



MPOPHOMENI

a community under siege

PACSA FACTSHEET

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Mpophomeni, with an estimated population of 15 000, is situated 12 km southwest of Howick, near Pietermaritzburg. Here many of the workers engaged in the industrial dispute with the BTR/Sarmcol Pty (Ltd) reside. It has a relatively well developed infrastructure in contrast to the surrounding rural settlements of Mgwagwa, Nxamalala, KwaShifu and Haza. Recently Mpophomeni has been the focus of attention as a result of a number of incidents there, which culminated in a restraining order being granted to the community against the SAP. However, Mpophomeni has been in the news frequently over the last six years.

JULY 1983 RENT ARREARS DISPUTE

Rent increases promulgated by KwaZulu in 1978 should have taken effect on 1 January 1979. This was only announced to the community in July 1983. By March 1985 rental arrears ranged from R300 - R500 per household, and the community had not been able to obtain clarity from the KwaZulu authorities. At a press conference in March 1985, the Mpophomeni Township council warned of possible outbreaks of violence. The main grievance was the directive from Ulundi demanding these increased rents. Other grievances raised by residents included:

- * Bucket toilet system
- * Untarred streets, no street drainage
- * Leaking roofs, cracked floors
- * No taps to individual premises

NOVEMBER 1983 BUS BOYCOTT

Bus fares were arbitrarily raised by 20% (six cents) and the residents objected strongly by boycotting the bus service and walked the 15 km to Howick and back. This protest lasted for four months and forced the owners to sell out to another company.

MAY 1985 SARMCOL STRIKE (see PACSA factsheet 32)

On 30 April just under 1 000 workers at the Sarmcol factory went on strike in support of a demand of recognition of their union. By 3 May the company had dismissed these workers because of an 'illegal' strike. In late June, violence broke out and two workers - one allegedly a 'scab' were killed and houses were stoned and set alight. It was claimed by community, union and church people that the police presence in the township had a negative effect, and that people leaving a mass rally in the community hall had been provoked by the police.

DECEMBER 1986 VIGILANTE ATTACK

On Friday evening 5 December, a large group of vigilantes entered Mpophomeni and during that night four people were abducted, assaulted and taken out of the area. One person managed to escape, but the other three, Phineas Sibiya, Simon Ngubane and Flomenah Mnikathi were shot to death and the car set alight. In the morning, the vigilantes killed a youth, Alpheus Nkabinde and injured a number of other people. At the subsequent inquest the Magistrate found that nine people and the Inkatha organisation were responsible for these murders. A year has passed, and no one appears to have been arrested by the police in connection with these deaths, despite the Magistrate's findings and identification of certain persons. In December 1988 on the second anniversary of the death of the four people, a very large crowd gathered for the unveiling of the tombstones.

The Sarmcol dispute has had the effect of unifying the community and residents of the township have developed a reputation as being supporters of NUMSA and COSATU. The cohesiveness of the community can be illustrated by the comparative internal calm and order which has prevailed in Mpophomeni while other townships in the greater Pietermaritzburg area have been racked by conflict.

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Since 19 March this year, however, the township has experienced increasing attacks from Inkatha supporters living in some of the neighbouring settlements. Instead of protecting the community from these attackers, the community found that the SAP harassed and assaulted them instead. The community made repeated attempts to notify the authorities of their complaints against the police. These attempts included:

- * Delegations to the relevant police officials, either directly or through their lawyers on no less than five occasions.
- * Approaches to the Magistrate in Howick.
- * Approaches to Members of Parliament for assistance.

As these representations did not solve the problem, residents felt that their only redress was through the Supreme Court, and accordingly approached the Court for an Order restraining the police from harassing residents and compelling them to take all reasonable steps to protect the community.

'Victory' for Mpophomeni

Court grants order against Vlok, S.A.P.

NW 23-8-89

Witness Reporter

AN order restraining the Minister of Law and Order and members of the South African Police from "unlawfully assaulting, threatening, harassing or intimidating" residents of the township of Mpophomeni, near Howick, was granted in the Pietermaritzburg Supreme Court yesterday.

Mr Justice Galgut confirmed a rule nisi granted on April 28 which imposed identical restraints on the S.A.P. While the order was made by consent and without admission of liability on the part of the S.A.P., it is seen as a major victory for the Mpophomeni community.

HOW HAS THE COMMUNITY MANAGED TO SURVIVE?

In 1986 just under 75% of the households earned less than R500 per month, while 20% of the households are dependent on their neighbours' goodwill - they have to subsist on less than R100 per month.

In this period the Minimum Living Level for a household of six (the average in Mpophomeni in this survey) was R385, and from the data gathered, 69% of households fell below this level; that is they were living in conditions of indisputable and abject poverty.

The community is geographically isolated and over 80% of residents purchase their requirements in the town of Howick.

Healthwise the community has suffered, especially from malnutrition associated illnesses, affecting particularly the very young and very old.

The psychological effect of job loss and unemployment indicated that the ex Sarmcol workers (350 from the area) have suffered a significantly greater degree of psychiatric stress and guilt feelings associated with their inability to provide for their families' needs, when compared to equivalent groups of employed persons within the community.

However, analysis of mobility and work history revealed that Mpophomeni was a stable community and ex Sarmcol workers were more stable than the rest of the community - with 69% having served the same employer for more than 15 years.

This stability and courage of the community, and the organisational skills and commitment of the unionists established the Sarmcol workers cooperative with its six projects: the agricultural project, the T-shirt silk screening project, health screening, news gathering and a cultural group.



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Sarmcol dispute: Didcott sets aside Industrial Court finding