

D. & G. Paper read at the International Center for  
Transitional Justice, New York, December 1<sup>st</sup> 2001

**The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission:  
An experience in the Research Department**

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June 2001**

HSRC RESEARCH OUTPUTS

2205

## **Introduction**

This paper identifies some of the key functions performed in the research department of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa. It elaborates on the kind of research that the researchers undertook. The paper pays special attention to an individual experience of a researcher in conducting such research. It also offers possible lessons that an international audience could learn from such an experience.

The paper begins by providing a brief background on the structure of the research department of the TRC. It looks at the research team, how it was composed and distributed within the various regional offices.

## **Background**

The South African TRC had a team of researchers that was based in four regional offices, Gauteng, Western Cape, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. The regional offices were located in the cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, East London and Durban respectively. As a country, South Africa has more than double the number of regions that the TRC operated from. The four TRC regional offices therefore covered vast and uneven areas.

Each regional office employed about three to four permanent researchers. During the course of time, additional researchers were contracted on short-term basis to assist in various research areas. The research team consisted of scholars with diverse academic backgrounds and qualifications. There were theologians, political scientists, historians, sociologists and philosophers with qualifications varying from an Honours degree to a doctorate.

The Johannesburg office that covered the largest area had three permanent researchers. I was one of the three Johannesburg researchers. The three of us divided our responsibilities into various research areas of the Gauteng region. This process was followed in all the other TRC regions. My research areas were predominantly the rural and peripheral parts covered by the Gauteng region.

As a team of researchers, we had a set of responsibilities that we carried out as our main function. These responsibilities were negotiated and agreed upon amongst the researchers from all the regional offices with the research director. Sometimes other TRC members

with research methodology expertise, outside the research department, such as the commissioners, the committee members, the information managers and the investigators were invited to give input on the researchers' responsibilities. Through a process of consultation and negotiation with most members of the TRC, as researchers, we performed the following tasks for the commission.

### **1. Research theme documents**

We identified research themes as sites or areas where there was a concentration of human rights violations. The purpose of these themes was to conduct research on them in order to gather information on the historical and political context within which gross human rights violations occurred. We identified themes such as the:

- Homelands,
- Vigilantes,
- Right wing,
- (Old) South African Security Force,
- Prisons and
- The liberation movements.

The homelands were parts of South Africa that the white minority Apartheid government created and gave pseudo political independence or a status of a self-governing state. The Apartheid government wanted to divide South Africans according to ethnic groups. More importantly, the Apartheid government wanted to dominate the black majority South Africans. As a result there was a lot of political violence from those who enforced the homeland system and those who resisted it. This political violence led to gross human rights violations. Gross human rights violations also occurred in other sites or areas such as the vigilantes, prisons and so on identified in the above paragraph.

### **How was the research conducted?**

We produced research proposals and conducted research on the above themes. This kind of research was mainly based on secondary literature. Some of us worked individually on these research themes. Others worked in pairs on a particular theme or two, from the different regional offices. This arrangement depended on our special research interests and academic backgrounds. This exercise took about three to four months of our time. In other cases, individual academics who had already done research work on some of the themes were approached to produce research papers for the commission. As a department, we produced a collection of research papers<sup>1</sup> on the various themes for the commission.

### **An experience**

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<sup>1</sup> These papers should be accessed from the TRC documents deposited to the State archives of the Republic of South Africa

I worked with a colleague from the East London office on the homeland research theme. Both of us produced a joint research proposal on the research that was to be done on human rights violations in the homelands. South Africa had about ten of these homelands. Each homeland could be a topic of a doctoral thesis on its own. Both my colleague and I had never done any research work on the homelands.

There were occasions when some (and not all) of the researchers including myself could not see the merit of conducting research on these themes. We could not fathom how it was possible to conduct such research properly within a short space of time and on themes of such magnitude. After many discussions and debates within the research team, some of us resigned ourselves into carrying out this duty even though we did not believe in it.

The first challenge my colleague and I confronted was to review relevant existing literature on these homelands. Most of the homelands are predominantly rural and are on the periphery of South Africa. From the onset, it became evident that many of these homelands were under researched. There was very limited documented information readily available, especially about their historical and political developments.

Many of these homelands' political events were never sufficiently recorded and documented. There was often very limited media coverage on these homelands. Many of the popular newspapers did not have offices or representatives in these homelands. This was possibly because geographically, many of these homelands are in the periphery and predominantly rural areas of South Africa.

Also, the level of high repression in some of these homelands, particularly after they were granted pseudo independence, possibly explains why media coverage was limited. Journalists from outside these homelands were often restricted from covering so-called independent news. Thus the lack of media coverage in many of these homelands compared with other places elsewhere in South Africa, explains why the country and the world knew little about political developments of those areas.

There was very little academic work in the form of theses, dissertations and journal articles, produced on these homelands' political developments. Scholarly work of that kind was discouraged during the Apartheid and homeland era. In many instances, it was mainly white and foreign scholars who contributed to the body of literature on homeland political matters, that existed. The interpretation of those homeland political matters by these scholars, although sometimes sympathetic to the cause of the majority of black South Africans, often reflected their status as observers in the political struggle against the Apartheid and homeland governments. The voice and interpretations of black South Africans certainly lacked in the interpretations of those homelands political matters.

During the course of reviewing the existing literature on our homeland theme, the research director contracted an academic consultant with research interests on homelands

to write a paper for the commission. My colleague and I therefore stopped the research we were about to undertake and continued with other responsibilities.

The homeland consultant had research expertise on some and not all the ten homelands. His special interests concentrated on security matters mainly of two homelands from one region. His paper was certainly invaluable in so far as homeland security matters were concerned. However, even though his paper superficially touched upon other aspects of the homelands, there were gaps on many other homelands' political developments and human rights violations.

It is difficult to weigh the merits and demerits of undertaking the (homeland) research theme research. I certainly obtained most of the relevant and invaluable information for most of my homeland areas orally, through interviews. Perhaps other researchers benefited from the homeland research paper that the consultant produced.

## 2. Outline documents

Our responsibilities included researching and writing outline documents of key political events in the specific areas where the commission held public hearings. The purpose of these documents was to assist the TRC commissioners, committee members, statement takers, investigators and others to have some idea about the political history, developments and conflicts of the areas.

### How was the research done?

As researchers, we had a few days to a week or two, to look for, find the relevant information and compile these critical outline documents. The annual *Race Relations Surveys*, which document current political events in South Africa, were extremely useful. We obtained our information also from newspapers, theses, journals and so on. For areas where there was little or nothing written about them, we obtained information orally.

For an example, an outline document on the Venda homeland<sup>2</sup> looked like the following:

- The formation of the Venda Student Association in 1969
- Underground operations post 1976
- The role of the Lutheran Church in Venda politics
- Venda independence in 1979
- The 1981 Bomb blast at Sibasa police station
- The Mass Democratic Movement in the mid 80s
- Ritual Killings in the early 1990s

The document could be a page or two, depending on political developments in the specific and local areas. It was important for us to compile this outline document timely.

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<sup>2</sup> Venda homeland was one of my research areas

This document was an important piece of information particularly to the commissioners and committee members who went to introduce the work of the TRC to the various stakeholders (in Venda and other specific areas). In those initial meetings with various stakeholders, the commissioners were able to mention the above key political events that occurred in Venda and elsewhere. They were able to talk openly about the political conflict that resulted from some of those political events. They were able to appeal to all those who were involved in such political conflicts which led to the perpetration of human rights violations, to come forward and disclose their actions to the commission. The commissioners were able to attract casualties of gross human rights abuses, to also come forward to share their experiences with the rest of the nation.

The outline document was equally important to statement takers who wrote down the submissions made by casualties of human rights abuse in Venda and elsewhere. It was important for the commission to ensure that the submissions made to it were representative. The submissions were to come from various groupings such as the supporters of the liberation movement, the Apartheid and homeland governments and also from those who were apolitical. However, in many instances, the statement takers obtained submissions mainly from the supporters of the liberation movement.

### **An experience**

It was extremely difficult to compile these critical outline documents within a week or two, on the homeland areas. With little or no data from the newspaper articles and other scholarly work, I relied heavily on oral interviews. I identified knowledgeable people and often travelled to those faraway areas and conducted oral interviews. Some of the people I interviewed were originally from those areas but were residing in the Gauteng region. Sometimes I conducted telephonic interviews. This meant working also after office hours and during the weekends because this was the only time that many of the potential interviewees were available for obtaining and verifying this information. Most of these interviews yielded invaluable information that was novel, on the political developments of those homeland areas.

Flowing from the outline documents, researchers wrote detailed documents for the public hearings that were held in specific areas.

### **3. Public Hearing documents**

One of the major functions of the TRC was to hold public hearings in different parts of South Africa. As researchers, we wrote detailed public hearing documents for the commissioners and committee members in order that they could put into political context, the submissions that the victims of human rights violations made to the TRC.

#### **The kind of research done**

It took us about four to six weeks to research and write a public hearing document. Such a document provided the commissioners, statement takers, the investigators and others

with a 'fuller' chronological and thematic political history of an area. It contained details of specific political events or themes of an area where the TRC held public hearings. The political events or themes dealt with the historical and political context within which human rights violations took place in that area. Such a document provided an indication of who the actors were, in political conflicts. It also indicated who the casualties of gross human rights violations were.

For an example, details of a specific event or theme for a public hearing document on the Venda homeland looked as follows.

*Around 1976-1977, politically conscious Christians in Venda formed the Bold and Evangelical Christian Organisation (Beco). Beco was aimed at furthering the struggle against Apartheid. The majority of Beco members came from the Lutheran Church. Pastors and members of Beco worked closely with other political structures that fought for liberation from the old South African and later from the Venda regimes. Political activists used the Beuster Centre, which was a branch of the Lutheran Church as a venue for political meetings. As a result, the Apartheid and the Venda regimes saw the Lutheran Church serving as a front for the liberation organisations that were banned at that time.*<sup>3</sup>

When the TRC obtained a number of submissions from former members of Beco and the Lutheran Church, it was easier to understand and appreciate the nature of the political conflict in Venda. A good example was that of Tshifiwa Muofhe. Muofhe was the president of Beco, a member of the Lutheran Church and an underground agent of the African National Congress. He was arrested and detained several times by both the old South African and the Venda police in the years 1977 and 1978. When a bomb exploded at Sibasa station in 1981, Muofhe and several pastors were implicated. The Venda police arrested and severely tortured them. Muofhe eventually died in police custody. Muofhe's mother and other members of Beco made submissions to the TRC. Members of the Venda police also applied for amnesty for the role they played in grossly violating the human rights of these people.

The public hearing document was thus extremely useful to the commissioners and committee members who set in those public hearings. The commissioners were able to fully appreciate those stories of victims of human rights. More importantly, these public hearing documents assisted the commissioners in making findings on those cases.

### **An experience**

Producing the public hearing research documents, was the best experience that I had, whilst working as a researcher for the TRC. This was the most enjoyable and fulfilling experience in all the other responsibilities that I performed. This can be attributed to teamwork that was practised in the Gauteng office.

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<sup>3</sup> Venda Public Hearings research report, 3rd and 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1998

Our Gauteng office formed three teams. Each team consisted of a researcher, one or two commissioners and committee members, an investigator, a briefer and one or two statement takers. The information manager, the office manager, the media officer and the logistic officer were also involved with the three teams. Each team met regularly to plan and strategise on how to function effectively on the various activities of the commission. The primary task of the teams was to organise public hearings for the commission effectively.

As the TRC staff members, we came from different backgrounds and brought with us different expertise and experiences. We had politicians, academics, lawyers, police, political activists, postgraduate students and so on. Each team member reported on her or his specific responsibilities to the team. As a researcher, I informed my team on the information that I managed to collect at that point in time. I shared the difficulties I was experiencing and indicated the kind of assistance I needed from my team.

All members of my team went out of their way to help with my research work. The assistance that I received from my team ranged from finding resourceful people to interview, their contact numbers, relevant existing documents that I was not aware of, or that were inaccessible to me and so on. This kind of help was similarly provided to other team members. This system worked extremely well. As a result, most of the public hearings the Gauteng office held were successful because we truly worked as a team instead of individuals from different departments within the TRC.

#### **4. Public hearings summaries**

After public hearings, researchers wrote brief summaries of the cases of human rights violations that were chosen for the public hearings. The purpose of these summaries was to capture new information from the testimonies of victims heard during the public hearings.

##### **What kind of activity?**

It took about a week and a half for us to write the summaries. The summaries were helpful for corroboration purposes. Often the victims who made submissions to the TRC brought with them various records such as inquest reports, medical records, photographs and so on. These records were presented and shown to the commissioners and committee members during the public hearings that were publicised world- wide. The added information brought forward by victims also assisted the commissioners to make findings on the various cases.

##### **Experience**

It was easy to write the summaries of submissions from the public hearings. This task was made easier by the fact that we worked effectively as a team. The team members provided me with all the new information that we had gathered during the public

hearings. The only difficulty was with time, when as researchers we had to quickly prepare documents for the next public hearing.

It is important to mention though that the national office of the TRC often did not use these summaries of the public hearings. Some of the findings made to specific cases did not take into account the information from the public hearings at all. This was a great pity as this kind of information was invaluable.

## **5. The regional and the final report**

The most important task of the research department was to write the final report of the commission. The purpose of this report was among other things to present an accurate and factual document of the extent of human rights violations in South Africa.

### **What happened?**

When the commission completed the process of holding the public hearings, researchers worked on regional reports that were to form part of a final TRC report. Each regional research office produced one report compiled from all the material that the commission as whole was able to collect. These materials ranged from all the research documents that the researchers had produced such as the research theme papers, the outline documents, the public hearing documents, the public hearing summaries, and others. The research report also had to include information from the TRC database, the investigation department and any available data from the Amnesty committee. This was a step towards producing the final report.

As a research team from all the regional offices, we held workshops to discuss the approach, the content and form that the final report had to take. The commissioners, committee members and information and office managers also got involved in the discussions on writing the final report. A specialist on report writing on human rights issues was also brought in to give guidance on the process of writing the TRC final report. In addition, a few journalists were contracted to write papers on areas that the commission did not have information on, for the final report. There was no clear decision on how the report finally had to be written.

This exercise took place only a few months before the work of the Human Rights Committee, a leg of the TRC process, had to be officially completed. It was very difficult for us as researchers, commissioners and others to come to a common understanding and reach consensus on how the final report, should look like.

Another major problem was that the Amnesty process was delayed. As a result, we as researchers could not integrate the Amnesty findings into the final report, as we should have. We thus did not use such invaluable source of information and opinions for the final report.



## **An experience**

This was the most difficult time probably of all the researchers. We could not agree on the best approach to be taken for writing the final report, not only as researchers, but also with commissioners, committee members, the information and office managers.

We, as the Johannesburg research team, continued to collate our research documents into one concise regional report. Other researchers from other regions possibly did the same or did their own thing. There were several meetings with other commission members to discuss progress on the final report. Most of the time there were no final decisions taken regarding the best approach to write the final report, in those meetings.

Yet, there was little time left until the official end of the commission. What came out of the final report ultimately was a compromise of all the efforts of individual researchers. This was nonetheless understandable given time pressure and the enormous work that the remaining researchers still had to do, to produce the final report. This was at the same time an invaluable, yet regrettable experience for some of the individual researchers whose major efforts were lost in the final report. Our South African final report was driven by a legal process of making findings rather than an historical – analytical approach of making sense of events in context.

## **Lesson to be learned**

This paper might create an impression that the listed examples of the kind of research we undertook as researchers, was done orderly. In many (not all) instances, we worked haphazardly and in a rush. With the benefit of our experiences, other future researchers for Truth Commissions could learn by investing in planning better:

Future commissions could benefit by looking carefully, for someone to head their research departments. That person's own research record should reflect a widespread knowledge of the political developments of a country. Such a person is likely to know a lot about the political history of the entire country. Her or his own research is likely to yield that kind of information or she or he will know of other scholars who have specialised in the various research areas covering the entire country.

The head of the research team should have a team consisting of journalists and scholars who have work experience in the various parts of the country. It should be a team of specialists in rural, urban or semi – rural or semi- urban areas of the entire country. It is not impossible to find such a team. In cases where it is not possible to employ such people full time and perhaps because of their commitments elsewhere, the head of the research department should attempt to establish formal relationships with those people. The research head should make sure that the available persons in the research team would work very closely with those 'area experienced' journalists and scholars.

Finding the best research team should certainly alleviate the problems of wasting resources and time as well as working haphazardly. A better research team should focus better with clearly defined responsibilities. It should also be able to foster constructive linkages with other departments of the truth commissions in order to serve the commission as a whole, better.