parkwood Tenants Association, and BBSK Residents' Association, n.d. [1983].

21. *Grassroots*, May 1983.

22. *Grassroots*, June 1983; emphasis in original.

23. Leila Patel, "The Way Forward," *Grassroots* AGM, 1983.

24. Ibid.

25. *Grassroots*, August 1984 and February 1985.

26. Chairperson's address, *Grassroots* AGM, 27 April 1985.

27. Fahdiel Manuel, *Grassroots* organizer 1988-91, interview by author, Amsterdam, 15 July 1991; Rossouw interview.

28. Willie Simmers, civic activist in Mitchell's Plain, interview by author, 8 October 1991.

29. Jonathan de Vries, publicity secretary Regional Executive UDF Western Cape 1983-1985, interview by author, Johannesburg, 12 November 1991.

30. Issel, "Setting up *Grassroots*."

31. Rossouw interview.

32. Badat interview.

33. Saleem Badat, "Building the People's Press Is Also Building People's Power," *Grassroots* AGM 1986.

34. *Grassroots*, March 1985.

35. Essa Moosa, chairman of *Grassroots* board, interview by author, 22 October 1991.

36. *Grassroots*, November 1985.

37. Ryland Fisher, *Grassroots* news and production organizer 1984-87, interview by author, 2 October 1991.

38. *Grassroots* report, April 1985-March 1986.

39. Report of *Grassroots* annual general meeting 1988.

40. WACC evaluation report, October 1984.
41. Rossouw interview.
42. Fahdiel Manuel interview, 22 October 1991.
43. A readership survey conducted in 1988 for *South* came up with similar results. In Coloured areas like Mitchell's Plain, "politics" was low on the list of reader preferences. See P. Eric Louw, "Resistance in Print II: Developments in the Cape, 1985-1989: *Saamstaan*, *Grassroots*, and *South*," in Tomaselli and Louw, *Alternative Press*, 210.
44. *Grassroots* internal assessment paper
45. *Grassroots*, October 1982.
46. Issel interview.
47. Simmers interview