

Towards Addressing the Root
Causes of Social Tensions:

EVALUATING CIVIL SOCIETY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE IN ALEXANDRA

by Luke Sinwell and Neo Podi



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*Luke Sinwell, University of Johannesburg, Centre for Sociological Research and
Neo Podi, University of Johannesburg, Centre for Sociological Research*

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Alexandra, a poverty-stricken township 20 kilometres to the north-east of Johannesburg, was the first to witness the wave of violence against foreign nationals, which later spread to other townships across the country in May 2008. Drawing from 19 in-depth interviews with a wide range of leaders and other residents in Alexandra, this article seeks to understand the strengths and weaknesses of local government and civil society responses to the xenophobic violence in Alexandra. Paying particular attention to the ways in which local government and civil society responded to the attacks, this article challenges recent analyses which suggest that government is necessarily better placed to counteract xenophobic attitudes and to prevent these attitudes from becoming violent. It then argued that while local government and civil society have been relatively effective in the short-term to counteract the violence, in the medium-term their efforts to instill a culture of tolerance have only been partially successful, as xenophobic attitudes clearly remain strong in Alexandra. The findings also suggest that any plan to develop tolerance of foreigners must take place alongside a programme that addresses the crisis of poverty, housing and unemployment. Placing hope in the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP), leaders have failed to undertake an immediate programme to alleviate the social conditions such as poverty and unemployment that leaders themselves declare make Alexandra ripe for violence.

Methodology

Drawing from 19 in-depth interviews with perpetrators, “xenophobic” residents who empathise with the attackers and key leaders of Alexandra including the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP), the SACP, SANCO, the IFP, the CPF, the ANC, the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), the Alexandra Development Forum (ADF), the Alexandra Land and Property Owners Association (ALPOA) and others, this article seeks to understand the strengths and limitations of local government and civil society responses to the xenophobic violence in Alexandra.

Problems & recommendations

The findings presented suggest that a unified response by civil society and local government, as well as the way in which leaders engage with communities and hold meetings, can be critical factors which determine whether or not leaders are able to suppress xenophobic attitudes or violence – at least in the short run.

Make use of local government and civil society organisations in order to develop short and medium-term plans to build tolerance towards foreign nationals.

In times of violence, make use of church, sport and youth leaders to spread peaceful messages, since these leaders may seem less partisan to the public than political organisations.

Use smaller meetings to address the public in times of violence, as opposed to one large meeting that addresses all residents and therefore has greater potential to become uncontrolled.

The findings presented challenge recent analyses which suggest that government is necessarily better placed than civil society to counteract xenophobic attitudes and to prevent these attitudes from becoming violent.

Any plan to develop tolerance of foreigners must take place alongside a programme that addresses the crisis of poverty, housing and unemployment. Placing hope on the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP) leaders to undertake an immediate programme to alleviate the social conditions such as poverty and unemployment that leaders themselves declare make Alexandra ripe for violence, has failed.

Develop an immediate plan to alleviate poverty and unemployment in Alexandra.

On 11 May 2008, Alexandra became a war site against foreign nationals. Over the next three days, at least 60 people were injured, two people killed, including one South African, and several hundred forcibly evicted from their homes by groups of armed young men. The violence began in a primarily Zulu-speaking area called Reconstruction Area (RCA)¹ which is dominated by Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The area experienced an intense wave of violence in the 1990s. Many residents suspected the IFP of orchestrating the violence, but this was never verified. In fact, one of the leaders of the IFP, Nhlanhla Msimang, actually played a key role over the next weeks preaching to the residents of Alexandra that all forms of violence are unacceptable. On the first day, the violence spread from RCA to other informal areas in the township where the perpetrators knew many foreigners resided. The group of 200-300 residents grew larger as it passed from one side of the township in the late evening to the other, terrifying some residents, and enticing others to join them in their battle against “kwerekwere” (a derogatory term

¹ The area is popularly called Beirut, but local IFP leaders prefer the title RCA and detest the name Beirut, since the latter reflects the violence that displaced people to the area, rather than the notion that it is being reconstructed in response to a period of violence.

for a foreigner). The group first reached Marlboro, which consists of about 20 abandoned factories where residents have resided for over a decade in the dozens of shacks that they have erected inside each of them. The mob then headed to S'swetla, an informal settlement along the Jukskei River in Alexandra, which has no running water or electricity. In the days that followed, smaller groups of armed men attempted to attack the shack transit camps² in Alexandra, including Silvertown, but the leaders assisted foreigners and, in at least two instances, negotiated with the attackers so that they would not enter the camps. The only other area, besides Beirut, in which residents were evicted or their belongings looted in this spate of violence, was the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses in extension 7 on 13 May. This occurred directly after a failed attempt by the local government and the tri-partite alliance to suppress the violence.

Drawing from 19 in-depth interviews with perpetrators, "xenophobic" residents who empathise with the attackers and key leaders of Alexandra including the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP), the SACP, SANCO, the IFP, the CPF, the ANC, the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), the Alexandra Development Forum (ADF), the Alexandra Land and Property Owners Association (ALPOA), and others, this article seeks to understand the strengths and weaknesses of local government and civil society responses to the xenophobic violence in Alexandra. In so doing, it contributes to some of the available literature on the xenophobic attacks in Alexandra in 2008, in particular Nieftagodien's "Xenophobia in Alex"³, which was written as a quick response to the violence, and Misago et al⁴ and Misago's⁵ findings and policy recommendations which are based primarily on in-depth interviews undertaken by researchers in several areas, including Alexandra, months after the attacks.

The findings presented problematise and also challenge some recent recommendations drawn by Misago⁶ and Misago et al⁷. Among others, these authors investigated the immediate factors/causes which led to the xenophobic violence. One of their main findings was that, "the micro-politics of local communities, particularly the lack of institutional structures and trusted leadership in the affected areas"⁸ were the fundamental causes of the violence in the research areas under investigation.

² Transit camps are those shack areas designed for residents who have been removed by the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP) for "development" purposes, and who are waiting (indefinitely in transit) for RDP houses.

³ Nieftagodien, N. (2008). *Xenophobia in Alexandra*. In: (eds) Hassim, S, Kupe, T., Worby, E. *Go Home or Die Here: Violence, Xenophobia and the Reinvention of Difference in South Africa*. Wits University Press: Johannesburg.

⁴ Misago, J., Landau, L., Monson, T. (2009). *Towards Tolerance, Law, and Dignity: Addressing Violence against Foreign Nationals in South Africa*. International Organisation for Migration, February.

⁵ Misago, J. (2009). *Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: Reflections on Causal Factors and Implications*. Policy Studies Bulletin at CPS, Volume 10 (3): 3-8.

⁶ Ibid.: 4.

⁷ Ibid.: 5.

⁸ Ibid.: 5.

Misago argues that: ...one worrying proposed solution is to empower community leadership structures (street committees and others) to promote reintegration and tolerance. While an effective community leadership will definitely play a crucial role in any way forward, there is a danger that 'unscreened' strengthening may empower unscrupulous leaders (some of who are responsible for the violence) to do more harm. There is a need to identify reliable community leaders to work with, and for a strong local government that constantly provides guidance and monitoring.⁹

This recommendation is problematic since it is based on the assumption that government itself does not exhibit xenophobic attitudes and is necessarily better placed to counteract violence. The case studies below reveal a situation in which three community leaders in informal settlements assisted foreigners in avoiding the violence, and in at least two instances negotiated with the attackers to avoid them inflicting violence onto foreigners. The findings also illustrate a failed attempt by local government and the tri-partite alliance to counteract the violence, and this also suggests that local government may not be better placed to counteract violence than civil society. In fact, the findings presented by Misago¹⁰ also reflect that the local government has been unable to effectively communicate and engage with communities. Indeed, there is no *a priori* reason to assume that local government is best placed to monitor xenophobic sentiments or to prevent them from turning violent.

However, the findings presented do suggest that

a unified response by civil society and local government, as well as the way in which leaders engage with communities and hold meetings, can be critical factors which determine whether or not leaders are able to suppress xenophobic attitudes or violence – at least in the short run.

After a failed attempt by local government and the tri-partite alliance to quell the violence, leaders of local government and civil society united and made the decision to have smaller and more decentralised meetings to engage with the community in a controlled manner. There is evidence which reveals that these meetings were far more successful than larger meetings with entire communities.

The article also takes issue with some of the conclusions drawn by Misago¹¹ about the role of poverty and service delivery in contributing to the violence. While they rightly point out that lack of service

⁹ Ibid.:5.

¹⁰ Ibid.:5.

¹¹ Misago, J. (2009). Xenophobic Violence in South Africa: Reflections on Causal Factors and Implications. Policy Studies Bulletin at CPS, Volume 10 (3): 3-8.

delivery or the condition of poverty in itself cannot be directly linked to violent behaviour (indeed, if this were the case, every unemployed or homeless person would resort to violence), they do not pay adequate attention to the way in which deteriorated living conditions contributed to the violence. He argues that “only a trusted, competent and committed leadership (from grassroots to high-level officialdom) can make a significant difference in terms of preventing social tensions from turning into xenophobic violence.”¹² By focusing primarily on the *immediate* causes of the xenophobic violence, however, Misago¹³ fails to adequately address the social tensions or root problems themselves, which make places like Alexandra more conducive to violence in the first place.

Previous attempts by the apartheid government to renew Alexandra had been done without consulting residents and failed to improve the lives of the majority, but the ANC government promised something very new. Despite the flagship Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP) undertaken in 2001 which was intended to be symbolic of the ANC's government's ability and capacity to deliver to the previously marginalised, the living conditions of the vast majority of residents have not improved. In fact, there is evidence that suggests that the ARP has been a great source of conflict among residents who vie for the ARP's limited housing and short-term employment opportunities. Today in Alexandra, 350 000 residents are packed into a 2km squared area, and the majority live in 74 000 shacks. In addition, 29% are unemployed, and 20% earn less than R1000 per month. Nieftagodien rightly points out that, “the poor people of Alexandra daily eke out an existence in the insalubrious warrens of congested squatter camps and dilapidated prison-like hostels.”¹⁴ While he has urged readers that, “any attempt to understand this conflict should be located in the politics of failed development and delivery” (ibid), he has not drawn from in-depth empirical evidence after the attacks in order to substantiate this claim or to evaluate civil society responses in this light.

Drawing from leadership in Alexandra which was at the forefront of engaging xenophobic community sentiments which had the potential to wreak further bloodshed onto the already psychologically and physically wounded township, the findings suggest that any plan to develop tolerance of foreigners must take place alongside a programme that immediately addresses the crisis of poverty, housing and unemployment. While Alexandra may be relatively less impoverished than other areas affected by the violence, this does not undermine the fact that leaders themselves ascribe the causes of the violence to limited resources and poverty. Furthermore, just because these causes are not direct does not mean that they did not play the primary role. The article argues that while local government and civil society embarked on a relatively quick and unified path to suppress the violence in May (which had the potential to become far worse had it not been for this intervention), neither civil society nor local government has developed or articulated a concrete plan to alleviate the social tensions (poverty and unemployment) which created ripe conditions for the outbreak of violence. While the Alexandra Vukuzenzele Crisis Committee (AVCC), an APF affiliate, initially appeared to hold the possibility of engaging with these root causes, the AVCC and other organisations in Alexandra bought into the ARP's framework and therefore did not offer any concrete alternative.

¹² Ibid.:5.

¹³ Ibid.:5.

¹⁴ Nieftagodien, N. (2008). Xenophobia in Alexandra. In: (eds) Hassim, S, Kupe, T., Worby, E. *Go Home or Die Here: Violence, Xenophobia and the Reinvention of Difference in South Africa*. Wits University Press: Johannesburg.

Leadership quells violence in the informal areas

After looting the RCA area, the group headed to Marlboro, S'swetla, and eventually also to Silvertown, (a transit camp) to attack foreigners and to loot their homes. They advanced from Marlboro to S'swetla. Themba Sithole, who joined the attackers, recalled that,

"we went to places where there are lots of dirty shacks because that is where they [foreign nationals] stay!"

But the organised leadership in these areas was able to assist in warding off the attackers. Informal settlements, including factories that have been occupied are, without a doubt, among the poorest and most densely populated areas in Alexandria. None have running water in their homes and several families in each of these areas share a single toilet, increasing the likelihood of spreading disease. Many of the residents had occupied the abandoned Marlboro factories for more than 10 years when they began paying rent of R300-R500 per month. They built shacks within the factories and families of three to six share a single room. The residents have "illegally" connected their electricity supply as the government recognises Marlboro only as a commercial area, and therefore does not supply electricity to residents. The government and private companies have been threatening to evict the residents since 2005, and they have formed an organisation called the Concerned Warehouse Residents (CWR) primarily to prevent themselves from being forcibly evicted. Charles Gininda, a leader of one of the abandoned factories in Marlboro recalls that: "We had a group of people who came here and they were carrying sjamboks and those things and they entered into three buildings... they just asked who are the foreigners and most of them were already in the police station so they only found South African citizens in those buildings"

The leaders of Marlboro held a mass meeting the following day to urge foreigners to go to the police stations for their own safety. Charles explains that: "We were not supporting the xenophobic attack because we believe that we are all humans and we have the right to live wherever we want to... We can't go around accusing people of being illegal in the country because if the government sees them in the country and they are not doing anything about it, it means they are rightfully in the country." After about three days, most of the foreigners headed back to their accommodation in the factories.

S'swetla is a squatter camp with a population of close to 15 000, and shacks are nearly piled up on top of each other. This has created a very unhealthy, unsafe and highly-congested environment in which people live. According to the ARP Benchmark Survey compiled by CASE, only 49% of residents in S'swetla felt that the ARP had positively impacted on their lives¹⁵ and 67% felt unsafe.¹⁶ The survey also concluded that by 2005, residents of S'swetla were not more satisfied than they were in 2001

¹⁵ C.A.S.E. (2005). Alex Benchmark Survey: Alexandria Renewal Project. Unpublished Document.

¹⁶ Ibid.:15.

prior to the ARP¹⁷. Residents reflect other concerns including the fact that they have been living without any electricity since the end of 2007. Ali Rasetelo complains that in S'wetla: "Even now, it's dark. There's a lot of crime. I just heard last weekend, they have raped and killed one lady... There is no lights even in the houses. There is no electricity at all. None (ibid)." The mob said, "they want to take our kwerekwere"¹⁸, but the leaders of S'wetla refused, and some of them even assisted foreigners in bringing back their stolen goods.

In the Silvertown Transit Camp, groups of perpetrators attempted to evict and loot the belongings of foreigners over a period of several days after the initial attacks. Ellen Chauke, a pensioner who receives R800 a month, which she says is "barely enough to feed myself", is one of the leaders of Silvertown who assisted in mobilising to stop mobs from entering the transit camp. She explains that "the attackers...wanted us to help them with the attacks", but they refused. Instead, "We kept our members inside the yard because there were people surrounding the area so we... locked the gates".

The attackers, however, were persistent. According to Ellen, one of the security guards around the transit camp was "threatening to call his brothers to come and attack people inside the camps". But the residents of Silvertown called a meeting of about 200 people. Ellen explains that at this meeting:

"We called him [the security guard] to order and told him that if anything happens to these people, we would know he brought the attackers. He understood what we told him. I told him that he is creating a bad name for Zulu-speaking people... he didn't even call his brothers from the hostels."

For the next month, the residents of Silvertown,

"were very alert and we even asked some community members to assist the guard at night."

About 6-10 community members assisted each night of the week and were on guard for a month after the attacks. Ellen explains the strategy that was used, "the guards were surrounding the whole area to make sure that attackers don't attack from unguarded sides". The residents held mass meetings each week where they preached that, "no one must be attacked... this was also done for those who were in the yard to let them know that we forbid any mobs from coming into the yard". Leaders of Silvertown even went on Alex radio to declare that, "nobody must attack people because they are all human beings."

¹⁷ Ibid.:15.

¹⁸ Nieftagodien, N. (2008). Xenophobia in Alexandra. In: (eds) Hassim, S, Kupe, T., Worby, E. *Go Home or Die Here: Violence, Xenophobia and the Reinvention of Difference in South Africa*. Wits University Press: Johannesburg.

The failure of a mass meeting: underestimating the scale of violence

The leaders of the informal areas were able to convince residents that xenophobic violence was not the answer, and thereby to prevent foreigners from being attacked. On a larger scale, however, at least initially, government leadership was far less successful at suppressing the violence. The day after the outbreak of violence, the community leaders in Alexandria, including the ANC, IFP, ADF, SANCO, SACP and others, held an emergency meeting to discuss how to deal with the crisis. On Monday, they decided to have a meeting the following night at AlexSancopane, a community centre in the centre of Alexandria. A Community Liaison Officer (CLO) for the ARP remembers thinking at the time that, “the violence was a small thing and it would be easily controlled”, but the leaders were gravely mistaken.

Thousands of residents overflowed the community centre that evening, and when the leaders who had called the meeting stood up, residents began to blame them for organising the violence. But, the leaders responded that they were equally surprised by it. According to Linda Memela, ANC chairperson and CPF leader in Alexandria, the intention of the leaders was to encourage the community of Alexandria “to join us in the fight against xenophobic violence in the community”. But, the meeting was uncontrollable and significant segments of the crowd exhibited xenophobic attitudes as they shouted, “we are tired of these people (foreign nationals), they must go!” When the MEC for housing and the ANC representatives arose to speak, they were booed by the crowd. At the time, the IFP was believed to have organised the attacks and when the IFP leaders took centre stage, “the crowd was clapping and cheering”. Nhlanhla Msimang, the leader of the IFP explains that:

“The crowd was cheering for me because they were under the impression that I would support them. When I stood up to address the crowd, I told them that I don’t support their behaviour because it is wrong.” “To some extent”, Linda pointed out, “the community was disappointed because there was no leader taking their side”. The leaders soon realised that the meeting was not going to be a success. Reggie Vilakazi, a CPF and SANCO leader, remembers that: “the meeting was disrupted and people came out of that meeting before it was finished... The tensions were very high and negative forces had given people the wrong impression that if they fight the foreigners, their troubles will go away, also that their poverty and shortage of houses will be solved.”

Friedah Dlamini, who attended the meeting claims that government officials actually made matters worse “because they kept on saying that they are going to punish the people responsible... They defended themselves and when people asked those questions about houses, they didn’t respond.” Residents left the meeting and called “for foreigners to come out from wherever they are and they are going to chase them out of their shacks.” They then launched attacks on several parts of Alexandria, including the RDP houses in extension 7 which was the only other place in Alexandria besides the RCA where people were evicted during the violence in May. Thirty six people were evicted, only 9 of which were foreigners. Sammy Mamabulo pointed out that, “people were angry about RDP houses and that is why I say, the violence was not about foreigners but about service delivery. Many

people vandalised RDP houses and others invaded them without permission.” According to one resident, “When they attacked RDP houses, they were telling people that those guys were taking their houses...The problem is that these guys [foreigners] get houses here and the people from Alexandra don’t get houses”

A unified response by Alexandra’s leaders

In March 1991, a civil war between the IFP and the ANC threatened to rip apart the entire social fabric of Alexandra. By the 6th of April 1991, 106 people had been killed since the violence began a month earlier¹⁹ and throughout 1992 the violence continued to permeate the lives of Alexandra’s residents to the point that Alexandra was deemed an unrest area on various occasions. In March 1992, the community engaged in sustained action to “secure a lasting peace in the township.”²⁰ The National Peace Accord (NPA) was the most significant of these engagements and its objectives were not political, but were aimed at uniting the community to bring peace in Alexandra. By July 1993, it was clear that these efforts were largely successful, as only six people were recorded killed since the beginning of that year. Reflecting on the period of violence in Alexandra between 1990-1992, Mayekiso stated that “more than two hundred people lost their lives, thousands were injured, and thousands more were displaced by invasion of their homes.”²¹

In part to ensure that there would not be a repeat of this violence, perhaps the greatest contribution to suppressing the violence in May 2008 in Alexandra was the strong and unified response by the leaders including SANCO, the ADF, the CPF, and in particular the ANC and the IFP. The day after the failed mass meeting at Alexsancopano, two days after the initial attack,

the leaders decided to undertake a new strategy. They met in groups to address smaller segments of the community and attempted to instill collective responsibility for the attacks, and to denounce all forms of violence.

Phumzile, general secretary of the ADF youth branch, explains the logic behind this. She points out that the meeting at Sancopane: “was quite chaotic and that is why we decided to decentralise the meetings because if you call everybody you will have the victims, community members who had nothing to do with the violence, and if you put them all in one room it’s going to be chaos. And that meeting [at Sancopane] did not finish on a good note and did not solve anything because I remember Mr. Catjalia who was part of the community safety programme, his voice was drained out by people who did not want to hear what he was saying and that is when we took the decision to call people in different wards.”

¹⁹ Bonner, P. and Nieftagodien, N. (2008). *Alexandra: A History*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University.

²⁰ Ibid.:19.

²¹ Mayekiso, M. (1996). *Township Politics: Civic Struggles for a New South Africa*. Monthly Review Press: New York.

The combined effort of known leaders in the area, including youths and even those representing sports organisations in each area, assisted ward councilors in addressing crowds of 200-300 people at a time in each ward. Phumzile adds that the church played a critical role at these meetings and in the churches:

Different churches formed a ministry or a forum and they took the issues into their own churches, preaching tolerance and also going into communities and assisting councillors in holding meetings because at certain times councillors would call meetings and people would undermine councillors. And if a priest is standing there then there is some element of respect and those are the measures that we started using.

Linda led one of the smaller ward meetings in ward 75. The issues that were raised in the meetings were mainly those related to housing, unemployment and crime. Linda claims that, "perpetrators planned the violence around those issues because they knew that people would respond". He says that, "we gave the community solutions on how to deal with the issues raised [without resorting to xenophobic violence]". Similarly to the NPA which was signed in 1993, the core political parties and civics in Alexandra were united in this strategy. Nhlanhla Msimang, leader of the IFP in Alexandra, is adamant that, "what contributed to stopping the violence so quickly was the unity amongst the leaders." "Even though we were oppositions," he explains, "when it came to addressing the crowd during meetings, we were speaking the same language".

SANCO also held branch meetings where they spoke with the community and condemned the violence, and the SAPS and the CPF played a critical role in quelling the violence as well. Critical interactions between the CPF and the police also assisted. Reggie, a leader of the CPF, explains that: "We would be in a meeting and one of our guys who is deployed in the safety and security would get a call to inform him that there are people gathering in some areas to go and attack foreigners." Furthermore, Reggie says that, "the issue of the police coming in and arresting people, that alone sent a message out there that violence of any form will not be tolerated, including xenophobia".

The combination of the response from the political and civic organisations as well as the CPF and the police, created the conditions in which it was very difficult for any leader to condone the violence. According to Linda: "perpetrators would not want to show their faces. I remember during that time of the violence there was an interview... on SABC3 when they interviewed a guy by the name of Sibusiso and even during the interview, that guy was hiding his face with his jacket and that is the only person who appeared as a leader but he never showed his face. Because there was no one willing to come forward and identify themselves as a leader of the violence, which indicated that the violence was unjustified cause and that is how we were able to convince people otherwise. The reason that the perpetrators are hiding their faces is because they know that what they're doing is not a just cause." He explains further that, "the perpetrators realised that they had no leader behind them and I think that is why the violence died down". Leaders in Alexandra point out that the violence, which became controlled after a week, would have been much worse had they not condemned the violence immediately."

NGO and other responses

Beyond the immediate responses to the violence above, other organisations in Alexandra have assisted the victims of violence or embarked on longer-term programmes to help instill tolerance towards foreign nationals. Women for Peace (WFP) assisted by volunteering their time by cooking and serving food to the victims at the Alex Police station before they were moved to the refugee camps. According to a spokesperson for WFP, Nkosi Khumalo, they were also involved with negotiations with community members, as part of the political organisations' and CPF attempt "to get a solution to the xenophobic violence".

The WFP was created in Alexandra in 1981 "under the objective of keeping peace, diversity, and empowering women". Referring to the WFP's objective of creating employment opportunities, Nkosi's states that: "If we empower people it will also be part of peacekeeping because people will have more confidence in themselves. If people have more confidence in themselves, they will not be jealous of a foreigner who has what they don't have."

ADAPT is another NGO in Alexandra which assisted in providing the victims of the attacks with food and clothes. They work to "create a society that is free from gender-based violence through the active participation of all members of the community"²² With a team of about 15 people, including volunteers, ADAPT counselled victims and "provided a platform where people could discuss their issues". They also worked with the South African Women Dialogue to organise a meeting with nearly 10 000 people, and did roadshows where they would stop at various places in Alexandra to talk about the xenophobic attacks.

Similarly to ADAPT, Lifeline assists with counselling around issues of HIV/Aids and violence. Iris Malibohom is the manager of Lifeline in Alexandra and assisted extensively to dish out food and conduct one on one and group sessions with the victims of the violence. After working hours, at the height of the violence in Alexandra, she worked from 18:00 to 22:00. She recalls that: "The police would take me home. I used to make jokes with the women and encourage them... and that is how our friendship formed. Although we couldn't change the situation, the people there appreciated what we did for them."

Another key effort came from the youth, particularly the ADF youth branch, who, after the initial meetings were held in each ward, held a number of further workshops to address the youth. They drew upon various group leaders, particularly those who were involved with sports to address large crowds of people in their areas, and also to discuss the issue on Alex FM and TV, including a programme called "Youth Expressions". According to Phumzile, they explained to youths, that "you find one guy who is fixing tires and he has various points where he works from, so you can't turn around and say to him he is taking your jobs because he saw an opportunity and he used it". These programmes were critical, since, as Phumzile succinctly pointed out: "It is easy to take young people and put them in a group and then feed them propaganda like "these people *makwerekwere* they come and take our jobs" and you use emotional language to arouse feelings. Some of these young

²² www.adapt.org.za

people do not necessarily have the capacity to distinguish right and wrong and they just follow and it's only later on when they will realise that what they were doing was wrong."

The most sustainable attempt to contain xenophobic violence in Alexandria was through the African Diaspora Forum. The objective of the forum was to teach people about diversity, and to learn about the various cultures of foreign nationals who reside in Alexandria. The Forum extended beyond Alexandria and brought together at least 18 representatives from different countries across Africa. Its main objectives were broad and they included: ...to work together to build one common voice on common issues, and a shared feeling of belonging to Africa...To facilitate and develop relationships, exchanges and mutual understanding between South Africans and non-South African residents in South Africa (in particular, but not exclusively, through the organisation of Pan African cultural events)...To make sure that xenophobic statements in public discourses and policies do not remain unchallenged; and to work with South African institutions (at the national, provincial and local level) to promote integration between all African communities, and to dismiss those discriminatory policies that fuel xenophobia.²³ A traditional fair was planned for late 2008 to share cultural differences and foods, but it was not successful. The forum collapsed due to the death of a member of the CPF who helped initiate the event. Others claim that it did not get off the ground due to the fact that the leaders of the forum did not consult the community properly.

²³ African Diaspora Forum Workplan 2008: I.

Towards the root causes of the violence

“Alexandra was a more conducive area for this [xenophobic violence] to happen because it consisted of poor people who are unemployed and living in poverty. So they [perpetrators] used that environment to mobilise people, and that is why issues that were raised related to that environment, like housing issues, poverty, crime, and unemployment. Perpetrators planned the violence around those issues, because they knew that people would respond. That is why xenophobic violence did not spread to suburbs, because people in the suburbs are not faced with similar problems.”²⁴

“It’s better than it was before [the violence in May 2008] because there are campaigns done just to make the community aware of the dos and don’ts...if you can teach our children or our brothers to

²⁴ Linda Memela, ANC, Civic, and CPF leader in Alexandra township, instrumental in quelling the attacks in May 2008.

make friends with those people [foreign nationals] I think a lot of things will change, but it's hard because those guys are also taking what is ours and this is where the war started. To be honest, people are tired of foreigners because when they come here they take our bread. People are not working, people are not employed."²⁵

The responses by local government and civil society in Alexandria, while absolutely critical on their own terms, did not address the underlying conditions which various leaders in Alexandria, who were directly involved in interacting with and educating residents on issues of xenophobia and violence, identified as the root causes. The first quote above suggests that

*key leaders, both civic and government, are aware that **the violence is much more than about the hatred or fear of foreigners, but also about poverty, lack of jobs, housing and crime.***

The second quote perhaps reveals, however, that while the responses in Alexandria helped conscientise people and, at least momentarily, made them more tolerant of foreigners, the attitudes in Alexandria have not changed in any substantive way. Instilling tolerance alone has not been successful, and residents of Alexandria still vie for limited access to resources. While one could argue that the educational programmes to instill tolerance towards foreigners may not have been thorough enough, the fact is that it is an unemployed woman living in a shack, not the middle-class businesswoman living in a suburb, who claims (more than a year after the initial attacks) that "I am going to kill someone for an [RDP] house" and further that, "Right now these people [foreigners] are scattered and if we try to do business in our own country its them [who have the business]". Indeed, she apparently blames foreigners for her own living conditions when she resolves that, "we are struggling to put money together but they don't struggle".

From the ANC, the IFP, SANCO, the ADF Youth Branch to the CPF and those who implement the ARP, the conclusions drawn by leaders regarding the root causes of the violence are fundamentally the same. After engaging the community about the xenophobic violence: "we realised that it is not necessarily hate against our fellow Africans, but just a scramble for limited resources... It is just fear of us being unskilled and not having the necessary resources to raise our kids and sustain our livelihoods"²⁶

When a project comes to Alexandria, it contributes to xenophobic sentiments as companies hire foreigners who are willing to work for less pay. Phumzile explains that, "us South Africans we have a culture of entitlement and if a project comes in Alex, we believe that we have the right to be hired at that particular company and we have the right to decide how much our salaries should be".

Linda Memela further understands that Alexandria, was far more conducive to violence than the suburbs because "it consists of unemployed people who are living in poverty". Sammy, a CLO for the ARP, believes that the violence started: "Not only because of non-South Africans but also because of the situation of Alexandria. Many people in Alexandria are desperate to live in better conditions and improve their lives. Alexandria is very congested... and they can see that the situation is not going

²⁵ Unemployed 32-year-old male resident of Alexandria township.

²⁶ Phumzile

to get better anytime soon.” He explains that, “there are limited resources and residents of Alexandra used foreigners as an excuse to take out their frustrations”. In fact, a key leader of SANCO and the CPF, though his interaction with the community at the time of the violence, understands that: “When people say “we [are] short houses because of foreigners, we [are] short jobs because of foreigners”, that is how they tend to see their poverty. Poverty and hunger are one of the areas that needs to be addressed as we address this issue of xenophobia”

The leaders suggest that instilling tolerance towards foreigners cannot stand on its own without a political project to immediately tackle the issues of development and failed service delivery in Alexandra. And yet, they have not responded with a development programme that holds the possibility of doing this any time soon. This is at least partially because leaders, both civic and local government from across the political spectrum, subscribe to the R1.3 billion ARP, which will end in 2010 without improving the lives of the majority of Alexandra’s residents who still live in abject poverty and the 350 000 residents remain densely packed into 74 000 shacks into a 2km squared area. Despite some increases in access to electricity and water, 29% of residents remain unemployed and one merely has to spend one day in Alexandra, talking with residents about development in their township, to uncover the ARP’s failures. Subscribing to the limited resource confines in which the ARP operates, the leaders of Alexandra contribute to a condition in which the poor battle for each other for limited resources – including from foreigners. Within this framework, the director of the ARP, Julian Baskin has suggested that development in Alexandra “will take a lifetime”, but residents appear unwilling to wait that long.²⁷

For example, the problem of housing remains unresolved. One resident reflects his individual frustration about the housing crisis in Alexandra: “Right now a lot of people in Alexandra are waiting for their houses but there are no houses because houses are occupied by foreigners so that makes them angry. It is sad because you were born here and raised here and you go to register for a house and they tell you to come after a couple of months but only to find that there is someone else staying in your house and when you go there, you find it’s a foreigner.”

The frustration regarding the distribution of houses in Alexandra is deep-seated, as the limited resources available excludes the majority of residents from accessing housing opportunities. While the ARP aimed to deliver 22 250 in seven years, by August 2007, the ARP website noted that there were only 2 727 completed housing units (including 2 000 in Bramfischerville), and more than 7 000 under construction.²⁸ Even if people were able to immediately occupy the other 7 000 houses that were under construction, the number of households receiving houses would be 9 727. While this seems substantial at first glance, it is less so given the fact that there is a housing backlog of approximately 40 000 in Alexandra.²⁹

²⁷ Sinwell, L. (2009). Participation as Popular Agency: The Limitations and Possibilities for Transforming Development in the Alexandra Renewal Project. Ph.D. Thesis, Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg.

²⁸ ARP website, www.alexandra.ac.za.

²⁹ C.A.S.E. (2005). Alex Benchmark Survey: Alexandra Renewal Project. Unpublished Document.

In this context,

a wide array of civic organisations in Alexandra have vied for housing opportunities – few, if any, will have their interests addressed by the ARP.

For example, The Alexandra Land and Property Owners Association (ALPOA) seeks to de-densify Alexandra so that their property values go up. However, these plans would undermine the interests of shack dwellers who want to remain in Alexandra. In fact, those living in shacks along the Iphuteng School cluster were part of the battle that resulted in their being provided with houses in Extension 7, just along the borders of Alexandra, instead of being removed to peripheral areas such as Diepsloot and Bramfisherville. There are also the residents who lived in S'swetla, an informal settlement in Alexandra until they were moved to a transit camp (a temporary government-designed shack settlement) so that a bridge could be built that would connect old and new Alexandra. These residents are now putting pressure on the government so that they can move into the houses that the ARP promised them. The Umpakathi Development Forum (UDF), the Marlboro Concerned Residents (MCR), and the Alexandra Concerned Residents (ACR) are the names of other civic organisations which have emerged to demand access to housing over the past several years.³⁰

The Alexandra Vukuzenzele Crisis Committee (AVCC), is another group comprising primarily of shacks dwellers, within Alexandra who have lived in atrocious conditions for years and are understandably desperate to escape to better living conditions. AVCC members typically live in shacks in overcrowded and rat-infested areas in the township. Many of them have lived in these atrocious conditions for years and are understandably desperate to escape to better living conditions. The AVCC also has 500 members who occupy the factory area called Ghanda Centre. These people live on the edge of survival and endure some of the worst living conditions in Alexandra. People's rooms are demarcated by corrugated iron sheets inside the factory, and most cannot be locked. These makeshift constructions are especially dangerous when it rains because of the damage caused to the amateur electrical supplies. They leak when it rains, thereby shorting the electricity, dampening people's clothes and blankets and creating conditions which are rife for the spread of illness. Furthermore, there are no bathroom facilities in the factory, and water can only be obtained from a few taps around the building. There are no toilets in the factory, which forces residents to use facilities in houses across the road, which is particularly dangerous at night for women. Many of these rooms hardly fit a small bed and are used by single people as well as entire families to eat, sleep, cook and bathe in.

While leaders of the AVCC tend to frame their demands in terms of corrupt government leaders, the AVCC organised a march, filmed by Danny Turkein, 2 weeks prior to the attacks which shows members of the AVCC vowing to evict Zimbabweans from the RDP houses in Extension 7. According to Dlamini, many people "thought that maybe we were involved in planning this whole xenophobic outbreak". Dlamini explains, however, that while members of the AVCC had exhibited xenophobic attitudes, their leaders had merely hoped to expose the corruption of councillors who, they claim sell

³⁰ Sinwell, L. (2009). Participation as Popular Agency: The Limitations and Possibilities for Transforming Development in the Alexandra Renewal Project. Ph.D. Thesis, Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg.

houses to both foreigners and South Africans. She reveals that intention of the march was to provide a platform to do research with councillors, ARP officials, metro-police and the residents of Alexandra: “We wanted to do it door-to-door because some of our South Africans are involved in corruption and it is not only foreigners... that was the aim of doing our march and to show the world that we can do better than the councillors and the housing department because they are not doing their job. People have been staying in Alexandra for 20 years, 30 years and staying in a shack and that shows that nothing has changed in Alex.”

After the outbreak, the APF became involved to get rid of these perceptions. The APF later intervened with a potentially more systemic way of dealing with the problem. Indeed, Nyanmjoh has cogently argued that,

“a narrow focus on legal and political citizenship has resulted in citizens without meaningful economic and cultural representation, who in turn have tended to scapegoat ethnic minorities and foreigners,

the “*makwerekwere*” in particular, instead of seeking justice from multinational capital and the elite few who benefit under global capitalism.”³¹ While the base of the APF in Alexandra, in particular the AVCC, has blamed corrupt local officials and even “*kwerekwere*” for their poor living conditions, the APF movement leadership outside of Alexandra, albeit momentarily, appeared to hold the possibility of redirecting people’s anger away from “*kwerekwere*” and towards the systemic enemy called capitalism. This highlights the sharp disjuncture between the base of the APF in Alexandra and its leadership outside of Alexandra which frames the demands of the poor in a very different manner. Partially responding to the AVCC’s xenophobic sentiments which were publicly revealed in “Hello, My Name is Alex,” the APF leadership submitted a press statement which declared, “don’t blame the poor from other countries for the poverty and joblessness in South Africa – blame, and act against those who are responsible”.

It is a tragedy that such attacks are happening in poor working class communities, where the poor are fighting the poor. But, there is a clear reason for this. Many in our communities are made to believe that unemployment is caused by foreigners who take jobs in the country – this is simply untrue. [This is] the result of the anti-poor, profit-seeking policies of the government and the behaviour of the capitalist class. Such massive and sustained unemployment is a structural problem of a capitalist system that cares little about the poor, wherever they are from/live.³²

The APF, with the Social Movements Indaba (SMI) organised an anti-xenophobia march on 24 May 2008. They handed over a memorandum to Premier Mbazima Shilowa and the Department of Housing and Home Affairs which called on the “South African government to acknowledge its role in the crisis, and to assume responsibility for providing solutions to the problems that speak to the root causes of the problems... the neo-liberal economic policy.”³³ While the xenophobic attacks

³¹ Nyanmjoh, F. (2006). *Insiders & Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa*. Dakar: Coderia Books.

³² APF Press Statement 13 May 2008.

³³ Desai, A. (2008). ‘Hell is Waiting for Them’: The Aftermath of the May 2008 Xenophobic Violence in South Africa. Unpublished Manuscript, University of Johannesburg.

could have provided a platform for the APF to work with the AVCC in Alexandria to embark on a radical programme, or at least articulated an alternative development plan to the government's ARP, the AVCC has not changed its development trajectory since the attacks, and a disjuncture between APF leadership and its base in Alexandria still remains. Like other civic organisations in Alexandria, the AVCC is trapped within the ARP's programme for development, and some of its members still articulate xenophobic attitudes. No organisation in Alexandria, even APF affiliates, has begun to address the question of how neoliberal policies restrict what is possible in places like Alexandria. They have not developed an alternative that is based on challenging the reality that Alexandria remains a sad slum, while its neighbour, Sandton, literally across the road, remains one of the wealthiest suburbs in Africa.

While local government and civil society have been relatively effective in the short-term to counteract the violence, in the medium-term their efforts to instill a culture of tolerance have only been partially successful as xenophobic attitudes clearly remain strong in Alexandria. Placing hope in the ARP, leaders have failed to undertake a long-term programme to alleviate the social conditions such as poverty and unemployment that leaders themselves declare make Alexandria ripe for violence.