# Facilitating or hindering social cohesion?

## The impact of the Community Work Programme in selected South African townships

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*This article discusses the contribution of the Community Work Programme (CWP) to social cohesion, a
term that is widely used in post-apartheid South Africa.[1] The article is based on a study that examined the
contribution of the CWP to violence prevention. The study by researchers from the Centre for the Study of
Violence and Reconciliation was conducted in six communities: Ivory Park, Orange Farm and Kagiso (situated
in Gauteng), Bokfontein (North West Province), and Grabouw and Manenberg (Western Cape). Some work
undertaken through the CWP, such as programmes against gangsterism, drug abuse and domestic violence,
are directly aimed at addressing violence and may not have been possible had the CWP not provided an
enabling context for such activities. However, we show in this article that that the impact of the CWP is not
always positive and that the CWP may in some cases result in tensions and contradictions that hinder social
cohesion and even cause violence. If not implemented in a consultative participatory manner, the CWP may be
a source of conflict rather than of social cohesion. It is thus necessary to ensure that the CWP is implemented
with integrity if it is to contribute to positive social cohesion and prevent violence.*

## The meaning of social cohesion

Social cohesion was a key concept in a study
commissioned by the Department of Arts and Culture
to deal with the issue of race and racism and other

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forms of exclusion in post-apartheid South Africa
in 2004.[2] During this period, the term was used to
talk about the need for South Africans to unite as
part of a broader process of nation building and
reconciliation.[3] In South Africa, as a result, the term
'social cohesion' has been equated with issues of
race relations.[4]

International scholars, on the other hand, have used
the term to analyse and understand the interaction
between social exclusion, poverty and inequality.[5]
More recently, the term social cohesion has been
used in studies of crime and violence.[6] The dominant
view in these studies[7] is that a lack of social

cohesion is associated with high rates of crime and violence in communities. This view was echoed by Veit, Barolsky and Pillay,[8] who argued that increasing levels of crime and violence are a sign of weak social cohesion in South Africa and can be ascribed to apartheid, which led to social disintegration and the erosion of social values in many black communities. However, during apartheid, job reservation and experiences of oppression and suffering limited upward mobility for black South Africans and may have reinforced feelings of solidarity in black communities. The transition to democracy in the 1990s brought rising inequality within black communities,[9] which may have contributed to a decline in social cohesion.

Today family instability is a frequent feature of black townships as a result of absent father figures,[10] high levels of domestic violence,[11] alcoholism and drug abuse.[12] Some studies[13] attribute high levels of violence to weak social relations. It is asserted that 'the breakdown of social cohesion is perceived to have created an anomic context for violent crime to occur'.[14] From this perspective, social cohesion acts to 'hold society together' to prevent crime and violence, even while it may also 'provide a source of social capital for offenders'.[15]

While social cohesion may be considered necessary to prevent violence, some studies show that social cohesion may also be a source of division, intolerance and violence. (See, for example, the article by Barolsky on page 17 of this edition of *SACQ*).

Is a lack of social cohesion the missing link in overcoming violence in South Africa? This is the primary question this article seeks to answer by analysing tensions and contradictions within the CWP, and how they facilitate and hinder social cohesion in communities.

For the purposes of this article social cohesion is defined as 'the shared sense of common purpose; aspects of social control and social order between people, groups and places as well as the level of social interaction within communities or families; and a sense of belonging to place'.[16]

## Researching the impact of the CWP as a crime and violence prevention programme

The CWP is a government initiative that falls under the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs. It was designed to provide two days of work per week (up to 100 days per year) to unemployed and underemployed people. During the year April 2014 to March 2015 there were 202 599 participants in the CWP at 186 CWP sites across South Africa.[17] The primary purpose of the CWP is to provide an employment safety net to unemployed people in order for them to obtain a basic stable income.

Any unemployed or underemployed person over the age of 18 years who meets the set criteria can join the CWP. The work undertaken in the CWP is supposed to be identified, prioritised and decided upon by community members in consultation with local councillors and key community stakeholders. The CWP work is categorised into social, environmental and economic sectors. The social sector programmes include home-based care, providing home visits and care to people who are terminally ill, very old people with no family support, child-headed households and indigent families. It includes support work at schools, such as assisting learners with their school work, and early childhood development (ECD) programmes for young children. Environmental sector programmes include cleaning public roads, removing rubble, clearing drains and planting trees. Economic sector programmes include agricultural projects, such as food gardening. Crime and violence prevention initiatives are part of the social sector programmes and were identified as key projects. These are the focus of this article.

It is important to note that the CWP was never designed to prevent crime and violence. However, it appears to have the potential to contribute in this way.[18] The CWP's community-orientated approach empowers community members to decide on priority projects in their communities. Communities burdened by high crime and violence have prioritised programmes that directly aim to prevent crime and violence. This was the case in all six communities studied and reported on in this article. In short, the

CWP appears to have galvanised these communities to address crime and violence.

The study involved interviews with more than 20 individuals, and five focus group discussions in each of the six communities. Those interviewed included CWP participants, coordinators and managers, police officials, school principals, local social workers, agents of the implementing organisations, and government officials responsible for the implementation of the CWP. A combination of snowballing and purposive sampling techniques was used to recruit all participants. Four CSVR researchers conducted these interviews in the six communities over a period of two years (July 2013 to June 2015).

Thematic content analysis was used to identify and code all the themes for in-depth analysis.

## Creating and enhancing social networks

One of the key attributes of social cohesion is to 'instill in individuals the sense of belonging to the same community and the feeling that they are recognised as members of that community'.[19] Kate Philip argues in her work that one of the unintended consequences of the CWP has been the facilitation of social relations among CWP participants and community members.[20]

One CWP participant who contributed to the CSVR study asserted that the CWP promotes the spirit of ubuntu among participants and that they provide each other with support.[21] Positive social bonds between participants were found to be valuable in enabling CWP participants to work well as a group.

> It [CWP] does create ubuntu among the participants. We did not know each other at first. But right now as we kept on meeting each other I ended up knowing her and she ended up knowing the other one. So if I didn't know this one then I wouldn't have been able to help this one. So because of the one I know, I am able to help the next person.[22]

> Yes. Friendships do develop. We are in the same society, we communicate about where we meet. And then if you need advice about something I would just [ask] for an advice on what to do. We visit each other … so friendships develop as colleagues.[23]

> We are like a family now because of what CWP taught us. We can work together with the community.[24]

It was evident in the six communities that networks between people increased as a result of the implementation of the CWP programme. The fact that the CWP facilitators and coordinators meet once a week to discuss work to be undertaken in the community enhances social relations and the spirit of collegiality among them, as described in the quote below.

> We meet every Friday to provide reports but to also share among ourselves what we are doing in our wards. Before we used to compete against each other but now we support each other because we all want to succeed … We have become closer like one big family.[25]

Generally, the CWP appeared to foster a high level of cohesion among participants, drawing together residents from different wards to work together for the betterment and safety of their community.

The work of the CWP not only contributes to cohesion among the CWP participants themselves but also extends to improving social cohesion in the broader community. CWP participants are seen as an invaluable resource, especially in communities where people do not have access to basic social and welfare services. For example, interviewees noted that if a CWP member or indigent community member dies, CWP participants provide support to the bereaved family by cleaning their house and the yard, digging the grave for burial, contributing money if the family cannot afford to arrange the funeral, and connecting such a family with the relevant social and welfare services.

> We do support by going to assist with cooking and cleaning when our member has died. The camaraderie among ourselves is really good although we do not contribute lots of money but we contribute some money to assist the bereavement. The contribution is voluntary.[26]

We as participants support each other. When a participant dies we agreed that we as coordinators we will contribute at least R50 and participants contribute R10. When a participant loses her partner or husband we contribute R30 and participants contribute R10.[27]

CWP participants also participate in other social networks, including stokvels and burial and savings clubs.

With regard to the stokvels, we realised that the CWP money is little, so we decided to contribute R100 with certain ladies. We were nine and we would contribute R100.[28]

Yes, there are so many stokvels where people meet and contribute money every month.[29]

[With] the money we get from CWP we are able to do many things. We are able to pay for burial societies, stokvels. We use that money. Maybe you'd find that we each pop out R20 – sometimes when it comes to you it's R200 and you are able to buy school uniform and so on.[30]

Generally these networks are formed to improve the livelihood of all those who participate in them. For instance, members of the stokvels or savings clubs come together to save money that is distributed equally among their members. The CWP enables people to participate in these clubs by providing them with a regular income. It also creates linkages within communities that facilitate the formation of such clubs, or increase participation in existing clubs. This money helps participants to supplement their income and buy other goods that they need in their homes.

It appears, therefore, that the CWP provides a foundation for social cohesion, building relationships of mutual support, solidarity and greater care within communities, which in turn may reduce or prevent violence.

## CWC and violence prevention

Crime and violence are major concerns for the communities included in this study, as evidenced by the following statements:

I believe that crime in Ivory Park is out of control because it is not safe as a woman to walk alone

at night. Women in this community are victims of rape and domestic violence. In my street, in May alone, two women who stay in my streets were raped on two different occasions. This place is definitely not safe for women because we live in fear that one day someone will attack and rape you.[31]

Crime is a big issue in Orange Farm.[32]

Manenberg is a depressed community on the Cape Flats, where gangsters roam, drugs are readily available and unemployment is high.[33]

It is therefore not surprising that initiatives aimed at reducing crime and violence initiatives were undertaken by the CWP participants, and were seen as valid CWP work.

Indeed, the CWP appeared to offer an opportunity for people to come together to discuss practical ways in which the problem of crime and violence could be addressed in their neighbourhoods. Crime prevention activities included cutting long grass and trees in 'crime hotspots' where people have been attacked and robbed of their possessions;[34] providing recreational activities for young men; integrating ex-offenders into the CWP;[35] and assisting in the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act and campaigns against gang violence. Other work performed by the CWP, such as providing support to early childhood development, may also in the long run contribute to violence prevention, though work of this kind is not done primarily to prevent crime, nor is it necessarily seen as such by community members.

CWP participants play a significant role in organising recreational activities such as soccer that involve young men who are, as research has indicated, most likely to be involved in criminal activities.[36] Participants said:

As you can see, Ivory Park has many people who are unemployed and have nothing else to do. These young people end up committing crimes because they are also bored. This programme aims to bring together all these young people and keep them occupied with sports… As you can see across the field, we have so many unemployed boys gambling and getting high on drugs. It is these people that we

want to attract to this programme so that we can also contribute towards reducing crime and related problems.[37]

We do not just play but we use soccer to recruit many people because they all like soccer. It is easy to get them if you ask to come and play soccer or other sports. This is when we talk to them [about] many other things, like crime, *nyaope* and other things. We tell them about school and education, you see.[38]

Gary Barker found that soccer was effective in preventing violence in the townships (favelas) in Brazil, especially where these soccer events were linked to acquisition of other life skills, mentorship programmes and career opportunities.[39]

CWP participants use soccer matches to raise awareness about substance abuse and the impact of crime, as well as to identify and promote job opportunities in the local municipality. Linking football and mentorship for young people through the CWP is facilitated by the GIZ-Seriti-Phaphama Social Health and Education (SHE) initiative.[40]

In Manenberg, Orange Farm and Ivory Park, ex-offenders were recruited to join the CWP and to participate in anti-crime campaigns intended to raise awareness about the consequences of crime among youth both in and out of school. The ex-offenders used their own life stories to tell others (especially the youth) that 'crime is not good' and that 'crime does not pay'.

We want to spread a message that crime is not good as well as drugs. We have public anti-crime campaigns by telling young people to stay away from crime because crime is not good. We tell them as ex-offenders because we know that crime is not good.[41]

With crime prevention programmes in CWP, we have a project whereby we motivate young people [in and out of school] not to do crime and drugs.[42]

You see, [we] use our experiences as former criminals that crime does not pay. We want to show young people that crime does not pay. We have been there. We know what we are talking about because we served long sentences.[43]

Whether this will be effective is open to debate, as studies have questioned the effectiveness of using ex-offenders to raise awareness about the consequences of doing crime. For example, it has been shown that the Scared Straight campaign in the United States (US) was ineffective in deterring young people from involvement in criminal activities.[44] Nevertheless, such interventions remain popular.

The key value of involving former offenders in the CWP is likely to be the impact it has on the lives of those ex-offenders, whose reintegration into communities is facilitated by the opportunity. Uggen and Staff[45] argue that the involvement of ex-offenders in work can offer a 'turning point' in their lives, motivating them to not re-offend, yet the limitations of these interventions must be acknowledged.

It was also evident in the interviews conducted with ex-offenders that they saw their involvement in the CWP as positive, and giving meaning to their lives through the work they were doing in schools and the community. They interpreted their CWP work as 'payback time' for the crimes they had committed.

In Orange Farm CWP participants have worked closely with the police to assist victims of domestic violence to apply for protection orders, as required by the Domestic Violence Act of 1998. CWP participants were involved in organising public campaigns to raise awareness about gender-based violence. Men were involved in organising these public campaigns – which emerging literature identifies as an important feature of successful campaigns to address domestic violence.[46] The involvement of men in campaigns such as this gives them the opportunity to reflect about violent practices associated with negative forms of masculinity that oppress and subjugate women.[47]

In Manenberg, CWP participants initiated a public campaign against gang violence. Several public marches took place under the banner of 'Take Back Our Streets'. Ex-gang members were also recruited to be part of these public campaigns, aimed at dealing with the problem of gang violence in the area.

These examples illustrate the potential of the CWP to bring community members together in doing work that is intended to prevent crime and violence. The

CWP may therefore serve to mobilise and enable community members to work together for a common cause, and thus increase social cohesion while preventing or reducing violence.

## How the CWP may hinder social cohesion

Despite these positive examples presented above, in some communities the CWP has been a source of local contestation and division.

One of the main sources of tension within the CWP related to recruitment into the programme. Any unemployed or underemployed person over the age of 18 years is theoretically qualified to join the CWP. The CWP guidelines recommend that the process of recruitment is done openly and transparently through community consultation. While many participants asserted that the recruitment process was fair and transparent, there are instances where the recruitment process has been politicised.

In Ivory Park, opposition political parties took to the streets to protest against unfair recruitment practices which were said to be favouring ANC supporters. A participant who identified herself as an Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) member shared her experiences during the recruitment process:

> I totally and completely disagree with what some of the participants are saying because I was victimised for being an active Inkatha member until I joined the ANC and the ANC Youth League. It was very clear that unless I do that I will starve until I die because I was told that this was an ANC government programme for ANC members and supporters. I had to join the ANC and the ANC Youth League for me to be in the CWP. Although I go to ANC meetings I have never supported the ANC or voted for them. I am a member of IFP but had to take the membership of the ANC in order to survive.[48]

Two other CWP participants said:

> I don't think it's something the ANC would confirm that we are only recruiting members and supporters of the ANC because this is a government programme not ANC programme. I remember that when I joined the CWP in 2012,

> I had to join the ANC and present myself to the labour desk as an ANC member. This was easy to do because I am not an active member of any political party. When I produced my membership card I was pushed right in front of the list. When they were recruiting I was one of the people who are recruited.[49]

> I was told that the ANC is bringing work to the people so I must get my ID to the ANC councillor for me to get this work. This meant that those who are not connected were left out of the process.[50]

In addition, opposition political parties were accused by the CWP of spreading false information about conditions of employment under the programme, leading to tensions between community members and CWP staff.

> They [CWP participants] understand me but they choose not to understand me due to the interference of third party, one, the APC [African People's Convention] and now the EFF [Economic Freedom Fighters]. The EFF spreads rumours that CWP are entitled to UIF [Unemployment Insurance Fund], which is untrue because this is a poverty relief project. The APC has been notorious of lying to participants that they are supposed to be full time employees with benefits. They even organised a march to force the government to provide permanent jobs for participants. The APC is trying to advance its political gains by misleading the community.[51]

In such cases the CWP may have a negative impact on social cohesion.

These tensions have at times even led to public protests, for example in Ivory Park where the APC organised public protests against the alleged recruitment of people on the basis of party political affiliation.

Portes and Landolt have argued that some interventions may lead to perceptions of social exclusion from social and economic benefits.[52] Social resources that are used to bolster particular groups may contribute to the marginalisation of other groups and increase community cleavages. It is therefore important that community programmes such as the

CWP are inclusive, consultative and depoliticised so that they do not become a source of division and violence in communities.

## Concluding remarks

Even though the CWP was not developed as a crime and violence prevention intervention, it has the potential to play this role. This may be directly, through activities such as community patrols, working with young men at risk through soccer and mentoring initiatives, implementing early childhood programmes, and working with the police to assist victims of domestic violence, among others. The CWP also has the potential to facilitate a spirit of solidarity and unity among community members. It strengthens social bonds based on experiences of mutual assistance and increased consciousness about the need to help those who are less privileged. On the other hand, if the CWP is used to further the ends of particular parties or groups it may fracture social cohesion, which in turn would undermine efforts aimed at preventing violence.

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## Notes

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