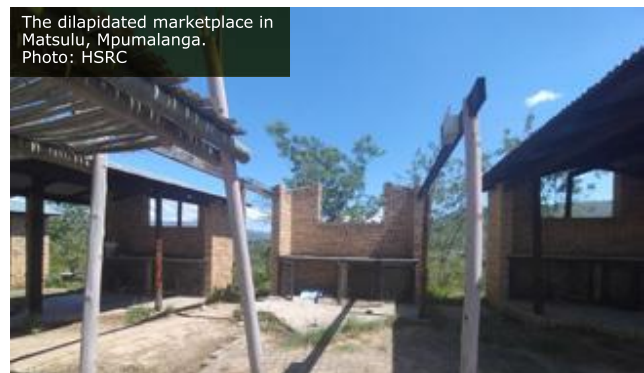


# Democracy@30: experiences from Matsulu, Mpumalanga

*Faced with crime and limited employment prospects, some residents of Matsulu township in Mpumalanga feel despondent. They want a caring government and meaningful change, researchers heard during a Matsulu visit as part of the HSRC's Democracy@30 Project. By **Simangele Dlamini** and **Nomcebo Ubisi***

As you drive along the N4 highway from the city of Mbombela in Mpumalanga, you marvel at the beautiful landscape: the lush vegetation, the meandering Crocodile River, and the mountains crowned with balancing rocks. Along the serene river, you occasionally see a vendor selling fish at the side of the highway. Approximately 50 km north of Mbombela lies the vibrant township of Matsulu, our destination as we set out to talk to residents about their lived experiences 30 years since the advent of democracy in South Africa.

Matsulu borders the Kruger National Park, and we heard stories of elephants breaking through the park fence into the township streets. Upon entering the township, we noticed a once-thriving marketplace that had fallen into disrepair. We stopped to enquire, and two elderly women hurried towards us, hoping to make a sale. As we bought some bananas and avocados, the women spoke of their hardships – that they barely had customers anymore and that they wished former President Nelson Mandela could 'resurrect' and help them escape their plight.



While gathering people's stories, we also hoped to capture the landmarks that defined the township's history. We noticed numerous food stalls, spaza shops, hair salons and shebeens on almost every street corner. People were happy to tell us of their experiences, but we sensed despair among the youth and nostalgia among the elderly. Unemployment was reported as unbearable, the crime level was alarming, and teenage pregnancy was high. We talked to a local pastor, who blamed high levels of immorality on a loss of values due to government policies that gave people, particularly children, "too many rights":

*"The family unit has disintegrated, parents and teachers can hardly discipline children, and the church is seen as unfashionable.*

*The Bible has been removed from the schools. Children no longer pray during school assemblies. This has led to moral decay."*

An elderly man blamed the high crime rate on the "new government", which, he claimed, discarded the traditional courts that he deemed more effective than the [current judicial system]. He also felt that the ineffective justice system allowed criminals back into the community:

*"Criminals now have free reign in our communities. They get arrested today, and the next day they are back on the streets, terrorising communities again.*

*Pre-1994, we used to have traditional courts, izimbokolo. These courts used to be very effective, hence crime levels were low."*

We asked the elderly man and the pastor if there was anything to celebrate 30 years into democracy and what they thought should be done to improve the dire state of affairs they were describing. Both responded in Siswati, saying *"komele sibuyele emasisweni"* (we have to resort to the old way of doing things). They agreed that there was little to celebrate, and the future looked bleak for their children.

As we drove further into the community, we came to the Kruger National Park fence. The area had once been a park where people could relax over a picnic during the day and revel away the evenings on weekends. However, as we approached, we were met with a dumping site, with only a few visitors relaxing along the Crocodile River. The place looked forlorn. The visitors blamed the neglect on an uncaring local government, claiming that, despite its flaws, the apartheid government had at least prioritised the preservation of parks. We noticed additional indiscriminate dumping sites along Matsulu's dusty streets. These added to the residents' accounts of their once vibrant township, which sadly had hardly anything left to celebrate as the festive season approached.

On the third day of our visit, we organised focus-group discussions with community members at a local church. We were joined by church leaders, local police representatives, youth and the elderly. They gave us permission to record the sessions and take pictures but wanted assurances that their concerns would not remain in reports but would be used to assist other communities as they believed their plight was shared by other South Africans.

Once again, the discussions painted a picture of dejection and despair. Elderly participants longed for the past, when jobs were more accessible and families could support themselves, despite apartheid restrictions. The younger generation said their future looked bleak and that they were caught in a cycle of despair:

*"We go to school, colleges and universities, but nothing comes out of it. Some of us have diplomas and degrees but are still unemployed. The Outcomes-Based Education system and the 30% pass rate is producing semi-literate graduates. Even those who are lucky to get employment abandon this township and go and live in big cities. No one ploughs anything back to this community."*

Representatives from the South African Police Service spoke about their challenges, such as the frustration they experience when arresting criminals, only for the courts to release them back into the community. They also cited a lack of resources as hampering the effective discharge of their duties.

The area along the Kruger National Park fence has turned into a dumping site. Photo: HSRC



Community members expressed outrage over the police station closing at 21:00 daily, saying criminals took advantage of this by running rampant at night, knowing there were no police patrolling the streets and that the communities had no one to turn to once the police station was closed. The discussion became heated, and we ended the discussion.

When we asked about the general state of disrepair of amenities – like the public hall, the local library, pothole-ridden roads and uncontrolled waste dumping – participants blamed this on politicians who make grand service delivery promises during election campaigns, only to disappear once voted into power.

*"We have not even seen our local councillor in ages," said one of the participants. "The infrastructure that you see was built during apartheid and during Mandela's time," said another.*

We then asked the audience what could be done to "achieve a better life for all" and whether there was any progress to celebrate 30 years into democracy. They said the government needed to be more caring and willing to end high levels of corruption.

They also said there was nothing to celebrate, as the country's independence had not translated into the betterment of their well-being but had actually made life unbearable. We then asked them about what the community was doing to ensure a better life for the future. Their views were diverse:

*"Bring back corporal punishment. Our children now have too many rights, once you try to discipline them, they may have you arrested." [Pastor]*

*"The police need to work harder to gain respect from the communities. During apartheid days and during Mandela's presidency, the police were feared. Once the Yellow Mellow (old police vans) appeared, people would run. Now, no one fears them, they are involved in corruption and even work with the criminals." [Community elder]*

*"Give more authority to traditional leaders. The current justice system is not working, and traditional leaders need to take back their communities." [Traditional leader]*

The statement that the "old way" of doing things had to be brought back was a recurrent theme. This included the government implementing harsher

Focus-group discussions with community representatives in Matsulu, Mpumalanga. Photo: HSRC



penalties for criminals, and allowing parents to discipline their children without fear of reprisal. The elderly audience members summed it up: "Masibuyele emasisweni" [Let us go back to the old system, and the old way of doing things].

### Reflection

There was an air of despondency in the community. Yet, an entrepreneurial spirit among some community members was evidenced by small businesses that dominated the main streets of the township. The church was trying its best too, running a soup kitchen for school children. The general infrastructure seemed dilapidated, but a project was underway for the rehabilitation of roads. We also reviewed a community member's copy of the Integrated Development Plan, listing priorities for the coming five years:

- Water supply and sanitation
- Road infrastructure and stormwater development
- Electricity supply and management
- Local economic development and tourism
- Waste and environmental management
- Social services

- Financial management and viability
- Integrated human settlement
- Community development and public safety
- Good governance and public participation
- Public transport

These items had been flagged by the community members as areas of concern. But will these be translated into action areas for the betterment of the community and the enjoyment of democracy, so many years after 1994?

We left, promising to document the community's stories. Hopefully, someone somewhere will hear their cries.

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