SISTER COMMUNITY PROJECT

LINKING COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE UNITED STATES: WHAT YOU CAN DO

PROJECT SUMMARY
The U.S. - South Africa Sister Community Project is a pioneering project designed to link black communities in South Africa threatened with removal or other catastrophic government action with communities in the United States. The purpose is to deter the Pretoria government from its removal plans, to help vibrant black communities survive, and to provide a vehicle for anti-apartheid organizing in the United States. The project signifies a new anti-apartheid strategy, and allows local communities to go beyond disinvestment and to invest "human capital" in South Africa. The immediate goal is to link 12 U.S. and South African communities. This document outlines how U.S. communities can participate in the project.

PROJECT HISTORY
The project emerged as a result of a two year long dialogue between anti-apartheid organizations in South Africa and concerned individuals in the United States.

The project has received the support of major anti-apartheid organizations in South Africa, including the United Democratic Front, the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa, and the Black Sash.

Funding has so far been received from the Arca Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Bridgeworks Charitable Foundation, the Boehm Foundation, the Pacific Peace Fund, the Skaggs Foundation, and National Community Funds. The sponsoring organization for the project is Humanitas, a non-profit, tax-exempt organization based in Palo Alto, California.

In January and February 1988, Berkeley, California and St. Paul, Minnesota were the first two cities to announce their "sister community" ties to threatened South African communities, and discussions are now in progress with other communities in the United States and South Africa.

The term "sister community" has been used because threatened communities in South Africa do not resemble cities in the conventional sense. Rather, they range in size from 500 to 15000 people on average. Some are rural communities. Others are townships. Yet others are informal settlements, or even entire regions faced with incorporation into South African "homelands". On the U.S. side, the intention is for city governments to establish formal links with South African communities and also to involve communities of people concerned about human rights in South Africa and around the world.
RATIONALE

According to the authoritative Surplus People Project, over the past thirty years approximately 3 1/2 million black South Africans have been forcibly moved as part of the government's efforts to push 80 percent of South Africa's population onto only 13 percent of the land. This constitutes over 10 percent of South Africa's population and marks one of the most extensive forced movements of people anywhere in the world. Hundreds of communities have been destroyed. In many cases, people have been moved onto land with no means of subsistence, or far from centers of employment. Once vibrant communities have been reduced to eking out marginal existences, contending with malnutrition, high infant mortality, family breakup, and unemployment. In some communities, residents actually owned the land -- land acquired before 1913 when it became illegal for blacks to own land in South Africa. That land has now been summarily expropriated by Pretoria. There is an urgent need for a vigorous international response to support the non-violent efforts of threatened communities to resist removal and to place the issue in the international spotlight.

After two years of extraordinary activity, the anti-apartheid movement in the United States is seeking ways to regain momentum. Disinvestment efforts have slowed almost to a standstill. Yet many Americans are still eager to contribute to the struggle for democracy and human rights in South Africa. The project presents a way for Americans to make such a contribution by allowing them to establish direct links with victims of apartheid. It also is a vehicle to educate large numbers of Americans about the South African conflict by personalizing the conflict.

The need for direct links with South African communities has become even more crucial because Pretoria's press crackdown has effectively removed South Africa from the arena of public debate in the United States. Our hope is that an entire network of communities in the United States will emerge that are directly linked with progressive black communities in South Africa.

INVOLVING YOUR COMMUNITY

If you think your community would be interested in participating in the project, you should contact our project staff person in San Francisco. We will, through our staff person in South Africa, attempt to find an appropriate South African community to link your community with.

In order to participate, your community must commit itself to making a public issue of the plight of your sister community. This is the most important aspect of this project, in that survival of the community is paramount. Should the community be removed, any other activities on your part will be rendered superfluous.

Once a community has been identified, the mayor of your community should extend an invitation to the South African community to establish a sister community link. Assuming representatives of the community in South Africa are agreeable to such a link, your first effort will be to launch a public awareness campaign on behalf of your sister community. It is important that this effort be a grassroots one, going beyond passage of a resolution by the city council, it should involve churches, synagogues and other religious organizations, community and human rights groups, and anti-apartheid groups in your community.
A public awareness and education campaign could consist of the following steps:

1. Passage of a resolution announcing the sister community linkage by your mayor and city council. To maximize the impact, the mayor of your community could host a press conference, and where appropriate, arrange a live phone hook up with representatives of the South African community. If possible, you should have photographs from the South African community on display, along with supporting materials documenting the extent of forced removals in South Africa.

2. Launch a telegram or letter writing campaign to the South African Embassy in Washington D.C. The current South African ambassador to the U.S. is Dr. Piet Koornhof, who at one time was Minister of Cooperation and Development, and headed the department responsible for forced removals in South Africa. The campaign could be mounted through a series of actions: collecting letters outside supermarkets and other public places on a specified day; talking at churches and synagogues, especially in black churches; and sponsoring house meetings to generate support for the community.

3. Request your representatives in Washington D.C. to raise the plight of the threatened community in Congress, and with the State Department and the South African Embassy.

4. File a complaint with the United Nations on behalf of the South African community, and seeking support from the U.S. representative to the United Nations. This should be designed to generate maximum media publicity.

5. Hold a church service in support of your sister community. Try to arrange a live telephone hook up during the service with a minister in your sister community in South Africa, or to play a taped message from clergy there.

6. Organize a symposium on forced removals in South Africa, in conjunction with universities or colleges in your area.

7. Generate local media publicity about the sister community in South Africa. (We will provide press packages you can adapt for dissemination to local media outlets.)

8. Produce a videotape on your sister community that can be used as an educational tool in schools, colleges, churches, etc.

9. Take out full-page ads in local papers to publicize the sister-community link, generate letters to the South African government, and consider the possibility of raising funds for organizing efforts in your community or for your sister community in South Africa.
There are other projects that could be undertaken:

1. Set up exchanges between school children in your community and in South Africa. School children could write letters to their counterparts in South Africa. They could raise money, or better still, send school supplies like paper, pencils, and textbooks, all of which are in short supply in South Africa.

2. Raise funds for specific, well-defined projects in South Africa, e.g. installation of an electric generator, providing medical supplies, or printing of a history of the community. This would have to be initiated in close consultation with community representatives in South Africa. However, direct aid is not the major goal of this project.

3. Provide technical assistance on agricultural schemes, low cost housing, alternative energy, and so on. If there are interested colleges and universities in your area, technical assistance could be arranged through these sources. Students could take on specific projects as class assignments.

4. Arrange visits by community representatives from South Africa to your community, and of representatives from your community to South Africa. This may not be possible to accomplish, because of the difficulties of getting visas to South Africa, and of black South Africans getting passports to travel abroad. In addition, the money spent on getting to and from South Africa -- close to $2,000 in airfare alone -- may be better spent on projects in the community itself or on organizing efforts in your community.

5. Because this project is designed to allow concerned citizens in the United State to establish direct links with South Africans resisting apartheid, other projects and ideas will emerge in exchanges between the two communities tailored to the specific needs of the South African community.

6. To increase the effectiveness of your organizing efforts, we urge you to seek funding for a local organizer from community foundations in your area. (We will provide sample proposals that you can adapt to your local needs.)

CONCLUSION

The project presents a new approach to anti-apartheid organizing. We believe it can be effective in mobilizing concerned individuals in local communities throughout the United States, putting pressure on the South African government to put a halt to forced removals, and focus attention on the entire system of apartheid. We welcome your interest and involvement.