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Volunteering for social transformation?

Understanding the volunteer response to the xenophobic attacks of 2008: Implications for democracy in South Africa

by

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CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Background	3
Origins of the violence	6
Democracy in South Africa.....	8
Understanding the response	12
<i>Personal outrage</i>	14
<i>Recognition of the limitations of the state</i>	15
<i>Opportunities for engagement and infrastructure to facilitate it</i>	16
<i>Recognition of the lived condition of the urban poor</i>	18
<i>Role of local leadership</i>	19
<i>Personal transformation and consciousness</i>	19
Lessons for promoting participatory democracy and sustaining civic participation and active citizenship.....	20
<i>Advocacy for civic participation</i>	21
<i>Acknowledgement of potential of volunteering & social activism to heal divisions</i>	22
<i>Developing a culture of active citizenship</i>	23
<i>Developing and nurturing opportunities for engagement</i>	24
Conclusion.....	24
References	25

Introduction

For many people in South Africa, the xenophobic attacks represented a shocking moment in which the fractured nature of South African society was laid bare. At the same time, the civil society response to the attacks made visible the potential for solidarity with communities directly affected, and for joint action across many different levels of society. Through humanitarian and activist actions, people expressed their opposition to xenophobia, made their voices heard and presented a strong counterpoint to a state that demonstrated inertia and lack of care in respect of foreign nationals.

May and June 2008 should be seen as a time in which South Africa could take stock of its gains and its failures as a democratic and developmental state. It also provided the nation with an opportunity to reflect on the enormous potential that lies within its citizens when they are mobilised to work towards common goals, to speak out against injustice, and to build cohesion.

This paper describes the responses to the attacks of May 2008, and provides an analysis of what this moment in South Africa's history means for participatory democracy, active citizenship and the development of a vibrant civil society.

Background

On 11 May 2008 a group of young men in Alexandra stormed a hostel in London Road, and attacked any person not deemed to be a true South African. Within days the violence had spread to other parts of Alexandra as well as to Diepsloot, Ramaphosa, Primrose, Germiston and Tembisa. Later in the month and into June, reports of xenophobic violence were received from KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape.

On 18 May Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuavhe, a Mozambican national, tried to leave Johannesburg with his brother-in-law, Kanze. As they tried to make their way out of Ramaphosa informal settlement, they were cornered by a mob that stabbed, kicked and knocked Kanze unconscious and then doused Nhamuavhe with petrol and set him alight. The picture of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuavhe being burned alive in a manner reminiscent of the final days of apartheid, while bystanders laughed at the *kwerekwere* and photographers clicked away, became a symbol of the xenophobic violence and remains etched in the memories of many South Africans.

Over the next few weeks, 62 people were killed, two-thirds of them foreign nationals. The South African government's response was initially one of denial, confusion and inaction. Various government spokespeople initially attributed the violence to criminal elements, to the influence of the media, and then to a 'third force' said to be fuelling the attacks. Political parties blamed each other for stoking the violence. On 15 May 2008, four days after the first attacks were made, the Cabinet issued a statement

indicating that the government would fulfil its obligations to refugees under the Geneva Protocol on Refugees. On the same day the Gauteng Provincial Government announced that its departments had formed a Joint Operation Centre to deal with the situation in Alexandra Township following the violence and xenophobic attacks in that area, and would focus on providing humanitarian assistance.¹ On May 21, then-President Thabo Mbeki approved a request from the SAPS for the deployment of armed forces against the attacks in Gauteng. It was the first time since the end of apartheid in 1994 that the democratic government had ordered troops on to the streets to quell unrest. In June up to 10 000 foreign nationals were ultimately relocated in temporary shelters in and around Johannesburg and in other affected cities. Some weeks later government officials instructed foreign nationals to return to the communities in which they had been attacked, or to return to their home countries.

In contrast to the violence and the slow response by government, there was an immediate and positive response from ordinary people living within the affected communities, as well as those outside of the affected communities.

In both cases it was initially ordinary people whose actions signalled that they were opposed to the attacks, that they wanted to be involved in some way and that they refused to simply be spectators to the violence.

Inside the affected communities people responded to the attacks in a range of ways. For instance, a number of the victims were given refuge by the community members. Most of the attacks happened during the night and the victims were assisted by the local community people. Some communities went to the camps where the displaced people were settled and requested that the people who had been displaced come back to their homes. Volunteers helped them to reconstruct their shacks and homes. One of the most moving responses within communities became evident when neighbours helped victims to reclaim their possessions that had been looted.

Outside the affected communities, thousands of people resorted to philanthropic action. Individuals donated food, blankets and other items to the relevant police stations and churches to which the victims had fled. In various companies, individuals were raising money, collecting clothes, canned food and blankets to take to the shelters. In shopping malls and churches people collected basic necessities to take to the displaced foreigners.

As time went on, reports were received of a much wider variety of individual actions sparked by the violence. For instance, according to the Times of 11 July 2008, a range of African musicians including South African artists such as HHP, Simphiwe Dana, Skwatta Camp, MXO, Pro-Kid and Relo collaborated on a new song "Not in our lifetime" that

¹ <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2008/08051610451002.htm>

speaks out against xenophobia. Siyabonga “Slikour” Metana of Skwatta Camp fame said, “we should unite and assess ourselves. No African country is an island.” (Molefe, 2008)

Students and staff at the University of Cape Town and other higher education institutions became involved in a wide range of support actions including assessment of needs at refugee camps, mobilising volunteers to provide humanitarian support, facilitating protests and providing a platform for debate and discussion.

As the weeks went by and displaced foreign nationals were housed in temporary shelters, volunteers also played an important role in monitoring the conditions in shelters, reporting on problems encountered when supplies were not delivered and publicising the hardships that displaced people were facing as the winter started to set in. In a number of cases volunteers were instrumental in alerting the media and non-governmental agencies to the pressure that provincial governments were putting on displaced people to return to the communities in which they had been attacked, or return to their countries of origin, resulting in at least one court case that successfully halted government plans to move displaced people back to communities until such a time as the communities were deemed safe.

May 2008 must rank as the moment in South Africa’s democratic history when the dream of the rainbow nation was finally shattered. It also ranks as a moment where South Africa could be proud of its civil society response, and where it could reflect on the gains and limitations of the democracy it has developed.

In the months that followed, a number of research reports and commentators attempted to explain the origins of the attacks. What is missing in the academic literature pertaining to the attacks is an analysis of the overwhelming response by those living in South Africa to those affected by the xenophobic violence.

This paper proposes that the events of May and June 2008 not only confronted South Africa with the consequences of persistent racism, growing inequality and the failure of the state, after 14 years of democracy, to deliver basic services to its poorest communities. The events also produced a response from ordinary citizens who, momentarily, had the opportunity to act on their perceptions of an uncaring state and express their solidarity with the victims of the attacks.

The paper was prompted by VOSESA’s interest in documenting volunteering and civic service in the SADC region. The research was carried out in an ad hoc manner during May and June 2008. Short interviews were conducted with people who volunteered their time and contributed food and clothing as part of the humanitarian effort, those who were located in the communities in which the attacks were taking place and volunteered in support of the victims, and those who participated in the marches called in protest against the attacks and in solidarity with foreign nationals living in South Africa.

Origins of the violence

Within the first few days of the violence, perpetrators, and those who supported the violence, tried to explain the sources of the violence. Through the media, perpetrators attributed the attacks to the 'fact' that "foreigners are taking jobs, houses and our women".

A week or two later academics were picking up on the same explanations in an attempt to explain the context in which the violence had spread. The HSRC (2008) noted that some of the reasons given for the xenophobic attacks included poor service delivery, lack of access to housing and corruption in the allocation of housing (also discussed by Silverman and Zack, 2008), lack of access to adequate jobs and the idea that foreigners are taking jobs².

Gelb (2008) and Pillay (2008) took this analysis further, claiming that poverty alone cannot explain the violence, but that relative deprivation and inequality need to be seen as key contributors to the context in which the violence took place. As Gelb noted, "It is surely not simply that people are poor which leads them to attack other poor people., but instead the sense of unfairness engendered by inequality, of being discriminated against, which creates the resentments and hostility towards those perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be better off or to have received preferential treatment" (2008: 79-80).

However, Maré (1992) points to the entrenched nature of ethnic social identity in the South African psyche, following centuries of colonialism, slavery and apartheid, inextricably associated with violence. "Ethnic social identities and ethnic group consciousness have now been tied inextricably to violence in South Africa. The racism of colonial conquest and slavery and the years of segregation in the Union of South Africa; the sacred history of the Afrikaner volk with its claims to a God-given mission in Africa; and the vicious consequences of the implementation of apartheid – a policy based on separation – all these repressively enforced 'group politics' have involved violence."

The context also needs to be understood against the history of South Africa's relationship with the rest of Africa, and particularly with Southern African countries. South Africa has a long and complex relationship with the people coming across its borders from neighbouring countries, most clearly shaped by the mining industry and the policies of the Chamber of Mines aimed at soliciting and controlling its labour supply.

The growth of the mining industry, particularly the gold mining industry in the late 19th and early 20th century was dependent on the use of cheap labour. Much of this labour was sourced from within South Africa's borders, through the Hut Taxes and later the Land Act (1913), which pushed Africans off of their land and forced them to enter waged

² It should be noted that the HSRC raises this point uncritically, without dissecting the belief held by the South Africans they interviewed that South Africans are entitled to jobs.

employment, often in the mines of Johannesburg. However, the mines required still more labour and sourced this by actively recruiting workers from neighbouring countries (particularly Mozambique and Malawi [formerly Nyasaland]) and as far afield as West Africa.³ In order to maintain their hegemony over labour, the mining barons, supported by the Chamber of Mines devised a divide and rule strategy that housed African workers in separate compounds, on an ethnic basis.

This historical relationship produced a set of social relations between local and foreign nationals that persists into the present. Since 1994, the government's stance on immigration has been ambivalent. As Gqola (2008) notes, the South African government has encouraged European and South American immigrants to enter the country, welcoming their skills into the economy. On the other hand it has been unenthusiastic about the increasing number of immigrants from African countries that have crossed its borders, seeing in them largely as surplus bodies that it must house, feed and clothe.

Gqola (2008) goes on to describe how the South African state has bred a brand of cynicism, which runs through the various levels of government officials that deal with immigrants. A range factors point to a pathology that lies at the heart of government's approach to the immigration of foreign nationals from African countries. This includes the inconsistent application of immigration policy and a refusal to review it, significant delays in processing documentation for foreigners, a lack of compliance with UN regulations and protocols on the treatment of refugees, and reported police attacks that have been directed at foreigners over many years.

While all of these factors go some way to explain the context in which the violence took place, they do not acknowledge that this was a profoundly grassroots, populist response and they gloss over the fact that the attitudes of the perpetrators to foreign nationals were – and are – prevalent among significant numbers of South Africans in affected communities and elsewhere (Glaser, 2008). They also do not explain why there was such a strong response against the xenophobia attacks by citizens and residents of South Africa across the country.

In order to place the civil society response to the attacks in context, a brief analysis of the nature of South Africa's democracy is necessary.

³ According to Innes (1984:25), by 1873 approximately 30 000 Basotho had been forced, through dispossession and taxation, to seek work in South Africa, including on the mines; by 1893 about 75% of African workers on the gold mines of the Rand were Mozambicans (1984:51). Following efforts by the mining industry to control the supply of African labour by cutting wages and through the government's passing of the Pass Law of 1895, Mozambican workers withdrew their labour and the Chamber of Mines tried to recruit labour from as far afield as Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Gold Coast. In the early 1900s, persistent labour shortages were met by importing indentured labour from China (from 1904).

Democracy in South Africa

Fourteen years before the violent attacks that began in Alexandra, millions of South Africans stood in long queues to cast their first democratic vote. While this moment was a triumph in South Africa's history, it was but a first step on the road to negotiating what a democracy in South Africa means for those who live in it.

The struggle for a democratic South Africa was carried out with extensive grassroots participation and it involved a great deal of violence. It was characterised by the participation of a wide range of grassroots and community based civil society organisations such as street committees, student organisations and other youth formations, banned political parties, active alternative media, and trade unions. Thus before the first democratic elections, South Africa had a strong and vibrant civil society that provided opportunities for and encouraged people's participation in service of the cause of freedom and democracy. Most of these organisations were closely aligned with the ANC in exile and shared a broad vision of a democratic South Africa.

Since 1994 when the ANC ascended to power through democratic elections, civil society has become a shadow of its former self. As Zuern (2000) states, "the establishment of formal democracy has led to a weakening of participatory institutions within leading organizations in civil society and political society as well as the structures of the state itself, the creation of a formal system of democracy has actually led to a decrease in popular forms of political participation." Part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that civil society leaders moved into government or took advantage of private sector opportunities as Buhlungu (2004) notes. Donor funding, which had sustained a strong and vibrant non-governmental sector prior to 1994, decreased following the establishment of the democratic state, with foreign aid flowing directly to the new government. Furthermore, as the ANC, which had been the major political partner of most civil society organisations, moved into government, it seemed natural for civil society organisations to embark on a partnership with government rather than continue to play a critical role as independent voices (Barchiesi, 2004) that would keep leadership accountable. The 1990s saw the rise of active social movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum and the Treatment Action Campaign, but by and large, the vast numbers of ordinary citizens have not seen themselves as active, critical citizens engaging meaningfully in their society and holding government to account. This led to a situation in which, as Ramphela (2008) notes, South African citizens handed over responsibility for the wellbeing of the country's democracy solely to the government.

This raises questions as to what we mean by democracy and what the implications are for South Africans and others that live within the borders of South Africa.

The anti-apartheid struggle and the intensive negotiations leading up to the 1994 elections paved the way for a strong constitutional democracy. South Africa's democracy is embedded in institutions that include a progressive Constitution that is

upheld by various Chapter 9 institutions such as the Constitutional Court, the South African Human Rights Commission, and the Commission on Gender Equality. In addition, its democracy is protected by the separation of powers at the executive, judicial and legislative levels and is underpinned by regular elections that allow for participation of all citizens 18 years and older.

The Constitution guarantees *inter alia* the right to freedom of association, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, belief and opinion, and thus creates the environment for participatory democracy between five-yearly elections. However, this does not necessarily translate into mass or popular participation in decision making. Robust civic participation requires spaces in which people's voices and concerns can be heard, and opportunities through which people can participate meaningfully in advocating for social justice, human rights and peace at all levels of society. In the absence of a vibrant civil society, the state makes decisions on behalf of the nation with or without people's participation.

While participatory democracy is thus a critical and necessary component of a well-functioning democracy, the reality is that all too often, citizens rely on the Constitution to protect their rights and interests, overlooking the importance of public participation. As Ramphela (2008) notes, "We have obligations as citizens of this democracy to hold our leaders accountable for living up to the commitments we made in our national constitution and as members of the international community of nations. We cannot be free riders and then get shocked when we wake up to violent outbreaks".

From the perspective of government, the 11 institutions created by the Constitution (six established by Chapter 9 of the Constitution and five given separate constitutional mandates) can be a thorn in its flesh if they are headed by independent-minded people. In this regard, former education minister Kader Asmal, commented recently that the Chapter 9 institutions and associated bodies should not be headed by "party hacks or friends", but cautioned that "by and large governments want bodies to be amenable".⁴ In addition, as the Centre for Conflict Resolution (2004) points out, in many African states the politicization of the civil society groups makes it difficult to determine the boundaries of what civil society is and what it is not, and to foster the independence of civil society. This makes the role of participatory democracy even more critical to ensure that the institutions entrusted with monitoring adherence to the Constitution are accountable for their decisions.

Ideally, therefore, in a well-functioning democracy, state and civil society should have some leverage over one another to ensure that the state is held accountable by its citizens. Ncube (2008) explains that in functioning democracies, the state's political domination and force is ably regulated by strong and inclusive institutional structures and processes, respect for the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and human rights and

⁴ Quoted in *Business Day*, 15 May 2009, p5.

a vibrant and independent civil society. DPSA (2005) comments that the existence of a strong civil society working alongside a capable state is seen as necessary in order to civilize the state and entrench democracy.

While the parliamentary process is intended to go some way in this regard, the system of proportional representation in South Africa makes it difficult for citizens to hold individual parliamentarians to account. Furthermore, the holding of *imbizos* at community level is intended to provide citizens with opportunities to express their concerns to government, but in practice these have become occasions on which government representatives inform citizens of their plans without listening carefully to grassroots opinions.

It is also important to note that constitutional democracy in South Africa is today understood within the context of a developmental state – by which is meant a strong state, seen as necessary for the effective delivery of a development agenda for the country. While resources have been allocated from the fiscus for the roll-out of services and support to poor communities, service delivery in South Africa has been compromised by a number of factors that include insufficient planning and implementation capacity in provincial and local government, corruption, and a lack of alignment in the implementation of national and provincial goals. In the face of a depleted civil society sector, social movements such as a range of concerned citizen's groups and the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s to champion the demand for services in informal settlements and other poor communities, and achieved some success. However, these tend to be relatively small groups of activists who advocate on behalf of the poor. What is still missing from South Africa's socio-political fabric is a vibrant and multi-faceted landscape of community-based and non-governmental organisations through which a multiplicity of interests can be represented and in which people participate in many different ways to support human rights and social development, and advocate for the delivery of services.

In May 2008 one consequence of a weakened civil society, the continued marginalisation of the voices of the poor and the lack of improvement in their lives, became clear: in a number of communities, poor and unemployed South Africans took out their dissatisfaction, anger and frustration on people who they perceived as appropriating resources and opportunities that they felt were rightfully 'theirs' and who were even more vulnerable than they were by virtue of being foreign nationals.

Glaser (2008) describes this in his chapter "(Dis)connections: Elite and popular 'common sense' on the matter of 'foreigners'" as follows: "the xenophobic discourse current in South Africa today represents an authentic effort by the subaltern classes to make sense of their condition" (2008: 56). He notes that although there were claims by government of a third force operating in these communities, there was no evidence that the perpetrators were incited by political leaders as was the case in Rwanda's genocide as well as in the DRC and the Ivory Coast. The xenophobic attacks were thus clearly an

expression of intense dissatisfaction at grassroots level. Furthermore, as Dr. Ashwin Desai noted in a seminar at the University of Johannesburg in April 2009, it needs to be considered whether, when legitimate means of expressing discontent at the failure of the state to take care of the needs of its citizens are limited or are not acknowledged, violence becomes the only means of being heard.

It is within this context that this paper seeks to understand the nature and significance of the civil society response to the xenophobic attacks of May and June 2008. Our argument is that a diverse range of South Africans and other residents wanted to express their solidarity with the victims of the attacks and to express their opposition to government inaction that had, on the one hand, fuelled the anger against foreign nationals and, on the other, demonstrated a lack of care for the victims. Their solidarity and opposition took a wide range of forms and served to show, briefly, how people's participation can be mobilised when there is an enabling environment to support it.

Understanding the response

Linda Twala, a community leader in Alexandra felt he had to respond to what was going on in his community. He loaded groceries into his car and drove to his neighbours asking them to contribute. As a community leader, people respected him and when they saw him assisting, they also joined him. Felicitas Maphuta who volunteered at the Alexandra Police Stations said in an interview, "We all came together as members of the community and volunteered at the Alex Police Station. We gave out blankets, sanitary pads, disposable nappies and food to the victims. Other members of the community cooked food for the victims and also encouraged and comforted them. We volunteered because of the Ubuntu spirit that we had. We believed in humanity, that these people that were being victimised were also human." Many of the people were afraid of the perpetrators but wanted to support the victims and so got involved in volunteering.

Susan Haris of Woodmead had been stunned by the news reports of the violence in the nearby township of Alexandra. In response she went to the kitchen and started cooking soup which was delivered to the Alexandra Police Station¹. She continued to make soup all week with the assistance of her family and five volunteers, themselves refugees who have sought safety with the Haris family. The Haris family represents thousands of other ordinary South Africans and non-nationals who flocked to churches and police stations offering their time and skills to deal with the crisis. Thousands of others collected food and blankets; and sent around emails and smses requesting friends and colleagues to do the same.

The xenophobic attacks in Alexandra and elsewhere in Gauteng triggered a spontaneous and multi-faceted response from individuals, organisations and institutions. In his column in the *Mail & Guardian*, Justice Malala commented that "an underground movement began to take shape. Men and women began sending email and text messages to organise taking food, clothes and other necessities to shelters set up by the police and churches."

University response

The initial response from universities was similar to that of other organisations. They became sites for collection of goods and were instrumental in providing some form of infrastructure that allowed individuals to respond so generously. Wits University through its volunteer programme collected goods for victims. Students from the University of Pretoria also launched a Tukkies Drop-Off where students and Pretoria residents were able to bring donations for the displaced foreigners.

Students and staff at the University of Cape Town became involved in a wide range of support actions. These included running a health assessment across all known sites at which victims had congregated, using a rapid needs assessment tool developed by Medicins sans Frontiers. The site details were accumulated by the Treatment Action Campaign and volunteers mobilised by SHAWCO Health. Within 24 hours the extent of the crisis became clear with 33 sites assessed and information from all those sites captured and assessed to report to various role-players in the response. The assessment included information on, inter alia, numbers of men, women and children, shelter, food provision, health needs, health services and safety. Up until this point the City of Cape Town had no idea of the scale and complexity of the situation (how many people were involved, their living circumstances and health concerns). The framework developed was later adopted by Disaster Management as a basis for monitoring all the sites. Subsequently modifications were made by the Civil Society Coalition to include questions on the provision of health services in the area, visits of health officials, and access to first aid at the sites. (UCT 2009)

In the following weeks SHAWCO Health also identified the sites most in need of extra health services and arranged for mobile clinics and teams of students and doctors to go out and run weekend and evening clinics. SHAWCO Health also developed and distributed materials to help site co-ordinators identify and treat diarrhoea, scabies and TB outbreaks, as well as information on medical 'red flags' – what to refer, how quickly, and to where.

Response from religious organisations

Religious organisations were amongst the first to respond to the attacks and were instrumental in providing an initial infrastructure to cope with the crisis. Many responded as a matter of necessity when fleeing refugees arrived at churches such as the Primrose Methodist Church and the Central Methodist Church (which already houses vulnerable immigrants) for sanctuary. Churches were thrust into action as they opened their doors to the refugees, necessitating mobilisation of their networks in order to cope with the influx. Religious organizations assisted predominantly by collecting food, clothing and other items and taking victims to the refugee centres. Religious groups were also instrumental in mobilising people to assist in the crisis by distributing food packs, cooking at the centres and raising funds to buy food and other essentials.

Among the religious groups that were involved are Elshaddai Hands of Compassion, the Rhema Church, and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa through its various branches. VOSESA conducted some interviews with people representing religious organizations. On being asked why they are getting involved in this crisis, Pastor Juliana of Elshaddai Hands of Compassion explained that "we are moved with compassion when we see so many people suffering like this. Christ was compassionate and as Christians we are moved by compassion when we see people suffering."

Islamic Relief hosted a Refugee Integration Workshop in conjunction with the city of Johannesburg, on Africa Day (Sunday, 25 May 2008) in Johannesburg. The event was part of ongoing efforts to call on government to combat violence against refugees and asylum-seekers in South Africa.

They were also well organised, large-scale responses from faith-based organisations such as the Jesuit Refugee Services, the Union of Jewish Women, Sri Sathya Sai Organisation of Lenasia South, and Yusuf Mustafa Institute for Islamic Services.

Formal NGO response

Most of the individual responses to the attacks initially took the form of humanitarian aid including spontaneous donations of food, clothing and other forms of assistance. Very quickly, however, non-governmental organizations such as the South African Red Cross Society (SARCS) and Gift of the Givers became involved on a much larger scale. The participation of NGOs provided much needed disaster management expertise and infrastructure that was not forthcoming from government departments and could not be provided by individuals. These organizations were able to provide tents, sanitation facilities and health care and provided additional manpower to handle the collection and distribution of goods to the refugees. Without their contribution the response would have been unlikely to move beyond collection and distribution of groceries and clothes.

The South African Red Cross Society (SARCS) Emergency Appeal was launched on Friday 16 May 2008. By Monday 19 May, the organisation had responded to the needs of 6000 refugees. SARCS volunteers and staff provided first aid and distributed mainly food, blankets, toiletry kits and baby products.

Mobile doctors volunteering through Medicines Sans Frontiers (MSF) treated 2500 patients and distributed blankets, hygiene kits and plastic sheeting to the sites where the needs were most dire.

NGOs also donated significant financial resources to the crisis. The Nelson Mandela Fund (NMF), the Mandela Rhodes Foundation, the 46664 campaign, as well as the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMF), donated R1 million to the Operation ReachOut project. NMF Chief Executive Officer, Achmat Dangor, noted that, "Our founder, Nelson Mandela, feels strongly that people who have already suffered violence should not continue to suffer these deprivations."¹

Response from the private sector

Large sums of money were raised through the private sector to help alleviate the hardships that were experienced by the displaced people. Standard Bank donated R3 million to the victims of xenophobic violence and its CEO, Jaco Maree, made the following statement: "As an organisation we strongly condemn the deplorable violence resulting from the xenophobic intolerance in South Africa at this time. The human suffering resulting from these mindless acts affects us all and we would like to express our deepest concern and sympathy for those members of our society who have been directly affected by these events. We are saddened by the plight of the victims of these outrageous acts."¹

Other companies that made cash or in-kind donations include MTN, which donated R1.5 million to the SA Red Cross and R670 000 worth of goods. Vodacom donated R400 000 to Operation ReachOut and also gave R100 000 to the Salvation Army. The Electronics group Altron donated R100 000 in cash and R100 000 in food. First National Bank gave R2 million to the Red Cross, Salvation Army and Medicines sans Frontiers. The Oppenheimer Memorial Trust also made a donation of R1 million when Mary Slack, daughter of the mining magnate Harry Oppenheimer went to the Primrose and Germiston police stations and was touched by the plight of the displaced people there. She explained that "I think it's absolutely shameful and I am hoping that the donation will provide relief in an immediate sense. I also hope it will normalise the situation and will go some way towards education." Oppenheimer Memorial Trust¹

In the context of a weakened civil society presence in South Africa and the relative lack of active participation that has been described above, how can this ‘movement,’ this sudden groundswell of participation, be explained? It is proposed in this paper that there were a range of factors that led to the involvement of a wide range of people in diverse activities in response to the attacks, and perhaps more importantly, that these offer lessons for sustained participation that goes beyond responding to emergency appeals.

Personal outrage

The first explanation is quite simply personal outrage at the attacks. Throughout the interviews conducted there was a sense of anger at how particularly vulnerable people in society had been treated, a realisation of the injustice, and a need to stand up and say something about it. In relation to this there was a sense in which people were responding in order to restore a sense of humanity in communities.

“It is despicable that people are treated in this way. I want to stand up and say that not all South Africans are like that, not all South Africans think like that.” Marcher at Hillbrow Anti-Xenophobia March

“I am just shocked that people can treat other people this way. I had to do something.” Marcher at Hillbrow Anti-Xenophobia March

“These people are also human, they should not be treated like this. If there is a problem, it should be solved properly.” Volunteer at Alexandra Police Station

The media had an integral role to play in stimulating this outrage and sense of shock. The media was the first to alert the public, particularly those outside of the affected communities, to the attacks. There was wide coverage of the attacks on a daily basis on television, radio, newspapers as well as the internet.

The Star was the first newspaper to feature the violence on its front pages and was also the newspaper to publish the picture that came to symbolise the violence – that of the burning man. The pictures published were particularly brutal and as Eliseev (2008) points out, were reminiscent of the township violence that preceded the elections of 1994. According to Harber (2008) there was wide coverage of the human face of the victims. This was nowhere more evident than in the involvement of Times journalist Nkwali who, defying the journalist’s stance of no involvement, committed himself to helping the family of Nhamuavhe and ensuring that he was transported back to his family for a proper burial⁵. Newspapers followed the story, gave the victim a name and linked him to a family. The media thus played a particularly important role in invoking personal outrage amongst the broader population. Commenting of the role of

⁵ As reported in the Times on 8 June 2008.

journalists, Eliseev (2008) notes, “we brought the violence into the living rooms of the people. They couldn’t ignore it.”

One of the key factors of a democracy and of facilitating active participation is freedom of speech, measured in part by the independence of the media, one component of a vibrant civil society. In response to the violence, the media played a key role in highlighting the attacks and later in pointing to the lack of government response (see for instance Tau, 2008; Seshibedi, 2008). The media and the independence of the media are key factors necessary for the protection of democracy and for facilitating broader involvement in society. Newspapers such as *Vrye Weekblad* before 1994 demonstrated the importance of the media for a functioning democracy and this is something that must continue to be protected. Currently in South Africa there is a strong and relatively independent media that can and does play the role of highlighting challenges in South African society and holding government accountable.

Recognition of the limitations of the state

As has been argued in this paper, the attacks of May 2008 highlighted the limitations of constitutional democracy in producing opportunities for active participation by citizens. In the face of a strong constitutional democracy, citizens may in fact curtail their active participation – particularly when they come to rely on the protection offered by constitutional democracy and become complacent about their own participation in society. In contexts with a strong state and a weakened civil society this imbalance is even more pronounced.

South Africa is such a case, and the notion of the developmental state has meant that there is an underlying expectation among large sections of the population for the state to deliver on everything – jobs, housing, electricity, water and other services. This is nowhere more pronounced than in the ANC manifesto and the ANC’s Polokwane Conference decisions, which are now being implemented in government. The ANC very clearly sees government as the primary agent responsible for formal job creation and provision of housing and services, albeit in some form of partnership with civil society organisations (that act primarily as service delivery agents) and the private sector.

While the role of government is central in the provision of services and in playing a developmental role, a problem arises when citizens expect that government must and will deliver everything. It is particularly problematic when it creates a sense of entitlement that sees the beneficiaries of government service delivery as being only those that voted the leadership into power. The HSRC (2008) for instance noted that the South Africans who participated in their study felt that they were entitled to jobs. This suggests that the discourse of a strong developmental state that will deliver everything serves to undermine collective and individual initiatives to create opportunities for community and individual development.

In the aftermath of the first attacks, government leaders and officials were silent. When they did respond, their response was inadequate and very limited. Citizens and residents of South Africa were outraged at the lack of response from government as was noted in various newspaper articles, and academic reflections.

"I am appalled at the fact that government has done nothing. We have to step up and be counted." Marcher at Hillbrow Anti-Xenophobia March

"Where is government here? They are nowhere. It falls to us to do and say something." Marcher at Hillbrow Anti-Xenophobia March

"I want to say to our leadership, we are here speaking out against this. What are you doing?" Marcher at Hillbrow Anti-Xenophobia March

In addition, the attacks were initially being explained at least in part by the lack of service delivery on the part of government. What this meant was that for a moment it became clear that, on its own, constitutional democracy is not sufficient to ensure good governance. Citizens have to contribute by holding government accountable and for participating in community change.

In the absence of state action, people, organisations and civil society institutions stepped in to demonstrate their solidarity with the victims. When South Africans were faced with a situation in which thousands of people were left homeless, and hundreds more were brutalised while the state sat immobile, they were moved into action. As has been highlighted above, religious organisations, institutions of learning, businesses and the media showed people how they could get involved in the crisis. This provided an opportunity to show the potential of a participatory democracy, of active citizenship, and of an enlivened civil society sector.

Opportunities for engagement and infrastructure to facilitate it

The violence also led to a situation in which opportunities for engagement were created. The importance of this must not be underestimated. As has been described above, South Africa faces a situation in which opportunities for active participation in society are not widely visible. Partly this has to do with the fact that we have a weakened civil society. Countries such as India, the United Kingdom and various countries in Europe all have structured opportunities for engagement through service programmes or through volunteer centres that link people with opportunities to participate. Such infrastructure is severely underdeveloped in South Africa.

In contrast to this, in the wake of the violence, there were suddenly a myriad of opportunities for people to become involved – ranging from philanthropic opportunities of donating money and goods, to humanitarian opportunities of assisting at the refugee camps, and more activist type opportunities with a range of marches and debates being advertised.

According to Pastor Togarepi Chivaviri of the Germiston Central Methodist Church, volunteers went to the police station where the displaced people had sought refuge and donated food, clothing and blankets and other necessities. Local people also volunteered at the police station and other centers that temporarily housed the refugees where they distributed the donated food, clothes, blankets and other necessities. A number of volunteers also maintained order and provided security at the police station, churches and other centers that provided shelter for the displaced people. Pastor Togarepi commented that "If the volunteers had not come through, it was going to be very difficult to manage especially for us as the churches who were involved in the day to day running of those places."

The attacks perpetrated against foreigners provided people with opportunities to become involved, albeit on a short term basis. The scale of the violence and the speed with which it spread across Gauteng and then the country, combined with government's slow response, resulted in a need for more human resources than the NGO's such as The Red Cross and MSF had at their disposal. In addition, the lack of basic necessities for the refugees enabled people to pinpoint needs that they could easily meet. Thus, this situation presented clearly identified opportunities for volunteering and giving.

Opportunities for participation also became easily accessible through sites that people inhabit everyday – the workplace, schools, universities and shopping centres. The opportunities for engagement were within reach and facilitated a situation in which the potential of each individual in society could be easily harnessed.

Again the media played a major role by providing information on how to respond. They encouraged people to volunteer their time at the various centres where the foreigners sought refuge and provided contact information in order to facilitate the response. Opportunities for engagement were thus effectively marketed and encouraged responses from communities. Telephone numbers and websites for the centres and the organizations involved were well advertised.

In addition, as more people began to respond, the media covered stories of people that were making a difference by volunteering and donating, and in so doing encouraged a spirit of giving in South Africa.

Related to the above point is the fact that there were a range of different types of opportunities for people to get involved, ranging from the philanthropic response, to the humanitarian response and the activist response. The range and types of opportunities available therefore provided many people with diverse skills, interests and resources with a diverse range of opportunities to become involved.

This is an important lesson for sustained civic participation. As CIVICUS/IAVE/UNV (2008) point out "In democratic societies, one challenge for people's participation is to foster an environment in which individuals from all backgrounds are encouraged to participate in local, national and international issues – social, economic and political – between formal elections. Civic participation takes different forms. The challenge here is to recognise the contribution of citizen action, no matter how small, to reclaiming and

opening up the space for the creation of a more just, inclusive and equitable social reality.” The situation in May and June 2008 highlighted the fact that people have very different ways of being able to contribute to society. Opportunities for engagement must recognize this and facilitate a range of access points and ways of contributing, ranging from philanthropic through to activist responses.

It is clear that a key explanation for the tremendous response from communities is the fact that there were clear opportunities for engagement that were well advertised and easily accessible, and allowed for various expressions of participation.

Recognition of the lived condition of the urban poor

Partly due to sensitive media reporting, and partly because of where the attacks occurred, working and middle class people were exposed to the conditions that the urban poor of the country face.

South Africa, through its apartheid history, is designed in such a way that very poor townships (the labour reserves of apartheid), are located close to very affluent communities. This stark inequality has been identified by many as a key cause of frustration amongst township communities and one of the contributing factors to the violence (Gelb, 2008; Pillay, 2008). The separation of communities has also meant that those living within middle class and affluent communities, despite having poor communities in very close proximity, are able to limit exposure to the suffering of these communities and thus create for themselves a psychological distance. It is very unlikely that a Sandtonite would find themselves in Alexandra, and the more recent establishment of gated communities as a response to crime has meant that homeowners in affluent areas are in effect able to keep the poor out of their suburbs, thus creating further psychological distance between the rich and the poor.

However, when foreign nationals were attacked they fled to police stations close to these affluent or middle class areas. The middle class communities of Primrose and Germiston for instance found themselves having to deal with a wave of people fleeing the very poor informal settlements that border their towns. It is possible that this sudden overt exposure to the human suffering may have motivated people to respond to the crisis.

This response was perhaps most notable amongst the churches that responded. Primrose Methodist Church was required to respond on the night that the attacks occurred when those that were victimised arrived at the church for shelter. This mobilized the church and its congregation members to respond immediately. It also alerted other churches in the proximity to mobilize their congregation members to assist with the response.

Thus people who normally would be able to ignore the existence of informal settlements and the lack of service delivery on their doorsteps had to acknowledge this

reality and the consequences of such poverty in their neighbourhoods and this may have elicited some sense of empathy and a need to respond. In essence, the violence had led to a situation in which people were forced to recognise their shared humanity.

Role of local leadership

The space created by the opportunities to respond also provided a platform on which local leadership could rise up and be identified. South Africans often bemoan the lack of leadership at the political or national level and this was certainly evident in the wake of the violence. However, equally important is a sense of leadership at the community level.

In the responses to the violence a range of ordinary community members stepped up to encourage their neighbours to contribute and to coordinate efforts. Linda Twala⁶ explained that people look at community leaders and when they see them reacting to an event, they also join in and do what they are doing. As a community leader, Twala realised that he had a huge role to play in mobilising the community members to assist the displaced people and he led by example. Once he started volunteering to assist the victims, community members followed suit. He comments that “people look at their leaders and if their leaders do not get involved, the people will not be involved.”

Personal transformation and consciousness

One of the most exciting aspects of the responses to the attacks was the personal transformation amongst many of those that participated. This relates to people realising that they could make a difference, developing a sense of being valuable contributing citizens, and their realization of their shared humanity with people of different nationalities, races and classes. This personal development as outlined by CIVICUS/IAVE/UNV (2008) is one step towards developing sustained civic participation. Volunteering in a philanthropic sense may therefore lead a person to become more politically conscious and more committed to change in their community.

On the crisp morning of 24 May people began gathering at Peter Roos Park in Hillbrow. Despite the cold and the wind, by 10h00 over five thousand people of all races, classes, religions and ages had gathered to march through the streets of Hillbrow in protest against the recent xenophobic violence that had hit townships and informal settlements in Gauteng and beyond.

There was a sense of solidarity and excitement as families, students, the disabled, middle class people and the unemployed carried placards with slogans such as “Xenophobia hurts like Apartheid,” “Unproudly South African,” and “Don’t touch my Sista!”

For Marie, a 20 year old student at Wits and her sister Kelly, a 17 year old learner at Parktown Girls High School, and many like them, this was the first time they had participated in a march of any kind.

⁶ Linda Twala is the Founder and Director of Phutha Dichaba Development Centre and a community leader in Alexandra Township

This was certainly the case for those responding to the attacks. For many it was the first time they had been involved in any development effort. Their engagement began with a philanthropic response that developed later into a humanitarian or activist response. For example, the churches in Edenvale and Kempton Park that had responded to the violence in Tembisa and Primrose by collecting goods and providing volunteer support, met two weeks into the attacks to debate the long term implications. Congregation members from Primrose, Edenvale and Kempton Park (all relatively affluent areas within close proximity to the attacks in the Primrose informal settlements and Tembisa) met to discuss the xenophobic violence. At this meeting they were encouraged to consider their own complicity in generating attitudes and stereotypes that create barriers between races, nationalities, classes and communities.

Lessons for promoting participatory democracy and sustaining civic participation and active citizenship

While the attacks that took place in May and June of 2008 demonstrated the consequences of not encouraging active citizenship and participatory democracy, the responses by the general population made visible the immense potential for solidarity and participation amongst the public when active citizenship is encouraged and promoted. It also showed that people are empathetic and are willing to get involved in issues that concern their communities and are able to make a valuable contribution, particularly when mechanisms are in place to facilitate such activity.

The activities that occurred in the wake of the xenophobic violence highlight how a vibrant civil society has the potential to not only work in collaboration with the state in the achievement of development agendas, but also (and perhaps even more importantly) how it can facilitate a space in which citizens can hold their government to account. In the weeks after the attacks, formal organisations and the general population played two roles that an active civil society sector should offer – that of the watchdog of government and that of a partner to government in addressing developmental challenges.

While the weeks after the attacks highlighted the potential that active citizenship holds for South Africa, this potential was never harnessed, and as the needs arising from the situation diminished, so too did the activity around it. There was some sustained activity through organisations such as the SARCS, which continued to assist at refugee camps, and organisations that monitored the dismantling of refugee camps and the reintegration of those that had been displaced. Beyond this, and as has been discussed above, South Africa does not have the vibrant civil society that it once had. A sustained and active civil society is not only necessary in times of emergency. It needs to be a permanent feature of the governance landscape of every democratic nation. Active

citizenship is necessary to uphold a vibrant democracy, to hold the state accountable, and to contribute to the development of communities.

What then is needed to foster participatory democracy or active citizenship?

Advocacy for civic participation

Fostering active participation of people in society requires firstly advocacy for the role that civil society plays in a well-functioning democracy. There is thus a need to develop a discourse that recognises the immensely important role that civil society plays in governance of a nation, that seeks to restore civil society to its rightful role as a key partner of government, and that encourages the active participation of citizens. This requires the acknowledgment and understanding of the role of civil society by civil society organisations themselves, as well as by the state that must actively support and nurture spaces in which active citizenship can take form.

One way in which to contribute to such a discourse is through widespread recognition and acknowledgement of the role that volunteers and social activists play in contributing to social cohesion, social justice, solidarity and the defence, restoration and physical expression of human rights. The examples discussed above demonstrate how volunteers and social activists played an integral role in stitching together the fabric of communities, in rebuilding broken trust between neighbours, and in speaking out against the injustices of the violence. These efforts must be celebrated, acknowledged and recognised for the value they add to a democratic society.

We must recognise that volunteering in South Africa, like in the rest of the region, is widespread (VOSESA, 2007). Volunteers for instance bear a major proportion of the responsibility of caring for orphaned and vulnerable children, of supporting those who are too ill to work, and of providing care to the aged. These volunteers are often not recognised for the work that they do and can in fact be exploited as the state depends on them for service delivery. Volunteers are contributing significantly to development within communities, to sustaining communities, and to building cohesion in communities. Similarly, in the face of difficulties with service delivery, particularly in poor communities, social activists have spearheaded the voices of the poor in demanding better service (Desai, 2002). They have provided leadership for change in communities, but are often viewed negatively by the state. While these activities are present in communities, they are currently uncoordinated and largely unrecognised. What is needed is recognition of the important role social activists play in building communities and in contributing to our democracy. In addition, there is a need to acknowledge that while volunteers and activists play different roles, they complement one another in fostering civic participation and in contributing to development and social change.

Acknowledgement of potential of volunteering and social activism to heal divisions

Perhaps one of the most overwhelming aspects of the response was the diversity of people who became involved and the way in which people from different classes and races pulled together to support the victims of the violence.

Worby *et al.* (2008) note how the violence laid bare the divisions that still exist within the rainbow nation. They argue that the discourse of the rainbow nation in fact serves to disguise rather than celebrate difference. South Africans therefore have continued to live with racial divisions and in particular class divisions.

But, if the violence highlighted the divisions within South Africa society, the response highlighted the solidarity. It provided a time in which South Africans got to know one another. Those from Sandton worked next to those from Alexandra cooking soup. The camaraderie at the 24 May march allowed people from all walks of life to connect with one another. There was over the month of May and June an opportunity for people to identify with one another and to begin developing the seeds of solidarity. There was an opportunity to build bridges between communities that had continued to be divided.

This is nowhere more evident than in the words of Felicitas Maphuta, a volunteer with, one of the many organisations that were involved in the volunteer response to the violence. “The efforts of the volunteers contributed to the change in perception of South Africans by the victimised foreigners. It made the victims realise that not everyone in South Africa was in support of what was happening. It gave them hope, some of them have continued in the country even though a number of them have gone back home.”

This highlights the potential of volunteering and social activism – civic participation in general – to build bridges of solidarity. As CIVICUS/IAVE/UNV (2008) point out, civic participation provides an opportunity for people to be oriented to others who are not normally in their immediate social world. A study conducted by Involve in Europe confirms this and acknowledges that volunteering has the potential to orientate marginalised groups into societies. The European Union (EU) has recognised this and as a result actively sends young volunteers to other countries within the EU or further afield to developing nations. Service and volunteer opportunities such as the National Youth Service have the potential to offer young people the opportunity to begin bridging social divides in South Africa.

In a context of racial, class and ethnic divisions, demonstrated most profoundly in the May 2008 attacks, South Africa must focus on strategies that build bridging social capital. Government, civil society, the private sector and ordinary citizens must work towards nurturing opportunities for citizens to break down their fear of the other and recognise their common humanity.

Developing a culture of active citizenship

Most importantly people's participation depends on the development of a culture of active citizenship that must be nurtured through policy as well as all of the systems that people interact with on a day to day basis. These include schools, institutions of higher and further learning, and the workplace. Currently there are some efforts in this regard, which include:

The further education and training life orientation curriculum in secondary schools promotes service and volunteering as ways in which young people can learn about their communities. However, this component of the curriculum is rarely implemented and its potential is yet to be harnessed.

National Youth Service programmes offer good opportunities for young people to add value to their communities through service and to develop a culture of engagement. The NYS has been significantly scaled up over the past two years, providing many more opportunities for young people. However, this programme has the potential to provide opportunities for a much broader range of young people if it works through civil society and local community based organisations rather than through government departments alone. At present, civil society participation in implementing the National Youth Service is extremely limited.

In addition, higher education institutions are required to encourage academic citizenship through service-learning and volunteering opportunities. Over the years a wide variety of service learning programmes have been launched in response to the call for greater responsiveness in the Education White Paper 3 (1997). At the systemic level, good progress has been made by the Council for Higher Education including service as one of the criteria for auditing higher education institutions. South Africa's only compulsory community service programme is that for health care professionals who must undertake a year of community service as a condition for professional registration.

There are also efforts in some workplaces to provide opportunities for staff to volunteer. The Charities Aid Foundation, for instance, promotes an Employee Volunteer Week that celebrates the work that companies such as First Rand and Investec are doing in contributing to communities. However, the number of companies involved in such activities is relatively small and the nature of engagement is often limited to philanthropic work.

These are encouraging initiatives but remain relatively small in scale. Furthermore, they face a range of challenges and are not well coordinated with each other. Nevertheless, this potential could be harnessed to grow a culture of active citizenship amongst people in South Africa.

Beyond the efforts to encourage voluntary service in schools, civil society, higher education and the workplace, there is a need to nurture the culture of participatory

democracy and active citizenship through a policy framework that acknowledges, supports and promotes the work of civil society and of volunteers.

Developing and nurturing opportunities for engagement

It must be noted however that advocating for, acknowledging and promoting active participation through volunteering and social activism is not something that occurs organically. As the CIVICUS/IAVE/UNV (2008) paper points out, it also requires programmatic support – the development of structured programmes that provide opportunities for people to engage in society. This may include the development of volunteer centres or networks and systems of information about volunteering or activist opportunities.

Conclusion

The civil society response to the xenophobic attacks demonstrated the huge potential that active participation in society has for the development of a strong and sustainable democracy, for building cohesion and solidarity, and for working towards a range of developmental goals.

It also provides lessons that point to the need for an enabling policy framework that recognises, encourages and supports civic engagement in all its forms. Such policy development would be immensely valuable in fostering the growth of social cohesion between marginalised groups and mainstream communities, in providing young people with opportunities for active citizenship and community service, and for harnessing the support and skill of people across all walks of life who seek to contribute to South Africa's growth and development. Most importantly, the attacks reasserted the need for a vibrant civil society landscape through which people's participation can be fostered in the context of South Africa's democracy.

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