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Civil society responses to homelessness

Diana Sanchez

This article explores how faith-based organisations in South Africa respond to homelessness, using research performed in 2005 with 12 religious organisations that provide services to homeless people in Johannesburg and Pretoria. It describes the organisations’ histories, funding schemes and relationships with other organisations, and considers the complexities of defining homelessness. The background to the study was broader and more in-depth work by other researchers in the Johannesburg area. The study provided some insights into civil society responses to homelessness, and revealed that the kind of services the Christian-based organisations provide depends on how they understand homelessness. The article concludes that their services are important because of their broad scope, their capacity to respond to specific local needs, and their role in channelling individuals’ interest in social issues.

Keywords: faith-based organisations; Christian-based organisations; homelessness; civil society

1. Introduction

This article explores the ways in which civil society in South Africa, through faith-based organisations (FBOs), responds to the phenomenon of homelessness. Qualitative methods were used to analyse information gathered through in-depth personal interviews in February and March 2005 with project managers, directors and church officials of 12 Christian-based organisations (CBOs) in Johannesburg and Pretoria. The interviews focused on the organisations’ history, funding schemes, relationships with other organisations, and the way they understand homelessness and how this informs their responses. Although the available budget restricted the selection to these cities, an effort was made to include organisations with a regional or national scope and located in a variety of socio-economic settings to represent the different contexts in which civil society organisations operate in South Africa.

For the purposes of this article, civil society is understood as:

the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and value … which commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women’s organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups. (London School of Economics, 2008)

This study focused on responses from specifically Christian religious organisations, for two main reasons: firstly because of the visibility of CBOs’ work with the homeless in the post-apartheid years, as Olufemi’s research in Johannesburg between 1995 and 1997 illustrates (Olufemi, 1998); and secondly because of the argument that a majority of South Africans feel more comfortable donating their money to such organisations than to other organisations or causes (Everatt & Solanki, 2008). The results from the...
interviews are complemented by content analysis of the organisations’ informal publica-
tions and the researchers’ ethnographic observations during visits to these organisa-
tions. While the sample is not representative enough to make generalisations, the
approach used does provide some insights into the motivations and modus operandi of
these FBOs and may help to increase our knowledge about civil society’s responses to
homelessness.

2. ‘Homelessness’ and civil society organisations in South Africa

Studies of ‘homelessness’ are confronted with many conceptual and methodological
challenges. ‘Homelessness’ is a social construction that classifies diverse circumstances
and individuals under a convenient description. Global research uses different definitions
and measurements of the phenomenon, making the proportion of homelessness in a
population highly variable. According to the United Nations Centre for Human Settle-
ments 1996 report,

Homelessness is a worldwide phenomenon. The number of homeless people
can be estimated to be anything from 100 million to one billion or more,
depending on how homelessness is defined. The estimate of 100 million
includes those who have no shelter at all, while the estimate of one billion
includes those in temporary or insecure accommodation (often squatters
found occupying someone else’s land illegally). The different estimates in
any city or country reflect the different definitions for homelessness and
the difficulties of measuring how many homeless people there are. (United
Nations Centre for Human Settlements, 1996:229)

Arriving at a simple definition is not easy, as there is usually no single, simple reason for an
individual becoming homeless, since ‘homelessness is often the final stage in a lifelong
series of crises and missed opportunities, the culmination of a gradual disengagement
from supportive relationships and institutions’ (Bassuk, 1984, cited in Olufemi,

A complicating aspect of the phenomenon is that people who are perceived as ‘homeless’
have their own subjective idea of what a home is. As Olufemi notes in looking at South
Africa, the meaning and definition of ‘home’ or ‘homelessness’ should be contextualised
within the broader issues of poverty, deprivation, socio-economic exclusion and, more
recently, HIV/AIDS (Olufemi, 2002). One-on-one interviews with Johannesburg
street vendors of the ‘Homeless Talk’ publication revealed that when homelessness
was defined as ‘not having a place to stay’ it turned out that 99 per cent of the
vendors were not homeless, nor did they seem to relate to such a definition. Some of
them associated homelessness with the lack of a ‘good’ place to live and a ‘good’ stan-
dard of living, arguing that even if they had a place to sleep they considered themselves
‘homeless’. This further demonstrates the complications of the definition.

Since the 1994 democratic elections, squatter housing has remained the kind of shelter
most commonly available to urban households in South Africa (Olufemi, 1998). ‘Home-
lessness’ in post-apartheid South Africa is a function of antecedent social and individual
processes that needs to be understood historically, politically, socially and economically,
if the phenomenon itself is to be grasped and the problem addressed.

Recent research by Winkler (2008) looking at various organisations’ responses to the
problem of homelessness suggests that FBOs seem to be better placed than the state to
address urban poverty and facilitate grass-roots regeneration, and that communities in
need turn in great numbers to these organisations. Her earlier research shows that at least 70 per cent of residents in Johannesburg’s Hillbrow – an area notorious for its high rate of poverty, mobility and crime – turn to FBOs for spiritual and material assistance and that the only civil society organisations which thrive in this complex environment are the FBOs, which have adapted to ‘a “Hillbrow” kind of environment’. She also highlights the FBOs’ lack of confidence in the state’s capacity to address, on its own, the enormous hardships faced by approximately 40 per cent of South Africans who live in poverty (Winkler, 2006).

It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the state’s capacity to address socio-economic problems. However, it is worth mentioning the relevance of three of Winkler’s findings to this study: that religious organisations play a central role in dealing with social problems, particularly in difficult socio-economic environments; that they are confident they can address these problems effectively; and that communities in need see FBOs as trustworthy and capable, particularly in harsh environments where the state itself might struggle to operate (such as Hillbrow).

3. Civil society in action: Profiles of Christian-based organisations and their responses to the problem

In South Africa, helping the poor is widely seen as an important way to support the young democracy and as the responsibility of citizens and not just the government (Everatt & Solanki, 2008). According to a survey of the South African public’s donations to the poor in 2003, South Africans say they feel more comfortable giving to structures than directly to individuals. Four out of five respondents had given to an FBO, with a massive 80 per cent of citizens’ financial support for social causes being directed through religious institutions. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that, of the total donations of goods, food and time usually provided by individuals, 60 per cent goes to religious institutions or causes while only 15 per cent goes directly to causes such as homelessness (Everatt & Solanki, 2008). Since individuals are more oriented to give their goods and time to FBOs, these are important channels for both money and goods from those who wish to alleviate the problem of homelessness.

The sample for this study comprised 12 CBOs based in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Information was collected on factors such as geographical location (in different socio-economic settings), services offered and operating capacity. The founding dates vary considerably. Those that are clearly part of a church are the oldest, and trace their origin to the founding of the churches. For nine of the organisations, work with homeless people is part of their broader social work (some emphasising it more, or having specific projects), and three were focused particularly on homelessness. Three of the organisations had a clear international background, and were founded to follow the international trends of their organisation, six were founded by national congregations who have similar projects elsewhere, and five were motivated by members of their congregation. Table 1 summarises their profiles.

Some aims of the organisations were as follows: to respond to the needs of the poor; to respond to the changes in the area (sometimes associated with freedom of movement after the abolition of influx control); to have a presence in the area (e.g. the South African Catholic Bishops Conference [SACBC] Justice and Peace Programme); to spread the gospel and fulfil the church’ vision; to support the work done by fellow churches or organisations; to respond to people’s desire to do something for the
### Table 1: Organisations included in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Anglican Church, (Turning Point Home for Children Project)</td>
<td>Parktown North, Johannesburg</td>
<td>Reception and referral, soup kitchen, accommodation, counselling, support with school fees, support to return to place of origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Bryanston Methodist Church</td>
<td>Bryanston, Johannesburg</td>
<td>Reception and referral, soup kitchen, rehabilitation and counselling, occasional support with school fees, support to get ID, support to access social grants, government intermediation (skills development)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C Church of England in South Africa</td>
<td>Auckland and Melville, Johannesburg</td>
<td>Reception and referral, soup kitchen, accommodation, rehabilitation, housing intermediation, support with school fees, special housing for pregnant homeless women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Doxa Deo, Inner City Campus, Popup Project</td>
<td>CBD, Pretoria</td>
<td>Reception and referral, soup kitchen, skills development and job intermediation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E Methodist Church City Mission, Mahube HIV/AIDS Project</td>
<td>Sunnyside, Pretoria</td>
<td>Reception and referral, accommodation, skills development, job and housing intermediation, HIV/AIDS support group, free testing, food parcels, vitamin supplements, and clothes donations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F Metropolitan Evangelical Services</td>
<td>Hillbrow, Johannesburg</td>
<td>Reception and referral, soup kitchen, accommodation, skills development, job placement, housing intermediation, crèche, support to terminally ill patients, support to get an ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G Central Methodist Church, Paballo Ya Batho Project</td>
<td>CBD, Johannesburg</td>
<td>Reception and referral, soup kitchen, accommodation, skills development, job placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H Pretoria Community Ministries, Akanani Project</td>
<td>CBD, Pretoria</td>
<td>Reception and referral, accommodation, skills development, job placement, housing intermediation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Rosebank Union Church, Rays of Hope Project</td>
<td>Sandton, Johannesburg (projects implemented in Alexandra township)</td>
<td>Reception and referral, food parcels in special occasions (maternity), build temporary housing for orphans, home-based care, crèche, Saturday school, counselling, youth centre, assist adoption/fostering of children by families in the community and community projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC), Justice and Peace Programme</td>
<td>Hillbrow, Johannesburg</td>
<td>Lobby under their Social and Justice Departments to transform socio-economic structures, reception and referral, government services intermediation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Table continued)*
community (e.g. the Rays of Hope Project, Rosebank Union Church); to redistribute the resources and wealth available in a particular community (e.g. Bryanston Methodist Church); and even to respond to demands coming from the homeless population themselves (e.g. the Turning Point Home for children, run by the Anglican church).

A number of perceptions and definitions of homelessness inform the CBOs’ responses to the problem of homelessness. Some use broad definitions like that of the Paballo Project: ‘living on the streets, living in abandoned buildings with no services, living in shelters paying per day, sleeping directly on the pavement, and living in squatter camps in townships’. The following remarks were made by the organisations when talking about their guidelines for identifying those in need of their help:

- It is the people in need.
- Someone living on the streets or in bad conditions.
- A person who is struggling with issues of unemployment, housing and food.
- Those who are living on the streets and have nowhere to go for various reasons. Those who struggle and are without.
- Those who lack legal and economic power and this puts them in a vulnerable position. It is an ongoing negative cycle.
- People with no physical structure where they can better themselves in terms of their human dignity. For instance people living in overcrowded mekhukhus [shacks], since they don’t have possibility of developing.

Some organisations have created more sophisticated definitions with clear categories of beneficiaries. For instance, the project manager at Pretoria Community Ministries defines: the ‘economic homeless’ as those with qualifications and some experience but no job; the ‘chronic homeless’ as those with mental problems caused by life on the street, drug abuse or lack of self-esteem; and the ‘near homeless’ as young professionals without jobs. Overall, however, as discussed in Section 3.2 below, the organisations have a broad definition of the phenomenon and thus do not select or segment beneficiaries according to strict criteria when providing their services.

### 3.1 Structure and operations

Although all of the CBOs in this study have some international influence or support, only three of them (the Salvation Army, the SACBC and the St Vincent de Paul Society) receive strong direction from their international hierarchies. The smaller churches or projects usually have a board or committee in charge of several coordinators, field workers, assistants and volunteers. The Salvation Army has very few unpaid staff, whereas everyone is a volunteer at St Vincent de Paul. When asked whether they thought they...
had sufficient capacity, seven organisations – mostly the smaller ones – said yes, four said no, and one was unsure.

The organisations in this study are primarily funded through donations. Their donors and sponsors include international and local non-governmental organisations, churches, small companies, corporations, the government and, substantially, individuals. Donations were overall very irregular, and since the organisations differ in size, so does the funding. Funders gave between R12 000 (US$1990) and R40 000 (US$6633) per year to some organisations, while others, such as the Metropolitan Evangelical Services, which works mainly with the homeless, was receiving more than R8 million (US$1 326 670) per year, with funding coming mainly from government, individuals and the community and supplemented by corporations, foreign sponsors and the church itself (see Table 2). The average income for medium-sized organisations was R250 000 (US$41 460). These are figures for cash donations, but many donors provide support by other means. The main reasons for the donations were a belief in the work done by the organisation, commitment to the Christian mission of helping, and the belief that the funds would be well managed.

The available figures showed that organisations spent from approximately R3 to R10 (US$0.49–1.65) per person for a soup kitchen and about R35 (US$5.80) per food parcel. Shelters estimated their costs were from around R15 to R30 (US$2.48–4.97) per night (including food). Skills development per person per day cost Doxa Deo about R50 (US$8.29) and the Care Centre at Pretoria Community Ministries about R150 (US$24.80). However, it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons between these figures, since the organisations provide different kinds of services.

Almost all of the respondents received support from other organisations or supported each other, usually establishing links with sister churches and other civil society organisations, shelters and organisations providing similar services. Only two of the organisations, St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army, said they worked independently – presumably their size makes this independence possible, since they have a broad internal support network. However, they acknowledged the importance of links with other organisations and the Salvation Army was in the process of building them.

Similarly, most organisations benefited from some kind of assistance from or relationship with government. Links were mainly with the Department of Social Development and, to a lesser extent, the Departments of Health, Home Affairs and Labour. According to interviewees, support was in the form of money, allocation of social workers, regular meetings and direct links with officials. Some organisations in Johannesburg noted that although they had links with the local community policing forum and attended regular meetings with the police, they did not have a consistent relationship with them and sometimes police actions (such as ‘cleansing’ operations) were in opposition to theirs. While the organisations commonly mentioned this lack of coordination between efforts and acknowledged that the government needed to be challenged on many issues, they all said they were interested in building a cooperative relationship.

### 3.2 Beneficiaries and interventions

It is difficult to place beneficiaries in clear-cut categories, and it seems that organisations do not particularly discriminate between the homeless, the very poor and the needy. Most
## Table 2: Summary of staffing and funding for organisations included in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Staffing</th>
<th>Funders</th>
<th>Average yearly funding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Mostly volunteers</td>
<td>Individuals/church members and church’s budget allocation</td>
<td>± R48 000 (US$7960)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>50 paid and about 400 volunteers</td>
<td>Individuals/church members</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1 paid, 7 volunteers</td>
<td>Church members and international funders</td>
<td>± R480 000 (US$79 602) for general church work and ± ZAR168 000 (US$27 860) specifically for homeless work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>21 paid and 3 volunteers</td>
<td>Government (skills) and sponsors from churches</td>
<td>&gt;ZAR100 000 (US$16 584)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>9 paid, 12 volunteers</td>
<td>ABSA Foundation, British High Commission, Friends of PCM, local and international churches, Mustard Seed Foundation, Rotary, South African Bishops Conference and USAID</td>
<td>± ZAR400 000 (US$66 335)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>122 paid, 25 volunteers</td>
<td>Government funding 23%, individuals 19%, corporates 16%, community contributions 14%, foreign sponsors 14%, church 13% and sundry income 1%</td>
<td>± ZAR8 500 000 (US$1 409 618)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Only director is paid, 20% receive stipend and rest are volunteers</td>
<td>Individuals, corporates and church</td>
<td>± ZAR12 000 (US$1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>39 paid, 20 volunteer, some casual workers</td>
<td>Companies and organisations and also subsidies from government, churches and international donors</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>2 paid, ±40 volunteers</td>
<td>Congregation members and overseas churches</td>
<td>ZAR40 000 (US$6633)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>6 paid, ±200 volunteers</td>
<td>Overseas churches and a few small local donations</td>
<td>± ZAR200 000 (US$33 167)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>600 paid, &gt;50 volunteers, several home-based care workers on stipend (national)</td>
<td>Government and private donors</td>
<td>± ZAR600 000 (US$99 502)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>90% volunteers, 10% paid</td>
<td>Donations of parish members, some donations from other sources (a few corporates), donations from overseas church members</td>
<td>± ZAR360 000 (US$59 701)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

US$1 = ZAR6.03 at the time of the study (February–March 2005).
said that the main requirement was that the individual should be in need and have a real commitment to being helped. The main beneficiaries of these organisations were those displaced from their homes by family conflict or economic difficulties, job-seekers and very poor people in temporary dwellings.

A large majority of beneficiaries found out about the organisation by word of mouth, and a few from organisational pamphlets and specific outreach activities. The numbers of beneficiaries assisted on a weekly basis varied considerably, depending on the size of the organisation and the services provided. As Table 3 shows, the bigger organisations supported from 400 to 700 people, and the smaller ones from five to 50 people.

When asked about the race and location of their beneficiaries, most respondents said that although most were black and living in the surrounding areas, many had migrated from all over the country. They said they occasionally assisted coloured and white persons. When it came to sex and age, almost all of the organisations (excluding the ones working with children and specific services for women) said their beneficiaries were mainly men (around 90 per cent). Most of the organisations provide services on an ongoing basis, while some set a time limit for a service, although this is usually flexible. For instance the Salvation Army’s shelter is meant to be for 18 months, the Rosebank Union Church’s shelter in Alexandra township for one year, the Pretoria Community Ministries’ transitional home for three to six months, and the Methodist Church’s Mahube Care Centre for six weeks. The children’s homes in Johannesburg managed by the Anglican Church and the Church of England in South Africa expect children to move out when they finish school and get a job.

In the interview questionnaire, ‘reactive’ work was defined as helping homeless people as much as possible in their current situation, and ‘proactive’ work as helping them to change their situation. More than one-half of the organisations said their work was a combination of the two, one said it was clearly proactive and four said it was reactive. In their own descriptions of their services, ‘reactive’ typically meant just responding to people’s immediate needs, while ‘proactive’ meant empowering people and affecting broader structures that would help to transform their situation in a sustainable way. Examples of these two types of service are presented in Table 4.

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**Table 3: Number of persons assisted**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Persons assisted per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglican Church</td>
<td>30–60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryanston Methodist Church</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of England in South Africa</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doxa Deo, Inner City Campus, Popup Project</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist Church City Mission, Mahube HIV/AIDS Project</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Evangelical Services</td>
<td>600–700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Methodist Church, Paballo Ya Batho Project</td>
<td>Around 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretoria Community Ministries, Akanani Project</td>
<td>Around 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebank Union Church, Rays of Hope Project</td>
<td>Around 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACBC, Justice and Peace Programme</td>
<td>N/A (due to the nature of their work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>250–350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Vincent de Paul Society</td>
<td>Around 600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All of the organisations valued a proactive approach. The activities they identified as proactive were those that addressed the broader causes of poverty and social injustice by lobbying, and by supporting long-term projects and local initiatives to solve community problems. Some specific interventions were development programmes to prevent homelessness or help people to escape it (e.g. Doxa Deo); medical support to prevent major diseases (the St Vincent de Paul Society); helping homeless people obtain their basic documentation so as to change their situation in the long term (provided by Bryanston Church); community projects; adoption schemes and community initiatives to look after orphans in critical areas like Alexandra township (led by the Rosebank Union Church); and education and homes for children to improve the lives of this vulnerable group (the Church of England in Melville and Auckland Park and the Turning Point Home Project in Parktown and Hillbrow). In general, it was the church organisations in the more wealthy areas that were able to provide the less traditional services since they could access more resources and networks.

### Table 4: Types of interventions provided by CBOs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proactive interventions</th>
<th>Reactive interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lobby to address broader causes of poverty</td>
<td>Soup kitchens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate for social policies (e.g. Basic Income Grant)</td>
<td>Shelter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and skills development</td>
<td>Medical care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early medical support</td>
<td>Parcel distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support to get paperwork and IDs in order to benefit as citizens</td>
<td>Reception and referral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for community projects</td>
<td>Rehabilitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediation with government for service provision (housing, job-seeking, government skills programmes, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Concluding remarks

The primary research presented in this article shows that CBOs have been responding to homelessness by offering a variety of services that respond to the multidimensional nature of this phenomenon: providing shelter, food, healthcare and counselling, helping people find jobs, and acting as intermediaries to enable them to access the services provided by the state. Their interventions, in South Africa generally and in Gauteng specifically, are important because the broad scope of their services is based on a broad definition of homelessness, encompassing a variety of related needs; because they are able to respond to specific local needs and adapt to difficult social environments; and because they intervene not only reactively but also proactively. This study did not seek to evaluate these organisations’ performance, but the value of their contribution to solving the problem of homelessness – not only by offering immediate support but also by addressing policy and root causes – seems clear.

Although their capacity and impact can only be fully assessed through more in-depth research, it is significant that many of the CBOs in this study saw themselves as having the necessary capacity to address a major issue like homelessness, even if they function primarily with the aid of volunteers (which incidentally highlights the importance of voluntary work and the willingness of a substantial part of South African society to help solve the problem of homelessness). More importantly, since FBOs are
broadly perceived as trustworthy by donors, they play a central role in channeling individual donations to community initiatives dealing with the homeless.

Although sustainable solutions to the problem of homelessness may be a long way off, looking at organizations that currently offer practical help will offer useful insights. Since the FBOs’ belief in cooperating with other organizations, and particularly with government institutions, suggests they understand the complexity of the problem and the need for collective interventions, further research should look at specific ways to build collaboration or constructive engagement between these organizations and government. Religious organizations may be pivotal in expanding social support networks, building a more inclusive agenda on homelessness and improving public initiatives to address the phenomenon.

Acknowledgements
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