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Joining hands to smash a common enemy

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ACCOUNTABILITY is one of the most significant keys to reducing crime. We can have the best criminal legislation, punitive sanctions and a justice system that is unique in the world, but without accountability of the police, crime will continue to escalate.

Off course, there are other factors when tackling crime, such as community participation, social upliftment programmes and employment. Accountability by the police to the public is significant because the police, like politicians, are the paid servants of the masses. The more vocal the masses are the better results and, within a democratic society, the public always demands positive results and accountability. Evaluation of police performance is one way to get the police to account and to gauge their level of commitment to enforcing the law.

Accountability must go beyond police management, because even the latter has to account to the public. This is where community-police partnership in a democratic society can play a pivotal role. One of the ways of reducing crime is for communities to work in partnership with the police. A few years ago, these forums were a strange partnership between the police and the pre-dominantly "white" South Africans.

These forums were also police-driven and often motivated by a "swart-gevaar" mindset. As a result, a distorted picture about crime trends emerged during the apartheid regime. The politicised role of the police further alienated the masses, who were understandably filled with suspicion and fear.

TODAY, South Africans of all "shades" and across political and socio-economic strata are working together through these forums. We often overlook the adjustments people are making in forging a united front against crime. We are also unable to appreciate the tremendous psychological pressure on the police who are going through a process of "debriefing" from a political to a civilian role.

The forums therefore make a strange partnership of bringing together activists and past members of the notorious security branch, working together in a spirit of reconciliation, peace, justice and trust. It is a very delicate and demanding challenge for a society besieged by spiralling crime. Community police forums have now entered a new phase. The police are having to account to the public and the public is being held accountable by the police in a structured manner.

The launch of “Project Safety and Security Excellence” on March 3 in the Albert Park precinct as a pilot project is the latest example of the growing credibility and successful role of the forums. This project was initiated here by Mark Todd, chairperson of the C R Swart Square CPF in Durban. The project envisages sectoral policing – The “Bobby on the Beat” concept of policing with regular evaluation on performance and delivery. SAPS members had to apply for the project and were given special training.

The project hopes to cement a closer, trustworthy partnership between the communities and the police in their struggle to reduce crime. However, the communities (business, residents, street traders) also have a responsibility. The cellphone and bag snatches, the infamous group of (“A-Team”) women who loot and plunder shops in the CBD and the criminals who steal from cars, are usually encouraged and enticed by someone, somewhere.

THOSE who encourage crime must be reported and exposed and the communities have an obligation to do so. When people unite and work selflessly, criminals of all categories will know their days are numbered. Social isolation and exposure of criminals and their partners in crime is a powerful weapon. The success of the project will mean replicating it to other areas. The strong possibility of the Durban city police becoming a metropolitan force shortly will further boost the partnership between the SAPS and the communities.

There are many community police forums – some proactive, some dormant and some reactionary. The forum in the

Albert Park area is the only one where questions raised by community members are answered by rank and file from the SAPS. It is here that plans are devised, visions shaped and differences set aside for a common purpose. Those who wish to play politics and cry foul when forums are established as a collective community effort, ultimately isolate and expose themselves. They undo their role by their “recklessness” because forums are unpoliticised, community-based structures.

The forums are a slow and painful process as we move across the bridge of the past, and offer little or no solace to those who have lost a dear one, property or wealth, but are one sure way of eventually reducing crime. It is imperative to work with a forum, and where one does not exist, to mobilise all stakeholders to establish one. As South Africans we are, in a sense, blessed with the tools of the past to create a better future.