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Seeking solutions in times of insecurity

Three community researchers, including two foreigners, brave a xenophobic hotspot to talk residents out of violence

ON A RECENT Sunday morning, I saw xenophobia as close as I ever wanted to: the anger of a poor community in Durban hotspot, Bottlebrush.

The shack settlement of about 4 000 residents is located in Chatsworth, and has divided political loyalties to two camps in the African National Congress.

It is unusually violent, known for leadership crises and wafordism. But in many ways it is no different than other similar shack settlements in which so many live.

At the July 25 meeting, 300 people from Bottlebrush gathered for several hours. Three of us from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society (CCS), and I addressed the crowd in Zulu, along with local leaders.

Our appeal was to halt the pressure on immigrants that generated attacks and mass flight in May 2008, and again in recent weeks, just as the World Cup ended.

We were first questioned and asked where we came from (one of us is Zimbabwean and another Congolese), which political party was our centre affiliated to (none), and if we were not "sell-outs" (we didn't think so).

Our centre provides a platform for people to address issues of concern in all communities, and xenophobia is the main cancer eating away

at South African civil society.

The centre recently issued a 100-page report by 10 researchers plus a national team co-ordinated by Atlantic Philanthropies and the Joburg non-governmental organisation Strategy and Tactics.

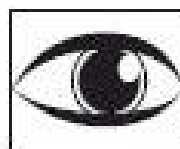
Sub-standard

Our visit to the settlement followed extensive research in Bottlebrush by CCS post-graduate student Trevor Ngwane. According to Ngwane, even in the wake of a government housing project: "It is hard to distinguish the new houses from the old brick houses some people built, everything appears drab and substandard."

He observes: "Electricity has been installed at Bottlebrush and one can see wires confusedly criss-crossing the streetpoles intent on finding a way into each yard.

"Most shacks are made of planks or wooden boards pinned together with rusty nails. Each yard can squeeze in as many as 13 shacks."

The settlement was established more than 20 years ago, when ANC refugees fled political violence in nearby KwaNdengezi township, and the



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ANC branch executive committee still rules. But according to Ngwane, "Almost every respondent who commented on the issue held this committee in disdain because of their poor and allegedly corrupt leadership."

We accepted an invitation to visit Bottlebrush from local leader, Fundisi Mhlongo. Our aim was to hear concerns from the residents as well as share experiences.

Bottlebrush leaders discussed alleged fraud and corruption by local elites, the need for proper housing, electricity water and sanitation and their unhappiness over rising municipal bills.

Residents at the meeting applauded Mhlongo's knowledge and proposed that he run for a position as local councillor in next year's municipal elections.

But then came the hard part, as locals explained why they think their problems stem from the presence of immigrants.

They blame immigrants

for taking jobs, as companies in the area allegedly retrench locals and replace them with much lower-paid foreigners, who, they say accept wages of as little as R20 a day, instead of joining a fight to earn a living wage. A company can employ four Zimbabweans for the salary of one South African, one man claimed.

The South Africans cannot access accommodation, while foreigners pay far higher rents, because many more squeeze into shacks. Foreigners may stay in groups of five where they contribute R500 a month for rooms that had cost the locals only R200 rent. Some landlords prefer to take in foreigners as tenants, because they are vulnerable.

As Ngwane put it: "The housing crisis is stoking xenophobia in Bottlebrush. This is because of unscrupulous landlords who take advantage of both the shortage of housing and the vulnerable status of African immigrants."

The two of us in our group who are foreigners explained

our plight, such as looting of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with increasing involvement by shady South African firms.

As for my country's background, I trace it partly to the move by Mafikazi away from Shaka. Matabeleland is full of Khumalo, Ndlovu and Dlamini so by attacking Zimbabweans, xenophobes are spilling their own blood.

Tyranny

During the apartheid era, we gave refuge to people like Jacob Zuma and many others from liberation movements.

This was repaid not through kindness, but by the South African government supporting President Robert Mugabe against a mass democratic opposition, even helping to cover up electoral fraud and tyranny.

I begged the Bottlebrush community not to legitimise the boundaries imposed by colonialists, and to treat Africans as one nation.

Immigrants do not choose to leave beloved families and homes voluntarily.

Not only Zimbabweans, but Congolese, Burundians, Somalis, Ethiopians, Rwandans and more flee from

despotic governments to save their lives.

I described what I felt when crossing the Limpopo River some years ago.

The majority of Zimbabweans here ran from Mugabe and his killer militias, such as the Green Bombers. Some were attacked at night, our families beaten, tortured and killed, our houses and documents burnt, and in some cases our children and wives raped in front of us.

Companies closed due to the economic meltdown and people with food turned to eating wild fruits. This is why there are so many Zimbabweans in South Africa.

Free and fair elections in Zimbabwe will change the kind of government, but with the South African government continuing to support Mugabe, more and more Zimbabweans will come here.

And if South Africans suffer both a shortage of housing and unemployment, then why not demand a mass construction programme just as ambitious and urgent as building soccer stadiums?

There are solutions if we put our minds together.

In the meantime, Mhlongo appealed to the residents of Bottlebrush: "We must not beat the foreigners."

●Shepherd Zvavanhu did community research for the CCS xenophobia report.