

# COMMUNITY ADVICE OFFICES: STRAINING TO SERVE POOR COMMUNITIES

Paralegal advice offices face numerous challenges, but they provide invaluable services to improve the quality of life in communities, by providing legal advice, consultation, mediation and access with regards to labour disputes and many other services, and deserve support for full or part public funding say *Yul Derek Davids* and team.

For months Mrs Nomvula Nala\*, a 60-year old woman from Langa township outside Cape Town, mulled over the differing advice from neighbours on how she should apply for an old-age grant; how she will get the money to travel there; how long will she wait in line; the food she would need to take along on her journey; and who will help her to fill in forms.

Finally she was directed to the Langa Community-based Advice Office (CAO), just around the corner from her. Within weeks her social grant problem was sorted out – swiftly and efficiently.

This is just one of the many interviews recorded during an HSRC study commissioned by the National Alliance for the Development of Community Advice Offices (NADCAO) and the Technical Support and Dialogue Platform with the purpose of conducting a cost-benefit analysis of CAOs in South Africa. A cost-benefit analysis is a systematic process for calculating and comparing benefits and costs of projects. The ongoing study of 20 CAOs also involves a qualitative analysis of the services provided by CAOs. The 20 CAOs are located across five provinces: Western Cape, Gauteng, Free State, Eastern Cape and Limpopo.

CAOs are non-governmental organisations that play a vital role in providing services particularly in rural areas where government institutions and departments are not available, or where government service points are a considerable distance away. It is especially within these rural areas where CAOs not only provide justice-related paralegal services, but also fill the gap of providers of service information and facilitators of access to services provided by, amongst others, private institutions and the Departments of Social Development, Labour, Health and Local Government. CAOs provide a range of services such as welfare, social security issues, human rights, education and community development, as well as legal aid, mediation, labour disputes, unemployment, domestic violence, drug-related problems and water, sanitation and housing.

But it also entails a passionate caring for their communities. In the case of Orange Farm, staff members often use their own income to provide food parcels or cash in cases where there is a desperate and urgent need, which is a threat running through all the CAOs.

## CAOs in funding dilemma

CAOs rely on donor funds to survive and this has become increasingly difficult due to factors such as the global economic crisis, decreased development funding flowing to South Africa as a middle-income country and competition from other organisations and priorities.

Consequently, organisations have adopted various accounting practices to demonstrate sustainability as well as accountability, good governance and transparency. Through increased accountability of service deliverables and the use of funds, NGOs are able to make a case for enhanced funding opportunities.

Nevertheless, challenges and limitations are not just addressed for the purposes of proper stewardship of public funds, but also to professionalise service offerings, improve standards and consistency of services and more importantly, have the ability to offer these services free of charge to the poor on a consistent basis.

## Findings

### Western Cape



*Langa Community-based Advice Office*

The Langa CAO services the Langa, Khayalitsha, Delft and Philippi communities. The Witzenberg Rural and Development Centre is located in the town of Ceres and service six other surrounding communities within the greater Witzenberg



Orange Farm Recycling Plant

district. Du Noon, in turn, caters for the local community as well as Parklands, Tableview and people from surrounding farms and informal settlements, such as Jo Slovo.



Du Noon Community Advice Office

The Witzenberg Rural and Development Centre appears to be the most successful in terms of how it is run (operations), its organisational structure, its infrastructure, human resources, funding and salary provision.

The main challenges for all three of these offices are similar in that there is a need to improve their infrastructures, resources and funding. This is especially important if one considers the large communities in which each CAOs are located.

The Langa office consults approximately 6–8 people per day, plus answers a myriad of telephone calls, keeping them busy for the best part of the day. In Ceres the office answers about 12–15 enquiries and open between 8–10 files daily. When the legal clinic is open, the CAO sees approximately 40 clients per day. In Du Noon the staff also indicated that they see a large number of people on a daily basis (often including Saturdays and Sundays).

For the Western Cape, the most common issues presented include labour disputes, unfair dismissals, housing-related queries, unemployment and other social ills such as substance abuse and youth pregnancy.

CAO staff identified needs for funding and training in report writing, proposal writing and finances.

### **Gauteng**

The Orange Farm Human Rights Advice Centre has three permanent staff members (two with paralegal training), one administrative assistant and two full-time volunteers, housed in a single container. Their service area includes part of the Free State, Vereeniging and De Vaal.

They indicated office space, capacity to deal with large volumes of enquiries, and training for paralegal staff (especially among young people) as their greatest needs. The CAO deals with a wide range of issues, such as socio-economic issues including drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, domestic violence, unemployment, service delivery disputes and labour problems. The office sees about 15 people per day and advises large numbers of people via telephone.

The office would also like to set up satellite offices to service their clients who often travel vast distances.

The Orange Farm CAO is very innovative in terms of generating funding, for example hosting events such as film festivals and youth sport days. They also manage a recycling plant which creates employment and income for both staff of the CAO and members of the community.

The preliminary results from these four CAOs showed that they are faced with numerous challenges which impact on their ability to deliver services. Despite these challenges they are able to help their clients and the communities which they service to improve their quality of life.

The preliminary findings therefore seem to suggest that those CAOs play an important role in servicing their communities. The final report will provide a more comprehensive analysis of the vital role that CAOs play in South Africa. The fieldwork of the present study will be concluded by the end of August 2014 and the project report will be finalised in October 2014.

\* Not her real name.

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