

# Making music of a special type: The Soweto Marimba Youth League Trust



**Michael H Rea** is the Founding Partner at SustainabilityServices.co.za, a niche consultancy focusing on the provision of advisory and assurance services over sustainability reports. He is also the Founding Trustee of the Soweto Marimba Youth League. Rea is a visiting lecturer at the University of Stellenbosch, a board member of Cotlands, and a regular volunteer contributor to a variety of other local charities. He is a Canadian by birth, a South African by desire, and mentor to Jabulani Bogatsu, the emerging manager of SMYLE.

*Despite what some, particularly in the corporate sector, might think, the Arts are not a 'nice to have': they are fundamental to the development of a rich, vibrant, safe, tolerant, educated and sustainable society. The Arts are not unfortunately funded to the extent that they could be, simply because they are often misinterpreted as an ends in and of themselves, rather than a means to much more important ends.*

The Arts are the gateway to refinement, and an important mechanism for teaching our youth that hard work and determination can, and do, lead to success.

The Arts teach harmony; not just in terms of a chorus of voices blending together to demonstrate aural beauty, but in terms of the way in which different strengths and weaknesses can be pulled together to create 'one voice'.

The Arts teach teamwork, and can become the only way in which many children can experience the power of working together for a common purpose. They are an effective demonstration that the whole is often much greater than the sum of its parts.

The Arts – deployed effectively – can become an important mechanism for encouraging youth to avoid drugs and crime, and to respect the value of an education.

The Arts are an effective tool for teaching the values of Leadership, Coaching, Mentorship and Entrepreneurship, and in a country such as South Africa, the Arts must be viewed as a weapon to be used in the war against mediocrity. For these reasons, the Soweto Marimba Youth League, or SMYLE, was developed at the start of 2008 to offer hope in the face of adversity.

The Dobsonville area of Soweto, albeit rich with its own cultural heritage, typifies many of the challenges marginalised communities continue to face more than two decades into the democratic South Africa that emerged from one of the world's most vilified cultural divides. Schools remain run-down, services are 'basic' at best, poverty, ill-health and crime abound, and the youth of the community are left with few alternatives to acts of antisocial behaviour.

## **Where goes poverty, so goes malevolence!**

Over the past couple of years, society has been forced to learn the meaning of the "Gini Coefficient", or the economic measure of income disparity that now sets South Africa near the ignoble top of a dishonourable list of countries that can't seem to share wealth. Where South Africa used to be second only to Brazil for having an



enormous chasm separating ‘rich’ and ‘poor’, and depending on the source cited, we now have the world’s largest level of economic unfairness. Say what you will about the end of Apartheid, of the ‘big A’ variety, the South Africa of 2011 is home to what might very well be a more disgraceful form of apartheid (‘little a’) – economic apartheid – and it is having devastating impacts on the youth of today, and the South Africa of tomorrow.

Interestingly, when you travel to Brazil, you are almost immediately bombarded by the fact that poverty is prevalent wherever you go. It’s neither hidden, nor segregated from the rest of society. It’s along the Marginal (via duct) in São Paulo, and throughout the slopes of Rio. It’s along the roads, railway lines and right next door to the mammoth and palatial houses of the über-wealthy. It’s not hidden on the leeward side of mine dumps, as in Soweto, nor tucked behind a ridge, like Alexandra, and deemed invisible from those living and working in the likes of Sandton.

As in Brazil, poverty and social inequality bring with them correlated rates of crime. Violent crimes, including gun-related robberies and intentional homicide, occur at alarming rates, yet South Africa’s rates now border on the truly absurd, and little seems to be being done to curb this. In the most recent announcement of crime statistics, at the end of 2010, it was reported that just under 18 000 murders occurred in the 12-month reporting period (albeit with questionable math). This places South Africa second only to Colombia for murders, with 4.96 murders for every 10 000 people, compared to 6.18 for Colombia, although Colombia is consistently regarded as a “conflict zone”. The murder rate in Brazil, interestingly enough, is only 2.5 per 10 000 people, or half that of South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Although a heightened risk – crime is all around you in Brazil, particularly the ‘smash & grab’ variety that South Africans have come to expect in high traffic density corridors such as the Joburg CBD – this level of risk appears to be a contributing factor for the heightened sense of social conscience, volunteerism and charity that abounds throughout Brazilian society. Granted, the wisdom of the Brazilian government, starting with the Real Plan in 1994, under the Cardoso regime, and

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the strong business-friendly social policies of the Lula (Luiz Inácio *Lula da Silva*) government, may very well have had a strong hand in this. Rather than society and/or industry expecting government to fight crime with a police-centric approach, Brazil appears to have tackled violent crime through a combination of street-level social reform and policing, with the social reform at least attempting to give the underprivileged a means to meeting their own needs without resorting to crime.

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One area of social reform that developed out of the Real Plan, was the ability for companies to invest in the communities around them. Organisations such as *Empresas Amigas da Criança Feliz* (Child Friendly Businesses) were established to manage corporate social investments in social development projects, using changes in the national tax policy to encourage investment in social development in exchange for tax relief. Companies were encouraged to assess the socioeconomic needs of their communities, and to invest in organisations or projects that sought to

improve the lot of those deemed 'less fortunate'. Orphan care, education, sports development and the Arts thus received much-needed support from 'Business', or those of the 'more fortunate' part of society whose 'business' was not social development. Government won, by reducing the burden to deliver services through admin-hindered bureaucracies. Business won, by creating a sense of 'caring' within their organisations, while simply re-deploying funds otherwise destined for taxes. Society won, by gaining access to well-administered social development projects that could ultimately measure its success by its ability to remain 'sustainable' in the pursuit of 'social good'.

In South Africa, we're yet to develop such a robust conscience, although we seem to be getting there.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) Codes of Good Practice, the government's inter-industry guidelines for transformation, encourage socioeconomic development (SED) spending of up to 1% of net profit after tax, as do the various industry-specific transformation charters, such as the Mining Charter (Broad-Based Socio-Economic Empowerment Charter for the South African Mining Industry). However, while many companies comply with the spend target requirements, it is yet unclear as to whether or not industry has taken a serious look at where their SED spend goes, or whether or not it will have a meaningful impact on any of the socioeconomic challenges surrounding us. While 5.4 billion Rand was donated by business in 2009, up nearly 20% over 2008, it is still unclear whether enough of this was 'invested' rather than merely 'donated'.

South Africa is still littered with examples of *'poverty pornography'*, or the multitude of corporate marketing attempts to portray their organisations and/or leadership as being sympathetic to the plight of the less fortunate in our society. We're bombarded by photos of a Managing Director cutting the ribbon to a brand new school, yet unaware as to whether or not the running costs of the school will ever be there to ensure that the school educates learners, or of senior executives handing out presents during their annual Christmas Hajj to a nearby Aids orphanage, unaware of whether or not the orphanage is able to meet its annual budget requirements.

What we don't seem to have is a clear corporate understanding of the need for a comprehensive SED strategy, complete with an understanding of how the Arts can play a fundamental role in fostering an education-friendly environment that at least moves towards a crime-free utopia.

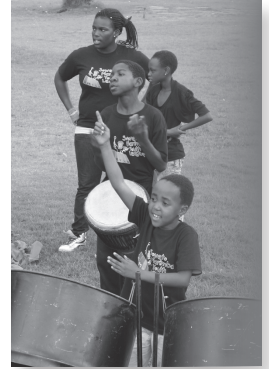
The Soweto Marimba Youth League, or 'SMYLE', was borne from a flawed community-based youth development project in the Dobsonville area of Soweto: the Soweto Marimba Kidz (SMK). Although started with the best intentions of the Gauteng Department of Education, the SMK project was run by an unscrupulous primary school principal who quickly learned that he could use the plight of underprivileged youth to obtain personal wealth. He learned that even the most respected companies, such as Sasol, would blindly donate funds to purchase musical instruments without requiring evidence that the funds were being used for the stated purpose. Thus, when evidence surfaced of the misappropriation of more than R500 000 in two years, the leadership of SMYLE could do little else but pull out from the SMK project.

But to what extent was this fair to the intended beneficiaries of the well-intentioned SMK project? Not at all!

It is not the fault of the children of Dobsonville that their schools do not have the resources to offer music instruction as part of the curriculum, or even as an after-school initiative. Nor is it their fault that one person could misuse a position of authority to seek personal gain; nor is it their fault that the corporate sector does not understand the value of the Arts, nor their role in ensuring that SED occurs effectively, and without abuse.

Thus, the SMYLE project was borne as a mechanism for proving that the Arts can make a difference, and that with proper guidance, the youth of Dobsonville could meet their own SED goals. SMYLE is operated, at the daily activity level, by Jabulani Bogatsu – a former band member – and a handful of other senior leaders who have emerged not only as gifted musicians, but as natural leaders. SMYLE is not the result of one committed donor, but rather the result of a committed donor's ability to offer a hand-up to a group of talented youth seeking to offer their community an opportunity to avoid drugs, crime, and to seek academic excellence, noting that our number one Core Value is 'Education First!'

In its third year of official operation, SMYLE is a musical instruction project based at a rented house in Dobsonville. Managed by a former student within the project, and with more than 80 full-time members, as at the end of January 2011, SMYLE counts as its successes the fact that the band has won honours at the National Marimba Festival in both 2009 and 2010, with a 2011 goal of entering no fewer than 60 musicians – aged 6 to 22 – in the competition. Also, 25 members of the team participated in the third bi-annual tour to Canada in September/October



or 2010, sharing a message of ‘hope in the face of adversity’ to more than 12 000 of their Canadian high school peers.

Using marimbas, steel drums, brass instruments and drums, the SMYLe team performs at a variety of corporate, community and private functions, giving its team members an opportunity to earn R100 each per performance, while covering its costs of getting to the events, and raising awareness with the goal of ultimately obtaining sponsorship support. SMYLe also uses ‘commitment to the team’, one of its Core Values, to identify excellence that is frequently celebrated at open-air performances in public spaces (e.g., the Mall of Rosebank and Zoo Lake). The junior and senior performance bands know as many as 120 different songs, and can learn a new song in as little as 20 minutes. However, inasmuch as SMYLe is a musical instruction project, music is not the desired end: rather a means to a much more important SED objective.

At a time when the South African education system is fundamentally flawed in its acceptance of 30% as a ‘pass’, SMYLe seeks no less than 80% attendance at practices in order for participants to be able to perform publicly, regardless of whether it’s a paid-for event or not. The collective thinking is that excellence cannot be found in mediocrity, nor in a system based on low expectations, and the parallel is easily drawn.

*Imagine what the band would sound like if everyone only managed to get 30% of the notes right!*

By vehemently opposing mediocrity, and by measuring attendance on a daily basis, SMYLe seeks to teach its members that excellence can be found in persistence, and that true leaders are those who understand the importance of seeking excellence within themselves, as much as in those they seek to lead.

Attendance at band practices is coupled with a monthly review of home and academic excellence. Each senior band member is expected to have letters of permission signed by their parent/guardian and their school, with their school’s authority based on measures of attendance, homework completion and in-class behaviour. Any band member unable to submit these letters, for any reason, is immediately suspended until

their behaviour improves. SMYLe is a privilege, not a right, and SMYLe participation can only be offered to youth seeking excellence in all areas of their lives.

Attendance ensures that the ‘commitment to the team’ Core Value manifests itself not only in a collective pursuit of musical excellence, but also in a means for the team to identify potential problems individuals are facing at home, at school, or with their studies. When a member’s attendance pattern suddenly shifts away from the team, leaders emerge to investigate the reasons for such a shift, and mechanisms are established to help mitigate problems, including homework teams to help individuals struggling with subject matter in one or more courses.

Ultimately, SMYLe attendance is observed as a mechanism for giving youth an opportunity to avoid prevalent misdeeds such drug as abuse, crime and teenage pregnancy. However, SMYLe’s ability to meet the need expressed by the Dobsonville community, particularly parents and educators, is limited by its inability to obtain assistance from mainstream SED funding partners. Once again, it is commonly observed that the Arts are seen as a ‘nice to have’ rather than a ‘must do’.

Trialogue<sup>2</sup>, in its 2010 edition of the CSI Handbook (13th Edition) reported that of the R5.4 billion donated by the corporate sector in 2009, only 4.6% (R291.6 million) was donated to the Arts, of which 40% (R116.6 million) was directed to the performing arts (music, theatre and dance). This equates to R2.3 per person in South Africa, and represents a significant shortcoming if one views the Arts as an investment in our collective ability to live in a vibrantly socialised economy.

At present, SMYLe seeks to find R1.5 million to develop the first performing arts centre in the Dobsonville area, with the ability to accommodate no fewer than 400 learners from more than 30 area schools. At an average funding of R2.3 per South African, SMYLe will have to wait a long time before it can extend its reach, but if the team has learned one thing, accepting mediocrity does not lead to excellence!

Wish us luck (or join our campaign to achieve success)!

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#### NOTES

1 Source: [www.nationmaster.com](http://www.nationmaster.com)

2 [www.trialogue.co.za](http://www.trialogue.co.za)