



NELSON MANDELA
FOUNDATION

Living the legacy

TACKLING VIOLENCE AGAINST PEOPLE PERCEIVED TO BE FOREIGNERS:

A WORKING DOCUMENT

Nelson Mandela Foundation

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Prologue

South Africa faces a significant moment in its journey with democracy. Again this year we have seen deep-rooted societal frustration, rage and xenophobia manifesting in violent attacks directed at those perceived to be ‘foreigners’. This is not a new phenomenon, of course. In 2008 there were even more widespread outbreaks of such violence in many parts of the country. What was then called xenophobic violence drew on energies which had emerged very early in South Africa’s journey with democracy. In 1995 Nelson Mandela addressed a gathering in Alexandra and said:

“During the years I lived here, the people of Alexandra ignored tribal and ethnic distinctions. Instead of being Xhosas, or Sothos, or Zulus, or Shangaans, we were Alexandrans. We were one people, and we undermined the distinctions that the apartheid government tried so hard to impose. It saddens and angers me to see the rising hatred of foreigners.”

Quick action by both instruments of the state and of civil society have seen the violence brought under control, if not quelled. The danger is that we become lulled into thinking that the crisis is over. It is not. The deep-rooted causal factors underlying outbreaks of violence remain firmly in place. We are in crisis, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. What is needed now is leadership inspired by human rights and peace-building, sustained action and the harnessing of South Africans’ highest ideals and dreams to meet the challenges successfully.

Background

Soon after the outbreaks of violence in 2008 the Nelson Mandela Foundation embarked on a two-year dialogue process that engaged communities in eleven of the violence 'hotspots' across five provinces. The results of that intervention were communicated to structures of the state and civil society (see below). It saddens and angers us that sustainable solutions have still not emerged. We believe that what we are seeing being demonstrated is a terrible failure of memory by South Africans. We are forgetting the long years of struggle against ethnic and related forms of identity mobilisation. We are forgetting the support given by the peoples of the African continent to the struggle against apartheid.

Also in 2008 the Foundation convened a dialogue between structures of the state and of the media to address both the broader role of the media in relation to crises like this and the ways in which media coverage can contribute to the problem rather than to the finding of solutions. In 2015 the Foundation has responded to the crisis by participating in civil society interventions, contributing to state consultative initiatives, and positioning the phenomenon within the broader contexts of societal violence and the faultlines defined by race and identity in South Africa. On 7 May 2015 the Foundation co-convened with the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation a cross-sectoral dialogue forum designed to interrogate violence against 'foreigners' from historical, political and socio-economic perspectives. Special focus sessions were dedicated to business, politics, and the media.

Analysis

Our engagements have surfaced a wide range of conflicting views. There are those who deny that xenophobia has anything to do with the phenomenon of violence perpetrated against 'foreigners'. On the other hand there are those who argue that xenophobia has a deep purchase in our society. There are those who view the violence ultimately as one expression of frustration at structural poverty and inequality. On the other hand there are those who argue that the violence is provoked by a 'third force' intent on destabilising South Africa's democracy, or is best understood as simply criminal activity undertaken by a small minority of South Africans. There are those who look to firm state action, specifically the implementation of security instruments, for a lasting solution. On the other hand, there are those who argue that securitisation of the response to the challenge is a dead-end and that what is required is an all-encompassing strategy addressing the structural, historical and societal dimensions. There are those who view the violence as an expression of an irrational rage that is ultimately beyond understanding. There are those who insist on a rationality informing all forms of violence.

The Foundation believes that the lessons learned from its post-2008 dialogue interventions remain apposite. Poverty, inequality and alienation establish a frame within which the

violence must be considered. Unresolved faultlines of race and identity with long historical trajectories must be reckoned with. The interests, needs and roles of South African small business operations, informal networks of authority, and local politicians must be understood. Failures of state policy, strategy and administration must be acknowledged and addressed. The role of corruption and the loss of moral authority by instruments of power must be factored in. We need to revisit the conflict resolution tools and processes that we were so good at in the 1980s and 1990s. We desperately need sympathetic ears and credible brokers of peace.

We should avoid the temptation to view violence directed at those perceived to be foreigners as exceptional. It is merely one expression of a broader phenomenon of violence in our society. Violence is woven through the tapestry of South African collectivity. Whether parents beating their children, men abusing women, teachers relying on corporal punishment, or police resorting to intimidation, too many South Africans view violence as necessary, acceptable and routine. We believe that this is ultimately a failure of democratic authority. Trust in authority is at a lower ebb now than it was in 2008. And, as Hugh Curtler argued decades ago:

“Once authority has deteriorated to the level of mere power, the next move to actual violence is no longer a moral problem – it is a matter of survival.”

Fundamentally we need to restore moral authority to the instruments of power.

Finding a way forward

It is time for all South Africans to take responsibility for embracing the hospitality that defines our democratic order and to work together to find solutions to the xenophobia and underlying societal dynamics which are destroying lives and bringing us shame. The time for pointing fingers is past. We must understand that we are all complicit in the development of cultures of ‘othering’. The focus now must be on making liberatory futures for all who live in South Africa. Government interventions can only be part of a medley of interventions to address the deep-rooted structural and attitudinal dimensions that underlie the challenge. Every sector of our society will have to be engaged – the state, government, the private sector, civil society, communities and individuals. We need an integrated strategy which addresses *inter alia*: the reconciliation of diverse communities post-conflict; the protection and reintegration of the dislocated; the development of migration policies which are coherent, rights-based, implementable and respectful of histories of migration in Africa; the teaching of international solidarity as an integral part of our liberation history; the reinforcement of the concept of South Africa as part of the African continent and her struggles; and the unravelling of the terrible societal knot created by inequality, poverty and systemic corruption.