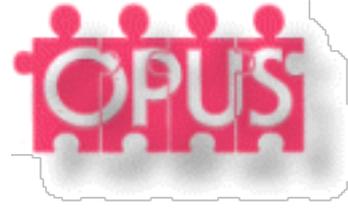


## AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

South Africa (Port Elizabeth) and the World  
at the Dawn of 2015  
Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

### Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

A member who works in a University setting had apologized for non attendance but had written up the reason for not being able to attend and would have raised the issue had she been able to be there. Her preoccupation was around the student population where plagiarism and cheating is prevalent. The member said that her reflection for the year focused on professionalism (which embraces honesty) especially in a field where the focus is on service to others. The University concerned has zero tolerance for dishonesty and at the same time it is often difficult to discover especially with a final year total off over 100.

Apart from plagiarism there are instances where students pay others to do their assignments for them. There was an incident recently where a student who was very weak regarding language and grammar suddenly presented "perfect" work after she enrolled at the language centre. It was clear that this was not her work!!!

Coupled with the above there are issues around the failure rate which "cannot be too high". Staff are called in to account for high failure rates and asked how they intend to rectify the issue. Another member then added that this dynamic was one of the reasons he left academia because he had been caught up in a similar situation. He had been called in by the Dean and asked to justify the failure rate in a class he had lectured to.

A member who does school readiness tests battles with feedback when the children are old enough to go to school but not ready. He finds the dynamic where children are promoted despite not having achieved the required results disappointing, frustrating and

disheartening.

Another member told the story about an annual training event for nurses doing a specialization which is outsourced to an NGO. It is the third year that this event has taken place and Objectives and requirements are sent in advance. One of the requirements is that full and punctual attendance of the ENTIRE course is mandatory. On the first day of the course this year only 9 of the expected 10 nurses presented for training. No word was heard from the missing member and efforts to contact her proved fruitless. The College was called and they also had no information. They were told by the NGO that the nurse would now not be permitted on the course. As most of the course is experiential it is too disruptive and she had missed too much. The nurse arrived the next morning with a list of excuses which did not make much sense. She was told that she could not now attend.

A little later the college contacted the NGO and begged the Director to let her in because if she did not attend, she would not be able to write exams and would then fail the year. 2015 training was already full. Eventually the NGO agreed to get staff to work extra hours to try to help her to catch up. This involved an additional cost which had to be paid before the work commenced.

This student is known by her colleagues and the College Staff to be manipulative, irresponsible and to lie and yet she continues to be accommodated. It can also only be wondered what kind of nurse she will be with her patients who suffer in situations of loss.

This story was followed by some conversation in the group about these incidents being a reflection of much that is going on in South Africa at present where many people seem to get away with wrongdoing at the expense of honest and law abiding people.

Another member then told the moving story about her old gardener's daughter who has just died of cancer. She was impressed with the treatment this lady received at the Oncology Department at one of the Government Hospitals. The group member had transported the patient and her husband from time to time and she was struck at how hard this would have been for them without her help. They live in a poor township and even when the member parked her car as close as possible to the house, the patient still had to be carried some distance into the shack where they lived. This was very difficult as she had also become partially paralyzed.

This family has no water or electricity. Their children, however, now attend the same very good school that the member's children had attended.

When the hospital told the husband that he could take his wife home

as there was nothing more that could be done for her, they meant till the next Chemo treatment but the husband understood that his wife would not be receiving any more treatment. He then told the member that he would not give up on his wife that easily and would take her to another hospital in a town close by. The group member found this so moving and hopeful that there was such love and care in the midst of such hardship. The member was also very impressed with the service provided by the Hospice sister who was called in to help.

Another member then alluded to the fact that cancer seems to be more prevalent at this time. Some, like this lady die soon, others go into remission and some fight on. In one instance the doctor treating the patient stopped working with her but neglected to tell the staff so they continued with drips etc. Eventually the Hospice doctor was called in and she recommended the removal of all drips. The patient was then able to die peacefully within a few hours.

Another member has been doing strategy planning with Municipalities at a macro level and trying to understand the structure and functioning of Municipalities.

He then went on to tell the story of his trying to assist a child who had developed problems at school. His father is unemployed and mother is a domestic worker for several families. The group member agreed to mentor the child so paid a visit to the school where he tried to engage with the Principal and teachers. The school is small suburban one, which previously was attended mainly by White Afrikaans speaking pupils. It is now predominantly Xhosa speaking children and in fact in this child's class there is only one White pupil. This child gets up at 05h00 in order to get to school on time. He travels a far distance to school and back by bus.

The Principal maintained that children behave differently at school from at home. They know the rules and if they break them, they suspend themselves!!! The classroom has white boards all around the class and they are filled with pictures and the classroom is somewhat untidy. The class teacher is young and Afrikaans speaking and has little control over the pupils. The Principal maintains that the child is disruptive and sent him home with an instruction for his mother to present herself at the school. She is a domestic worker and it is very difficult for her to take time off and she could not get to the school immediately so the child was then left on his own to do as he pleased.

The conversation then moved to talking about President Zuma and that all the badness is being ascribed to him and a belief that when he goes, all will be well. One member talked about the sadness about the lack of control over corruption. It was now being accepted as the norm and as if it is not happening or it does not matter that it is

happening – Corruption is any case said to be a Western concept.

## **Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:

- Cynicism
- Non accessibility of prior known resources and resourcefulness
- A struggle to maintain hope in the face of the present leadership and in the midst of massive disintegration
- There is a struggle to understand what goes into keeping society together so people abdicate and delegate to people who do not know either. Competent bureaucrats were pushed aside and others, without the skill, education or ability to do the work, appointed in their place.
- Some individuals who take responsibility and are ethical give us hope
- People from privileged backgrounds take responsibility and then often feel personally liable while those from impoverished backgrounds who often “do not know” do not experience wrongdoing or breakdown as personal failure and also do not ask for help when they do not know what to do
- There seems to be a lack of emotional intelligence or deep analysis and people grab at superficial understanding
- Care, ethics, fortitude and striving are not primary needs of most of the hungry and the poor

## **Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION**

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their ‘psycho’ or ‘internal’ world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following two interrelated hypotheses:

**1.1** Because we do not think deeply enough or in a complex enough way we take things at face value, become cynical, see only corruption and inadequacy and then lose hope

**1.2** We need to care enough to think deeply in order to deconstruct stereotypes and counteract cynicism which will then fan the flames of

helpful qualities and lead to unique outcomes and a force which will build as opposed to break down in civil society

**1.3** Apartheid was a container for badness and when that went we developed a superficial understanding of society, accompanied by a loss of faith in the goodness of humanity and the genuineness of care

**Convener: Lorna Brown.**