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Libraries in Dialogue for Transformation and Innovation

NOT PEER REVIEWED

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The purpose of this paper is to give a Community perspective on why communities attack libraries during service delivery protests. This presentation is just a glimpse of actual experiences in our quest to answer this ‘burning’ question and gain insight into why a community who, at grassroots level, see the destruction of a library and other municipal property as an acceptable tactic against social and political ills – it was in their minds weighing the ends against the means and therefore it was a rational and purposeful means of protest as the library is seen as an active part of a “political lobby-club”. After all from the protesters side it did not initially involve violence to human beings. Although one cannot but condemn these acts of anger and frustration the protesters achieved some order of success in exposing and discrediting claims by local government that it is extremely sympathetic to the issues at hand and is working closely with the community to address these.

While September is traditionally celebrated with National Book Week, in Westonaria frustration with service delivery boiled over into politically motivated vandalism with the burning of a library, municipal buildings and the defacement of another library. Library staff member’s houses were also stoned.

During meetings in early September at Waterworks more than 1000 protesters complained about the lack of sanitation and housing, other service delivery demands were also raised. Residents wanted to be moved to Syferfontein due the pending rainy season and annual flooding at Waterworks, further to this the area is also unsafe because of dolomite.

Community members declared Waterworks a health hazard without running water and proper toilets. Residents feel dehumanised by the fact that despite frequent requests over a period of 15 years for proper sanitation they still have to relieve themselves in the bushes surrounding the shacks where they live and only have candle light or buying expensive paraffin. Members from this community feel that although they are loyal citizens working towards building a common South African identity to strengthen our nationhood and pride, participating in elections, the very same politician voted into power do nothing to empower them the people.

A memorandum was handed over to officials at the municipal buildings in Westonaria stating their collective concerns stating that “We want responsible people to deal with our problems.”

In their response, the local government stated that Syferfontein falls outside the municipal jurisdiction of Westonaria and therefore it is not within its power to adhere to this request. A follow up community meeting was called at the public park in Waterworks where community members conjured – and during ensuing talks it was suggested to burn the library, as the library is the only formal structure within this informal community and as such represents
the face of Council. By the time “calm” were restored to the kasi, 200 people were arrested, angering residents even further. On 11 September the community blocked the N12 between Potchefstroom and Johannesburg as well as the Impala Road, west of Johannesburg with burning tyres and the crowd ensued to throw stones to express their frustration claiming that the improvement of service delivery is not a priority of local political leaders and that local government is failing in its mandate to deliver basic services.

The other big issue was the Audit-General’s report about Westonaria Local Municipality’s funds being unaccounted for. Community members called for the disbandment of the municipality and put under administration in order to have responsible people deal with problems. According to residents local politicians have failed to address their grievances.

The crowd then moved to the library situated right across from the park and started stoning the structure, trying to break the burglar bars from the windows and door.

No intervention was made from local government’s side.

The next day the crowd returned with petrol bombs. The police was made aware of the situation and were called in. The crowd made their intention clear about burning down the library and the police was requested to stay on site to try and prevent this from happening. Eventually after calming the residents and feeling the situation was contained the police moved out between 8 and 9 pm. On seeing the police leave the area the residents then moved in and bombed the library.

Three more libraries had to be closed during the following week due to unrest and the general safety of library staff. The situation got more heated when residents looted spaza shops on 18 September and ignored police orders to disperse chanting: “we are not afraid to die.” Angry residents have vowed to make the area ungovernable until their demands for basic services are met. On the evening of 27 September 2013 angry residents targeted the municipal buildings in Bekkersdal setting fire to it, casting local government in further negative light, indicating that when society is sufficiently unbalanced residents with no outlet or ear who listens may turn to extreme measures and channel their anger and frustration into vandalism. Acts of violent protests like these, especially those with a symbolic component, are seen as attempts at communication that of deep anger and frustration at being ignored. Although acts of vandalism sends a message, the message may not be the one intended by the people as “you can’t rub out [a] present reality by book burning” – (De Kok 1984).

This is not an isolated occurrence as Minister in the Presidency, Collins Chabane revealed on 11 September 2013 that 80% of government departments do not comply with service delivery requirement. We have seen the deliberate burning and or defacement of more than 15 community and public libraries since 2005 across South Africa.

What makes the Waterworks and Bekkersdal incidents and others like it so meaningful is that it demonstrated that libraries could be destroyed because of a “good” cause (in this case targeting an institution of governance, which tries to project an image of respectability on the
basis of equality of access for all). It is clear that our democracy is very fragile and that a lot more needs to be done to convince people that it is working in their favour.

However there is hope that future generations will be able to map out an inclusive approach in terms of our heritage as a society, including the protection, maintenance and development of our libraries as a source of information and intellectual discourse.

I also urge LIASA to focus its full attention on our collective plight as librarians in addressing this issue.

I thank you.