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## **The Protea Glen Community: Perspectives of the Youth**

**An executive summary of the results**

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**In collaboration with COPESSA.**

## **Introduction**

Participatory Action Research requires collaboration with various stakeholders of the community. A crucial component of participatory work is that research is done with the community and not for the community. Thus, people who are perceived to be in positions of power or hold the position of 'expert' should not be allowed to make decisions on behalf of the members of the community. Instead, community members and various stakeholders should be involved in a continuous dialogue to address the needs and concerns of the community, as well as empowering the community to recognise that they have the solutions. In collaboration with COPESSA, the participatory community-based student educational psychologists set out to find out what the activities the youth of the community have access to, what facilities or activities they would like to have and to gather an understanding of their experiences, especially in terms of what they perceive the problems to be and what their ideal community would look like. COPESSA expressed concerns that the youth do not have any outlets to turn to and as a result they are more likely to engage in riskier health-harming behaviours. Thus, the team set out to engage with the community and understand what the youth think is needed in the community to mitigate their perceived issues.

## **Data Collection**

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of July, the Wits-COPESSA Team attended the #YouthToPower campaign. This campaign sought to work with young entrepreneurs to address unemployment and raise brand awareness for businesses in the Protea Glen community. The campaign also sought to modify the attitude and behaviour of youth to get their power and break through the uses of drugs, crime, and poverty in their society. Additionally, the Team also visited Reasoma Secondary School on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, in Protea North, to amplify the voices of the youth. To collect data, five questions were presented to the community through a banner. Participants took a colour Koki pen and wrote their responses on the banner. Such questions included:

- What activities are available in the community that you enjoy doing?
- What would you like to see in the community that you don't have?
- What do you think the biggest problem in the community is?
- What change would you like to see in the community?
- What would the perfect community look like to you?

In addition, a photobooth was created and participants were asked to describe their community in three words. Participants were given a pen and sticky note to write the answers and then to stick it on the photobooth frame. Notably, a particular limitation of this small-scale research activity was that the researchers did not keep count of how many participants responded. However, based on the types of handwriting and potential double responses, it can be assumed that between 60-70 participants responded to the questions. Another potential limitation of this research was that participants could see each other's answers which may have influenced their responses. However, while this is a limitation it was also a strength as it facilitated conversations among community members and increased solidarity as participants knew they were not alone in how they felt.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Available Activities**

### *Theme 1: Sports*

Many participants indicated that Sports were available within their community, prominently soccer and netball. There were also other sporting activities listed such as tennis, volleyball, basketball, cycling and dodgeball. From observations, many of the available activities range very much around sports. However, it is unclear where these activities take place and the kinds of facilities that they have access to. These responses are very much substantiated by the request for a Sports Academy.

### *Theme 2: Drama Arts and Art*

Quite a few participants responded that they have access to 'Art' and 'Drama'. These could have risen from the data collected at the school, as it is assumed that this domain is provided within the community and hypothetically, within the school premises.

### *Theme 3: None*

While many other people expressed that there are things for them to do within the community, some expressed that there was nothing available for them to do within their community with great emphasis. This also showed how vast the community of Protea Glen is and that maybe some parts of the community really do not have much to offer. A variety of community members responded to this, indicating that there is some attention that is needed.

### *Theme 4: Community involvement*

Some participants reported that they are involved a lot in the community, in things such as letting people know about the Glen radio station; volunteering to clean a pre-school; volunteering at the COPESSA after-care programme; empowering the community to fulfil their dreams; debating and public speaking with community members; providing the youth with computer skills courses and lastly cleaning the community. These were the positives and it provided insight into knowing that there are people within the community who are willing to uplift the community.

There were some responses provided by the vast minority that were not as repeated as the aforementioned, these being singing classes; going for shows; chess, girls club pageantry; public speaking and lastly reading and playing marimba.

## **Wanted Community Activities**

### *Theme 1: Sports Academy*

Many of the participants indicated that they would like a Sports Academy. Some participants stated that having more sports facilities would be used as a preventative measure in terms of attracting drug users. Similarly, some participants requested a sporting facility as a means of engaging with the youth and keeping them mentally stimulated. Other participants also highlighted that a sporting facility can be used to entertain and engage with children. Insights from COPESSA highlight that a sports academy can be used to mitigate the drug issue in Protea Glen, and it can be an effective way of engaging with the youth and creating a supportive environment.

### *Theme 2: Employment and Skills Development*

The youth requested that there be more youth expos which can be used as a tool for youth empowerment. In addition to this, small businesses would like more community support. Insights from community members indicate that Protea Glen is a business-driven community with much undiscovered potential, however, the community itself seems disconnected, either due to a lack of skills or because communities would rather support bigger conglomerate brands than entrepreneurs. Many of the participants also requested that there be more opportunities for employment and skills development.

#### *Theme 3: Peace and unity*

Some participants were concerned about the lack of motivation and low self-esteem within the community. To improve this, the participants expressed the wish to have more peace, unity, and solidarity among the community members. A participant also expressed that the power of unity can go a long way in changing the community.

#### *Theme 4: Cleanliness*

A smaller sub-theme that occurred was the desire for more cleanliness within the community. Some participants complained about illegal dumping and how this meant that there was no sense of pride within Protea Glen. The participants believed that if the environment were cleaner then there would be a better sense of pride which may lead to change.

### **The Community's biggest problem**

#### *Theme 1: Substance Abuse and Crime*

The overwhelming response to this question was drugs and substance abuse. There seemed to be major concerns about the drug use in the community, specifically Nyaope. Gender based violence and rape were two other major problems identified, indicating that safety is an issue in Protea Glen. This was also brought forth with quite a few responses signifying that crime seems to be rife in the community: consisting of acts such as robberies, cable theft as well as illegal dumping.

#### *Theme 2: Unemployment*

The community battles unemployment and poverty. A number of participants raised this as a concern and also included the lack of resources available. The problem of drugs and unemployment were put together, in a single response, a few times. This shows that community members may be identifying a link between the two – the drug problem may be exacerbated because of the lack of jobs available.

#### *Theme 3: Lack of Recreational Facilities*

Additionally, participants pointed to the lack of recreational facilities being a problem in the community as the youth do not have any safe spaces to spend their free time, have fun and be creative. In relation to this, there was mention of vandalism done to the spaces that are available such as the parks. This signifies that the community not only wants recreational facilities, but they want to take care of these facilities.

#### *Theme 4: Lack of Support*

Finally, the theme of disconnectedness and lack of support emerged. Responses pointed to issues of discrimination in the community as well as a lack of communication, respect, and love between community members. Bullying was identified as a problem and there seems to be stigma related to certain groups of people, such as the LGBTQ+ community and pageantry. This may be due to an additional problem identified; the lack of information provided to those in the community.

## **Desired Changes**

### *Theme 1: Less drugs and crime*

Many participants expressed their wishes to see less drugs and crime. More specifically, the youth want to see no drugs in their community and the members of this youth group going back to school and receiving the required rehabilitation. Insights from COPESSA highlight the need for rehabilitation services and for the community to be more accepting and supportive of recovered drug addicts. Previous events show that drug-users find rehabilitation services to be beneficial, however, upon returning to a seemingly punitive environment, they were more likely to relapse. However, in some instances it was difficult to access rehabilitative services. On this note, participants also expressed the need for better health facilities and for rehabilitation services to be more affordable, or free. Participants also expressed the desire for crime to decrease as currently, there are feelings around no sense of safety and security.

### *Theme 2: More employment*

Many participants wanted to see more opportunities for employment and job creation. In particular, participants wanted more exposure to expos and workshops that would facilitate skills development. Some participants also expressed the wish to create a centre that is specifically focused on the youth and their skills development. In addition, some participants expressed that they wanted to see more equal access to resources and more entrepreneurship.

### *Theme 3: More unity, support, and Ubuntu*

Participants frequently suggested that there needs to be more unity, ubuntu, support, peace, and trust. Many participants expressed that these qualities were missing in the Protea Glen Community. In addition, they wanted to see less gender-based violence and more solidarity:

*“A community that [has] solidarity, stand up for gender-based violence and drugs that also affect the youth”*

There is a deep desire for children to have access to education, but also be treated equally despite coming from less stable backgrounds. Similarly, the participants also expressed their desire for a community without judgement and one that is supportive of others. Furthermore, there is a wish that the community of Protea Glen would live in harmony together and that the youth be empowered to change the community and be more involved in community development. Notably, there was also a wish that there were more safe spaces for the youth to express themselves creatively. Insights from community members indicate that the youth have a lot of untapped potential, but they do not have a place where they can showcase their talents, whether it be dancing, soccer, music or beauty pageants. Thus, there is also a desire to have more spaces dedicated to them to showcase their talents and utilise their skills.

## **The Perfect Community**

### *Theme 1: A safe one*

Crime and drugs are prevalent in many communities (if not all) of South Africa, and it is not surprising that the first theme identified is based on crime and drugs. Participants expressed that a perfect community is “crime-free” and “drug-free”. In addition, a perfect community has no occurrences of gender-based violence. GBV has been on the rise for many years and very young children are exposed to it and accordingly, expressed their concerns surrounding GBV as noted above. In response to the question of what a perfect community looks like, one participant stated:

*“I would like to see a safe community, where everyone is free to live and feel safe and a community where women and children are treated in a good way”*

### *Theme 2: A united one*

A united community was the most frequent description of a perfect community. Accordingly, the youth expressed that a perfect community is one where there is “Ubuntu”. The values of ubuntu such as respect, harmony, love, sharing, caring, togetherness etc. were all the descriptors used. Moreover, the participants expressed that a perfect community is one where everyone is accepted- one that is non-homophobic, non-racist and where no one is undermined because of their gender. In essence, an equal community.

### *Theme 3: An empowering one*

The community expressed that a perfect community is one where different perspectives of young people are heard- where there is better communication and where it is a safe space for young people to express themselves. In addition, a perfect community was expressed as one where there is support, empowerment of the youth and good education. Access to facilities where the youth can share and develop their talents also describes a perfect community according to the youth.

### **Describe your community in three words**

The words that were frequently used to describe the community were “*crime*”, “*drugs*” and “*unemployment*”. On the contrary however, members also used the words “*talent*”, “*kind*” and “*respectful*” to describe the community of Protea. It is equally important to acknowledge the positive descriptions that describe the community as these are fundamental in describing what constitutes a community.

### **Discussion**

Through this small-scale participatory action research project, it is evident that the community knows what they want and hold the answers to their perceived problems. It is clear that crime, safety, cleanliness and drugs have been identified as the major problems in the Protea Glen community. The data confirms COPESSA’s concerns about limited public resources, or outlets, which can be used constructively. Furthermore, the concerns around limited safe spaces for the youth is also confirmed by this data. Consequently, the youth are more likely to turn to negative and harmful habits, such as drugs, due to the lack of outlets. It would appear that the community would like to see the construction of a community Sports Academy. Previous conversations with various members of the community suggest that the youth would like to see something similar to the Nike Training Centre in Pimville.

Furthermore, based on the data, the youth want to see more opportunities for employment, and while this may be difficult to do as an organisation, they would also like opportunities for skills development. This also highlights the necessity of COPESSA's Projects such as the Embroidery Project and the Garden Project as they tackle issues of unemployment, poverty, skills development, and empowerment. Insight provided by COPESSA indicates that this research aligns with their goals of community mobilisation as the banner created a medium for the community to engage with the questions and issues in the community, but also highlighting that the community holds the solutions to their perceived problems.

The data indicates that the youth of the Protea Glen community want more harmony, unity, Ubuntu, support, peace, and trust. Much of the community members who participated felt that the community was divided, lacked motivation and as a whole were struggling with low self-esteem and pride. This was further supported by discussions with COPESSA whereby love and support is desperately needed among the youth, especially in light of the increasing mental health problems experienced by the youth. The banner and resultant analysis has created a platform for the organisation to build on. It is recommended that a community group is developed to facilitate focus group discussion and facilitate further insights.

Crime was a major concern among the community and while this may be related to the elevated rates of unemployment and substance use, COPESSA's suggestion of a Men's Forum should continue to be explored further. Notably, it may be a deterrent for crime but also an empowerment strategy for the men of the community. Similarly, it may be beneficial for the community group, based on participatory action research principles, to include a member of the South African Police Service (SAPS) to generate further insights from their perspective.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, this small-scale research provides a foundation for further research into understanding the perspectives of the youth. It sought to understand the perceived issues in the community, the available activities, desired activities and to let the youth describe their ideal community. It is noted that the community would like a Sports Academy/ Recreational Centre for multiple reasons. Some members of the community felt that there are not enough activities or facilities to showcase their talent and skills, but also a lack of safe spaces to freely express themselves and entertain themselves. The community desires more solidarity and Ubuntu as there appears to be a division in the community and poor community participation. However, with that said, many participants explained that they are involved in community projects highlighting the sense of pride that youth may have in their community. It is critical that this sense of pride and community be tapped into. While this small-scale research activity has limitations, such as the inaccurate methods of counting the number of participants and the transparent nature of the banner potentially influencing other participants' response, it should be noted that this activity has strengths. In particular, the transparent nature of the banner created a sense of solidarity among the participants as they felt that they were not alone in their responses; it was also powerful in the sense that it allowed different voices of the youth to be heard through a medium that was non-threatening. Additionally, it provided a foundation for further engagements and discussion with the youth to take place as the banner allowed participants to reflect on their answers and others.