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Towards meaningful social development in the covid-19 era: Strategies for capacity building in a gang-affected community in Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha), South Africa

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At the second think-tank session of the Helenvale Dialogues initiative held in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in May 2018, the main theme of the session focused on scenario planning for the community of Helenvale, regarded as one of the most fragile and volatile communities in Port Elizabeth. The author, as an invited member of the think-tank, engaged in group discussions with other attendees, with the aim of outlining three possible scenarios for where the Helenvale community could find itself by 2030. None of the scenarios predicted the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which began in 2020, and wreaked havoc across the country and globally. Within this context, this article highlights what the author considers to be three key focus areas for meaningful capacity building and social development in the community, in order to avoid the most negative scenario that could impact on Helenvale, particularly within the "new normal" of the Covid-19 environment. Attention is given particularly to the challenge of gangsterism and gang violence, one of the most serious issues affecting the community.

Key words: Social development, capacity building, Covid-19, gangsterism, gang violence, urban upgrading initiative, community coaching, negative subculture, indigenous knowledge, Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha).

INTRODUCTION

Gangs and gang violence, as well as the many challenges associated with them, affect various communities throughout the world. Indeed, scholars such as Hagedorn (2005:153) have asserted that gangs are significant worldwide phenomenon and they are directly linked to the effects of globalisation. Hence, both in the developed and developing world, gangs are not only found but have a marked impact on the communities in which they are found. Given the worldwide occurrence of gangs, South Africa is not excluded from the myriad countries where gangs present a challenge to established authority. Gangs are found in various communities throughout South Africa. However, media reports seem to suggest that particular regions and particular communities are the most adversely affected by gangs. For example, the Cape Flats communities of the Western Cape Province are regarded as the most prolific gang-affected areas in the country. In a report by Dolley (2017), the former Minister of Police, Fikile Mbalula, singled out the Hard Livings gang, which has 'strongholds in several Cape Town suburbs', as one of the most dangerous formations in Cape Town. In the same report,

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it was also mentioned that the Hard Livings group had been involved in a turf war with two other prominent gangs, namely the Sexy Boys and the 28s. Between April 2016 and March 2017, almost 100 gang-related murders had occurred in another Cape Flats suburb, Bishop Lavis, widely regarded as a stronghold of the 28s gang (Dolley, 2017).

In addition to the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape Province is also regarded as a region affected by gangs. In particular, the northern suburbs of Port Elizabeth in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality are the most affected by gangs. In a report by Sain (2018), a suspected gang-related shooting had occurred in the residential area of Shauderville. It was alleged that the three victims of the shooting were members of a gang known as the China Ah Shene, and they were in conflict with another group called the *Spotbouers* which is the group that the alleged shooter belonged to. A 2016 report revealed that, according to local police statistics, there had been a notable increase in gang-related shootings and violence between 2012 and 2016. Furthermore, police noted that the Gelvandale and Bethelsdorp precincts, where twenty-one known gangs were in operation, were leading the upward trend (Van Aardt, 2016).

Arguably the most notorious residential area in the northern suburbs of Port Elizabeth, and the one that many regard as the centre of gangsterism in the whole city, is Helenvale. Ironically, the community is also one that has been singled out for fast-tracked development initiatives. Despite these efforts, the community remains volatile and susceptible to ongoing gang violence. According to Capa (2018), development projects in Helenvale had ground to a halt for a period of at least six months (between December 2017 and June 2018) 'as workers fear for their safety because of the gang violence in the area.' As a consequence, the Mandela Bay Development Agency (MBDA) was struggling to meet project completion targets. As one strategy to overcome these challenges, the MBDA organised a think-tank or colloquium entitled the *Helenvale Dialogues*, in which invited academics, development practitioners, law enforcement officials and others were tasked with developing strategies to address the on-going development challenges in Helenvale (Helenvale Dialogues Series, 2018).

The issues discussed in this article are to be understood in relation to the above-mentioned context, as well as the social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The author, as one of the invited participants in the 2018 *Helenvale Dialogues* symposium, identified three key areas that are critical for meaningful capacity building and development in the community. This article seeks to elaborate on each of these key areas, and argues that all three of them would need to be addressed in order to improve the success of development initiatives in Helenvale, as well as contribute to building meaningful citizenship within the community. Building this capacity, it is argued, would be an invaluable resource to enabling community resilience in the wake of on-going social challenges, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The discussion is based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data was gathered mainly through the well-known anthropological method of participant-observation (PO). The author was invited to be a participant in the think-tank session, along with other stakeholders and community representatives. While participating in the discussions, the author was able to acquire significant information about the contemporary context of Helenvale, and the possible future scenarios that the community could face. Observation enabled the author to detach from the dialogues and conversations and reflect on the deliberations as an outsider. The information garnered from observation provided the complementary etic perspective, enabling the author to apply an analytical and critical lens to the scenario planning.

Secondary data, used primarily to complement the data gained from PO, and to provide much needed context to the issues under discussion, was gathered from relevant literature. This did not only included scholarly works, but also news articles and other online sources deemed relevant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following is a discussion of the author's reflections and analysis of the data gathered through participant-observation and study of the relevant literature.

Outline of the challenge of gangsterism and gang violence in Helenvale

While there has been little scholarly research on gangs in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth, compared to what has been done in the Western Cape, recent works by Petrus and Kinnes (2018) have outlined the nature and scope of the challenge of gangsterism in Port Elizabeth. Recent reports on gang violence in Port Elizabeth asserted that gang-related murders were intensifying, particularly in the communities of Helenvale and Gelvandale. In addition, the increase in gang violence appears to have been linked to the trial of a Dustlifes gang leader, who was facing triple murder charges in Port Eizabeth (Paulse, 2018). In the same report it was indicated that there were seventeen gangs operating in the northern areas, and that drugs remain instrumental in young children turning to gangsterism (Paulse, 2018). However, the context of gangsterism in the northern areas is more complex than only involving drugs as a push factor for youths to join gangs.

There were historical and contemporary factors that have significantly impacted on the extent of gangsterism in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth. These factors underpinned the context of gangsterism. One of these

factors was past and present coloured identity dynamics in the communities of the northern areas. The vast majority of the inhabitants of the northern areas are predominantly coloured people, and this has been the demographic of the northern areas since their creation under the Apartheid Group Areas legislation. According to an online information repository for the northern areas, the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth [are] a historically Coloured demarcated residential area (Napedia, 2018). The designation of the northern areas as a coloured group area was linked to another piece of Apartheid legislation, the Population Registration Act of 1950. This legislation segregated South African citizens into identifiable races. The 'coloured' category was created for persons of mixed race who could not be included in the white, African or Asian categories. Many scholars of coloured identity, including Du Pre (1992a, 1992b), Erasmus (2001), Adhikari (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008), and Petrus (2018) have put forward arguments that coloured identity was much more than merely race or ethnicity, and that the complexities surrounding the identity have endured from the colonial and apartheid eras, and into the post-apartheid context. For the purposes of the current discussion, it suffices to indicate that the consequences of the dynamics of coloured identity, which include perceptions of marginalisation and negative views of coloured heritage, have created a social context that not only creates but reinforces gangsterism.

A second factor underpinning the context of gangsterism in the northern areas concerns the negative and, in some cases, even destructive subcultures that prevail in communities such as Helenvale. Three of these identifiable subcultures include the gang subculture, the stone-throwing subculture among school-going youths, and the subculture of poverty. While each of these subcultures is discussed in more detail later, it is necessary to point out here that the symbiotic relationship between each of these subcultures creates an enabling environment for gangsterism. Some aspects of the gang subculture have already been alluded to earlier in the discussion. While marginality, or perceptions of marginality, is a key aspect of the gang subculture, there are also other aspects, such as stigmatisation and the notion that gangs occupy an ambivalent position in their communities. Despite gangs being perceived negatively by community residents, they have nevertheless been able to integrate themselves into the social organisation of their community, mainly by 'establishing themselves as critical institutions of provision'. In other words, particularly the larger, more established and more organised gangs have been able to fill the vacuum left by the failure of legitimate structures to provide services to marginalised communities such as Helenvale. In the contemporary context, where many government institutions are characterised by rampant corruption and non-delivery of key basic services, gangs have, to a certain extent, hijacked some of these functions.

This has placed them in an ambivalent position: on the one hand they are viewed as criminal organisations that threaten the safety and security of residents; yet, on the other, they fulfil a role that legitimate structures are unable to.

A third factor, one that emerged in 2020, is the impact of the lockdown restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the national lockdown was intended to prevent further infection of the pandemic, as well as maintain law and order in communities, ironically, in Helenvale, it had the opposite effect, particularly in relation to gang-related crime. According to Daniels (2021), the lockdown in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth (which includes Helenvale), had 'done nothing to ease the level of crime and violence the people of the northern areas endure. Rival gangs exchange gun fire on a daily basis while women and children suffer under spiralling gender-based crimes.' This conclusion was reached following a two-day visit by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) to the area. The Human Rights Commissioner, Chris Nissen, stated that 'Gangsterism is glorified in the area', and that gang culture was entrenched (Daniels, 2021). Despite lockdown regulations, gang violence and other crimes continued, thereby implying that the lockdown exacerbated ongoing socio-economic challenges in the community.

Efforts to address social, economic and safety issues in Helenvale: the Safety and Peace through Urban Upgrading (SPUU) initiative

In an effort to address the challenge of gangs in Helenvale, the municipal authorities and political leadership of Port Elizabeth proceeded to fast-track urban development in the northern areas, and prioritised Helenvale due to the extent of the problems created by the lack of development in the area. Consequently, in 2012 a joint initiative between the South African and German governments was launched, with the express aim of curbing crime and violence in Port Elizabeth, as well as introducing opportunities for development and urban upgrading in priority areas. Hence, the Safety and Peace through Urban Upgrading (SPUU) programme was implemented, and Helenvale was identified as the target community for the project (SPUU Inception Report and Masterplan, 2014).

The SPUU initiative was envisioned to follow a dual approach to development in Helenvale. This dual approach involved establishing 'soft' social programmes, including crime prevention, as well as the provision of 'hard' infrastructure, specifically safe public open spaces and pedestrian pathways (Helenvale Dialogue Series, 2018: 2). Five project components were identified, namely safety in public space, safety in schools, improved perspectives for youth, reduction in domestic

violence and improvement in living space (housing) (SPUU Inception Report and Masterplan, 2014: 6). However, as said earlier, the implementations of some programmes have been disrupted by gang-related activities, while, almost simultaneously, the socio-economic challenges in Helenvale have increased (Helenvale Dialogue Series, 2018: 2). A further complication is the politicisation of both the urban development initiative and the gang issue. The Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality, which includes Port Elizabeth, has been a highly contested political space for years, with the African National Congress (ANC) and Democratic Alliance (DA) vying for control of the metro, the latter having won the most recent battle in 2016 (Fick, 2016; Spies, 2016). Much like the situation in the Western Cape, the political contestation in Port Elizabeth has negatively affected development and other initiatives aimed at curbing gangsterism and enhancing community safety and security. In fact, some corrupt political officials have been reputed to have used gangs to further their agendas (Petrus and Kinnes 2018). It is thus not too much of a stretch to speculate that recent sabotaging of SPUU development projects in Helenvale may be the result of political manipulation of some gangs in the area.

The above context catalysed the need for a multi-stakeholder colloquium to identify and address the obstacles to the SPUU programmes. As a result, the MBDA's Helenvale Dialogue Series (2018) has sought to bring together experts and other stakeholders in an effort to identify key areas of concern in the implementation of the SPUU initiative, and to suggest alternatives or possible solutions.

The Helenvale Dialogue Series: Scenario planning for 2030

At the heart of the Helenvale colloquium held in March 2018 was scenario planning around what Helenvale would look like by 2030. Several key dimensions were identified and scenario planning was done for each dimension. The scenario planning involved identifying the problems and challenges in each dimension, what the worst case scenario would likely be, and what steps could be taken to avoid such a worst case scenario. The following were the key dimensions identified for scenario planning:

1. Gangs, crime reduction and prevention
2. Identity, social cohesion, sense of community and place
3. Education, skill and youth development
4. Economic development and livelihoods
5. Planning and institutional challenges (Helenvale Dialogue Series, 2018: 5-12)

From the discussions held during the colloquium, various

challenges were highlighted that were deemed to be unique and specific to the Helenvale community. These challenges included:

1. Abnormally high levels of unemployment
2. Poverty
3. Gang-related violence
4. The fractured nature of families
5. Lack of community cohesion
6. Sense of hopelessness (Helenvale Dialogue Series, 2018: 14)

In light of the above, the author identified three key focus areas to improve capacity building in Helenvale, as well as to enhance the effectiveness of development initiatives. The focus areas stem from a holistic view of development challenges in Helenvale.

The three key focus areas for capacity building and development

Life skills training and community coaching

One of the most critical and fundamental aspects necessary to facilitate effective development in a community such as Helenvale is capacity building through critical skills training. Given the already discussed types of social challenges affecting the community, there are two significant areas of capacity building that would benefit and enhance the effectiveness of development programmes. These areas are life skills training and community coaching. Various international studies have highlighted the impact of life skills training on the social and behavioural skills of individuals, particularly children and young adults. According to Kazemi et al. (2014), life skills' training has a positive influence on self-esteem and communication skills. These scholars conducted a quasi-experimental study among forty primary school learners with learning disabilities. In another study, Moshki et al. (2014) found that life skills training had a positive effect on drug abuse preventive behaviours among university students. The above examples suggest that life skills and life skills training are critical components particularly for child and youth development. However, what do the concepts *life skills* and *life skills training* mean? According to the UNICEF (2003), life skills refer to 'psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life'. These skills are loosely grouped into three categories, namely cognitive, personal and interpersonal skills. Furthermore, a life skill training, or life skills education, involves 'a structured programme of needs- and outcomes-based participatory learning that aims to increase positive and adaptive behaviour by assisting individuals to develop and practise psycho-

social skills that minimise risk factors and maximise protective factors' (UNICEF 2003).

In order to address social challenges such as substance abuse, violence and gangsterism, all of which negatively impact on the implementation and effectiveness of development programmes, life skills training is a way of addressing these issues. As indicated, a structured training programme focusing on improving positive and adaptive behaviour among the youth could assist in addressing the social challenges in Helenvale. Arguably, trying to implement development initiatives in a community where many of the residents lack the necessary adaptive skills will have the opposite effect than what may be envisaged. Hence, building the community's capacity by teaching life skills is a viable strategy to improve the effectiveness of development programmes. Linked to life skills training is the related aspect of community coaching. According to Emery et al. (2011: 1), community coaching is a process where the community coach serves as 'a guide who supports communities and organizations in identifying and achieving their goals.' Community coaching is an extension of what is typically referred to as *life coaching*, the main difference being that while life coaching focuses on individuals, community coaching deals with communities and related organisations. Thus, community coaching is most useful within the context of community projects in which the coach plays a supportive and guidance role, rather than prescribing or dictating to the community. Community coaching developed in the United States in the mid-1980s, when a non-profit research and development organisation in North Carolina attempted to increase the speed and success rates of educational reform projects in local communities through the provision of community-based technical assistance (Emery et al., 2011: 5). The success of this strategy led to the organisation using a coaching-based approach in other change initiatives. Within a decade, various rural development practitioners and funders began to incorporate a coaching approach into their community change initiatives (Emery et al., 2011: 6).

Community coaching is based on several fundamental principles that make it indispensable for capacity building and development in communities. First, community coaching is concerned with helping communities to move from a needs-based approach to an asset-based approach. Hence, community coaches 'do not provide answers; they [rather] support capacity building by helping community members…to find their own solutions' (Emery et al., 2011: 9). Secondly, community coaching is based on relationships and a social context. This means that 'Successful coaching requires that all four elements of the [community development/change] equation (funders, intermediaries, coaches and community team members) be in harmony on the goals and processes involved in the project.' (Emery et al., 2011: 10). The third fundamental in community coaching is the emphasis

on co-learning, where coaching shifts from the so-called "expert model" characteristic of individual coaching, to a model based on co-learning and collaboration. The coach does 'not do things for the community, but rather learn[s] with community members about how to build their capacity…' (Emery et al., 2011: 11).

Applied anthropologists who work in the field of development anthropology will immediately see the similarities between community coaching and action anthropology. The anthropologist Sol Tax and his associates are generally credited with the founding of this form of applied anthropology following Tax's work among the Fox Indians of Iowa in the late 1940s (Piddington, 1960: 201; Bennett, 1996: 34). Notwithstanding the critiques levelled against applied anthropology in general, and action anthropology in particular (Bennett, 1996: 30-34, 37-39), the emphasis of action anthropology on the role of the anthropologist as a change agent, and on the wellbeing of the community in which planned change was being implemented, most closely resembles community coaching. As Bennett (1996: 34) stated, action anthropology was about treating community members as 'equal participants', with the view of helping them to find ways of 'solving problems' in their community. The overlap between community coaching and action anthropology is also reflected in what established community coaches regard as one of the key competencies required of the community coach. According to Emery et al. (2011: 16), 'all community coaches must also have grounding in cultural competency in order to relate to and engage with diverse people in a community.' Hence, the combination of community coaching and action anthropology forms a viable strategy for capacity building and community development.

Addressing negative subcultures in the community

The second key focus area to enhance capacity building and development in a fragile community such as Helenvale is to identify and address negative subcultures that have become obstacles to development. There are two negative subcultures that can be identified, namely the subculture of poverty and the stone-throwing subculture among school-going youths. The subculture of poverty was first identified in the anthropological work of Oscar Lewis, who did ethnographic research on poverty among Puerto Ricans in both Puerto Rico and New York (1966). In essence, Lewis argued that certain conditions predisposed poor communities to a 'way of life' that develops into a (sub) culture of poverty. These conditions he identified as persistently high rates of unemployment and underemployment; the failure of society to provide social, political and economic organisation; a bilateral kinship system that favours the nuclear family; the dominant class assertion that stresses upward mobility

and emphasises the accumulation of wealth and property; and the dominant class assertion that low economic status results from individual inferiority and personal inadequacy (Lewis, 1966: 21). Consequently, the subculture of poverty emerges, but the real danger is in the manner in which the subculture perpetuates itself. Once again according to Lewis (1966: 21), 'By the time slum children are six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic attitudes and values of their subculture.' This means that the value system underpinning the subculture of poverty is transferred from one generation to the next, thereby entrenching the subculture. The Helenvale community is characterised by a similar subculture, given the prevailing conditions in the community. The challenges identified in the *Helenvale Dialogue Series*, as outlined above, attest to this. Gangsterism thus forms an integral part of the subculture of poverty, as many youths regard this as the only viable option to escape material poverty. Unfortunately, since gangs are a product of the prevailing subculture, the youths are never able to truly escape, but remain trapped within the subculture.

The stone-throwing subculture appears to be specifically found in the school environment. In Helenvale, 'stone-throwing was not a new or recent phenomenon but formed an integral part of the subculture of gangsterism.' He further argues that stone-throwing and gangsterism existed in a symbiotic relationship, as both were built upon similar value systems. Stone-throwing refers to the subculture where young boys of school-going age form groups and engage in a game of throwing stones at each other. When someone is hurt, then it is expected that the members of his group retaliate. Such a situation has the potential to become violent and to spill out into the streets. Established gangs take interest in these conflicts as they use these incidences as mechanisms for recruitment. The stone-throwing subculture prepares boys for the gangs as it is here where they learn the very same values that underpin the gang lifestyle, namely loyalty to one's group, aggression, retaliation and the internalisation of the 'street code value system'. Both the subculture of poverty and the subculture of stone-throwing are negative subcultures that need to be addressed. These subcultures represent obstacles to capacity building and development. Successful development cannot occur if the negative value system of these subcultures is entrenched in the community.

Harnessing and utilising Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and heritage through cultural education

In line with the above-mentioned principle of helping the community shift towards an asset-based approach, one of the key assets in the Helenvale community is the existing indigenous knowledge. Unfortunately, much of this knowledge remains untapped due to various factors

including the impact of negative perceptions of heritage and identity. Interestingly, this also links to the occurrence of gangsterism in the community. According to Jensen (2008), there is a relationship between gangs in some coloured communities and coloured identity dynamics. For example, the gangs, much like coloured identity itself, are characterised by ambivalence or liminality, meaning that while they are a part of the community, they also are not, because they represent all that is negative about coloured identity. Also, and in line with the point just made, those males who belong to or associate with coloured gangs symbolise the stereotype of the *skollie* (thug) (Jensen 2008: 2-5). The idea of negative stereotypes and meanings attached to coloured identity has been an area of interest for various scholars of coloured history and coloured identity (Du Pre 1992a, 1992b; Adhikari 2006, 2008). These scholars have pointed out that negative perceptions of coloured heritage and identity have continued to be a feature of perceptions of coloured identity, not only by other groups but also by coloured people themselves.

From the above it follows that there is a need for some form of cultural education to address negative perceptions of coloured identity and heritage in vulnerable communities such as Helenvale, and to use such opportunities as a mechanism to encourage the inclusion of heritage and local knowledge in development initiatives. The importance of local or indigenous knowledge in the socio-economic development of local communities has been consistently stressed in national policy documents such as the South African Indigenous Knowledge Systems Policy of 2004. The restoration of a sense of pride in the community will have a positive impact on the mindset of residents, and may help to encourage greater participation in development. This relates to the points made earlier regarding community coaching, where the focus is on utilising local knowledge and local expertise, thereby foregrounding the available assets in the community. This approach is also critical to encourage a bottom-up rather than top-down approach to development. As recently as 2016, some commentators were still of the opinion that development in South Africa was not participatory or democratic, despite the necessary structures being in place (Buccus, 2016). Thus, one way to facilitate a bottom-up development strategy is to include local knowledge and expertise. However, in order to achieve this it is necessary to restore pride in local knowledge and identity.

Conclusion

There are few who would question those vulnerable communities such as the one referred to in this discussion should be prioritised for development initiatives. However, as was shown, development in the community of Helenvale is hampered by challenges such as gangsterism that has not only delayed programmes,

but has also resulted in financial and other resources going to waste. The MBDA's *Helenvale Dialogues* colloquium was designed to find alternatives to address this challenge, specifically through scenario planning. As indicated, the author identified three key areas for capacity building that could potentially aid development programmes in the community. This discussion elaborated on these key areas and aimed to show how each of them could potentially contribute to addressing the underlying concerns that have become obstacles to development. Each of these three focus areas is necessary to develop a holistic strategy. Also, the interconnectedness between each focus area suggests that all three are necessary to address, rather than singling out one or two at the expense of others. By emphasising the identified focus areas, it is possible that meaningful capacity building and development can then be achieved in Helenvale, which ultimately would be a step in the right direction to prevent the worst case scenario of a Helenvale left in the grip of gangsterism and under-development.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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