

Community dialogue for safety and prosperity

An assessment

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The communities of Hoekwil and Touwsrante on South Africa's Garden Route have been engaged in an ongoing dialogue process to improve safety and increase the prosperity of all residents since August 2021. The dialogue brings residents together across class, race and nationality. This assessment reveals the achievements and challenges of the process.

Key findings

- ▶ Having experienced facilitators helps to make the community dialogue a space where everyone can participate freely.
- ▶ The dialogue has resulted in increased interactions between the people of Touwsrante and Hoekwil. This has been achieved through holding inclusive community markets and by interactions in the dialogue across race, class and age.
- ▶ The fact that the dialogue has been sustained for two years is in itself a success. It has also solved refuse collection and sanitation problems in collaboration with the local municipality.
- ▶ Police accountability has improved. South African Police Service (SAPS) members routinely provide feedback in meetings about current cases and crime levels.
- ▶ Participants make inputs on the agenda and are engaged in a facilitated dialogue that is process driven. This approach enables them to play an active role in leading the dialogue process.
- ▶ Building emotional connections between participants wasn't something that all community members were comfortable with. Some raised concerns with what they called the 'team-building' check-in exercises, which they viewed as creating a false sense of community.
- ▶ While the dialogue followed an inclusive language policy, language remains a challenge as three different languages are spoken in the communities.
- ▶ Reconciling different experiences is a challenge. Some participants found it challenging to respect other people's opinions, particularly when they expressed views they did not share.
- ▶ For dialogue to be effective, participants must take ownership of the process and believe they can effect change in their community.

Recommendations

- ▶ The involvement of public service institutions such as the SAPS in local dialogue is important as these representatives provide access to information and resources and can build trusting relationships with community members. This should be encouraged by local government managers and SAPS officials with decision-making power.
- ▶ Ratepayer associations and other community structures should consider how dialogue, in addition to regular, agenda-led meetings, could support efforts to build cohesive, inclusive communities.

Introduction

The Hoekwil and Touwsranten communities along South Africa's Garden Route have been holding monthly dialogues since 2021, following concerns about a lack of safety in the area. Hoekwil and Touwsranten are less than 2 km apart, and reflect apartheid-era divisions. Most residents in Hoekwil are white and middle-class or wealthy, while those of Touwsranten are mostly working-class people of colour. The dialogues are the first significant intervention to bring residents from both areas together to build a cohesive community across lines of class and race.

Background

Touwsranten and Hoekwil are two communities located within the George Municipality in South Africa's Western Cape Province. The country's 2011 census put the population size of the two communities at 6 032. Although this number is likely to have increased since 2011, more recent census data was not yet available at the time of publication. For many years the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) has been active in the community of Touwsranten, with ISS Senior Research Fellow Chandré Gould having played a key role in the formation and development of the Seven Passes Initiative, an NGO established in 2008.

According to Jack Froude and Michael Zanchelli, community dialogues have been used across the world for a wide range of issues relating to conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and fostering knowledge sharing and learning.¹ In Hoekwil and Touwsranten, dialogue has been used to promote connection, build trust, and collaboratively work towards creating a safer and prosperous community. This report discusses the findings of an assessment of the Hoekwil and Touwsranten community dialogue.

The assessment, undertaken in the second half of 2023, sought to understand the process and experience of the community dialogue. The intention was to learn about what worked, what hasn't worked, and what could be improved for the dialogue to better meet its objectives of a safe, inclusive, and prosperous community. This study

is intended to draw lessons that can be used to inform dialogues in other communities and to share the lessons with others interested in using community dialogue to prevent violence and crime.

Since August 2021, the Hoekwil/Touwsranten community dialogue has met monthly to discuss challenges, share information and updates, and find solutions to problems that impact safety and wellbeing. The community dialogue offers a platform for relationship building between people from Hoekwil and Touwsranten, and within these two communities. It also offers a platform for sharing emerging research and knowledge on community development, and crime and violence prevention.

At the time of writing the dialogue had held 18 meetings. The dialogue process was facilitated by a group of volunteers from the two communities and a member of the South African Police Service (SAPS). The author of this report, who is not part of these communities, has been a member of the convening team, and has attended 11 meetings since 22 June 2022. She provided secretarial support to the dialogue ensuring that the meeting venue was booked, invitations to meetings sent out, and reports shared on the community dialogue WhatsApp group after each meeting.

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) was involved from the beginning through Chandré Gould, a Senior Research Fellow in the Justice and Violence Prevention Programme and a convener of the national Violence Prevention Forum (VPF). Gould is a long-time resident of Hoekwil, and became involved in both her personal and professional capacity. In this way the ISS has had a role in the establishment and maintenance of the dialogue.

This research builds on the 2020 evaluation of the VPF² and complements case study research on the impact of the VPFs for the key sectors represented: government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and academia. In the following pages the author will clarify the purpose and nature of the study, and reflect what the literature says about community dialogues and peacebuilding. She will provide background information about the Hoekwil/Touwsranten community dialogue, and present findings from interviews with dialogue participants on their experience of the dialogue, what is working, its outcomes and challenges.

This study was undertaken in order to document the work of the community dialogue with the following objectives:

- To assess the changes, if any, the community dialogue has led to in Touwsrante and Hoekwil
- To understand what is needed for the dialogue to serve its function better and make a difference in both communities

The following questions guided the research:

- What has and has not worked in the design and implementation of the community dialogue?
- What keeps community members participating in the community dialogue?
- What changes have the community dialogue led to for individuals and the community?
- What is needed for the dialogue to serve its function better and make a difference in both communities?

What is community dialogue?

Froude and Zanchelli define dialogue as ‘a facilitated, conflict-intervention process that brings stakeholders together in a conflict or around a problem or concern to transform drivers of conflict.’¹³ Waner argues that ‘dialogue allows groups of people, with a diversity of perspectives, to listen, share, and discover – all in the name of community change.’ Dialogue demands that people enter into conversation with three intentions: to listen for what is true to others, to share what is true to them, and discover what they share in common.⁴

The Well Being in the Nation (WIN) Network, an intersectoral collaborative body, emphasises the need for dialogue to facilitate collective action. WIN frames dialogue as a ‘turning together in conversation, to create a social space-betweenness in which personal opinions and ideologies are suspended and wherein persons conjoin in the community to search for new meaning and understanding.’¹⁵ Others have defined community dialogue as an ‘interactive participatory communication process that brings together different generations.’¹⁶

The term ‘community’ is traditionally used to refer to people who live in the same area; however it can also refer to a group of people who share something in common, such as an experience or interest.⁷ In this

assessment Hoekwil and Touwsrante will be referred to as the community.

Why community dialogue?

The main purpose of a dialogue is to provide a platform where community members can participate directly in identifying problems and practical solutions to them.⁸ According to Nick Milton, the Director for Knoco, an international knowledge management consultancy, community dialogues offer spaces where knowledge is shared and created collaboratively between multiple stakeholders or among community members.⁹ This is particularly necessary in communities that have low levels of trust or interaction, but where there are shared problems.

A community dialogue can support community development. It can achieve this by launching new initiatives, building the capacity of groups working on issues concerning the community, and building relationships that enable information and knowledge sharing.¹⁰

The WIN Network identifies three main benefits of community dialogue: they create cohesive communities, build trust between community members, and provide space for shared sensemaking and social learning. These are further discussed below.

Creating cohesive communities

Community dialogues have been found to strengthen people’s sense of belonging and connection through the process of building relationships. As the WIN Network finds, they can also shift participants’ understanding of their identities, how they got to where they are, and how they might create wellbeing and equity in their communities.¹¹ This sense of belonging is cultivated through connections around mutual interests as well as shared values, and has been found to be essential for transforming community systems.¹² As will be shown later, in the Hoekwil/Touwsrante community dialogue, the desire for cohesion has been one of the central features that participants cite as motivating them to participate.

Building trust between community members

Trust is broken or deficient when people don’t understand how decisions are made; when they don’t

feel that their experiences and perspectives matter to those who are making decisions that affect them; and when people are isolated from each other.¹³

The history of South Africa has ensured division and mistrust between races, classes, and nationalities. The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation's Reconciliation Barometer 2021 found that mistrust due to balkanisation by class, race, nationality, and gender is higher in mixed groups than groups inhabiting the same characteristics.¹⁴ Despite the mistrust between racial groups, there is willingness to work together and gain better understanding of one another's realities, as evidenced later in this report.

Sensemaking and social learning

Through discussion and deliberation, stakeholders with different perspectives and information can learn from each other and develop a shared vision and plan for moving forward.¹⁵ As a platform for sensemaking, community dialogues allow participants to reach a common understanding of the issues they are challenged by, and by so doing, create the basis for shared action. The sensemaking process can help leaders and other stakeholders to establish rapport and find out about the community's concerns.¹⁶ These leaders can be local government or community leaders who can effect change. As will be shown later in this paper, this process can better enable service providers to understand the needs of the communities they serve.

Tomas Koontz argues that opportunities for shared learning and sensemaking are enhanced when there is local control of the process and individual efficacy in the community.¹⁷ This means that for the dialogue to be effective, participants must take ownership of the process, and must believe they can effect change in their community.

Conditions for successful community dialogues

Community dialogues have been studied and assessed in various settings to determine what makes them work and how they can be improved and implemented in other settings. Research into what makes a dialogue a success by scholars such as Blake Ratner¹⁸ has identified three factors that determine the success of a community dialogue: it must be purpose-driven; people

make it work; and the process and environment must be conducive to enabling participation and ensuring those present are representative of the communities involved.

- Successful community dialogue must serve a purpose that has been identified and agreed on by community members.
- People make the community dialogue work. For it to be successful, it needs the participation of community members who are in positions to effect change, and local actors who have an interest in the community. This could include the police, local government officials, NGOs, and people who own and run businesses. These people need to participate in, or at least not be opposed to, the dialogue.
- Successful community dialogues pay attention to process. Important components include who is invited, how they are invited, which activities will be carried out during the meetings, by whom and how the meetings will be facilitated, and what language will be used during meetings.¹⁹

Furthermore, three categories of people are necessary for a successful community dialogue: conveners, facilitators and participants.

- A convener is an individual or group of individuals responsible for bringing people together to address an issue or problem.²⁰ Conveners are responsible for providing strategic leadership and guidance for the dialogue and for managing logistics.
- Facilitators play a critical role in framing the discourse, ensuring every participant feels confident to share their opinions and can trust that the space will be safe enough for discussion.²¹
- During the community dialogues the facilitators engage participants in the discussion, enabling them to share their opinions, experiences, views and values in an interactive and participatory way.²²

Ownership of the dialogue process is important for the sustainability of a community dialogue. How it is facilitated and who facilitates discussions can build ownership of the dialogue.

Community dialogues are spaces where a partnership is formed between those who attend the dialogue, whether they attend as community members or in their professional capacity.

Libraries Transforming Communities suggest that the ideal size of a community dialogue is eight to 15 people who are diverse to enable a varied and rich conversation.²³ The Hoekwil/Touwsrante community dialogue is attended on average by at least 19 people, with the highest number of attendees being 28 in one meeting. The lowest attendance number recorded since this dialogue started has been 10 people.

Prior to the dialogue there were no opportunities for Hoekwil and Touwsrante residents to get to know one another and share common concerns

In multicultural contexts, language can be a barrier to participation. Community dialogue should be conducted in a language that is easily understood by everyone, preferably the local dialect of all participants.²⁴ It should also be possible for participants who are not conversant in the main language used in the dialogue to be able to use their home language with some translation for the group. Efforts need to be made for language not to exclude participants.

Challenges faced by community dialogues

Community dialogues face several challenges:

- A lack of trust
- Overlapping mandates with existing community organisations
- Cultural expectations
- Rank and power differences among participants and attendance.

First, looking at how trust can be strengthened throughout a community dialogue process, Gideon Ogunniye et al. propose having rules of engagement. These rules of engagement or shared values should be codeveloped with members of the dialogue.²⁵ Members should agree on the values that will govern the way they engage with one another, what should be done when values or rules of engagement are transgressed, and how to restore trust when it has been violated.

Second, existing community organisations and cultural expectations and priorities can have an impact on a community dialogue's success. Community organisations that already exist may act as gatekeepers and barriers to effective community dialogue if not engaged.

Third, when engaging in dialogue the distribution of power is key. Participants who experience themselves as lacking power may feel intimidated and not participate freely.

Last, securing consistent attendance from community members is a challenge faced by community dialogues. Numerous factors influence people's attendance or lack thereof.



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A snapshot of Touwsrante. Image by: Cedric Buys

Case study

Touwsrante and Hoekwil are adjacent rural settlements in the Garden Route district in the Western Cape. They fall under the administration of the George Municipality.

Most residents in Touwsrante are Afrikaans-speaking 'coloured' people, with a smaller number of black isiXhosa-speaking people, and other African immigrants, mainly resident in informal housing in Touwsrante. Touwsrante is adjacent to the more affluent, primarily white Hoekwil neighbourhood.²⁶ The 2011 census conducted by Statistics South Africa found that at the time Touwsrante had a population of 2 245, and Hoekwil a population of 3 787.²⁷

The Hoekwil/Touwsrante community dialogue is a community-led initiative that started in August 2021. Prior to the dialogue there were no opportunities for the residents of Hoekwil and Touwsrante to come together to get to know one another, and to share common concerns.

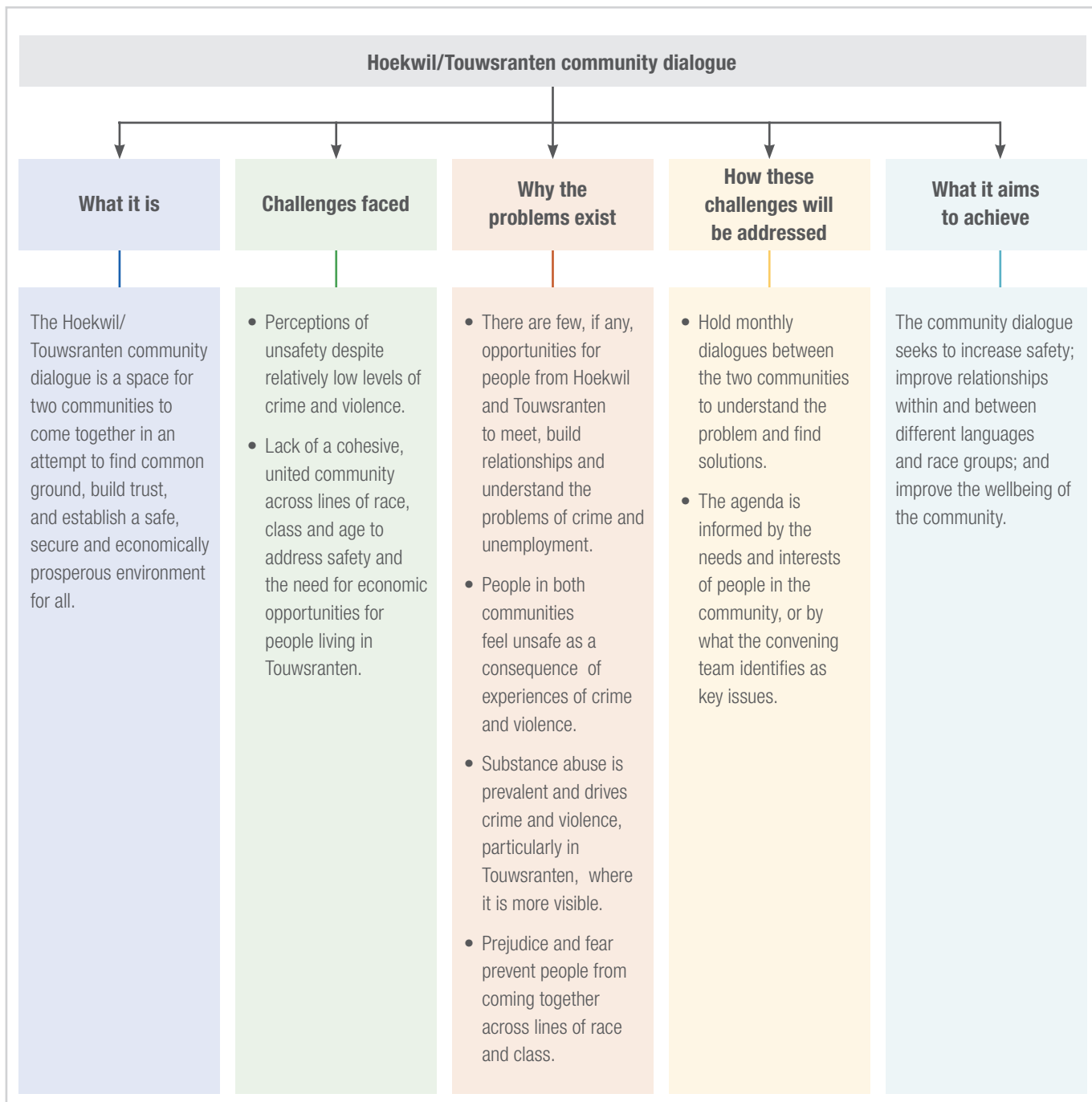
The dialogue came about when a representative from the Hoekwil Ratepayers Association, Laurell Pelsler,

raised concerns about the perception from Hoekwil residents that crime was on the rise, and that security was at risk. She discussed the concern with Gould. The two agreed that it was important to bring residents of Hoekwil and Touwsrante together to share their concerns and perceptions of safety.

Captain Morné Heunis had recently participated in the VPF's facilitation course and was supported by the SAPS Cluster Commander at the time, Major General Oswald Reddy, to contribute to the dialogue by co-facilitating the meetings. Twenty residents of Hoekwil and Touwsrante and six members of the SAPS met in August 2021. Pelsler framed the meeting saying:

This first meeting is to open dialogue between our two communities ... The days of an 'us' and 'them' mentality are over. We need to find solutions to keep our families safe, create jobs and support small businesses. What affects families in Touwsrante, affects families in Hoekwil. We all want the same thing – a safe and prosperous community.

Chart 1: Simple theory of change for the community dialogue



The community dialogue drew on the principles of the VPF²⁸ – a collaborative effort by multiple stakeholders who are committed to using the best knowledge and evidence to prevent violence in South Africa.

Soon after the dialogue was established, a WhatsApp group was started in order to share meeting reports and dates. Over time it became a platform for sharing work and study opportunities, event details, and other

relevant information, including about crime. Community members have also used the WhatsApp group to ask for assistance, such as to reach an ambulance or the police, and helping community members in need.

We have the WhatsApp groups [which have] been amazing because I know people ... when you need an ambulance, when you need [the] police, then you can add it or you can say it on the group.²⁹

About this research

The main objective of the research was to gain an understanding of how community members experienced the community dialogue and the changes they observed.

The assessment drew on meeting reports and data gathered through interviews with dialogue participants. The author was a participant observer. She participated in the community dialogues from 22 June 2022 to the time of writing this report and contributed to the convening team. She was also responsible for documenting meeting proceedings. Her perceptions and insights are included in the analysis offered in this report. In addition, she has drawn on discussions in the community dialogue WhatsApp group.

For this assessment, purposive sampling was used to ensure that the 10 people who were interviewed represented residents from Hoekwil and Touwsrante, and those who had participated and those who had left the dialogue. Three of the participants were part of the convening/facilitation team. Seven participants in this research are residents of Touwsrante. Two were from Hoekwil. One participant was a SAPS member who is part of the convening team, but doesn't live in either community.

The community dialogue is convened by three community members and an experienced police officer

The interview sample included both regular and non-regular attendees of the dialogue. Seven participants were interviewed in person and three interviews were done telephonically. For this report, the team tried to interview six people from Hoekwil, and had four people decline to be interviewed. Participants in the interviews had attended at least one meeting of the dialogue. The interviews were guided by an open-ended interview schedule with 13 questions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The dialogue has kept a meticulous record of each meeting that has taken place. For this research, process notes from conveners' meetings, dialogue meeting reports, participants' registers and the

dialogue WhatsApp group were sources of data. These were analysed based on the themes from the dialogue's objectives.

A thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcribed interviews. A coding matrix was developed based on the interviews and document review.

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the ISS's Ethics Committee. Consent to record interviews and use them was obtained from each participant at the start of the interviews. Participants were made aware that their responses would be used and shared with the community dialogue. They had the option to withdraw from the interview at any stage.

Findings

How the dialogue works

The community dialogue is convened and facilitated by three community members (Gould, a Senior Researcher with the ISS and resident of Hoekwil; Sharon Appels, a resident of Touwsrante and single mother of two; Roslynn Damons, a resident of Touwsrante and Parenting Facilitator with the Seven Passes Initiative) and Morné Heunis, a police officer with over 30 years of experience.

The conveners meet at least a week before a meeting to plan and assess current issues affecting the communities. Conveners also invite participants to make input on the agenda.³⁰ While there is an agenda for meetings, these are process- rather than agenda-driven. This means that the agenda can change, even during the course of a meeting, to meet the needs and interests of participants. This is one practical way in which the participants have an active role in leading the dialogue process. For example, at the 11th meeting on 14 September 2022, participants set the agenda in the meeting. This led to the formation of a youth group. Other issues to emerge were the safety on a walking path between the two communities, and the need to address uncollected rubbish.³¹

The convening team shares responsibility for facilitating meetings, with each taking on a role. A non-violent facilitation method, which is conscious of group dynamics, is used in these meetings. The methods draw on the Alternatives to Violence Project. Non-violent

facilitation means the facilitator is not dominating the conversation or interjecting.

The facilitators are supported by an experienced non-violence facilitator from Phaphama Initiatives, Judy Connors. Connors provides mentoring support to the facilitation process as a way of following up on the skills gained in the facilitation course. The facilitators practise the shared values in the meetings, and ensure that they are brought into every meeting, even if lightly.

Shared values

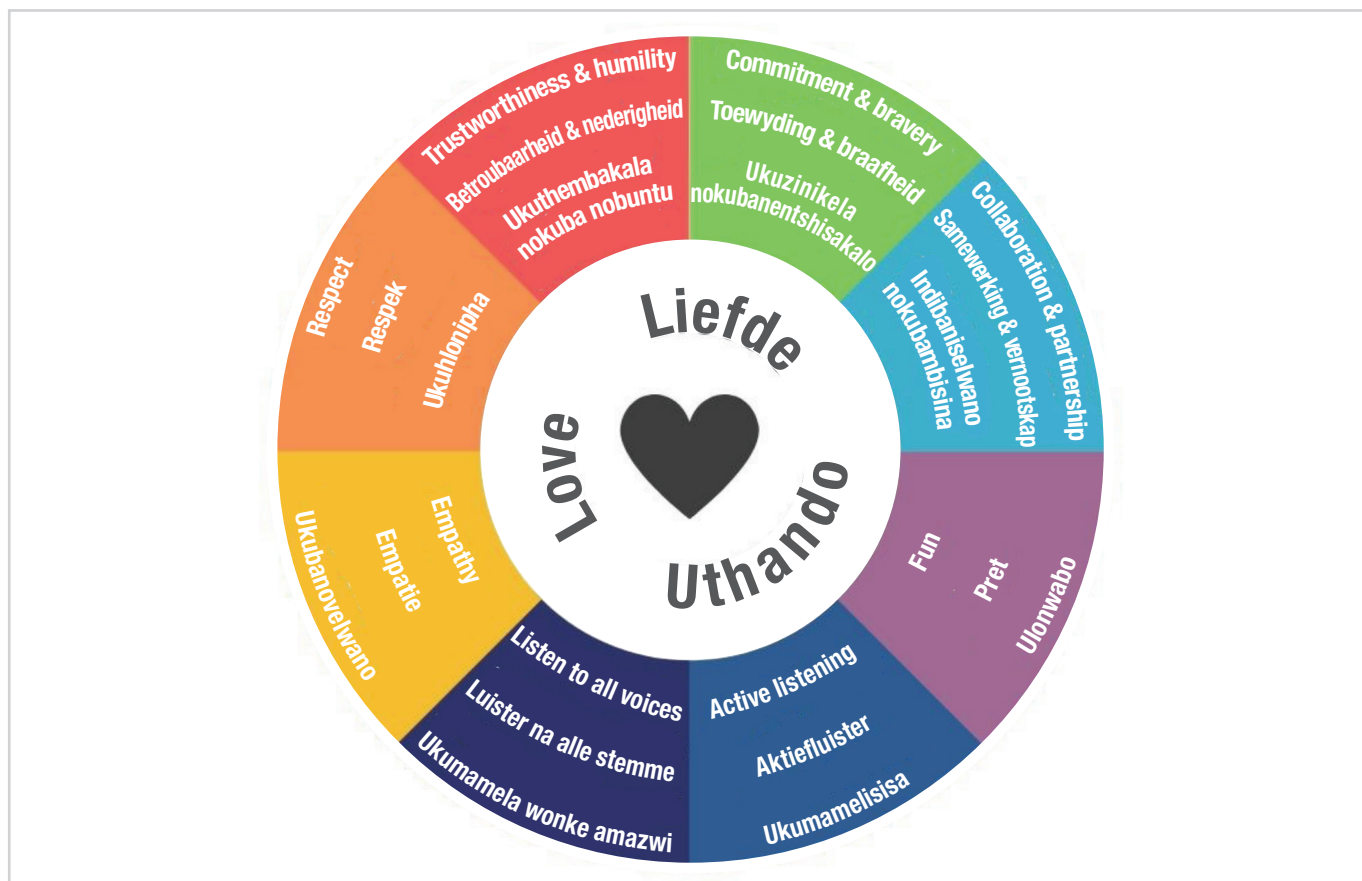
Shared values were agreed on at the third meeting of the community dialogue. This was informed by the experience of the VPF, and an evaluation of the forum that highlighted the importance of dialogue being valued.³² To aid this process, the VPF value model and principles for community development were drawn on and added to. The principles for community development were developed by Peter Block, author and consultant in the field of organisational development, community building, and leadership development. Block's work

emphasises a human-centred approach in leadership and community development. These principles had previously been applied in the national VPF.³³

Peter Block's principles for community development

- We all come to the process as leaders
- We accept that we have what we need to make things better through our own best thinking, knowledge and wisdom, which is already present in the room
- We accept that by omission or commission, we contribute to that which we identify as challenges
- We accept that we make the path by walking it and we can co-create a future that we desire
- We look for the next elegant minimum step forward³⁴

Chart 2: Dialogue values



Participants in the interviews said they were comfortable with the way the dialogue meetings were facilitated. Most felt the facilitators created an open space that allowed participants to express themselves. The facilitators are a diverse group who support each other. But they also find facilitating the meetings challenging, as this facilitator explains:

As a facilitator of the community dialogue group, you get people that think, okay, you have all the answers and because you're one of the facilitators, you are expected to know certain things, but that is not the case. I think as facilitators, we go with the flow³⁵

Respondents found the facilitation of the meetings to be different from other meetings. One facilitator found facilitating the community dialogue to be a learning journey to improve their skills. Another saw their facilitation as enabling them to be part of something good in the community.

Meetings are held monthly for 1.5 hours, as agreed by participants.

Participants in the dialogue meetings sit in a circle, which symbolises equality. The circle ensures that the setting is non-hierarchical and that the focus is placed on the topic and not on an individual.³⁶ Respondents in the interviews said that sitting in a circle ensured everyone felt like a leader and there were fewer power imbalances. One said:

We're sitting around. That means no leader. Everyone is a leader. Nobody's entitled to make decisions. We all make decisions. So, everyone is responsible. So, we do not have higher tables where people have to sit and everyone is down there; no, everyone [is] equal.³⁷

The circle was seen as giving a voice to participants:

Oh, the way we meet. Circle form. I like that because it's more open, it gives you ... more voice, it [allows] you to have a voice, the opportunity to have a voice if you sit in that kind of way. And also, it's not [those stuffy kinds] of meetings, you know, where you, okay, am I allowed to say something? Is anybody going to judge me? And that is why the circle form is, to me, it is a nice kind of way.³⁸

At least three languages are spoken in the two communities – isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English. Community members adopted a language policy that allows for participants to use whichever languages they are comfortable with, as long as there is someone to translate; and that all meetings would have translation from English to Afrikaans and from Afrikaans to English.³⁹ While this slows meetings down, it also means that things are said and heard twice, allowing for better understanding and clarity.

Each meeting starts with an introduction and a check-in. These are intended to build connections and bring everyone's voice into the meeting as it starts. This lowers the barrier to participation in discussions. For example, at the second meeting participants were asked to say their name and share 'Something I feel proud about that happened since we last met'.⁴⁰

Not all community members have been comfortable with building emotional connections between participants

These check-ins are planned to elicit emotions, thus enabling vulnerability, which allows participants to get to know each other as well as help make people comfortable around each other. Getting people to share personal experiences is an important way for community members to get to know each other, beyond the roles they play in their communities.

However, building emotional connections between community members is not something that all community members have been comfortable with. Some participants raised concerns and discomfort with what they called the 'team-building' check-in exercises. They viewed these exercises as creating a false sense of community. One person said:

I think it also depends on personality. I know one or two people are not so comfortable with that, and that's maybe part of the reason ... why they are a little bit hesitant to participate. Some people enjoy the lighter side and all the activities and the things and so on. For me, it's kind of 50-50. So, in other words, it's nice that we are doing certain

things, and that there is a little bit of team-building exercises and things like that. But it also takes up a little bit of time. And the problem with those things is that [they] sometimes create a false sense of community.⁴¹

The interviewed participants acknowledge that a community dialogue of this nature is difficult to facilitate, as it brings people together to openly discuss subjects that can be sensitive to one group, and at times difficult to address.

Every meeting includes feedback from the subgroups about their activities since the last meeting. From these feedback sessions, participants could see what action was happening, or not, outside of the dialogue.

When talking about how the meetings were held, some participants felt there wasn't enough time to work on the 'actual' issues, because of the focus on relationship building or 'light talk'. One participant from Hoekwil saw what is experienced as 'light talk' as a way of hearing people's stories, thus getting to know them better. Other participants reported experiencing feelings of powerlessness before coming into the dialogue, and said being part of the dialogue gave them hope that they could contribute to changing their community.

While the participants from Hoekwil seemed frustrated with what they perceived as not enough commitment to put in the work from the Touwsrante side, those from Touwsrante seemed more frustrated with the pace; or as one Touwsrante participant put it, wanting quick solutions to complex issues.

This difference in approach quite accurately reflects the experiences of communities – those who are used to being able to find quick fixes to their problems, and those who understand the importance of investment in relationships.

Outcomes

There are several notable areas of success and improvement since the beginning of the dialogue. These relate to relationship building, holding the police accountable, collective problem solving, and personal and community development. The community dialogue's resilience was also identified as an area of success. Participants saw the fact that the dialogue still existed,

a year and a half after it was established, as a success. This is not least because of the challenging nature of bringing together such different communities.

Relationship building and increased police accountability

One of the original objectives of the dialogue was to foster relationships in the community. Those who attended meetings reported feeling more connected and less suspicious of strangers.⁴² Interview participants reported people being more friendly towards each other, as some people made a point of greeting everyone they met. They also reported intervening when serious challenges emerged, for example in cases of child abuse; and sharing news about the dialogue with others.⁴³

Interview participants said that having community members work together in the subgroups of the dialogue also helped to build relationships across racial divides. They said there was more communication between community members and that people acknowledged each other outside the dialogue, for example when they encountered each other in the shops or at the mall in George.

The people of Hoekwil, they sometimes come to the big shop here. So when you see somebody in the big shop ... or somebody recognises you, 'Oh you're one of the facilitators' – then it's not because I work at Seven Passes [the Seven Passes Initiative is a local NGO that supports children and parents], everybody knows I work at Seven Passes ... but nowadays they will say, 'Oh you're the facilitator of the meetings.' Everybody knows me. So, I think that is one of the successes of the dialogue meetings. Because we're building relationships, we're checking in with each other: 'How are you doing? And how can we assist each other?'⁴⁴

The dialogue also appears to have improved the relationship between community members and the police.⁴⁵ Through the discussions in the community dialogue, participants have gained a better understanding of how the police operate, and the challenges they face. Similarly, the police have been able to build relationships with community members and have a better line of communication with community members.

The participants reported that since the dialogue started, the police have been more visible, and the WhatsApp group has made access to emergency assistance easier for some. For example, assistance was required for a woman who went into labour, and through the group an ambulance was called. In a separate incident, when an ambulance and police were needed, a participant was able to communicate directly with a station commander and get assistance.

Police accountability is improving, with participants able to enquire directly with police about the progress of cases during dialogue meetings

Despite such interactions having been observed in the WhatsApp group, the experience has not been the same for everyone. This participant expressed their frustration saying:

It's just our community of Touwsrante. Although I'm a facilitator of the community dialogue, we are not treated the same way, and that is a big challenge for me. Because I've asked, everybody knows the challenges that I had in the community with theft and everything. And I've asked members of the SAPS, members I know through the dialogue, I've asked them to assist me in the matters and in a certain matter and nothing happened. I'm still waiting. And this is a challenge for me because I am the one that's there when somebody needs you. The police need me. I'm there to assist, I'm working together with the police, but the police [are] not there for me.⁴⁶

The community dialogue is also contributing to improving police accountability. Feedback from SAPS members about current cases, and crime levels, is routinely on the agenda of meetings. Police officers who participate in the dialogue have encouraged people to report cases of domestic violence and provided feedback in each meeting about active cases pertaining to the two communities. Immigrants have also been assured that they can access the police. They have learnt that they can report domestic violence to the police and get help.⁴⁷

This was made possible by the SAPS visiting these communities to raise awareness and provide support. In meetings, feedback is also provided about police action to close illegal taverns. In community dialogue meetings community members have been able to enquire directly with the police about the progress of cases. At the third meeting, participants reported a shift in mindset about the police, particularly among the immigrant community. They had previously feared the police, but now saw them in a more positive light.⁴⁸

The market was identified as one of the successes of the dialogue, because it resulted in more interactions between the people of Touwsrante and



those from Hoekwil. Since the dialogue started, five flea markets have been held, with three taking place in Touwsrante and one in Hoekwil. The first market was in December 2021. Three markets took place in 2022, and one in 2023.

One of the notable things participants identified was that the market brought white people into the township to interact with other racial groups and buy from the stalls, whose holders were from both communities.⁴⁹ According to the participants, everyone felt safe in that environment. Achieving social integration between the two communities was one of the two primary intentions of the market. The second was to generate income for stall holders.

Collective problem solving

Despite the many challenges to sustained collective action faced by the community dialogue, participants view the space provided for collective problem solving as a good thing. People's willingness to assist was seen through the exchanges on the WhatsApp group, where people ask how they can help when an issue is reported. For example, when a community member's house

burnt down, people were willing to donate items such as clothes. This was seen as a sign of better communication and a sense of community that had developed between the dialogue participants.

The community dialogue also facilitated the cleaning of the path between Hoekwil and Touwsrante.⁵⁰ When a problem is reported, such as rubbish not being collected, it is discussed and together the community dialogue comes up with solutions. According to the respondents, this is one of its successes.

Dignity through access to safe sanitation

Before late 2023 a group of informal houses had no safe access to useable toilets. This was raised in the community dialogue several times. When first approached about the toilets, the municipality said they knew there was a need, but when they promised chemical toilets as an interim measure, they were told the community would burn them down, so they didn't install them.

In the course of the dialogues, it emerged that only one person who had been at that consultation had threatened to burn down the chemical toilets. Everyone else was also

Chart 3: Evidence shared during dialogue meetings

Substance abuse

Hermann Reuter is a local medical doctor. As a consequence of his public sector work in the Western Cape, over the past eight years he has shifted his focus from HIV and Aids activism to that of alcohol and drug abuse. With consensus that evidence of impact of awareness campaigns was very low or non-existent, Reuter became fascinated by an Icelandic model, Planet Youth, that reported a 50% reduction in alcohol and drug use over 10 years.

Children reflect their parents' behaviour

Children whose parents don't like them to drink, drink less. They are also less likely to get drunk as often. Children whose parents implemented a curfew of 8pm and who ate meals with them, and children who spent time with their parents over weekends, whose parents had a full life without a reliance on alcohol,

were significantly at less risk of developing long-term substance-abuse problems.

Dialogues about anger and violence

This same approach of putting tools in the hands of parents through dialogue has shifted the relationship between anger and violence. Through discussion, the group realised that violence meant different things to different people. This includes verbal violence, like telling a child he is useless, or speaking behind people's backs, as well as more obvious kinds of violence.

Through these dialogues and the introduction of good information, parents began to feel more confident, and proud of their own behaviour changes. Dialogues form the basis of bringing people together across diversity, recognising that no one sector or group can enable a safer community on their own.

reluctant, because they had seen too many temporary solutions that put them at the back of the queue for permanent solutions.

This issue was raised several times in the local dialogue, because there was at least one instance in which a woman who lived in the affected households had been assaulted as she went out to relieve herself in the bushes near her house. Three members of the dialogue, including the Hoekwil Ratepayers Association chairperson, did a site visit, and took pictures of the dysfunctional toilets. A letter from the dialogue was written to George Municipality.

At a meeting with residents at the community hall, George Municipality Human Settlements Manager Wendy Mentor told attendees that the cost of permanent toilets was much more than for chemical toilets, so it was hard to find the funds. Local women reported that the two broken-down toilets that were in place were used solely by drug addicts and for other criminal behaviour. They had to instead use nearby bushes, increasing their risk of gender-based violence, and posing negative health risks.

The dialogue has brought about tangible change, but some participants are frustrated with the slow pace of change

Because it was load shedding at the time, the meeting with Mentor and her team took place on the veranda, and was in public view. The meeting was calm, short, practical and productive, and resulted in a plan to address the problem.

A community leader set up a committee on a WhatsApp group with the municipality, who undertook to put out a tender for the permanent toilets. Mentor ensured that the toilets were built. They are sturdy and can be locked, and everyone who needs a key has one. The new toilet buildings also have basins with running water.

Each aspect of delivery strengthens belief that the community can move towards resolving difficult issues. Trust grows slowly, but it makes a big difference as it progresses.

Challenges

Numerous challenges were identified during interviews for this assessment, and during community dialogue meetings. These included difficulties sustaining subgroups, misconceptions about the dialogue, slow progress, and working with differences. These are further discussed below.

Difficulty sustaining subgroups

Many of the dialogue subgroups have not been able to sustain themselves, either because of a lack of leadership and convening skills, or because of a lack of clarity about what they can do – or because an idea failed.

Misconceptions about the dialogue

Another challenge has been the misconceptions about the dialogue and its affiliation with other community structures and organisations. When the dialogue started, the meetings were held in a church in Touwsrante. Community members therefore associated it with the church, which discouraged some from participating in the dialogue. There were also concerns that the community dialogue was trying to replace other forums such as the community safety forum. This was one of the factors that informed a name change from the ‘community safety forum’ at the start of the dialogue process to the ‘Touwsrante/Hoekwil community dialogue’.

Initially some community members thought the community dialogue was an intervention led by a local NGO, the Seven Passes Initiative. This led to some people, who did not view the NGO favourably, being reluctant to attend meetings:

In my community most of the people don't know about the community dialogue; they only know about Seven Passes, and they think the dialogue is Seven Passes. So they don't actually understand what it's about. So I think that's a challenge for me because when people ask me where are you going and I'm like I'm going to the community dialogue, do you want to come, and they go oh no it's Seven Passes. So it's very hard sometimes.⁵¹

Progress is slow

Some participants left the community dialogue due to the slow nature of the processes. They expected quicker results, as this participant explains:

Some people, they needed quick answers, like quick results, but to my understanding ... things like crime, unemployment and lack of resources was a deep problem. It can't be dealt [with] in a day or maybe in just a month. We need to be patient. Some people they were lacking patience. They could come today, then after some time they would say, no, this thing is not working. We are not looking for just talking, we want more actions, but this thing is not working. So, yeah, I can't do it. Yeah, so that's the challenge.⁵²

Even though the dialogue has managed to bring about some tangible change, some participants remain impatient and frustrated with the slow pace of change.

Working with difference

Some participants found it challenging to respect other people's opinions, particularly when they expressed views they did not share. Another challenge was language differences. Although there is an inclusive language policy that is applied, translation takes time, and this can be frustrating; and information is sometimes missed. One person thought that language barriers may make it difficult for some participants to actively participate as they may not be confident enough to speak in a group.

There have been clear differences in experience, expectations and needs between people living in Hoekwil and Touwsrante. Working with differences is not easy, and can be frustrating, as this participant explains:

The work I'm doing with Chandré and Chris ... I love it. It's benefitting the community, so I think part of the reason why I'm still there is also the working and the things that me and Chandré discussed that we want to do. But it shouldn't be one-sided. I understand why it is at this stage still one-sided because the people who need that dialogue, most [are] in the township rather than the suburbs ... When you sit down and you think about what do these people who live in the

suburbs need, you can't come up with anything that you think that yeah, I can go and do it there. So the reason why it looks one-sided is because we are more in need than the people who are living in the suburbs.⁵³

Conclusion

It appears that the relationship-building element of the dialogue is what makes it effective. While opinions diverge as to whether the dialogue has achieved the goal of bridging the gap between the two communities, there is general agreement that it has made a difference to some people's lives.

The findings also suggest that trying to solve multiple issues simultaneously has proved ineffective as some projects are unsustainable. Participants acknowledge that they have gained some knowledge through the research-sharing and information-sharing sessions.

While the facilitation of the dialogue has been described as good by the participants, attention needs to be paid to the comprehensive translation of all inputs in meetings. Studies have found that community dialogues yield successful results when facilitated by knowledgeable conveners who make the space safe for participants to express themselves and ensure the process is done respectfully, and that ground rules are set by participants to ensure they abide by them.⁵⁴

This has been the case for the community dialogue. Having experienced facilitators has been shown to be effective in making the community dialogue a space where everyone feels encouraged to participate freely. These facilitators enable the participants to express their opinions without fear of being judged and practise active listening when it comes to setting up the meetings.

To make the community dialogue work requires conveners to pay attention to both substantive issues and processes. Logistical issues such as when and where community dialogue meetings take place were found to influence attendance. Research shows that facilitators and conveners of dialogue need to be conscious of the time, day and place where the dialogue is held.

The Touwsrante and Hoekwil community dialogue meetings take place in the evenings to accommodate

those working during the day, but at times these meetings clash with the meetings of other structures in the community. This is inevitable, but managed by ensuring regular meeting dates and making these available to the community at the start of the year.

While everyone is invited to attend the meetings, the conveners were intentional in reaching out to invite particular people who represent marginal or significant voices, or who play a key role in the community. The involvement of public service institutions has proved to be an important contribution to the success of some of the dialogue. Representation from the Hoekwil Ratepayers Association has also proved beneficial for the dialogue, as they have been able to assist in some projects, such as cleaning up the path between the two communities and helping to remove refuse in the informal settlement.

Participants want the dialogue to deal with one issue at a time, as taking on too much proved to be ineffective

The unique aspect of the Hoekwil/Touwsranten community dialogue is that it aims to bring two different communities into dialogue. Yet Hoekwil and Touwsranten themselves are diverse. This adds layers of complexity for the dialogue to grapple with. It means that participants come to the dialogue with different life experiences, resources, power, and influence, among others.

In South Africa where levels of mistrust between races is high, these differences can be difficult to overcome. The findings demonstrate that although imperfect, the community dialogue provides an opportunity for these issues to be acknowledged and aired. This is a first and necessary step in building trust between communities and enabling collective problem solving.

The findings show that continued participation for most participants is motivated by seeing the benefits of the dialogue both for themselves, and for their communities. Seeing tangible results such as streets and paths being cleaned and toilets built has shown that the

dialogue does have the potential to make a difference in the communities. This motivates them to continue participating in it. According to one of the respondents, this is its biggest achievement to date.

It has been the biggest achievement to put those toilets for those women there who were being robbed in the bushes and potentially they would have been raped at some point. Those people are very, very happy ... they are extremely happy about those toilets.⁵⁵

When participants feel like they are leaving the meetings having learnt or gained something from it, they are likely to continue attending. The community dialogue has become a space for knowledge sharing.⁵⁶ It is through this new knowledge that participants are able to reflect on how they are affected; and how they might both perpetuate and prevent violence.

Through participating in the dialogue, the participants who volunteered to be part of the convening team gain facilitation skills and public speaking skills. Being part of the convening team brings increased status and recognition and connection.

Research shows that for community dialogue to work, it has to be purpose-driven.⁵⁷ The Hoekwil/Touwsranten community dialogue has a clearly stated mission. Through the community dialogue the two communities of Hoekwil and Touwsranten have created a space where they can talk to each other, find common ground, and work towards creating a safer and more prosperous community. The data tells us that the community dialogue has strengthened the sense of community for most of the interviewed participants.

There has been improvement when it comes to communication between the police and community members. The dialogue has provided a space where community members can communicate directly with police officials and learn more about how the police work. Improved relations with the local police have had positive results, particularly in the immigrant community.

The assessment found that participants want the dialogue to deal with one issue at a time, as taking on too much proved to be ineffective.

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