

# Overcoming Violence: The role of business

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## A Letter From the Publisher

The recent release of large numbers of political prisoners, among whom are many like Barend Strydom and Robert McBride who were convicted of crimes of violence, has highlighted once again the problem of violence in South Africa.

These releases, coming as they do at a time of escalating violence throughout the country, also raise questions of the wisdom of such policies. What impact do these releases – including the release of common murderers, such as Lucky Malaga – have on the minds of those in society who are already predisposed to committing acts of violence? If lengthy prison sentences are intended as deterrents against criminal violence, do these releases not in fact serve as a green light to those who would commit similar acts of violence?

As South Africa moves hesitantly towards the future, one thing seems certain – and that is that violence will be with us for a long time yet. Furthermore, as the violence spreads, its impact on the lives of ordinary people reaches ever further outwards, from their homes to their communities and to their places of work.

But what is the nature of this violence? Where does it come from and what motivates those who perpetrate it? And what can business do to protect itself and its employees from the ravages of the violence?

With these questions in mind, *The Innes Labour Brief* recently approached Graeme Simpson and Lloyd Vogelman of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation for their views on the subject. This Special Brief was prepared by them exclusively for our subscribers in response to our questions.

Its value lies not only in the analysis it offers of the numerous causes of violence in South Africa, but also in the insights it provides into ways in which business can proactively involve itself both in attempting to minimise violence and in protecting and assisting employees who are affected by violence.

The time when business (and other non-political communities) could sit back and ignore the problem of violence as if it was not affected by it is rapidly passing. Violence threatens not only the negotiation process, but the entire fabric of our society. It has become an issue that none of us can afford to ignore any longer.

Duncan Innes  
4 October 1992

### Executive Summary

The post-1990 era of negotiations in South Africa has witnessed intensifying violence which has spread from the political arena into all dimensions of society. This "culture of violence" has fed on the legacy of political intolerance, racism and economic impoverishment bequeathed by apartheid.

It is important to note some of the trends in the violence during this period:

- The violence has developed a momentum of its own and has thus become more difficult to simply "switch off".
- As a result, the dividing line between political and criminal violence has become increasingly blurred.
- Conflicts over scarce resources in impoverished communities have rapidly become politicised.
- There has been an increasing resort to informal justice as a result of the failure of the state's law enforcement agencies to win the trust of the communities being policed.
- The violence has become increasingly arbitrary and random in nature.

Ethnic explanations of violence, particularly notions that it is "black on black" violence, are at best unhelpful and at worst merely compound the problem. One of the gravest dangers to South Africa's future lies in the manipulation of ethnic identities for political gain.

To deal properly with the social and individual consequences of violence, it is essential to take cognisance of the psychological needs of the perpetrators – in particular their experiences of powerlessness and emasculation.

As a key interest group within civil society, the business community has an important proactive and remedial role to play in resolving the problems of violence. This operates at two distinct levels:

Corporate community-based involvement:

**Including participation in local and regional dispute resolution, social upliftment programmes, collective mobilisation of resources through the activities of employer organisations and fostering peace initiatives.**

Internal corporate-care strategies:

**Including the enterprise-level development of trauma management strategies for victim aid, the running of educational programmes at all levels of the enterprise and forging of negotiated workplace rules or codes.**

To deal appropriately with the high levels of violence, the business community must become an agency for social change.

### Explaining Endemic Violence

It has been argued that the legacy of apartheid has bequeathed to South Africa a "culture of violence". This is seen across the political spectrum where violence has been sanctioned as a means both of maintaining political power, as well as an accepted means of attaining change or resolving conflict. The consequence has been that, despite the prospects of peace heralded by the process of national political negotiations, the past three years have been amongst the most brutal in this country's history.

Part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that the era of negotiations established the terrain for an intensified political contest. For the first time in this country's history, the key political interest groups had to establish their credentials in terms of their national representivity if they were to occupy a seat at the negotiation table with any degree of clout. The resultant power struggle, involving **all** the key political interest groups, almost inevitably played itself out through the style of violent confrontation so firmly established in the preceding decades.

These political conditions have been accompanied by experiences of economic impoverishment and poverty for the majority of South Africans. In the absence of a social welfare net and in the context of dramatic levels of unemployment, economic conditions are created which offer a solid foundation for the social, political and criminal violence which pervades South Africa.

Considering the extent to which bread and butter issues such as housing, jobs, rents, wages and education have become politicised in this country, it should come as no

surprise that people have very high expectations of the implications of political change. The impasse in negotiations has created a climate of extreme impatience and frustration which has enhanced the prospect of violence. The result is that violence begins to intrude into all these dimensions of social life, often manifesting itself through conflict over the most basic resources within impoverished communities.

It is not possible in an article as brief as this to document, analyse, or even describe the violence in South Africa in all its complexity. What this brief outline should demonstrate is that the search for mono-causal explanation is fruitless. The convenient terms in which the violence has been labelled, by politicians and the commercial media, often does more to disguise complex causation than it does to explain it.

The violence has been variously labelled as ethnic conflict, conflict between hostel dwellers and squatters or township residents, conflict between ANC and IFP supporters, conflict between the police and the residents, between the poor and the very poor, conflict generated by government or by a "third force", etc. None of these descriptions is completely wrong. Yet none, on its own, will properly explain this complex situation. It is only when we accept that we are dealing with a host of overlapping causal factors that we can begin to address the problem constructively.

The notorious lack of reliability and the politically contested nature of most of the statistics which are generated about violence, make it difficult to rely on this sort of information. Nonetheless, some trends over the past year remain discernable and are instructive.

According to the Human Rights Commission, there were approximately 100 politically-related killings per month in the PWV region and 88 per month in Natal in the course of 1991 (HRC Annual Report). The South African Institute of Race Relations estimates that a total of 2 672 died in political violence during the course of that year (Race Relations Survey, 1991/2, page xxxiv). Within the first six months of 1992, a further 1 585 people are estimated to have died in political violence (Human Rights Update, HRC, June 1992).

Amidst competing claims over who is most responsible and over whose political interests are best served by the violence, certain trends remain clear:

- Despite competing claims that particular political interest groups have been responsible for "switching on the violence" in order to control the negotiation process, it is clear that the violence has developed a momentum of its own. This has made it more difficult for any of these interest groups to simply "switch the violence off". In the final analysis, it is clear that the levels of violence have become central to the consequent stalling of the national negotiation process.
- There is an increasingly blurred dividing line between political and criminal violence. This contributes to explaining both the dramatic increases in criminal violence and the extent to which criminal violence has become politicised.
- The above trend is exacerbated by the impoverishment, unemployment and consequent conflict over scarce resources which dominates township communities and which often lies at the root of the involvement of the most economically impoverished communities such as squatters. A further example of this has been the increase in "taxi wars" in the PWV and the Western Cape. Beginning as a conflict over relatively lucrative transport routes in the deregulated transport sector,

WEBTA/LAGUNYA taxi war in the Western Cape rapidly become transformed into a conflict of political affiliations. Ironically, the Peace Accord has occasionally compounded this problem through framing such conflicts and their resolution in terms of politically-defined interest groups and parties. The result is that violence emanating from a range of ostensibly non-political sources rapidly becomes politicised.

- A related trend has been the failure of the state's law enforcement agencies to establish their good faith and to develop any trust-based relationship with township communities through meaningful reform of the SAP. This has resulted in an escalation of violence (through the resort to informal justice with a consequential spiral of revenge and retribution). In the process, the dividing line between political and criminal violence has become increasingly blurred, resulting, whether by accident or design, in the cumulative effect of further political destabilisation. This also lies at the root of the ongoing attacks on members of the security forces, who are regularly accused of partisan behaviour in the violence. 137 police were killed in 1991 and a further 96 by June 1992 (*Weekly Mail*, July 17-23, 1992).
- Perhaps the most significant trend has been the increasingly arbitrary and random nature of the violence. One example of this has been the frequent random attacks on mourners at funerals and vigils, as well as massacres at beer halls in the PWV region. An even more striking example has been the violence on the trains. In 1990, 69 people were killed and 277 injured in 11 incidents of attacks on trains. In 1991, the number of attacks more than doubled to 23, although fewer deaths (38) and injuries (208) resulted. In the first month of 1992, there were 14 recorded attacks resulting in 15 deaths and 72 injuries – the highest in any month since September 1990. (Blood on the Tracks, Report into Train Killings, Independent Board of Inquiry into Informal Repression, 1991)

### Mobilising Ethnic Identities

The contention that much of the violence can be explained away in terms of ethnic conflict requires some discussion here. It would indeed be somewhat surprising if the ethnic orientation of 40 years of apartheid did not, in some way, shape the identities of people living under the system. However, on their own, racial and ethnic identities do not seem to be a significant cause of violence. But where these identities correspond with conflicts over material resources or political allegiances, their potential as vehicles of violence increases.

The short-hand description of township conflict as "black on black" violence therefore serves to disguise the underlying causes of violence rather than to elucidate them. It reinforces the unhelpful notions of "black barbarism" and feeds the fear which for decades has been the foundation of white politics under apartheid.

We argue that ethnicity does not provide a meaningful explanation of the violence in its own right, but must be viewed in the context of the trends discussed above. Attempts to explain the violence in purely ethnic terms are largely founded on the racist legacy which is a residue of the apartheid era.

The real danger, however, resides in strategies of political organisations (such as Inkatha, the National Party and the range of extreme right-wing organisations) which deliberately mobilise support in ethnic or cultural terms. Once mobilised, such ethnic-based political identities become particularly volatile, defensive and extremely difficult

to control. This is especially the case where such political tactics are used as the rationale for claiming that certain groups should have the right, based on "cultural heritage", to carry dangerous weapons. This danger is also illustrated by the rise of the AWB's "Ystergarde" and by the fact that "traditional" rural-based migrant residents in single-sex hostels have become central to township violence on the Reef over the past two years.

## Psychological Factors

In explaining the complex trends in violence in South Africa today, insufficient attention has been given to the psychological aspects of the problem. This involves not only examining the effect of violence on its victims, but also demands that we give some attention to the psychological motivations of many of the perpetrators.

The current violence in South Africa must be understood not only as a result of political conflict and economic deprivation, but also in terms of the psychological and social needs which the violence itself fulfills. Violence is often connected with the individual's need to derive pleasure and compensate for his own deficiencies.

A primary characteristic of perpetrators of violence is that they feel powerless. For them violence is a means of reasserting control. In the moment of violence, the offender is able to exercise supreme control over the fate of his victim. In re-asserting his power, the perpetrator also re-affirms his manhood. Since violence mainly involves men in South Africa, whether it be in youth gangs or hostels, the affirmation of manhood through violence takes on even greater significance.

Linked to the issue of powerlessness is the marginalisation that offenders experience as a result of unemployment, under-education and political voicelessness. They believe that society does not regard them as important enough and does not take sufficient notice of their needs. Violence thus becomes a compensatory response which makes them central and important. The victim (and possibly a public audience) is unable to ignore the perpetrator.

In every subculture there are different ways of obtaining status. In societies that emphasise wealth, exhibiting one's possessions is a means of acquiring status. Similarly in subcultures in which violence is acceptable and encouraged, demonstration of violence provides status. This is the case whether one is talking about police or youth gangs. However, as these subcultures become more desensitised to violence, it is necessary to demonstrate more and more brutality. When assault is seen as normal, one has to kill to obtain status. And when killing is normal, then one has to become more brutal in the killing, for instance burning, repeated stabbing, hacking off body parts, et cetera. The value of violence lies in its immediacy. It can transform self-image and relationships instantaneously. Any solution to the problem of violence in South Africa must therefore include mechanisms which offer those who perpetrate violence different means of acquiring status and power.

Dealing with Violence: What business can do

As a key interest group within civil society, business has a clear role to play in resolving the issues of violence. However, our concern with both the social and psychological roots of violence demands that business strategies look to both collective and individual needs. We argue here that in practice this should involve an investment not only in wider community-based initiatives, but in the development of comprehensive "care strategies" within the working environment as well.

In fact, Section 13 of the Draft Bill on Occupational Safety and Health (due for passage into law in 1993) goes so far as to impose a duty on employers to protect employees from violence where such violence is "reasonably foreseeable". Section 13(1)(b) extends this duty to include the development of:

**an action plan which provides for the measures necessary to protect such employees including, but not limited to, training, the provision of security measures, the adaptation of procedures, aid to victims and, generally, all other measures necessary under the circumstances to give effect to the employer's duty contemplated in this section.**

#### Corporate Community-based Involvement

There are a range of community-based methods in which business can engage in resolving the issues of social and political violence and which attempt to redress the problem in its wider social context. For example, John Hall, chairman of the Peace Committee, has called for business involvement in local and regional dispute resolution structures. Many companies have utilised their impartial status to engage actively in mediating conflicts at a local level, particularly in war-ravaged Natal. It seems likely that business could play a vital role in the process of monitoring violence as well.

Corporations are investing in social upliftment programmes, such as in the fields of education, housing, etc., as an attempt to redress some of the root causes of violence. Others are contributing by assisting community-based victim aid programmes. In many instances, the required investment of time and resources places these macro activities beyond the means of all but the largest business organisations. Part of the solution here lies in the collective mobilisation of resources via the various employer organisations. Yet there is a spectrum of activities which are within the reach of a wider range of business organisations.

For example, where negotiated peace has been achieved at shop-floor level over industrial relations issues, employers and worker representatives should carry these lessons forward to a wider political context as well. This involves an endeavour to institutionalise conflict beyond the shop floor and may be achieved through the active contribution of business in encouraging the development of vibrant civic organisations and in pressurising the political interest groups in the search for a rapid political settlement.

The business community is traditionally a reluctant entrant into the political realm. Yet it has a vital role to play and an objective interest in so doing – as witnessed by concerned business leaders' involvement in peace initiatives over the past eighteen months. The essential ingredient in any of these initiatives remains business' political impartiality which must be rooted in genuine consultation with those people most affected by violence – black South Africans and their representatives in the townships and in the workplace.

### Internal Corporate "Care Strategies"

Whilst the relative peace of the industrial arena provides a vital space within which it is possible to address some of the social and psychological causes and effects of violence, this peace cannot be taken for granted. This means that business and employee representatives have to look not only to remedial measures, but also at proactive attempts to curb the potential (or perhaps inevitable) prospect of the intrusion of violence into the working environment.

The suggestions below illustrate some of the avenues which could be considered either to manage the trauma of affected employees or as proactive measures to empower those who are endangered.

Trauma management or "care strategies" may involve a range of activities:

- They may involve attempts to minimise the experiences of trauma through financial support for victims and potential victims. These may range from assistance with insurance schemes or the provision of alternative temporary accommodation for employees displaced by the violence, to the simple matter of assistance with funeral costs for a deceased employee or a member of his/her family.
- Such victim aid programmes, far from merely dealing with the symptoms, are important proactive measures for intervening in the cycle of violence which may otherwise easily become self-perpetuating.

Such programmes should involve the provision of psychological counselling for traumatised employees (through the training of in-house counsellors or through referrals to outside agencies), as well as the provision for legal support for victims with a low level of confidence in the existing law enforcement agencies.

- All of these care strategies if they are to succeed, will be reliant on negotiated processes and participative needs assessments involving those most directly affected.
- Demonstrations of corporate concern and active involvement should not be underestimated.
- This may amount to simple demonstrations such as holding memorial services for employees or their families who have been killed in the violence.
- The demonstrations of concern may be protective in nature: for example, flexibility around working times, shift arrangements and different pay systems to take into account the dangers individuals face when living in war zones through which they have to travel to and from work.
- Education programmes are vital within the working environment if business is to respond proactively to the violence.

- Such educative programmes should ideally be run at various levels within the organisation: at shop-floor level, at supervisory level and at the senior management level.
- These education programmes may include specific skills training such as in the application of negotiation skills and alternative non-adversarial forms of dispute resolution to extra-workplace situations. This could have lasting benefits within and beyond the workplace.
- Education through workshops, experiential learning forums and dialogue within the corporate organisation or business serves a vital purpose in empowering people in dealing with the issues of violence. It also offers the opportunity for communication and learning across the divides wrought by apartheid and frequently reproduced within the working environment.
- Once again, the success of these education programmes, if implemented, will depend on their negotiated character and the joint ownership of the process by employers and employee representatives.
- Negotiated and mutually accepted workplace rules or codes of conduct could be vital in inhibiting the intrusion of a culture of violence into working relationships through high tension situations.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the potential of violence in the workplace and the experiences of trauma resulting from high levels of community violence are fundamentally inseparable. The challenge in dealing with the problem touches directly on the role of the business community beyond the confines of the shop-floor. Ultimately, if business is to play a role to its full potential, it needs to do so as an active agency for change.

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