

Where hope eludes...



a vision of development

The people of the Karoo recently gathered in Beaufort West to tackle their future. RONEL SCHEFFER reports.

One feels compelled to silence among the people of the Great Karoo, thoroughly humbled in the midst of those who persevere in this remote and harsh region in the face of so much deprivation. Virtually a human disaster area, they are now saying "enough". Yet one waits in vain for a torrent of rage and bitterness.

That, it seems, is not their style. Mostly, they understate the suffering, with a dignity reminiscent of the vast landscape of scrub they inhabit.

Clearly it is a place they love, and have no intention of leaving. In the debate references frequently are made – with a quaint old-worldly possessiveness – to "hierdie Karoo van ons" en "ons Karoo".

But what to do? About unemployment figures as high as 80 and 90 percent in some towns? The miserably low wages and all-pervasive poverty that has left vast numbers destitute, with some deliberately seeking imprisonment or neglecting their health to qualify for disability allowances? What to do about the rampant social problems of alcoholism, teenage pregnancies, family break-

ups, child neglect and school drop-outs? What remedy is there, in the final analysis, for communities that have become characterised by desperation, fatalism and an all-pervasive sense of defeat?

The motto of the Bastiaanse High School in Beaufort West, where the conference took place, is "Mik Hoog". The 200 delegates, perched on uncomfortable chairs in the freezing school hall, heard that they should reach high to bring the "pie in the sky" of development down to earth in their region. The first step would be to create a vision of development that would sustain the people of the Karoo.

"We don't need shiny sky scrapers and computers to give birth to such a vision," said Prof Wynand Louw of the University of the Western Cape. "It is the product of human creativity." In a sympathetic and supportive socio-political environment it would be possible to create to such a vision.

The conference itself, hosted by the Karoo Council of Churches and Idasa, was a small milestone in creating this vision. The product of a year's intensive consultation and

planning, it succeeded in bringing together some 35 of the 50 communities in the Karoo. Most of the speakers were professional people – teachers, school principals, ministers of religion – but there was good representation too from the civics and community development groups.

Representatives from the Small Business Development Corporation and the Independent Development Trust came, but notable absentees were the white local authorities. The town clerk of the host town, Beaufort West, sent a coldly worded apology – all his officials were otherwise engaged that weekend.

The conference was opened by Dr Beyers Naudé who stressed the importance of community-centered and co-ordinated projects. Group discussions followed after Dr Aubrey Redelinghuis of UWC provided an overview of poverty and underdevelopment in the Karoo.

He ended his presentation with quotes from interviews with Karoo residents, painting a picture of slave labour on farms, arbitrary dismissals, destitute elderly farm workers, starvation, a struggle for basic commodities like firewood, and endemic despair.

Dr Redelinghuis highlighted the need to end the urban/rural split; rural communities will remain important to the national economy, their numbers will increase in future and their development should therefore form part of a broad national development policy and process.

He said poverty in South Africa was concentrated in these areas, de jure "white" but de facto "black" with agriculture as the main economic sector. While the white population was declining, most of the facilities, amenities and infrastructure remained inaccessible to blacks, pointing to substantial wastage of potential resources, including farm land, in the rural areas.

Poverty in the Karoo existed in all sectors: on farms, in towns, in squatter areas and among the "roaming" labour force – mostly



Jeremiah Blekitwe (Murraysburg) and Wynand Louw (UWC).

the result of poor wages and unemployment of a structural nature.

Other problems included housing shortages and poor housing, poor health, false perceptions of work-dodging among employers, racial discrimination, the privatisation of the SA Transport Services causing uncertainty about one of most important employers in the region, and inactivity on the part of local and central government authorities.

Report-backs from a range of discussion groups further illuminated the problems faced in the areas of education, housing and health, also highlighting the important role churches could play in combating poverty and reviving the human dignity of people.

Community groups spoke of the difficulties of fostering development in a region where people, literally, were in survival mode, desperately concerned about the next meal and unable to relate to anything else.

'The road which must be built must be one which leads to new opportunities'

Activists admonished themselves for sometimes failing in their duty towards ordinary people. Said one: "In the struggle we always talked about 'grass roots, grass roots'. It seems that the grass has grown so thick that we cannot see the people in it any more." And another: "Development must try to address the physical conditions of the man on the street, not those of a person like me with a tie on."

They stressed the need to create an awareness of development in the community, to empower people and to tailor projects to the pace of the people of the Karoo. Projects should be broad-based and not revolve around individuals or particular interests. The community should not be made dependent on hand-outs, but hand-outs could become a catalyst for other development projects.

Problems with funders and service organisations were also raised, the former being criticised for not understanding constraints in the territory, the latter for not staying the distance.



Norman van Wyk (Carnarvon) and Katy Wessels (Beaufort West).

The need to engage farmers and to change their perceptions of reality was raised repeatedly. "The farm worker doesn't trust the community because we are not able to address those elements who stand in the way of their needs," said a teacher from Leeu-Gamka.

John Lolwana of the Richmond Civic Association shared his strategy of a diplomatic approach to farmers who are resistant to any "interference" with their workforce. A lay preacher, he pitched his sermons for workers to create awareness of their rights and their plight. Gradually he moved them to understand why "city people lift their fists like babies battling with winds". He engaged farmers, advocating TV-sets for workers to combat high birth rates. They got their TVs, and better housing followed.

Another success story came from Venterstad, situated on the Orange River but battling to secure a good water supply for residents. Ds Richard Joseph told how the community set out in 1985 to challenge conditions. Development started with building a mortuary, then they began to produce coffins, a mini-bus to overcome transport problems followed. Venterstad now has an advice office, a sewing group and a community store.

The agricultural ambitions of some also came to the fore. Jeremiah Blekiwe of Murraysburg, translator for most of the con-

ference, articulated the frustrations of many: "We all grew up on these farms, by the mere fact that you grew up on a farm, you want to be a farmer. But we have no agricultural school in the Karoo. Grootfontein and Middelburg must open up to all."

Development, said Wynand Louw, is like an umbrella with numerous spokes - one cannot keep the rain off if one of the spokes are missing. But it starts with people and its end goal is the development of "complete" people.

The Karoo has what it takes, but... Basic needs of health, housing and education must be provided, land needs to be redistributed in a productive way, human resources need training and existing legal constraints on economic enterprises must be removed.

He suggested that a start could be made with changing the relationship between employee and employer, and that it was imperative to remember that development did not occur in a vacuum - the struggle



Stephanus Jooste (Beaufort West), Louise Boezak (Carnarvon), Vincent Williams (Idasa), Beyers Naudé and Venter van Zyl (Hanover).

against low wages and poor working conditions will, and must, continue.

Above all, the community needs to tackle projects that spiral in size. "The road which must be built must be one which leads to new opportunities," said Louw.

The conference identified the need for an expert investigation of the problems and development potential of the Karoo, and committed itself to place the region on the national agenda as an area with specific problems and deserving of special consideration. A steering committee, representing all communities, was formed to take the process of networking further.

Ronel Scheffer is production editor in Idasa's media department.