TOGETHER AGAINST VIOLENCE

In South Africa, young people are particularly affected by violence: they are its most frequent victims and perpetrators. Young people are now taking action in an effort to improve safety, especially in the townships, where there is a high level of social deprivation.

Text Dagmar Wittek
Sarah turns the key and rattles the front door to make sure that it is securely locked. She crosses the yard, where her little niece is playing. Sarah kisses her on the nose. 'See you later,' she says as she leaves. But it’s a phrase that always fills her with dread, for they were the last words she ever spoke to her best friend. Last year, Sarah said goodbye to her and never saw her again. Her friend was abducted, raped and strangled by a young man from the local neighbourhood. Her body was discovered by the neighbours.

‘I never feel safe,’ says 17-year-old Sarah Fina. Not even at home. ‘Here in Walmer Township, anything can happen to you, anywhere, anytime,’ as she herself knows from bitter experience. When she was just six years old, her father was shot dead by an armed gang in a break-in. Since then, she has lived with her mother, who is disabled and cannot work. Sarah’s sister and her little daughter – Sarah’s niece – and Sarah’s twin brother also share the house, which is tiny – just 30 square metres. Sarah’s sister is the only member of the family who brings in a wage: she works as a receptionist for a small business. Otherwise, they live on welfare, amounting to around EUR 250 a month. To boost the family income, they also receive a small amount of rent from five sub-tenants, who live in huts and tiny rooms built from corrugated iron and cardboard next to the house.

60% unemployment

‘There are days when I get nothing to eat because there’s no food in the house,’ says Sarah, her eyes downcast. She finds it difficult to talk about life here in the township in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape, South Africa’s poorest province. 60% of the township’s 50,000 inhabitants are unemployed and only around half the homes have electricity and water. Rapes, assaults, break-ins, stabbings and drug abuse are all part of daily life in Walmer Township. No taxis venture out after nightfall. The risk of being robbed is simply too high. But Sarah has had enough of sitting around doing nothing, always paralysed by fear. ‘My friends and I decided that we had to play our part and become change-makers.’ The determination is audible in her voice. Sarah is convinced that the situation would improve if everyone took more responsibility, refused to tolerate injustice, and worked together to create a more cohesive community. So together with the non-governmental organisation Masifunde and 45 of her peers, Sarah launched the ‘Youth for Safer Communities’ initiative.

They’ve already achieved some successes: a professionally produced, catchy song featuring one of the most popular local bands, which is now getting plenty of airtime on local radio. They also have a Facebook page, a film about young role models in Port Elizabeth and a youth magazine, and they have launched a programme of events which reached 2,000 school students in a single year and made them advocates for safer communities.

Sarah, who is 17, is talking to a Year 10 class at Alexander Road High School in Port Elizabeth. She is brimming with confidence and enthusiasm. The topic is ‘safer communities’. She looks smart in her blue and black school uniform. She always starts the sessions with the same question: ‘Where do you feel safe?’ Zimasa, a tall, slender girl with long braids, answers: ‘I feel safe at home because my father’s a police officer. But if I walk home alone after 7 o’clock at night, I don’t feel safe because there’s a good chance I’ll be mugged.’ Her classmate, 15-year-old Fabian, says that he doesn’t even feel safe at home. ‘There
are so many break-ins in our neighbourhood. Car radios get stolen and there are so many assaults – and the attackers are armed.’ Fabian admits that he lives in a permanent state of fear and tension. Not even the journey to school is safe. ‘I’ve been attacked on my way to the bus. They shoved a knife in my face and stole my phone.’ Many of his classmates know how he feels: they say that similar things have happened to them.

‘These are traumatic experiences,’ says Linda Zali, a psychologist and Masifunde facilitator, who provides social work support for the workshops. Assaults, violence and threatening situations are everyday occurrences in Port Elizabeth. The city registered 551 murders in 2011/2012, and according to a police report, there is one carjacking and five reported sexual assaults every day.

So how can the situation be improved? Most of the workshop participants suggest that more community solidarity is needed. ‘If we always go around in groups, we can reduce the amount of crime,’ says Zimasa: she thinks that a group is less likely to be attacked than a person on their own. Sarah encourages the class to think about why young people become violent and start stealing and mugging people. ‘Because they have nothing better to do,’ says Fabian. Everyone laughs – but he’s right. That is indeed the reason, as studies have shown, says youth worker Linda Zali.

Broken families

South Africa’s townships rarely have decent play areas and there are very few youth centres and sports clubs. As a result, young people often have nothing to do after school so they just spend the time hanging around. Bettina Silbernagl, Project Manager of a violence prevention project implemented by GIZ on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), reels off a long list of risk factors for youth violence. As she explains, youth unemployment in South Africa is extremely high compared with other emerging economies. In most of these countries, 80% of young people of working age (14-34) are employed, compared with just 46% in South Africa. And apartheid has left a bitter legacy: family breakdown is the outcome of a policy which forced fathers to leave their wives and children and move to wherever there was work. For most South Africans today, it is quite normal for children to grow up without a father. According to official figures, unemployment in South Africa is running at 27%. Alcohol and drug abuse are other major problems,
and one person in six has a family member in prison. ‘South Africa’s young people are growing up in a dangerous and fragile environment,’ says Bettina Silbernagl. What’s more, attitudes are still very repressive – also a legacy of apartheid. ‘Safety and security are generally outsourced to private security services or left to the police – and they rely on repression, not prevention.’ Moreover, they are overstretched: on average, there are 38 police officers for every 10,000 people. The private security companies employ around 400,000 people across the country, and have also been contracted to provide security in public institutions such as police stations and prisons. ‘We don’t have the resources,’ complains Lee-Anne Meiring, a local government officer who is responsible for community safety in Port Elizabeth. The city is bankrupt. But there are other problems as well, including mismanagement and a lack of awareness of how an integrated security strategy for the city might look and how it could be implemented together with the various stakeholders.

Everyone round the table

Good governance and administration are priority areas of German development cooperation with South Africa. ‘It’s obvious to everyone that 12,000 social workers for the whole of South Africa are not enough,’ says Bettina Silbernagl, GIZ’s expert in violence prevention and youth work. Nonetheless, more cooperation between the government agencies of relevance to security could help to bring about some improvements. ‘South Africa has very good experts, but the problems lie in the practical implementation of policies, especially at local level.’ But now, efforts to bring urban planners, social workers, the police and the education sector together around the table have been successful – and everyone views the Masifunde project, which is based on peer involvement in the prevention of youth violence, very positively. ‘And that’s encouraging,’ says Bettina Silbernagl, for as she explains, it shows that there is now a greater awareness among all stakeholders, not only the agencies that have customarily been responsible for security.

GIZ’s support for Masifunde is funded by a BMZ programme on violence prevention in South Africa.

Sarah collects up the paper and pencils. She is happy with the workshop and thinks that ‘the participants now understand that they are not powerless or defenceless’. What does Fabian think? ‘The workshop was great because it made us realise that together, we can be change-makers.’ His class now wants to organise a fun-run in Port Elizabeth, to promote community cohesion and raise awareness of safety issues. Youth worker Linda Zali is delighted: ‘We now have a few more kids who are taking positive action to shape their futures, which means that they are less likely to get onto the wrong track.’

Creating more security

Project: Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention for Safe Public Spaces (VCP)
Commissioned by: German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Overall term: 2012 to 2017

Due to decades of neglect of South Africa’s poor majority population, ongoing social deprivation, young people’s lack of prospects for the future, a high rate of family breakdown and major social inequality, violence dominates daily life for many people in South Africa. In order to address the consistently high levels of violence, GIZ has been implementing a violence prevention programme in South Africa on behalf of the German Government since 2012. The primary goal is to make the prevention of violence a community task, rather than simply leaving it to the police and justice system. The project encourages the government and administration, especially at local level, to bring together all the relevant stakeholders and develop lasting solutions to conflicts. There is a particular focus on strengthening young people’s involvement in preventing violence. Young people are especially affected by violence, both as victims and as perpetrators, so they have an important role to play.

> SOUTH AFRICA

> VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Pretoria
Population: 51.7 million
Population growth: −0.5%
GDP per capita: USD 7,525
Unemployment rate: 25.1%
Number of violent crimes against women solved: 151,115
Human Development Index ranking: 121 (out of 187)

Sources: Germany Trade & Invest, GIZ – The World Factbook
¹estimated figure, ²South African Police Service, 2012/2013

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