

Clearing a path through voter confusion

‘When I think of the need for voter education in my area, I think of MamLulu, a typical rural woman who cannot read and write. She works for a white farmer and knows very little about the changes that are taking place in the country today. She hopes that things will get better, in the way that most people do, but she has never seen anybody important come to our area. She has never really seen anything change’

‘The person I know who needs voter education is my ideal woman. She grew up in Mozambique and she lives in Gazankulu now. She doesn’t read or write, but she is powerful and confident. She knows how to motivate people to organise themselves. But she is still angry inside’

‘In my mind’s eye I see a very old man who came to the advice office the other day. He just said: “I want to vote before I die, but I don’t know when it will happen and I don’t know what I will do”’

‘There is nobody in Magopa who has had the privilege of being exposed to voter education. The women are just starting to get back together again. As victims of forced removals, we have just returned to our homes and are starting to rebuild our lives. We have a weaving project and we grow vegetables, not for an income, but just to survive. We all need to know about the vote’

By **MARIE-LOUISE STRÖM**

AND SO the portraits of would-be voters began to evolve as participants in a research workshop introduced themselves and the work they do.

Representatives of rural organisations from all over the country – literacy workers, para-legals, trainers and development officers – gathered to discuss the specific needs of voters in the rural areas.

While some basic information on voting was provided for participants themselves, the chief purpose of the workshop, hosted by Idasa’s Training Centre for Democracy, was to clarify what rural people in general know, think and fear about elections. In particular, the workshop aimed to clarify the needs of women voters and of voters who cannot read.

For people in rural areas, voting by the raising of hand is a familiar experience, although it is not always common for women to be involved in important decision-making that affect their lives. On a political level, the majority of rural people have had no experience of voting at all. However, a significant number of people have in fact participated in homeland elections.

Rather than needing to learn how to vote for the first time, these people will need to ‘unlearn’ certain procedures and separate past experiences of voting – often very nega-

tive – from the opportunity of voting in the forthcoming election in South Africa.

Among those rural people who have never voted before, there is a tremendous fear of the unknown. Even basic terminology used in connection with voting becomes a source of confusion and concern.

People need to be reassured that a polling station is not the same as a police station, and that a ballot is not the same as a bullet. They need to know that the indelible ink

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used to mark voters’ hands is not some kind of muti, a term used by some trainers as they themselves struggle to imagine this particular step in the voting process.

Indeed, literate trainers have had to struggle with the meaning of many new English words before being able to translate or transfer these into their mother tongue.

Many people who have had some experience of school associate a cross with something that is wrong. They are puzzled that voters are generally required to place a cross next to the correct name on the ballot form, next to the party of which they approve.

And for those who cannot read or write, it is difficult to contemplate handling a pencil and marking a ballot paper on their own.

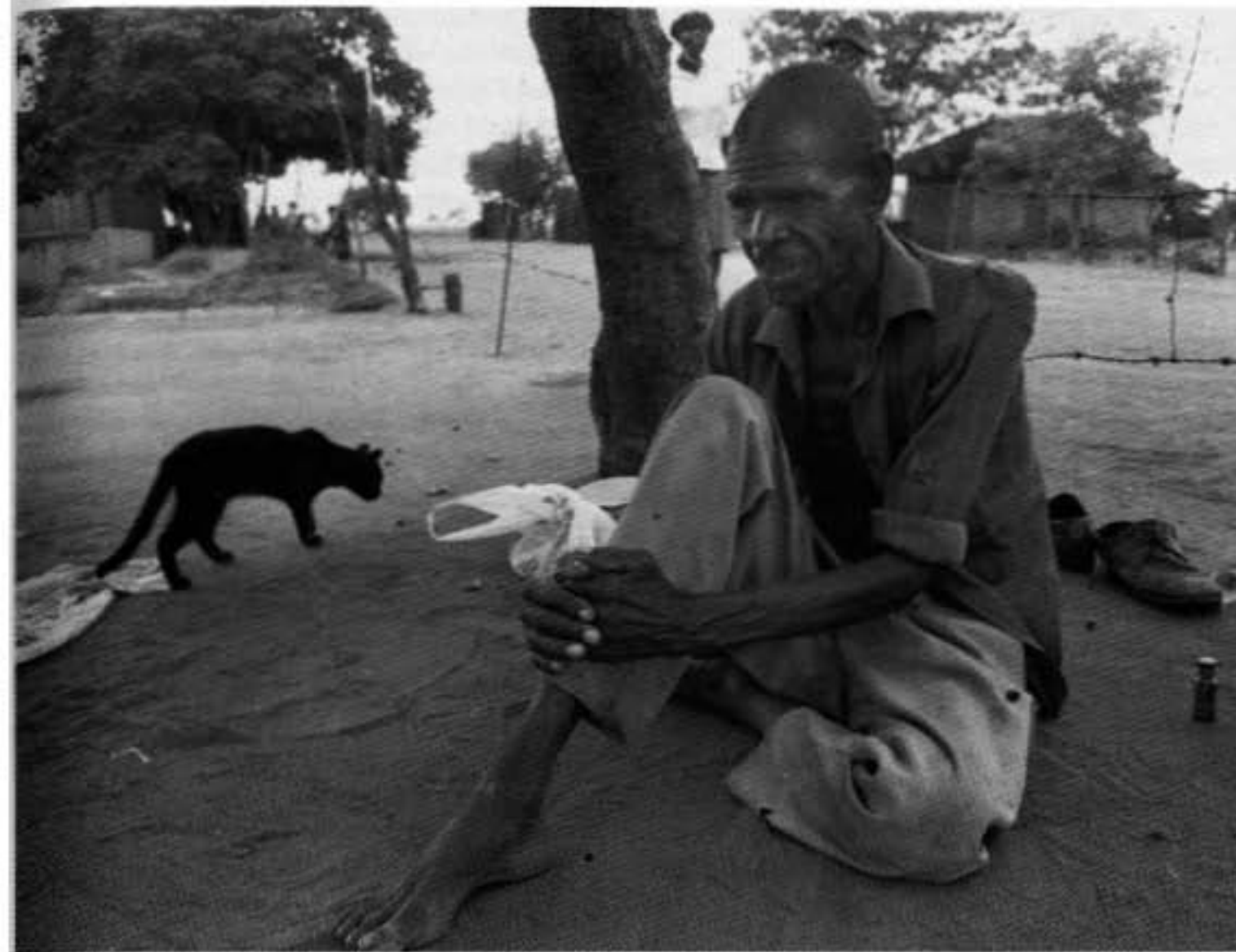
No adequate materials are available at this stage for the training of illiterate voters. On the positive side, most literacy workers believe that few people are totally illiterate. A certain degree of functional literacy allows people to read a stop sign, for instance, or the names of shops.

Illiterate voters will need to learn to recognise the colours and symbols of the parties of their choice, notwithstanding the attempts that will be made to confuse them on this score. It is not yet clear what sort of assistance will be given to people who are unable to vote on their own. However, it will undoubtedly be an empowering experience for any first-time rural voter to feel confident in handling a ballot form and to understand the meaning of the vote they cast.

In homeland elections, illiterate voters generally named the candidate of their choice and officials then marked their ballots, often without being monitored in any way. Ballots included photographs of individual candidates, a feature that will fall away when the system of proportional representation applies.

In the rural areas at present, people are still inclined to talk about political leaders rather than about parties, and voters will need to be trained to link the two.

Indeed, in 1990 people were generally



More importantly, however, voter education needs to convey a thorough understanding of the election process as a whole. If voters can trust the process, they will be able to accept the result of the election and believe that it will make a difference to their lives.

● This research marked the first phase in the development of a voter training package that is being produced by the Training Centre for Democracy. The package will take the form of a large envelope containing nine extra-large posters and a trainer's manual. The posters will contain no wording and will be specifically designed to appeal to rural voters, particularly women. However, the package will be adaptable for use with other groups in urban and peri-urban areas. The manual will be self-explanatory and facilitators will not necessarily need to be trained to use the package. It should be available early in June.

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ERIC MILLER

Rural areas: voters will need to be trained to link political leaders and political parties.

aware of the release of Mandela and the unbanning of organisations, and many homeland inhabitants thought that there would be elections soon afterwards. Since then, very little has been seen to change in homeland areas.

For the coming elections to be perceived as different, and as taking place on a national scale, trainers are convinced that the homelands will need to be reincorporated into South Africa in good time.

Many fears of intimidation spring from people's experience of having been forced to vote in the past. Candidates in homeland elections often campaigned by threatening people with eviction from their homes, or with the discontinuance of pensions, schooling and cattle dipping.

Voters were loaded on to open lorries and taken to polling stations where police monitors were seen as stern and menacing. Some people voted more than once as lorries took them to more than one station. Chiefs and headmen also organised groups of voters and threatened that individual choices would always be known. Once elections were over, candidates were never seen in villages again.

It is feared that in the forthcoming election, many white farmers may intimidate

their workers in the same way. Chilling examples of intolerance towards farm workers who are members of the ANC were cited at the workshop. Other farmers, it is suspected, will use attractive bribes to mislead their workers.

Whatever the situation, it will be difficult for trainers to assure voters that none of these irregularities will recur. Above all, in order to cope with intimidation, people need to know that their vote is secret, and to feel confident that they are able to mark the ballot correctly.

Finally, the fear of violence is likely to deter many rural people from casting their vote. Police and farmers are perceived as

being trigger-happy, and much political intolerance is blamed on the youth. Older voters fear that youths will behave provocatively on election day by toyi-toyi-

ing and wearing party clothes. They say that this will cause trouble for everyone, and the election may end up having a negative impact on people's lives.

It is clear that participation in the election – not only in the rural areas – will be influenced by stability. Hopefully, voter education will contribute in some way to preparing a stable voting environment by creating an atmosphere of realistic anticipation and tolerance.

'The fear of violence is likely to deter many rural people from casting their vote'

If only people could 'eat' democracy

By LEFUNO NEVHUTALU

THE way in which human rights and democracy relate to development, cultural diversity and tolerance formed a central thread running through a major conference held in Canada recently.

More than 300 participants from 70 countries around the globe took part in the 'International Congress on Education for Human Rights and Democracy' in Montreal in March.

During the opening discussion the importance of sharing information, ideas and resources was agreed upon by all delegates, and non-governmental organisations in particular were seen as playing a vital role in teaching, defending and helping the creation of democratic societies.

It was felt that democracy needs to be rooted at local level in all countries and those involved in teaching democracy and human rights should continue to redefine their educational tools.

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