

Xenophobia – Mobilising a possible solution within our midst

During the past few weeks a gulf of xenophobic attacks has swept through our country. Most South Africans are horrified by the reports they read in the press and see on television. A number of public figures have declared they feel ashamed to be a South African in these times.

Even in speaking to locals in the affected areas, there seems to be no clear answer to the roots of the apparent sudden outbreaks of violence against foreigners.

One of the perceptions created by the media is that most of the local township-residents support the perpetrators.

However, a conversation with Nosizwe, a Khayalitsha-resident since 1992, paints a different picture.

Nosizwe lives in a quiet, peaceful area of Khayalitsha, one undisturbed by crime and violence. During the day, she and most of the people in her neighbourhood are not at home since they work elsewhere in Cape Town.

Nosizwe's community is serviced by a single tiny shop. The residents do the bulk of their shopping in a nearby area, at shops run mostly by Somalis. Quite a few of these residents also let out rooms to foreign nationals.

On Friday, 23 May 2008, life in this peaceful neighbourhood suddenly changed. Nosizwe returned home to find chaos, disruption and fear in the air.

Her world had erupted in mayhem.

Grocery stores were vandalised and looted; Somali shopkeepers were running for their lives. Police arrived to arrest some of the instigators of violence and escorted the foreign nationals to places of safety.

Since that bleak Friday, talk on the streets and in mini-bus taxis have been buzzing with questions without any apparent answers: Who started this? Why did it happen? Who is behind the attacks? Why did it happen just after the schools closed – was the youth behind it in some way?

Locals are shocked and horrified. They struggle to understand why anyone would do something so unimaginable to a fellow human being. They mourn their losses.

Many lost good friends who happened to be from another country, or even from a different province in South Africa. They don't know where to start searching for their friends. And if they do, they fear being victimised in the process.

Mothers and caretakers don't have a proper place to buy their groceries. Landlords who rented rooms to foreigners don't know if and when their tenants will return. They have to deal with the anticipated loss of rental income.

Residents seem to agree that it cannot be more than a handful of people who have chosen to inflict such suffering and pain on an entire community.

The majority strongly objects to what has happened. In areas such as Harare the community has asked the Somali traders to return. However, it is difficult – if not impossible - to guarantee the safety of the traders should they risk coming home.

One possibility of addressing the current crisis might be through Street Committees.

These are informal representative bodies that look after the interests of residents of one or more streets. Depending on the number of people living in an area, a committee consists of anything between 10-15 members. Locals elect them to address issues such as sanitation, crime and home ownership.

All new homeowners and tenants in the street/s are introduced to the Street Committee, ensuring that residents in an area know one another and are known by the committee members.

Street Committees meet as need demands to discuss issues raised by residents. They will then call general meetings to facilitate a cooperative process.

Through this process of shared responsibility and accountability, the community participates in producing solutions for the problems at hand.

Nosizwe believes Street Committees might be strategic in mobilising locals to turn the current situation around.

A practical example: Locals know where to find refrigerators and furniture that have been looted from foreigners' shops. The Street Committees – with the support of the community behind them - can instruct people in possession of stolen goods to return it to their rightful owners. Such is the power of these informal bodies – if the community agrees on it.

Listening to Nosizwe, one is struck by two things.

Firstly, the media only shows us the picture in part. Often a much deeper – yet untold - story forms the backdrop to the reported events. Taking the time and effort to uncovering and understanding this, is vital in gaining a true sense of perspective.

Secondly, the existence of informal structures might be the best vehicle to restore peace in affected areas.

One thing is clear – we need to talk to the people at the centre of the hotspots, listen to them and learn from their unique perspectives on the situation.

Because ultimately, they are the ones living closest to the core issues that might lead to sustainable solutions and prevent similar incidents in future.

Written by Carel Wandrag from Cross Cultural Conversations CC
www.ccconversations.co.za

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