

‘Xenophobia’, service delivery protest and government failure

The case of Thembelihle

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Like in 2008, the recent wave of anti-immigrant violence and looting of foreign-owned stores that followed King Zwelithini’s statement that foreigners must “pack their bags and leave” quickly spread to cities and townships across the country. Unlike other places in Johannesburg, however, there were no reports of xenophobic violence in Thembelihle and, although the violence spread to numerous parts of Soweto in 2008, this adjacent township was unaffected then too. This article, based on an interview with an activist from the Thembelihle Crisis Committee (TCC), looks at how working class self-organisation and solidarity helped curb or prevent the outbreak of xenophobic attacks and attempts to draw lessons for preventing future attacks.

When anti-foreigner looting and violence broke out after a 14-year-old boy was shot dead in Soweto on January 19 this year while looting a foreign-owned store activists from the Thembelihle Crisis Committee, fearing that looting and violence would spill over from Soweto into the neighbouring township, went into action to try and prevent this from happening. First, they went around to the foreign-owned stores and called the owners to a meeting on the Wednesday following the shooting in Soweto to appeal to them to attend a mass meeting called by the TCC for the Sunday to explain to the community – as they had done in 2008 – that they are against xenophobia and that they would not tolerate anti-foreigner looting or violence. At the meeting with the foreign nationals they also explained to them that they as TCC were against xenophobic attacks and looting, but also that the foreign nationals needed to be more part of the community, not just because they are providing goods and services to the community but also that the community should know them and they should know the community and build a relationship with the community at large and not just customers or people in their immediate vicinities.

At the mass meeting the foreign nationals were also given an opportunity to talk and share their concerns and the TCC explained to the community that the foreign-owned stores were important to the community because they offered cheaper goods and services, such as selling loose cigarettes and offering credit – for example to pensioners so that they can pay at the end of the month when they get their government grants – which the local shop owners don’t do.

The week following the Soweto shooting the TCC attended an anti-xenophobia march in Johannesburg organised by the African Diaspora Forum and invited the foreign nationals from Thembelihle, many of whom attended the march with the TCC. However, because the march was not supported by the government or ANC it was stopped, the police claiming that it was illegal.

While they were dealing with the issue of xenophobia the TCC was also dealing with their own issues of service delivery and demands on government. After the stopped march in Johannesburg the TCC led a community protest on February 16 in response to the Human Settlements MEC's failure to respond to the community's demands by the agreed deadline, barricading the roads and burning tyres. On the second day of the protest they noticed a large police presence and decided to back off and send a delegation to negotiate with the police. The state responded by arresting the negotiators and about 30 protesters and, although there hadn't been any looting until that point, when word got out that about 36 activists – who had been instrumental in preventing any looting – had been arrested a minority of youth and a criminal element decided to take advantage of the absence of leadership in the community and started looting. Those activists who had not been arrested attempted to prevent further looting and catch the perpetrators but they were too thinly spread due to their diminished numbers and were unable to keep up with the looters. When the police were called in they came and arrested about 5 or 6 people for looting but were unable to catch them all.

On the afternoon of February 17, the TCC decided to suspend the protest action for one day while they attempted to recover the stolen items. After that they would go back on the streets in support of those that were arrested during the service delivery protest, but not those arrested for stealing or looting. Supported by the broader community, which gave them tip-offs as to where people had been seen with goods believed to be stolen, the TCC, working together with the foreign shop owners who identified stolen items, were able to recover about 12 fridges and freezers, 2 generators, 3 gas bottles and some TVs etc, although they couldn't recover stolen groceries because they couldn't prove what was stolen. When they called the police the police refused to arrest the people who were found in possession of the stolen items. That afternoon they called another mass meeting to report to the community on what had been recovered and to appeal to the community to tell them if they were aware of anyone with stolen groceries etc. They also asked the foreign national shop owners not to open their shops until things had calmed down. During this time the community complained that they couldn't buy the goods they needed due to the foreign-owned stores being closed, but because the perpetrators had not been arrested and were still at large and because many of the community activists had gone into hiding as the police were still hunting them following the February 16 protest, they couldn't risk opening the shops yet.

After things calmed down and the TCC activists came out of hiding they told the shop owners they could reopen their shops. Since then, the TCC patrols the area every weekend to prevent any looting and remains in contact with the foreign shop owners, who call the TCC when they suspect anything suspicious is going on. In fact, thanks to the relationship that has been built between the TCC activists and foreign shop owners the activists were alerted by the shop owners that the police and army were surrounding the township on the morning of April 30 and probably narrowly avoided arrest, as it is likely that the state would have used the so-called anti-xenophobic raids to round up activists as well. By the end of the raids, carried out by the police with the support of the army and Department of Home Affairs officials, about 180 people –

mostly foreign nationals – were arrested. Many of their shacks were broken into in their absence as they were not given time to pack up their belongings and lock up properly; the actions of the state again leading to criminal activity.

In the end, in Thembelihle the xenophobic attacks in January and February 2015 only took the form of looting, not violent attacks, and even this was confined to only one day – after which it was nipped in the bud. Foreign shop owners even called their colleagues from Soweto in February and told them to come to Thembelihle because the community supported them and it was safe. In fact, some of them have not left to this day and there were no reports of looting or attacks in April, following Zwelithini's statement.

Foreign national shop owners later reported to the TCC that local ANC members had tried to turn them against the TCC by telling them that the TCC was responsible for the looting on February 17 because they had called the service delivery protest. However, the shop owners saw through their attempts to divide the foreign nationals from the community because they had seen that the TCC were in fact the ones who had helped them recover their goods, whereas the ANC-led state had turned a blind eye, police actions had contributed to the looting and stealing and even police themselves had been seen stealing money, airtime and cigarettes from foreign-owned shops on the day of the looting.

In conclusion we can say that, while the state failed either to prevent the looting or arrest the perpetrators, it was strong civic organisation rooted in the community that was able to stop the looting in its tracks and prevent the situation from becoming violent. Moreover, it is the community organising and carrying out of mass education and consciousness raising in the form of public meetings and discussions – as well as attempting to expose the government's failure to provide for the people as the real cause of the problem, not the foreign nationals – that offers the only real safeguard against potential future anti-foreigner looting and violence.

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