

# Training for peace

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After 300 years of colonialism, South Africa began its transition to democracy in April 1994. Among the legacies of the past are fractured communities that are out of touch with their cultures and traditions, shattered family structures, and a deep-rooted history of division. On top of this, South Africa also has been left with a culture in which violence is commonly used as an acceptable method of problem solving.

It is within the constraints of this environment that the Independent Projects Trust (IPT), an NGO, offers training in conflict-resolution skills. This training is delivered throughout the region of KwaZulu Natal and focuses on structures such as the following:

- South African Police Services and Community Police Forums
- School Boards, including Management Committees, principals, teachers, and pupils
- women's groups
- political parties
- traditional structures and grassroots leadership in rural areas.

In this paper, we focus on our work with traditional structures in rural areas.

## Background

The province of KwaZulu Natal is situated on the eastern seaboard of South Africa, and is bordered by Mozambique in the north and the former Transkei in the south. It occupies approximately one-tenth of South Africa's land mass and has a population of about 9.4 million. The region is characterised by hilly terrain, and the northern-most reaches are remote and often inaccessible by road. A large portion of the province is rural, and the IPT has three offices in these areas:

Port Shepstone in the south, Ulundi in the far north, and Empangeni in the north. The organisation's head office is in Durban, which is the urban centre of KwaZulu Natal.

Most people in the region are Zulu speakers, and it is the second most densely populated region after Gauteng. Although there is significant economic development, this is largely concentrated round the port of Durban and the Richards Bay and Empangeni area. Important crops are sugar and citrus, but the associated activities do not generate enough employment, and it is estimated that the unemployment rate in rural KwaZulu is as high as 70 per cent. Some 46 per cent of all households depend on remittances from male family members who work as contract labourers on the mines and in the industries of Gauteng. The continuation of this system of migrant labour exacerbates the spread of HIV/AIDS: the region has the highest rate of infection in South Africa, as high as 40 per cent in some rural areas.

Infrastructure is – at best – rudimentary, with little or no provision of running water, or access to electric power outside the urban areas. The average monthly per capita income is R210, while the household subsistence income is estimated at R900 per month. Approximately one million children do not attend school.

KwaZulu Natal has a history of political violence which dates back to the 1980s and frequently threatens to undermine the stability of the new dispensation. At risk of over-simplifying things, it can be said to have arisen from the mid-1980s, when the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) sought to consolidate its influence in the province, against the growing support for Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the United Democratic Front (UDF), both aligned with the African National Congress (ANC). The IFP also threw its weight behind the effort of the National Party to crush the Mass Democratic Movements, a factor which had a long-term negative effect on relationships in the region.

The rural areas of KwaZulu Natal are dominated by traditional structures. This is a system of chiefs (*amakhosi*) and headmen (*indunas*) who exert a major influence over rural life. The rural areas are generally controlled by the IFP, and the urban areas by the ANC. There is continuing tension between the political parties in the province, which is likely to increase as the second general election approaches in 1999.

It is against this backdrop that the IPT trains in rural areas and gives community workers the skills to help their own communities to handle disputes in an effective and peaceful manner.

## Definition of community-based peace workers

Rural areas in KwaZulu Natal have been scarred by years of deprivation, and then further damaged by internecine violence. It is critical that we begin to build peace mechanisms into community structures. Little development takes place where there is war and, left unchecked, communities then enter a downward spiral from which there is little hope of return.

The successful peace structures in this region have generally had spontaneous origins, and have often comprised two-person teams, one from each of the combatant groups – for instance the ANC and IFP. These are the types of structure that have the most chance of success in terms of a sustainable peace.

A spokesperson for one of the longest-surviving peace structures in this region gave the following qualities as essential for aspiring peace workers and a successful process:

- fear of God
- honesty
- ‘knowing the opposition’, understanding and accepting them
- a willingness to ‘take it slowly’ and handle setbacks
- both parties must be fearless and committed enough to appear in public together
- neutral zones must be identified for joint meetings
- hard-liners may be elected into office, and should be kept in the process and visible at all times
- peace must have a high value for both parties
- small peace cells must be active throughout the community and able to react to crises.

Peace workers at the grassroots level face unique problems. They will be beset by daily challenges, and their constituency – which is usually at the bottom of the pile in the struggle for food, water, and shelter – is often sustained by the violence. This violence may also serve the needs of middle leadership, because it draws the focus from them and any failure on their part to deliver services. Thus peace workers battle continually against adversity. They need to be brave and have a deep commitment which will sustain them through the failures which characterise this type of work.

## **Training community-based workers and strengthening existing social structures**

The type of training and skills transfer in which we are involved is long term, tedious, and difficult to measure. Both the training and funding agencies must have a realistic picture of these difficulties.

We have had some success in training for changing attitudes. For this we concentrate on the following modules:

- communication: effective skills, including active listening skills
- assertiveness: in a country where confrontation is the norm, assertiveness is a vital component for changing attitudes
- problem-solving skills
- co-operative behaviour and consensus-building.

There are certain steps that it is helpful to follow. Firstly, it is essential to work with both sets of combatants, in order to give each group an equal opportunity to provide community trainers. Secondly, the training organisation must be accepted as impartial and trusted by all the groups involved. Openness and integrity on the part of the training agency are imperative.

Our strategy at IPT is to meet with each party to conflict and share our plan, which is to provide training services which will foster skills and assist the parties to manage a changing and stressful environment. Having done that, we work with as many key players at grassroots level as possible, and draw these from all interest groups in the community, such as women's groups, youth, development committees, and so on. The provision of this skills training serves a two-fold purpose, since it also strengthens community ties for people to begin to work together, to realise that they share a common vision and purpose, and start to interact with each other on issues of concern to the community.

### **What does and does not work?**

Where a community has some structures of its own, and has not been too depleted by violence and poverty, it is often possible to enable and support structures which will contribute to peace making in the area. It is, however, impossible to do so without some of the following:

- a spontaneous desire for peace among the people at grassroots level
- strong leadership from both sides of the conflict to carry the process forward

- some external support
- hope of real change and transformation in the community, through the provision of jobs and infrastructure, which will assist in creating new psychological attitudes
- grassroots and middle leadership who support the process
- media which are prepared to play a constructive role.

In conclusion, our experience is that this type of work is never easy and there are no 'quick fixes'. Long-term commitment and dedication are needed. No 'outsider', such as a training organisation, can bring peace: this has to start in the hearts and minds of the affected community.