

Daniel Dunia of the Africa Solidarity Network reflects on the 2017 social cohesion dialogues to stop xenophobia in Durban

CCS Activist Brief October 2017

The Centre for Civil Society (CCS) and Africa Solidarity Network (ASONET) undertook a collaborative project for the human rights awareness on xenophobia and social cohesion in Durban. The project entailed 5 Community Dialogues and 12 Capacity Building Seminars, carried out in the Durban area, to further the awareness of issues surrounding xenophobia and to bring together South African citizens and foreign nationals residing in Durban communities. ASONET carried out the substantive community work with support from CCS staff, including liaising with relevant civil society organisations and government departments. CCS provided further support in terms of project conception, framing, reporting and provision of resources and capacity.

In general, this project has been successful. All the activities envisaged under the proposal were carried out and participation by communities, local authorities, civil society organisations and government departments were good. This signals both an interest in the ASONET social cohesion initiative and a commitment to ending xenophobia in Durban.

The main project outputs were the community dialogues, capacity building seminars and re-integration exercise:

The community dialogues created spaces to unite South Africans and foreign nationals from areas in Durban most affected by xenophobia. This in itself is a step towards social cohesion. The dialogues established that a number of misperceptions exist among South Africans, with regards to foreign nationals, which create and sustain xenophobic reactions. Among these are perceptions of foreign nationals as 'illegal', criminal, a source of competition for resources, under-cutting employment opportunities and even, dirty. The dialogues provided a platform for these perceptions to be discussed and analysed, resulting in a new awareness among South Africans as to the status 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker'. In this sense, dialogue conveners claimed that, "South Africans are not xenophobic — they are misinformed". Furthermore relationships were built between and among community members and local leaders marking a first step in cohesion-building. This is evidenced by establishing 'peace builders committees', manned by volunteers from both sides to serve as an 'early warning' mechanism for xenophobic violence and to mitigate community-level conflict

The capacity building seminars focused on bringing awareness to foreign nationals and locals as to the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. This exercise was imperative in raising awareness with regards to the plight and place of foreign nationals. It also worked towards paving the way for understandings of how foreign nationals fit into Durban communities and the positive aspects of them being a part of South African society.

The re-integration exercise raised feedback from dialogue and seminar participants and revealed that while social cohesion had begun to manifest in communities such as Isipingo, some areas were still wrecked with violence against foreign nationals, suggesting that efforts need to be maintained and expanded.

It is ASONET's recommendation that social cohesion projects in the Durban area be maintained in the form of support for the 'peace builders committees' who are beginning important work on the ground and which is very much a community 'owned' initiative. Furthermore, there needs to be more effort made, with regards to a Human Rights Campaign, focusing on ensuring that communities, whether local citizens, residents or foreign nationals, are aware of their rights and understand their status in South Africa. Such a campaign could take on more innovative methods including art, culture, community video and photography. Another aspect of social cohesion extends to training of front line officials who deal with foreign nationals and who are often responsible for framing perceptions about foreign cultures within South African society. Cultural events are also a notable way in which local citizens and foreign nationals can come together to forge common understandings of their contexts and their shared challenges.

The most notable outcomes on target groups are an increased awareness by local citizens as to the true plight of foreign nationals in South Africa, as victims of persecution or war fleeing for a better life rather than competition or siphons of scarce resources. There was also an increase in awareness among foreign nationals as to their rights, many did not realise they had rights. Areas significantly affected by xenophobia, such as Isipingo, have stabilized in terms of xenophobia related violence but there is still work to be done in areas such as KwaMashu, Inanda and Ntuzuma where there continue to be reports of a lack of cohesion and common understandings.

How the Community Dialogues worked:

The community dialogues took place in areas that had experienced xenophobia. These included Lotus Park, Ramalinga and Isipingo. The proximity of these areas to Malukazi and the conflict that once engulfed these communities make this section an ideal place for a social cohesion dialogue. Another factor that makes this area strategically positioned for ASONET interventions is that there are a large number of foreign nationals who have formal and informal enterprises in the area. Social cohesion therefore becomes even more critical in a community that has a history of socio-political intolerance and potential for eruption of violence. ASONET interventions were premised upon the conviction that creating safe and conducive spaces for people to talk and engage, is the prerequisite for any successful and sustainable social stability. To this end, the aim was to stress the importance of critical and constructive social engagement with an aim of developing a sense of community and belonging amongst people, irrespective of race, colour, place of origin and culture.

The rationale behind the dialogue methodology is that this form of communication is both transformative and participatory. This is demonstrated when participants in groups have an opportunity to engage on a myriad of issues without being intimidated and sharing with people from diverse backgrounds. Dialogues are not over-structured, hence allowing the facilitator and the participants to easily navigate and tackle topics that are relevant and more meaningful to people thus resonating with lived experiences.

The dialogues aimed to:

- Create a space for local people and foreign nationals to discuss matters affecting them within the context of social cohesion and economic development.
- Provide a platform where individuals could freely express their views on the above issues.
- Enable participants to find a common ground regarding areas of convergence and cooperation.
- Formulate peacebuilder teams from both local and foreigner communities to deal with day-to-day challenges.
- Develop a collective programme of action to enable participants to operationalise the resolutions of the dialogue.

The dialogues attracted a diverse audience which elicited robust and informative discussions. The fact that the events were facilitated by Thembeiso Madlala, a South African citizen, and Daniel Dunia, a foreign national, sent a message to the audience that through cooperation local communities can achieve social cohesion and work together towards local economic development.

Participants at a Community Dialogue held in Durban in 2017

