



REFLECTIONS ON VICTIM EMPOWERMENT 10 YEAR ANNIVERSARY, 18 – 20 AUGUST 2008, DURBAN, KWA ZULU NATAL

Durban weather was uncharacteristically cold – dark clouds and frosty wind. This is what delegates to the most significant event in 2008, were confronted with as they arrived in Kwa Zulu Natal, on the eve of South Africa's third conference on Victim Empowerment. Despite logistical challenges, the ten year anniversary conference on Victim empowerment in South Africa was a resounding success. Government departments and civil society organizations came together to network, share information, reflect and debate South Africa's progress in empowering victims of crime. The conference, made possible by the partnership between the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Department of Social Development, proved beyond doubt, our national determination to make a difference in the lives of victims of crime.

This article briefly captures the Department of Justice (national and provincial) delegation's reflections on the conference. It concludes by identifying critical issues for implementation of the Victims Charter (Service Charter for Victims of Crime) in light of conference resolutions.

Interestingly, celebrating our success in victim empowerment seemed overlooked throughout the conference. Perhaps this is a reflection of our national psyche and how we view ourselves as South Africans. We are passionate individuals, but we seem to have lost the energy to fight crime and instead, we fight each other – government vs. NGOs or government department vs. government department.

We must acknowledge our challenges, but equally important, we must celebrate our success. A conference that was able to bring together government and civil society organization to discuss victim empowerment is in itself a celebration. Often the trauma we face as individuals working on an emotive issue such as crime and victims rights can reduce us to victims. We become victims, when we face obstacles that impact on service delivery for victims. Often our commitment is tested when we face "red tape" which makes us deal with "cases" and not "people". We were the silent victims discussing emotive issues, not conscientiously making the connection between "the victim" and ourselves.

Committed individuals within government and civil society are increasingly growing anxious about whether we have, over ten years, made any significant impact in the lives of victims? The conference presented an opportunity for delegates to critically reflect on this question.

Defining moments over ten years – successes and failures

If we collectively define ourselves (government and civil society) as the Victim empowerment movement, we can claim several victories to demonstrate our measure of impact. We have created a legislative framework that progressively attempts to provide a legal response to socio-political and economical causes of crime. We have developed empowerment programmes through shelters that also include skills development for victims of domestic and sexual violence.

In addition, we have pioneered integrated service delivery to victims in the form of the Thuthuzela Care Centres.

Our successes as government include, the Department of Social Development that has steadfastly remained on par, over ten years, in its vision of support to NGOs working with victims. From the days of the National Crime Prevention Strategy, 1996, to the initiation of the Victim Empowerment Programme, 1998, Social Development has consistently provided the space for NGOs and government departments to collectively translate the vision of our caring South African nation into a reality for victims.

We need to celebrate the formation of the NPA Business Unit, SOCA, which pioneered the Thuthuzela Care Centres.

We need to celebrate the success of NGOs that have been in existence prior to the NCPS and have managed a transition into our new democracy. We need to celebrate the birth of new specialist sector NGOs that provide service to victims who are often forgotten – gays and lesbians, men, victims of human trafficking.

We need to celebrate individuals who have worked on Victim empowerment for ten years – working tirelessly, in government and civil society, fighting battles, and wearing scars of war against victimization, with honor and pride. We need to count the victories of individuals when we measure impact.

The conference celebrated successes serenely, and perhaps this is a lesson for future conferences – victim empowerment is at the heart of current context of crime, we need to inject energy of hope and victory into our work.

Importantly, our success was marred by two significant issues; the first, the demise of Themba Lesizwe and secondly, our collective failure to produce a National Integrated Victim Empowerment Policy.

Another challenge that will undoubtedly become more visible was the invisibility of differences amongst victims. Victim empowerment has focused, rightfully on victims of domestic and sexual violence; particularly women and children. Our focus has made invisible male victims, immigrants, ex combatants etc.

Conference resolutions were taken on these issues and what is required is for the current Victim Empowerment Management team (which consists of government and NGOs) to develop plans for resolutions.

Thinking in the dark..... load shedding at the conference

The conference provided all delegates with a moment of self-reflection – as we sat in the auditorium and the lights briefly went off. The darkness presented us with an opportunity to think about why we were at the conference. Whether we used the opportunity for self-reflection is debatable. For a brief moment in darkness, we shared common hope – for lights to be restored. As we united against the darkness, we were victims; forced into a situation we had no control over and completely at the mercy of someone else, with power to restore lights.

With lights restored, we continued to share information, reflecting how far we have progressed in our understanding of the complexities of victim empowerment.

As the Justice department, the conference presents us with an opportunity to reflect on our victim empowerment programme which is implemented through the Victims Charter. The courts are our service point for implementation of the Victims Charter. Do we have a common understanding across all provinces (regions) what implementation means? One of the conference resolutions commits all departments to 'formalize partnership with civil society'. Do we have a guide that informs what partnerships will mean for the Department? Answers to these and other questions linked to resolutions, presents us with a light bulb moment – development of a policy or guide to inform how we uniformly implement the Victims Charter.

Who is the victim?

An interesting part of the programme was a Case study of a victim of domestic violence. All government departments (Justice, NPA, SAPS, Health, Correctional Services, Social Development and Education) formed a panel and were asked to show to how they would respond to the victim. Facilitated by an NGO, the Case study highlighted a dimension that seemed forgotten. All departments work with NGOs, particularly on referrals. This shows a partnership in victim empowerment. The reality of partnership means that government and civil society must be called to account and not only government. The panel should have included an NGO because without NGOs, government is not able to deliver as it should. The fact that most NGOs are funded by Social Development, further demonstrates a partnership that should be put to equal scrutiny.

This is a lesson for the next ten years – how do we implement Victim Empowerment programmes in partnership – how do we hold each ourselves accountable – within individual government departments, across government departments, between government and NGOs and across NGOs?

The question of absence of victims in the conference was raised. A simplistic response is that victims were present – we are all victims; directly or indirectly. Victims, like people affected by HIV/AIDS, do not wear a sign. We are victims through trauma we face in supporting victims. We are victims working in a system that does not seem to prioritize needs of victims. We are victims when others use words to generalize all government employees as incompetent, non-committal and ineffective, when we are dedicated staff working to make a difference. We are victims when we see daily media reports of crime that are not balanced with good news related to victims rights and victims programmes.

Certainly we should ask where is the victims' advocate – the political champion that can translate our commitment into reality with financial and human resources, monitoring and accountability.

New energy... another ten years

One of the conference resolutions is convening a conference every two years. If we calculate from August 2008, the next conference should be August 2010 which is the year of the Soccer World Cup. As we develop a programme of action for the conference resolutions, we need to determine the next conference date. This will allow us to develop targets for each resolution. We need to plan for what financial contribution we will make towards the conference. We can no longer rely on donor funds to support our work on victim empowerment.

The weather cleared on the last day – brilliant golden sunshine hiding behind white clouds – could this have been a symbol of how we start the next phase. We can only determine

this as we journey to our elections in 2009 and we ensure that our political commitments are translated into tangible results for victims of crime.

The Department of Justice participation in the conference:

- Delegation consisted of:
 1. North West – Raesibe Tladi and Bonolo Madiba
 2. Free State – Tsuba
 3. Gauteng – Ntombi Chiolane
 4. Kwa Zulu Natal – Joe
 5. Limpopo – Joe and Motsei Kgosiemang
 6. Northern Cape – Ado Plaatjies
 7. National Office –
 - Gender: Sizzy Mdhuli and Adelaide (Responsible for the Exhibition stall), Naomi Webster
 - Vulnerable Groups, Policy Unit – S. Ntombela
- Exhibition stall – documents provided to conference delegates; conference paper bag, brochures, newspaper insert, posters. The television advert on the Victims Charter was played at the exhibition stand throughout the conference.
- Conference papers were presented.
- Participation as panel speaker.