

*Issue topic: International perspectives on social education*

# NEWSLETTER

## Newsletter

### Ndlovu Youth Choir

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Although South Africa has one of the strongest economies in southern Africa, as well as the whole continent, it still faces many problems. Among these is the problem, pointed out in many scholarly articles, that the country to a large extent has remained racially segregated even after the fall of Apartheid (including e.g. South Africa's Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2019). Recently, the country has been troubled by a high level of corruption and significant social differences between rich and poor, which will probably be deepened by the long-term economic recession that may continue well into 2020 ("[11 alarming charts](#)," 2020).

South Africa is a multi-ethnic country with 11 official languages and a number of cultures that live next to each other, cultures which were oppressed during Apartheid. The racist regime built up walls between people and forced millions out of the town centres and into the outskirts, to the townships. These areas turned into places of no hope long before the introduction of democracy in the 90s. With high unemployment rates and poor hygiene standards, many have remained excluded areas with soaring poverty and crime levels (Donaldson, Du Plessis, Spocter, & Massey, 2013).

To a European tourist, South Africa offers an exceptional travel experience, but even just passing through the country one learns very fast which part of the city is safe and which is not. Even though the South African government has implemented projects that have improved the living conditions of people in such townships (Donaldson et al., 2013), those who have seen parts such as Khayelitsha in Cape Town, Alexandra in Johannesburg and other similar areas are not surprised to hear that crime in such areas remains high, as does the high school drop-out rate according to Hartnack (2017).

One issue that negatively affects developments in South Africa is the high school drop-out rate. According to Hartnack (2017), 40 percent of first graders leave school before they reach the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The high drop-out rate is a result of negative peer pressure, not only in townships but also in poor rural areas. Young people often end up engaging in alcohol and drug abuse, as well as anti-social behaviour.

Hartnack (2017) also refers to other authors and points out that positive pressure from high-achieving peers can have a beneficial effect on youth. However, negative peer influence is a more significant element.

Involvement in leisure-time activities is one way to motivate young people to strive harder. One good start would be to finish school, find a job and be resilient to the socio-pathological phenomena in their surroundings. An example of this that has gained not only national, but worldwide fame, is Ndlovu Youth Choir, supported by the Ndlovu Care Group; this choir started as a leisure-time activity in Limpopo region, a rural area north of Gauteng.

#### **Ndlovu Care Group and its activities**

In South Africa, there are a large number of NGOs working with local communities, and a large part of civil society is a result of their work. In 2013 there were almost 100 000 registered non-profit organizations (Stuart, 2013), and they are playing a crucial part in delivering the socio-economic rights that are guaranteed by the constitution, and in assisting the South African government in carrying out its mandate.

Ndlovu Care Group, founded by Dutch doctor Hugo Templeman in 1994, is based in the rural area of Elandsdoorn, Limpopo Province. It focuses on providing integrated health care, child care and other services in order to develop the community (“Ndlovu Care Group,” 2019). On a daily basis, Ndlovu Care Group implements different programmes ranging from health care and programmes to support the needs of children and youth, to WASH (Water Sanitation and Hygiene). It also supports the local infrastructure and is involved in research (Ndlovu Care Group, 2020a).

One of the activities, the Child & Youth Development Programmes, is focused on orphans and vulnerable children in the area. It includes: the Ndlovu Children’s Units, which works to prevent malnutrition and provides treatment; Child-Headed Households, a programme that not only ensures basic care to satisfy the needs of orphans and vulnerable children, but also provides social skills to those growing up without parents; and finally the Community Disability and Rehabilitation Programme, aimed at disabled children in the community (Ndlovu Care Group, 2020b). The organization also runs pre-schools and schools, as well as a low-threshold facility called Chill Hubs. It offers a safe space for extra-curricular activities for children after school. Apart from training IT skills, the facility works to prevent drug abuse, gives advice on domestic violence, etc.

### Ndlovu Youth Choir

The Ndlovu Youth Choir has recently drawn attention worldwide through participating in the TV show America’s Got Talent (2019). But let’s tell the story from the beginning.



The choir consists of a group of young people from the small village of Moutse, in Limpopo. The choir itself was founded in 2009, and since then it has been changing the lives of its members. In a short video about the impact of the choir, Dr. H. Templeman explains why they set up the choir: the goal was to give vulnerable children “a voice” (Ndlovu Youth Choir, 2019). But what children should be considered vulnerable in such conditions?

As explained by H. Templeman, CEO Of Ndlovu Care Group, one of the results of AIDS in South Africa has been the high number of children who grow up without parents in a desperately unequal community (Ndlovu Youth Choir, 2012). These orphans do not have anybody to take care of them, despite the fact that as children, they need guidance. The risk of getting involved in crime or prostitution to survive is high (Ndlovu Youth Choir, 2012). Therefore this choir presents an opportunity to work with these children, guide them and take care of them. It is a way to learn to deal with their life situation.

Ralf Schmitt, artistic director of Ndlovu Youth Choir, talks about how the children are shaped and changed by the music. Apart from giving them a meaningful leisure-time activity, it also seems to provide them with a life goal, and removes them from situations with negative peer pressure. The choristers describe it as a place where they can forget about their problems and feel free. They are also aware that the experience is very educational and, what is more, they themselves are looked up

to. Coming from a poor environment, this gives them a feeling of achievement that can motivate them to go further in their lives (Ndlovu Youth Choir, 2019).

Working with music is also a way for the children to process their emotions. Ralph Smith claims to be thrilled to work with them, something that would not have been possible during the time of Apartheid. It gives them a chance to work with their earlier experiences in a positive way. Creativity helps them to heal and, at the same time, also helps to improve the community (Ndlovu Youth Choir, 2019). Dr. H. Templeman explores the same ideas when talking about how the children flourish through the choir's activities (Ndlovu Youth Choir, 2012).

Girls who have been singing in the Ndlovu Youth Choir say that singing gave them direction in their life: they studied, found a job, and thus became more independent. Obviously important to the individuals, this is also part of a wider improvement for the whole community (Over het Ndlovu Youth Choir, 2019). In this way, the women inspire others and help improve the conditions of people around them.

Moreover, children who grow up as orphans find new friends with whom they not only sing, but also play. They describe the choir as easing their internal pain, and helping them to focus.

Clearly, the impact of the choir on the community is huge. The chance to show their qualities at the international level by participating in America's Got Talent shot them to the stars. Since autumn 2019 they have performed in different shows, both in South Africa and overseas (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands). But the main impact of their work remains on the local level, in their region and with children who need support. The fame might help, but it is not the aim.

As they state in all their interviews, the choir wants to be an example of how people from humble backgrounds can achieve marvellous things and inspire others to do the same.

## Conclusion

In a way, the Ndlovu Youth Choir became a symbol of South Africa after appearing on America's Got Talent. It shot them to stardom and attracted worldwide attention to their cause. Yes, it might be true that for a short moment they lived the "South African dream". But going deeper, there are more things than meet the eye. The children showed to the whole world that fine art can come from poor environments and a tough background, and in a way the children is a symbol of Nelson Mandela's rainbow nation: people of different colour working together. It would never have been possible during Apartheid, but times have changed, and perhaps these children can go forth as an example of how to choose a better path in their lives. And as such, it is a good example of how the work of an NGO can often make a real difference.

Nelson Mandela once said: "After climbing a great hill, one only finds there are more hills to climb". Let us wish that, for the rest of their lives, the choir keeps on using the strength from their achievements.

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## Resources

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Both authors visit South Africa regularly.