



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

REBUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE AMID GANG VIOLENCE: CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA, 1998 - 2001

SYNOPSIS

Violence in neighborhoods on the outskirts of Cape Town, South Africa, escalated in the late 1990s. In areas like Manenberg and Hanover Park, gangs dominated community life, interrupted the delivery of public services, and in some instances threatened civil servants working in housing offices, medical clinics, and libraries. Following the African National Congress's victory in the first democratic local government elections in 1996, city officials sought new ways to reduce the impact of the gang presence on the delivery of community services. Ahmedi Vawda, executive director of the Directorate of Community Development (called ComDev), and his team thought that the only ways to succeed were to build confidence among residents—thereby increasing their resolve in standing up to the gangs—and to lower the attraction this way of life had for young people. By giving a greater voice to residents, including greater discretion over service delivery, the team hoped to build social capital and gradually enlarge the space under public control. The ComDev team mapped the economic and social challenges facing the most-vulnerable communities and created Area Coordinating Teams (ACTs) that enabled local organizations to play major roles in governance. These forums increased community understanding of local government responsibilities—along with the community's role in development—by identifying areas where municipal funding could support community initiatives. Although the ACTs did not take direct action against the gangs, in the neighborhood of Manenberg they provided a space for local participation in development projects and laid the foundation for progress by soliciting local feedback for city services, by asserting the presence of government in previously insecure areas, and by restoring a degree of community confidence.

Richard Bennet drafted this case study on the basis of interviews in Cape Town and Pretoria, South Africa, in March 2011. Case published May 2012.

INTRODUCTION

In August 1999, a tornado devastated the Cape Flats, a working-class area on the outskirts of Cape Town. The storm killed five people,

injured 180 others, and left more than 5,000 homeless. Hardest hit was Manenberg, a neighborhood known for gang violence and drug trafficking. Shortly after the tornado tore through

blocks of public housing apartments, looters took to the streets to plunder homes and storefronts.

The tornado added to the pain that Manenberg's residents already felt. According to the 1996 census, 25% of households in the city were living in poverty.¹ Gang warfare in the late 1990s culminated in early 1998, when more than 60 gang-related killings took place during a six-month span on the Cape Peninsula that includes Cape Town.² City employees struggled to deliver services in the crossfire. Feuds between rival gangs left bullet holes in the sides of the library. And health workers feared that by treating wounded gang members, they might inadvertently bring the violence into the clinics. Many staff members were reluctant to go to work, and some pressed their union officials for relocation or danger pay. Ahmedi Vawda, who led Cape Town's Directorate of Community Development, or ComDev, recalled that the city officials suddenly had to ask themselves, "Who runs Manenberg? Do we run Manenberg?" They saw the devastation wrought by the tornado as a chance to reassert the government's authority and rebuild its credibility. "Reconstruction was used as an instrument to intervene and demonstrate the city's responsiveness in a community that had long felt that they were abandoned to the gangs," Vawda said.

Neighborhoods like Manenberg suffered from long histories of discrimination and neglect. Under the white-controlled apartheid government that practiced racial segregation, the 1950 Group Areas Act had legislated the forced removal of black and "coloured" families from many of Cape Town's developed inner-city neighborhoods. At the time, the term "coloured" denoted those of mixed race who possessed some black African ancestry—not enough to be considered members of the black racial group by law but too much to be considered white. In the 1960s and 1970s, many coloured families relocated to Manenberg,

Hanover Park, and other neighborhoods in the Cape Flats areas approximately 15 kilometers outside the Cape Town city center; these areas had limited access to government services and economic opportunities. Along with the booming drug trade and other, associated crimes, unemployment fueled gang activities throughout the 1980s and 1990s. A survey by the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit at the University of Cape Town's School of Economics estimated that by the late 1990s, 61% of the Cape Flats population under 30 years of age were unemployed.

When Vawda became executive director of ComDev in 1997, the directorate was a new municipal organization for the City of Cape Town (Central), one of the seven municipalities that in 2000 would merge to form the Cape Town "unicity." The municipality included Manenberg and the surrounding neighborhoods of the Cape Flats. And the directorate combined departments that the postapartheid government had identified as critical to social development: health, housing, and community services.

Vawda's job was to establish and coordinate social-development efforts and related projects as instruments to reduce poverty levels, but the task was far more difficult than it appeared. In the late 1990s, gangs were deeply embedded in the social fabric of the community, and it was difficult to distinguish gang members from law-abiding citizens unless a shoot-out was going on. Vawda and other ComDev officials worried that trying to attack the problem directly—by asserting the presence of local government in the communities—might spark a dangerous backlash from the gangs and jeopardize the safety of city workers and other innocent citizens in the area.

With the support of Ivan Toms, a physician and Cape Town's director of health, Vawda adopted a more subtle strategy. Toms and Vawda organized groups called Area Coordinating

Teams, or ACTs, to encourage community participation in influencing budget allocations for local government development efforts.

This case study outlines the steps that Vawda and Toms took to create forums and build active community participation in Manenberg's development. ComDev's experience highlights how coordination between the government and the community can help extend the government's reach into insecure areas and provide communities with a platform for greater citizen involvement and empowerment.

THE CHALLENGE

In 1994, when a national election officially ended apartheid and the African National Congress Party came to power, the alleviation of inequality and the redressing of historical injustice were the new government's policy priorities. For many parts of the City of Cape Town that were wracked by racial and socioeconomic divisions, the local government became the primary service provider for newly enfranchised communities, including those in the Cape Flats.

ComDev's challenge was to improve the conditions in disadvantaged areas so that residents had better access to resources, services, and decision making. Cape Town mayor Theresa Solomons and City Manager Andrew Boraine knew Vawda from their work with civic groups in the 1980s. One of South Africa's most renowned civic-support agencies was PlanAct, an organization that became an intellectual center for antiapartheid progressives working on urban development in the 1980s and early 1990s. Vawda had been an active participant in PlanAct's work on urban development alternatives, and Solomons and Boraine appreciated his knowledge of how civic organizations could partner with local government in urban development. In early 1997, they asked him to lead the process of framing a strategy for addressing poverty in the city.

Vawda had a mandate to formulate the city's response to development needs in formerly neglected neighborhoods, with a specific focus on housing, health, and other community services such as libraries and parks. In addition to framing a policy response to problems with housing, health, and community services, Vawda had to win the cooperation of citizens who had historically harbored an antagonistic view of government. Gangs were obstacles to both objectives, and community participation did not come easily in many neighborhoods.

Gangs had existed in Cape Town since the 1940s and in the country's prisons since the 19th century. However, it was not until the early 1980s that gangs emerged as a serious social factor in the Cape Flats area of the municipality. Within a decade, the level of gang activity in the area had escalated abruptly with the growth of the drug trade and the introduction of crack cocaine. Historically, there had been little correlation between prison-based gangs and street gangs, but throughout the mid-1990s solidarities between the two began to develop. Gangs with colorful names—the Hard Livings, the Americans, the Junky Funky Kids, the Clever Kids, and the Sexy Boys—grew in power and esteem.

Through the lens of a popular counterculture, gang leaders often were viewed as Robin Hood figures in the Cape Flats, battling against the injustices the community faced. For young, unemployed residents who had few economic prospects, promotion to leadership positions in the gangs—often based on reputations for violence—became a source of pride. Many of the larger groups joined their criminal networks to create what was called The Firm, a cartel of drug dealers and gang leaders that dispensed with their middlemen and began to buy directly from international sources and subsequently control the supply of drugs into the Cape Flats. The result was an increase in the

magnitude of the drug trade, with fewer but more-powerful gangs presiding over larger shares of the profits.

Although gangs relied heavily on intimidation and the threat of violence to control swaths of territory in Manenberg and surrounding neighborhoods of the Cape Flats, they also provided a variety of support services—loans, food, and protection for community members who worked on their behalf—that bought them a certain level of respect and credibility. Young members of the Hard Livings, for instance, gave away cash in the streets of Manenberg when the gang’s leaders drove through. For many families in the area, the gang supplanted the traditional protective role of the adult male figure.

Not all community members, however, bowed to the burgeoning influence of the gangs. Vigilante organizations sprang up as a reaction to the lack of security, the prevalence of drugs, and the weakness of the government’s response to organized gang violence. The August 1996 assassination of a Hard Livings gang leader focused national attention on one such group called People against Gangsterism and Drugs, which had ties to militant Islamist groups. A war erupted between the gangs and the vigilantes. When the vigilante organization assassinated powerful gang leaders, would-be gang successors fought over the vacated territory. Police lost control of the streets. And Manenberg, the Hard Livings’ stronghold, became a center of violence.

In Manenberg, gangs dominated the streets and in effect supplanted the government as the legitimate civil authority. According to the South African Police Service’s antigang unit, by the late 1990s more than 130 gangs operating in Cape Town had more than 80,000 members in a city with a population of just over 2.5 million. Romeo de Lange, a former police officer who worked on strategies to fight the gangs, recalled, “If you look at the scope of gangsterism at that time, it was

already deeply rooted in each and every community. It was well structured, it was well organized, and very much professional in the way it operated. And one can understand why, because if you look at the previous government prior to 1994, in the apartheid state the focus of policing was political violence. ... As a result, it neglected to police real issues in terms of crime and violence.”

When Vawda accepted his job as head of ComDev in 1997, homicides were on the rise in the Western Cape province as a whole and three times higher than in 1994. At the height of the violence, a few months after Vawda began work, the province recorded 86.5 murders per 100,000 residents—nearly one-third more than the national average of 59 per 100,000 over the same 12-month period.

With as many as 50 shootings reported monthly in the city around the time Vawda wanted to move forward in early 1998, many municipal workers in the Cape Flats—and particularly those in Manenberg—feared for their safety as they tried to do their jobs. The residents of the community, caught in the middle of what seemed like a war zone, distrusted outsiders, not knowing whether gang members might retaliate if they accepted offers of government help. A March 1998 Community Development report described the situation in frightening terms: “There is a potential collapse of service provision in libraries, child care, health and housing in Manenberg. ... The gang violence ... has disrupted the provision of services, placed staff lives in danger and is cause for distress amongst staff such that they are traumatized, unable to work, and in instances, not wanting to return to work. It requires urgent attention and a course of action to physically protect staff. ... The situation in Manenberg ... has reached a dangerous point where the very existence of law and order, good governance, a stable social environment and

healthy working conditions have all but become impossible.”³ Local media estimated as many as 45 different gangs were active in Manenberg alone in 1997.

Gangs had a vested interest in making sure that government workers did not interfere with gang operations in the areas they controlled. In no aspect was this more apparent than in government housing, where gangs muscled into the business of managing publicly owned three-story walk-up apartments. Although the government’s regional housing office was supposed to handle vacancies according to a waiting list, the gang that controlled the area often decided on evictions and subletting. In these instances, the city had no clear policy response and limited ability to intervene.

The government’s weakness and ineptitude showed in the pre-1997 activities of a housing subcommittee, chaired by a member of the city’s executive committee and filled with city councillors, that arbitrated disputes among residents but had little power to enforce agreements. Billy Cobbett, who served as national director general of housing from 1994 to 1997, had deep misgivings about the role of the subcommittee. “I never saw any set of rules for how they made these judgments, judgments they made all the time,” said Cobbett, who became Cape Town’s housing director in July 1997 and who was a member of the Community Development team. “They also lectured people about their morals and their behavior, so it became enormous theater.” To answer complaints from their constituents, councillors would issue decrees or promise renovations without regard for the housing policy, the department’s budget, or the bounds of their own legal authority. Although City Manager Boraine prioritized housing on the development agenda, initial failures to address the problem of gang control underscored the limits of the municipal government.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

When Vawda became director of ComDev in 1997, he leaned heavily on Toms, the city’s director of health. A respected physician who had been a prominent antiapartheid activist in the area of community health, Toms gave ComDev’s efforts a public face and offered a strategic focus for reforms. Toms argued that poverty was a primary cause of poor health in the communities. He contended that an integrated approach to primary health care—addressing problem areas and emphasizing sustainability and preventive care—could act as an analogy for ComDev’s intervention into the community. Just as poor health was linked to poverty, so too was violence, Toms reasoned. To achieve sustained reductions in homicides and other crime, the local government would have to address the underlying reasons that young people joined gangs and participated in gang violence.

Vawda carried this thinking a step further. Two visions of development and service delivery existed in South Africa at the time, and both emphasized the need to change people’s relationship to the larger community and the government. The first came from the Reconstruction and Development Programme, a framework for the national government’s attempts to alleviate historical injustice and inequality in the transition from apartheid. The reconstruction program aimed to democratize decision making at the local level, based on a core commitment to empowering the historically disadvantaged. Introducing participation at the neighborhood level was consistent with that aim. The second theory was embedded in the Growth Employment and Redistribution policy, which championed a free-market approach to improving service delivery and eliminating excessive government intervention. The approach encouraged local government to treat communities as customers.⁴ Vawda reasoned that in order to function

effectively as customers—and to think of themselves as sharing responsibility for the welfare of their neighbors—residents had to have a better sense of what citizenship meant. In what he described as “particularly traumatized communities” like Manenberg, Vawda saw the need to build new norms of active citizenship and community participation so as to enable residents to make intelligent choices.

Vawda and Toms discussed the practical implications of this analysis. Could they extend services into dysfunctional, difficult neighborhoods by using community-defined projects as vehicles for building cooperation, changing attitudes toward government, and addressing some of the unmet needs that helped make young people easy targets for gang recruitment? The model attempted to improve the flow of information between the community, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and city officials. It also called for area-based development plans, integrated across government departments. By addressing problems that the community articulated and fostering stronger relationships between the community, community organizations, and city officials, ComDev hoped to limit the gangs’ influence in residents’ everyday lives. The approach had the intention of building on a sustainable framework of shared public service delivery, reconstituting community confidence about alternative passages into adulthood to limit future gang recruitment.

To act on those ideas, Vawda and Toms first moved to map out an accurate assessment of the problems to determine which neighborhoods required prioritization. Then they designed a strategy and an action plan in response to their initial assessment.

During their first months at ComDev in the summer of 1997, Vawda and Toms invited a small team of scholars from local universities to review a survey of the city’s levels of development and

deprivation. The surveys had been conducted by an enthusiastic team of city officials committed to a new vision set out by the city’s administration. In addition to the 1996 census data on education and unemployment, Vawda’s team gathered health sector statistics on maternal mortality, infections, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, teenage pregnancies, nutrition, and other areas. The national government mandated that cities across South Africa develop health districts and collect data. Vawda and Toms looked for areas where steep unemployment coincided with high rates of tuberculosis and HIV. By overlaying health statistics with socioeconomic data and incidents of violent crime, Vawda and Toms were able to designate six geographic zones especially in need of ComDev’s intervention. Manenberg and its surrounding neighborhoods ranked as the most urgent of the six zones.

In designing the initiative, Vawda teamed up with several researchers and scholars, including Ivor Chipkin, who noted of Vawda, “He wanted people to engage critically with what he’s doing ... [He asked,] ‘To what extent can what we’re learning not just apply to others, but apply to this project?’”

That view contrasted with the national police strategy. At the time, the national South African Police Service took a hard line in its attempts to suppress gang activity, increasing its operations as the violence continued to rise in early 1998. The national government drafted the Prevention of Organized Crime Act, which passed through Parliament with nearly unanimous support. The legislation criminalized gang membership and set harsh punishments for involvement in gang-related crime. The government was also in the process of establishing the new Directorate of Special Operations, modeled on the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. Teams of special prosecutors, detectives, and forensic specialists within the new directorate worked to seize the

assets of gang leaders and create a database of gang members. The directorate aimed to limit the violence by arresting the gang leaders with the highest profiles.

In discussing the best way of establishing a foothold in the community, the ComDev team initially disagreed on whether to take a hard line similar to that of the national police. Some managers in the municipal services division had endorsed informal dialogues with the gangs in order to facilitate service delivery and protect their workers. Some members of the ComDev team called for similar negotiations. Initially, Vawda worried that talking to the gangs would only grant them greater authority and further isolate other members in the community. He thought it best for ComDev to operate in spite of the gangs, in order to avoid legitimizing their presence.

But in late February 1998, an incident caused Vawda to doubt his initial approach. Billy Cobbett, director of housing, wanted to impose order on the chaotic housing committee but was unaware of the confrontation that any change in housing policy would cause. “All roles [on the housing committee] were blurred, with councillors performing the role of the administration, and bureaucrats interfering in what were essentially political decisions,” Cobbett said. Among Cobbett’s first actions in his new role, therefore, was to put in place a code of conduct clarifying the roles and responsibilities of councillors and officials, respectively. He picked 10 cases of egregious violation where gangs had forcefully removed residents and taken over an apartment or house, and he obtained court orders for the city to reclaim the residences. But in Manenberg, when the police went in to force the eviction, they quickly found themselves surrounded by armed gang members. Two councillors from the area arrived and began to argue on behalf of the gangs, in breach of the housing committee code of conduct. The councillors called Cobbett on the

phone to demand that he rescind the eviction order, but Cobbett refused to negotiate. Within a few weeks, Cobbett learned that the gang had issued kidnapping and death threats toward him and his family. After less than a year in office, in March 1998 Cobbett decided to move with his family to England, and his deputy took over as director of housing. The episode illustrated the challenge of government intervention in the Cape Flats and left Vawda searching for ways to communicate directly to the community about its role in public service delivery without agitating the gangs and endangering the city’s staff.

Vawda recalled that after the eviction episode, he was forced to amend his approach and recognize the power and authority the gangs held. “Some of us were saying, ‘Don’t cut deals with the gangs. Just reassert public services, enter into an arrangement with the NGOs and communities, and forget about the confrontation with the gangs. We’re not going to win that; that’s in another domain of control and contestation.’”

Seeking a way forward, Vawda decided to put off any future direct confrontations on housing—an area in which the gangs had a vested economic interest—and focus instead on building other aspects of community development. Vawda resolved, “I didn’t want housing officials and librarians to be seen as antigang people. I wanted them to be seen as people who ... helped fractured communities and rehabilitated our responsibilities as the local government.” ComDev would focus on less-confrontational issues and seek input from the community, thereby shielding workers from additional risk. “I didn’t want officials being confronted by gangsters and seen to be people who were part of networks spying on gangs,” Vawda said. “We couldn’t expose officials to that. We wanted to set up the notion that our officials cared, that they could work with communities, that there was a network of progressives that offered an alternative.”

Vawda and Toms decided to move forward with an area-based strategy, approaching neighborhoods with offers to build community partnerships by asking residents—through community groups and alongside their councillors and managers responsible for community services—to make critical decisions about the kinds of programs and projects their neighborhoods valued most. The participatory element would help build trust and aimed to forge new norms of engagement between community and the city council.

Vawda summarized his team’s approach: “There was a debate about whether we were taking on the gangs or not,” he said. “And we were. But we were not taking them on as gangs but the predominance of their influence ... What we were trying to do was reclaim public services in the name of the community and [establish] that the community has a right to shape them, to be a party to the processes involved. The rehabilitation from passive recipients of public services ... to active citizens shaping community would, we believed, undermine the ‘Robin Hood’ gang mythology that had taken its place in the intervening years.”

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

Before Vawda and Toms could begin implementing their plan, they had to persuade finance officials to revise the way the city managed departmental budgets. They wanted to be able to go to a community and say, “We have this much to spend, and you can help decide how best to allocate the funds.” Traditionally, directors of subordinate departments like housing and health had absolute control over their budgets, with significant autonomy and the ability to influence political decisions in council. That left Vawda relatively powerless, with the task of persuading different departments to communicate with one another and carry out intervention in a

coordinated manner. He needed a financial approach that could offer more space for community-based decisions concerning public resource allocation.

By 1998, under Vawda’s leadership, ComDev had persuaded the city’s manager of finance to allocate each department’s budget by district. That change enabled him to judge the effectiveness of development funding by pairing the spending data for each neighborhood with health and socioeconomic indicators for that particular area. ComDev’s finance division established an integrated budgeting framework for determining initial budget allocations by neighborhood. The framework enabled the planning department to fund many projects— notably, the Dignified Places program, a campaign to upgrade the public spaces in the six zones identified by ComDev. Manenberg and Hanover Park were part of that program.

Area Coordinating Teams

Vawda, Toms, and the ComDev staff next created the Area Coordinating Teams (ACTs). The teams comprised local councillors, city officials from all divisions of the city, officials of other spheres of government, and leaders of community-based organizations who met monthly in order to gather information on local conditions and service-delivery plans and to discuss potential courses of action. The meetings were open to the public and functioned as forums for city officials and local leaders to discuss development projects and coordinate implementation across departments and local organizations in accordance with the wider needs of the community. Vawda designed the meetings as open forums in order to give voice to residents and so as not to enter into direct confrontation with the gangs, and ComDev actively recruited the community and religious leaders in order to ensure that key stakeholders were present.

The first opportunity to deploy the new program arose in the summer of 1999, when City Manager Boraine received an especially large number of complaints about poor services from local councillors of the Hanover Park neighborhood near Manenberg. The councillors appealed to Boraine for improvements in street cleaning, road repairs, and sewer systems, and they voiced anger about housing shortages and lack of development. With Boraine's support, Vawda and Toms made plans to launch the first ACT in the fall, as a response to the outcry. They would begin with Hanover Park, a community with many vocal community-based organizations, before attempting the more difficult challenge of opening an ACT in Manenberg.

Persuading neighborhood organizations to play constructive roles proved a challenge at first. The communities already had associations and organizations that were providing a variety of social services, arts, cultural events, and sports. Committed local activists typically led those community groups, and religious leaders from both the Muslim and Christian populations played roles by organizing youth activities. Individually, the organizations did not wield enough influence to threaten the gangs' influence or control over large parts of the community. However, the scarcity of resources and common project goals often created hostility between the local organizations. If the ACTs were to succeed, they would need to coordinate, complement the efforts of the rival community groups, and determine common goals that were independent of gang influence.

As Vawda and Toms prepared to launch the Hanover Park ACT, a local tragedy created an opening in Manenberg. In August 1999, a tornado swept through the Cape Flats, with Manenberg at the center of the destruction. Community-based organizations called for the city to help with emergency aid and

reconstruction, and Vawda's team coordinated the city's response. The devastation was severe, and the gangs were so preoccupied with their own internal battles that they did not offer any response when government aid arrived. In the months following the rapid response to the disaster and the lengthy process of agreeing on rehabilitation plans, Vawda's staff established strong relationships with community leaders, local council representatives, and local line managers for each of the city's services in the area. Following the November 1999 opening of the Hanover Park ACT forum, Vawda and Toms prepared to open a similar forum in Manenberg the next spring.

Toms agreed to chair the Manenberg ACT in order to lend a prominent name and face to the proceedings. A well-known and admired senior official in the city at the time, he also chaired the Hanover Park forum. Toms' initial goal was to begin a dialogue with the community about how to prioritize health, housing, and community service projects in the rebuilding efforts. Having Toms, the city's medical officer of health, as coordinator "said something to the community about how seriously we take [the ACT forum]," Vawda said.

Vawda needed to convene the right kinds of people so that the ACTs would be effective and benefit the community. He created a Development Facilitation Unit out of a community liaison unit made up of experienced community activists for facilitating meetings, managing the engagement of different parties and agencies to the community development processes, and scheduling follow-up actions based on agreements reached at ACT meetings. He enlisted ComDev senior staff member Russell Dudley to serve as ACT facilitator and map out which local organizations and projects existed in Manenberg. Dudley had worked with many community members in the aftermath of the

tornado and was familiar with the neighborhoods. The Development Facilitation Unit also surveyed city workers who had experience in the community and encouraged them to participate. With the help of councillor and longtime community activist Faldiela De Vries, Dudley identified influential local leaders and invited them to the forum.

The forums provided a meeting space for three distinct groups of stakeholders: The first group consisted of Dudley's unit and local line managers: both those under ComDev's purview—such as health, housing, and libraries—and those responsible for other basic services. The second group comprised members of community-based organizations and religious leaders. The third included ward and council representatives. Municipal government councils in South Africa consisted of two types of representatives: one elected by the local community and the other selected by parties based on the proportion of votes each party controlled in the council. Though the political representatives were supposed to act as intermediaries between the community and the service providers, many councillors did not know their roles and responsibilities, according to De Vries.

In each forum, the chairperson of the ACT worked with the local councillor for the community and discussed the budget for projects. The two used the feedback they received during the previous meeting to identify projects. Legally, the ACTs had no decision-making powers, but with greater information and improved cooperation with the community, city officials hoped to enhance the planning, monitoring, and integration of development efforts.

Toms scheduled monthly meetings—usually in the evenings so that those with daytime jobs could participate. Meetings took place at a central location in the community. Because many community members did not have cars or other

means of transportation, the local setting ensured higher attendance. The presence of upper-level managers also attracted participants, because such officials rarely visited communities like Manenberg. The meeting location within the communities increased local ownership of the forums and buttressed the notion that citizens could offer direction for their communities and, most important, be taken seriously, according to Vawda.

When the first meeting of the Manenberg Area Coordinating Team convened in March 2000, it did not go smoothly. Long ignored by government officials, community members hurled abusive language at the senior officials. They disputed Toms' authority and would not allow local line managers to speak. Vawda, recalling the first meetings, said local community groups were furious. "They said, 'We've had to be the front line against the gangs. For 20 years where were you?' They would just scream at us, literally just scream at us," he said. As community members came to realize that the ACT provided an opportunity to vent their frustrations and perhaps influence outcomes in their communities, participation in the meetings grew. Having a space to air grievances with senior members of city government was an important step in building partnerships between officials and the community, but the process took time and patience.

One ACT tenet was that residents must "own" decisions on planning and spending by participating in the discussions. Not everyone came to meetings with the skills to participate effectively, however, and some carried extra weight because of the power they wielded on the streets. Chipkin, the scholar who later became executive director of the Public Affairs Research Institute, observed, "In Manenberg, the model was monumentally naive because you were creating a participatory forum in a situation that was absolutely riven with gang violence and with

gangsters. You were creating an opening to a community that was deeply, deeply damaged and that was also dominated by all sorts of insalubrious characters.” At the same time, however, Chipkin noted that Vawda and Toms displayed an optimism that enabled them to persist despite the initial resistance and challenges.

During the first year of the ACT program in Manenberg, gang violence continued unabated. ComDev moved the neighborhood’s health clinic to neighboring Hanover Park to ensure the safety of staff, and the municipal government installed bulletproof windows and reinforced doors in other facilities because of the dangers of armed street fighting.

Coordination between the ACT forums and the police presented a significant problem for Toms. He invited police from the local precinct to attend the Manenberg meetings, but the South African Police Service did not answer to the municipal government, and Toms and Vawda wielded scant influence. The police also had their own initiatives, such as community policing forums. Toms reported to police officials various citizen concerns about violence, but no significant coordination ever developed.

Vawda and his team wanted the ACT meetings to focus on development and community participation rather than confront the gang problem directly. Direct confrontation might have provoked the gangs and made the forums into targets.

Two primary goals of the ACT were to help community members understand what resources the city could provide their district and to involve local civic groups in decision making. Forum participants then needed to agree on priorities and develop a plan of action according to the community’s needs. Aiming for inclusiveness, ComDev was careful to ensure that no single group of community organizers would benefit at the expense of others that might not be

represented at a particular meeting. Vawda and Toms enlisted Dudley’s facilitation unit to identify newly emerging groups that could help advance the collective decision-making process. Dudley’s unit also handled a public relations campaign that advertised the progress and outcomes of meetings to the rest of the community.

After several meetings, local community groups began to see that Vawda’s team had the ability to influence government policy making and to direct significant funds toward development projects in their area. Decisions that local groups made in the forums could translate directly to their programs. “There were real resources for this forum,” Chipkin recalled. “If it could reach decisions, it could allocate money to projects.” The ACT supported two established community organizations—the Manenberg People’s Centre and the Silvertree Community Centre—in projects that offered counseling for women and sports programs for youth. Toms helped coordinate a successful program that delivered library books through the health clinics. The ACT also worked with the municipal planning department to identify parks and other public spaces that needed upgrading and repair.

In an effort to involve as many community members as possible, ComDev also arranged smaller meetings to tackle specific issues and invited the organizations and individuals who had expressed concerns during the larger sessions. During the summer and fall of 2000, the directorate hosted workshops for associations whose focal points overlapped, so that the groups could coordinate their projects and avoid duplication of effort. By pooling their resources, groups that sponsored women’s rights, youth programs, and elder care could focus their activities on common goals. Those workshops, along with the larger ACT meetings, began to open lines of communication between the

municipal government and the community. The gangs did not feel threatened by the efforts, nor was there any sense that the meetings were beginning to undermine their influence—likely because the initial workshops were so small-scale.

Housing remained the community's greatest challenge. Overcrowding caused disputes between residents, and complaints often reached the forums. Much of the housing department's time was spent in "crisis management," according to Chipkin—most notably, dealing with the backlog of residents on the waiting list for government-owned properties.

Follow-up

Of the eight pilot ACTs that Vawda and Toms created in 1999 and 2000, the ACT forums in Manenberg and Hanover Park were the most successful. Their success rested on Toms' success at lobbying the city council and the line managers on the forums' behalf. After meetings, Toms, using his prominent position and profile in city government, would call on senior managers in different departments to respond to needs the communities had identified. He also phoned line managers in each department before ACT meetings to make sure they would attend. In other ACTs, the chairperson played a less prominent role in building support, and those ACTs' forums subsequently had much lower attendance rates. Vawda suggested that an official with less stature than Toms would have been unable to persuade city managers to send in additional street-cleaning or road maintenance teams or to agree to redirect resources.

ComDev encountered other problems in making the strategy work: although the directorate brought together three main city departments responsible for so-called development, many of the community's complaints had to do with other departments' maintenance responsibilities. Toms could

convince many of his colleagues on the executive committee to address particular problems, but there was no institutional structure that demanded the other directors' compliance.

Placing Toms as chairperson of the Manenberg Area Coordinating Team itself created a few difficulties. Such a high-profile figure served as public acknowledgment that Manenberg was in a state of crisis. Unions demanded higher pay for their workers in response to the exceptional conditions in zones like Manenberg's and for the longer hours required for attendance at ACT meetings. Vawda recalled, "You're asking officials who already carry huge loads of flak to come to extra meetings and have abuse hurled at them for their evenings." ComDev appealed to the city council for increases in pay for those staff in front-line service delivery positions and installed extra security in city facilities.

De Vries and Vawda agreed that during the first year, participants had begun to understand what government could do for them as well as existing limitations. De Vries said, "One of the reasons why the ACT worked was that people were taught how to engage with government, and both sides began to know how the other functioned." Local residents cited better communication among the NGOs, and Toms' written notes from the meetings indicated a move from reactive complaints to proactive solutions.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

The first year of the ACT forums in Manenberg coincided with the second democratic municipal election and a period of transformation in Cape Town's city government structure. In December 2000, following its victory in municipal elections, the Democratic Alliance Party eliminated ComDev and removed Vawda from his position as executive director. The Greater Cape Town metropolitan area's seven local

municipalities merged to become one local authority dubbed the “unicity,” and much of ComDev’s portfolio transferred to the new Department of Community Services. Although the ACTs survived the transition and Toms continued to chair the Manenberg forums, the Democratic Alliance viewed the forums as an initiative of its rival, the African National Congress, and limited political and financial support.

During the next two years, the meetings in Manenberg continued to develop, and the tenor in the community started to change. “There was a gradual transformation of the institution,” Chipkin said. “You could see it in terms of the minutes.” Toms’ meeting notes showed that gradually, grievances and complaints occupied less time on the agenda; and defining and coordinating future priorities took more-central roles. The changes coincided with the national government’s passage of the 2000 Municipal Systems Act, whose legislation called on municipalities to develop “integrated development plans” and outlined local governments’ obligation to enhance community participation in service delivery. The legislation also mandated community participation in the drafting of municipal budgets and in determinations of subsequent resource allocations. Toms noted that the new legislation and the Area Coordinating Teams shared a common mission, and he encouraged existing ACTs to form the basis for community involvement in the drafting of integrated development plans.

As the Democratic Alliance reduced support for the ACT program, the teams’ meetings lost their influence. By the end of 2001, only the Manenberg ACT was still meeting on a monthly basis. Toms and the other coordinators no longer had significant discretionary funding to support development projects. Despite the lack of government support, though, community-based

initiatives continued the coordinating efforts. A prominent NGO founded by De Vries—the Manenberg People’s Centre—published in 2002, *Manenberg Speaks*, a newspaper that highlighted good news from the community and aimed to give local residents a voice. Like-minded organizations actively lobbied for greater support from government and continued their increased coordination and planning of local projects and programs, including a youth development forum and an economic development forum.

ASSESSING RESULTS

ComDev’s experiment in coordinating development in Manenberg was able to bring together city officials, local councillors and community residents to identify priorities. By not openly challenging the gangs, the forums created an alternative space for government officials to clarify roles and responsibilities and offer the community an opportunity to shape the course of neighborhood development. Improved communications allowed for targeted improvements to delivery of services in accordance with the community’s wishes.

The extent to which the ACT forums made a difference in the confidence, social capital, or well-being of the community was difficult to measure, however. In a 2004 survey of Manenberg residents, more than 74% of respondents said that since the establishment of the ACTs, they had become more aware of the role of the city council. About half (51%) said communication *from the council to the community* had improved since the beginning of the program; 48% said communication *from the community to the council* had improved as a result of the ACTs. A slightly greater percentage (55.5%) said the ACTs held the council accountable.⁵ Aside from public opinion surveys, the directorate lacked clear data for measuring the impact of the ACTs on socioeconomic indicators.

Although Manenberg saw a steady decline in gang-related violence following the first year of the ACT program, it was difficult for officials to conclude whether the drop in shootings correlated with ComDev's activities. By the early 2000s, many of the gangs had settled their turf wars, as leaders came to understand that violence only drew greater government attention.

In 2005, after the killing of a student, a group of local activists joined together to form the Proudly Manenberg campaign and express their frustration with the persistent presence of gangs in the community. The campaign's goal was to carve out a space for the community that would be separate from gang life. Irvin Kinnes, a lifetime resident of Manenberg, had mediated intergang negotiations in the past. Kinnes joined with another young activist, Mario Wanza, to lead organized rallies that protested the violence. As a part of Proudly Manenberg, Wanza and Kinnes brought together Manenberg's local organizations in a way that was reminiscent of the Area Coordinating Teams. Just as the ACT had coordinated local civic organizations and development projects, Proudly Manenberg gathered key stakeholders in the community to chart a social and economic development plan that centered on local empowerment. Proudly Manenberg divided the community into zones and coordinated projects for education, business, environment, health, sports, arts, housing, safety, and other concerns. It began as a campaign that allied the various local organizations under one banner, charting new initiatives such as after-school projects for students and work programs for unemployed or recently paroled residents. Like the ACTs, Proudly Manenberg aimed to develop alternatives to gang life rather than address the gangs themselves. Kinnes said, "What we didn't do in the strategy was focus on the gangs. That was the success of the strategy." Wanza agreed: "You don't fight gangsterism and

crime by targeting gangs; you fight violence by targeting the root causes, which are unemployment [and] poverty."

In the first few years, Proudly Manenberg made significant progress in "edging out the gangs," as Kinnes put it. In 2007, when the provincial government provided financial support for the initiative and attempted to replicate it in other communities across the city, Wanza decided to develop Proudly Manenberg from a coordinating campaign into an established organization that could attract further investment. However, local NGOs that had been allies with Proudly Manenberg suspected that Wanza was taking from the government certain resources that should have gone to their own projects, and the ensuing fallout split the organization. Subsequently, the Manenberg People's Centre and many other local organizations pulled their support.

Though he was years removed from his role as director of ComDev, Vawda remained convinced that the ACT had provided the space for the community to take on an active coordinating role. "I think the intervention that we made had opened the wider process of communities reasserting themselves," he said.

REFLECTIONS

In Billy Cobbett, former director of housing for the municipality, reflected on the challenges of governing in Cape Town. "For all of the talk of its image as the mother city, Cape Town has this huge underclass," he said. First, the city had to define the limits of what the government could and should do, and then it could allow the local community to take a more active role. The persistent presence of gangs complicated the job of finding that balance. "Parallel systems of governance had emerged. If you don't deliver essential services, such as water or electricity, someone else will. In extreme cases—and Cape

Town had become an extreme case—this parallel governance extended to the allocation of the council’s housing stock, as well as dispensing arbitrary justice and dispute resolution. We needed to establish that the city council was in charge of the housing stock, not the gangs,” Cobbett said.

Ahmedi Vawda noted the influential role of Ivan Toms in developing the concept for the ACTs and implementing it with some success in Manenberg. Toms brought an air of legitimacy and respect to the effort by virtue of his reputation as a prominent physician and former antiapartheid activist in the area of community health. (Toms died of meningitis in 2008 at the age of 54.) Vawda was also quick to acknowledge the limitations of the ACT program but also argued that the Directorate of Community Development changed the lexicon that the community and government officials used. “I don’t think, in the end, we won against the gangs,” Vawda said. “But we got senior officials ... and community organizations to recast their role in relation to the state ... and to become a counterbalance to the gangs. I think if you look at something like Proudly Manenberg, it picks up off of that. ... We must see ourselves as complementary partners. I think the ACTs allowed [for that partnership].”

EPILOGUE

The City of Cape Town’s efforts to alleviate poverty and reduce urban violence took many forms in the decade following Vawda’s time as director of ComDev. The Democratic Alliance Party focused on tougher policing activities while in power in 2001 and 2002, and the African National Congress–led municipal government implemented many community-policing strategies from 2002 to 2006. No single strategy produced long-term success, and many of the efforts fell victim to political change as incoming administrations eliminated programs that predecessors had started.

One of the efforts that enjoyed significant support from the Democratic Alliance government was the Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) program in the township of Khayelitsha. Funded by the city with contributions from the government of Germany, the VPUU urban designers took an approach similar to ComDev’s that engaged the local community in sustainable development and improved security and service delivery. Beginning in 2006, the program mapped the perception of crime in the community, creating a baseline survey of the situation. The survey was followed by extensive consultation with community members regarding prioritization of the interventions. Michael Krause, VPUU team leader, said, “You have to get to know your stakeholders, set up an inclusive forum, and give them an opportunity to voice certain problems and provide oversight throughout the project period.” After creating a detailed action plan, the program established so-called sustainable neighborhoods in locations throughout the community that corresponded to areas with higher crime rates.

Khayelitsha’s VPUU began as a five-year program and received additional funding after demonstrating early success. The city also planned to expand the program to coloured communities, with Manenberg and Hanover Park at the top of the list. Krause emphasized the importance of sustainability and cautioned that results could not come overnight. “VPUU is by no means a quick fix,” he said. “It is a long-term intervention. Urban changes are 10- to 15-year processes.”

Despite the challenges that Cape Town’s many different community development measures faced, all of the programs that saw initial success featured several congruent themes—most notably, taking an integrated, area-based approach to development projects alongside active community participation and empowerment.

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- ¹ The percentage of households living in poverty is calculated in the City of Cape Town Report 2005 by using the 1996 census data and the Household Subsistence Level (HSL) measure, developed by the University of Port Elizabeth. HSL measures the income households require to purchase the goods and services necessary for a minimum standard of living. Keith Smith, "The Status of Cape Town: Development Overview," 2005, http://www.capetown.gov.za/en/stats/CityReports/Documents/Cape_Town_2025_and_2030/The_Status_of_Cape_Town_Development_Overview_19122005111348_359.pdf (14 December 2011).
- ² Mike Hough, "Urban Terror in South Africa: A New Wave?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 12:2 (2000): 67–75.
- ³ "Report, Community Development (3/2/1998), the Executive Committee, Manenberg Crisis," as cited in Steven Robins, "At the Limits of Spatial Governmentality: A Message from the Tip of Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 23:4 (2002): 666–689.
- ⁴ Laila Smith and Ahmedi Vawda, "Citizen vs. Customer: Different Approaches to Public Participation in Service Delivery in Cape Town," *Urban Forum* 14:1 (2003).
- ⁵ John J. Williams, "Citizenship, Community Participation and Social Change: The Case of Area Coordinating Teams in Cape Town, South Africa," *IDS Bulletin* 35:2 (2004): 19–25, <http://www.drc-citizenship.org/system/assets/1052734405/original/1052734405-williams.2004-citizenship.pdf?1289388845> (14 December 2011).

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