

Scene report

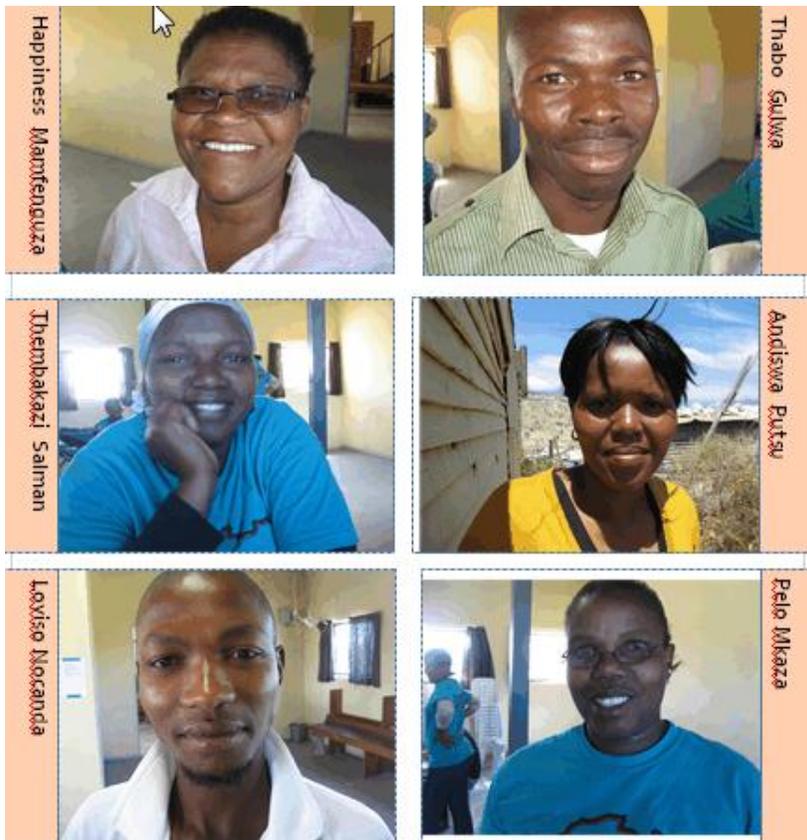
Scene Title: **Encountering the Community**

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Setting (where, when): Monwabisi Park, October 22, 2010

Backstory: From what we've learned during the prep phase, the efforts of our sponsoring NGO have been criticized by local groups in MWP---SNAC, SANCO--- for not being inclusive and transparent, for benefiting some members of the community but not all members. The tall poppy syndrome---cutting down those that are seen to have risen higher than others---seems to be at work here. These tensions are exacerbated by poor service provision by the city (toilets, drinking water, housing), promises that are not kept by the city and others, and competition among informal settlement residents for limited resources (jobs, training, housing etc). This is what we're facing from the outset.

Cast of Characters: To help us understand the views of local residents, and to communicate our work to other social actors (SNAC, SANCO, street committees, sponsors), we need to work closely with co-researchers, whom we met today. Apart from Thabo who grew up in Jo-burg, each of the co-researchers grew up in small village in the Eastern Cape and came to MWP within the last 4-5 years. They were selected for our program by the VPUU for whom they volunteered as community watch members. In subsequent reports we'll no doubt have more to say about the co-researchers.



Setting: Although the distance from the main road to the sponsor's building is no more than 100 yards along a sandy path, in that short distance we saw sheep heads grilling on a roadside brazier, two

ramshackle taverns (shebeens) whose customers seemed solemn and watchful, a small shop built like a fortress from concrete blocks, and with a heavy metal grate to safeguard the proprietor and his family, and tin shacks, some painted others not, some blaring music others quiet, set down in no apparent order. Some people greeted us warmly; others walk past in a hurry. While we have seen photographs and videos of Monwabisi Park, we were surprised by the bustle, by the lively intonation of Xhosa, by the mix of poverty and dynamism. When we reached the community center, we saw our six co-researchers and our project sponsor waiting for us in what appeared to be a receiving line. They were very well dressed, the women in elaborate dresses, the two men in freshly ironed shirts and crisp trousers. We formed a line and each of us shook hands with each co-researcher and said a few words in Xhosa “Molo” and “Kunjani”, which seemed to go over well.

Scene

a) *Connecting*

After Scott and Bob welcomed the assembled in the community center in MWP, we had a half an hour or so to introduce ourselves to the co-researchers and to have a conversation about the project. Each team, with a co-researcher, then went on a one hour tour of MWP. We asked the co-researchers if they would be willing to use digital cameras we brought with us so that they could take pictures of places in Monwabisi Park that were in some way important to them. None of the co-researchers had used a camera before, but they were all keen to try.

b) *Planning*

We divided up the first day into three planning components: 1) initial greeting/ice breaking activities; 2) walking/photo tour; and 3) discussion of photographs.

Question/Planning Activity 1: Initial Meeting MWP

- How can we establish from the outset a collaborative relationship with our co-researchers?
- What can we do to make the first day energizing and informative?
- What are the expectations of the community about our work?
- How are we seen by different groups in the community and why?
- How might our work affect different groups and why?
- How can we best relate to local residents? How will they relate to us?
- Will our little booklet of photos from back home help co-researchers understand us a bit better or will it make us seem even more foreign, more privileged?
- What are the barriers to communication with the co-researchers?

Question/Planning Activity 2: Walking Photo/Tour

- How should we teach co-researchers about the use of digital cameras?
- Where will the co-researchers take us in MWP and why?
- How much variation will there be in shack construction, amenities (electricity, television, etc)?
- By what criteria will the co-researchers categorize different locations in MWP: safe, unsafe, susceptible to flooding, vulnerable to the wind, older residents/newer residents, “better” vs “worse” location?
- From the perspectives of the co-researchers, what do we need to know about MWP?
- Will they opt to show us “problems” or will they focus on “assets” or some sort of mix?

Question/Planning Activity 3: Discussing co-researcher photos

- How should we plan the presentation----how many pictures per co-researcher? How much time to allot to each co-researcher? How to address language/communication problems?
- What do the pictures tell us about the attitudes of the co-researchers to life in MWP?
- What differences might emerge among co-researchers in how they portray MWP and why?
- To what extent will co-researchers show us what they think we want to know?

Action/Observations:

a) Initial meeting: Our few words of Xhosa to greet the co-researchers were very welcomed and elicited supportive laughter and additional Xhosa responses----“How are you. Fine. We’re fine”. The co-researchers on the whole were forthcoming and spoke English well enough so that we could have a conversation about where they lived in MWP (sections, A, B and C), how long they lived here (from 1 to 8 years), if they had children (most do have children), where they were from originally (from the Eastern Cape, except Thabo) At times we were doing most of the questioning and felt what we were doing bordered somewhat on an interrogation, with power firmly on our side. Perhaps it was out of politeness, or a cultural norm that the host---and they clearly felt they were hosting us---- doesn’t pose too many questions to the visitor. To change this dynamic we brought out our booklet of photographs taken of our families, our neighborhoods, WPI and that helped establish more of a conversational tone.

“Take home” observations:

- English language proficiency among co-researchers is variable and communication can be challenging.
- Co-researchers were very welcoming and appreciated our efforts in Xhosa
- Considerable joking, laughter---different notion of personal space (not as much!)



b) The Tour

We were first taken to see a co-researcher’s shack in B section which had 4 rooms (kitchen, living room, two bedrooms), tiled floors, electricity, refrigerator, television, and a stereo (see figure 2). The co-researcher’s partner is in steady employment doing construction and they are able to afford material possessions and maintain a small garden in the rear where the co-researcher grows spinach (see figure 1). Despite these conveniences, her family had to walk a few hundred feet to a water tap and further to reach a toilet. We didn’t talk much about sanitation at this point, but there were no outhouses that we could see and the nearest toilets were by the main road. She mentioned how difficult it was to keep

sand out of the house when the wind was blowing and in the winter, with heavy rains and strong winds, water enters under the front door since her shack lies in a slight depression. Carpet is used to reduce the amount of sand tracked into the house. The bars on the front door are manufactured locally, and the materials for the house---galvanized tin, windows, wood supports are bought locally. We saw that many of the houses are oriented away from the prevailing wind, that there are gaps between the roofs and the wall which can let in rain, and that the shacks can be very hot in summer and most likely very cold and damp in winter. We could not discern any order or logic to the location of various shacks, although this is something we need to look more into. Things seemed improvised and somewhat random. There are no paved roads; people move through MWP on winding paths and a few dirt roads.



1



2

We were taken to see community assets as well as problems. One asset was a soup kitchen outside of St. Johns church in B section (figure 3). We saw a handful of men sitting by the cooking pots. We asked the co-researchers about soup kitchens: How were they organized? How many operated in MWP? Where were they located? How were they funded? How many meals did they serve and at what times, and to whom? Were they connected to MWP churches? We didn't get very precise answers. Apparently, the soup kitchens are funded by various religious charities, and that in most cases women and children first go to the soup kitchens first, and then the men attend. This is a rich vein for future discussion.



3



4

The co-researchers took pictures of what they considered to be various problems in MWP. Figure 4 shows a shack, located in a depression, that is prone to flooding, a hazard that according to the co-researchers is widespread in MWP. In addition to natural hazards, the co-researchers photographed a shebeen (an illegal tavern) to alert us to what, in their view, was a significant threat to the community's

welfare---hard earned money going to drink, drunkenness leading to violence and crime, and sobriety giving way to recklessness and the spread of HIV. At this point we do not know if this view is held by many MWP residents, or if there is difference in perception among men and women about shebeens, or even if our co-researchers felt the need to emphasize the negative aspects of shebeen because they felt that's what we wanted to hear. Shebeens, however one sees them, are ubiquitous. We walked passed many shebeens, some of which seemed somewhat welcoming and others where we felt we somehow had walked beyond an accepted boundary. The co-researchers, were most voluble about the poor sanitation conditions, as shown in figure 6. The taps we examined were either not working or in poor condition. The retaining basins were often damaged and water flowed from the taps, carrying with it litter and what we imagined were various pathogens. Near the taps, the city had installed flush toilets. Most of the toilets had been vandalized, others had locks on them for various families. We didn't see anyone using them, but were told that many people going to the bush to relieve themselves.



5



6

“Take home” observations from the tour:

1. **MWP should not be seen only as a set of problems;** our project can build on a network of community assets: churches, crèches, self help organization, such as the soup kitchen.
2. **The role of shebeens is contested** ----the sociability of shebeens and the invigorating effects of alcohol, music and pool tables can help people make it through the week, but the shebeen, for some of our co-researchers and are places where alcohol fueled resentments and jealousies spill out into violence and further destabilize MWP.
3. **Taps and toilets in MWP are in dire need of improvement:** they need repair, are poorly maintained, and are the source of much frustration.
4. **Settlement patterns have an organic feel.** While we can't yet deduce a logic to the settlement pattern in MWP, the place feels lively and organic, with shacks nestled into the dunes and connected by winding paths. People acknowledge each other in loud confident voices.

c) Photo discussion

After returning from the tour each group transferred the images taken by the co-researchers to a laptop. One student team worked with all the co-researchers to select a handful of photographs for the presentation. We had access to a digital projector and projected the images, one by one, onto a wall. Each co-researcher came to the front of the community hall, and stood before us to talk about the images they had selected.

“Take home” observations from the presentation:

- **Camera sharing worked:** Putting the cameras into the hands of the co-researchers shifted power relations, encouraged collaboration and enabled the co-researchers to convey their views of MWP.
- **Our co-researchers' photos represented "problems" that were most immediately felt in their lives:** poor sanitation, lack of electricity in some sections of MWP, flooding, sand laden winds entering their shacks.
- **The co-researchers represented MWP's varied assets:** lay churches, crèches, spaza shops, shebeens, hairdressers and other businesses as well as a network of soup kitchens that provides food across MWP. In the discussion, the co-researchers warmed to the task and told us about how residents offer dance schools to preserve traditional Xhosa dances.
- **Discrepancies about setting emerged in discussion.** When some of us described how attractive we found the MWP setting, with mountains in the background and the blue green waters of False bay close by, the co-researchers discounted this view and pointed to the more immediate problems evident in the photographs.

Reflection and Learning

When first entering Monwabisi Park, we did not know what to expect. When we were dropped off, we were surprised to find that there was nothing significant to show our path to our meeting space, the Indlovu Centre. We were surprised also by a man who approached us to give us all hugs, as well as several others who greeted us. The manner in which we shook hands was pleasant, but different from the norm in the United States. Finally, we made it to the centre, which was significantly different from the surrounding buildings. This commenced our first day in the settlement.

After discussing our project, we went out for a tour with several co-researchers. Everyone seemed so upbeat yet they live in such a disadvantaged place that we were unsure of whether to feel bad for their living situations or envious of their outlook on life. When we first toured C-section with the co-researchers, they told us about the wonderful, vibrant community that lives in this different environment. We got the feeling that MWP was not worse than any other area of the world, it is just different. Just because someone's home doesn't have running water or a pretty exterior doesn't make it any less of a home.

But then every once in a while, something will happen that reminds us why we came to Monwabisi Park. The co-researchers will say that one of the people you just talked to was a victim of rape or is HIV positive. They will show a picture of a child out of whose mouth they had just removed a battery. You will see a young child walking around in bare feet over broken glass and unidentifiable debris. And most importantly, someone will come up to you and ask you for help. That is the reason that we are here... not because we think that we should be doing something to help these people, but because they are in a situation where they want to improve their community but do not have the resources to do so.

The hardest part of being in the settlement is the feeling of expectation. We know that many people see us as being able to bring change to MWP that just isn't possible at the speed which they expect it to be delivered. We are still learning how to interact with people and finding out what shape our project will take, but when we talk to someone there is a feeling of expectation that we do not know if we can meet.

When we went to the grocery store in Green Point on Monday, some of our team ran into a man named Markese, who was working at the pizza place down the road. He said he thought he saw us earlier in the day and asked if we had been in his township. We asked him where he lived and he said he lived in Khayelitsha and had seen us. It was interesting to see someone outside of the MWP working. It made us

feel uncomfortable, however, because he saw that we were living a more affluent lifestyle while he was living in a shack. It made us feel uncomfortable seeing the people of MWP in a different environment. We felt judged in some way, even though Markese seemed very friendly and excited to see us.

Notes for the next scene:

- The co-researcher presentations were very helpful as a first step, but how can we continue to create settings for collective reflection as we learn more about MWP and document current conditions?
- By what means can we seek out diverse perspectives in MWP---beyond that of our co-researchers--- and get people excited about the prospect of working with us? What can we offer them?
- How should we share our findings and impressions with MWP residents---written reports, oral presentations, performances, songs? How can we tap into the strong and vibrant social performance we see all around us?