

# Now you're talking ...

Hearings on poverty will take the people's grievances to the corridors of power, writes **Patrick Burnett**

**W**ith a backdrop of rising food prices, high unemployment and in the aftermath of the xenophobic attacks that swept South Africa in May, a coalition of civil society organisations will hold national hearings on poverty in a re-run of a process that took place 10 years ago.

The 1998 Speak Out on Poverty hearings, facilitated by the South African National NGO Coalition (Sangoco), drew 10 000 participants and heard heartbreaking evidence from nearly 600 people in the nine provinces who talked about the hardships of living in poverty.

A report from the hearings concluded that poverty was about an ongoing struggle with starvation, lack of access to shelter, services, income and jobs. It described poverty as the violation of the right to basic resources.

"We feel that it is important for us to assess from the poor themselves the actions that have been taken to address their plight, actions that they have taken to improve their lives and their awareness of economic and social rights as enshrined in the Constitution," said Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane in a motivation explaining the 10th anniversary hearings, scheduled to take place in all nine provinces from the beginning of August and to end in September.

For the first time hearings are planned in other African countries, with the idea that information gathered will be used as a lobbying tool as the United Nations gears up to review progress on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), targets set by world leaders to halve poverty by 2015.

Among the organisers of the 2008 hearings are African Monitor, founded by Ndungane, the Southern Africa Trust, Cosatu, Black Sash, the SACC, Sangoco and the Human Rights Commission.

Outlining how poverty has increased in the past decade, Ndungane said the hearings plan to use people's own voices to take their issues to the corridors of power.

"At the end of the day we wish to see a prioritisation of poor people's issues and a move from talk to action as far as policy formulation and implementation are concerned."

With government finalising an



**Poverty is strongly associated with exclusion. Khayelitsha resident Nombuso Ngcawuzele (above right), who runs a vegetable store, says in 10 years she has been to Cape Town's wealthy centre only once, but travels to the Eastern Cape every two weeks. Photograph: Sandiso Phaliso/WCN. Khayelitsha (above left), 35 kilometres from Cape Town, faces problems of poverty, unemployment and crime. Photograph: Patrick Burnett/WCN**



anti-poverty strategy, the hearings are likely to give an insight into how the face of poverty has changed in the past 10 years. Where a decade ago bureaucratic delays in accessing state grants were a source of frustration, the focus might change, for example, to how the 12 million people on state grants struggle with rising food prices and lack of opportunity.

And with shrill cries from labour and civil society on the need to cushion the blow of economic woes — with an election in 2009 — the hearings could give voice to what is seen as a deepening of frustration with government delivery failures.

One of the communities that gave evidence at the 1998 hearings and which faces enormous development challenges is Khayelitsha, Cape Town's largest township and home to between 500 000 and one million people who lack housing, cannot find jobs and are frequent victims of crime. Khayelitsha exists in a city with a housing backlog of 400 000, 222 informal settlements and vast differences in wealth.

Ten years ago Matoto Michael Ngomana told the hearings about the

hardships at Site C in Khayelitsha.

"Things were bad," says Ngomana, who works for the provincial government and once served as a ward councillor, referring to poor living conditions and high unemployment.

In the 10 years since, Ngomana believes there have been improvements in Site C, saying that about 3 000 families have been housed. He estimates that 45% of people are not working, but disagrees that there is widespread frustration.

Not all Khayelitsha residents agree. One woman, who did not want to be named, said: "From my point of view there is no change." She talked about high unemployment, a high rate of HIV/Aids and an increase in food prices.

"For example, if you have a mother getting a R210 child support grant she has to buy things such as rice and flour. I'm talking about basic needs and sometimes she has to support four or five people with that. It's not enough."

Although there is some work available, such as street cleaning, she said this is temporary and does not lead to improved conditions.

"Those that are poor are still very

poor and those that are rich are getting richer," she said, echoing the findings of 2008 development indicators from the presidency, which noted how poverty remains racially underpinned and indicated that the incomes of the wealthy have improved at a faster rate than those of the poor.

With Ngomana saying that there was a lack of feedback from the 1998 hearings, African Monitor programme director Namhla Mniki said the "continuity and consistency" of what happens after the hearings is one of the things with which the organisers aim to deal.

She said efforts have been made to invite local government structures and other stakeholders to attend the countrywide hearings.

"We are hoping that in starting the conversation or dialogue what can happen is some kind of social contract where the community members, civil society, business and local government can start talking to one another."

Jacqui Boule, former head of programmes for Sangoco who was involved in organising the 1998 hearings, said the 2008 edition will have value because the voices of the poor

are "not adequately reflected and their voices need to be at the forefront".

Boule said the 1998 events were successful because of their innovative approach and because they enabled people to think differently about the capabilities and abilities of the poor.

But she said the hearings need to be the first stage in a broader campaign of advocacy. The failure of the 1998 hearings not getting decision-makers to use the information gathered and not adequately following up after the hearings, she said.

This time organisers plan to include the hearings in Africa-wide advocacy efforts around the MDGs.

Mniki said the Global Campaign Against Poverty, a worldwide civil society campaign, and the Millennium Campaign, which supports the achievement of the MDGs, are involved in discussions on how the hearings can be used as a tool to get decision-makers to listen to the voices of communities.

Between five and nine African countries will be involved in documented hearings, which will be taken to a UN meeting on the MDGs in New York in September. — © West Cape News

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