



# BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH SOCIAL COHESION: A CASE STUDY IN LAVENDER HILL

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Between 2010 and 2012, the Democracy Development Programme (DDP) ran the 'Creating Visions of Hope' programme in the Cape Flats suburb of Lavender Hill. The programme aimed to bring together prominent local actors to engage with the state, in order to strengthen their capacity for creating positive change in the community. Along the way, the DDP learnt some critical lessons about vulnerability and resilience, which are explored in this case study. Overall, the case study demonstrates that social cohesion is integral to the development of resilience, especially in communities fraught with a multitude of challenges and vulnerabilities.



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THIS PAPER DESCRIBES the vulnerabilities that the Lavender Hill community confronts on a daily basis and then outlines DDP's intervention and the ideology underpinning it. Finally, it explores the challenges, successes and lessons learnt in the course of programme implementation.

## VULNERABILITY IN LAVENDER HILL

Lavender Hill is a suburb on the Cape Flats that overlaps the boundaries of wards 67, 68 and 110 and falls within Subcouncils 18 and 19. Created during

the early 1970s, the suburb was a dumping ground for coloured people removed from areas that were classified as white under the Group Areas Act – mainly District Six, Lower Claremont, Newlands and Plumstead.

Lavender Hill can be characterised as a vulnerable community, based on the five elements of asset vulnerability identified in Moser's framework (1998: 4): labour (evidenced by a high unemployment rate); human capital (undermined by high rates of drug abuse and a failure to complete schooling or access tertiary education); productive assets (housing

is often a valuable asset for poor urban households, but the vast majority of properties in this community are owned by the state or are informal structures); household relations (mechanisms for pooling income fail women and children when absent fathers make insufficient maintenance payments); and social capital (trust from social ties has been eroded by the divisions between those who benefit from and those who feel victimised by the drug trade).

### EDUCATION AND INCOME

According to the 2011 Census, the total population of Lavender Hill is 32 598, with 95% of the population regarded as coloured (StatsSA 2012). Only 19% of those over the age of 20 have completed Grade 12 or higher and, although 58% of the potential labour force (ages 15–64) is employed (compared to a national average of only 39%), 59% of households in the area have a monthly income of R3 200 or less (City of Cape Town 2013).

### WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Levels of fear in the Lavender Hill community are high. Residents fear revenge from gangsters for standing up against drug trading and violence. Women comprise the majority (51.7%) of residents (City of Cape Town 2013) and, like in many troubled communities, face additional risks related to high rates of domestic abuse and financial vulnerability because of the failure of men to support their children through regular maintenance payments (DDP 2012).

Children are especially vulnerable (Bowers 2005: 167). The environment of poverty, overcrowding, high rates of abuse, malnutrition and foetal alcohol syndrome make children in Lavender Hill particularly susceptible to recruitment by gangs and to drug addiction. There is also a high drop-out rate in schools in the area (DDP 2012).

### HOUSING

The township consists predominantly of low-cost council housing in the form of double and triple storey blocks of flats – known as Courts. These flats were poorly constructed and have not been maintained over the years. During the past three decades, informal dwellings have been constructed in the area, and 16% of residents of the area now live in shacks (City of Cape Town 2013). Poor housing is intricately linked to vulnerability, not only in terms of threats to good health but also leverage of capital, social security and a sense of 'belonging' to the community.

### SOCIAL COHESION

The inhospitality of the living environment is one of the reasons for the high incidence of gangsterism and drug abuse in the area (Bowers 2005). Forced removals destroyed the social fabric and cohesion among members of uprooted communities across South Africa, and those who were re-settled in Lavender Hill were no exception. The high levels of unemployment, poverty and overcrowding amplified existing problems, and criminality and violence became entrenched in the area. Today, the media commonly refers to the area 'Gangland' or 'the most dangerous area on the Cape Flats'.<sup>1</sup>

Gang- and drug-related activities have had substantial impacts on the social cohesion of the community. Although statistics for Lavender Hill specifically are difficult to ascertain, crime statistics from the South African Police Service (SAPS) illustrate the prevalence of drug-related crime in the area: between April 2011 and March 2012, Grassy Park (ward 68) recorded 1 810 cases of drug-related crime (SAPS 2012). Local gangs hold the bulk of economic power in the area and recruit many community members by offering financial support. For example, they offer to pay rent or electricity bills in exchange for hiding parcels (Bowers 2005).

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As Merton reports (in Bowers 2005: 164), 'gangs have largely replaced Council authority and filled the vacuum left by lack of jobs, social services and recreation facilities. They organise everything from cash to school uniforms, a free taxi ride to the hospital, rent money and soccer tournaments'. At the same time, the selling and use of drugs lead to high levels of violent crime, both in turf wars between gangs and within domestic spaces,<sup>2</sup> where drug users are often known to steal from and/or physically abuse family members (DDP 2012). As a result, while a large part of the population is dependent on the gangs for their survival, the rest of the population feels under direct attack from those very same gangs.

### THE DDP INTERVENTION: 'CREATING VISIONS OF HOPE'

The DDP's mission is to deepen democracy through the promotion of good governance, citizen participation and human and socio-economic rights. The objective of the organisation is to contribute to the creation of a democratic society in which the governed can articulate their aspirations and those who govern are able to do so efficiently and inclusively.

In early 2010, the DDP went into Lavender Hill with the idea of activating citizens to develop a vision for their community and to engage with decision-making processes that affect daily life.

The specific objectives of the intervention were to:

- ✦ strengthen relationships between local actors, including staff and volunteers at civil society

- organisations and community activists, and
- ✦ build citizens' capacity to engage with the state.

The DDP Cape Town coordinator spent a substantial period of time identifying local organisations and explaining the proposed project to local leaders, and then checking that the project was aligned to their needs and aspirations. At the first public event hosted by DDP in Lavender Hill, the organisation made a public commitment to work in the community for two years. However, as DDP was unknown in the community, the initial reaction of community members was that the organisation must have a political interest to promote. Breaking down this perception could not happen overnight, as the only way to overcome such suspicion was for DDP representatives to act in a transparent, accountable and consistent manner – by following through on commitments, allowing the programme to be guided by the steering committee and building personal relationships with those involved.

### UNDERLYING IDEOLOGY

Paulo Freire's principle of 'popular education' informed the DDP's intervention in Lavender Hill. Popular education is education that is aimed at transforming personal lives, the community, the environment and society. It 'recognizes the energy and potential within each person and each community, and tries to empower them to make their full contribution to the process of building a new society in which it is possible for all people to meet their fundamental human needs' (Hope and Timmel 1995: 16). The Freirean approach emphasises that learning is not only about reason and action but is also bound up with emotions. Any resistance and apathy, which have built over time as a result of blocked and frustrated efforts, can be overcome when facilitators concentrate on issues that individuals

feel strongly about. Freire refers to these issues as 'generative themes'. Some of these issues may be discussed freely in communities (for example, the maintenance of housing structures), while others (for example, domestic abuse and drug addiction) require courageous individuals to break the taboo of discussing these personal issues in a public space.

In addition, DDP has adopted the methodology proposed by Peter Block in his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (Block 2009). Block's approach has two main dimensions: the physical structure of meetings and the emphasis on certain kinds of provocative and personal questions. Meetings and workshops are structured around meaningful conversations which take place in small groups, with feedback in a large circle. The small groups create intimacy between participants, deepen personal reflection and provide safe spaces for even the quietest voices to be heard. The questions asked explicitly create space for personal reflection on the individual's contribution to the place where they find themselves. The questions allow for dissent to be expressed and emphasise possibility and gifts rather than problems to be solved. The process of individual reflection in a shared space with other members of the community can create a profound sense of 'connectedness' between participants.<sup>3</sup> This methodology was used wherever possible in the events and workshops that fell within the 'Creating Visions of Hope' project.

### BASELINE STUDY

The intervention in Lavender Hill began with a survey of 50 local leaders and youth. The survey focused on people's understanding and perception of political leaders and structures. Levels of understanding about the functions of government were found to be poor. For instance, few knew the length of term of a South African president or understood the branches

and levels of government. Community leaders were clearly not engaged with the state: although 83% of the respondents were involved with a community-based organisation in the area, only 7% were in any way involved with their local ward committee. In fact, 40% of those polled did not even believe that voting – the most basic form of democratic participation – was important.

This lack of political involvement is related to the poor perception of the state and minimal trust in state organs. Belief in the efficacy and trustworthiness of local government appeared to be higher than that of the president, but the majority of people surveyed believed that ward committees were largely ineffectual. A lack of engagement in state structures is linked to a failure to harness the assets of the state – in Lavender Hill, 'political powerlessness was identified as a reason for a lack of basic services' (Wilson and Ramphela in Bowers 2005: 155).

These findings of political apathy among residents of Lavender Hill informed the focus area of the DDP's intervention.

### BUILDING CAPACITY TO ENGAGE THE STATE

To encourage citizen engagement with the state, some capacity-building training was required. During the first year of the project (April 2010 to February 2011), DDP introduced the concept of active citizenship and stressed the importance of public participation. Workshops and public forums were held on topics that included the Dinokeng Scenarios,<sup>4</sup> building partnerships for community development,

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reinventing the culture in local government (from relief to transformation), municipal elections and the role of civil society in deepening democracy.

During the second year of the project (March 2011 to July 2012), DDP worked to deepen community leaders' understanding of the structures and functions of government, as people who have the capacity to engage meaningfully are more likely to take up such opportunities. Several workshops were held on various aspects of integrated development planning, on the role of councillors, the importance of voting in local government elections and by-elections, the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy, and preparing submissions in terms of the Western Cape Petitions Act 3 of 2006. Representatives from the Community Development Workers (CDWs) and Public Participation Directorates in the Western Cape provincial government also attended some events and, in fact, requested special training sessions on using the Block approach in community development.

### BUILDING NETWORKS OF LOCAL ACTORS

The DDP intervention allowed generative themes to emerge, by encouraging the local steering committee to select topics for public forums and training. The steering committee consisted of local activists and community leaders, with representatives from the Christian Benevolent Society, Hope Sanctuary, Women Hope 4 the Nation, the Greater Retreat Youth Forum and Gender Steps. Additional partnerships were forged with RAPCAN (Resources Aimed at the Protection of Child Abuse and Neglect), the New World Foundation, Black Sash, SCAT (Social Change Assistance Trust) and Earthlife Africa. Topics for forums and training suggested by the steering committee included local government elections, councillor accountability and the role of the ward forum, local health challenges and the National

Health Insurance, the rates billing system, problems with Eskom, child maintenance, and understanding gender and gender-based violence.

Additional elements of the intervention included an internship programme that gave selected local youth the opportunity to build their capacity by working at the DDP, and workshops on leadership and personal mastery for the steering committee and other community leaders, which allowed participants to interrogate their own value system and leadership style, develop a vision for their organisation and manage a team more effectively.

Community leaders were also exposed to Block's work on structuring dialogues to build community. The community dialogues and governance-training events used methods that were learned at an experiential-learning workshop on 'Connecting Community' and proved beneficial. As Tiffany Joseph from RAPCAN stated, 'people are hurt and need to be heard and comforted. Speaking needs to happen as it helps the healing process. All people want to feel like they belong and knowing your identity plays a huge part in that' (Joseph interview 2012).<sup>5</sup>

However, building local networks required addressing some challenges. The idea of connecting local leaders was somewhat easier than the reality. In addition to the rifts in Lavender Hill caused by drug- and gang-related crime, genuine community building was inhibited by different levels of economic power and perceived class differences. Even the choice of venue was contested terrain, as some community members were hesitant to attend events at venues outside their usual comfort zones.

Another challenge was getting all relevant stakeholders into one room. Government officials resisted going to grassroots community venues, preferring middle-class venues. They were also unwilling to extend their working day in order to

attend meetings outside working hours. Yet many of the community leaders were unavailable for meetings during working hours, as they rely on day jobs for survival and work as volunteers in their organisations.

Shifting the prevailing ‘problem-solving’ approach was difficult, as many participants struggled to move away from discussing problems to considering possibilities and gifts. With the problem-solving approach, the tendency is to identify a list of resources needed to solve the problem, e.g. more training, more money, more influence. Then, when the required resources are not available, apathy and helplessness often emerge, and solving the original problem seems impossible. However, when the approach is to look at assets instead of problems, possibilities and opportunities emerge, and people feel empowered and inspired to build on those gifts and resources. Such a sense of energy and possibility is intimately tied to resilience, as opposed to apathy and hopelessness that maintain and magnify vulnerability. This approach also requires people to move from competition to collaboration, which is not a smooth, seamless or quick process, especially overcoming the element of competition across organisations faced with constrained access to funding and other resources.

## STORIES OF EMERGING CHANGE IN LAVENDER HILL

During and after the project period, several stories from participants illustrated increased social cohesion among community leaders and, in turn, increased capacity to overcome challenges, shocks and stresses. These are not ‘DDP successes’ but are stories of members of the community using their assets, skills and newfound connectedness. These are stories of communities that clearly show that they have become resilient. Some of these stories are presented below.

## STANDING UP AGAINST VIOLENCE

During the last week of June 2012, Soraya Nordien, a long-time resident and prominent local activist, was one of six people killed in Lavender Hill. Nordien, along with close friend and colleague Aysha Davids, was a founding member of Women Hope 4 the Nation, an organisation that offers counselling services to victims of domestic and child abuse. She was also a member of the Community Policing Forum and the neighbourhood watch, and an outspoken opponent of gangs and drugs.

The week before her death, a known local gangster threatened Nordien outside her home and pointed a gun to her head. On the day of her death, two men rushed into her boyfriend’s shack and shot her dead while she lay in bed. Nothing was stolen. Family and friends believe that she was targeted because of her opposition to the illegal activities common in the area. A man who is believed to be a local gangster has been arrested.

Nordien’s colleague Davids was told that she was ‘next on the list’.<sup>6</sup> Davids is one of the local activists who has attended many of the DDP workshops. When asked by our Cape Town facilitator about the progress of the Nordien murder case, Davids reported that she had petitioned the court and managed to get the accused’s bail denied. She ascribed this idea directly to having attended the DDP training on the Western Cape petitions process.

Facilitators of early workshops remember Davids as a shy person, who sat and quietly listened in workshops, without raising her voice. Her refusal to acquiesce to violence – instead actively involving

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herself in protecting the community and seeking justice for her fallen friend – illustrates her resolve, courage and commitment to the transformation of her community. The story also illustrates how motivated and committed people use the skills and assets at their disposal (in this case knowledge of the Western Cape petitions process) in unpredictable ways to overcome their particular struggles.

### COURT COMMITTEES

After attending a Connecting Community workshop, several residents of the Courts joined together to take action on issues affecting residents. This idea had previously been suggested by a local NGO but had not taken off. However, this time some residents independently established Court Committees, which organised residents' meetings to identify and try to resolve local problems. The actions taken by the Court Committees demonstrate the power of the Connecting Community process to empower communities to take action and change their environment. This case also demonstrates that social cohesion serves to build more resilient communities.

*Building community spirit:* one of the first actions was to organise a social evening, where adults and children played dominoes, cards and darts, and shared food. Such an event shows how community members do not need formal structures, expensive workshops or external facilitators in order to build personal relationships and community spirit.

*Building confidence to make a change:* another initiative was to start a cleaning programme, in which residents committed to sweeping and maintaining the buildings and immediate surroundings. It is an example of how confident and committed individuals can make a change, no matter how seemingly small.

*Using their collective voice:* the Court Committee members have also engaged with their local councillors to advocate for improved maintenance of

buildings. They understand that their collective voice is much stronger than individual complaints about specific housing units. Through this engagement with the councillor, several members have obtained work through the Expanded Public Works Programme.

### FOCUS ON ASSETS

Creating linkages between active local leaders produced beneficial results almost immediately. Participating organisations reported that getting to know who was doing what in the community allowed them to improve their referral services and get people the support they need at times of crisis. For example, Gender Steps and Hope Sanctuary both placed orders for clothing with the volunteer-based Women Hope 4 the Nation, whose members have sewing skills. Gender Steps passed on a donation of office stationery to Women Hope 4 the Nation. The existing neighbourhood watch also grew and has been extended to surrounding areas.

These examples illustrate the principle that building on community assets (which motivates and inspires), instead of focusing on problems to be solved (which can seem overwhelming and beyond the capacity of the community), enables these assets to be leveraged in the interests of community development. People have the capacity and assets to start to respond to their own challenges and to make positive changes. In the case of Lavender Hill, many people were already active in the local community, and so building relationships between them has helped to expand the impact of their efforts and renew their commitment.

### ADOPTION OF DIALOGUE METHODOLOGY

Several organisations have adopted the DDP methodology and begun hosting their own community dialogues at Lavender Hill High School, with religious

groups and with other groups of interested residents. The events at the High School were aimed at getting youth involved in community development and building a vision for the school. RAPCAN facilitators reported that teachers, parents and children interacted for the first time at that school. The time was right for such a conversation, as one of the facilitators explains:<sup>7</sup>

*It was amazing to see people speaking in a place in which they felt safe and coming up with solutions to problems which started the process of change. It was good to see people coming up with solutions to their own problems and I think this workshop allowed them to think critically and relatively about their problems and what they can do about it.*

### BUILDING LOCAL LEADERSHIP

The project was based on a leadership concept that emphasises creating the space and context for change to emerge, not providing expert-driven answers to problems.

Ellen Pakkies, who is notorious in Lavender Hill for killing her drug-addicted son, attended many of the events and has since started a Foundation. She now gives motivational talks to abused women and other groups.

As mentioned, Aysha Davids runs Women Hope 4 the Nation. She explains that 'we feel more confident and secure when working with the community'. The DDP workshops taught her how to be a leader, run meetings and record discussions. Her eyes were opened by seeing how DDP allowed 'people to find their own voices'. In the past she would never have developed a relationship or taken on the councillor. However, '[g]oing to the debates and roundtables and workshops helped us to sit in the same room as people who were clever but we learnt a lot. We did not always speak but we could listen and understand' (Davids interview 2012<sup>8</sup>).

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### NETWORKS OF CARE

The City of Cape Town runs an initiative called Local Networks of Care (LNOC). These clusters of community-based organisations are organised by local ward councillors and are aimed at improving the lives of those in deepest poverty, with an emphasis on rehabilitating and reintegrating people living on the streets (City of Cape Town 2012). The City has established approximately 16 such networks. In early 2013, a Lavender Hill LNOC was set up with eight participating organisations. Of these, five had participated in the Lavender Hill steering committee that DDP co-ordinated. The ward councillor for ward 68, who is driving this LNOC, also participated in DDP Connecting Community workshops.

The participating organisations in the LNOC decided to focus primarily on youth and are working to prevent vulnerable youth from becoming homeless. They have established various programmes that include a school holiday project, skills and entrepreneurial workshops, networking and referral services, and a prevention of school drop-out programme. The City identified this drop-out prevention programme as one of the best initiatives of any of the networks and awarded a cash prize. Of the 16 young drop-outs identified by the Lavender Hill group, nine have returned to school.

### INCREASED PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY STRUCTURES AND WARD COMMITTEES

In 2010 the Retreat/Square Hill Civic Association had no members and had not held an AGM in two years.



However, when the Civic Association held an AGM October 2011, 89 people attended the AGM at which board members were elected. The majority of the people at the AGM had participated in DDP forums and training events. Lavender Hill Civic Association has also been re-vitalised and now has offices based at the New World Foundation.

When DDP started working in the community, the local ward committees were composed mainly of representatives from minstrel groups. In 2011 a by-election was held following the death of the local councillor for ward 68 and, around the same time, the ward committee was re-elected. Several people who had participated in the DDP project are now actively involved on the ward committee. Local councillors and officials have observed change in the community. In 2012 and 2013, community meetings were well-attended, and residents are demanding accountability from their elected representatives.<sup>9</sup>

CDWs from Lavender Hill and surrounding areas who also attended DDP training reported that the training helped them to understand democracy and democratic processes. The legacy of apartheid in the area has left many uneducated and under-capacitated and, as one CDW pointed out, 'If you don't understand how our democracy works, you won't be able to access the benefits' (Afrika interview June 2012<sup>10</sup>).

### LESSONS LEARNT

The Lavender Hill experience shows that an external organisation can be the catalyst for a community to become resilient. Work in communities often emphasises structures and processes. However, creating meaningful change is possible through the collaboration of people with a common vision and values and the power of impassioned and empowered individuals. The DDP learned some important lessons from the 'Creating Visions of Hope' programme.

Shifting the power to the community means letting go of preconceived or predetermined outcomes. Since DDP's partial exit from Lavender Hill, the steering committee had ceased to meet regularly, which was a worry for DDP. Did this mean that the gains made in coordinating community organisations were not sustainable? However, many of the individuals previously active on the steering committee are now involved in ward committee meetings, and meetings are held using the structures of the Block methodology. New structures have emerged (such as the Court Committees), and conversation and dialogue in the community continue but not in the spaces initiated by DDP.

Empowered people are more willing and able to engage with the formal state-created spaces for participation. The initial survey showed no trust or respect for ward committee structures, but today several participants are involved in these structures and are using them to push their developmental agenda. They have overcome the distrust and suspicion of these state-initiated structures using information provided to empower themselves and possessing a new-found sense of capacity.

Laying the groundwork for the project is essential. Groundwork is not about identifying problems to solve or structures to replicate. The most important preparation for the project is to create and develop relationships between the host organisation (in this case DDP) and the 'beneficiaries' – the members of partner organisations who participate. Trust, honesty and commitment emerge through these relationships, which enabled DDP to recruit local leaders into the project.

Building trust between stakeholders in a community - a critical element of establishing resilience - is important. Speaking honestly and listening deeply are skills that are often taken for granted, yet many people struggle with these aspects

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of community life. When people are able to develop these skills, community members are able to heal and to build nurturing and productive relationships. The Block methodology of setting up the physical space to promote meaningful conversation in small groups and feedback in a big circle provides a useful vehicle for deepening provocative and transformational conversation.

NGOs must understand that development and increased resilience cannot be 'given' to a community. Instead, as DDP has come to realise, NGOs must

simply be the catalyst for community-driven action. Building social cohesion between local role players provides a basis for courage, motivation and commitment, and is one of the ways to facilitate a community's ability to overcome challenges, shocks and stresses. In other words, 'Work WITH the poor and oppressed, not for them. Development is an awakening process. Let the people grow. Build up the people's solidarity. Build up the people's organisation' (Hope and Timmel 1995: 27).

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- <sup>2</sup> *Cape Argus*, Cape Flats gang war claims more lives, 15 July 2013, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/cape-flats-gang-war-claims-more-lives-1.1546762#.UhyC4H9y2ls>
- <sup>3</sup> For more on DDP's application of the Block methodology to its various programme activities, see Andani A and Naidu R (2013) From Subject to Citizen: Building active citizenship through community dialogues and radio stations. In GGLN (Good Governance Learning Network) *Active Citizenship Matters: Perspectives from Civil Society on Local Governance in South Africa*. Cape Town: GGLN and Isandla Institute.
- <sup>4</sup> The scenarios imagine the future development of South Africa with various levels of citizen engagement and emphasise the importance of active citizen participation in governance.
- <sup>5</sup> Interview with Tiffany Joseph from RAPCAN, June 2012, Cape Town.
- <sup>6</sup> C Dolley, Slain woman 'was next on list', *The Post*, 5 July 2012, <http://www.thepost.co.za/slain-woman-was-next-on-list-1.1335036#.Uh8VX39y2ls>
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Shane Lentoer, RAPCAN facilitator, June 2012, Cape Town.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview Aysha Davids, Women Hope 4 the Nation, July 2012, Cape Town.
- <sup>9</sup> Y Kamaldien, Lavender Hill residents feel 'ignored by City councillors', blog post 18 September 2012, <http://yazkam.wordpress.com/2012/09/18/lavender-hill-residents-feel-ignored-by-city-councillors>
- <sup>10</sup> Interview Shahied Afrika, CDW in Bonteheuwel, June 2012, Cape Town.