

# Health Workers Society

The late seventies saw a resurgence of political activity throughout South Africa; the fight against oppression and exploitation was once again taken up in various ways. Trade unions and community organisations which were being established, were critically examining society and taking up the fight for better living and working conditions.

There was also a growing awareness of the problems related to health such as the inequalities in health care, the deteriorating health status of the majority of people and the exploitation of health workers. However, there was no organisation in Cape Town that could take up these issues in a critical and constructive manner. In October 1980, the Health Workers Society (HWS) was launched, following the establishment of similar health worker organisations in Johannesburg and Durban.



HWS acts as a supportive force for health workers, recipients of health care and communities.

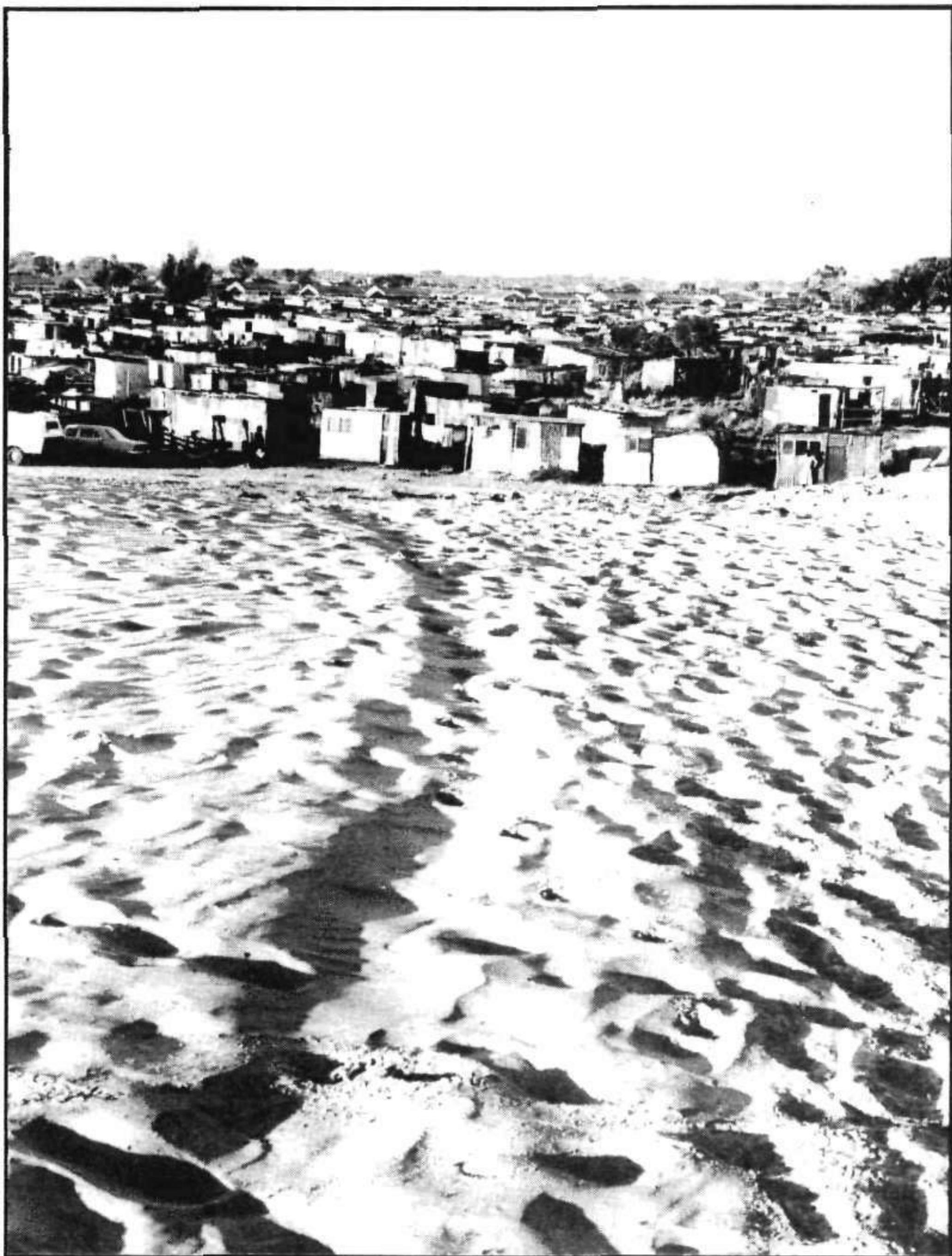
## Aims and objectives

- To provide an organisational base for health workers in the Western Cape.
- To promote patient care at all levels.
- To provide a forum for health discussion, opinion and education, with the emphasis on the socio-economic and political aspects of medicine in society.
- To act as a supportive force for health workers, recipients of health care and communities.

The main aim was to build a strong, progressive and democratic health worker organisation, that could effectively participate in broader struggles at a local level. It was also an attempt to critically challenge the domination of orthodox western medicine and promote the health worker concept. In addition, there was a need to develop an understanding of the political economy of health and how best to use this understanding in the community and the workplace. In practice it meant the organisation and unionisation of all health workers, meeting and organising with health workers from other organisations and centres and publishing newsletters and resource material, as well as providing the community with the assistance it requested.



**HWS is committed to building and supporting community organisations where the community is actively involved in and in control of a project.**



**KTC squatter camp - HWS has been involved in a combined KTC-HWS project providing curative services, health worker training and the establishment of co-operatives.**

## Review of activities

Since its inception, HWS has been actively involved in the following inter-related issues. These have been divided into three major areas for discussion purposes.

1. Community health related issues
2. Health worker issues
3. Relationship with other organisations

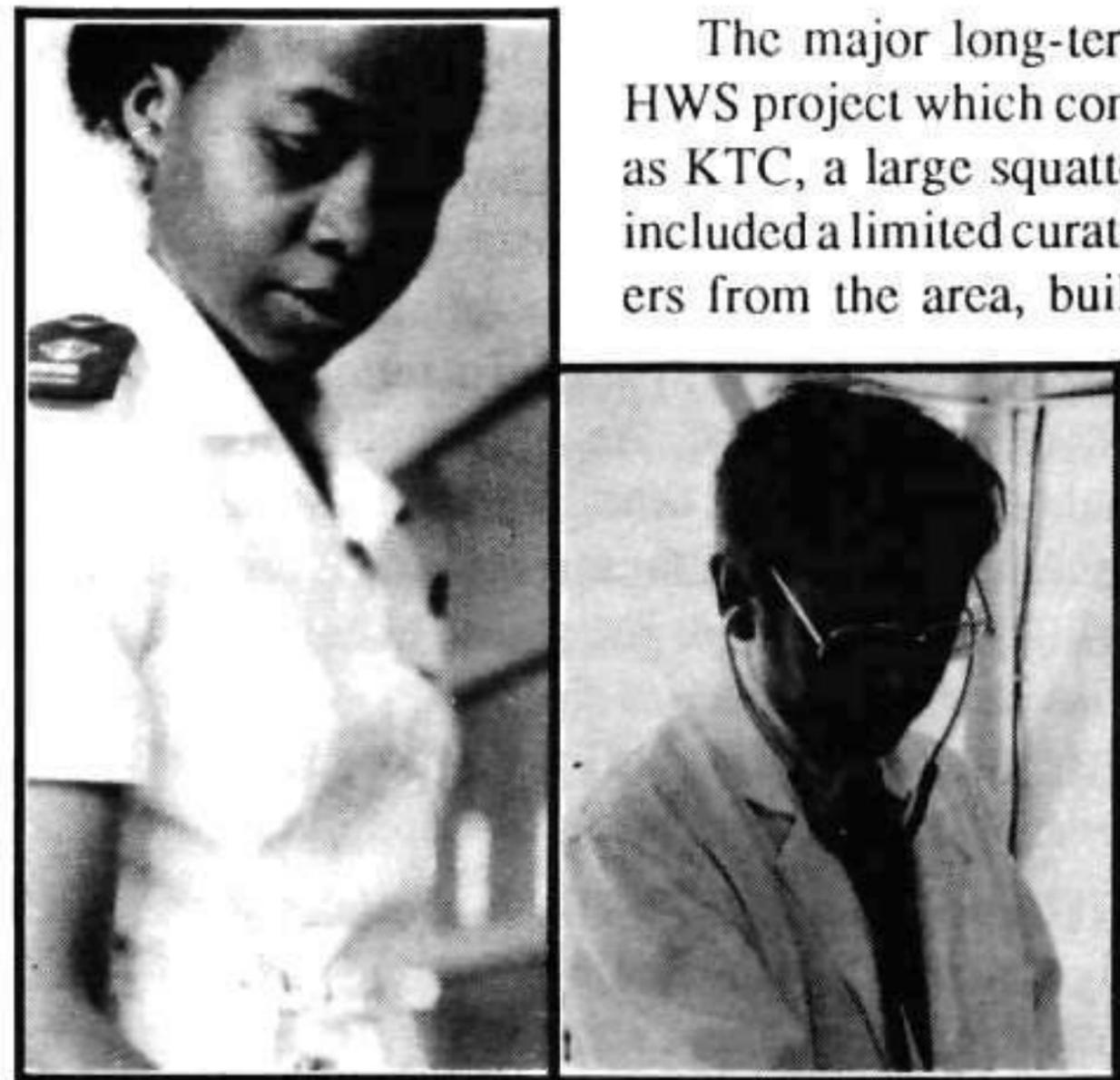
### Community health issues

Soon after its formation, HWS organised a workshop with 18 community organisations with the objective of defining the health needs of the community. This included examining how to work towards solving these problems and how a health worker organisation should relate to such initiatives. It was from this gathering and from our own position that the commitment emerged to build and support community organisations, only where the community was in control and actively involved in a project.

Many of the projects were limited in objectives and time span and included screening projects, short term squatter medical relief work, first aid projects, providing medical services at rallies and meetings and first aid facilities at progressive sport activities, campaigns against the high cost of health care and providing resource material relating to health for organisations.



HWS joined the Cape Action League in their campaign for better housing and electricity.



Membership of HWS is open to all health workers.

The major long-term project was a combined KTC-HWS project which commenced in 1985 in the area known as KTC, a large squatter area adjacent to Guguletu. This included a limited curative service, training of health workers from the area, building of a multi-purpose resource centre and clinic and assisting with the establishment of co-operatives. Some aspects of this project were more successful than others. The general problems in the area, the Crossroads - KTC crisis with the burning down of the greater part of KTC as well as the clinic, led to the stopping of the project. During the crisis period HWS set up and ran three relief centres for the displaced people of KTC for four months. Subsequent involvement in KTC

included only the training of health workers. At present HWS is involved in training health workers and having general health discussions with groups in Heideveld and Khayelitsha.

## Health worker issues

A concerted attempt to organise nurses into a progressive health worker organisation was undertaken soon after the launch of HWS.

Issues discussed in workshops included the exploitation of nurses and the legislation governing their activities and training. HWS also actively campaigned against racism in the South African Nursing Association (SANA). However, it soon became evident that it was extremely difficult to organise nurses. Reasons included apathy, fear of victimisation and the bureaucratic control over nurses.

In the early eighties, attempts to organise health workers into formal trade union structures were attempted by the progressive trade unions but were unsuccessful. Attempts to get the public service organisations, such as the Public Servants League, to adopt a more progressive position also failed because of the conservative nature of these bodies. In April 1985, HWS set up the Health Workers' Advice Office, to assist health workers with specific work-related problems and in the long term, to assist in the establishment of a trade union for health workers. By December 1985, workers' committees had been set up at a number of hospitals and the Health Workers' Union

(HWU) was launched. This was the first union in the Western Cape that specifically organised health workers. At present mainly general workers are being organised. Since the launch the union has been operating completely independently of HWS, but HWS has been assisting the union when requested.

In 1986, HWS together with HWA (Health Workers Association - Transvaal) and HWO (Health Workers Organisation - Natal), arranged a national meeting in Cape Town where unionisation of health workers was discussed. An important feature of that gathering was that it brought together, for the first time, representatives of HWU, General Allied Workers Union (GAWU) and Health and Allied Workers Union (HAWU) for informal discussions.

## Relationship with other organisations

Since its inception, HWS has had informal contact with HWA and later with HWO. From 1983 regular national meetings were held where common issues were debated, projects discussed and strategy planned. One issue that was frequently raised was the formation of a national health workers organisation. This subsequently became the focus of a national gathering of the three organisations in Cape Town in April 1988. At this meeting HWA and HWO made it clear that a prerequisite to being part of a national organisation was the adoption of the Freedom Charter. HWS felt that it could not be bound by this particular position. The reason for this decision is that the membership of HWS consists of individuals from different political persuasions. It was felt that our organisation should remain non-aligned as we had adopted a non-sectarian position and that we work with all progressive organisations. The focus of our activity, that is organising around health, is in itself a non-sectarian issue. In other words, an issue that should not be restricted by a particular doctrine or belief or by being affiliated to a specific grouping.

HWA and HWO subsequently formed the South African Health Workers Congress (SAHWCO) in March 1989.

In 1984, HWS formed part of NCOHO (National Committee of Health Organisations) which successfully campaigned against the World Medical Association (WMA) congress being held in South Africa. Progressive organisations held the view that such a congress, held here, would only strengthen the Medical Association's (MASA) international standing as well as create a favourable impression of health in South Africa.

HWS is also participating in the ESG (Emergency Services Group) which provides for medical services during crisis situations as well as the ongoing care of detainees through the detainees clinic. We also participate in the Western Cape Progressive Primary Health Care (PPHC) group as observers.

We were actively involved in the Cape Action League (CAL) since its inception in 1982, and were actively involved in its activities, for example the anti-election

campaign and housing and electricity campaigns. In mid 1986, HWS disaffiliated from the CAL because the membership felt that HWS as an organisation should be non-aligned and non-sectarian and thus work with all progressive organisations.

## **Membership**

Membership is open to all working within the health sector as well as students and any person interested in promoting the aims of HWS. This is a deliberate attempt to engage the largest number of people in the health debate and to reduce the control and influence of professional groupings. There is an executive committee with subcommittees around the various projects, for example, education and training, labour and emergency services.

## **Future plans**

We see ourselves continuing as we have in the past in an attempt to meet our objectives. We hope to expand our activities to this end. Our ultimate goal is to work towards a health system that is free from exploitation and oppression and we know that it is imperative to engage the people of South Africa in this process.

## **Contact address**

**HWS**

P.O. Box 481

Salt River

7925

Tel: (G. Hussey) 021-7616167