

## Research Article

Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor, Norma Romm\*, Lesego Serolong

# Academic-practitioner collaboration with communities towards social and ecological transformation

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**Abstract:** In this article we offer a discussion around our academic-practitioner involvements with one another and with a targeted community, in relation to a particular project. In the title of the article, we have hyphenated the term *academic-practitioner* to render fuzzy the distinction between “academic” roles (associated with institutions of higher learning and with professional research) and the roles of “practitioners” operating and learning in the field in engagement with communities. In the article we detail our collaborations with one another and with a farming community in all undertaking (co)inquiries around options for social and ecological development. We explain how this fits the epistemological views as offered by Indigenous authors propounding an Indigenous research paradigm (with transformative intent) to generate visions of realities in-the-making, towards enhanced wellbeing in communities and towards a sustainable future. We provide a detailed example in the course of our deliberations.

**Keywords:** Relational knowing; Transformative learning; Community wellbeing; Food security; Sustainable future

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\*Corresponding author: Norma Romm, Department of Adult Education and Youth Development, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, Pretoria 0003, South Africa, Email: norma.romm@gmail.com  
Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor, Department of Adult Education and Youth Development, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa  
Lesego Serolong, CEO of Bokamoso Impact Investments, Centurion, South Africa

## 1 Introduction: Some contextual background

In order to introduce ourselves, we need to first briefly highlight the pivotal role played by two educational institutions: The University of South Africa (Unisa), and more specifically the Department of Adult Basic Education and Youth Development (ABEYD) department, and Tiger Kloof Educational Institution, which offers education to children across all the grades.

Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor (nicknamed Arko henceforward), who has been working for Unisa’s ABEYD since 2011, was previously a deputy principal at Tiger Kloof Educational Institution, where he met Lesego Serolong, an alumnus of Tiger Kloof. After her schooling, Lesego was given the opportunity through scholarships to pursue her undergraduate studies in America (City College of New York) and post-graduate studies at the London School of Economics (LSE). Upon completion of her studies at the LSE, Lesego returned to South Africa (2014) and approached Arko to provide literacy adult education classes to rural farmers in the North West Province, for a small-scale farming Agri-hub that she was initiating in Manyeledi village. Lesego’s involvement in the Manyeledi rural community (as in other communities) had the aim of empowering people and helping them to become more self-reliant and entrepreneurial so as to produce food and at the same time address the challenges of unemployment, poverty and malnutrition in their locality. She founded an organisation called Bokamoso Impact Investments (BII) in 2014, which began operations in 2015, with this in mind. While she has been involved in various social enterprise projects, in this article we focus on the initiative in Manyeledi.

When envisaging the project to train farmers in Manyeledi, Lesego realised that most of the potential farmers who were interested in the program lacked reading and writing capability – due to the legacies of apartheid, which left millions of adults functionally illit-

erate – and hence would not be able to benefit from her planned agricultural training. To correct for these legacies on a large scale, in 2008 the government introduced a national mass literacy campaign (called *Kha Ri Gude* or *Let Us Learn* in Tshivenda, which is one of the 11 official languages of South Africa). A team led by Veronica McKay from Unisa, who was seconded to the then Department of Education (DoE) created adult literacy materials in the 11 official languages. (DoE, 2008; McKay, 2018.) The campaign reached 4.7 million adults during its running (2008-2016) and won awards for its organisation (cf. <https://www.skillsportal.co.za/content/unesco-international-literacy-award-kha-ri-gude-programme>).

Nevertheless, there were still many millions of adults who were not reached through the campaign for various reasons. The material created for the campaign was geared to teaching functional literacy and also to laying the basis for further participation of learners in social, economic, and political life (Hanemann, 2016; McKay & Romm, 2019). This material became part of the teaching resources used by Arko to train the farmers identified by Lesego to participate in her planned training in small-scale farming (after obtaining permission from the DoE for use of the material), but who first needed some functional literacy. This process was put in motion towards the end of 2015, when Arko put in an application to Unisa's Directorate of Community Engagement and Outreach (DCEO) to provide funding to enable the ABEYD Department to organise these adult education classes.

Over the next few years, about 25 farmers were trained and started to run the farming hub/co-operative in Manyeledi. In July 2018, Arko invited Norma (Romm) to join him and another colleague (Joyce Karel), along with one of our affiliate from Flinders University in Australia (Janet McIntyre-Mills), in order to visit the farmers and others in the Manyeledi community, the farm manager, and also some farmers from nearby villages. The idea of the visits and meetings as Arko explained them to Norma and Janet was that we could all “assess” the community-engaged effort undertaken thus far through ABEYD, by speaking with the farmers and others in the community while at the same time researching options for further advancing the development agenda. (Some of the details of the July 2018 visits can be found in the article by McIntyre-Mills *et al.*, in this issue.) Subsequent to this, Arko and Norma went on another community-engaged visit in October of 2018, continuing to share ideas with community members (mainly in the form of meetings) and to facilitate dialogue around scope for action based on the various participants' understandings of their community assets and how these could be expanded upon to lead to further social development,

while being ecologically healthy for the environment. This was followed by Arko's two-day involvement with the community in November 2018, to discuss principles of co-operative enterprises.

## 2 Premises of this article and the structuring of our discussion

Authors such as Hamann and Fraser (2018), McIntyre-Mills (2014), and Tsampiras, Mkhwanazi, and Hume (2018) make the point that we can regard the boundaries between the positionalities of “academics” located in academia and “practitioners” operating in daily life as blurred. In keeping with this we class ourselves as academic-practitioners who are all concerned that discourses around social and economic development agendas are linked to (re-)generating life chances of people (especially marginalised ones) and to re-generating the living eco-systems on which we depend (Arko-Achemfuor, 2019, Romm, 2017; Serolong, 2017a). Serolong (2017a) refers to the importance of inputting into the “great debate” on food insecurity in South Africa by working practically with people in communities to create futures yet to be – by trying to explore with communities their challenges so that they can “take charge” as agents, while Bokamoso works alongside them in (re)defining and envisioning ways of responding to the felt challenges. This way of working together is in keeping with certain Indigenous authors' promulgation of what is called an Indigenous research paradigm, which respects that “knowing” in Indigenous settings is relational and takes place in communities as people interact with each other in relation to felt challenges. This epistemology (and attendant ethic) has been propounded by Indigenous scholars across the globe (e.g., Arko-Achemfuor & Dzansi, 2015; Chilisa, 2012, 2017; Kovach, 2009; Letseka, 2012; Smith, 2012). And, as noted by Cram and Mertens (2016), there is much scope for negotiating solidarity between Indigenous and transformative-oriented research, as both are committed to exploring “versions of reality” that can lead to constructive transformation towards more social and ecological justice. As Mertens clarifies: “there are consequences associated with accepting one version of reality over another” (2017, p. 21).

The aim is thus not to seek “comprehension” as if there is ever a politically neutral way of gaining knowledge – but rather to explore together felt challenges with a view to redefining them and seeking ways forward for collective action. When one takes this epistemological starting point, there is also no effort to try to reduce the com-

plexity of situations (as experienced) to specific “causes” or sets of “causes” which can supposedly be found by expert analysts so that they can inform lay people accordingly; rather, the idea is to work collaboratively so that those involved and concerned can all contribute insights and visions (in dialogical fashion) towards dealing with the complexity of what has been called “wicked problems” (Churchman, 1967; Mertens, 2016) to try to mutually locate certain leverage points for action. (See also Romm, 2018, pp. 344-351, for a discussion on ways of generating knowing that supports leverage for action.)

The ongoing research process in Manyeledi (as the project is still ongoing) is aimed at drawing out the local wisdom in communities – as expressed and generated in various contexts – while we also input ideas and visions as part of the discussion on ways forward. Arko-Achemfuor and Dzansi (2015, p. 63) make the point that in collaborating with communities, all knowledge (and ways of knowing) which can be brought to bear becomes part of the discussion in an effort to together find routes to more inclusive and sustainable living. The research aim or knowing endeavour is, as Gjöttterud and Krogh summarise (2017, p. 8) “to contribute to more just and equitable world”. This also implies that “the world” is considered as in-the-making (that is, in a process of becoming) *and research is seen as part of rather than apart from the unfolding of social and ecological life* (Romm, 2018, pp. 9-10).

In the next section we as authors proceed to write our stories, which detail our collaborations with one another and with the Manyeledi community which involved our all exploring together action options for trying out, which are of course reviewed in the light of further information and experiences (as interpreted in collective discussion fora). It should be noted though, before we begin with our stories that we are not assuming that “the community” in Manyeledi is homogenous in the sense that there is only one perspective emanating from members thereof. But, as Serolong points out, what has become a cohesive force is that the chief of the village (Chief Kgosiyaage), is well respected and serves as a way of assisting communications between BII and the various members of the community. According to her experience, the chief has been a trusted bridge between BII and the community. (He decided to also enroll in the BII training program and as one of the group of farmers, and has been leading by example.) The chief has played a continuing critical role by updating community members on progress as well as challenges, during his monthly community meetings, to ease communication challenges.

Challenges that have arisen include certain unfulfilled promises by potential donors and lack of financial

support from the local department of agriculture, such that BII experienced a delay in moving the students to their own fields after they graduated from the basic literacy and agriculture classes, mainly due to lack of financial resources for inputs and mechanisation for their own agri-business. Another hurdle Lesego and team experienced was when the water table decreased, forcing BII to drastically decrease production, thus negatively affecting the farmers. This caused BII to spend months looking for resources to drill additional boreholes and requesting a R1.5 million grant from Eskom Foundation, for a new electricity line for a borehole identified 3km away.

Some of the farmers were deeply discouraged by these setbacks and some decided to give up. Some members of the community also started to complain to the chief, as they had expected to see their village greening at a rapid pace and jobs being created. They were also frustrated by the fact that many government officials who had visited the hub made empty promises to the farmers and the community at large. To resolve these conflicts, the chief played a major role by mediating and updating the community on progress that had been made, and most importantly, assuring them of BII’s commitment to the village, despite current challenges. Lesego considers that it was important to include the chief on any issues encountered with individual community members and farmers. As a result, overall, the community takes pride in the Agri hub. (This can also be detected in some of the material in the article written by Janet McIntyre-Mills et al., also in this issue.)

The stage is now set for the three of us to offer our accounts of our academic-practitioner interconnections with one another and with the beneficiary community. In brief, Arko considers himself as an adult educational practitioner and also transformative researcher; Norma considers herself as primarily a researcher concerned with examining opportunities for facilitating research with transformative intent and sharing with audiences the underpinning of this quest; Lesego has academic background and (practitioner) experience in fostering entrepreneurship towards social development, while inputting into local debates and international debates about food security.

### 3 Three stories: The practice of co-research towards social and ecological transformation

#### 3.1 Akwasi Arko-Achemfuor

I joined Unisa's Department of ABEYD in 2011. I taught in various high schools in Ghana, Lesotho and South Africa for twenty-two years before then. I was born in a typical African village with my parents being illiterate peasant farmers which possibly informed my interest in rural community development and adult literacy for transformative purposes. Before joining the ABEYD, I worked as an independent contractor for the Department on part-time basis as a monitor and facilitator for its different adult basic education (ABE) programs in the North West Province. My educational training has been largely in business education where I obtained Master's and doctoral qualifications in adult education as well. Meanwhile, at my current post level as an academic, my key performance areas (KPA) are teaching and learning, research, community engagement, academic leadership and academic citizenship with the first three the most emphasised. I am expected to integrate the three areas in my job setting.

As an academic situated in ABEYD, I teach teacher trainees in the field of adult education and youth development and also practice as an adult education practitioner involved in communities in teaching literacy to illiterate adults as well as business skills. My concern is with trying to encourage enterprise and community development, in keeping with preserving a healthy natural environment as far as possible. Meanwhile, I am equally open to learning – e.g., I have learnt many things from other practitioners, adult educators and adult learners in my interaction with them. These interactions were mostly through my community engagement activities (such as the Kha Ri Gude Evaluation and the current Rural Youth and Adults Upliftment Program) during community meetings and other communication with them.

What I learned from the Kha Ri Gude Evaluation (2013-2016) was how basic numeracy and literacy has empowered the former illiterate people to transform their lives by applying numeracy and literacy skills for livelihoods such as dress making, vegetable farming, knitting, making plastic shoes, rearing fowls, baking, and other economic activities. Those of us in ABEYD who were involved in the evaluation of the Kha Ri Gude campaign learnt certain aspects of the culture of the communities (respect, appreciation, their resilience and spirituality surrounding all

their endeavours) and what some of their aspirations are for further studies to become teachers, nurses, social workers, and so on. The learning experience from the Kha Ri Gude evaluation made me realise how small endeavours on the part of governments, academics and organisations can open the flood gates for adult learners who acquire basic education for sustainable livelihoods.

We were approached by Bokamoso Impact investments (BII) under the leadership of Lesego Serolong to collaborate with them to provide basic literacy and numeracy to be followed by agricultural and entrepreneurship training as a holistic approach and a model for sustainable rural development in Manyeledi. This is a rural community in the North West province of South Africa near the Botswana border in the Kalahari region. The community has vast tracts of land for rearing animals and the cultivation of crops. The community has traditional leaders (a chief and counsellors) who had agreed with BII to avail the communal land for productive purposes to benefit the members of the community and the partners. BII approached Unisa's ABEYD department to collaborate with them to support the community in their endeavour for sustainable development, which gave birth to the community engagement Project – Rural Youth and Adults Upliftment Program (RYAUP).

With Lesego, her background and her work as a young lady have taught me how resilience and hard work pays. The use of social enterprise for community upliftment and using local resources to address community problems and challenges serves as an example to me of how community strengthening can be managed. The endeavour of BII has also made me learn more about agriculture and the use of technology to access the maximum benefits from the environment while respecting the need for sustainable farming practices.

In Manyeledi where our main community engagement is located, we are engaged in providing basic literacy and numeracy to the community members who want to go into agriculture. BII then follows it up with a Sector Education Training Authority (SETA) accredited basic horticulture training. After the training, BII then incubates the farmers to produce vegetables on commercial scale which BII secures markets for. Our ABEYD department at Unisa through RYAUP endeavours to offer a holistic approach for the farmers and provides continuous training in small business development, project management and entrepreneurship to the farmers so that they will be able to run their farms as commercial ventures in a sustainable manner and also in line with principles of co-operation.

We meet the community and the group about three times a year. On 30th and 31st October 2018 for example,

Norma and I met the community and group of farmers in the project, which became meetings in which, inter alia, I shared with them my suggestion that if farmers in the community could produce healthy and fresh food then this could be a selling point in the community who could be encouraged to buy from them and everyone would benefit. This suggestion seemed to have inspired them – as they all nodded in agreement. That is also when we suggested to them that we were thinking of teaching them at our next meeting – based on needs they had expressed in previous visits – about the principles and ways of running cooperatives which they were very enthusiastic about. We went there to fulfil the commitment on 26-28 November 2018 and we received very positive feedback from the group. For example, the chief of the village sat for the whole two days in the training on cooperatives and expressed his appreciation for our team for giving hope to his community. He stated that: “God should bless your group, Unisa and Bokamoso for haven chosen to support us. We are now seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. We used to be poor but we see that your efforts and our commitment is going to make this community a prosperous community in the shortest possible time.” We as academics are researching with the community options for enhancing development, while at the same time sharing our skills and our visions as we engage with them.

With Lesego, I discussed with the possibility of introducing the idea of doing honey as part of the enterprise in Manyeledi, which is in line with what is feasible in that hardy environment as the bees can feed on any flowers. This was done where fifteen hives been introduced with BII securing a market for the organic honey produced in the United States of America. The intention according to Lesego is to increase the hives to about one hundred and fifty for the farmers. Already, the benefits of the introduction of the bees is clear as a symbiotic relationship is developed between the bees and the vegetable farming. The bees pollinate the plants while feeding on the flowers. The honey they produce has become a source of income for the project.

Poverty, coupled with unemployment, malnutrition and food insecurity in rural South Africa where I have taught for eighteen and half years, coupled with my business and entrepreneurship background made me explore how I could combine adult education and entrepreneurship to address some of the challenges mentioned above in transformative manner. Transformative learning as a process is likely to happen in adult learning and was introduced as a concept into adult education discourses by Mezirow (e.g., Mezirow, 1996, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Transformative learning (is based on the idea that

education should be geared to bring empowerment in line with Freire’s theories (Freire, 2000). Gjøtterud and Krogh (2017, p. 8) also point to the links between Mezirow and Freire when they suggest that both authors focus on the expansion of consciousness which goes hand in hand with reviewing action possibilities. It is suggested that transformative learning processes can aid people to change their habits of mind and assumptions which act as a filter for understanding experience, and can renew their ways of thinking, feeling, and acting by introducing new frames of reference (cf. Kroth & Crantos, 2014, pp. 4-5). This is echoed in Korten’s (2015) words about the possibility of changing the future by changing the story. Transformative learning by all accounts is taking place for farmers and community in the collaboration between BII, Unisa staff, and the Manyeledi community. The initiative in this education process as a process of mutual learning is arguably bringing empowerment to this marginalised community by changing the futures in the community by “changing the story” (as Korten puts it).

### 3.2 Norma Romm

Our community-engagement directorate at Unisa encourages us to become engaged in aiding communities to address their felt needs, as explored further via processes of research. It is understood that this implies our working with communities to make a difference in some aspects – related to the skills we can bring to bear – to their quality of life. In my book on *Responsible Research Practice*, I expressed the idea that those considering themselves as professional researchers should admit that research undertakings are always impactful in some way and are never innocent in their consequences (2018, p. 26). In view hereof, I suggested in the book that research (and co-research with others) should become consciously interventive in the direction of generating increased social and ecological justice in the world of which the research is a part (rather than apart). This idea – as noted in our Introduction – resonates particularly with the transformative paradigm (e.g., Mertens, 2009, 2014, 2016) and also with Indigenous paradigms or worldviews underpinning research (e.g., Chilisa, Major & Khudu-Peterson, 2017; Cram, Chilisa & Mertens, 2013; Kovach, 2009; Mihesuah, & Wilson, 2004). Carrying this orientation into the field when invited by Arko to join this community-engaged project (2018), I did not shy from making some inputs into the discussions with the various parties whom we encountered (sometimes in one-to-one conversations, sometimes in small group conversations, and sometimes in larger

meetings). I also noticed – as elucidated by Arko above – that he too expressed a concern with trying to make inputs into the trajectory of events. For example, upon finding that people in the Manyeledi community tend to buy their vegetables from the shops (which in turn get their produce from the town of Johannesburg), he made an interjection. He suggested in a meeting with the community that this is not conducive to overall wellbeing: it is not conducive to the wellbeing of the farmers who could gain more income from their farming, to the rest of the community (where youth could be employed to help with the farming, e.g. weeding, harvesting, and so on), to the health of the consumers (as the produce is not fresh, and is possibly steeped in pesticides and other chemicals), or to the health of the environment. This reminded me of Kovach's argument when discussing Indigenous research methodology that researchers practicing such a methodology can legitimately “share as necessary” their understandings, as an offering into the continued discussions in the community (2009, p. 125).

It seemed to me that Arko touched a chord with participants/audience when he spoke to them – meanwhile also learning from them about what might be feasible ways to activate the visions he was expressing, based on their understandings of the situation and the potential to draw on their social and natural assets. Social assets included the networks that made it easy for community meetings facilitated by the chief and counsellors to be easily arranged with a large community attendance. When I spoke later to the chief, I asked him if he could hold meetings to reinforce the ideas that had been discussed in the previous meeting, and he replied that he could indeed do so as there are many channels by which to arrange meetings, which he does regularly.

Discussions around natural assets were also triggered in the community through the farming hub initiated by Lesego. In view of the harsh climate, Lesego and team together with the community have been experimenting with ways of proceeding, for example, experimenting with honey-production (as mentioned by Arko, above), experimenting with hardier plants and trees (*Moringa* and pecans), and exploring uses of, and extending options for using, the available water (see our Introduction too). This type of experimental approach tallies with the suggestion offered by Restrepo, Lelea, and Kaufmann that due to what they call “sustainability challenges”, there is a “growing emphasis in food and farming systems, on building up farmers' adaptive capacity through an ongoing process of learning, acting and reflecting to cope with, prepare for, and adapt to deal with complexity and uncertainty” (2018, p 2).

I managed to engage with some of the participants, especially some of whom were conversant with English – for example: the community development worker (CDW) from Tlakgameng who was trained by Unisa's ABEYD; Maxwell Masasi from Tiger Kloof (who teaches environmentally-friendly farming practices); a farm manager on the hub at Manyeledi; some of the farmers in Manyeledi; and the chief and one of his counsellors (July and October, 2018). On a few occasions, I asked a local community member conversant with English and Setswana (the local language) to translate for me a question that I was interested in pursuing. Space does not permit an account hereof, but my questions were aimed to feeding into the discourses that were being generated. One example of a conversation (held in English) was when I met the farm manager on the hub (July 2018) – who since then has become a deputy to another (agronomist) who used to be the farm manager and has been re-appointed. I asked him about his use of fertiliser and to what extent he is using manure as one of the modes of fertilising, instead of artificial fertilisers. My question was part of a conversation in which we together spoke about the importance of using as much natural fertiliser as possible to support the soil.

In July 2018, after we (a number of us) had mooted with the community the idea of extending their farming activities through goat cheese production – as we had observed many goats roaming around and the CDW from Tlakgameng had explained to us how they survive the winter – we relayed this idea to Lesego to consider as an option for BII to invest in. She indicated that she had been considering this idea and was researching prospects for this. On a further visit to Manyeledi in October, I asked the counsellor to the chief with whom I had struck up a conversation in the July visit whether he thought this was a viable option – and he replied that it would mean getting goats which are good for cheese/milk production from a nearby village, as the goats we had seen on route to Manyeledi were not suitable for this. I relayed this to Lesego and her BII team during our next encounter.

In short, through all of us sharing ideas as to what we think might be feasible (based on our various sources of understanding which we bring to the table for discussion), collective research towards finding solutions to the challenges of food security while empowering communities is being undertaken. In this process, I have been mindful that the questions I ask and my way of inputting can, more likely than not, lead to what can be called (in academic jargon, but also in language infused in practical life) increased social and ecological wellbeing – as explored in more detail in Romm (2015, pp. 418-423) and Romm (2018, pp. 247-305).

### 3.3 Lesego Serolong

One of the ways in which I identify myself is as the co-founder and chairwoman of Raise the Children International, a registered non-profit here in South Africa, USA and UK.<sup>1</sup> As a former volunteer teacher in a rural school outside of my hometown of Mmabatho, I was inspired to believe in education-based and entrepreneurship solutions to poverty. Once I recognised the need for income generating activities to revitalise the mindset and economy of the communities from which the orphan scholars supported by Raise the Children hail, I founded Bokamoso Impact investments (BII), a social enterprise solely dedicated to uplifting remote underdeveloped areas of the country through agriculture and entrepreneurship. Bokamoso introduces innovative agricultural solutions to poverty, educates and incubates local rural entrepreneurs, and tackles lack of basic resources with commercial strategies and natural asset mobilisation.

After receiving my B.A. degree at the City College of New York and Master's degree at the London School of Economics as a Standard Bank Derek Cooper Scholar, I spent time abroad in Asia in impoverished communities exploring the ways in which entrepreneurship presents a sustainable way to lift whole communities economically and on a long-term scale. I felt that rural communities in South Africa had the same potential to be transformed through social entrepreneurship. After a year of research in remote Manyeledi and Tseoge villages in the North-West Province – which included an open forum, via town hall meetings to discuss problems existing in the community and possible viable solutions – agriculture and entrepreneurship emerged as a multi-dimensional and holistic solution.

Rural smallholder farmers in remote areas in South Africa are confronted with many hurdles that hinder their capacity to effectively contribute their quota to national food security. Most smallholders are found in rural areas where the absence of both physical and institutional

infrastructure stalls their productivity. I also learned from talking to (black) farmers that the high cost of production and the attendant lack of access to credit have also proven to be a recurrent limitation to the growth of smallholder farmers. As a result, most of these farmers grow low-quality produce and also at very low yields, which results in their products being rejected by the markets.

Human capital constraints have been another hindrance for smallholders in rural South Africa. Illiteracy and poor technical skills constitute obstacles in reaching out to the relevant industry institutions for expert advice and assistance. The deficit in technical know-how results in the production of low quality crops. Furthermore, access to markets remains a major challenge experienced by these farmers. Rural black farmers often produce on subsistence scales – on relatively small land size with varied cultivation methods – making their viability difficult in an agricultural economy which thrives on high volume and low production cost. There have been some government programs put in place intended to address such challenges (<https://www.nda.agric.za/docs/policy/policy98.htm>). However, these interventions give very little practical remedies to the stumbling blocks impeding emerging farmers from accessing the market. These challenges render the farmers vulnerable to the exploitations of intermediaries and wholesalers. Consequently, many rural farmers have become despondent in the face of a bleak economic outlook arising from these challenges and are deserting their lands and migrating into townships in search of non-existent employment opportunities. (See also Serolong, 2017b.)

My involvement with, and learning from the challenges faced in communities, led me to believe that smallholder agricultural growth will not be achieved without access to support services. To significantly improve the livelihoods of rural farmers, a multiple-pronged approach needs to be adopted. Farmers have to be able to increase their yields and decrease post-harvest losses; be able to sell their produce to their target consumers; and have support to build protection against price fluctuations (Serolong, 2017b). Bokamoso (BII) was set up to help farmers navigate the agribusiness ecosystem with emphasis on best practice in farming and market distribution of produce. We currently operate Agricultural Hubs in our two project sites of Manyeledi and Tseoge both located in the North West province.

In order to take advantage of the enormous opportunities the horticulture value chain presents, we also assist farmers aggregate their production. The resultant economies of scale achieved can make the markets accessible to them. In short, BII hopes to have far reaching social

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<sup>1</sup> Raise the Children International, is a registered non-profit organisation in South Africa, USA, and UK. Raise the Children International identifies self-motivated orphans from impoverished and rural communities and mobilises resources for these children to gain access to higher education that leads to employment and public service with a high return on social investment. It is also worth noting that in June 2017, Lesego was honoured by Mail and Guardian as one of South Africa's 200 young leaders. An honorary Golden Key Award was bestowed upon Lesego by the University of Pretoria in October of 2017, for her servant leadership and work in developing South African youth. In August of 2018, Lesego won the Standard Bank Top women award.

impact in beneficiary communities and at the same time contribute to addressing challenges of food security in South Africa while also preventing migration to overcrowded cities. Ultimately, the aim is to showcase to the rural populace how farming can be a viable source of livelihood which will help drastically reduce the high rate of unemployment. In this future-directed mode, we engage with local communities to work with them in exploring leverage points for action.

The community meetings in the project sites have drawn in hundreds of young people; both post-matrices and no-matrices, looking for an opportunity to succeed beyond their stationary existence in areas bedeviled with a depressing statistics of 80 percent unemployment rate and just as many inhabitants reliant on social grants and pension (<https://municipalities.co.za/contacts/1232/kagisano-molopo-local-municipality>). The amounts of teenage pregnancies and high dropout rates from schools in these areas also add to paint a bleak future for the villages of Manyeledi and Tseoge (Serolong, 2017b).

Many organisations have passed through these communities, promising development, yet nothing has come to fruition. These organisations reneged on their pledges mainly because they have often adopted a paternalistic and top-down approach in dealing with community members, thus failing to seek community input in designing solutions. Therefore, Bokamoso's strategy of engaging communities as stakeholders finding solutions is key to ensuring the long-term sustainability of their projects. The communities hosting Bokamoso's project had hitherto been written off as areas with no economic viability. However, Bokamoso saw them differently – as places full of untapped potentials. These villages and their surrounding areas have vast arable lands that are not being fully utilised due to lack of adequate public investments. This can be regarded as presenting a great opportunity for growth and economic development within these communities. Hence, instead of reproducing ways of speaking which point to the non-viability of these communities in terms of economic thriving, Bokamoso is intent on forwarding a “version of reality” based on seeing (and activating) untapped potential in recognition that, as Mertens (2017, p. 21) reminds us, there are consequences associated with accepting one version of reality over another.

## 4 Conclusion

In this article, we have offered mini-stories and an overarching story which show how we can render permeable

the boundary between “academics” and “practitioners”, as our various positionalities in “academia” and in “the field” mean working with communities to create visions of worlds yet to be. Practitioners become “academics” insofar as they co-research with others (including those situated in higher education institutions and also communities in the field) options for inputting constructively into the social and ecological fabric of life, where knowing is linked to action as part of the definition of “knowledge”. We have also shown how this epistemological orientation is in keeping with transformative as well as Indigenous paradigmatic views of the knowing process, where knowing is tied to ethical action as those involved in the inquiry process become agents of justice-oriented interventions in the fabric of life.

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