

➔ SOUTH AFRICA: POOR PEOPLE FIGHT FOR THEIR SPACE THROUGH ORGANIZED FORA

In a Nutshell

Convened by the South African NGO Coalition (SANGOCO), the War on Poverty Forum collected numerous anti-poverty programmes around a common agenda: holding public hearings to solicit a wide range of perspectives from ordinary citizens on key policy issues such as health, the environment and housing. A large number of the responses called for redressing grievances, for which separate mechanisms were established. This voice mechanism proved capable of culling a rich and informative body of public opinion.

The Story

In 1997, amidst the frustration of seeing a host of agencies working on poverty eradication through a myriad of schemes, all of which added up to little impact, SANGOCO called together key actors to discuss ways to coordinate efforts. Besides SANGOCO, these included the South African Council of Churches, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the Homeless Peoples' Federation. UNDP and the Department of Welfare were also represented. From this meeting, an idea was born: to launch a national War on Poverty Forum. The forum would allow ordinary citizens to express their views on critical development issues at public hearings called "speak outs".

As a starting point, SANGOCO commissioned seven thematic background papers on rural development and land matters, education, urban development and housing, welfare, economic development, environment and health. These provided participants at the hearings with quick summaries of policy issues related to each theme. Having reviewed the existing national policies, participants were better prepared to comment both on implementation failures and on policy reform.

A total of 35 day-long hearings were held in 29 locations across South Africa between 31 March and 19 June 1998. To maximize policy impact, important national organizations were assigned primary roles. Since the South African Human Rights Commission has the constitutional mandate to monitor the government's performance vis-à-vis the new Constitution, SANGOCO invited the commission to serve as co-host. Given that poverty and inequality have a strong gender dimension, the Commission on Gender Equality was asked to appoint its commissioners to the panels that ran the hearings. And because the church is committed to working with the poor, its leadership and congregations were called upon to actively participate. The Congress of Trade Unions also sent representatives, as did a number of other national umbrella organizations. An aggressive advertising campaign

publicized the schedule of hearings, with radio messages employed as the principal medium, although other means, such as messages written on T-shirts, caps, mugs, etc., were also used.

Mechanisms were put in place for the benefit of those who did not have the time or the resources to attend a hearing. People were invited to make submissions by telephone via toll-free lines. Organizations and individuals could also record their submissions on tapes and forward these to a secretariat.

To expand public discussion even further, an essay writing and drawing competition took place in schools. Primary school children drew pictures depicting their personal experiences of poverty, and secondary school children wrote essays that dealt with various aspects of the issue. A private publishing house sponsored prizes for the best submissions. Photographs depicting poverty were collected and exhibited at hearing locations.

Large numbers of poor citizens came to each event, keen to participate and speak out. Volunteers stood at the door collecting statements, asking individuals whether they would like to make a formal submission, and then selecting those that appeared most useful for stimulating public discussion. Approximately ten per cent of those who gave statements then made presentations before the assembled gathering. Each speaker had ten minutes to talk, with 20 minutes for questions from the audience and the appointed commissioners.

To facilitate easy access, the hearings took place in community halls, churches and schools, mainly in rural areas. In each province, a local NGO was assigned responsibility for convening the hearing, but it was required to work with other organizations in order to publicize it and mobilize participants.

Between four and eight commissioners, selected from among participating organizations, officiated at the hearings. Each was conducted in at least three languages, and many were done in five. Cases were divided between those involving failures of implementation, and others for which wider changes, including policy reform, needed to be considered. For the former, submitters were referred to a local NGO, a government department, or some other organization that could assist.

A list of required interventions was prepared at the end of each day, with the commissioners taking charge of follow-up. Many problems were resolved locally. At a hearing held in Messina, for instance, a farmer was subpoenaed by the Human Rights Commissioners for ill-treating his farm workers. In other cases, information was compiled that improved service delivery by government line agencies. Referrals were made to legal experts on matters relating to miscarriages of justice, and school boards in many areas were requested to include basic legal rights within their curricula. After each hearing, the organizing team wrote to every submitter, providing them with a summary of the meeting report, and including a list of local and national organizations that could be helpful in providing assistance.

Results and Critical Factors

The War on Poverty Forum offers innovative elements both in terms of its outcome and process. These include:

- The creation of a voice mechanism for the poor to speak on policy issues is a large step in capacity development. It enhances a sense of ownership, and strengthens lines of accountability between the people and formal policy-making structures. It empowers people by allowing them to contribute to making meaningful policy.
- SANGOCO very skilfully managed a complex process. The case points to the importance of creating strategic partnerships between government and civil society organizations in order to combine different capacities and strengthen overall legitimacy.
- One key innovation was the careful separation of submissions related to grievance redress and those on substantive policy issues like school reform. This enabled the forum to be very effective for both constituencies. Participants were satisfied that volunteers listened to their grievances and raised these with appropriate authorities, while policy makers were privy to a unique “peoples’ perspective” on issues affecting the poor.

Further information

V. Mthintso and Jacqui Boule. 2000. *The War on Poverty Forum: The South African Experience with Poverty* (www.undp.org/csopp/CSO/NewFiles/toolboxcasesafrica.htm).

South African NGO Coalition (SANGOCO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (www.undp.org.za/docs/pubs/povertyupdate.html).

Southern African Regional Poverty Network (sangoco.org.za/progs/fin_sust/natprogaction.htm).

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