

Service delivery protests

LESS FREQUENT, MORE VIOLENT

Community protests have become almost commonplace in South Africa. In 2009 protest activity reached a peak of 17.75 protests every month, on average. This prompted the Community Law Centre to survey data on the frequency of protests and on some of the underlying causes. A report, *Community Protests in South Africa: Trends, Analysis and Explanations*, was produced in August 2010 (see *LGB 12(4)*, pp 14–16). Jelani Karamoko, an intern from Harvard Law School, recently updated the report to reflect current data on media-reported community protests. While the update produced some new findings, it also confirmed many of the trends that had already been identified.

The good news is that since June 2010, the frequency of community protests has fallen significantly. The bad news is that the intensity of violence accompanying these protests has increased. This suggests that despite the appearance of relative calm, there is still strong public discontent with the delivery of municipal services throughout South Africa.

In surveying media-reported community protests, a broad definition of ‘community protest’ was used that includes not only protests related to the pace or quality of service delivery, but also instances where protesters complain about local government corruption and grievances for which local government is not solely responsible (such as inadequate housing).

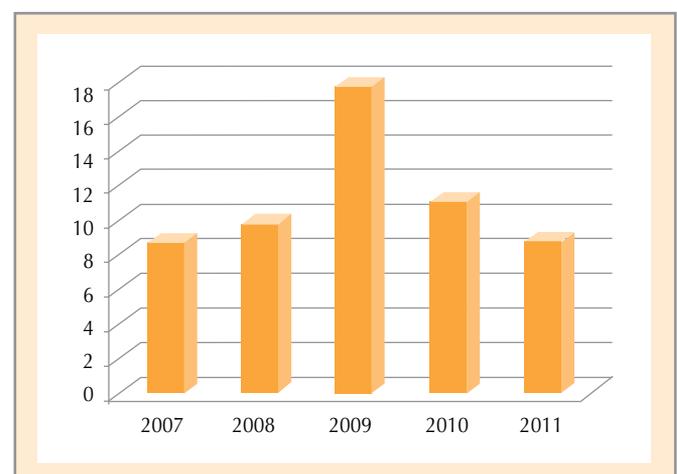
The good news: The number of protests decreases

Research shows that the frequency of community protests throughout South Africa increased substantially over three years, and then there was a period of fewer protests. In 2007, there were an average of 8.73 protests per month. In 2008 the figure rose to 9.83 and in 2009, it nearly doubled to 17.75 per month. Community protests remained frequent in the early part of 2010 (January to May), with an average of 18

per month. After June 2010, the escalation ended abruptly with only 6.14 protests per month for the rest of the year. The monthly average for the whole of 2010 was 11.08.

Protests continued to decline in the first five months of 2011, with an average of only 8.80 protests per month. The rate of community protest so far this year is comparable to the low of 2007, confirming the trend of less frequent community protests. From June 2010 to the present, the occurrence of community protests has fallen dramatically.

Figure 1: Average number of protests per month 2007–2011



The abrupt end of the upward trend in community protests coincided with the beginning of the FIFA World Cup tournament in June 2010. The second half of 2010 saw fewer incidents of community protest than any other six-month period in the dataset, with only 35 in total. This was arguably because communities used the FIFA World Cup as an opportunity for celebration rather than protest. The Municipal IQ data and intelligence service has also suggested that the period of the soccer tournament conformed to the tendency of fewer community protests during holiday periods. Since mid-2010, South African communities have therefore experienced a relative lull in protest activity.

The bad news: Protests become more violent

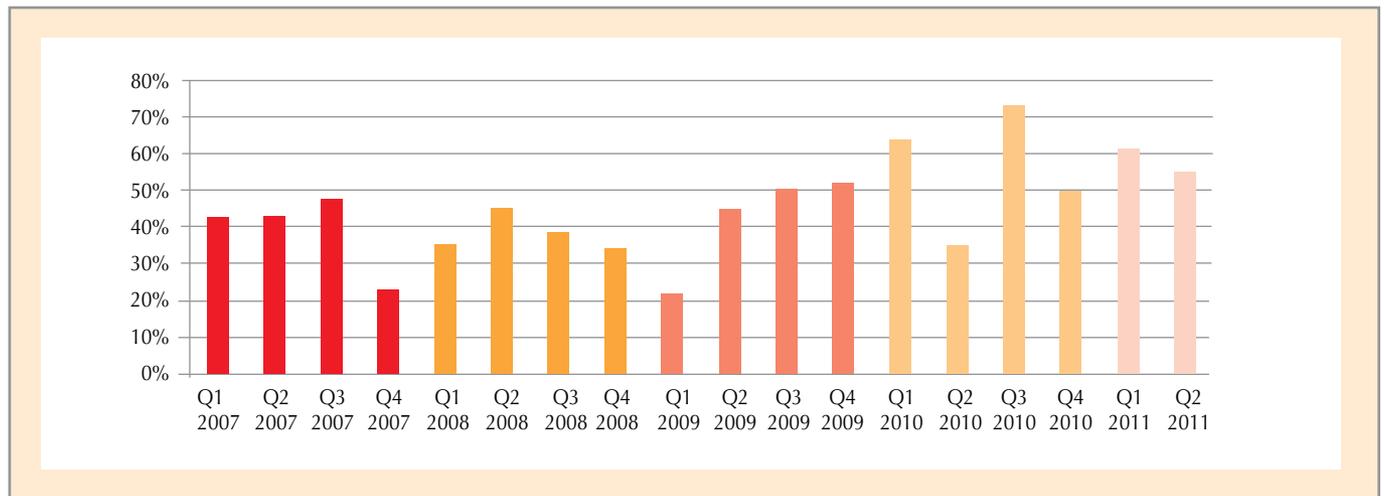
Community protests have become less frequent, but more of them have led to violence.

Although there was a spike in the number of community protests during the financial crisis in 2009, the proportion that were violent remained relatively constant from 2007 to 2009. Beginning in mid-2009, though, there is a noticeable increase in that proportion.

Only 36.86% of protests in February 2007 and March 2009 were violent, but 53.00% of those during after April 2009 were violent. The figures for 2009's third quarter (50.65%) and fourth quarter (52.38%) and the first quarter of 2010 (64.06%) were the highest quarterly figures since the beginning of our dataset in 2007.

Although the incidence of community protests remains relatively subdued in 2011, only one month has seen the proportion of violent protests fall below 50%. In March, 7 of the 11 protests (63.64%), and in May, 5 of the 7 protests (71.43%) involved violence.

Figure 2: Proportion of protests turned violent – by quarter



Concerns expressed by protesters

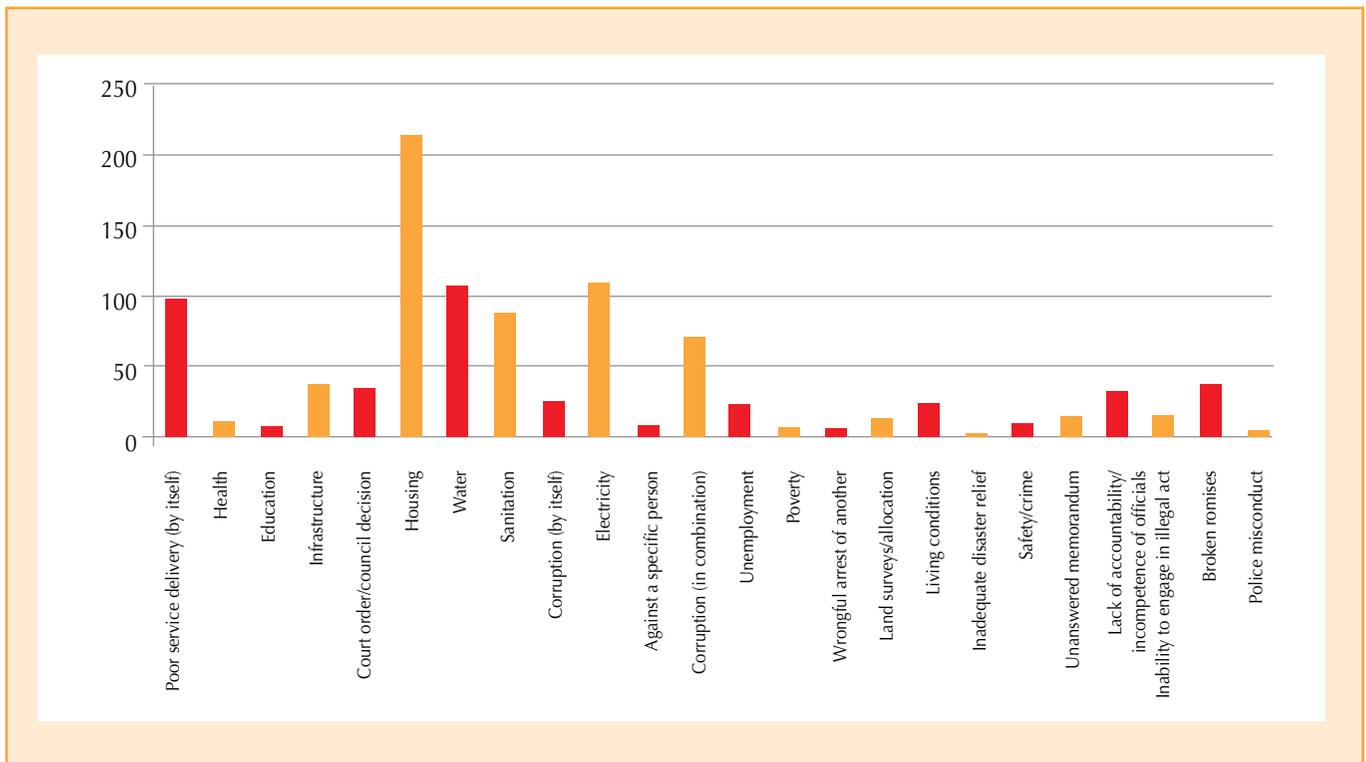
Figure 3 on the next page tabulates the frequency with which participants in community protests expressed specific complaints, such that those grievances can be said to be 'reasons' for the protest. While it is impossible to give an accurate account of all of the reasons behind protests, an examination of the frequency with which protesters express certain complaints still provides some insight into the nature of community protests on the whole. In particular, it helps distinguish between protests in which residents' concerns relate to the failure of local government to fulfil its obligations, from those in which the grievances expressed do not fall within the competence of local government.

What is most striking is the regularity with which protesters expressed concerns about their housing. In 214

instances (21.23 % of the total number of protests surveyed), protesters complained that they did not have access to affordable or adequate housing, and that the houses that they lived in were deficient, inadequate or unfinished. Protesters often claimed that they had waited several years for the government to provide them with RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) housing, but to no avail.

After housing, the lack of access to clean water was a common grievance. Protesters complained about this in 107 instances (10.62%), often alleging that little had changed since 1994. An equally frequent concern was electricity, arising in 109 protests (10.81%). Protesters regularly complained that no electricity was available to them, they had to pay exorbitant rates for electricity, or their (illegal) electricity connections were dismantled by government officials. In addition,

Figure 3: Protester complaints: Feb 2007–May 2011



protesters often complained of inadequate sanitation systems, most commonly because of insufficient refuse collection and unsanitary toilet systems. These concerns arose in 89 instances, or 8.83% of the time.

These grievances were often invoked in combination: that is, when residents complained about one of these issues, they were likely to mention some or all of the others as well. Moreover, these concerns were often accompanied by the allegation that government officials were corrupt or were engaging in nepotism. For instance, many protesters complaining about the state of their housing claimed that they would have had adequate housing were it not for the favouritism demonstrated by certain government officials.

Distrust of local government took a number of other forms as well. In 26 instances, protesters cited corruption on the part of government officials as their sole grievance. Similar allegations of corruption were accompanied by other grievances in 71 instances. Furthermore, protesters cited incompetence or the need to hold government officials accountable in 33 instances, and on 38 occasions claimed that state officials had broken their promises.

In a number of cases, however, protesters expressed concerns that fell outside the obligations of local government. For example, there were 24 instances of protesters complaining about unemployment, while in 7 they cited poverty as a grievance. On 16 occasions residents engaged in protests after they were prevented from engaging in illegal

acts, such as using illegal electricity connections or illegally occupying houses. Finally, 35 protests were at least partly motivated by recent court orders or council decisions that residents disagreed with.

Clearly, the source of community protests was often not simply the inability of local government to provide services adequately. However, although protesters may express grievances that do not fall under the mandate of local government, the phenomenon of increasingly violent community protests still has to be addressed.

Comment

Community protests are a predictable consequence of the systemic institutional failures of government to provide basic services to poverty-stricken communities. If these failures cannot be remedied immediately, more modest measures that reduce the potential for outbursts of violence must be considered.

This is especially critical because the anger generated during a violent protest often fuels further violent protests. Following Andries Tatane's death during a community protest in Ficksburg in April this year, his enraged supporters set fire to the library and the Home Affairs office. A storeroom at the municipal offices in Meqheleng township was burned to the ground. Police used water cannons, rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the dangerous crowd.