

# “They just drive by in big cars”

## Youth, community change and elections

While local elections yielded a 48.4% turnout of registered voters, little comment is made of those who did not register or of why some of those who registered did not vote. *SALB* went to Katlehong to interview a small sample of unemployed youth to find out if they voted and whether conditions in their local area had influenced their decision to vote or not.

Entering Katlehong on the east of Johannesburg, which was ravaged by violence in the early 1990s, you are struck by the paucity of public amenities. Most roads are untarred and, except for the large Huntersfield Stadium, the lack of trees and green open areas makes for a stark environment. Soweto, a sister township on the west of Johannesburg seems luxurious by contrast.

Parking outside ‘Touch’ Hlahatse’s house, we notice a group of unemployed young men loitering on the pavement. It is 9:30 in the morning and some are draining beer bottles. These are the people I have come to interview and my heart sinks at the deprivation in their lives. This is going to be a depressing few hours.

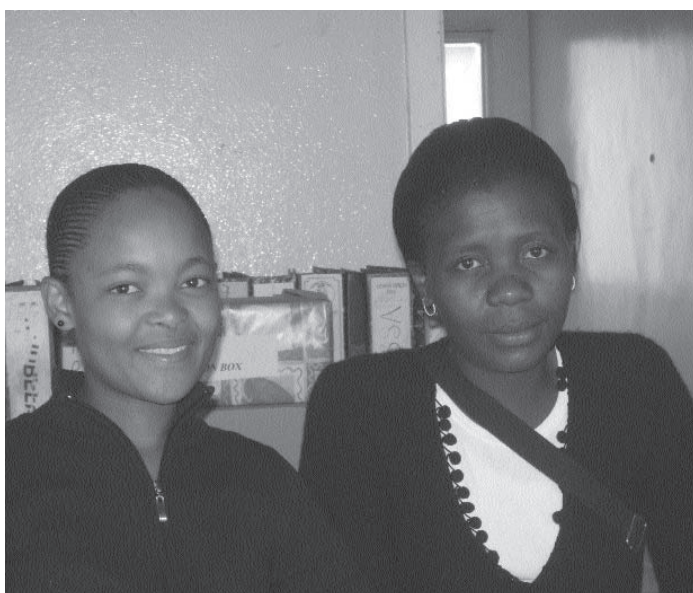
Touch is relatively wealthy in this context, as we enter a small, neat house where he runs an advice service. He explains that these youths used to gather in an abandoned house on the fringes of society with a concomitant slide towards crime. He persuaded them



to ‘come down’ and to inhabit the pavement in front of his house as a step towards re-entering the world of purposeful activity. He watches over them in a paternal way and points to a recently established stall on the corner of the street where a group of youths has gathered to sell various wares. He sees this small

initiative as an important sign of their possible reintegration.

While we wait for everyone to arrive, I watch Touch’s elderly brother doing carpentry in the garage. He is skilled and with rudimentary tools provides well designed goods for local people. He explains that it is impossible to sell



to large stores like Dions as he cannot upgrade his tools which he would need in order to provide sufficient quantities. He also cannot transport goods in bulk as he has no means.

Gazing at the youths on the pavement, he laments that they have no interest in learning carpentry which he is willing to teach. "Young people, even if they are unemployed, don't want to learn these things. They don't want to work out of a garage in the township. They want big jobs in companies."

#### IEWS OF YOUNG KATLEHONG WOMEN

Before interviewing the young men, Touch pulls in some young women who are passing to talk to me. They are all in their twenties.

Nompumelelo lives with her father, four sisters and two brothers. Her mother died years ago. They work as a lawyer, a secretary for Nedcor in Sandton, a train driver and a clerk in Katlehong's courts.

Thuli, the youngest, lives with her mother, grandmother and small brother. Her father died six years ago. Her mother is a domestic worker in Alberton. She matriculated but there was no money to study further. She once

had a temporary job as a packer in Edgars and now hopes that through a contact of her grandmother's she may get a job with an estate agent.

Her passion is singing in a gospel choir which 'really makes me come alive'. She practices at the Apostolic Faith Mission where she meets up with other young people. It is her main social activity.

Thandi lives in a family of four with her baby, mother and sister. She is on her way to her hairdressing job which she does because she has no other choice. This is not what she wants to do long term and is busy taking a computer course.

Of the three, only Nompumelelo voted in the recent local elections. She did this for fun as she wanted to feel part of the community. She's not sure but she heard that it's easier to get a job if you are on the voters' roll. Her brothers and sisters didn't bother to vote. She really has little hope that things will change in Dikole, her section of the township. She is fed up with the muddy roads and pot holes which harbour water and cars splash her clothes as she walks by. Tarring roads would be the most important change for her.

She longs for something for young people to do. Huntersfield

she points out is owned by Jomo Sono but it is for looking at not for walking on. She sometimes goes to Germiston Lake to relax but around Katlehong there are no pleasant places to picnic so 'the only thing there is to do is to get pregnant'.

Thuli didn't register or vote. "They want us to vote but they don't do anything. I don't see the need to vote. I haven't thought about doing anything about it. I'm scared to talk out. Nothing will happen anyway. The ANC only does things for Xhosa people in the Eastern Cape anyway. Everything is fine there - water, electricity. There is no attention to other people."

Thandi hurried off purposefully to go to her course and the others soon followed.

#### IEWS OF YOUNG KATLEHONG MEN

Four unemployed young men, some from the pavement outside, filed into the front room. They too are all in their early or late twenties.

Modupe has lived with his grandmother for about four years. He had previously lived with his whole family but as they had moved off to other townships he stayed to look after his grandmother. They get on well and he enjoys living with her. He has a matric but at 26 years has never been employed.

Soon after Modupe received a call and grasping his cell phone left the interview.

Nhlanhla likewise has a matric from a Germiston high school. He lives in a household of 16 people which includes two aunts and 13 cousins. His parents and grandparents passed away.

After school he studied business IT and computer skills at Pretoria Technikon but stopped because of financial constraints. He registered

again at a college in Rosebank and hopes to get enough money to finish his diploma in business information technology in two years time which he believes will give him a good chance of getting a job.

He has worked for the IEC (Independent Electoral Commission) scanning IDs and he briefly worked as a machine operator in an Alrode factory.

He gets pretty bored during the day and mainly watches TV. He also hangs around with friends.

Vuyisile lives in a household of 24 which includes his mother, brothers, sisters and other non-related children in a five roomed house with some backyard rooms. He finished school in grade 11.

He spends a lot of time training and playing soccer with friends. He is resentful that there is no proper field on which to play as they kick around on a small rough patch of ground.

Oupa by contrast lives in an eight roomed house with only his father. He is the most educated and has a diploma in mechanical theory although he never completed his practical. He'd like to get a welding or blasting certificate but doesn't have the money to continue studying. He has never worked but sometimes helps his neighbour by minding his hostel shop.

He wiles away time by taking a two to three hour jog everyday. Afterwards he cleans the house and garden and then hangs out with friends for the rest of the day. He attends the Anglican church every Sunday.

All of them have seen changes in Katlehong since the 1994 democratic elections. The main change is a new shopping centre with chain stores such as Jet Stores, Diskom, and Shoprite.

But many things, they complained, have not changed.

The drainage is bad in the streets, when it rains they can't move around as the water rises. Also the roads are full of mud and stones.

There is no sports complex. The swimming pool is no longer working and there's nowhere to cycle. The parks aren't maintained and the swings got messed up so after a while the council stopped fixing them. There are no trees, plants or seats and the council doesn't cut the grass.

A big problem of unemployment exists so people drink a lot, especially on weekends. Then they classify and judge each other.

There's a lack of information about jobs. The local councillors don't communicate with people and they don't even know who the councillors are. "They just drive by in big cars. They never come to people and talk and discuss, we only see posters of them. We feel for those who are squatters, with nobody in the family working."

As a result Vuyisile only votes in national elections, he doesn't bother with local.

Nhlanhla would have voted for the ANC but was elsewhere on election day. "Many councillors don't live around here and they just look after themselves. No councillor has ever spoken to me since I was born. My father is an ANC member, he fought for us. I would vote just to honour him."

Oupa voted in 2000 but doesn't think he'll vote again. "Councillors don't scout for work, as in football, they don't bother with unemployment. I don't have skills but I definitely don't want to cut grass for the rest of my life. They must come to us in the township and ask what the problems are."

Nhlanhla believes the ANC is the best option and that it has only been in power for 11 years and is doing a good job. Oupa does not see the ANC as taking people in the township forward. He feels he has to go forward alone. He believes ANC people just get the 'high' jobs. They become ministers and then use their portfolios to enter the corporate world. "Their families go up and get richer. They also give people in their family who are not skilled, jobs. This supports corruption. The ANC has got money but they waste it. They should rather spend it on free tertiary education."

"You can lose hope and get a 'don't care' attitude and then you don't get involved in community activities. I don't want to get too over-committed in community activities. Others do things in the community but I don't see change in their lives."

These young people painted a bleak picture but their spirit was still very much alive. My final feeling was not of bleak hopelessness. Despite their complaints they all had hopes of going forward. The pity is that township leadership is not tapping into this energy. This is just a small flavour of what unemployed township youth are thinking, but it is clear that they feel outside of local government plans for their community. They are not kept informed, they have no idea who represents them, and no one in local government seeks their opinions or 'talks' to them. They feel invisible.

*Those interviewed were Nompumelelo Butbelezi, Thuli Simelane, Tbandi Miya, Vuyisile Mazibuko, Nonblanbla Lublongwane, Oupa Kweza and Modupe Kotope.*