



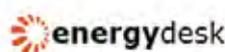
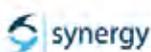
PRACTICE NOTE

# A WAKE-UP CALL TO ACKNOWLEDGE TRAUMA

LEARNING EVENT INSIGHTS

DEEPENING REIPPPP'S COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IMPACT

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## What can, and must, be learned to improve community development in the REIPPPP, the largest renewable energy programme ever undertaken in South Africa?

This was the question that 150 diverse participants came together to explore at a dedicated Learning Event in early 2020. The event was funded by USAID, in partnership with the IPP Office, and supported by the industry associations SAWEA and SAPVIA, and was hosted at the IDC in Johannesburg. This practice note is one of six compiled by a group dedicated to recording the day's rich discussions, and captures insights related to the specific important theme of **trauma**.

## THE CHALLENGE

Deepening the impact of development interventions in South Africa generally, and in the REIPPPP particularly, will not be possible unless a hard fact is acknowledged: we live in a highly wounded context. By virtue of the country's history and current experience, South Africans carry trauma – as individuals, within families, communities, institutions, organisations, and as a society. This (unresolved) trauma has a direct (yet unacknowledged) impact on how development interventions at community level are implemented, and how they are received. At best, it undermines efforts by independent power producers (IPPs) and others to bring about positive change in the communities hosting REIPPPP projects. At worst, trauma-insensitive approaches result in development and engagement practices that leave people worse off – disempowered and disadvantaged.

Unfortunately, what could be termed a 'crisis of pain' has been largely ignored in the policies and programmes of government. Further, the prevailing stigma attached to issues of mental health prohibits

the kind of progressive conversations needed for effective work on trauma. Indeed, South African community development practice risks being blind to one of the biggest factors determining its success. This is not unique to the renewable energy context. Unaddressed trauma presents a real business risk in any sector where the intersection with society is direct, and it is often the reason why community development programmes are met with low participation, aggression and disengagement. Practitioners doing the work are also at risk of experiencing 'compassion fatigue' that leaves them incapacitated.

Therefore, a critical challenge for community development practitioners is to understand this collective woundedness (theirs and others'), to appreciate why it hinders efforts, and to then develop strategies for responding more sensitively and wisely. Only by doing this can the community development realised in the REIPPPP become part of a wider healing journey in the nation.





# NEW INSIGHTS

## *Ideas we need to let go*

- **We can swoop in and make a difference.** This approach tends to be patriarchal and top-down. It can trigger old wounds and flight responses among community members who resent being seen as having no agency. The majority of the REIPPPP projects are in rural and peri-urban communities, some of which are vulnerable and volatile. Development work is, at times, challenged by people's apathy and resistance to embrace IPPs' offerings and programmes. We must understand that it takes time to grapple with trauma (our own and others').

- **Anyone can do community development work.** Given the historical context of South Africa, where oppression and disempowerment are racialised, it matters a great deal who engages communities on behalf of IPPs. Typically, a white male is likely to trigger a trauma response in a historically oppressed community, not because people do not appreciate his good intentions, but because of the past system he is seen to represent.

- **Healing and development are one.** In fact, investment into development is not producing the intended outcomes: channelling more resources into a community does not automatically translate into more well-being. This is largely because of unacknowledged trauma, which is something that cannot be resolved only by increasing investment; it is a human phenomenon that needs a much more emotionally intelligent and sensitive approach.

## *Insights that **disrupt** and **liberate** our thinking*

- **We must go deeper.** The call to be 'trauma-sensitive' requires acknowledging the deeper complexities – long-term psychosocial and socioeconomic conditions associated with structural racism, poverty and disempowerment, for example – that prevail in communities. Such complexities go beyond the boundaries of current development practice, where the socioeconomic baselines are dominated by quantitative data. Instead, we need to understand the nature and extent of woundedness in communities, and then to collaboratively develop approaches that are sensitive to it. There are no 'short cuts' to reaching such an understanding.

- **Engaging with trauma is everyone's duty.** No one is exempt from the emotional work, including those in leadership roles, who need to courageously work through their woundedness in order to lead whole-heartedly. This sets the tone for an organisation's culture, where people are encouraged to be 'peace carriers' rather than 'trauma carriers'. This includes developing an awareness of compassion fatigue in our organisations – understanding the signs and knowing how to guide and support people back to health.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## *Actions for **local or community** impact*

- **A full picture understanding of trauma.** We need to foster awareness of the multiple potential trigger points across the project lifecycle, and across the full business. This includes the trauma that could be triggered by direct project operations (such as land appropriation, relocation, cash injection, construction, labour) as well as by otherwise well-intentioned engagement and development programmes.

- **Seek specialist assistance.** Learning to work more sensitively may require input from psychosocial specialists who have experience with intergenerational and ongoing trauma. This could greatly assist us in understanding how best to guide community development practitioners through their own trauma, and could enhance their ability to navigate the secondary trauma that comes with working in these contexts.

- **Design interventions to incorporate addressing trauma.** At all times, in designing programmes, it is important to reflect on whether the design is driven by our own responses to trauma (individual or organisational), and how might it inadvertently trigger trauma responses in the beneficiary community. Consider including trauma debrief sessions as part of community capacity development processes, invest in staff development and coaching (particularly among leaders who must be examples to others), build self-care processes into interventions, and include trauma sensitivity in programme evaluations. We must acknowledge the position of power that we hold over host communities, and proceed with care.

- **Draw on existing approaches that work.** Fortunately, there are standards of practice available that can have fruitful outcomes. The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework, for example, positions communities in their power, as having agency and assets, despite (and sometimes because of) their woundedness. This approach can assist community members in overcoming apathy and fatigue, and can reignite their sense of self-determination.

## *Actions for **national** impact*

- **Have realistic expectations of the programme.** The developmental impact that can be realised in a community in the short to medium term is unlikely to be drastic. We need to foster an understanding of the time and work needed for healing, and accept that, in some communities, the 20-year timeline provided by the REIPPPP will still only be a first step.

- **Formulate policy that is informed by the realities of trauma.** Nationally, there is a strong demand for quantitative measuring and achieving socioeconomic development quickly. While there is value in these indicators and impact objectives, they are largely blind to the effects of woundedness and its developmental implications. Current reporting timeframes must be extended, and qualitative indicators (including emotional well-being) must be included.

- **Compassion fatigue has an impact on productivity.** Research indicates that the cost of disengagement to a company's bottom line is almost 2.5 times the individual's annual salary. This makes a critical case for addressing compassion fatigue and burnout.



# FURTHER READING

## **[South Africa – Research Report]**

Hamber, B. & Lewis, S. (1997). An Overview of the Consequences of Violence and Trauma in South Africa. Research report written for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, June. Available online: <https://www.csvr.org.za/index.php/publications/1778-an-overview-of-the-consequences-of-violence-and-trauma-in-south-africa.html>

## **[South Africa – Podcast]**

R-Cubed. Disrupting inter-generational cycles of trauma: a R-cubed podcast, Available online: [https://www.buzzsprout.com/981496/3566155?fbclid=IwAR1rAA\\_lvopWTnN59bdMcNZnfZ6ihj0FA\\_hbT6CSWmT1-yg9W66knvctFw](https://www.buzzsprout.com/981496/3566155?fbclid=IwAR1rAA_lvopWTnN59bdMcNZnfZ6ihj0FA_hbT6CSWmT1-yg9W66knvctFw)

## **[International – White Paper]**

Falkenburger, E., Arena, O and Wolin, J. 2018. Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement. Available online: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/trauma-informed-community-building-and-engagement>

## **[International – Published Journal]**

Figley, CR and Figley, KR. 2017. Compassion Fatigue Resilience. In: Seppälä, EM., Simon-Thomas, E., Brown, SL., Worline, MC., Cameron, CD and Doty, JR(Eds). The Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science. New York: Oxford University Press; 2017. p. 387-398.

## **[International – White Paper]**

Bridge Housing. 2018. 'Trauma Informed Community Building: The Evolution of a Community Engagement Model in a Trauma Impacted Neighborhoods'. Available online: <https://organizingengagement.org/models/trauma-informed-community-building-model/>

## **[International – White Paper]**

Weinstein, E., Wolin, J and Rose, S. 2014. 'Trauma Informed Community Building: A Model for Strengthening Community in Trauma Affected Neighborhoods'. Bridge Housing and Health Equity Institute. Available online: <https://organizingengagement.org/models/trauma-informed-community-building-model/>

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