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An evaluation of the implementation of the safer cities project in South Africa

Jenny Pillay [1], David Tubatsi Masiloane [2]
[1, 2] Department of Police Practice, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, South Africa.
Corresponding author: dmasiloa@unisa.ac.za

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Abstract: Safety is a major concern in cities around the world. Criminal activities in urban areas leave a geographical footprint, affecting the safety and security of city dwellers and tourists alike. The South African Police Service, together with ten identified cities and other strategic stakeholders, piloted the safer cities project in an effort to address criminal activities and enhance residents' safety. This study evaluated the implementation of the project by exploring its potential to reduce crime and enhance individual safety. To that end, a qualitative approach was used to interview 30 project team members, representative of the South African Police Service, the piloted cities, and traffic police departments, as well as a national representative from Business Against Crime South Africa and the Community Police Forum. The analysis identified several challenges that need to be addressed for the smooth implementation of the project and the enhancement of safety and security, in efforts to create safer cities. Also highlighted were the value of data-driven policing strategies to leverage advanced analytics, real-time crime data and predictive technologies to optimise police responses and resource allocation.

Keywords: Community policing; crime prevention; partnership in safety; partnership policing; safer cities.

Introduction

Crime levels in South Africa are very high, as exemplified by the 121 593 murders reported over the 2019/2020–2023/2024 reporting periods, with the highest number being reported in the 2023/2024 financial year (South African Police Service [SAPS], 2024:12). The fact that the murder rate has continued to rise over the recent past is an indication that the strategies the police are employing to deal with crime and criminality are not as effective as one would hope, thus warranting the adoption of innovative approaches.

In 2020, to promote comprehensive and inclusive safety and security in this country, the South African Police Service (SAPS), together with ten identified cities and other strategic stakeholders, piloted the safer cities project to combat criminal activity and enhance individual safety. This collaborative project aims to eradicate violence and crime within cities, and reduce fear by improving the safety services delivered to communities (Alabi & Balgogun, 2018:637).

To evaluate the implementation of the safer cities project in South Africa, and understand the experiences and perspectives of the project team, the researcher interviewed 30 members who were representatives of the SAPS, the piloted cities, and traffic police departments, as well as a national representative from Business Against Crime South Africa (BACSA) and the Community Police Forum (CPF). The researcher chose a qualitative approach to explore the issue of safety and security, and obtain an in-depth view of the study participants' views. Unstructured observations were also conducted by virtually watching the interactions of the project team during their meetings.

Any analysis of the implementation of the safer cities project had to focus on several important parameters to determine its effectiveness, including its role in improving community safety, enhancing urban infrastructure, and increasing police visibility in high-risk areas. The focus fell on the importance of collaboration between government agencies, law enforcement officials and communities, in fostering safety and security in the identified cities. The success of this project was deemed to be closely tied to the development of sustainable partnerships and a unified

approach to urban safety. Success would thus be reliant on a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach that requires all stakeholders to work together to address crime- and safety-related issues.

Clearly, implementation milestones would differ from city to city, given various factors such as the availability of resources, the strength of political support, project complexity and external challenges. The researcher undertook to make targeted recommendations on specific findings, to address possible challenges in respect of project stagnation, resource constraints, technological upgrades or the need for a customised legislative framework.

Objective of the study

High levels of crime in South Africa continue to generate negative publicity and affect the quality of life of all citizens. Crimes are more prevalent in cities, and have a negative effect on the economic growth and quality of life of residents and visitors (Urban Reference Group, 2016:8; Kruger, Lancaster, Landman, Liebermann, Louw & Robertshaw, 2016:23). The overwhelming need to create safer cities requires a partnership approach that integrates stakeholders, technology and effective processes, in efforts to curb crime (Risdiana & Susanto, 2019:292). Communities that become frustrated with crime in their area are more likely to take the law into their own hands when the police fail to protect them, thereby creating a perpetual problem for law enforcement's attempts to restore law and order (Kral, 2021:7).

In November 2020, the SAPS engaged with ten cities and relevant stakeholders to pilot the safer cities project (Urban Safety Reference Group, 2021:63). In terms of implementation milestones, all the participating cities had to be at the implementation phase, but only eThekwini, Cape Town and Polokwane were in this phase, while the remainder were still at the planning phase (SAPS, 2021). An evaluation of the implementation of this project would offer a useful and detailed account of its roll-out and future potential. According to Kusek and Rist (2004:13), the process of evaluation complements monitoring, and sends a signal when things are derailing. Peak and Glensor (2012:100) warn that the absence of an evaluation component is one of the factors that leads to poorly funded and short-lived initiatives, because evaluation provides valuable information on the success or failure of a project.

This study set out to evaluate the implementation of the safer cities project in Johannesburg, Tshwane, Rustenburg, Cape Town, Polokwane, eThekwini, Mangaung, Kimberly, eMalahleni and Gqeberha, in respect of its ability to reduce crime and ensure individual safety. Exploring how the project is implemented in other countries, allowed the researcher to identify unique contextual challenges.

Overview of the safer cities project

Tilley (1992:1) states that the Safer City Project was launched in March 1988, in London, United Kingdom to reduce the fear of crime and create safer conditions which would allow economic life to flourish. In March 2019, the SAPS held a National Safer Safety Summit to publicise the concept of safer cities (SAPS, 2019:1). The ten pilot cities identified across South Africa represent all nine provinces (SAPS, 2021:17).

The Safer City Project is implemented in phases: during the initiating phase, projects are identified and selected; during the planning phase the project scope is delineated, the necessary resources are identified, a project schedule is developed, a budget is worked out and risks are identified; during the implementation phase, the project plan is executed and activities are carried out to ensure that all the project deliverables are met; and during the closing phase, project evaluation is conducted and there is a review of lessons learnt (Gido, Clements & Baker, 2018:10).

During the initial phase, stakeholders are educated about the project and start creating a project plan that specifies the goals and procedures for implementation (Gido et al., 2018:12; Gido & Clements, 2015:10). For the Safer City Project to succeed, governance structures must be established to minimise the risk of failure (IHS Markit, 2017:19). As Karlson (2020:927) explains, governance entities are accountable or responsible for the results of a project. This entails an all-inclusive framework made up of management systems, rules, procedures, connections and organisational structures. To achieve set strategic objectives, such a framework must act as the basis for decision making throughout the project (Bekker & Steyn, 2009:226).

The Safer City Project was launched to enhance policing initiatives and improve security amongst citizens (Alabi & Balogun, 2018:639), strengthen community participation, and find joint solutions to tackle crime-related problems. As the Civilian Secretariat for Police (2016:17) states, the 2016 White Paper on Policing advocates for 21st-century democratic policing that embraces technology and fosters stakeholder participation (Civilian Secretariat for Police, 2016). The steering committee is tasked with making strategic decisions, including ensuring the availability of resources for the success of the project (IHS Markit, 2017:19). According to the SAPS (2018:15), the technical team must consist of individuals who work to produce the deliverables, while the project team is determined by the specific

requirements and nature of the project, ensuring that skills and expertise are a perfect fit. The effective organisation of the day-to-day administration is crucial for fulfilling project responsibilities (Rosenbloom & Kravchuk, 2005:141).

Cities are safer where there is rapid decision making, immediate responses to incidents and coordinated services, where data are collected from various parts of the city using technologies such as sensors, card readers and video cameras (Atha, Callahan, Chen, Drun, Green, Lafferty, McReynolds, Mulvenon, Rosen & Walz, 2020:9).

International perspectives on safer cities

The safer cities project has been implemented in cities around the world, including Cincinnati in the United States of America (US), Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, New Delhi in India, Sydney in Australia, Shanghai in China, London in the United Kingdom, and Nairobi in Kenya. International perspectives on the implementation of the project offer insights into best practices and successful models rolled out in other countries. These cities could thus serve as a benchmark in respect of best strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of the Safer City Project in South Africa.

Cincinnati – According to La Vigne, Owens and Hetrick (2012:11), in Cincinnati social crime prevention principles give impetus to creating a safe city through an integrated approach such as the development of a safe city logic model for the distribution of technology to stakeholders; an impact analysis on infrastructure and crime trends; as well as an analysis of the effectiveness, viability and cost effectiveness of safer cities initiatives.

Kuala Lumpur – in this city, the police collaborate with important ministries to create coordinated plans of action and strategies for accomplishing the goals of the Safer City Project (Hamidi, 2017:4). As Hamidi (2017:10) notes, the police have built an efficient intelligence network and improved cross-border cooperation. Stakeholder collaboration has been a cornerstone of public and private sector management, with almost all community-based programmes stressing the importance of residents' involvement in resolving issues in their communities (Aldrin & Hassan, 2017:419). According to Lim, Kong, Rashid and Malek (2020:55), a highly effective contribution to the programme has been the introduction of the Safe City Monitoring System, which relies on multi-stakeholder collaboration to identify crime displacement and hotspots in the city. The system has improved the sharing of crime-related information and the monitoring of the impact of crime prevention programmes through the use of the Geographic Information System (GIS). The Safe Community programme is designed to lessen the impact of crime by linking a variety of stakeholders who share information and address crime hotspots in the city (Snyders & Landman, 2016:13). The city also uses the Licence Plate Recognition System to deal with crime, traffic controls and other emergency situations (Khalifa, Khan, Islam & Suleiman, 2007:355). Intensive crime awareness campaigns have made residents more involved in crime prevention, for which they use smart phones and other devices to channel information to the police (Lim et al., 2020:55).

New Delhi – As Turok and McGranahan (2013:6) state, rapid economic growth and booming populations in New Delhi have put the government under severe pressure to reduce crime and ensure public safety. Preventing criminal activities by disrupting criminals and their operations has been the most successful strategy in terms of lowering the likelihood of victimisation and fear of crime (Ghani, 2017:27). The city bought a closed-circuit television (CCTV) system complete with network equipment, information servers for command centres, cyber patrol, communication monitoring systems and GIS, for automated car tracking (PWC, 2013:3). As Frost and Sullivan (2011:18) explain, the Safer City Project advocates using new technologies to enhance existing security apparatus. Part of implementing the process involves using technology to monitor the responses of law-enforcement officers.

Sydney – The Safer City Project in Sydney has adopted a multifaceted approach which includes policy initiatives, technology integration and community participation, to improve public safety and security (Clancey, 2015:2). It recognises the variety of challenges that exist within urban contexts (South African Cities Network, 2022:13; Searle, 2017:6). Local residents and businesses are empowered to actively participate in crime prevention efforts, to foster ownership and collective responsibility through structures such as community forums, neighbourhood watches and outreach initiatives. These structures facilitate dialogue between law-enforcement agencies and the community, thus allowing for the identification of specific safety concerns and the development of targeted solutions (City of Sydney, 2023:6). These endeavours are augmented by the use of technologies such as genetic analysis, audio systems and video cameras (Gogov, 2017:29). As Gogov (2017:30) and the South African Cities Network (2022:11) point out, the use of video surveillance is increasing and it works well with other tools such as facial recognition software, fingerprint and various other databases that are used by the police and government agencies.

Shanghai – Here, project implementation is intertwined with the technological advancement of China as a whole. From 2000–2018, the country made massive investments in CCTV cameras, creating the largest surveillance network in the world. As Eckman (2019:10) states, China was expected to have 300 million surveillance cameras by 2020, four

times more than the US, but did not achieve this target. Despite this, a growing number of local governments are implementing facial recognition technologies to promote efficiency in urban operations, making China a global leader in smart city efforts by combining sensors, cameras and other technologies with big data and artificial intelligence (AI) to manage cities and public spaces (Civilian Secretariat for Police, 2021:16; Atha et al., 2020:1). Wu, Sun and Hu (2021:436) explain that all surveillance cameras are linked to an integrated command centre, to facilitate a coordinated response to incidents.

London – The low crime rate in London is mostly attributed to teamwork, information exchange, and deliberate planning aimed at lessening public disturbances and criminality (City of London, 2022:1). It encourages the community to report suspicious activities, and to serve as additional eyes and ears for law enforcement – a key strategy for enhancing police–community cooperation and reducing crime effectively (Mangai, Masiya, Murwamuila & Holtzhausen, 2022:12). The police have embraced advanced technologies such as body-worn cameras (body-cams), drones, security cameras, gunshot trackers and enhanced patrol car systems (Laufs & Borrion, 2022:190; Rogers, Pepper & Skilling, 2022:330; Byrne & Marx, 2011:18). Gunshot trackers use sensors to detect gunfire, enabling police analysts to swiftly pinpoint incidents and dispatch officers to the scene (Gkougkoudis, Pissanidis & Demertzis, 2022:148). Johnson, Egan and Londono (2022:6), Geldenhuys (2019:56) and Conser, Paynich and Gingerich (2013:336) state that drones are commonly used for search and rescue operations, mapping, traffic enforcement, and providing aerial views of crime scenes.

Nairobi – There is cooperation between the Government of Kenya and Huawei to implement cutting-edge technology and improve integrated surveillance capabilities, to protect the people and enterprises of Nairobi (Eckman, 2019:18). According to Frilander, Lundine, Kutalek and Likaka (2023:2), Nairobi has made great strides in the past five to ten years, in terms of embracing mobile technology and positioning itself as a leading hub for information and communication technology (ICT) innovation in Africa. Enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of law-enforcement agencies is achieved through sophisticated technologies such as automatic license plate readers, CCTV and predictive policing software (Gichohi, Murimi & Owino, 2023:5; Hill & Paynich, 2014:23). In strategic locations across Nairobi, 1 800 CCTV cameras with facial and vehicle recognition capabilities have been installed (Kapiyo & Githaiga, 2014:150). There is also a command-and-control centre for real-time monitoring and the connection of 195 police stations via high-speed internet. A fourth-generation (4G) wireless standard was introduced to provide increased network capacity and speed for cell phones and other cellular devices, thus providing 7 600 radio communication devices and linking 600 police vehicles to the control centre (Gichohi, Murimi & Owino, 2023:59). The aim is to improve communication among security personnel and enhance counter-terrorism efforts (Kapiyo & Githaiga**,** 2014:150). Finnegan, Hickson and Rai (2008:14) state that community policing has improved relations between the police and the communities they serve, and, according to Diphoorn and Stapele (2020:399), this collaboration collectively addresses crime and security concerns. Crime prevention strategies in Nairobi mainly focus on community-, neighbourhood-, offender-, victim- and situational-oriented approaches (Ndikaru, 2023:2).

Crime prevention approaches in safer cities projects

According to the Civilian Secretariat for Police (2022:5), effective crime prevention is predicated on integrated planning and commitment from communities, businesses, traditional leaders and government entities. Although crime prevention is not their primary responsibility, local governments have forged partnerships with other stakeholders to participate in efforts aimed at combatting crime (Pheiffer & Rakubu, 2023:536). The police are required to play an active role alongside crime prevention partners, to ensure that all operations fall within legal frameworks (Jannetta & Lachman, 2011:13).

As far as Tilley and Sidebottom (2017:15) are concerned, a failure to mobilise stakeholders could lead to the failure of the safer cities project. Anderez, Kanjo, Anwar, Kanlo, Johnson and Lucy (2021:2) emphasise that the integration of technology has been found to significantly strengthen crime prevention initiatives in cities. Some of the technologies mentioned by the SAPS include a mobile application, the Automated Vehicle Location (AVL) system, body-cams, drones and GIS. The value of using technologies such as GIS, in enabling the police to plan and execute operations based on reliable geographical information, cannot be overemphasised (Ibrahim & Kuta, 2015:45); the AVL system helps with the speedy identification and dispatch of vehicles close to the crime scene (Civilian Secretariat for Police, 2021:20); even though body-cams are not yet used in South Africa, they enable the capture of activities and the engagement between the police and the policed (Civilian Secretariat for Police, 2021:23); drones monitor criminal activities and assist in the protection of critical infrastructure (Civilian Secretariat for Police, 2021:23; Russell, Hasbini & Peterson, 2016:5). The SAPS also has a mobile app on which residents can share information and access services. The Civilian Secretariat for Police (2021:18) states that the “My SAPS” app prioritises safety in the community and

assists people who are in danger. It allows them to report not only emergencies, but also suspicious activities (Anderez et al., 2021:7).

The recognition of key stakeholders, procurement of the necessary resources, determination of top priorities, and the formulation of policies that promote urban development are some of the critical elements in the establishment of secure cities (Wereda, Moch & Wachulak, 2021:1). Involving communities makes a positive contribution to the project, rather than inviting the negative impact of excluding them (Mamokhere & Meyer, 2023:7). Assessing the environment is one of the fundamental aspects of the safer cities project, because antisocial behaviour is significantly influenced by the nature of the immediate environment and the opportunities it offers to potential criminals (Wortley & Townsley, 2016:4). As Morgan, Boxall, Lindeman and Anderson (2011:2) note, assessment assists with planning and adopting the most suitable intervention to address prevailing crime-related problems.

Challenges in the implementation of the safer cities project

Irani, Abril, Weerakkody, Omar and Sivarajah (2023:1) found that some of the challenges in the implementation of the safer cities project involved changes in government, outdated technologies and financial constraints. The unstable nature of local governments means some elected officials may view the implementation of this project as a low priority (Frost & Sullivan, 2011:10). According to Daniel (2018:2) and Berman, Bowman, West and Van Wart (2015:21), political infighting and coalitions seeking to gain power have taken precedence in many local governments, negatively affecting the quality of the services municipalities render. Newham and Rappert (2018:11) note that building strong community partnerships, engendering political commitment and adopting a multi-agency strategy are essential for successful community-oriented policing interventions. The full support of all stakeholders will boost the effectiveness of such a project and enhance its successful implementation.

The use of outdated technologies in cities impedes the adoption and implementation of innovative systems aimed at linking critical stakeholders in the safer cities project (Frost & Sullivan, 2011:10). Laufs and Borrion (2022:192) emphasise the need to retire outdated technology and embrace solutions that align with the current era. Failure to mothball almost obsolete technologies might be driven by concerns about cost implications and financial constraints. Duminy, Parnell and Luthango (2020:48) concede that a country's financial constraints and concomitant budgetary restrictions present a significant challenge to the development and implementation of projects aimed at safer cities. In many instances, even the most meticulously devised plans can falter without adequate funding (~~South African Police Service~~ SAPS, 2014:28). According to Singh, Smit and Kempen (2022:48), emerging technologies such as AI and machine learning have revolutionised crime detection and investigation, providing authorities with tools to analyse vast amounts of data and generate actionable intelligence. Furthermore, smart infrastructure and internet of things (IoT-) enabled technologies contribute to the overall resilience of cities, and facilitate swift responses to security threats. The Department of Corporate Governance and Traditional Affairs (2021:11) states that, by embracing technological innovations and fostering collaboration, cities can harness the power of innovation to create safer and more resilient urban environments.

Methodology

The study reported on here, espoused a qualitative approach to understand the experiences and perspectives of the participants on the implementation of the safer cities project. Conducted in the ten identified pilot cities, the aim was to understand how the project was implemented, and how crime can be reduced. In qualitative research, data are normally collected through interviews, observations and document analysis (Zahle, 2020:102). According to Zahle (2020), inclusion and exclusion criteria are necessary for selecting participants who can provide most beneficial information on the subject. For this study, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 32 participants who were selected from the technical team that is responsible for the implementation of the safer cities project. The technical team ranges from 5 to 8 people in each pilot city, who are responsible for ensuring the day-to-day running of the project. The interviewed people were selected as follows: ten police officers representing the SAPS, ten municipal employees representing pilot cities, ten members representing traffic police department (i.e. one representative of each category per city), as well as a national representative from BACSA and the CPF. Representatives of BACSA and CPFs at pilot cities level continuously feed their national structures on their activities for support and guidance, that is why a decision was taken to interview national office barriers, to have a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of this project in all pilot cities. Unstructured observations of meetings were also conducted in all pilot cities to understand how technical teams coordinate activities, make decisions and interact with stakeholders.

The interview method afforded the researcher greater flexibility to observe the participants and pose probing questions. The collected data were recorded, transcribed, converted into text and grouped into themes. The spiral method was

chosen as the means of data analysis: according to Leedy and Ormrod (2019:387), it entails the researcher identifying and systematically analysing the data collected, and then verifying these with data collected from the literature review. In this study, rigorous procedure and processes were also embarked upon from data collection, data analysis and report writing, to ensure the credibility and dependability of the research findings. In the data collection phase member checking was done where transcripts are presented to participants for their verification. This was done in line with Candela's (2019) assertion that participants should read or be taken through their transcripts to ensure that the interview has been correctly transcribed. Triangulation was done by comparing multiple data sources on the information obtained from the literature, interviews and observations.

Research findings

The findings are categorised into the themes that emerged based on the literature and empirical research in this study, namely understanding of the safer cities project and different implementation milestones; the potential value of the project; challenges in its implementation; legislative and policy frameworks used in the implementation of the project; and the training of project team members.

Understanding of the safer cities project and different implementation milestones - The participants clearly understood what needs to be done in this project, and the types of collaboration and technologies required to improve individuals' safety. Although the implementation process was at different stages in each city, the need, use and extent of use of technologies varied from one city to the next. Some technologies were already in use in the pilot cities (surveillance cameras, biometric systems, GPS tracking, AVL and drones), while others were still required (body-cams and predictive policing software).

Variations in the implementation phases across cities could be attributed to a combination of factors, including resource availability, political support, project complexity and external challenges. Cities in the planning phase were focused on setting up resources, coordinating with stakeholders and making detailed plans, while those in the implementation phase had already moved past these steps and were putting their plans into action.

The potential value of the safer cities project - All the participants had a solid understanding of the value the safer cities project could have for crime prevention and safety in urban areas. This was clearly captured by one participant from the municipality, who said: "*I think that the Safer City Project is an inclusive project aimed at reducing the causes of crime through primary, secondary or tertiary crime prevention.*" A representative from BACSA concurred, stating that the project has the potential to prevent crime or add value to crime prevention, if properly implemented.

Challenges in the implementation of the safer cities project - Like any other project, this one encountered challenges and obstacles that needed to be addressed/removed, for its successful implementation. The challenges could broadly be categorised as those arising during the implementation process, such as a change in government – that could lead to the stagnation of the project, if the new leadership is not committed to it. Other challenges include the following:

- Reluctance to upgrade ageing technological systems, mainly due to financial constraints, and to adapt to new, modern approaches (e.g., the use of drones) for addressing intricate safety and security challenges, as it requires police officials to be well equipped and trained, to be able to use this technology efficiently.
- Some participants from the SAPS and the Traffic Department decried the lack of commitment from their fellow stakeholders, branding their participation 'inconsistent'. Sometimes delegates attended project meetings without any background on its objectives. Worryingly, some who had been involved in the project from the outset did not attend meetings regularly, meaning they were unclear about certain decisions made in previous meetings. This frustrated the more dedicated members. As a participant from the Traffic Department said: "*For this project I do not see commitment from stakeholders. You see this person in the meeting, the next time you see another person, and some of these people don't even know why they are there*." Some participants lamented that certain members were not fully deployed, being appointed to work on the project on a part-time basis, and thus carrying a heavy workload alongside their normal duties. In their view, this had a negative effect on the effective implementation of the project.
- Budgetary restrictions posed a significant challenge to the safer cities project and could impede the achievement of the stated deliverables. Some participants stated that certain stakeholders were unwilling to commit, as they also experienced resource and financial constraints. The availability and proper allocation of resources is critical for achieving the objectives of a project of this nature, which seeks to bring together a range of resources from various stakeholders (law enforcement, community leaders and civic organisations) to ensure that citizens living in the city are safe. The participants stressed that funding is one of the most significant barriers in the implementation of the project, highlighting the imperative to

secure adequate funding for the critical resources needed for success. One participant from the municipality stated: "*Stakeholders need to work together and put all their commitment and resources into ensuring that challenges such as resources and budgetary constraints are addressed.*"

Legislative and policy framework in the implementation of the safer cities project - Understandably, a project of this magnitude should be grounded in sound legislative and policy frameworks, to enable stakeholders to carry out their functions effectively. There is plethora of legislation and policies at the national and local levels, to support the implementation of the safer cities project. Despite this, some participants identified the absence of clear legislative frameworks and interdepartmental agreements as significant barrier to project implementation. A participant from the BACSA stated: "*There needs to be some sort of a memorandum of understanding with different organisations to say this is what we will implement*." It is not clear whether the participants were unfamiliar with some of the available enabling legislation/policies, such as the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2000); the South African Police Service Act 68 of 1995 (RSA, 1995); White Paper on Safety and Security (Civilian Secretariat for Police, 2016); the National Development Plan, 2030 (RSA, 2012); and the National Crime Prevention Strategies of 1996 (RSA, 1996). The participants may have regarded these (legislation and policies) as inadequate for ensuring the success of this project, or simply wanted customised policies to refer to.

Training of project team members - Of the 32 project team members interviewed, eight had received formal training on the project; 12 had received informal training; and the remaining 12 had not received any training at all. Formal training in the Safer City Project consists of structured programmes conducted by knowledgeable experts (Birgit, 2020:4). The training focuses on urban safety, crime prevention, community policing and partnership policing. By contrast, informal training refers to unstructured and less formal learning that occurs through community engagement, on-the-job training, shared experiences, peer learning or mentorship (Birgit, 2020:4). The participants highlighted the need for formal as well as ongoing training for all team members, to ensure that they have the requisite knowledge to deal with the evolving safety challenges confronting urbanites. Training will upskill project team members in managing project activities. The overall goal of this initiative is to bring together the range of knowledge, skills and experience of various stakeholders, including law enforcement, community leaders and civic organisations, to ensure that city dwellers remain safe. Highlighting the knowledge gap, a participant from the Traffic Department stated: "*The lack of necessary skills within the team has posed a challenge in implementing certain aspects of the project*."

Recommendations

According to Zaid and Tsagem (2022:8), recommendations comprise actions aimed at addressing any issue identified in a study, through offering practical steps based on the findings to guide future decisions or actions. The following recommendations can be made, based on the key themes outlined in the research findings.

Implementation phases - Some cities are not in the phases they should be. It is recommended that a project plan (which is aligned to the strategic plan on safer cities) be compiled and strictly monitored, to ensure that the implementation process progresses according to the set timelines, and any undue delays are detected and addressed timeously. Stagnation on the project implementation plan due to a change in government could be avoided by developing a long-term project plan that is backed by all political parties represented in the respective cities. This will ensure the continuation and sustainability of the project, irrespective of which political party is running the city at a particular time.

Training project team members - In prompting those responsible for implementation to acquire project management skills, it is important to offer them training and workshops that are tailor made to capacitate them. Joint training and workshops for project stakeholders will also endow them with knowledge and skills aimed at enhancing effective collaboration. Those involved in the implementation of the safer cities project should also be trained and capacitated on the use of the various technologies at their disposal.

Budgetary constraints - Cities should first investigate the scalability/upgradability of their current technologies, as that might be cheaper than replacing current technologies with new ones. Cities need to collaborate with technology firms that could support them with specific technologies that they could maintain and upgrade as and when needed.

Commitment to the project - It is crucial to set clear expectations and responsibilities for stakeholders from the outset, so that they clearly understand what they are committing themselves to in terms of human and material resources. It is vital to ensure that those assigned to the safer cities project have ample time and resources to make a meaningful contribution.

Legislative and policy framework - it is vital to compile a customised project manual on the applicable legislation and policies. This will serve as an easy guide for team members and stakeholders, and would address prevailing misunderstandings on the legislation and policies guiding the project. Making the proposed manual part of the induction/orientation session will lead to a uniform understanding, interpretation and application of the legislation/policies in all the cities involved. It is also crucial to enter into formal agreements with all stakeholders, to detail their roles and responsibilities. This will ensure the efficient application of the legislative/policy framework in this project.

Conclusion

The high crime rate in South Africa indicates that the strategies used by the police to prevent and combat crime are not as effective as they could be, thus warranting the adoption of innovative approaches. To address this and enhance the safety and security in the cities, the SAPS piloted the safer cities project, the implementation of which was evaluated here to determine its nature, challenges and the progress made to date. Thick reporting was used in detailing the processes and procedures used in this study, as well as providing evidence that include direct quoting of some participants' responses to substantiate the findings. Giving a thorough account of the participants' views, experience and understanding of the implementation of the safer cities project and its challenges. The interpretation and analysis of the collected data was done in the context of what was virtually observed during the unstructured observations of technical teams' meetings as well as the observation of the demeanours of the participants during the interviews. Thus, enabling the researcher to provide a detailed account on the implementation of safer cities project to allow readers to make judgments on the appropriateness of the findings. Which is in line with Wolff (2003:48) assertion that thick description requires researchers to provide a concise account of what unfolded in their minds as they interpret the research findings. Enhancing the value of the findings to allows other readers to evaluate the study's applicability to the implementation of safer cities to other cities in South Africa, thus enhancing this study's validity and generalisability.

The findings revealed that the success of this project tends to hinge on local needs, available resources and the level of community engagement. Indicating that successful safer cities initiatives can be achieved through a combination of advanced technologies such as surveillance cameras, predictive analytics, facial recognition and strong community partnerships. Current challenges that hamper the implementation of safer cities as well as their ability to reduce crime and create safe environments in future are clearly indicated. Recommendations are made to address identified challenges such as project stagnation, resource constraints, technological upgrades and the need for a manual for the project. However, there is a need to evaluate the impact of this project once the pilot phase has been completed. The proper evaluation will indicate whether it is a worthwhile project to implement in all cities in South Africa, by determining the cost of its implementation and its effect on crime reduction and community safety. An analysis that could also indicate the types of crimes that are successfully impacted by safer cities and those that are not.

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