



Co-ordinating prevention: the role of Community Safety Forums

Sean Tait and Dick Usher

The Community Safety Forum project is run by U Managing Conflict (UMAC), a non-governmental organisation with several years' experience working in the field of policing and conflict resolution.¹ When UMAC started in the mid-1980s as the Unrest Monitoring Action Committee, it was mainly concerned with monitoring political demonstrations and the police's response to these events. The organisation also played a role in developing the community policing approach that was adopted by the South African Police Service (SAPS) after 1994. These activities led to a greater role for UMAC in policing and crime prevention and ultimately, the development of the community safety forums (CSFs).

New policing and prevention challenges

With the passing of the 1995 Police Service Act which required the formation of community police forums (CPF) at all police stations, UMAC assisted in establishing CPFs as part of the Western Cape Community Policing Project. The final evaluation of the project highlighted the lack of formal interaction between CPFs and other criminal justice agencies (such as the courts and prisons) as well as government departments concerned with welfare, education and local government.

UMAC's ongoing work with CPFs also confirmed that "interventions that seek to empower the CPF and do not address wider developmental issues are likely to raise expectations the police would be unable to meet".² This could result in "either greater privatisation of policing in wealthier areas or more self policing or vigilantism in poorer areas".³

These weaknesses in the SAPS' community policing approach motivated the establishment of community safety forums. UMAC recognised that people needed to be involved not only in determining police priorities in their area, but also in identifying the crime prevention needs. And because crime levels are affected by a range of economic, social and political factors, addressing the crime prevention needs would require a multi-disciplinary, integrated approach.

The need for an integrated approach to crime—involving both law enforcement and prevention—was based on UMAC's experience in policing and conflict resolution in Cape Town's townships. Law enforcement could not sustain reductions in crime without attention to the causes of crime. The converse was also true: meaningful development could not take place in an environment plagued by crime and weak law enforcement. This was demonstrated by long delays in the initiation of economic empowerment projects in high crime areas such as Cape Town's Wetton-Lansdowne corridor, as opposed to the highly successful Waterfront and Century City developments in comparatively safe parts of the city.

The CSF concept tackles the deficiencies of community police forums by approaching the security challenge from a developmental perspective. This involves bringing together those role-players responsible for criminal justice and services that, correctly targeted, could assist in preventing crime.

Development and functioning of the CSFs

Community safety forums were developed in response to requirements outlined in the two documents that have steered government's crime prevention policy in South Africa: the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) of 1996, and the 1998 White Paper on Safety and Security. Both sought to improve the functioning of the criminal justice system (and in the case of the White Paper, the police in particular) and to enhance crime prevention activities. The NCPS and the White Paper recommended adopting integrated approaches to preventing crime and increasing the efficiency of law enforcement.

CSFs are based on the premise, articulated in the policy, that increased co-operation and interaction would improve the functioning of the criminal justice system and the delivery of crime prevention projects. To achieve this, the CSF project has created a replicable structure for integrated problem solving at local level. As such, community safety forums provide a means for sharing information, and co-ordinating an inter-disciplinary approach to crime prevention.

Such initiatives are not new. The Institute for a Democratic South Africa (Idasa), for example, ran a project to enhance co-ordination in the criminal justice system and create the foundation for crime prevention in the Free State province. Business Against Crime has also facilitated an inter-sectoral anti-crime network in Port Elizabeth.⁴

Support from provincial co-ordinating structures

In the Cape Town area, the CSF initiative was supported by provincial structures similarly aimed at joint problem solving. UMAC was involved in the Western Cape's Provincial Crime Prevention Committee (PCPC) which formed out of the National Crime Prevention Strategy. The Western Cape PCPC, like its counterparts in other provinces, was tasked with implementing the four legs of the NCPS at provincial level: re-engineering the criminal justice system, victim empowerment, public education, and trans-national crime prevention.

With its experience in setting up community police forums, UMAC encouraged a more proactive approach that would include crime prevention. It also suggested that the PCPC's role be expanded from implementing predetermined projects to identifying local problems that needed solving. Experience had shown that projects emerging from a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach were more likely to have local relevance, local support and therefore more chance of success.

Meanwhile, the structure and functioning of the PCPC evolved, shaped by the challenges of working with a range of NGOs and other role-players. It finally emerged as the Multi-Agency Delivery Action Mechanism (MADAM)—a core management team that could focus on specific tasks. The restructuring made CSFs even more relevant, as the agencies that would ensure projects were firmly rooted in local needs.

UMAC's approach was that solutions should, within the broad parameters of national policy, be identified and implemented at local level. This would ensure that those affected could make decisions and provide feedback, thus enabling timeous adaptation of projects. The CSFs could also provide a single local forum where all relevant government departments and NGOs could meet, air their ideas and work co-operatively on projects. UMAC also argued that CSFs would strengthen the emerging democracy by blurring the rigid distinction between government officials and the communities they are meant to serve.

MADAM accepted these arguments and appointed UMAC as the agency for implementing CSFs. Working with a MADAM sub-committee, UMAC formed a think-tank with other role-players to examine the possible structure and functions of a CSF, especially regarding the participation of members of the public. The result was a three-year plan that outlined pilot CSF sites, the projects they could handle, and how to involve local organisations where necessary. Funding was obtained from the British Government Department for International Development (DFID) and the Open Society Foundation.

Building local support for CSFs

The establishment of the project was followed by extensive negotiations with a host of role-players—most importantly the SAPS and community police forums. The limitations of CPFs for crime prevention have been alluded to above:

- Policy directed the police to prioritise the detection and apprehension of suspects. Other prevention activities (such as diversion or victim empowerment) were to be led by the appropriate agencies (such as the Department of Welfare), with the SAPS being simply one among many partners.
- It was important that crime prevention not be dominated by policing projects.
- There was a danger that the success of crime prevention would depend on whether a good relationship existed between the CPF and the SAPS.
- There was also the question of whether loading the SAPS and CPFs with even more responsibilities was desirable.

By taking over the co-ordination of crime prevention activities, community safety forums could allow community policing to focus exclusively on police-community issues. The forums could also assist CPFs to access government resources that would previously have been beyond their reach.

CPF's were nevertheless seen as important partners for the success of community safety forums. They were established legal entities with a mandate to participate in community safety and security. Importantly, CPFs had also developed relationships with community organisations over the past four to five years. As such, they could serve as the major conduit for community participation in community safety forums. The involvement of CPF's also reduced the possibility that parallel structures for engagement could divide communities, and that structures would be duplicated.

Apart from the CPFs and SAPS, UMAC also negotiated with many other potential role-players—from local and provincial government departments to a variety of NGOs already operating in the field.

Establishing a multi-disciplinary agenda

Initially, agencies working on projects relating to the pillars of the NCPS were drawn together by the CSF process. Later, as the forum and its understanding of crime prevention developed, other projects aimed at improving relationships and increasing effectiveness, kept the process alive (see box below).

Example of Khayelitsha in the Western Cape

In Khayelitsha, a sprawling settlement of over half a million people, a CSF was launched in April 2000. A month later it was constituted as the vehicle for bringing together those involved in government's Urban Renewal Strategy. The strategy comprises a range of government, community and other role-players, with the mayor serving as chair. Facilitation services are provided by UMAC.

The link with the Urban Renewal Strategy is in itself important. This initiative, launched by the Mbeki administration in 1999 and driven from the office of the president, links crime prevention and poverty alleviation. The natural link between the strategy and the grassroots reach of the community safety forums is testimony to the effectiveness of the CSF approach.

Influenced by the Urban Renewal Strategy, projects in Khayelitsha fell into the following categories:

- crime reduction
- improving the criminal justice system
- improving municipal services and facilities
- targeting youth at risk and general youth development
- targeting the facilitators of crime such as firearms, alcohol and drugs
- poverty alleviation
- improving health facilities.

Crime prevention and urban renewal in targeted hotspots and community concerns about safety in the area could all be grouped into similar broad categories.

Types of project facilitated by CSFs

UMAC has helped set up eight CSFs in communities around the Western Cape. A further three community safety forums are being piloted in the Eastern Cape and another in KwaZulu-Natal. The Western Cape areas, which were the first to be established, were selected to cover the range of demographics in the province in order to test the model under various conditions.

The projects developed by the CSFs can be grouped into five categories, bearing in mind that many initiatives were already in progress, and that the CSF assisted by incorporating these into a more integrated approach to crime prevention for the area. The five categories and example of projects in each are outlined below.

Established initiatives to which the CSF could add value

An example of a project in this category is the new magistrate's court in Khayelitsha. Until recently, residents living in Khayelitsha were required to travel long distances to the magistrate's court in Mitchell's Plain. A new magistrate's court building (planning and approval of which started well before the CSF concept was introduced) was nearing completion in Khayelitsha. The CSF could assist by expediting a range of processes and functions both within and beyond the court offices. For example:

- The new courts would require lay assessors from the community to assist magistrates. The CSF could make recommendations for these posts to the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development—one of the CSF participants. A forum for processing maintenance claims could also be established in which community volunteers would assist claimants with some basic requirements, thus making the processes easier for both the clients and the department.
- The Khayelitsha CSF could assist in the provision of public education about the legal processes such as bail and parole, and the rights of accused as well as victims.
- The CSF could also add value by improving the court's relationship with witnesses. Resources permitting, it is considering introducing services to familiarise witnesses with court procedure which will help to make them more comfortable in an intimidating environment.

Existing government initiatives that require input from the community

Several projects in this category developed from the emphasis in the Department of Correctional Services on community corrections as an alternative to incarceration. For it to be effective, however, the courts and the community need to be sensitised to community service as an effective alternative sentence. CSFs could assist in facilitating interactions with relevant community groups so as to identify appropriate projects, and gain support for community corrections as a sentence.

Other projects involved developing safer schools. This requires improving relations between learners and teachers, and dealing with immediate concerns where possible—tasks which are often the responsibility of a few safe-schools co-ordinators in the Department of Education. Real change can only be achieved when the challenge is taken seriously by the whole school community. The CSF assisted in this regard by facilitating the support and participation of relevant groups. The need was evident in view of the broad scope of the safe schools initiative—covering peer mediation, drug and sex counselling and the incorporation of schools into communities through the establishment of skills centres and horticultural facilities.

Existing initiatives that require an integrated approach

This category relates to multi-disciplinary projects that have been launched in an area. For example, a victim empowerment pilot project had been launched in Khayelitsha, in line with the objectives of the NCPS. It sought to improve service delivery to victims by integrating available services in a complementary manner. Several organisations were already offering counselling and assistance in matters such as domestic violence, HIV/Aids and trauma associated with violent crimes such as murder, robbery and hijacking. A victim empowerment forum had been established but was struggling to secure the participation of relevant role-players.

The CSF's role was to link victim empowerment to broader crime prevention initiatives and the workings of the criminal justice system in a practical manner. Often the same officials have to serve on the victim empowerment programme, integrated justice forum and a host of other forums. This leads to 'meeting burnout' and detracts from the success of the initiatives. The CSF provides a single forum to cover all these initiatives, thus keeping central decision makers informed and facilitating the secondment of personnel to manage projects.

Activating projects on 'wish lists'

Ambitious projects have the potential to fuel tensions between government and the communities where they are planned. An example is setting up an independent crisis and trauma facility with day-hospital services near the magistrate's court or police station, where a full range of counselling and other services can be offered. Because they often progress slowly, such projects cause frustration. The delays are interpreted by the community as a sign that government disregards local ideas, which increases feelings of resentment.

By discussing and analysing these issues in a structured environment, and taking consensus decisions on how to proceed, the CSF provides an opportunity for constructive engagement between government and the community.

Projects identified on the basis of research and resources

This category includes projects that are initiated by the CSF according to the guidelines of the crime prevention manual distributed by the SAPS in 2001.⁵ Progress on these projects has been slower than on the others described above. Although the goal of the CSF project is to establish a sound foundation for crime prevention, it is still too early to see results in this area.

A programme is however under way in Khayelitsha to develop capacity for crime prevention. This will include capacity to conduct a safety audit of the area, identify projects and draw up action plans for their implementation. In Mitchell's Plain, a member of the CSF has already undertaken a number of safety audits to assess the area's crime problems and available resources.

Benefits of the safety forum approach

The methods described above are not particularly original. Several concepts which highlight the benefits of the CSF approach are, however, worth noting:

- There is an emphasis on a sustained, multi-disciplinary approach to crime prevention, and a holistic approach to community development on a local basis, involving many role-players.
- Co-operation by local agencies on a range of problems deepens their understanding of one another's work. This increases the possibility for co-operation and mutual support which should enable further efficiencies in service delivery. Those involved can learn about the issues first hand, rather than through a memorandum from an unknown official in another department or at another level of government.
- CSFs provide an opportunity for getting feedback on the efficacy of policy.
- Multi-disciplinary forums enable a flow of information between government departments and between government and civil society in a way that single-department forums cannot.
- The CSF presents a forum where several levels of government intersect. Local representatives of a national department have the opportunity to bring their own unique circumstances to bear on questions of better service delivery and crime prevention. For officials at national level, the CSF provides a vehicle for implementing policy.
- The CSF methodology brings role-players together to develop a common vision for a particular area. The responsibility for implementing projects rests with those who introduce them. Projects identified on the basis of national policy are usually well received. Others that are based on local needs often need to be lobbied with respective departments. An example is the establishment of the Phillipi Branch Court. Although not included in departmental planning, it was successfully negotiated and implemented.

Challenge of community involvement

The success of any crime prevention programme is directly related to whether it is accepted by the target community. Community acceptance requires some degree of

community involvement in the project development process. Defining 'community involvement' is however difficult. In the Khayelitsha CSF, as with all the other pilots, the main avenue for community participation is through the community police forum. The CPF is mandated to communicate the needs and views of the community organisations it represents on the community safety forum.

For example, a Khayelitsha neighbourhood watch project trained seven people to be responsible for establishing neighbourhood watches in the area. The neighbourhood watches, in turn, are part of a project on armed robbery which has been identified as the priority crime in Khayelitsha. The armed robbery project also aims to improve co-operation, especially between the law enforcement agency of the Tygerberg administration and the SAPS. So the project seeks to strengthen the relationships between the community, represented by the neighbourhood watch, and local law enforcement agencies. An indication of community acceptance would be the effectiveness and sustainability of the neighbourhood watches and the links they form with other relevant organisations, including street committees.

The relationship between CSFs and local government is also relevant to the issue of community involvement. Although community needs are currently expressed through the community police forums, cognisance must be taken of elected councillors who have a democratic mandate from the people in their area, and should participate in the identification of community needs. Local government is also key to the sustainability of CSFs.

Challenge of sustainability

Another challenge for community safety forums is that of sustainability, particularly because the concept of integrated governance is new. The key question is where the administration of the CSF should be located. Because the value of the CSF approach lies in its focus on local issues and needs, local government is the obvious answer. This would also provide an opportunity for local government to exercise its responsibility in terms of crime prevention. The 1998 White Paper on Safety and Security echoed earlier calls in the 1996 White Paper on Local Government for municipalities to consider crime prevention during the integrated development planning process.

This has been entrenched with the recent passing of the municipal services legislation. The new law emphasises the need for the participation of stakeholders in the integrated planning process, and also requires local government to address crime prevention issues as one of its responsibilities. Local governments now have to

include a crime prevention component in their budgets, with priorities being decided at community level.

The CSF provides an ideal forum where community needs can be discussed and co-ordinated with inputs from other role-players. The CSF method of operation could help to overcome the problem inherent in the new policy and legislation and often cited by local government—that crime prevention is an unfunded mandate. The CSFs enable local government to play a co-ordinating role, but require individual service providers, stakeholders and government institutions to meet their responsibilities and the attendant resource requirements.

The envisioned lead role for local government in crime prevention also has advantages for other role-players. For participating government departments, local government provides a neutral co-ordinating agency, with benefits that would not have been possible if CSFs were run by the police, for example. Municipalities also have sufficient status to mediate between the needs of the communities they represent, and the requirements of provincial and national government.

Crime prevention, like most activities, has to be learnt and practised.⁶ It is thus better to introduce it incrementally. The CSF pilot projects have established a strong foundation for working in an integrated manner, understanding crime prevention, and increasing co-operation as a basis for engaging in long-term crime prevention projects. Practitioners in the Western Cape have taken note of these achievements. The provision of facilitation services to the point when local government is equipped to take on the CSF mantle is currently being explored with the provincial Department for Community Safety.