

THE YOUNG CHILD MUST GROW

It is not unusual for Western NGOs to create and export programme models and development tools to Africa. What is less common is for this process to happen in reverse: when a wealthy Western nation imports a tried and tested African model to help address its social problems. This is exactly what has happened with Khulisa Crime Prevention Initiative, a South African organisation that has successfully undertaken its programmes in the UK, demonstrating the universality of its approach.



Khulisa was founded in 1997 by Lesley Ann van Selm, based on her notion that through the morals, values and life lessons embedded in traditional African stories, it would be possible to engage troubled youth and help them to make sense of their problems. Early trials at youth prisons in Soweto and Johannesburg were so successful that the Welfare Department named the programme Khulisa (“the young child must grow”) and expanded it to five prisons with the largest numbers of youths awaiting trial.

Thirteen years later, the organisation employs 220 people (around 15% of whom are former offenders) and operates nationally. It has developed over 20 programmes designed to address the needs of individuals and communities – from crime prevention and diversion to addressing offenders’ multiple needs after release. Khulisa’s approach is holistic and the needs of family members, victims and the wider community are also taken into account, with participants encouraged to use their new skills to create a positive ‘ripple’ effect.

In one rural community in Northern Gauteng two young men who joined a Khulisa programme in prison have since gone on to set up a crèche, a children’s shelter, school clubs, an internet cafe, a substance abuse treatment clinic and a grannies football team. This in turn has led to the formation of more youth clubs and the launch of small businesses such as bakeries, food stalls and vegetable gardens. Their actions, with Khulisa’s support, have helped to revitalise the entire community and attract further funding to make projects sustainable.



One of these men, Abiot, became involved with Khulisa whilst serving an eight year sentence in Leeuwkop prison. As an angry young man, he had become caught up in crime following a family breakdown, teenage drug addiction and his dropping out of school at 14. Things changed when he enrolled on a Khulisa programme while in prison, initially purely to gain favour with the Parole Board. After attending the programme however he began to realize that he could have a second chance in life. The course allowed him to explore and understand himself and he began to change his decisions and started studying again, including HIV and AIDs peer education. Khulisa continued to work with him upon release, helping him to put his skills to use, and stay on the right path. Today, Abiot is employed by Khulisa to motivate and engage other young people at risk of turning to crime.

This approach of rehabilitation by doing good sits naturally in a country with a strong overarching philosophy of 'ubuntu' - which loosely translates to mean 'a person is a person through other people.' The redemptive power of Restorative Justice is also key, and participants are motivated to try and repair the harm that their actions may have caused. Not only does this help to foster goodwill towards those who may previously have been shunned by the community, it also helps both offenders and victims to feel a sense of pride and achievement, bringing about healing and the knowledge that offenders are not inherently bad and can overcome their past.

Originally intended as a platform from which to apply for EU funding for its work in South Africa, van Selm registered Khulisa in the UK in 2007. At that time however, London was experiencing its own rise in violent youth crime, with the media fanning the flames and few new solutions being put forward. Van Selm realised this could be an opportune moment to introduce Khulisa's innovative approach in the UK, and after extensive research and consultation, pilot work began in 2009.

The programme identified as the most immediately relevant and adaptable to British audiences was Silence the Violence, which uses creative, therapeutic techniques to address the root causes of violence and foster a fundamental shift in attitude and behaviour. The programme was first piloted in a Young Offenders Institute in Kent, a community centre in London, and an adult prison in Manchester. Ten pilot programmes have now run, including two funded by the Home Office's 'Tackling Knives Action Programme'. Further funding was recently secured to deliver the programme in schools over a three-year period, to address violence arising from a local youth "postcode war".



An important factor was the decision to identify a highly qualified local evaluator, Dr Nicola Graham-Kevan from the University of Central Lancashire to demonstrate the pilots' success. Her initial findings have shown a significant impact among participants in the areas of empathy, coping, motivation to change and anger/impulse control.

Though currently stabilising, South Africa still has one of the highest violent crime rates in the world. It is an incredibly diverse nation with 11 official languages; an hour's drive from modern "first world" cities can take you to rural areas with no electricity or running water and 80 per cent unemployment. Thus Khulisa is a flexible and dynamic organisation and staff are used to working with offenders for whom rape, murder and hijacking are everyday crimes. Nevertheless, becoming an international organisation was a big step: a new culture and social norms had to be learned and a new audience understood.

One poignant example of cultural difference occurred when South African trainers began working in UK prisons. Even after working with hardened offenders, one of our most experienced facilitators was shocked by the lack of respect shown to him by young men in a London Young Offenders Institute. Even the most disruptive youth in South Africa have been brought up to respect their elders, and prisoners are generally appreciative of anybody who comes into the prison to help them. In the UK, prisoners are more likely to reject authority and be mistrustful of those offering them help until their actions have shown them to be worthy of trust.

Despite these initial differences, UK participants have responded extremely well to the creative, experiential aspect of Khulisa's programmes. While we were not surprised that the universally accepted therapeutic techniques developed by Khulisa would translate to the UK, we were thrilled that holistic and creative approaches translated just as well.

In our experience the basic problems that often lead to youth crime – a lack of love and family support, lack of employment opportunities, low educational attainment – are the same in the UK and South Africa, and probably in most countries. Though the levels of poverty are higher in South Africa than in the UK, the multiple underlying contributory causes of crime are the same. In South Africa youth crime often stems from a necessity to meet basic needs, however in the UK it frequently originates from boredom and a feeling of being marginalised by a fast-paced society. In both countries the situation is exacerbated by drug and alcohol abuse and, for young people in particular, the sense of belonging and support offered by gang affiliation perpetuates criminal behaviour, and an escalation into violence.



Khulisa has always worked closely with South African government departments including Correctional Services, Education, Health, Social Development and Labour. In the UK, with its highly developed welfare system and charity sector, it was especially important for Khulisa to build partnerships, rather than attempt to make a difference in isolation or in competition with existing services. As a small fish in a big pond we drew on our unique heritage to help open doors with the UK National Offender Management Service and others. Though it is still early days for us in the UK, the organisation is gaining momentum and interest from those who are ready to try something new. Many organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors are keen to analyse our programme models and partner with us, bringing our techniques to bear on some of the UK's more intractable social problems.

Khulisa is proud to be demonstrating what we call a "reverse development model": bringing something to the UK that has been so successful in Africa. We believe that as the UK looks to re-kindle a sense of community with the concept of a 'Big Society', many more lessons could be learned from the spirit of ubuntu and other African development approaches.

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