

ALICE COETZEE explains how a community-policing initiative is bringing hope to an area where poverty and mistrust are rife.

Small peace blooms in Bekkersdal

Row upon row of corrugated-iron shacks, bleak and encircled by dust, lead you into Bekkersdal, a small, treeless West Rand township outside Krugersdorp. Outwardly, it's a stark picture of hopelessness, yet this little place was the first township in 1990 to unite supporters of the ANC, Inkatha Freedom Party and Azapo into a working relationship aimed at building the community.

The accord was shattered in the run-up to the April elections, with Internal Stability Unit (ISU) intervention fanning the flames. But a fragile peace has returned in the wake of the formation of a peace committee led by local leaders. The restoration of peace is all the more remarkable in the new context of mushrooming informal settlements around Bekkersdal, with new communities with their own needs and leaders asserting themselves.

The Bekkersdal community is now on the brink of officially launching its own community-police forum, but police and community representatives have different views on how it will work. For the police, the forum will give the community a role in solving crime. For the community, the forum has a much broader purpose: to change the nature of policing in their township.

A champion of the process is Lieutenant-Colonel Louis Cole, unit commander for community liaison on the West Rand. In his view, the community has been more open to dialogue with the police, including the ISU, since the elections. "Through the forum we hope the community will feel free to report crime and to bring problems with the police to the police," he says. Aware of long-standing community mistrust of the police, Cole hopes trust will be built once there is a "solid mechanism in place".

Chairperson of the Bekkersdal Development Campaign Committee Vusi Dhlamini agrees. "The most important thing is to build trust and communication between the police and the community. Since the fighting, there have been no-go areas and the amount of crime is increasing. We hope the forum will be able to stop this. The police attitudes are changing."

Azapo activist Violet Mogone is not so sure. "I don't see any difference between the past and the present police," she says. An opponent of the forum, she believes the community should do its own policing. "By including the police, the community will be divided because people will be encouraged to inform on one another," she says.

Mistrust of the police and the need to deal with it through the forum appears to be high on the community's agenda. This is expressed through fear of police dominance of the forum and anger over what is perceived as continuing police harassment, in contradiction of the forum's objective of building relations between the community and police.

"The police from Krugersdorp work here and when they ask you to show the policeman who beat you up yesterday, you cannot tell the difference between the white policemen. They hide their name tags," says Simpeo Mpothsana, of the Bekkersdal ANC

marshalling structure.

The apartheid legacy of the police and attitudes instilled during their training is what worries James Ngoko of the ANC. He says that if the forum's aims of uniting, educating and building a positive relationship between police and community are to be achieved, police should be recruited only from the community: "If we can work with the local police and not the police from Krugersdorp, we will be able to solve problems with the police because we can go to the house of the police officer and raise the matter with him."

Nellie Mathikge of the Concerned Women of Bekkersdal agrees, calling for the upgrading of Bekkersdal's single satellite police station into a full station. She thinks it should be operational 24 hours a day and should have adequate resources, including transport, so that police can respond to emergency calls.

Both she and Azapo's Mogone are particularly keen to see the appointment of women police officers who can deal sensitively with women who have been raped and abused.

Bekkersdal station commander Lucas van Tellegen supports the call for a full police station. "We have 28 policemen working in four shifts to serve 150 000 people. It is very difficult for us to do our job."

Says Warrant-Officer Tefo Mpete of the police community relations department: "We've come a long way. At first it was gloves off and we boxed each other. Then, as the process went on, we wrestled; and now we are helping one another. There are still problems but some of the police who could not accept the changes are beginning to understand the realities. Community policing is two-sided. We must each do our part." ■

Alice Coetzee is based at Idasa's Pretoria office.

Partnership is path

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put forward, among these the RDP.

These principles should not be treated as slogans. If this practice continues, then we will not be able to consummate the process of democratising our country.

After this address, Mufamadi was asked a number of questions.

Police-community forums are almost impossible in certain areas, such as KwaZulu and Bophuthatswana. How can this be addressed?

We are now building a national police service

which will be organised at two levels – national and provincial. Standards will be set at national level and these must be observed, irrespective of whether one is in KwaZulu/Natal or the PWV. These reform initiatives, internal to the police, will ultimately make police-community partnerships possible throughout the country.

Now and then one will see manifestations of resistance. In such cases it will be necessary to encourage, persuade and sometimes even punish officials who behave in a way which is inimical to sound police-community rela-

tions. In KwaZulu/Natal some investigation is already in progress with regard to making community policing possible.

Has a fresh, systematic look been taken at the claims against your department which you inherited from the previous government?

We are looking at those claims because some of them present a moral dilemma. How can the new SAPS fight a claim made by the widow of Matthew Goniwe? It would not be justifiable. I think some of these cases will end up with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission where it will become possible to talk about reparations for victims. But if we were to settle all these claims at the amounts that are being demanded, the RDP would suffer. ■