

A TOOLKIT FOR OUR FUTURE: Building sustainable capacity for a safe South Africa at local level

BY DR BARBARA HOLTSMANN

A NATIONAL STRATEGY to promote safety can be achieved through the implementation of a local model for a 'Safe Community of Opportunity'. The model is the outcome of work undertaken over the course of the past five years and draws from widely inclusive consultation and literature review. It proposes a 'people on top' approach: The traditional view of government as a pyramid with national government on top is up-ended. Instead, national government provides essential guidance and substantive support in an attempt to create a balanced South Africa.

Children – our most vulnerable population

A very large number of the world's child population and in particular, South African children, are exposed to victimisation. This is compounded by various risk factors and adverse conditions, which will make them vulnerable to engage in criminal behaviour and become criminals.

Society tends to ignore the needs of children while they are vulnerable victims, but once they tip over into offending behaviour, they are quickly identified as a problem. Once children have offended, they are often stripped of their status as children and the right to be treated as children. The risks that define disadvantaged children's lives make it likely that they too will become parents at an age and stage in their lives when they are inadequately prepared to break this cycle, and so the cycle goes on.

This learning informed a model, 'Breaking the Cycle of Violence', that was the starting point for the research undertaken which resulted in the later model, 'Safe Community of Opportunity'.

From it we learn a range of important truths. Families need to be cradles of nurturing. Communities must be built on the foundation of caring, functional families. To achieve such communities, we need governments to provide visionary leadership, collaborating with communities in developing a protective and enabling social fabric and opportunity for all.

Research evidence points to the fact that unsafety is a whole-government and whole-society problem.



Only through a multi-perspective lens and the promotion and enactment of a multi-stakeholder vision at local level are communities able to look inwards for opportunity. Thus begins a process of investment in themselves in the promotion of opportunities where they are, rather than seeking them elsewhere, leaving their communities bereft. Such opportunities are often focused on access to better services, to employment, to a better life for their children and to increased personal and community safety.

Safe communities of opportunity model

Unsafety is experienced at local level, and it must logically be addressed at local level. Local safety approaches must bring together the perspectives, understanding and vision of local actors in collaborative, integrative approaches to overcome the fragile social systems that are the legacy of Apartheid and that perpetuate vulnerability and increase the risks of a cycle of crime and violence. This requires a systemic approach that embraces the com-

plexity of the problem and delivers a systemic solution.

An obvious obstacle to achieving safety is a lack of skilled capacity to lead and implement change. Since it is implausible to expect that local safety strategies will be able to access and benefit from systems expertise within local environments, the safe community of opportunity model provides a toolkit in which these concepts and theories are embedded.

In line with the systems theory on which it is based, the model reflects collaboration across many disciplines, including systems theory, design thinking and innovation, visioning and information and communications technology (ICT). Previous attempts at multidisciplinary strategies to address unsafety have required complicated and ultimately impossible coordination functions. The model proposes instead a network of collaborative relationships based only on mutual dependencies.

The model elaborates the complex relationships amongst 48 elements of safety as

Crime, violence and the resultant lack of safety – or unsafety as it is now termed – are issues of deep concern for most South Africans. Criminal justice responses, despite heavy investment and efforts by the State to increase and improve capacity to ensure effective law enforcement, remain inadequate to achieve safety.

The model is the basis of 24 local safety plans in the Western Cape. It was presented to 300 police officers in Santiago de Chile in November 2009. It was the topic of a keynote address at the 15th Colloquium of the International Centre for Prevention of Crime in Montreal in December 2009. In February 2010 it was presented at a Round Table hosted by UN Habitat Safer Cities in Nairobi. A partnership is planned with UN Habitat Safer Cities.

elicited from extensive expert and community consultation, and review and analysis of literature and policies. The mandates and programmes of 28 government departments and the non-governmental sector are each tested to identify who should do what and with whom, to achieve each element. The impacts of achievement or non-achievement of the elements on each other are also explored.

The model proposes innovative ICT support in a systemic approach to local safety, building capacity through knowledge and simple processes, to enable management at local level. It is proposed as the core of a national strategy for a safe South Africa, in which what is experienced and learned locally informs a constantly adaptive process responsive both to changing needs and progress towards safety in individual communities.

Enquiries:
Dr Barbara Holtmann
bholtmann@csir.co.za

