

EXCERPTS from

SMALL CHANGE
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THE BUS STOP: CULTIVATING COMMUNITY

How starts can be stops, but also the other way round, as it turns out.

As we set about our planning we are, by now, cautious of pre-emptive community building. Instead, we seek to build an architecture of possibilities in the broadest sense of the term and give this shape, spatially and organizationally. Later, we may attach to it rules or codes of conduct which we will develop with others. In this way, we create the kind of social space where individuals and organizations engage with each other in ways more akin to the behaviour of Nakagaki's slime mould organism than any devised systems of planning. We create conditions, in other words, for emergence to take place and, in this respect, search for catalysts. The question for planners is: how much structure do we design before the structure itself interrupts the natural process of emergence?

We decide, as a first step, to explore the emergence potentials of the bus stop – to route the bus line, which currently skirts the area, into the site and provide a stopping place where the two roads on site intersect. Better transportation to city markets had been a priority need, in particular for those engaged in the fisheries business. It would be something quick, useful and visible. Better still, it would not require a loan from the World Bank to get it started. Located close by the chosen site is one of the settlement's

few public standpipes where women and children gather to collect water, gossip and wash clothes. We might plant some trees to give shade where people wait or play and place some streetlights to give it all definition and make it look good.

We had observed elsewhere the density of life and commerce which clusters around places where buses stop. People will gather and wait for substantial periods of time and so, often and in small steps, small shops and coffee houses will open to serve them, shoeshine boys and other street hawkers will appear. These same people will carry their fish or other produce to city markets and will spread their baskets on the ground to sell what they can to passers-by while they wait. At first, a small market emerges: cheaply, spontaneously, incrementally and in response to demand and to circumstances. No-one designed a market place, no-one contrived a centre. Instead, conditions for trade were informally structured so that if it wanted to happen it could and, if not, very little investment was wasted and no-one would suffer. At the same time, with the newly installed streetlights, children would gather at night to do their homework, in the absence of lighting in their own homes. And where children gather, so do informal vendors selling candy, soft drinks, pencils and paper, exercise books and the rest. At the existing standpipe, more work and organization to integrate this facility into this new place are done – a new water trust had been set up and improvements to this, and other water supply facilities, were under way. Later, we would seek to find a place for Mela's new waste management resource centre and expand this to include a meeting place for all the organizations now working in this settlement.

At a chance encounter with the Dean of the National University's Faculty of Medicine and Dental Surgery, we persuaded the school's dental department to offer their services to the community as part of their field training. We would provide a place for their mobile dental unit to park once a week, adjacent to the new resource centre, which was also now used for community events and meetings. It was a visible event that attracted many – to look if not to be treated – with free inspection and advice.

In time, the word got around that there was cheap and fresh food to be had at this daily informal market. As its reputation as a fish

market grew, so people would come from town to buy. Buses were now bringing people in and not just taking people out. It became known as The Fish Run. Meanwhile, the firemen's cooperative, a long-standing organization set up to look after the welfare of its members, would get together with the newly set up water trust and Mela's waste management organization to elect a new Council of Community Representatives to help develop the commercial potential of their centre – to pool a community enterprise revolving fund in partnership with the local authority to secure their new school, improve utilities, encourage fire prevention and put in place flood-prevention measures. It was all based on the initiatives of Seva, who had for some time been running a day bank for small businesses, mainly pavement hawkers.⁴⁹ The bank encourages individuals and small groups to save small amounts of money and, in contrast to the high interest rates charged by money lenders (10–20 per cent) enables small loans at interest rates of around 0.5 per cent. Loans had ranged from between R1000 to R20,000 and the operation was simple: each day, members borrow what they need to buy stock or materials and pay it back at the end of the day. The new Council of Community Representatives would be encouraged to establish a day bank to support household programmes in recycling and other enterprises related to the community's new and emergent Centre.

One such entrepreneur was Tandia's son, Tomi, whose rudimentary skills at carpentry, together with a loan of R3000, enabled him to convert his bicycle into a delivery vehicle. He had tied a wooden box to the back and insulated this with polystyrene sheets, which he had bought from Mela's recycling centre. He had decorated the box with small advertisements for which he got a few pennies. With its growing reputation as a fish market, he would set out at 5.00am to go to the bus stop, buy his fresh fish from the still informal market, take it home, scale, clean and sometimes fillet the fish before packing it in ice into his box. By 7.00am he was on the road delivering orders or touting for sales, mostly in the middle-class parts of town. At the end of each day, he would pay back his loan and earn a profit of between R500 and R800, which he invested back into his business. In time, he and his friends would own a fleet of 12 bicycles and offer deliveries of vegetables and dairy products,

picked up from households and, over time, create network markets for families producing a few eggs, a dozen tomatoes or a bundle of carrots. Tomi and his fleet of individual entrepreneurs, who collectively had enhanced their commercial potential like any other growing business, parked their bicycles close to where the buses stop – which became known, like a taxi rank, as a place where you could always find delivery bikes. Unsurprisingly, as the delivery bikes would return to home base, so the business of maintenance and repair would emerge. Nearby and soon enough, front rooms and courtyards were converted into repair shops; others for calligraphy, making small signs, and even making sun hoods for bikes. It became more openly a place to get your bike fixed, a place to buy a new bike made out of recycled parts, some from Mela's centre, a place to hire bikes to carry people and food when you could not, at first, afford your own. Soon, Tomi found himself returning from his daily run selling fish with school uniforms for mending, with a special order for leather bible covers, and with information on who needs cleaners in the smarter parts of town, or childcarers or cooks or gardeners. His networking of markets and people, his entrepreneurship, his source of information had, in many ways, enabled him to become a development practitioner in his own right. His organization was emerging and scaling up.