

ON TOUR: (from left) Gontse Koitsloe of Sapu, Janine Rauch of the Ministry of Safety and Security, Gert van Beek of the Amsterdam Police and Idasa's Mduuzi Mashiyane.



BEA ROBERTS was among a group of South Africans who visited the Netherlands to see how security is provided in an unusually tolerant society.

Policing with vision

LETTING a group of 25 South Africans loose on Amsterdam is at the best of times a challenging experience. When the group consists of police and civilians who have come to see the Dutch policing system in action, the experience promises to be even more interesting. The long overdue study tour took place in September. It was planned by three local organisations – Community Peace Foundation, Idasa and the Policing Research Project – and facilitated by the Dutch Foundation for Society.

For the tour group, the Netherlands became far more than tulips, cheese, windmills and Van Gogh. Our own struggle to achieve a safe and secure environment in South Africa was vastly enriched by the opportunity to engage around these issues in the international arena.

As the main focus of the study tour was community policing, the group included members of the police, non-governmental organisations and local communities. The police delegation consisted of members of various divisions within the South African Police Service as well as representatives of the police unions – Popcru and Sapu. Most delegates were from the PWV, but the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu/Natal were also represented.

The social environment within which policing takes place in the Netherlands is vastly different from our own. Few societies are as tolerant and free as that of the Netherlands, and few cities offer as many choices as Amsterdam where our visit started. Visible manifestations are the sex industry (visits to the red light district, ably led by one of our Dutch police hosts, were mandatory for the majority of the group!), open homosexuality and easy access to soft as well as hard drugs. Our inherently Calvinistic tour group had some difficulty in acclimatising to this context. One policeman confessed that he had to restrain himself from arresting two people smoking heroin on the street.

But it was the approach of the Dutch police to these practices – in particular the drugs – which most clearly reflected their policing philosophy. Policing is not only regarded as law enforcement: it has a far broader social function. This is encapsulated in the Dutch concept of community policing which takes a pro-active approach to ensure that safe and secure living conditions are provided for all citizens.

The mid-1970s saw the emergence of a group of “angry young men” in the Dutch police who wanted a radical new approach to policing and for several years struggled against the authorities to make this possible. Today many of these rebels hold senior positions in the force and the changes they proposed have been phased in. Towards the end of the 1980s, a number of changes were evident: geographic decentralisation within the police force, de-specialisation, a flatter organisation, spreading of responsibilities and management by objectives.

Of particular relevance to the development of community policing in South Africa was the notion of neighbourhood teams that are assigned to a particular district and become a visible and known presence in that neighbourhood. The social commitment of the police is most evident in a range of special projects. They identify specific problems in the community and address these by mobilising the assistance of other institutions or structures. In this way the police are integrated into society and realise their fundamental guiding principle of “knowing and being known”.

We also met the representatives of the three Dutch police unions which, between them, represent 90 percent of police officials, including those in management positions. Unions have been active for over a century and have played a major role in improving working conditions in the force. They engage in collective bargaining and influence police policy, and would only consider strike action if the fundamental rights of their members were compromised.

At times it was difficult to bring our experiences across to our Dutch hosts. This was particularly evident when we visited their specialised training centre for public order policing, or riot control.

The main public order threat in the Netherlands is that of crowds which may become rowdy or even violent, a situation largely experienced at soccer matches. It is virtually inconceivable that crowds would be armed and open fire on the police, but should this be the case, the police are obliged to withdraw and call in the military police. There are no permanent riot units in the Dutch police and the mobile units are composed of volunteers from the force who receive extra payment for this duty after specialised training.

The emphasis on professional training and continuous retraining probably accounts for the professionalism of the Dutch police. We spent a day at one of their training centres, De Boskamp, attending classes and marvelling at the facilities and innovative teaching methods. Much of the teaching is done by civilians, and mock situations and role plays, recorded on video and played back to trainees, are an integral part of the training.

Experiencing first hand how security and stability is provided in a well established democracy was an eye-opener for most of us and it revealed the vast possibilities for policing in South Africa.

Encouraging self-reliant behaviour among citizens, and policing with vision and discretion are qualities that are not unique to the Dutch situation. The Dutch police took decades to change and restructure – our own situation calls for a far greater sense of urgency. ■

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