# Political Change, Organisational Fluidity and Police Training: The South African Case

**Elrena van der Spuy** (¹)

*Centre of Criminology, University of Cape Town, South Africa*

## Abstract (²)

*The establishment and evolution of a constitutional democracy held considerable implications for police training in South Africa. The historical record at our disposal indicates that since 1992 police training has been a topic of debate around which a wide range of practical interventions aimed at the restructuring of police training have been forthcoming. The South African case study allows us to reflect on how the fortunes of police training – its philosophy, methodology and logistics – have been shaped by a complex mix of factors relating to structural realities, political developments and organisational changes. This paper tracks the momentum for reform of police training which existed as the new constitutional rechtstaat came into being and the kinds of mechanisms which played a key role in creating a new vision for police training and translating that vision into practice. The focus then shifts to a consideration of the internal and external influences which have diluted the momentum for change. The paper concludes by reflecting on the latest round of conversations in which the need for reforming the processes of selection, recruitment, training and deployment of police recruits are identified.*

*Keywords:*
*South Africa – police training – demilitarisation – professionalisation – specialisation*

---

## Introduction

In 1994 the racial oligarchy of Apartheid gave way to the establishment of a constitutional democracy. The change required a fundamental restructuring of the state apparatus including its security establishment. After all the security forces played a critical role in the maintenance of racial role throughout the forty long years of formal Apartheid. Furthermore from 1976 onwards both the military and police were embroiled in a counter-insurgency war against popular insurrection which further consolidated a paramilitary institutional culture. In the context of political transition the police as an institution had to be re-engineered in terms of its political role, cultural ethos and operational strategies. Restructuring of training at the level of both basic and advanced training was considered a critical strategy to realign the normative parameters of the organisation to the new democratic polity. This was no small endeavour.

## Police training in fortress South Africa

In 1992 just as early negotiations towards a negotiated settlement took off Janine Rauch undertook a pioneering assessment of basic police training. In doing so she managed to explore a domain which had been largely hidden from external research scrutiny. Under Apartheid, Basic Police Training was organised along the principle of racial segregation. At the time, the four major police colleges were organised along racial lines and scattered across the Republic of South Africa and the various self-governing and independent 'homelands'.

Rauch (1992) confirmed that at the time police training was steeped in an ethos of paramilitarism with an emphasis on drill, physical fitness and the training in musketry skills. In terms of teaching methodology, 'front-loading', 'talk and chalk' characterised the classroom. At the time the training of police recruits was still organised along racial lines with training colleges earmarked for specific racial groups. Rauch's research proved instrumental in galvanising support for a radical overhaul of training as the momentum for political change increased at a time when racial integration of the training estate got underway. As Rauch (1992: 1) would put it:

> "Credible, effective and accountable policing is essential to the larger process of social change in South Africa. To achieve such a style of policing requires a deep-rooted change in the aims and methods of the police organisation. Training has an important role in this process of change, both in terms of addressing the problematic aspects of the informal organisational culture, and in providing members of the police force with the skills that will enable them to deliver an efficient and professional service."

CEPOL

## Policing training suited to an emerging democracy

In years to come various structures participated in the process of reform of police training. In October 1992 – under the auspices of the Police Board – an International Training Committee (ITC) was appointed to review and oversee all reform in the field of police training. The Committee consisted of local and international experts. The conceptual parameters which guided the work of the Committee were defined by the philosophy of community policing and the principle of probationary training. Training had to be 'modernised' to equip police officers with 'professional skills'. On this score, international developments in 'new style training' were considered particularly critical. New strategies for recruitment and selection had to be devised. The selection of recruits had to be guided by a new social profile of the future South African police constable. Recruitment and selection also had to be part of a wider strategy to change the social composition of the public police institution to become more representative of the population. Reform of basic training was interpreted as a critical access point to engender a cultural change within the organisation by advocating new values (accountability, effectiveness, police-community partnerships) and aligning institutional habits to international best practices. Considerable effort went into the training of some 400 local trainers who underwent various crash courses referred to as 'new style training' at the different training centres in the country. This group constituted a racially diverse group of trainers selected from the formerly racially segregated training colleges.

Implementation of the new paradigm for police training became the responsibility of the Multi-National Police Training Implementation Team (MIT). MIT commenced work in August 1994 shortly after the new political elite of the Government of National Unite moved into office. And so it came that the Basic Level Training Pilot Programme (BLTPP) was designed with generous funding support from the Office of Development Administration of the United Kingdom. MIT comprised of four international experts – one each from the UK, Sweden, Holland and Zimbabwe – and four South African Police Service officers. This structure was further supported by a Commonwealth Advisory Team.

In January 1995 1760 recruits arrived to be trained as 'community police officers'. These initiatives had to contend with considerable constraints of times and infrastructural resources. The Pilot Programme envisaged a period of practical training in the field once training at the college was completed. Field training also required the creation of a new infrastructure as well as mentoring support. The latter was provided by eighteen International Advisors who worked alongside local operatives covering the 107 training stations scattered across nine provinces.

The BLTPP constituted a moment of enlightenment in the history of South African police training. At the time it seemed as if the stage was set for an altogether new beginning in the recruitment, selection, training and deployment of police recruits. The new curriculum placed much emphasis on the normative principles of due process, human

rights, police-community partnerships and service delivery. The South African Police Service seemed poised on the eve of a new organisational phase with recruits being inducted in the principles of 'democratic policing'.

The optimism of the early 1990s, however, was not to be sustained. After 1996 a combination of factors effectively stalled the reform of police training. Space limitations do not allow us to go into much detail. Suffice to highlight the most important factors which shaped the trajectory of police reform and of police training in years to come. We now turn to a brief consideration of two sets of factors: internal police organisational factors and external social factors.

## Internal police organisational factors

In the first instance, *a moratorium on police recruitment* was announced in late 1995. Budgetary considerations lay at the heart of this decision. The moratorium disrupted the momentum for change which has just been set in motion. What contributed to a further dissipation of energies was the decision that during the moratorium the training colleges offer remedial type training of three months' duration to 'special constables'. Special constables were deployed in African townships during the 1980s with the explicit task of suppressing popular resistance. The cohort of special constables all drawn from the black African lumpen proletariat exhibited low levels of literacy. Many of them had criminal records too. Amongst township residents, they had a reputation for thuggish behaviour. As part of the political agreement of 1994, these auxiliary forces were to be 'integrated' into the SAPS. It became the responsibility of trainers at the colleges to impart some basic knowledge to this group. The task was difficult. Morale was said to be extremely low amongst trainers who have just been exposed to the latest ideas about classroom pedagogics. The trainers at the police colleges were ill-prepared to make the shift from the intensive demands of teaching new style police recruits to training low calibre 'special constables'.

The moratorium on police training lasted for two years. By the time basic training resumed in 1999 many of the trainers at the colleges who benefitted from the pilot programme had left to take up positions elsewhere in the organisation. It appeared at the time that the investment in basic police training was being squandered (van der Spuy, 1995).

A second factor of importance relates to the *massive increase in police personnel* which took place over a relatively short period of time. This process which ensued in 2000 became known as "en masse recruitment". Between 2003 and 2012 more than 120000 recruits were absorbed into the organisation. Part of the rationale of recruiting large numbers of new personnel was to adjust the demographic profile of the larger organisation in pursuit of demographic representiveness. To illustrate the point, we can compare the demographics of the organisation between 1995 and 2012. In 1995, at the time of amalgamation of the

CEPOL

11 police forces into a national police institution, the ratio between white to black personnel was 36 % to 64 %. Seventeen years later, in 2012, the ratio stood at 12 % white and 88 % black (Bruce, 2013). In numerical terms, the integration of former ANC militias into the police organisation made only a marginal contribution to human resources for reasons which are discussed elsewhere (van der Spuy & Lever, 2016). The SAPS was applauded for its rapid achievement of equity targets considered so critical an aspect of transformation. Success on the equity front, however, did not translate into either effectiveness or efficiency. In later years the Commissioner of Police, under whose watch the organisation expanded, admitted that the expansionist drive overemphasised 'quantity' at the expense of 'quality'. In years to come the effects of "en masse recruitment" would loom large over the organisation (news24, 2010).

Many risks were associated with such ambitious personnel targets resulting in a 51 % growth in police personnel between 2002 and 2012. As thousands of applications streamed in, the administrative systems started to buckle under the strain. Delays in the processing of applications increased. Opportunities for corruption multiplied (The Voice from the Cape, 2014). Overflow and congestion led to a lowering of controls and standards at the point of recruitment, selection and training. Reference-checks were by-passed and the system of fingerprinting which was supposed to eliminate applicants with criminal records became inefficient (The South African, 2016). Parliamentary debate on the topic was recorded as follows:

> *"Mass recruitment had occurred between 2002 and 2012, to meet a need, but it was badly planned, and failed to ensure correlating improvements for the training colleges and supervisors, with the result that inadequately trained officers were related without proper management support, which was exacerbated by a breakdown also, of accountability systems"* (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2013).

Field deployment, so critical a feature of the Basic Level Training Pilot Programme, was also whittled down. The dramatic increase in police recruits exacerbated personnel problems on the ground. The supervisory role of frontline managers increased exponentially. They struggled to cope with the increase of responsibilities. It did not take long before command and control over the deployment of new recruits became compromised.

A third factor which influenced police training related to the way in which multiple waves of restructuring made for organisational fluidity and a lowering of police morale. In 2000 Jackie Selebi took office as Commissioner of the Police and embarked on an intricate process of organisational reshuffling. There were two waves to the restructuring. In 2000 various specialist units were reorganised (Burger & Omar, 2011; Redpath, 2000). The reorganisation took different forms. In some instances specialist units were closed down. In other cases formerly centralised units were decentralised to station or area levels only to be re-centralised in the second wave of organisational change (Burger, 2015). Take the case of the *National*

*Anti-Corruption Unit.* Since its inception in 1996 this unit established an admirable track record. Notwithstanding its achievements, Commissioner Selebi closed down the Unit in 2003. This decision left the police institution without any dedicated capacity to investigate corruption. This loss of expertise was all the more critical at a point where all national indexes of corruption were pointing upwards. The *Serious and Violent Crime Unit* was centralised in 2002 and then decentralised in 2006 with a consequent dispersal of policing expertise. The *Family, Violence, Child Protection and Special Offences Unit* originally established in 1996 was decentralised to station level in 2006 only to be re-established in 2010. Then finally, the changing fortunes of *Public Order police units* over a decade also demonstrate the negative impact of ever-changing policy decisions to centralise, disperse, disband or re-centralise specialist policing expertise. Amidst such organisational reshuffling, it was not possible to consolidate the gains of police training as envisaged in the early period of reform.

A fourth factor which impacted on training initiatives related to wider policy shifts within the police organisation. Take for example the issue of *de-militarisation.* From 1992 onwards there was large-scale consensus in political circles about the need to demilitarise the organisation. At the time the new vision for the police envisaged a police service working in close cooperation with communities in pursuit of local safety. The Basic Level Training Pilot Training Programme shifted the emphasis from drill and discipline to the development of the 'social skills' of police officials. By 2000 however, the National Crime Combating Strategy foreshadowed the continued appeal of fire-brigade and saturation forms of policing. The continuation of high levels of violent crime, the growth in more organised transnational forms of crime on the other, and the re-emergence of public protests (after a respite of some five or so years) created the very conditions within which a return to combative crime control strategies found traction in both political and police circles. From the political centre throughout the first decade of the new millennium there was talk of the need for making 'war on crime' and for allowing the use of lethal force in the execution of police duties vis-à-vis dangerous criminals. For many these conversations signalled a dangerous return to the use of maximum force so characteristic a feature of Apartheid police (Bruce, 2005; Jensen, 2010).

Before long the pendulum of debate would swing back to de-militarisation. In part public concern about basic police skills, police abuse of power and high levels of corruption within and across the organisation would prompt a re-think of the ethos to guide police. In 2012 with the release of a strategic developmental document – *The National Development Plan* for 2030 – the call was once again for 'professionalisation' and 'demilitarisation' of the police service (National Planning Commission, 2013). With regards to the latter the architects of the report would argue as follows:

> *"The decision to demilitarise the police force, moving away from its history of brutality, was a key goal of transformation after 1994. The remilitarisation of the police in recent years has not garnered greater respect for the police or higher conviction rates. If anything, it has con-*

CEPOL

*tributed to violence. The police should be demilitarised and managed towards a professional civilian service"* (National Planning Commission, 2013: 44).

So far we have considered some of the internal organisational factors which diluted the reform momentum in the training environment so characteristic a feature of debates and innovations between 1992 and 1995. We now turn to a consideration of external factors.

## External factors of relevance

Ongoing theorising and practical experimentation in various aspects of police training were also influenced by wider external developments. Three factors deserve mention here.

### The increase in public disorder

Between 1994 and 1999 there was a considerable drop in incidences of public disorder. This lull provided a welcome reprieve from the long-standing adversarial engagements between public order policing units and pockets of protesters so characteristic a feature of policing in Apartheid South Africa. The reprieve did not last long. From 2000 onwards protests over 'service delivery' became a routine political feature at the level of local governments. The sheer magnitude of incidence of public disorder, demonstrations and protests would strain police resources on an almost daily basis (Alexander, Runciman & Maruping, 2016).

In the context of such protests, the police would be re-inserted into the theatre of adversarialism. Before long, discussions on police training again tipped toward the paramilitary end of the equation. Investigative journalists attached to the Mail and Guardian reported in 2011 that old style training practices reminiscent of police training during Apartheid were very much in evidence at the training college in Pretoria. The investigation supported by leaked video footage spoke of 'South African Police Service's heavy-handed, military-style approach to the training of police recruits, which includes assault, harsh punishment and sleep deprivation' (Gumede-Johnson, 2011).

### Old and new crime demands

The evolution of South Africa's democracy has been accompanied by the diversification of safety concerns and crime threats. Take the issue of police responsibilities vis-à-vis domestic violence, for example. High rates of gender-based violence have long characterised the South African situation. Since the early 1990s a concerted effort has gone into the development of socio-legal policies aimed at addressing such violence. So, for example, the promulgation of the *Domestic Violence Act* has placed new demands on the criminal justice sector. Training to develop the skills of SAPS in this area was prioritised in the Training Provisioning Plan of 2010 (Combrinck & Wakefield, 2010). Considerable effort has been made to engage the police in their legal responsibilities and to develop awareness and skills to

fulfil their responsibilities vis-à-vis victims of domestic violence. Police training on the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act has been a subject of considerable research, which has allowed us to engage, not only the limitations of police training, but also the limitations confronting the police as an institution to control or prevent domestic violence (Smythe, 2015).

Legislative reforms in both youth and child justice as well as in organised crime have similarly led to various training interventions aimed at equipping the police to fulfil their responsibilities in these areas. Again, research has allowed us to appreciate the complexities of the issues and the limitations confronting law enforcement in engaging deeply embedded social problems.

The Annual Reports of the Commissioner of Police provide details about the large number of training initiatives on a wide range of topics which have involved police personnel. Numerous police officers are 'trained' annually. For example, the 20014/15 Annual Report of the South African Police Service captures training of numerous police personnel specialising in domestic violence; child justice; sexual offences; and victim support. Many training initiatives have also focused on the development of detective skills; service delivery at station level; the development of intellectual skills; tactical development particularly in the area of crowd management, firearm competency and so forth. Furthermore, parliamentary deliberations on international cooperation in police training allude to ongoing training exchanges between the South Africa Police Service and a number of other police institutions as far afield as China, the USA, the UK, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Hungary. The SAPS have also offered courses relating to environmental crimes, human trafficking and data protection to other police agencies. So for example, study visits hosted by SAPS were attended by police from Qatar, Namibia and Bangladesh (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2016). Questions, however, have been asked by members of the relevant Parliamentary Portfolio Committee about the content of such training; the way in which personnel are selected, the quality of the trainers involved, and what is known about the impact of such training on the professional expertise of the police.

### State capture and political influence over the police organisation
Twenty years into the new democracy another development became more evident: the steady encroachment of political influence over the police's operational mandate and key appointments at the upper echelons of the organisation. Political commentators began to point to the side effects of 'state capture' on the security apparatus. Processes of politicisation introduced new tensions and cleavages within the police organisation which have in turn bedevilled the pursuit of police professionalism. Time will tell whether and to what extent the increasing politicisation of the police as institution will have corrosive effects on training endeavours within the institution.

## New moves to address training deficits

The story about reform of police training and the factors which have militated against a deepening and/or consolidation of the post-1994 initiatives need not end on a negative note. There is reason for some optimism. Over the past few years, critical engagement with the deficits of police training has again emerged. The public debate has been influenced by the deliberations of two Commissions of Inquiry – both of which were established in 2012. Both the Khayelitsha Commission and Marikana Commission have in their respective reports documented the shortcomings in both generic and specialist policing skills.

The reports of the Khayelitsha and Marikana Commissions of Inquiry yielded insight into the wider structural dynamics confronting the police organisation and the many internal organisational challenges (Marikana Commission, 2015). Take for example, the findings of the Khayelitsha Commission, which focused on police-community relations and the delivery of police services to poor African inhabitants of a sprawling township situated on the periphery of Cape Town (Khayelitsha Commission of Inquiry, 2014). The findings revealed the many challenges confronting community safety. Resource allocation remains skewed toward more affluent areas leaving the safety of the urban poor severely underfunded. Routine inefficiencies plague the police system ranging from the failure to record complaints; lack of police visibility; poor investigations; the loss of dockets; the submission of poorly prepared dockets to courts, and the daily violation of the principles of procedural justice. Case overload was further exacerbated by low levels of literacy and high rates of absenteeism within the police (van der Spuy & Armstrong, 2014).

Since 2006 there has been some realisation forthcoming of the need for radical interventions in the police organisation. Training is again seen as key to the quest for a professional police organisation. In theory (or on paper) there are many facets to the 'turn-around' strategy. For our purposes it is relevant to note that entry-level basic training has again been identified as a starting place for re-engaging the education of training of police recruits including detectives. The strategy has become advertised as the 'Back to Basics' approach. The title suggests a spirit of pragmatism. At a press meeting, acting national police commissioner Lt.Gen. Khomotso Phahlane in somewhat circular terms explained that the "Back-to Basics" approach to policing "focuses on every police officer doing the basics of policing and on doing these basics properly and consistently." Recruit training too one surmised would be subjected to the dogma of 'back to basics' (Guduka, 2016). What exactly this means for the form and content of training however, is not readily evident at present.

In recent years there has been much talk of creating infrastructural capacity within the Training division or Human Resource Development to oversee education, training and skills development. Such investment is seen as critical to improving the quality of service delivered by police personnel. Changes to recruitment strategies are to be consolidated following the establishment of a Task Team in 2013 to investigate corruption in recruitment. In 2013

CEPOL

the Deputy Minister of Police acknowledged that a key challenge confronting recruitment of a credible workforce is to uproot corruption within the recruitment process. Recruitment, she went on to say, 'was besieged with favouritism, nepotism, allegiance and prejudice'.

Over the past few years there has been renewed talk of community involvement in recruitment. There has also been reference to the need for 'grooming camps' to equip prospective recruits and the need for vetting candidates and identifying fraudulent qualifications (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2015). A rigorous engagement with the normative templates for police as set out in the SAPS Code of Conduct is envisaged. There has again been persistent talk of the need for demilitarisation, professionalisation and technological modernisation of and within the police organisation.

It remains to be seen whether the latest training vision will become operationalised and succeed in yielding police recruits equipped with the basic policing skills required to engage the many crime challenges confronting the South African society.

## Conclusion

The South African Police Services is large by international standards and with 194552 personnel, it is the largest police organisation on the African continent. In terms of infrastructure it is by African standards well-endowed. It routinely utilises a very enlightened discourse which emulates 21-century 'police speak' with references to community-based policing; human rights compliant policing and intelligence-led policing. Beyond this modern discursive surface, however, lies a deeply embattled institution and a flawed training estate. Wider structural inequities (poverty and unemployment) combined with contextual realities (high crime rates and low levels of cohesion) make for an extremely challenging situation. Whilst much hope is pinned on the benefits to be yielded by bold training initiatives those very initiatives are in turn shaped by a heady mix of internal and external influences.

## References

- Alexander, P., Runciman, C. & Maruping, B. (2016) The use and abuse of police data in protest analysis: South Africa's incident registration information system (IRIS ). *SA Crime Quarterly*. 58, 9-21. doi:10.17159/2413-3108/2016/v0n58a1513

- Bruce, D. (2005) Interpreting the body count: South African statistics of lethal police violence. *South African Review of Sociology*. 36 (2), 141-159. doi:10.1080/21528586.2005.10419135

- Bruce, D. (2013) New blood: Implications of en masse recruitment for the South African Police Service. *SA Crime Quarterly*. 2013 (43), 17-28. doi:10.17159/2413-3108/2013/v0i43a823

- Burger, J. (2015) No-man's-land: The uncertain existence of SAPS specialised investigative units. *Institute for Security Studies Papers*. 283.

CEPOL

- Burger, J. & Omar, B. (2011) A critical overview of restructuring in the South African Police Service (SAPS). *Institute of Security Studies*. Unpublished Paper.

- Combrinck, H. & Wakefield, L. (2010) Going the Extra Mile: Police training on domestic violence. *SA Crime Quarterly*. 31, 27-34. doi:10.17159/2413-3108/2010/v0i31a890

- Guduka, S. (2016) Police going back to basics. Available from https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Local/Express-News/police-going-back-to-basics-20160126

- Gumede-Johnson, K. (2011) Police training: Brutality exposed. Available at https://mg.co.za/article/2011-06-03-saps-the-strong-arm-of-force.

- Jensen, S. (2010) The security and development nexus in Cape Town: War on gangs, counterinsurgency and citizenship. *Security Dialogue*. 41 (1), 77-98. doi:10.1177/0967010609357038

- Khayelitsha Commission of Inquiry (2014) Towards a safer Khayelitsha - Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of Police Inefficiency and a Breakdown in Relations between SAPS and the Community of Khayelitsha. Available at http://www.khayelitshacommission.org.za/images/towards_khaye_docs/Khayelitsha_Commission_Report_WEB_FULL_TEXT_C.pdf

- Marikana Commission (2015) Report on matters of public, national and international concern arising out of the tragic incidents at the Lonmin Mine in Marikana, in the North West Province. Available from http://www.gov.za/sites/www.gov.za/files/marikana-report-1.pdf.

- National Planning Commission. (2013) *National development plan vision 2030*. Executive Summary.

- news24 archives (2010) Police sacrifice quality for quantity – Cele (2010-09-14). Available from http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Police-sacrifice-quality-for-quantity-Cele-20100914.

- Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2013) Minutes of PMG Meeting, 26 March 2013. Available at http://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/15623/

- Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2015) South African Police Service on its 2014/15 Annual Report; Audit outcomes by Auditor-General. Minutes of PGM Meeting. Available at https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/21578/

- Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2016) SAPS &IPID: Training programmes & professionalisation, with Union and independent research input. Minutes of PMG Meeting, 09 February 2016. Available at https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/21987/

- Rauch, J. (1992) *South African police basic training: A preliminary assessment*. Project for the Study of Violence, Psychology Department, University of the Witwatersrand.

- Redpath, J. (2000) Restructuring the Detective Service. Available from https://www.issafrica.org/uploads/Mono73.pdf

- Smythe, D. (2015) *Rape unresolved: policing sexual offences in South Africa*. Cape Town, UCT Press.

- The South African (2016) South Africa's criminal cops: Is the rot far worse than we have been told? Available from https://www.thesouthafrican.com/south-africas-criminal-cops-rot-far-worse-told/

- The Voice from the Cape (2014) 'SAPS corruption stems from mass recruitment'. Available from http://www.vocfm.co.za/saps-corruption-stems-from-mass-recruitment/

- Van der Spuy, E. (1995) *The role of the international policing community in the reform of the SAP(S) Basic Police Training*. Unpublished document.

- Van der Spuy, E. & Armstrong, A. (2014) Policing of an urban periphery: The case of Khayelitsha. *South African Journal of Criminal Justice*. 27 (3), 377-403.

- Van der Spuy, E. & Lever, J. (2016) *Amalgamation and Integration: Some intricacies relating to the forging of the South African Police Service, 1994-1996*. Centre of Criminology, University of Cape Town. Research Report.