

WHO IS THEM?

Book review

Campbell, Catherine (2003) **“Letting them die”**: Why HIV/AIDS prevention programmes fail. Cape Town: Double Storey / Juta. ISBN 1-919930-11-6 pbk. Pages 214.

Yvonne Sliep
School of Psychology
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Westville Campus

There is no lack on material or literature on HIV/AIDS, quite the contrary. Being totally overloaded with both information and problems is slowly resulting in a serious AIDS fatigue for those working in the area. Cathy Campbell has written a book that has been picked up by many all over the world and has had tongues whacking both locally and internationally which is a feat in itself in this context. The book received much publicity overseas with many positive BBC interviews and newspaper coverage for the general public. Although the academic language was noted as a barrier it did not bar people from reading about AIDS and it is assumed, gaining a better understanding about the complexities confronting those working in the area. It was reviewed as an important contribution that a failed programme was written about as it opened up different perspectives.

The described project known as the Summertown project in Carltonville was very well resourced and planned and focussed on promoting sexual health through peer education, multisectoal collaboration and treatment of STIs. The book has a strong gender focus and broadly examines the social construction of sexuality, HIV prevention and community development and is based on a three-year study of a large-scale HIV/AIDS prevention programme in a Gauteng gold mining community. It has two main areas of research and theorising frameworks. Firstly it looks at sexuality and HIV prevention of the migrant workers, young people and commercial sex-workers. Secondly it tracks the complex involvement of incorporating the array of stakeholders involved in the programme and less involved in the process than they could have been. Both micro and macro social contexts are examined in both areas. It draws on disciplines of social psychology, community health, sociology, development studies, social medicine and health promotion. A strength of the book is the clear illustration that exists in translating well planned ideas into practice. It is important to read the book in terms of the time it was written. HIV/AIDS is a dynamic pandemic with constant changes in response and it is useful to stop and learn whatever lessons we can as we go along. The book details the ways in which a project's ideals can fall by the wayside and how intention is not always translated into action.

Acknowledging that many very positive reviews were written about the book the purpose of this review is to take the reflections to another level. One of the important contributions of the book is that it illustrates clearly how HIV/AIDS can be used to mobilise more general social development programmes including groups that are generally invisible and voiceless, like unemployed women. It critically reviews the participatory community development approach to HIV/AIDS programmes and makes some suggestions on how to take the work forward. The theoretical framework successfully explores interlinked concepts like social identities, sexuality, empowerment, critical consciousness and social capital as well as power and illustrates all of these in practical examples. Although these concepts are not new, their importance in this kind of work is well illustrated. Possibly the complexity of behaviour change could have been looked at in more detail. What it does do very well is highlight the gender and relationship factor. The book starts with the question “why is it that people knowingly engage in sexual behaviour that could lead to a slow and painful premature death? In attempting to answer, attention is given to the phenomenon of sexuality and to some contextual issues like unequal relationships and economic power. The book emphasises, explains and illustrates the importance of real multisectoral collaboration and how that could have made a real difference to the programme providing lessons we can all take to heart.

In view of the many topics covered it is a book that can be recommended to students of all levels from a variety of disciplines and incorporates both theoretical and practical challenges for debates and exercises. The students doing a Masters in Health Promotion (at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Westville campus) were asked to read the book and to reflect critically on multisectoral collaboration. The book was perceived as being pitched perfectly for the level of understanding and experience of this particular target group. The real value of the exercise was in the dialogue that was created around a specific case study within South Africa which was described so comprehensively. From a facilitators point of view it was interesting to note the emotional impact the book had on this particular group: Initial experiences to reading the text mostly included emotions like fatigue, despair, and depression. After grappling with the material the outcome was one of hope that things could be done better if it is understood more clearly beforehand what the pitfalls could be. Mostly the students would have appreciated better guidelines on how to avoid the pitfalls and how to strengthen the identified weaknesses especially in term of responding to emerging problems through the formative evaluation process. Questions were also asked about implementation of gender sensitive strategies as opposed to only doing gender analyses. An example cited was the co-ordinator being a man from outside the country. Curiosity was also raised about how the funding and western paradigm had influenced the project. Reflections from the students also included formulating strategies of how these issues could be picked up in their projects and a belief from the example that individuals can make a difference. Finally the students mentioned that it would have been helpful to hear more about the small successes that were achieved along the way to prevent the project being described as a failure.

This last reflection is an important one to pause at. Precisely because it is so difficult to achieve desired behaviour change a different way of evaluating the work can lead to better staying power. For instance, if the question is asked if condom use works well in

South Africa the answer would be no - despite all the efforts and costs involved. If however the problem is approached in a more tailored way the results can be measured more appropriately. For instance condom use of young men in urban settings is very different to condom use of rural older women. If before the programme intervention commercial sex workers did not contemplate using condoms unless they were paid more and this moved to an intended condom use all the time it can already be viewed as a step in the right direction. The intervention is then tailored to where the particular group is at and evaluating each step or phase. Writing about the progress made in this way leaves a sense of more hope that results can be achieved even though the area is very complex. Perhaps the purpose of the book was to serve as a wake up call and to ask researchers and practitioners to be honest in what they find – that purpose is certainly well served.

There is no doubt that Catherine Campbell not only knows what she is talking about, but also knows how to bring a well thought argument to a wide audience. It is excellently written, well organised and has an accessible style both in its narrative as well as in the more complex theoretical ideas that are presented. It also engages with the audience on an emotional level. Would she have written the book in quite this way if she was living and working in South Africa full time? Maybe not - Campbell can afford to take the distancing position of an outsider – those dealing with the realities on a daily basis may disappear in despair if the work was embraced in the same way. We need to stay hopeful that our efforts can make a difference despite on-going difficulties. There is no “them”, there is only us, and that us should include the international community, something which Campbell has started by engaging an international and wider audience.