

As the election approaches, concern about voter education is mounting. Are there enough programmes? How effective are they? Are people bothering to consider the issues? **SOBANTU XAYIYA** took to the streets of Cape Town to get some views.

# New voters call fo



RASHILENG: Great job.



MAKUBALO: Confident about broadcasts.

**V**OTER education programmes seem to have succeeded in reaching their audiences – very few people I spoke to had not had any exposure to the efforts of voter educators. Yet Capetonians of all races and walks of life complained about shortcomings in the voter education campaign.

Clearly these programmes have skimmed the surface very successfully, but have left many people ignorant about aspects of the forthcoming elections.

Certainly television, radio, workshops and the print media all seem to be doing something right and reaching an audience.

Of tertiary students interviewed, nearly a third said they had gleaned some voter education from television. A much smaller percentage of mostly African students named radio as their source of election information. About 10 percent of students spoken to either had not had access to voter education or could not follow the programme content.

But even those students who felt they were adequately exposed to voter education cited shortcomings in the television and radio programmes:

- The time slots are too limited to deal satisfactorily with the public's questions.

- The programmes are not detailed enough – for example, many said they were still not sure exactly what constituted a spoilt ballot paper.

- The campaign is too "slow". Some people felt that the education process should be more intense.

Mvuyisi Siwisa, 28, a final-year student at the University of the Western Cape, felt strongly that the government, in conjunction with the Independent Electoral Commission, should play a major role in facilitating voter education.

*'Of tertiary students interviewed, nearly a third said they had gleaned some voter education from television'*

"Many people will be sceptical of such a move, but the fact of the matter is that the government has the necessary infrastructure and resources to do it. I do feel, however, that the fewer people exposed the better for the government."

Some students also felt that the double ballot system would exacerbate an already complex election situation.

They said voter education should include school pupils as many of them were eligible to vote. Pupils would also be able to pass on information to their parents.

Voter educators received praise from University of Cape Town student Dumisani Rashileng, who said the structures were doing a great job in training trainers.

He suggested that a lack of resources and a weak infrastructure stood in the way of an expanded workshop programme in the townships.

Some students felt that the election would not present too much of a problem to them. Charles Hopkins, 18, and Paul Karbiner, 19, both from Rosebank House College, said

## Band-Aid broadcasts coming unstuck

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It is trite to say that the number of paid-up television licenses does not accurately reflect the number of TV sets to be found running off car batteries in squatter camps and semi-rural shacks. Research by the Rhodes University Journalism Department reveals that in and around Grahamstown, one of South Africa's poorest regions, 66 percent of all households have a TV set, including a startling 37 percent of squatter households.

What this suggests is that debate among media theorists about the relative merits or

demerits of radio versus TV for voter education is inevitably inconclusive.

More important, it may deflect attention from a vital point: the smaller and further removed from the metropolis a community is, the less likely it is to have access to either radio or TV, according to research cited by Eurospace, a company producing voter education advertisements for radio.

In the smallest rural settlements, media penetration of all forms declines significantly. In settlements of less than 500 people,

only 15,5 percent of the community ever see any TV and barely half have access to radio.

Eurospace deputy managing director Lyndall Campher says: "All media consumption is low in the rural areas, even the penetration of radio. While radio is essential in reaching the rural market, it does need some form of complementary exposure of message which cannot be provided by the formal media."

The implications of this for voter education programmes are profound. Powerful as they are, the electronic media do not reach into the nooks and crannies of mainly rural South Africa; on its own an advertising campaign has limited effect.

# workshops, increased air time



HOPKINS AND KARBINER: Don't need voter education.



SIWISA: State must play a role.

they had not had access to any form of voter education.

Both said they were regular watchers of M-Net's KTV and videos. They thought they could "handle" the forthcoming election without voter education.

Hostel dwellers interviewed confirmed that voter education workshops were being conducted - mostly in Xhosa and English - at their workplaces. While these workshops had helped to address some of their initial reservations about voting, most said they didn't know what the elections were about.

They pointed out that most of these workshops were organised by unions that followed a particular political line and that neutrality could thus not be ensured.

About half of township residents spoken to said they had not attended voter education

workshops. Many said the workshops would be very helpful to new voters and an important supplement to the media campaign.

## ***'Voter education should include school pupils as many of them are eligible to vote. Pupils would also be able to pass on information to their parents'***

The view was also expressed that all political parties should volunteer staff for voter education and that they should distinguish between campaigning and voter education.

Residents said voter educators were lax about workshops and had left this task to political parties. Yet because the question of no-go areas had not yet been resolved, some felt certain parties were at a disadvantage in this regard.

Certain categories of employees who work awkward hours, for example restaurant workers, said they felt excluded from the campaign and suggested that their industry and voter educators should meet to address the problem.

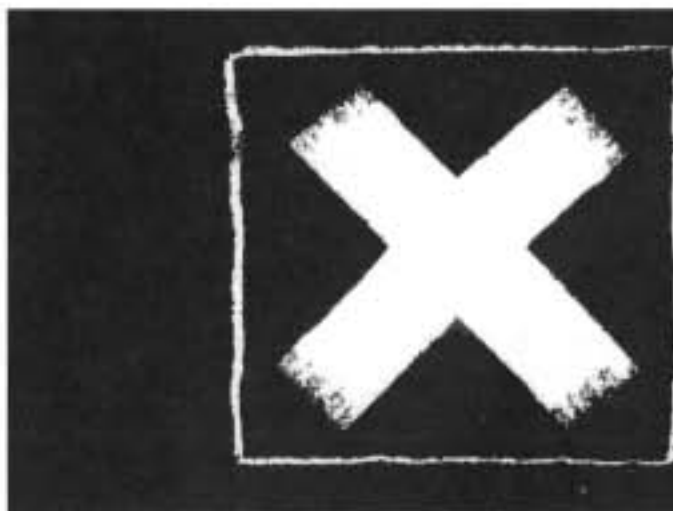
A member of Idasa's voter education radio project team, Mandla Makubalo, said he was confident that Idasa's programmes, which are broadcast mainly on Radio Xhosa, Radio Zulu and Radio Ciskei, were reaching the target. The radio project had received many "encouraging" letters from listeners, he said.

Makubalo gets correspondence from as far afield as the Orange Free State and Eastern Cape. However, he feels that in the Cape his programme misses many "literate" people because they listen mainly to English-language radio stations.

Sobantu Xayiya is a freelance journalist based in Cape Town.

While Debi can go some way towards reaching and enabling potential voters, the real work needs to be done through human contact, on the ground, in people's homes, in bus queues, at taxi ranks, out in the fields. The Black Sash, for example, conducts daily voter education programmes in the queues at its advice offices.

Teams of voter educators from organisations like the Matla Trust and Idasa are taking information about the election into the field. But, considering that over half the South African population is categorised as rural, and that over 70 percent have not voted before, the need to mend the holes in the voter education net is urgent.



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