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# Community Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown in Diepsloot

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# Community Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown in Diepsloot

A research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters degree in Social Anthropology in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Witwatersrand

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Plagiarism Declaration

I, Thandolwethu Thwala, hereby declare that this research report submitted for assessment is my own work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.

I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.

I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this is not my own work and/or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.

Signature: Date: 20/12/2024

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## Abstract

The first case of COVID-19 in South Africa was confirmed on the 5th of March 2020 with more cases confirmed in the following days (Carlitz & Makhura 2021, 2). On the 15th of March 2020, the South African President announced broad measures that were meant to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus and to protect people's lives (Carlitz & Makhura 2021, 2). These included a hard lockdown that would bound every person who was not considered an essential worker to their home. Community leaders were not considered "essential" and therefore, were pushed into the private sphere and could not carry out any of their public duties during this time. Community leaders play a very significant role in communities like Diepsloot due to the socio-economic issues that the community often deals with and the leaders' commitment to community development. Therefore, this research report focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the leadership structure in Diepsloot. The chapters in this report are arranged in a chronological order starting before the pandemic until 2023 when there was a significant return of collective action in the community. The research report features the narratives of six community leaders and how their leadership roles were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. My main finding was that there were different shifts that took place in the community leadership structure of Diepsloot and these are exhibited by the narratives of my participants. I found that leadership roles of people changed during the pandemic and people who were previously not community leaders, became leaders due to the moments of crisis that arose in the later stages of the lockdown.

## List of Acronyms

ANC - African National Congress

ANCYL - African National Congress Youth League

COVID-19 – Corona Virus Disease 2019

CPF - Community Police Forum

DCF - Diepsloot Community Forum

NGO - Non-government Organisation

RDP - Reconstruction and Development Programme

SANCA - South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Independence

SANDF - South African National Defence Force

SAPS - South African Police Service

SRC - Student Representative Council

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

> It is the same during COVID. We never had that space where you'd say 'no, I'm spending time with my family' or 'its lockdown I can't go anywhere' because two minutes, people are knocking there. They want food parcels, or they went for a food parcel, and they didn't get it, or they don't have food in their houses. They want you to make a plan. Make phone calls. You know these things. It was tough. Very, very, tough for other people. While you're sitting watching TV and you're thinking and minding your own business and then somebody's coming by your gate. They're coughing and they want you to take them to hospital… errrm you are scared. You can't take them because you think you will get infected and all those things, so it was not - it was not easy.

These are the words of Walter, a community leader from Diepsloot. Walter has played a very vibrant role in the community of Diepsloot. This has been in terms of creating sports programmes for the youth, feeding schemes for people of all ages, and single handedly coming up with solutions of how to curb the gangsterism issue among the youth.

At the beginning of my research, I was fascinated with the blurring of public and private spheres in Diepsloot. This was because of a common occurrence for people who live there whereby the home spills over into the street, and how the homes are often places of strangers living together. It was clear that lockdown regulations imagined a clear division between the private and public spheres, but this could not easily be enforced here. I was curious about how community leaders, like Walter, who take on wider public responsibilities would negotiate this tension.

Despite his commitment and all the contributions, he has made to Diepsloot, when the COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) lockdown started, Walter was forced to retreat from being a public figure into a private one. He had to stay at home and focus solely on his family rather than the community on the outside of this space, even when community members would come to him asking for assistance. This created a tension between the public figure he usually was and the private figure he was being forced into by not being able to leave his home.

Diepsloot is a post-apartheid township that was established in 1995 and is located in the North of Johannesburg. It is made up of a total of thirteen different areas referred to as Extensions. These Extensions were named in numerical order i.e. Extension One, Extension Two, Extension Three up until Extension Thirteen. It is home to people that had initially been evicted from informal settlements in Honeydew, Sevenfontein, Zandspruit, and Alexandra[1]. It is made up of fully government-subsidised housing (often referred to as Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses), brick houses built by landowners, partially government subsidised houses as well as shacks (which are often built on any empty land or in the yards of people with RDP houses and are rented out)[2].

Extension One is the oldest area and is known as the 'reception' area. It is characterised by many shacks and does not have any formal housing. This is the same for Extension Eleven, Twelve, and Thirteen, even though they were established much later than Extension One. Extension Two, Three and some of Extension Nine consist of the bond or brick houses built by the landowners. The rest of the Extensions consist of a mix of the government subsidised houses and shacks. Due to South Africa's legacy of apartheid and how densely populated Diepsloot is, the people of Diepsloot often encounter service delivery issues in the form of ineffective policing, lacking health services, power outages, and water cuts.

This is what created the gap for elected community leaders to step in and become mediators between community members and the state. These community leaders help with their own resources where they can and/or amplify the voices and complaints of community members so that promised services are delivered.

COVID-19 brought in more challenges for the already disadvantaged community of Diepsloot and unfortunately worsened the living conditions of many because of the restrictions that came with following the health regulations. As the whole world was dealing with the Covid-19 health crisis, other crises that existed beforehand, like crime or lack of service delivery, were forced into

[1] "Diepsloot, Johannesburg", Accessed 26 February 2024. https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/diepsloot-johannesburg
[2] "Diepsloot, Johannesburg", Accessed 26 February 2024. https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/diepsloot-johannesburg

the shadows even though they still impacted communities like Diepsloot. As shown in Walter's quote, those working to try and solve these long-term issues were also forced to stop their work, as the priority was to slow down the spread of COVID-19 infections and curb the deaths that came with it..

In Diepsloot, ensuring that the spread of COVID-19 was slowed down came with the use of the police and military to make sure that people follow the health regulations. These regulations included curfews, very limited movements, and wearing the appropriate protective gear when one was out. I did not go out often during the lockdown but when I did, I would see and experience the military and police enforcing these regulations. The enforcement of these regulations would, at times, reflect the violent and hostile ways in which the state often deals with poor and black communities, like Diepsloot (Steinberg 2008). In contrast, my Diepsloot experience was highlighted when I moved to Braamfontein, a place in the inner city of Johannesburg, where violence was mostly absent.

My interest in this research is about how community leadership in Diepsloot was restructured by the COVID-19 pandemic and how the community leaders navigated this shift. Walter is only one of the many community leaders in Diepsloot.  Therefore, I will also lay out the experience of other community leaders. To help me frame my research, I engaged with different literature ranging from the kind of mobility regimes that were enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, defining politics, and giving a sense of the kind of politics this paper deals with, civic societies, and the connection between policing and leadership in the South African context.

## Literature Review

The first case of COVID-19 in South Africa was confirmed on the 5th of March 2020 with more cases being confirmed in the following days (Carlitz & Makhura 2021, 2). On the 15th of March 2020, the South African President announced broad measures that were meant to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Carlitz & Makhura 2021, 2). These regulations promoted social

distancing, mask-wearing, isolation of sick people, quarantine of asymptomatic people, and limited people's movements to those with permits and during curfews.

A lot of literature has been written on how the lockdown regulations impacted people who were already disadvantaged (Lang et al 2021; Bedford et al 2020; Mallah et al 2021; Team and Manderson 2020; Ellison et al 2022; Friedman 2021). These regulations had a significant impact on communities like Diepsloot. When one is looking at this area and how regulation was employed during the COVID-19 pandemic, one is reminded of the mechanics the apartheid government would enforce to justify the use illness and disease to forcibly remove black people to less desirable areas to ensure that there would be racially-segregated spaces (Reed & Xaso 2022, 94).

Finn (2022) theorises this as pandemic urbanisation, which is the usage of urban spaces to create social, economic, and racialized divides in the name of pandemic control (Finn 2022, 1-2). This is important to highlight because Diepsloot is a post-apartheid township but has been following a development not unlike older apartheid townships like Alexandra. In fact, Diepsloot is populated by people who moved from Alex to escape the violent conflicts which erupted there towards the end of apartheid.

One of the results of this racialisation has been the lack of access to formal housing that is close to viable and sustainable sources of employment (Ellison et al 2022, 2). Black people have fallen victim to this causing them to have to share facilities such as water and toilets, while lacking access to other resources like electricity (Ellison et al 2022, 12). This led to conflictual issues when it came to compliance with COVID-19 lockdown regulations. There is little evidence that the South African authorities and government worked with poor people to develop lockdown regulations more suitable for their circumstances (Ellison et al 2022, 12).

Team and Manderson (2020, 671) add on to this by stating how poor housing, poor health, lack of employment, loss of employment, and low income were exposed as factors that inhibited the implementation of the COVID-19 health regulations and people's capacity to follow them. Moreover, Friedman (2021, 1) indicates how the lockdown regulations separated South Africa

into two worlds, one focused on mimicking Western Europe and North America in how the pandemic was dealt with and another that focused on how disadvantaged people who lived in crowded dwellings and used taxis sustained and protected themselves.

The dualism that Friedman (2021) talks about shows how pandemic urbanisation led to the hierarchical treatment of people in the management of COVID-19 and the enforcement of health regulations. It was through the enforcement of these health regulations that the pandemic made evident that police violence towards black people is still a serious problem in contemporary South Africa (Reed & Xaso 2022, 93). It is also worth noting how public health measures like police surveillance, house arrest, and curfew inadvertently mimicked tools of apartheid and the negative impact these might have on those who were historically impacted by it (Reed & Xaso 2022, 93-94).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about an erasure of the informal economy which played a significant role in communities like Diepsloot where 50% of South Africans are unemployed (Cahill, 2019). This is not a complete reflection of the unemployment rate in the area as it reflects the rate for South Africans; whereas the area is inhabited by foreign nationals as well. Ellison et al (2022, 12) found that imposing the regulations on people living in communities like Diepsloot not only compounded the existing risks and challenges they faced, but also stopped them from carrying out their "casual, flexible, informal, and opportunistic sources of 'in-person' work". A lot of literature has focused on the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic but not as much on the political impact, especially smaller scale community politics in communities like Diepsloot. Yet community politics play a significant role. Therefore, my research aims to shed light onto the political impact of COVID-19 by looking at the community leadership structure in Diepsloot particularly.

One area in which politics in the form of grassroot leadership emerges is in the field of policing. Bierkschenk (2017, 111) poses the rhetorical question of who the police are in contemporary Africa, and answers it by acknowledging that "different forms of private policing prevail" when it comes to solving social conflicts even when the responsibility lies with the legislation. These could be informants or contacts that may come from vigilante groups or other forms of private

security which exposes more of the relationship between the police and those who step in when the police fail (Bierkschenk 2017, 111). Understanding the role of Community Policing Forums (CPFs), requires an emphasis on this relationship. CPFs played a significant role in negotiating between residents and official police in townships like Alexandra where official police had previously been driven out during the apartheid (Steinberg 2008, 53-54). The CPF continues to play a significant role in areas like Diepsloot, as they are often considered the community's leaders.

Community leadership is often along a spectrum rather than being clearly categorised. Smith (2019, 6) focuses on vigilantism as the alternative form of policing and leadership with different models that explain how it came about and why it continues to prevail. The first model was built on state failure, which explains vigilantism as a response to the state's failure to police, protect, or imprison. Vigilantism also reflected the state's failure to ensure access to social rights (Smith 2019, 6). The second model was civic failure which saw vigilantism as a response to collapsing civic and communal trust, this addressed the difficulty of integrating rural populations that had their own justice traditions and racial or ethnic violence in divided societies (Smith 2019, 7). This has impacted how policing is done as it suggests forms of vigilantism as the immediate form of policing for community members. This is important for my research because community leaders do not always work in harmony with the police/state and when they are at odds, their work tends to be labelled as vigilantism which can be dangerous for them.

Shore (2014, 177) states that political leadership is an intensely studied concept that still manages to remain poorly understood. Studies have shown no unified theory or common agreement on a definition for it (Shore 2014, 177). Still, within anthropology, this concept can be understood as "a system of social relationships involving authority, charisma, and other forms of personal or institutional power, whose rules are specific to and embedded within particular cultural contexts" (Shore 2014, 177). I draw from Cartwright (1983, 285-297) who defines political leadership as the governing of people, by persuading them to voluntarily comply with the set ways of living, suggested by the leader and agreed to by his/her followers.

Early anthropological studies of leadership focused on small scale societies but studies have now moved into focusing on more complex societies (Shore 2014, 177). These complex societies warrant more nuanced ethnographic studies of political behaviour through looking into traditional concerns with authority, kinship, informal mechanisms of social control, and dispute resolution (Shore 2014, 177). This political behaviour includes micro-politics of managing one's reputation, political brokerage, and an interest in the dynamics that come with having followers and factions (Shore 2014, 177).

According to Swart, van Wyk, and Botha (2014, 660), political leadership in Africa was set apart particularly by how it was marginalised in comparison to other continents. Therefore, as one studies it, it is important to pose questions concerning how different/similar it is to other forms of leadership, whether there is a uniform way of how its defined, and lastly, whether there actually is a distinct form of leadership that is 'African' (Swart et al 2014, 660).

Political leadership tends to be considered problematic as an analytical concept, but it is still important in anthropology because most societies have elements of leadership and recognise categories of leaders (Shore 2014, 178) often beyond state governance. It also matters because there are implications that result from its absence and/or from ineffective and selfish leaders, who can produce a legacy of bad governance and a lack of respect for the governing laws (Shore 2014, 178). Another concern in the African context is that there is a lot of national, ethnic, and religious diversity therefore "the term 'African leadership' may be too broad in its ontological status to say much about leadership, let alone [to convey] any sense of a distinctively 'African leadership'" (Swart et al 2014, 661).

Shore (2014, 180) found that a key figure in the anthropology of leadership is the 'Big Man'. This term was adopted in Melanesia to refer to male leaders who achieve their political affluence by means of having public rhetorics, informal persuasion, and a skillful conduct of private and public wealth exchange. A similar figure like this exists in the South African context and these figures often became the community leaders. Steinberg (2008, 76-77) illustrates the beginning of this figure in South African townships. These figures would be policemen but considered genuine sources of authority. However, they would not be fully trusted because they were

employed by the apartheid government and worked with violence which instilled fear against them (Steinberg 2008, 77). Nonetheless, being white-collar professionals who were middle class earned them a deep respect within the black communities. People would approach these figures for assistance with family disputes, fights between neighbours, or any other troubles (Steinberg 2008, 77). I want to use this framing as a way of looking into how these figures have changed over time, and characteristics black communities attribute important for people they appoint as contemporary leaders.

An important aspect of these leadership figures that I will explore in my research is how they were historically documented as men and not much was written about women. According to Sykes (2013, 691), studying leadership through the lens of gender is important because, historically, leaders who did not fit conventional sex roles were excluded from conversations around political leadership and an increase in female leaders only started in the late twentieth century. Since women have a history of being banned from leadership in public office, feminists would find examples of their leadership in domestic settings (Sykes 2013, 691). As they began to be more involved in public leadership, they were still expected to satisfy highly masculine standards to gain considerable power (Sykes 2023, 295). This helps question the centrality of what is considered formal leadership and how it contributes to the political leadership of women as "not significant". Therefore, my work aims to find out how women get into leadership roles in the present day, especially in a context of a township that is gendered, and how useful community members find them in these positions.

The contemporary leaders whose contexts are hugely, and mostly negatively, impacted by race, class, and gender in their communities are the focus of my work. While Wu (2021, 30) states that community leaders cannot substitute the government in providing public services and welfare, they play a significant role in addressing public problems at the local level in these roles and can bring transformative impact to communities. Robins (2008) contributes to this by highlighting how social networks, clientelistic networks, and communal forms of belonging can play a significant role in areas where the state does not reach people on the ground. Considering that Diepsloot is a community that is constantly facing service delivery issues, these community leaders tend to play a significant role. Therefore, I use this framework to understand the role that

these leaders were playing before the COVID-19 pandemic and how these roles were impacted by the pandemic especially in the context whereby the livelihoods of people living in the townships worsened but leaders were forced to give up their public lives.

Couto (2014, 349) presents that civil society is characterised by being a space separate from government and businesses thus sometimes termed the 'third sector'. It is made up of voluntary associations that "provide civic leadership through cultural events, human services, and other vital and valuable programmes they conduct for the general benefit of the community" (Couto 2014, 349). Bob (2011, 83) states that a civil society should not be conflated with the third sector as this overlooks the political differences that exist between the two and obscures what a civil society truly means. Civic leadership often challenges existing political and leadership assumptions by posing the question of 'why?' and this is what distinguishes it from the third sector (Couto 2014, 352). The question of a civic society plays a significant role in my research as I will be looking at leadership that exists outside of government and business. I intend to work with Couto's idea that civic leadership is voluntary and presents itself as those who take up the roles and work for the benefit of the communities they are working in and for (2014, 349).

This literature is important for my research because there is not much that has been written about the leadership structure in Diepsloot therefore, it will help me conceptualise ideas around that. My fieldwork has revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown was a significant period for the leadership in Diepsloot and came with changes to the leadership structure. In this paper, I will be elaborating on this, but I will use past theoretical concepts because as discussed earlier, Diepsloot is a post-apartheid township therefore even though it is not old as a township, it still carries a rich history and contemporary context.

## Methodology

My field site was Diepsloot. Diepsloot is a post-apartheid township so originally, I wanted to explore how the history of the policing of poor black people in townships has impacted how it is policed in the present day, particularly, the different levels that exist when it comes to governing and enforcing the regulations, as well as how the regulations were enforced specifically within

this community. I also wanted to see if there are any differences to how its governed by people who live in the area since they would be aware of the many other issues like crime, poor housing, lack of employment, and low income that the community has to deal with. I partook in participant observation with one of the participants who is a community leader in Diepsloot. I did this by spending a few days in her workspace to see how she went about resolving issues relating to her roles. This helped me explore the current context to understand better how things were done during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. This method was inspired by Steinberg (2008) and Hornberger (2011).

My participants turned out to be people who were leaders before the lockdown and others who assumed leadership roles during the lockdown. I began by talking to community members and asking them about their experiences of being policed and by whom they were policed. I found that community leaders did not play a big role in policing the regulations but did have other roles to play during the lockdown. After finding that out, I began talking to these community members and how they navigated this. The people I spoke to range from being volunteer leaders, partial CPF, chairpersons of community forums, and political party affiliated people. During the lockdown, I saw more police and military presence when running errands. The only time I had encountered government officials and police considered as community leaders was when they went from house to house signing people up to receive food parcels. Therefore, I was curious to find out if they played a bigger role than just that since they are meant to represent the community.

I held semi-formal in-person interviews with community members to find out which people they considered community leaders, then I held in-depth semi-structured interviews with the people I was directed to. During the interviews, I would ask my participants for permission to voice record our conversation but also carried my notebook and pen to take down fieldnotes about the kind of environment we met in, what the atmosphere was like, and the kind of body language they expressed while interacting with me or other community members.

Since I was asking people about past events, I had to phrase my questions in a way that would trigger their memories of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. In order to bring my

participants back into the time of COVID-19 so that they could provide me with answers, I would try to relate my questions to roles that they play in the present so that they could be able to contrast them to the lockdown and pandemic.

## Ethics

There were a few ethical concerns I had to take into consideration as I did my research. The mention of the COVID-19 lockdown brought back bad memories like the passing of people that my participants were close to. Therefore, I would have to pause the interview at times to mitigate this. Some people lost loved ones and others lost their sources of income during the time. Talking about the pandemic was triggering for them. I made sure that I constantly checked in on my participants and whether they wanted to continue with the interview especially when they got emotional. I also let them know that they were allowed to ask me to not include certain things we discussed in my research report.

As I conducted my interviews, I tried not to lead the conversation about community leadership in Diepsloot but let my participants direct it instead since I did not know much about it. This helped me map out the different ways in which people came into the leadership roles they occupied before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Ensuring that my participants labelled their leadership roles ensured that I did not misinterpret or misrepresent what these labels were. Titles like ‘vigilante’, which is sometimes used to label these kinds of leaders have implications of making community leaders appear as villains since they are not part of a “formal” spectrum of leadership. I had also intended to use pseudonyms but some of my participants preferred that I used their real names in my write up. I respected their wishes.

Lastly, as a woman, I had to be very careful with how I navigated the area because I was exploring parts of Diepsloot that were not as familiar to me as my own. I tried to ensure that I was not in any position that could be unsafe for me. I therefore also got a research assistant who helped me navigate my research. Unfortunately, I did have an incident whereby community leaders I was being introduced to by my colleague acted inappropriately towards me leading me to cancel my interviews with them. I understood that having a research assistant might have impacted on the comfortability of my participants but it was also important to ensure my safety.

## Chapter Outline

The argument of this research report is that there were shifts in community leadership that took place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in Diepsloot. The chapters are arranged in chronological order of how the pandemic took place. Chapter two lays out what community leadership looked like in Diepsloot before the pandemic and how Unathi, Thabang, Walter, and Rebecca became community leaders. The chapter three is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the early moments of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown and the second section focuses on the later moments. The early moments' section recounts how Unathi, Thabang, Walter, and Rebecca's leadership roles were impacted by the introduction of the lockdown. The later moments' section recounts how they got back into leadership when the hard lockdown ended as well as how Anita and Pamela came into leadership during this time. Chapter four explores all their leadership roles "post-pandemic" and how dissatisfaction from the "unofficial" community leaders and members lead to collective action in the form of a strike.

# Chapter 2

## Leadership Before the Lockdown

In this chapter, I argue that although leadership is often formed through formal practice such as elections, the community leaders in Diepsloot became part of the leadership structure through different and unofficial ways. Their leadership roles originate from being foremostly chosen by the community members who recognised them as being influential and helpful within the community. Their influence and how they helped the community often emerged from seeing what was wrong and wanting to help to fix it, rather than desiring to become community leaders. This section explores the relationship between leadership and representation in an area where people are constantly dealing with social issues like crime, poverty, and poor service delivery (Harber, 2011). This chapter begins by showing how leadership requires social relationships (Shore, 2014) through exploring the factors that led to these Diepsloot residents becoming leaders, and then narrates their subsequent work within the community.

This chapter works with Shore's (2014, 177) argument of political leadership being a system of social relationships that involve authority, charisma, and other forms of personal or institutional power with rules embedded within certain cultural contexts. I apply this to my participants and show how they possess some of these characteristics. Although leadership in Diepsloot is underwritten by these characteristics, community leadership in the area is still an organic form that is often not directly associated with or even explicitly distances itself from party politics and institutional power. Becoming a leader in Diepsloot happens in different ways. Leadership presents various roles for people when they are considered community leaders. These range from having to deal with social, economic, and sometimes personal issues. Community leadership is not a substitute for government but, as stated by Wu (2021, 30) it is still very useful in addressing public problems like provision of public services and welfare at the local level.

According to Shore (2014, 177), "the meaning of leadership varies cross-culturally and temporally, as do the qualities expected of a leader". This means that leadership is contextual and can change over different periods of time. Diepsloot is a good example considering that the leadership structure in the area underwent countless shifts after the COVID-19 pandemic

compared to what it was before. This, as I will show in the following chapters, is because of the complexities posed by the regulations, like being unable to move around and thus being unable to carry out community leadership duties during the lockdown. Although the township is still characterised by high rates of crime, service delivery issues, and power outages as explained by the participants, how community leaders fulfil their roles has shifted because of the pandemic.

In this chapter, I introduce the community leaders who go by the names of Unathi, Thabang, Walter, and Rebecca. Their stories detail how they became community leaders before the pandemic and what duties they carried out at the time.

Unathi has been the Chairman of the Diepsloot Community Forum (DCF) which he described as a civic movement that was created to deal with the social issues in the area. It was established post-lockdown, and he described it as a forum whereby community leaders could come together to solve the issues facing Diepsloot without political affiliations. Members of this forum live across the different Extensions of Diepsloot and it is meant to serve the whole Diepsloot community. Unathi has a house in Extension Six and another one at The Parks in Riversands, Johannesburg, where his wife and kids reside. He is constantly moving between these two areas since he is very involved in what happens in Diepsloot and still considers it his home.

We had our conversation at the KFC outlet in Chuma Mall. There are no coffee shops or cafes in Diepsloot so the fast-food outlet was the only public place that was quiet enough for us to sit and talk. We had scheduled to meet two days prior, but I had fallen sick and called to apologise and reschedule. This was met by a sympathetic and understanding tone from Unathi, proving Tshepiso, the friend I got his contacts from, right about him being “a very kind and accommodating man”. Tshepiso had sent a picture of Unathi on TV addressing the media about the strike against crime that was taking place then as one of the representatives of the DCF. Still, I was unsure of how he looked and sat glancing around as I waited for him to arrive. It did not take long for me to recognise him after he stepped out of his car.

He was wearing the same navy-blue jacket with an orange logo from the picture that Tshepiso had sent me. His aura demanded respect, but he was not intimidating. He approached me and

hesitantly greeted. “Bhut’ Unathi?” I asked respectfully as the grey hairs on his beard made me realise that he is older than I had expected. “Thando?”, he responded as I stood up to shake his hand. He declined my offer of food because he had just eaten so we got started with the interview. I asked him about his background, and he answered openly, hesitating only when I asked about his businesses and how he makes his income. I assured him that he did not have to answer any questions that he felt uncomfortable answering. This made him respond more freely.

Unathi’s involvement in the community demonstrated the various levels and relationships that enable an individual to become a leader. He outlined his beginnings as an activist:

> Err…being an activist, it starts with identifying problems and to try to solve them. And then people come with problems because you have solved a problem somewhere and then, it grows and grows. And without even yourself identifying with – you are a community leader -, you will see yourself being in the role of being a leader. Then you start to engage in organisations and get elected to political organisations and civil movement, then that’s why then you see yourself as a community leader, and also identifying yourself being part of certain structures or movement.

He explained that he has always possessed leadership qualities, but it was the recognition of community members that helped him to understand those traits and allowed him to be officially placed in that position. His leadership was born from being an activist and only as it grew did, he start to bring politics into it. Unathi has been part of different political organisations that required leadership qualities like the Youth Forum and the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL). He also mentioned being part of the Student Representative Council (SRC) at the University of Johannesburg when he was a student at the institution. This was before dropping out due to reasons he did not mention. The way in which he admitted having actively been in leadership organisations but stating that it happened through external recognition in Diepsloot hints at an erasure of agency when it comes to how he presents his leadership story. This seems important for him, as he highlights that his priority when he became a leader was recognising problems and finding solutions for people around him, rather than a hunger for power.

He also highlighted how being reactive to the community’s problems led to one being recognised as a leader and being presented with more problems to solve since that individual appears to be

capable. Although Unathi speaks of what it means to be a community leader in the community, when it comes to detailing the work, he has done for the community before the COVID-19 pandemic, he talks more about what he has achieved through the political organisations rather than his individual influences at the beginning of the interview. Nonetheless, Unathi's involvement with the community supports Shore's (2014, 177) argument that leadership requires social relationships, he detailed how his involvement and approachability with the community is what made them trust and respect him as a leader. He admits that he would not be a leader if the community did not consider him as one, and it is through the social relationships that he built with the community members, by helping them, that they saw him as someone worthy to lead and represent them.

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I have known Thabang for as long as my family has been based in Diepsloot, but I was not aware that he was a community leader. My aunt and brother suggested that I speak to him after I told them what my research was about. We met in his house, which I had never been to before. We spoke as his TV played on in the background and he glanced at it every time I asked him a question that seemed difficult for him to answer. The conversation took place in English for the most part. This I see as a contributing factor to some of our misunderstandings because he is SeTswana speaking, whereas I am an IsiZulu speaker. We spoke in English as a compromise. This was our first full conversation despite knowing him my whole life and it appeared to be as awkward for him as it was for me because the biographical questions were quite personal.

Identifying as a "partial CPF (Community Police Forum)" member, he also described becoming a leader because the community saw him as fit to lead them. The CPF was started as an approach to policing that can recognise the independence and shared responsibility of community policing by the police and the community (Dlamini 2023, 2). As it is linked to the South African Police Service Act of 1995, it plays a crucial role in communities that are townships, and it is the responsibility of the police at the local and provincial level to establish and maintain them (Dlamini 2023, 2).

Thabang works mostly within Extension Nine and explained that being a "partial CPF", for him, means working closely with the CPF and police in crime-related matters while not having

official CPF training. He also helps sort out power outages and any other issues brought forward to him by community members residing in Extension Nine. Sometimes he works with community leaders from other extensions when dealing with similar issues impacting them as well.

Outside of community leadership, he worked as a carpenter but did not always have clients. He described becoming a community leader after the realisation that people often did not want to get involved in resolving the many social ills in the community, even when they affected them. Due to the fact that he sometimes spent a lot of time at home when he had no work, he attended community meetings and consulted with his fellow residents and leaders. This is how the people of Extension Nine recognised him and asked him to represent them. "It's not difficult to have access to these kinds of things. You can go to the councillor and tell him what's our problem, you see?…Tell him I'm not satisfied with this and this. The community is worried about this, this and this", Thabang explained.

He also mentioned that having prior connections with people who were already in the leadership structure helped him. This proves how leadership is a creation of followership that is acquired through demonstrating that as a leader, you possess the kind of skills that demand respect and to be put in that position (Sahlins 1963, 290). Whereas everyone else did not seem to be acting on the issues that were being encountered by the people staying in Extension Nine, Thabang took it upon himself to act on them and thus gained respect from the community members. Acquiring this respect then meant that he could work in more formal spaces, such as with the CPF, to represent the community members. Outside of his partial CPF duties and resolving electricity issues, Thabang also talked about stepping into the role of mediator when people come to him for assistance with quarrels. This is not uncommon for community leaders in Diepsloot. Therefore, this role, once again, shows the social relationship aspect of it.

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Rebecca is another one of the community leaders that I met and spoke to. I arrived at the NGO space of the *Wof-if*? *Trust* a bit earlier than we had scheduled our meeting so I had to wait for her to finish the meeting she was in. I sat on the couch opposite the reception desk as I observed people coming in and out to use the computers. I later found out, during my interview with

Rebecca, that the organisation offered these computers freely for the community to use. I also found out that oftentimes the people from the organisation have to help those coming in because most struggle to use the computers.

Rebecca is a short, gentle and well-spoken woman. She was the Operations Manager of *Wot-if?* Trust but has since left the organisation for what her ex-colleagues described as a better opportunity. While I interviewed her, she responded to messages on her phone and occasionally put it down to give me her full attention. She became a community leader through what would be considered formal practice. Unlike the other participants who underplayed their own agency in emerging as a leader and put the onus onto community members as appointing or recognizing them as such, Rebecca's agency in wanting the job is clear as she explains how she applied for the job of operations manager at the *Wot-if?* Trust.

She has lived in Diepsloot since 2004 and completed her matric in 2005. She explained how she struggled to get a job after completing high school which drove her to focus on community engagement and supporting the youth in similar situations. For her, the position at *Wot-if?* Trust was the perfect way to give back to the community and assert her leadership. She worked at the *Wot-if?* Trust for 10 years and when I asked her what drove her, she responded:

> Being here for a long time, staying here in Diepsloot and knowing the struggle of the community, you know? Having matriculated and you don't have money for varsity and then you end up finding work because you can't afford to study. So, I've been there, and I know how it goes. I know how it feels to be unemployed. I know how it feels to be a student without Wi-Fi, without electricity, while you're writing exams. So that was imprinted in me. I know the struggle they go through because I've been there. So right now, if I see a student coming here and needing resources, I can help them from my heart whether I'm at work or not because I know that living with limited resources is very hard.

According to their website, the *Wof-if?* Trust is a Diepsloot-based organisation that strives to enable platforms, programmes, and spaces that connect community members to opportunities to create sustainable income and enhance their livelihoods[3]. On top of being equipped with computers that all community members can access to complete their research and apply for jobs,

[3]Wot-if? Trust, accessed 29 August 2024.
https://wot-if.co.za/

it also provides training programmes that teach community members how to type, create logos, and write letters. This organisation also has different programmes that aim to engage and teach the youth. This is important because, as stated by Rebecca, it is common for young people to not have opportunities in the area. The programmes they have are significant because the lack of opportunities and the lack of exposure for young people can discourage children as young as those who attend primary school. In an article about the violence taking place in the area, the CPF chairperson shared that the children in the area do not have role models and therefore, are prone to idolising criminality because of how common it is[4]. According to the *Wot-if?* Trust, programmes for the youth allow young people to see beyond issues such as poverty and crime that have infiltrated the area and contribute to better the community.

Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, the centre gave out meals to those who could not afford them and distributed 'rise against hunger' food packs that could feed up to six people in a household. Unfortunately, this programme was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the Trust has since been working on reinstating it. This is another significant way in which the *Wot-if?* Trust contributes to the development of Diepsloot because being unable to afford to buy even the most basic food is a big factor of deprivation for people in the area. These food packs are made up of rice, lentils, vegetables, a packet of spice, some salt, and a beef cube.

Through her work in this organisation, Rebecca became an influential figure and worked closely with other community members and leaders. She agreed that she is a community leader and recounted how she always tried to find a way to help when people came to *Wot-if?* Trust with their problems. Surprisingly, she did not recall any people approaching her at home for assistance when I asked if she feels like this role carries on into her personal life. Her leadership often happened through her role as the *Wot-if?* Trust's operations manager. This differed from the experiences of the other community leaders who felt as though accepting leadership roles often led to them having to fulfil unforeseen expectations. So it seems they associated the support they got more with the organisation than just her as an individual. Rebecca's story conveys how an organisation such as the *Wot-if?* Trust plays a significant role in leading and steering for

[4] Noxolo Sibiya, "Diepsloot violence spills into schools", Sowetan Live, accessed 20 June 2024, https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2023-12-05-diepsloot-violence-spills-into-schools/

community change (Wu 2021, 30). Rebecca has led the organisation in such a way that people do not merely see it as a place whereby they can access computers but where they can be vulnerable enough to admit that they cannot sustain themselves and be assisted with needs such as food. She has made an intentional effort to choose a leadership role in the form of an institutional position. In that process she has been bestowed with the responsibility to care for others and help wherever and whenever she can. Her leadership differs slightly from the other leaders because it is framed by the formality of an institution that is *Wotif?* Trust. This can be viewed as less organic in comparison to Unathi and Thabang's journeys to become community leaders. Despite this, Rebecca has done well in building a social relationship characterised by trust with the community members. This has allowed her to fulfil her leadership position well.

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Walter is a lean, dark skinned man with hooded eyes. He is not that much taller than me but radiates a charisma that gave me some understanding of why Simbarashe Nyuke (Simba) had spoken so highly of him when he gave me his contact details. Simba is a Wits colleague who also conducted his research in Diepsloot. I met Walter at his workshop where he often meets members of the community and allows the children that he works with to watch movies and play games to "keep them off the streets". He explained that becoming a leader led to a feeling of a loss of privacy with the constant arrival of community members inside his house seeking assistance at any time of day and night. Creating the workshop space allowed him to regain the privacy of his home while being able to help those who needed his assistance in a space that he could still consider private.

"To be a leader, it comes naturally… Once you start doing things without being advised to do so you must know that people will have to follow you. I started a lot of things here in Diepsloot.", Walter said when I asked about how he became a community leader. He said that he started the first football and netball team in Diepsloot. His community work has always targeted the youth. The sports teams were a way for him to keep young people occupied. This was because he believed that a huge contributor to crime in the area was that the youth often did not have engaging and educational projects to keep them occupied, so they got easily badly influenced.

Initially, his biggest challenge was constantly having to find a new space for their sports grounds. Whenever they had created such spaces, political community leaders would claim the area for people who needed to build their shacks due to the lack of housing. Therefore, he felt that there was no support for sports and culture in the area.

In 2011, Walter joined the African National Congress (ANC) to combat the obstacles he faced while trying to incorporate more sports and culture for the youth. He realised that opportunities were often available to those involved in politics first, before anyone else, and would sometimes not reach ordinary members of the community. He used his entry into the ANC as a way to gain exposure to them. “Before I became a political activist, I became an activist.”, he explains, emphasising how being an activist for the community is more important for him than being a political figure. This shed light on the complexity of leadership in Diepsloot.

Unathi had mentioned earlier during our interview that he joined the DCF as a way of moving away from politics. Politics, he felt, held the community back. Unathi explained that the DCF functioned as a way for different community leaders to abandon their political agendas and focus on developing the community. This was important as it highlighted the significance of politics within informal community leadership. It showed how politics could hold back people in some instances, but also how they could help organisations get exposure. This shows how political structures are about power which can be taken away but also given. They can animate but also limit community leadership.

Walter’s leadership role also tends to overflow into other roles. He recounts experiences whereby people have called him as they deliberated over committing suicide. For a reason unknown to him, they felt as though talking to him would help. Therefore, it is evident that this kind of leadership has no specific scope. People tend to follow you if they see you succeeding in one area. Walter’s experience of community leadership was mainly in the sports and culture sphere, until one day when he confronted the seriousness of gangsterism (Nxumalo 2021) in the area. He narrates:

> I was here at home, I heard people screaming outside. They were going around, picking them up like they had done crime. They were accusing them of doing crime, so they wanted to burn them… They went from Extension to Extension. Going around, picking them up with the intention to kill them. And it was at that stage when they arrived here, going that side, passing my house that I stopped them. They were so many, and they had one young boy. So, I realised that I know this boy and they don't rob people, but they attack each other. Then I started to intervene… I advised them what to do and then I called the police and then I saved his life.

This is the day that Walter described as having solidified him as a community leader. The people going around picking up people were community members who were attempting mob justice. The people they were picking up were boys in the community who were considered gangsters. He explained that he did not know what came over him and caused him to intervene, especially since he knows how dangerous mob justice situations can be. He is happy that his actions saved the boy's life and led to him working with the community to fight the issue of gangsterism in the area and make the streets safer for the youth.

This encouraged him to continue with his sports programmes which proved useful as a rehabilitation tool for the youth he helped out, of gangsterism. The more young people he helped, the more help and opportunities he needed in order to help them build better futures. This is how he ended up joining the ANC group in Diepsloot. The recognition he gained from being well spoken and helpful within the community not only granted him the opportunities he was seeking for the youth he was helping, but also granted him the opportunity to be the secretary for the organisation and to attend a political school. This helped him sharpen his leadership skills and learn how to deal with community issues that go beyond gangsterism and sports programmes.

This shows how Walter's leadership role grew from his sports programmes and how his relationship with the community members allowed him to make the community see reason and to be willing to fight gangsterism in a more productive way. His act of bravery shows how far he was willing to go for the betterment of the community because of his awareness of the issues facing the youth and wanting to deal with them, from the root rather than at a surface level. He would not have been able to do this had the community not trusted him and his leadership skills.

Therefore, this is another example of the role social relationships play in successfully leading a community like Diepsloot. It shows the importance of possession of skills that demand respect and how these were elevated by the training he received in the political spaces he was in that allowed him to lead the community (Sahlins 1963, 290).

The way in which the people I interviewed became leaders was different but motivated by the same goal of wanting to help their community even when there was no direct or monetary benefit to it. This chapter shows how politics play an interesting role in this community because Unathi believes that being apolitical is the best way to resolve the issues faced by the community whereas Walter believes that politics are a gateway to more opportunities and thus, better ways of helping community members.

Despite these community leaders' differing opinions on politics, they have organic ways in which they came into leadership which highlight their social abilities that made leadership easier for them. They both believe that being a leader is having the qualities inherent in you but most importantly, having them being recognised by the people you lead. This is reflective in Thabang's interview because he now recognises he would not have been a leader without the people from Extension Nine recognising him as one. For Rebecca, her narrative differs slightly as her leadership happens through an institution but is still significant because her leadership allows the institution to help the community as much as being part of the institution allows her to help the community.

What I have attempted to show here are the "unofficial" ways of becoming a leader in Diepsloot, the complex structure of this "unofficial" leadership, how the community leaders I spoke to used this for the benefit of the community, and the importance of social relationships and being recognised if not chosen by the people as a leader. This is important because this structure was greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Therefore, explaining what it was like beforehand to be a community leader will help to show how it changed during and after the pandemic period.

# Chapter 3

## Leadership During the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown

This chapter argues that the COVID-19 lockdown impacted on the roles of community leaders in Diepsloot. The COVID-19 lockdown forced people that were public figures into private roles through the implementation of the health regulations. When the implementation of these health regulations became less strict and leadership resurfaced, it had a different structure. People who held certain roles and duties before the pandemic had to adapt to different roles and duties. Meanwhile, those who were private figures before had to adapt to being considered public figures.

For the participants who became community leaders because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, leadership also happened in the "unofficial" way that it happened in for Unathi, Thabang, and Walter from the previous chapter. I will introduce here a further two community leaders called Pamela and Anita. I will go into more depth with Pamela's and Anita's story, by discussing how the pandemic and lockdown pushed them into being leaders while also narrating how it impacted Unathi, Thabang, Walter, and Rebecca's leadership roles. These narratives will be separated into early and later moments of the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa. The early moments are from the time when the first case of COVID-19 was announced throughout the strict lockdown. The later moments are from when the hard lockdown ended.

### Early Moments

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on the 5th of March 2020 with more cases being confirmed in the following days (Carlitz & Makhura 2021, 2). On the 15th of March 2020, the South African President announced broad measures that were meant to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus and to protect people's lives (Carlitz & Makhura 2021, 2). These regulations promoted social distancing, mask-wearing, isolation of sick people, quarantine of asymptomatic people, and limited people's movements. However, as Reed and Xaso (2022, 93-94) hypothesise, the public health measures like police surveillance, house arrest, and curfew inadvertently mimicked tools of apartheid so they had a negative impact on those who were historically impacted by apartheid. This was especially the case as the SAPS and SANDF were brought into

townships enforce these regulations. Therefore, there is a strong connection between how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled and how the apartheid government used disease to ensure segregation. In this section, I focus on how the health measures impact the lives of people living in Diepsloot in terms of accessing community leadership.

Community leadership is a significant part of South African politics when one considers the racial history of the country. For black people living in townships, community leadership solidified itself as the more efficient way to receive services when the apartheid state and police failed (Steinberg 2008). Following mistreatment from the apartheid authorities, residents in areas like the Alexandra township rose up and prohibiting the apartheid state from policing the area and opted to govern themselves (Steinberg 2008, 49). The people responsible for governing the area were elderly and middle-aged men who had previously been activists and were veterans (Steinberg 2008, 49). Unfortunately, this continues to be one of the preferred ways to ensure community development, service delivery, and policing as the state continues to fail communities like Diepsloot[5]. Cahill's (2019) news article exposes how the government has not delivered on its historic promise to help millions of black South Africans out of extreme poverty and eradicate unemployment and inequality. Diepsloot is no exception to this especially with the rapid population growth, unemployment and the big scale of the urban sustainability challenge it faces.

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown worsened the economic, social, and environmental issues faced by South Africans as they were forced to stay at home. This eradicated the informal economy that keeps most households afloat and stops families from going to bed hungry. More than two billion people are employed in the informal sector globally meaning that the livelihoods of all these people were threatened by the virus (Khambule 2022, 2). In South Africa, the informal economy consists of work such as being street vendors, waste-pickers, market traders, and other enterprises that are not formal work but make meaningful livelihoods (Khambule 2022, 8). This kind of work could not continue at the time since the regulations stated that only essential workers could continue working. Despite a lot of people relying on the informal sector to make means daily, they were not considered essential and thus could not continue operating. In his study of the KwaDukuza Municipality, Khambule (2022, 13) found that these kinds of workers faced the greatest consequences from the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. They ran

[5] Susan Cahill, "Diepsloot: South Africa's Forgotten Township", accessed 20 July 2024, https://www.newstalk.com/news/diepsloot-south-africas-forgotten-township-838890

out of income, food, could not pay rent or other living expenses and 50% struggled to recover more than half of the income they were making before COVID-19 by the time he conducted his research (Khambule 2022, 13). This can be used as a reflection of the South African informal economy and thus, a reflection of the informal economy for areas like Diepsloot as well.

As one moves around Diepsloot, what cannot be missed is the number of people with stands full of vegetables, snacks, sweets, and sometimes clothes or appliances. These people are found along the roads, the streets, and any other open spaces, turning these areas into mini-markets. Some of these mini-markets include hair braiders, people selling second-hand clothes, or fast-food stalls selling food such as chicken feet or gizzards, roasted corn, fried cow intestines, fried chips, braai chicken, or cow head. Most of these food stalls are often take-away due to limited sitting space but are often very affordable to cater to the local people. One will also come across a number of people, sometimes homeless, walking around with big sacks collecting plastic items or tins/cans to take to recycling centres in exchange for money. These are the different ways that unemployed people in the area have resorted to so they can make a living.

The South African lockdown started on the 26th of March in 2020. It later came to be known as the hard/level five of lockdown. This came with strict health regulations like curfew, movements that were limited to buying essential items, requirement for permits to go to and back from work, mask-wearing, and constant sanitising. The mobility health regulations were of great interest to me especially since SAPS and SANDF were dispatched to ensure the enforcement of them within townships. This brought up the question of the important piece that was missing between the “enforcers” and the “enforced” in townships. The missing piece, to me, was the community leaders who constantly have to negotiate between the community members and the police/state.

Walter, who I introduced in the first and second chapter, pointed out this missing piece during our interview. He stated how it posed a challenge for him and his leadership role because, “We never had that space where you’d say ‘no, I’m spending time with my family’ or ‘its lockdown I can’t go anywhere’ because two minutes, people are knocking there. They want food parcels, or they went for a food parcel, and they didn’t get, or they don’t have food in their houses”. This caused a tension between him having to stay in-doors and limit his interactions with community

members, as was stated by the government, and him being able to help community members in times of hardship as was his core role as a community leader.

Unathi, who I introduced in my previous chapter, was also impacted. When I asked him how community leadership was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, he answered:

> We had to stop everything and be confined in our own homes and stay there. We could not go out. There was a point during lockdown when we could not go out of our yards. We had to be in our own spaces. So, it did affect us a lot because you had to forget whatever position you had and focus on this pandemic and how to deal with it. It did affect us a lot because we could not do anything.

He told me that when the President made the announcement of the lockdown, everything came to a standstill regarding the community leadership aspect of his world. This was difficult for him to process initially. But as he saw the seriousness of the pandemic, he started to understand why such a measure was required. He explained that since his leadership role was being a chairperson of the ANC Youth League and being a part of the Youth Forum, his main duty before COVID-19 was to help young people understand politics and become a part of them.

> You know, at that time everything had to stop. I could not complain, for a position. People lost jobs because of Covid. Others lost houses. With positions you can be elected and be a chair again, but people lost houses and cars and everything of importance. Other people lost friends to Covid. It did not affect us that much. We understood at that time that something must be done to combat the death that was happening at that time - the spread of Covid.

He elaborated further, including the fact that he also lost a friend to COVID-19, a comrade that was close to him and that brought about a lot of change to the community. He got very sad as he explained this and I felt bad as I realised, I had triggered the bad memories of COVID-19 that I had naively thought I could avoid bringing up. Unathi owns a cleaning company, so he still had to find means to move around as he drove his workers to and from work during the pandemic. Therefore, even though he was aware of the seriousness of the pandemic and respected that his leadership duties had to pause during this time, his business could not do the same as his workers were considered essential. This sheds light into how Unathi's public role of being a community leader had to retreat whereas his personal role of being a businessman continued.

Rebecca is another whose influence in the community was greatly impacted by the pandemic and lockdown. When the lockdown started, the NGO had to close down the Wot-if? Trust community centre because it was not considered essential. She continued working at the time, but the NGO lost over half of their funding. This meant that as employees, they had their salaries cut and were working from home. She encountered a lot of issues while working from home such as power outages and connectivity issues. She said that it was a hard time for them because she was aware of the number of people, especially, children who relied on their community centre for their daily meals.

> "We were affected in a big way because we lost some of the funding we had and some of the programmes that we were running had to stop. Our salaries were affected - there were times when we were earning just 40%-50% of our salaries. And then even now, we are still trying to come back but it hasn't been easy. There were times when we almost shut down because of funding" she sadly said, her low voice becoming even lower.

Unfortunately, public leaders being pushed into the private sphere impacted the people who relied on them the most. Robins (2008, 20-21) highlights how social movements and NGO activists play the role of helping ordinary citizens to make claims for housing, health care, and other resources when the state fails to address these issues. *Wot-if?* Trust plays a similar role because in addition to helping the youth apply for employment opportunities at their computer lab, they also run other programmes that equip members of the community with crafting and gardening skills. This offers these community members opportunities to make an income for themselves through selling their crafts or sustaining themselves with food they grow. This helps bridge the gap of unemployment and a lack of income in the community.

South Africa's adaptation of the universal approach in response to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted these kinds of programmes. This led to a failure to address these inequalities and further marginalised people who were already living on the margins (Ellison et al 2022, 13). Therefore, a time like the COVID-19 pandemic was when people like Rebecca would have been most critical for the people of Diepsloot to have access to, especially with the income losses that people experienced. This shows how even though her leadership has institutional backing, it was also under threat as it was in danger of completely falling apart.

The community leaders in Diepsloot hold different kinds of roles and experienced leadership differently during the COVID-19 hard lockdown. According to Thabang, everything was working so perfectly during that time so much that there were no requirements from him as a community leader. He felt that there was no crime in Diepsloot during this time and credits this to there being a heavy police and military presence. He also says that there were no electricity or water problems, so community members did not come to him wanting help with this. Since we live on the same street, I can confirm that there were no electricity or water issues. But I must acknowledge that Extension Nine, where we live, is an area made up of RDP houses which mostly has an adequately connected electricity and water supply. The area is also better spaced out than some areas in Diepsloot, so it was easier for the police and military to patrol.

This is not the case for areas like Extension One, Eleven, Twelve or Thirteen that are made up of shacks and are poorly serviced. These areas have no tar roads except for where the area meets the main roads. The people do not have private bathrooms or access to water but have to use communal toilets and taps. Neither do they have legal connections to electricity, meaning that streetlights are non-existent. Anita, who is from Extension One, tells me how the crime and their access to basic services got worse as people were unable to make a living, the way they normally did since the informal economy was put to a stop. This resulted in an increased level of crime and left people in this area feeling hopeless as they could not access the police service as easily as other Extensions.

### Later Moments

Anita is a 24-year-old outspoken and petite woman. She was born and raised in Diepsloot. She lives with her mother, her two siblings, and her child. I met her outside the KFC where I met Unathi. We had been planning  this meeting for almost two months, but it had been difficult because she did not have a phone.  Therefore, we had been arranging the meeting through her friend. I started by asking her if she would like something to eat and she agreed so we went into the KFC and ordered. Unfortunately, my apple pay did not go through, so I had to go inside the mall to withdraw money. She offered to come with me, so I used our short walk as an opportunity to get to know her a bit better. We managed to casually get through her biographical information as she was not that much older than me. This made her easy to talk to. We then made

our way back to the KFC, ordered her food, and then got started with the interview after she received it. She was very open throughout the interview, so it went smoothly for the most part.

Anita has worked in a lot of community development programmes, before and after the pandemic. She explained that she was intentional about these jobs because she felt as though retail and similar jobs were not for her, and she worked better with community programmes. Some of these roles were with the Census takers where she would go from household to household, counting how many people were residing there. She also worked with SANCA (the South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence) to help curb the issue of alcohol and drug abuse in Diepsloot. Lastly, she worked with Safe-hub which is an organisation that provides access to quality after-school programmes, strong role models, and beneficial services, opportunities, and support to young people[6].

As a young person that had limited opportunities growing up, she found it important to help the younger people in her *kasi*. *Kasi* is a slang word to refer to the township. Anita's leadership role started during the later moments of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, after level 5 (hard lockdown) had eased, and there was more visibility of community leaders and organisations offering help in the form of food parcels. The eligibility criteria for the food parcels targeted the most vulnerable groups but because of corruption, as narrated by Anita, these groups did not always receive them.

Corruption is a common occurrence in South Africa, often happening on big and small scales. It started receiving attention as a social problem soon after the transition to democracy in 1997 and 1998 (Bruce 2014, 50). The government introduced a code of conduct for public servants and politicians to ensure that they conducted their work with integrity (Bruce 2014, 50). Despite all these efforts it continues to be a problem. Although corruption in South Africa predates and was also apparent during Apartheid, it cannot purely be understood through this framework (Bruce 2014, 56). Bruce (2014, 56) introduces the socio-psychological aspect of it that focuses on how the political elite are shaped by their historic deprivation, and "brutally compete with social commitment that once gave meaning to the struggle for liberation". South Africa's transformation that aimed to deracialise the country and bring social change is thus undermined

[6] https://www.safe-hub.org/en/safe-hub-en/about-safe-hub/#tab-menu

by people who use their proximity to power to corruptly secure government work (Bruce 2014, 57).

This was no different during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown as Mantzaris and Ngcamu (2020) exposed how municipal officials knowingly did not follow supply-chain management guidelines but rather mismanaged funds and went as far as to steal food parcels in exchange for political favours. What the corruption that took place during the distressing time of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed is the limitations of the government in fighting against it. The vulnerable groups that these food parcels targeted included child-headed households, unemployed single parents, elderly persons living with no help, families where no one was employed, and families where the employed persons were not getting income due to the lockdown restrictions (Mokoena et al 2023, 105). The Steyn City Foundation partnered with Gift of the Givers and Bidvest to accommodate the needs of Diepsloot residents who had no access to food due to their loss of income[7]. Community leaders were then brought back into the picture to help carry out the deliveries and access hard to navigate areas like Extension One.

The bringing back in of community leaders highlighted the gap that caused when community leaders were forced into the private sphere at the start of the pandemic. This is highlighted by Walter's experience of people coming to him asking for these food parcels during the hard lockdown and his inability to help because of the regulations that were in place at the time. This moment then signified a shift in the leadership structure as community leaders who previously could not freely fulfil their roles, were brought back to ensure that the distribution went smoothly. People like Walter were called back in to help distribute the food parcels because one could not move around without a permit at the time, the counsellor helped organise these for them. Walter explains that:

> The community members would come without even being on the list and say we want food. And then they would start fighting. Immediately when they see that the food is not enough, they would start fighting. Then the police came and advised me that people cannot come here

[7] Fourways Review, "Local mall helps deliver food parcels to Diepsloot community", accessed 25 July 2024, https://www.citizen.co.za/fourways-review/news-headlines/2020/05/25/local-mall-helps-deliver-food-parcels-to-diepsloot-community/

> and fight, so you better stop. So, I realised that with the food that I had, it was better to buy pots and cook for everyone to eat.

This shows how desperate people were for food after the hard lockdown, and the extent Walter went to help and the creativity that comes with being a leader. He knew that he had to try and find a way to help the community with the little that he had.

The corruption that arose at the time of the food parcel distribution signifies another shift that led to people like Anita stepping up as representatives of vulnerable groups in the community and thus, becoming community leaders. Anita and her two friends Zenzi and Maya played a significant role in the distribution of food parcels to the people living in her area. During my conversation with Unathi, he had explained that when they started helping with food parcel distributions, they would deliver them to block leaders in Extension One, due to the accessibility issue of the area. According to Anita, these block leaders would use the food parcels and the community's vulnerability to their advantage. She said that the block leaders would distribute these based on the close relationships they had with people, rather than people's need, and then they would attempt to sell the rest to those who needed but unfortunately, could not afford them.

As they saw this injustice taking place, Anita and her friends started speaking out against it and gained the support of the community members.

> So, like ama-comrade a-serious besingawathatheli serious. And then they understood ukuthi as soon as sikhuluma into enje phakathi - phambi kwabantu laba abaletha lama-food parcel le bona e bafakela matlo / *So we didn't take the serious comrades seriously. And they understood that as soon as we spoke, we would expose them for their corruption*.

She narrated the tension they experienced with the corrupt block leaders. She explained further that luckily, the people bringing the food parcels were committed to helping community members. Therefore, they were willing to listen to their complaints and eventually, would refuse to distribute the food parcels unless Anita and friends were around because they only trusted them to distribute the parcels fairly.

The depth of the tension that came from these interactions was evident in Anita and Zenzi who started clashing with Zenzi's mother, who was one of the community leaders not distributing the food parcels appropriately. They called her out and continued speaking out against this issue

during community meetings which upset her. Still, they continued because they understood the dire situation of most people in Extension One and how desperately the food parcels were needed.

Since then, Anita has continued attending community meetings and often has community members come to her for help with their issues. She explains that she is still taken aback, at times, because she is so young, and most people are dealing with issues she feels like are bigger than her. Nonetheless, she continues to help where she can and admits when she cannot. She is not the only person who stepped into leadership, at this time. Pamela also became a leader during subsequent levels of lockdown and helped with different issues in the community.

I sat nervously in the yard while I waited for Pamela to finish up what she was busy with, before I arrived. The sound of kids playing in the street was the only thing I could hear, because our area had not had electricity for the previous two days. As I sat there, I worried that she might want us to do the interview while sitting outside, as I realised, we might not hear each other well from there. Although I was in the yard, I was sitting quite close to the wall separating the house from the street. Therefore, I could hear everything happening on the other side. Her child walked in and out of the house, watching me curiously and looking away when I caught him staring. He walked back into the house again and this time when he came out, asked me what I would like to drink. He articulated himself well when speaking English, which is something I had also noticed about Pamela. I answered and he left to go buy the drink.

Pamela came out and, to my relief, asked that we conduct the interview inside instead because she too did not think we would hear each other well outside. We moved in and she poured me a glass of the Fanta Grape cold drink as our conversation began. Pamela was a 33-year-old woman who worked as a sales account specialist and artist manager as she completed her honours degree in transport economics. She started living in Diepsloot in 2005 when her mom got her RPD house, which has now been renovated into a bigger house. Before the COVID-19 pandemic started, she stayed in Broadacres with her son, but had to move back to Diepsloot shortly after, due to financial reasons. This took me by surprise as I tried to understand how someone who chose to leave the area when she could, would decide to come back and get involved to the extent I heard she is. So, I asked her how she became a leader, and she responded:

> Just after we sort of got out - our levels a bit better. And we had an incredible increase in crime in Extension Nine. And at the time, they had said "guys, we need visibility, we need street committees. Number Nine doesn't have that stronghold, like other extensions, we need to do better". So ideally, I volunteered. At the time, I was in between work. And I just thought, you know, I do actually have a passion for this. And you know, I could be able to, you know, just lend a mind to some of the things that they were trying to solve, especially from a security perspective. So, I volunteered and there were like ten of us. I'm the only one standing right now. But that's how it's come to be for like, the past two years. And that's how I ended up where I am at the moment. Yeah.

Earlier Thabang mentioned how crime rates decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the military and police presence in the area. Pamela's experience shows how when this heavy presence went away, the crime rose up quickly again and was possibly even worse than before. According to the Diepsloot Police Station commander, Koena Moichelo, crimes that are a big concern to the community of Diepsloot and the police are: assault with grievous bodily harm, murder, common robberies with firearms or other weapons, rapes, house robberies, attempted murder, and business robberies[8].

Pamela stated how this was caused by a lot of people losing their jobs at the beginning of the pandemic and being unable to recover, as the pandemic regulations eased down. When community members realised the increase in these crimes again, they decided to do something about it. This is when Pamela volunteered herself to be one of the people who could contribute to solving the issue of crime. She explained the requirements for being a volunteer at the time as:

> They weren't very specific, it was more - the task at hand for the ten of us was really to engage each other and try and find a solution to the whole crime situation. But not all of the streets and extension wanted to be involved. So, we piloted a project between the street Nile and Msakazo to put in a security gate. So, if you're - I'm not sure which direction you came from - but there's like palisades that you can see at the major entrances. And those were going to be closed at a certain time, open at a certain time, then we could have uhm night and day… I'm not going to call them security guards because you obviously need to have the

[8] Masechaba Sefularo, "Diepsloot police make breakthrough in gang violence", Jacaranda FM, accessed 25 July 2024, https://www.jacarandafm.com/news/news/diepsloot-police-make-breakthrough-gang-violence/

> right accreditation, but I'll just say safeguarding during that time, because we had break-ins even during the day. So ideally, that was just our task team.
>
> But naturally, it just took on everything else in our community. So, after that, when people really saw that there was movement, the visibility from the ten. Now it was a case of "oh, I have a tenant that's unruly, oh my meter, or someone stole my… I can't find my child". It got crazy. It got crazy but we ended up absorbing all of that, but no one had like a specific portfolio of like "you deal with women and children" or "you deal with your development". No, no, no, it was always just wherever we were needed, we would go.

This project was how her and the other nine members who had volunteered, proposed that the issue of crime be dealt with. It required that the community members contribute to have palisades installed at either ends of each street and every household would have to contribute money to pay the people who would be in charge of safeguarding them. It seemed to work well and that is how the community learned about them, and they ended up taking on more responsibilities that were not necessarily related to this particular project. Pamela explained that most of the other members of the group just left without providing a solid reason and because this was volunteer work, not much could be done about it. But Pamela stayed on.

Since coming into this leadership role, she dealt with many other issues; inclusive of missing children, quarrels between tenants and their landlords, quarrels between landlords, power outages, and house break-ins. She narrated to me times when she and other community leaders would have to go and safeguard power cables because they kept getting stolen, resulting in power outages in Extension Nine. This is when her parents started getting very worried about her involvement in the community because people would do this at night, and she would be at a disadvantage. They did not have weapons to fight against the thieves, should the situation call for that. Her parents then had to make peace with the fact that she was aware of the dangers that come with this role but was committed to it nonetheless.

The period that Pamela came into leadership signifies the shift during the COVID-19 pandemic whereby community leaders went from being side-lined to being needed again. It also shows how crime, which has always been an issue in Diepsloot, became worse than what it was before because of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. The loosening up of

policing in the area meant that community leaders had to step back in, and the extremity of this crime required new forms of leadership.

Pamela showed a lot of enthusiasm as she spoke about working within the community, even though she admitted that most times she had to use her own resources to get things done. Since she was not affiliated with any organisation within Diepsloot, she did not get paid or receive any other benefits from the work she did. She said that it was not easy but luckily, she had some community members who sometimes offered her support in the form of airtime, if she needed to make calls or money if she was travelling. I asked her what kept her going, nonetheless. She responded that the community needed help and not many people were willing to offer it. As someone who can help, she thought it was important that she helped as much as she could but what she would like to see improve was having the community be more involved in helping themselves rather than recognising one person and then becoming reliant on them. She worried that because she is not planning to stay in Diepsloot permanently, the community development areas that she has been most active in might fall apart when she leaves.

As the lockdown levels loosened up, Rebecca also started being able to physically go back to work. The hard lockdown impacted the *Wot-if?* Trust and Rebecca's leadership role negatively but things seemed to get better with time. "After level 3 we were allowed to come back but we were doing half hours, so we were not here full time. In 2021 we were also here, working in shifts. Finally, we started operating fully in 2022" she told me, her voice rising a little from the very low tone she had been using while explaining the hard lockdown. At this point, the NGO could only allow half the number of people they could take on a daily, before to stay safe. So, I asked her how they managed to enforce the regulations at this point, and she explained:

> It was difficult because when you work in the community you have to understand the realities of other people - what they are going through. For me, I'm also the officer of health and safety in this premises so health and safety are also part of my role. So, some people would come without masks, some would come without sanitising, some would come and not social distance, and then when you ask someone 'why they're not wearing a mask' they'd tell you 'they don't have it'. So, we had to have a bag full of masks that we could give to people who didn't have. And then sanitiser - we were giving some of them sanitiser to take home because they didn't have. So, it was a bit difficult because before Covid we also used to offer people lunches because we knew that we were dealing with people who don't have food at

> home. Sometimes people would come and say they had not eaten in three days and ask that we help.

Although Rebecca's leadership differed in that she held an official position in an organisation, this did not exempt her from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. The work that they did within the community also had to pause and they had to continue at half their usual capacity when the regulations allowed them to continue to operate. The funding they lost posed a big disadvantage for them as it was what helped them remain operational and provide full support for the community. The lost funding meant that they could no longer provide food for the community members who relied on them. the way they did before, even though they always made a plan. "If someone came and said they were hungry, then we would make a plan and give them bread with peanut butter and jam because we understood that these people relied on us", Rebecca said.

Her experience demonstrated how much poverty and inadequate household services contributed to community members' inability to comply with the health regulations (Ellison et al 2022, 13). It also showed how her work in the Wot if? Trust contributed community members to overcome this.

Gender is an aspect that cannot be avoided when speaking of leadership and the reason why Pamela, Anita, and Rebecca came across as very admirable people to me. I appreciated all the community leaders I spoke to but my admiration for them was strong because they are women. Diepsloot is an unsafe area, especially for women. Women in this area often suffer from abuse, violence, and sexual assault which is often overlooked in the discussion of "crime". This is a reality that I am very well aware of and have been exposed to from a young age as I have lived there. I also encountered an incident whereby two of the community leaders that Simba Nyuke introduced me to behaved inappropriately towards me, resulting in Simba insisting he be present should I want to meet them. This made me aware that, as much as community leadership was great for the community, gender dynamics were still very much present within them. Pamela, Anita, and Rebecca did not mention incidents they felt were explicitly linked to their gender but their leadership styles and the issues community members reported to them such as missing children and quarrels between neighbours alluded to this.

What is interesting about these three women is that like Unathi, Walter, and Thabang who were also turned into leaders because of the support of the community – they stand out as people who the community trusted, after they took on concern for the community. What makes them different, is that none of them have the kind of political clout which Unathi and Walter developed in the past through their engagement with more established political structures. What seems to give the women, the edge and the courage is some level of work experience, which made them public figures, who exist beyond the household, and have experience of getting things done. Therefore, their experience of leaving the area for work, and then being home-bound and (re-)confronted with the conditions of Diepsloot allowed them to use their skills to resolve the issues faced by the community which led to them becoming community leaders.

It is evident that the lockdown had a significant impact on the leadership structure in Diepsloot. Unathi found himself being one of the founders of the Diepsloot Community Forum (DCF) which aims to prioritise the development of Diepsloot, outside of politics as opposed to his previous position which was in the ANC Youth League. He did not struggle as much during the lockdown with leadership whereas leaders such as Walter had to learn to navigate the tension that came with being forced into being only a private figure when previously used to being a public figure and people still considered you one. Walter had to learn to prioritise his own and his family's safety despite community members still coming to him to ask for help because they had nowhere else to go for help. This feeling was shared by Rebecca who could no longer help the community the way she did before COVID-19, despite knowing that this was the time the community would need her and the organisation's help the most.

Leaders such as Thabang, who often had to deal with issues of crime, considered the lockdown a crimeless time for Diepsloot, and thus felt his leadership was not required; even though he soon realised that the standard of living had become much worse, as he signed people up for the food parcels they desperately needed. These need and arrival of food parcels then signified a significant shift as community leaders were needed to distribute them fairly, which is where Anita's leadership role arose. As Thabang, Unathi, and Anita helped with the distribution of this food, Pamela stepped into leadership and worked with the community to try and resolve the

drastic increase in crime that came as a result of the economic deprivation the COVID-19 lockdown had on people's livelihoods.

# Chapter 4

## The Return to Collective Action

> It was the 20th of June 2023, and I was at home in Diepsloot conducting my fieldwork. I did not have any interviews or planned observations on that day, so I was watching TV. My brother walked in and in his know-it-all tone asked,
>
> "Uhleli la endlini wena ama-community leader akho ebe estrika la ngaphandle?" / *You're sitting here in the house while your community leaders strike outside?*
>
> I decided to step out of the house to see what he was talking about, and the smell of smoke came before the sight of the fire. Some people were already standing and observing as the people striking bulldozed and burned the stands on the opposite end of the street. I could hear the stands fall as they successfully managed to push them to the ground, and heard chattering voices that I could not make out, from where I was standing.
>
> The strike was taking place at the T-junction where the stands that the braiders use as their workplace were being destroyed. Three men violently shook the pillars holding the nets that function to provide shade from the sun, and they slowly fell to the ground. Other people stood around and watched. As this was happening, I could see one of them gesturing with their hands and guessed that they must be one of the strike leaders. I asked one of the familiar faces standing outside, also observing, and they told me that someone who was part of the CPF had apparently been killed. Therefore, this was a strike against the increase in crime in the area.

This chapter argues that the strike action that was taking place, at the time when I conducted my fieldwork, reflects life in Diepsloot "post-pandemic". The chapter also discusses what the leadership structure looked like, at that time, giving a sense of the longer-term effects of the pandemic, as well as deliberating on when the pandemic came to an end. This section narrates Unathi's experience of the strike. He was one of the community leaders leading it. The chapter discusses Rebecca and Walter's experiences of how the community development projects they were working on were affected by the post-pandemic situation and what kind of space they were in at the time when I met them. This will give insight into the longer lasting impacts of the

pandemic on the area as well as the issues that were previously overshadowed by the pandemic but that got worse.

Post-apartheid South Africa is characterised by high levels of violence ranging from violent crimes, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and collective violence (Seedat et al 2010). This has been explained through socioeconomic inequality as well as the culture of violence, and historical trauma from apartheid and the struggle against it. According to von Holdt and Alexander (2012, 114), it is then no surprise that post-apartheid South Africa would continue manifesting "high levels of publicly visible collective violence among subaltern classes, some of it directed towards the state and its symbols, some towards policing subaltern unity and community, and some towards expelling or purging 'foreigners'". A contributor to this is that democracy and violence have a complex and shifting relationship rooted in the resistance to apartheid (von Holdt & Alexander 2012, 117).

Petrus and Isaacs-Martin (2011, 52) add to this, stating how strike and protest culture in contemporary South Africa has been inherited from past and uses methods of using violence, destruction of property, and the burning of tires and blocking roads, that used to take place during apartheid. Violent strikes are used in South Africa because they are "devastating for the economy" and tend to impact all community members (Tenza 2020). Therefore, they are good at attracting attention to issues being striked against.

Violent strikes are a common occurrence in Diepsloot, especially because of the many issues the community has. I had not realised the magnitude of the strike until the day I drove around with Simba in Diepsloot. He had offered to introduce me to the community members he had met and interviewed. Our introductions were meant to happen the day before but could not because the strike was more intense at the time. Therefore, because it had gone quiet in Extension Nine where I live, I had assumed it was the same for the rest of the area and agreed to that day instead.

Burning tires and huge rocks were scattered on the main roads to limit the movement of vehicles. It was a disheartening sight to see. What was worse, was the fact that black people were still striking and protesting issues that were prominent during apartheid and continued into the democratic era. Areas like Diepsloot were formed to provide a new start for people who were hugely disadvantaged by apartheid but unfortunately, people still suffered from the same issues of low employment, poverty, crime, and lack of service delivery. The values that were used to

justify these actions by 'heroes' of the 'struggle' in the past were evidently passed on to the new heroes in the post-apartheid struggle as they fight similar issues (Petrus and Isaacs-Martin 2011, 52). This means that people who lead strikes are often trusted community leaders and, according to Unathi, do so to help draw attention to the community's needs, so that they can get help with the issues they are experiencing.

Unathi gave me a lot of insight into the strike that was taking place in Diepsloot at the time and how it came about. He explained that a number of people had been killed the previous weeks in store break-ins. The Diepsloot Community Forum had deliberated on what could be done and how to get attention from the state to help with this increase in crime and murders. The unfortunate murder of a CPF member had then radicalised and fuelled the community towards the direction of the strike. This CPF member had been alerted of a store break-in that was taking place and rushed there to help. Upon trying to do so he was shot by the criminals and killed. This happened in Extension Thirteen which is one of the areas that is characterised by tightly packed shacks, illegal electricity connections, communal water taps, and bad streets where cars often struggle to/cannot drive through.

Unathi explained that the spatial planning and living conditions in areas like Extensions One, Eleven, Twelve, and Thirteen in Diepsloot have led to the type of crime that requires the presence of the Ministers of Police, Home Affairs, Human Settlement, and Justice to come to resolve. He explained that the purpose of the strike was to get attention from the President so that he could come with the four ministries to help resolve the issue of crime in the area. The Diepsloot Police Station Commander also supported this, as he stated that the spatial planning in the areas posed a challenge to policing[9].

Unathi and the other strike leaders had met with Bheki Cele, the Minister of Police, but the minister had stated that police vans could not enter these areas, even though they are crime-ridden. Unathi added that Bheki Cele explained to him that this was because there was not enough space to drive through, so the police could not access it to patrol or make arrests. Therefore, he stated that he could not resolve it alone and it would require the involvement of the other ministers.

[9] Masechaba Sefularo, "Diepsloot police make breakthrough in gang violence", Jacaranda FM, accessed 25 July 2024, https://www.jacarandafm.com/news/news/diepsloot-police-make-breakthrough-gang-violence/

Unathi was arrested on his way to fetch his car after the strike. He stated that he is familiar with the people who arrested him. He constantly worked with the police on crime related issues in the community, so they had built a relationship over time. The people had told him that there was not a solid reason for his arrest, other than to stagger the progress they were making with the protest, because it was upsetting certain political figures. He did not disclose who these political figures were, but he said that he understood it as an issue directed at how their organisation had moved away from politics, which therefore, did not allow any political organisations to take credit for the work they do. This was saddening but also interesting to hear, especially as Pamela and Anita had also given me insight into how political organisations and "official" community leaders tend to take advantage of the poor living conditions in the area. This also fed into the idea of a civic society that people in areas like Diepsloot have to promote in order to have their basic needs met.

It speaks to the kind of leadership I have explored in this paper, where leadership comes from the people being chosen by community members because they have acted on the community's issues and thus, gained the trust of the community. It also highlights how community members associate and dissociate themselves with politics. For example, Unathi's leadership history has deep connections with political parties, but we see how post-pandemic, he moves away from these. This speaks to how political leadership can be problematic and ineffective and how selfish leaders can lead to bad governance (Shore 2014, 178) and overlook the function of leadership, which is to help improve the community.

Walter was also significantly involved with politics, before the pandemic, which helped him gain access to opportunities for his community programmes. Even though his involvement did help him with the opportunities, he still described the political space as "greedy" because:

> Things are lying there but people are not using them. It depends on which political affiliation you belong to and then some people are so greedy that they wouldn't want to share with the community, so that's where I realised that most of the things are political. For the tar road to be here, its politics. For electricity, its politics. Some people will discuss it somewhere and make a decision with or without you guys.

Appearing apolitical and describing that his affiliations with politics were only because of access seemed important to Walter. It was interesting because it shed light on how he had to balance the needs of the community with being in political spaces to maximise the ways in which he could

help. It did not sound as though one could be an apolitical leader and help the community because the opportunities are in the political space which is filled with people who did not have intentions of actively helping community members.

Unfortunately, people like Walter struggled to continue with this kind of leadership 'post-pandemic'. Walter explained to me that his projects struggled to pick up after the hard lockdown ended, causing limitations to the ways in which he could assist community members because he did not have sponsors anymore. He came up with a solution whereby he decided to open a shop that sells kotas (bread with chips, cheese, and other assorted cold meats) and chips so that he could take the profit to sustain his soup kitchen, and at the end of the day, the kids could come and eat leftover items that were not sold. Unfortunately, this model could not hold for long because of electricity issues, which led to the food rotting.

At the time when I spoke to him, his sports projects had come to a complete standstill. They had ended when the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown began, and he struggled to get them off the ground again. In addition to low funds, he also explained that

> it was not easy because we lost some of our friends. People that we used to do these activities together with, they passed on because of this Covid. And things were never the same. Some of our football players collapsed and passed on. And yeah. Things were never the same.

He still worked very closely with the community to try and assist with gangsterism but admitted that due to his limited resources, he struggled to come up with different ways in which this youth could keep busy. He was able to continue with his soup kitchen, but it was mostly funded from his own pocket which was strenuous. People continued to ask for food and he would use his own money and resources to help. In many ways, he was forced to remain the private person which the COVID-19 lockdown had turned him into.

As we were talking, Tshepo, one of the people Walter helped out of a gang, walked in. Tshepo has now grown from the time he first met Walter, having completed school and started his own family. Unfortunately, he was unemployed at the time we met, but he dedicated most of his time to helping Walter with community work. He did not mention how he makes a living, but it sounded as though Walter helped him where he could. Walter spoke about the importance of having people like Tshepo, who have encountered the challenges that come with living in an area

like Dieplsoot. They can help those who are younger and going through a similar situation. He said that:

> What I am scared of is that when people graduate from being a gangster to being lone robbers. Because now that person, because of lack of employment… er, some of the boys, the need for money has prompted them to commit these petty crimes. They will see you with your handbag or phone and take them so they can go sell to get money. Or some of them are the ones who are now selling drugs to survive and when I interact with them, they will say they 'are just making a living' and if I have to tell them to stop doing that then I have to give them jobs.

This saddened him because he explains they [gangsters] now fight for territories to sell drugs. This becomes hard to detect but through talking to this youth and finding out how they are doing, he can pick that up and help them find other employment. Like Tshepo, some of them now have their own families, but he explains that it becomes hard to keep them clean because they do not have a lot of skills and are at a high risk of relapsing. He was saddened by the fact that his sports programmes had taken a knock due to the pandemic because this was a very useful way to keep the youth busy, but he was hopeful that things would get better.

Similarly, to Walter, Rebecca was back at work full time when we met but admitted that the organisation was not in the state it was in before the COVID-19 pandemic because a lot of their funders were still not contributing as much as they did before. Despite this, her and her team continued with their work within the community, in all capacities available to them. They also continued to apply for funding from different organisations and created events that provide them with some income whilst helping the community.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic deepened economic vulnerabilities that existed before the pandemic (Schotte and Zizzamia 2023, 22-23). Schotte and Zizzamia (2023, 23) found that this was caused by a decline in labour earnings and employment, increased exposure to economic setbacks, and the individual loss of control and agency that caused psychological distress. What this chapter has made evident is that the poor were severely affected by the loss of income and community leaders who were contributing towards helping them make ends meet. The COVID-19 pandemic might have been declared over but the community's poverty and disadvantages clearly are not. Community leaders continue to work within communities to help where they can, even if it means using their personal money, like Walter does. Unathi has

distanced himself from politics in his efforts to help specifically with the issues of service delivery, spatial planning, and policing. Meanwhile, Rebecca continues work to get *Wot-if?* Trust back to the organisation it was before the pandemic. These community leaders continue to show perseverance, despite the many challenges that come with being in their leadership positions.

# Chapter 5

## Conclusion

This research report argues that there were shifts in community leadership that took place because of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in Diepsloot. To show these shifts, the report has been divided into four parts. Chapter One introduces theoretical frameworks on community leadership in relation to the unequal history of South Africa and the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. It also outlines my methodology and ethical concerns. The second chapter argues that although leadership is often formed through formal practice such as elections, the community leaders in Diepsloot became part of the leadership structure through different and unofficial ways. The third chapter is split into two parts which are the early and later moments of the lockdown and work together to show that the roles of community leaders in Diepsloot were hugely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. The fourth and last chapter argues that the strike action that was taking place at the time when I conducted my fieldwork is a reflection of life in Diepsloot "post-pandemic". These chapters were arranged in a chronological order to guide the reader through how the shifts in community leadership took place.

The first chapter allowed me to lay out what has been theorised and conceptualised about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa allowing me to shed light into what the context currently looks like. What is highlighted by the work of these academics is that poor black communities were further disadvantaged by the health regulations that were set out by the government to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Lang et al 2021; Bedford et al 2020; Mallah et al; Team and Manderson 2020; Ellison et al 2022; Friedman 2021). Although meaning well and aiming to deal with the health crisis that South Africa, and the rest of the world, was

dealing with, the South African government did not consider what a lot of these regulations would mean for poor black communities and just how it would put them in more desperate positions. Regulations such as staying in your private space and not being allowed in public spaces, where you could interact with people who are not kin does not apply to communities where people use communal taps and toilets, which blur the lines between what is considered public and private. To add to this, these communities were already subject to poor housing, poor health, lack of employment, and low income (Team and Manderson 2020, 671) which was worsened by the absence of the informal community that helps keep them afloat. The worsening of these factors also made it very difficult for the people in these contexts to follow the health regulations, which put their wellbeing and health in danger. This helped me frame the context of Diepsloot and shed light into the different things that impacted the people living there during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shedding light into this context allowed me to show how the role of community leaders in townships bridges the gap between government and community members. Once I established the significance of community leaders, I was able to provide an overview on the anthropology of leadership. I was also able to show how the lasting effects of apartheid impacted the kinds of roles community leaders fulfil in township settings. The definition of leadership that I decided to draw on and frame my work was that leadership is the governing of people by persuading them to voluntarily comply with the set ways of living suggested by the leader and agreed to by the people being governed Cartwright (1983, 285-297). I chose this definition because I recognised the influence the community leaders, I spoke to, had over community members and how it takes a significant level of trust for them to lead them the way they do. What this definition does not account for but becomes clear in my paper is that this leadership is as successful as it is because the people who become leaders were recognised and put into these leadership positions because community members deemed them as worthy people to lead them. Their activism came before their leadership therefore, people trusted them enough to make them their leaders.

The second chapter then delves into the kind of activism that Unathi, Thabang, and Walter participated in that led to them being recognised as leaders and what their leadership looked like before the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Unathi's activism started when he was in high school and ventured into politics when he started his tertiary education. He used his leadership

role to radicalise and mentor the youth in Diepsloot to becoming future leaders. In chapter three, we follow his experience of how he moved away from politics to become part of the Diepsloot Community Forum (DCF) as he became intentional about community development that was not clouded by political affiliations. This shift happens after his leadership role is put on hold when the hard lockdown starts and resumes after the hard lockdown ends. As lockdown ends, his first leadership engagement is distributing food parcels to vulnerable community members. Soon after, he decided that he did not want to go back into politics and instead, plans to continue his leadership without politics because he believed that political affiliations restricted community development especially when political parties clashed. Therefore, Unathi's leadership shift is from being a political leader to being in a forum that aims to develop the community and is apolitical.

Walter provided an interesting contrast to the role of politics seen in Unathi's narrative. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Walter ran sports and afterschool programmes for the youth in Diepsloot and led a rehabilitation movement for youth affiliated with gangs. Walter explained that he joined politics because he realised that this would grant him access to opportunities that would be useful for helping the youth. This was true and worked in his favour. However, he acknowledged that opportunities should not only be handed out only when community leaders or members are affiliated with politics, since these opportunities are meant for the community.

When the hard lockdown started, Walter had to stop all forms of leadership that he participated in, and he highlighted how difficult this was for him because the vulnerable people he helped, became even more vulnerable. He was only able to resume activity when the hard lockdown ended, and he started helping with the distribution of food parcels. As helpful as this was, it posed a challenge because more people (than he could assist) would come to him for food parcels. That is when he resorted to cooking the food and dishing up for people instead, when this too became unsustainable; he started a business and used the profits to sustain his soup kitchen. Unfortunately, the sports and afterschool programmes he managed did not resume, again. The shift that Walter experienced was that he lost the funding that sustained his programmes and he funded his soup kitchen from his own pocket, because of the constant power outages that affected his business.

Thabang found himself in a similar position as Walter because his soccer programmes failed to continue after the pandemic. He is one of the community leaders who did not describe a bad experience during lockdown, mainly because of the reduced levels of crime in Extension Nine. Even though this was the case, as the restrictions eased, he became more aware of how people were left poverty stricken by the pandemic as he helped distribute food parcels. The shifts he experienced were from being needed by his community before the pandemic, to not being needed at all, and then having to come back into leadership again to help distribute the food parcels.

Despite being backed by an institution, Rebecca was not exempt from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. She also experienced the loss of resources experienced by the other leaders and could not carry out the role she had before lockdown. She continued working from home while taking pay cuts in her salary. Before the pandemic she helped daily, she was unable to do this now. The Wot-if? Trust lost a lot of funding which was hard to recover from, even post-pandemic. Fortunately, the organisation continued to make efforts to help community members in every way possible but the change that came because of the pandemic and lockdown, was still visible.

Moving on from people who were leaders before the pandemic, another shift that happened in leadership was that Pamela and Anita become leaders during the later moments of lockdown. The shift that takes place here is having people who were not leaders before, become leaders during moments of crisis as a result of the impact of hard lockdown. Anita became a leader through speaking out against corrupt “official” leaders that were misappropriating food parcels. These parcels were not being given to the vulnerable people they were meant for, and Anita was vocal about how this was taking place, and that it was wrong. Her standing up for her community gave the community more confidence to fight for themselves as well and to support her as she spoke out against this injustice. Her success in doing this then led people to go to her for help with other issues as well.

The desperation for survival was heightened by the hard lockdown and it is clear in the narratives provided by Walter and Anita in relation to food parcels. This desperation also meant a spike in crime in Diepsloot and volunteering to help curb this is how Pamela ended up as a community leader. The absence of the police and military who had been present during the hard lockdown,

meant that community members were left helpless and had to take matters into their own hands. Part of doing this was allowing regular community members to volunteer to be on a committee that would dedicate itself to coming up with solutions to the crime issue. Pamela was one of the 10 people who volunteered themselves for this but was the only member that still continued to do the work, at the time we spoke. Once the community members became familiar with Pamela and how she successfully helped curb the spike in crime, they started trusting and asking her to help them with more issues such as power outages, break ins, missing children, and even quarrels among neighbours or tenants and landlords. She explained that she took these challenges on eagerly, but it was difficult because she relied on her own resources and the kindness of community members to donate airtime, or transport money for her to do this work.

COVID-19 had a very significant impact on the community leadership in Diepsloot. This ranged from issues such as service delivery, food distribution, crime, access to employment, hunger and poverty. There was a strong need for civil society intervention but, unfortunately, no means for it due to the lockdown. When the lockdown finally allowed these community leaders to resurface, they had to work with even more limited resources to try and curb the issues being experienced by community members. With the help of organisations that provided food parcels, these were able to be distributed by the community members. These food parcels created tension between “informal” and “formal” community leaders when the “formal” leaders exhibited corruption in the distribution of the food parcels. Overall, the impact of COVID-19 on community leadership was adverse and changed the way it was structured in the area. It also showed how the support found in civil society is undermined.

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