

Meeting the Challenge of Change? Notes on Policing and Transition in South Africa

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Policing and Transition in South Africa

In the period since 1990, the negotiated transition in South Africa has been accompanied by increasing levels of criminal and political violence. At the heart of this problem lie some heated debates on the role of the South African Police force (SAP), its history of political bias and its legacy of oppression under apartheid, as well as its capacity for change and for effective law enforcement in the "new" South Africa. The failure of apartheid-based policing institutions has compounded the problem of a spiral of violence which has thus been exacerbated by people taking the law into their own hands because they simply had no trust in policing institutions – which have historically been perceived as oppressive rather than protective.

The negotiations themselves posed a further serious challenge to the SAP as the multi-party forum set about dismantling the old undemocratic and repressive forms of social control in the society. However, the haphazard negotiation process (frequently stalled or held to ransom by various of the key political players) whilst effective in dismantling the old, was less systematic in generating new consensus-based alternatives for social regulation. The result has been a vacuum of legitimate authority within the society, accompanied by growing lawlessness which has in turn accentuated the challenge to the policing agencies to establish their credibility based on community trust and professionalism. In the absence of an alternative police force to simply replace the SAP in South Africa, this demands that existing policing agencies have to be transformed, re-trained and rendered accountable to the communities they are supposed to service. This

paper examines some of the limits and possibilities of the transformation of the SAP in this context.

Police/Community Relations

Although initial attempts at reform within the SAP recognized that community mistrust undermined effective law enforcement, these initiatives were concerned with the SAP's public image – rather than addressing the critical issues of police accountability and professionalism, as well as the SAP's traditional organisational culture. Far from generating better police/community relations, these reform initiatives were seen as merely cosmetic.

This becomes clear when we consider the central role of the Internal Stability Unit (ISU – formerly the "riot police") in the policing of black townships. Initially deployed as a visible policing unit aimed at defusing political violence and supposedly freeing other police units to "fight crime", the ISU was almost set up to fail because of the simple reality that violent crime had become inextricably enmeshed with political conflict. This public relations strategy backfired and the ISU became a central barrier to community perceptions of the police service as accountable and professional. Indeed, public hatred of the ISU has been reflected by demands that the unit be completely removed from violence-torn areas of the country. In response to this popular displeasure, most of the attempts to redress the public image of the ISU have once again been merely cosmetic. These included changing of the ISU uniforms from camouflage gear to regular blue uniforms and the use of more soft bodied vehicles.

Understandably, popular opinion reflected continued dissatisfaction, and many people argued that the newly established National Peacekeeping Force (NPF) should take over the duties of the ISU in these areas, both before and after the April 27 election.¹ For a number of reasons this will not occur – mainly because of the small size of the NPF, as well as time constraints which make effective training of the new NPF impossible. It has not, however, been ruled out as a possible scenario for the future. In the meantime, the ISU has been withdrawn from the violent East Rand townships and has been replaced by units from the South African Defence Force (SADF).

However, it ultimately remains clear that the only effective manner of improving police/community relations must be through the delivery of a more effective and professional service to the black township communities.

- This demands the upgrading of police stations in the townships so that they match the standard of those in "white areas" and have all the necessary equipment such as telephones, sufficient vehicles and adequate manpower.
- The response time to emergency calls must be dramatically improved.
- Investigations and prosecutions must be completed in a manner that is transparent to complainants and the structure of the force must be revised to provide for transparency, enabling township residents to determine who is responsible for what.
- There must be more effective and visible investigations into allegations of police misconduct.

- The establishment of police-community consultative forums must serve as a platform for community empowerment and participation in the framing of policing priorities – rather than merely operating as an SAP public relations exercise.

Ultimately, policing must be rendered more transparent and more accountable to the communities being serviced. The police "force" must be transformed into a police "service". Policing needs to be closer to the community in order to build trust, improve efficiency as well as to develop a safer working environment for the future policemen and women. However, there are a number of hurdles intrinsic to South African policing which need to be overcome if more accountable policing is to be achieved.

Organisational and Cultural Problems in the SAP

In recent months, the SAP has committed itself to a more substantial process of change and transformation. As noted, one of the greatest challenges that is faced by this organisation, is the need to change its role from that of the strong arm of an (unrepresentative) government to a police service which is professional and fulfils the policing needs of all people in a democratic context. Some of the most important problems within the SAP which pose barriers to the immediacy of this necessary change are as follows.

Current Policing Paradigm

In order to keep up with policing developments around the world the SAP needs to embrace a total shift in paradigm. Historically the South African Police has been a quasi-military institution deeply embedded in the philosophy of "total onslaught" which views the police as the protectors of the "white" interests from the potential evils of communism and black majority rule. This paradigm manifested itself in the involvement of police in battles outside of the borders of South Africa and in the development of a huge intelligence network aimed at infiltrating and sabotaging the liberation movements. This resulted in a general policing style of confrontation with black communities in the 'interest' of protecting white privilege.

In the last few years this paradigm has officially fallen into disrepute. The SAP has initiated a huge publicity campaign marketing community policing and the police force as the answer to many of South Africa's problems and beseeching the community to forget about the past and accept the police as their friends and servants. Unfortunately this cannot occur as simply as the police would like. Sloganeering must be accompanied by concrete action and visible changes in behaviour. In fairness, it must be noted that initiatives have been taken by the police force in this respect. The setting up of Community Forums in many areas is one such initiative. However the success of these forums has been irregular and the failure to build trust with the communities is particularly problematic in the light of the coming elections.

The Nature of the SAP's Organisational Culture

According to Reiner (1985) 'cop culture' refers to the "norms, values and craft rules ... which shape the working rules of the police organisation". In the SAP, as in any other

police organisation, this cop culture is not monolithic and there are tensions between the various 'cop cultures' that exist. Especially in recent times, with the unshackling of the political process in South Africa, divisions between various groups within the SAP have become more marked. In particular, racial tensions within the force have been more inclined to surface and express themselves.

However, it is still true that a large section of the SAP are distinguished by their resistance to change. This is arguably not a particular characteristic of the SAP but is rather an aspect of policing in general. Brogden notes that a central aspect of police culture is "a social conservatism".² Within the SAP this unwillingness to change may be a major obstacle to police reform which can only be effective if it is widespread and uniform though the whole policing structure. Attempts to eradicate racism, sexism, paranoia, suspicion and separatism – all of which are aspects of mainstream SAP cop culture – may be thwarted by a substantial conservative section of the South African Police who would prefer the retention of the status quo. This is of particular concern considering the vital necessity for immediate behaviour changes amongst police officers on the ground, before and during the election period.

Organisational Structure

Over 50 % of the South African Police force are black but only approximately 5% of the officer corps is black. Thus the majority of black police officers are situated in the lower rungs of the hierarchy. This is particularly problematic in relation to the acceptance of the police by black communities and the success of the community policing initiative. It could be argued that the confidence of the community in the police would be improved by a more visibly representative police force. Until extensive and sincere affirmative action initiatives are implemented by the police force to rectify these imbalances, it will be viewed with suspicion by the majority of South African citizens.

Inadequacy of the Content and Process of Police Training

Criticisms have been levelled about the inadequacy of both the content and process of police training in South Africa. In regard to the content of the courses, especially at the advanced levels, the training is impaired by years of isolation and insulation of the SAP. Not only have South African policing institutions been denied access to modern police forces and policing methods in other parts of the world, but for the past decades the SAP have also been particularly hostile to any civilian or "outside" influence from inside the country in developing the training courses to meet the requirements of a changing society. The result is that these training courses have not been kept up to date with international developments in police training. Community policing as a subject is one example of this. It is now offered as a subject within the training curricula but the complete neglect of the subject in the past is making itself felt in practice on the ground. As noted by Marais and Rauch, "... neither basic training, nor in-service training adequately cover police-community relations, ethical problems in policing, police accountability and assessment of policing services and strategies".³

Police training was also marked both by its faulty theoretical basis and its focus on theory and "chalk and talk" teaching, instead of interactive teaching entailing skills training for discretionary policing activities. The end product is police officers who have been through full "education" courses, but who are nonetheless totally under-skilled to deal with the

practical realities of policing. Most importantly the existing training fails dismally to equip police managers to deal with the rapidly changing demands of police reform within a society in transition. This is a particularly costly liability considering the need for rapid change in the police force in the period leading to the April 1994 elections.

Training as a Vehicle for Change

One way of impacting on the transformation of the police force is through new and different training. Such training courses are limited as a change strategy, however, because of the urgent and immediate need for change coupled with the large number of policing personnel people who need to be trained or re-trained in the short period of time available. Another limitation on the effects of new training programmes, relates to the self-sustaining organisational culture of the SAP. Training may not be an effective mechanism for transforming such a culture – especially a culture of racism – unless accompanied by major structural changes both internally within the police organisation and within the society at large. Thus Brogden notes that "any initial impact of anti-racist training is lost soon after the trainee officer is placed 'on the street' as the prevailing police culture – with its particular 'on the job' guidance – resumes as the major practical guide".⁴ Thus, for training or re-training to be effective, it must be in line with other internal and external developments.

There are three arenas of training which nonetheless have considerable potential as transformative vehicles to professionalise the police force and render it more accountable and representative. These are:

1. **The (basic) training of new recruits;**
2. **The re-training and upgrading of serving police officers; and**
3. **Training of change agents' at the management level.**

A number of groupings both within the police service and outside of the police service are, through training at these various levels, attempting to contribute to the professionalisation of the South African Police Service. One such body is the Police Board and its subsidiary structure – the International Training Committee. The Police Board is a body set up under the National Peace Accord which has the broad responsibility of reviewing and making recommendations on police policy. This body is made up of both civilians and police officers from the SAP and the various homeland police forces. The International Training Committee falls under this structure and consists of international policing experts as well as the above-mentioned groupings. This body has the more narrow responsibility to investigate and make recommendations on police training. Its impact on the nature of police training relates to the training of new recruits and the retraining of serving police officers. The International Training Committee has already reviewed the SAP Basic Training and its recommendations for the new basic training programme will be implemented in the course of the coming year. Some of the most important recommendations being made by the Committee include the suggestion that new recruits undergo training in the field under the supervision of a field training officer for 14 weeks; the basic training programme be extended from 6 months to 12 months; and that practical training be included as part of basic training as well as training at the police colleges.

In 1994 the International Training Committee has been given the task of reviewing and making recommendations on Advanced Training including management training. The impact of this body on the future face of police training in this country has been and will continue to be substantial.

Conclusion

One of the most important factors contributing to the "closed culture" of the SAP (at the same time as being a product of it) has been the unwillingness to make use of outsiders (civilians) in police education and training. In recent times this approach has shown signs of changing. The majority of trainers are still police officers but some outsiders are now being used, especially in Advanced Training. It is anticipated that this trend will continue and will broaden. A related development is that the training institutions themselves are becoming more "influenced" by outside developments and initiatives and are more flexible in incorporating new ideas into their training curriculums. International advances in training methodology, have been eagerly grasped by trainers in these institutions. Another development is the incorporation of new courses specifically aimed at professionalising the police force and instilling in its members both attitudes applicable to policing in a democracy, as well as the skills for dealing with potentially conflictual situations. The success of these courses is however debateable.

Much of the impetus for change and for the professionalisation of the SAP is being focused on the arena of training. However, while making an important contribution, training alone cannot transform undemocratic policing. Ultimately developments in training must be accompanied by the establishment of politically accountable policing institutions. This must include local-level accountability through policing practices which render the SAP activities subject to the scrutiny and criticism of the wider community.

South Africa's first non-racial democratic election due to take place on April 27 1994, offers the prospect of establishing a political environment in which policing is legitimised in this country for the first time. This may be the critical first step in truly transforming the police service, but it will still be subject to the pervasive organisational cultural dynamics of the old SAP. For this reason, empowerment of black police officers within the service becomes essential – both through an effective affirmative action programme, as well as through the establishment of a legal police trade union. These developments are arguably essential both to the democratisation and the professionalisation of the SAP.

The Centre's Training and Re-training of Police

The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation's Policing Research Project, and the Graduate School of Public and Development Management (both from the University of the Witwatersrand) have initiated 2 programmes concerned with the training of change agents and lateral entry programmes within the SAP. The first programme, which ran in 1993 for the first time, was aimed at equipping people outside of the police service. Most of the participants on this programme were members of the liberation movements, primarily drawn from the ANC. These people were given both theoretical and skills-based training in police management and it is envisaged that at least some of them will be incorporated into

the future police service in relatively high positions. The second programme that began in January 1994 is aimed at serving police officers from the SAP and the various "homeland" police forces. The aim of this programme is to identify and train current members of the police forces as "change agents" who could be influential in ensuring that the process of change is successful within the policing institutions.

Notes:

¹ The NPF is to be an integrated force made up of members of a broad range of forces, including the SAP, SADF, Umkonto we Sizwe and some of the "homeland" forces. The NPF is subject to multi-party control and is directly accountable to the Transitional Executive Council.

² Brogden, M., "Social Accountability of Policing – An Alternative Agenda", unpublished seminar paper, University of Cape Town (1991), p.7.

³ Marais, E. and Rauch, J. "Policing South Africa: Reform Prospects", *IDASA* Conference Paper, Van der Bijl Park (October 1992), p.13.

⁴ Brogden, M. *Opcit.*, p.13.

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