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Ecumenical Agencies as Partners for Development in South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article explores briefly the extent to which ecumenical bodies could make good partners for the development agenda within an African framework of nation-building. To this end, three questions are posed to assist in this engagement with the topic. These questions imply various avenues that demand attention, reflection and action by the contemporary ecumenical community and public theology in their ecclesial and academic participation in development and nation-building.

1. INTRODUCTION

To what extent, if at all, do ecumenical agencies make good partners for development? Notwithstanding the ambiguous role of the churches and religious movements prior to 1994 in South Africa, there is increasingly an acknowledgement and commitment discernible within the faith-based organisations and churches as well as among development thinkers concerning the constructive role that such ecumenical bodies might potentially fulfil in the post-apartheid democratic era of South Africa in which development challenges have become of primary importance (cf. Swart 2006). The question of ecumenical agencies as good partners for development in and beyond South Africa, therefore, requires consideration of three further questions vis-à-vis the nature of agency, the nature of ecumenism, and the nature of partnership.

2. AGENCY AND THE METHODOLOGY OF ENGAGEMENT

If development is a response to a situation that is deemed inadequate, imperfect, or dehumanising, if this is the status quo that must be overcome through development initiatives, then the notion of agency must be incorporated into our discussion. In its most basic sense, the term 'agency' carries with it the ideas of power for action, instrumentality towards a desired end, specialisation in contributing to an active operation, and a channel or mechanism through which to achieve something. In other words, a question about agency is a question of a methodological nature, i.e. how do we get from 'here' to 'there'? Among the various pathways to development, it is a question about what is a most (or more) appropriate route by which to travel in order to arrive at the desired destination of development?

Current development discourse rightly critiques prevailing methodological perspectives and approaches in the attempt to assess the extent to which these routes and resources are meaningful and effective in contributing to real development ends. Of special significance in this regard is the

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work of D C Korten (1990) and others (e.g. Swart 2006) who reflect critically on different generation strategies for development.

Korten's fourth-generation strategy is one through which social movements for global change are prompted and effected. Critical of the inadequacy of first- and second-generation strategies, third- and fourth-generation development strategies look beyond the individual (relief and welfare mode of first-generation) and community (community development mode of second-generation) modes, to the regional-national (sustainable systems development of third-generation) mode and to draw attention to the ways in which national or global people's movements, through their loosely defined networks of people and organisations but sharing a common vision, work in synergy and with energy to respond to the cause of development in society, i.e. the national-global mode of people's movements (fourth-generation approach).

M Castells (1997/2004:367-418) affirms this type of paradigm in the context of his discussion on the crisis of democracy today. He claims that people have grown increasingly sceptical with the current mode of democracy to help them address the issues with which they contend in their daily lives. The prevailing form of political democracy pervades as "an empty shell", for "the new institutional, cultural, and technological conditions of democratic exercise have made the existing party system, and the current regime of competitive politics, obsolete as adequate mechanisms of political representation in the network society" (Ibid., 414). To put it another way, the current mode of democracy appears methodologically inadequate as an agency for the demands of development.

Castells then offers some thoughts on potential paths of democratic reconstruction, but it is his remarks on the trend "of symbolic politics, ... of political mobilisation around 'non-political' causes" (Ibid., 417) that is of relevancy to our discussion on agency and agencies as partners for development and contributors to nation-building. These local and global movements "are the most powerful proactive, mobilising factor in informational politics," asserts Castells, that "appeal to people's solidarity directly" in "asking people to put pressure on public institutions or private firms that can make a difference on the particular matter targeted by the mobilisation" (Ibid.).

Such "issue-oriented, non-partisan politics, seem to win increasing legitimacy in all societies, and to condition the rules and outcomes of formal political competition. They re-legitimise the concern with public affairs in people's minds and lives" (Ibid., 418). To put it another way, the new emerging mode of symbolic politics holds great legitimacy and promise methodologically as an agency – in partnership with other institutions and structures, such as the democratic nation-state – for realising development challenges in the future.

If Korten and Castells in line with the critical experience of people in search of development are to be taken seriously, then not only is the question of agency and agencies all-important in development discourse as a methodological matter, but there is also the further question of how appropriate ecumenical agencies are in standing in any potential partnership relationship in contemporary development discourse and praxis.

3. ECUMENISM AND THE MODE OF ENGAGEMENT

The ecumenical tradition played a significant role in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.² As S de Gruchy points out, "A high degree of unity of purpose was forged between the

2 It is, however, necessary to take note of the ambiguous response of the churches in the apartheid era. Responses could generally be categorised as follows: the 'status quo' churches, who preserved and promoted the theological justification of apartheid; the 'sitting-on-the-fence' churches, who remained ambivalent and aloof to the social and political crisis; and the 'struggle' churches, who actively

churches, coalescing most visibly in the work and witness of the SACC, but also in many other local ecumenical and fraternal networks and organisations” (2004:223). Some of the most noteworthy examples of such ecumenical bodies include Beyers Naudé’s *Christian Institute* (cf. Nash 2005:31-40), Allan Boesak’s *Foundation for Peace and Justice*, and the SACC’s *Institute for Contextual Theology*.

These ecumenical bodies fulfilled a vital and propitious agency role in contributing to the wellbeing of people and society. They were a potent force and coalition in protest against ideologies, legislation and practices that sought to dehumanise people and deprive them of their right to development as people of freedom and human dignity.

Of the different models of development – economic growth, modernisation, social justice, liberation, community development – the ecumenical tradition’s struggle for development in South Africa was to a large extent characterised by the goals of social justice and liberation. De Gruchy proposes seven key factors about the ecumenical church (and other such bodies) during the struggle against apartheid that served them well in engaging the vision of an *oikoumené* in which the outcomes of social justice and liberation could be discerned. These ecumenical identity-markers say something about the rich legacy of ecumenical agency that existed in the South African milieu. While De Gruchy confines these points to the life of the ecumenical church, it is certainly applicable also to other broader ecumenical agencies. Deserving special mention, they are as follows:

the public role of theology and the church;
human rights as a legitimate locus for Christian witness;
the witness of individuals who played a leadership role in the life of the church;
the ecumenical nature of the public witness of the church;
written documents bearing witness to the struggle against apartheid;
ongoing contextual theological reflection; and
the value of international links (De Gruchy 2004:255-260).

The rich legacy of the ecumenical tradition in South Africa notwithstanding, there is growing consensus these days that the ecumenical agency of the church is in a struggle of its own of some sorts. “Ecumenism is in crisis. ... Everywhere, the structures of ecumenism appear to be in disarray, hanging together by the most fragile of threads” (Maluleke 2005:117). So laments T S Maluleke in his reflection on South African questions more than ten years after the dawn of democracy. He is, of course, mindful of the financial pressures and existential uncertainties about which it has become a platitude to bemoan, a situation in no way confined to the South African story (cf. De Gruchy 2004:207ff).

And yet, as Maluleke rightly suggests, “Perhaps it is not ecumenism that is under threat but certain modes of it” (2005:118). He contends that “cold-war-era ecumenism” cannot be successfully employed as a relevant mode of engagement in a new “era of globalisation and the USA as a lone super-power” (Ibid.). So, if protest served as the weapon of choice in the previous era, Maluleke wonders whether it is now appropriate for “lament and lobbying” to “be honed as one of our main instruments in order to change the world” (Ibid.).

repudiated and protested against the apartheid ideology as part of their prophetic witness. The ecumenical tradition with its popular structures (such as the South African Council of Churches) and programmes (such as the Program to Combat Racism) and individuals (such as Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu) were at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid.

Whereas earlier the insights of Korten and Castells underlined the question of the kind of agency required to contribute to meaningful and effective development, Maluleke now poses the question of the mode of engagement on the part of the ecumenical church and public theology in supporting this kind of agency necessary for real development. In the end, he breathes the following sigh (Ibid.):

I am not convinced that the churches have done enough advocacy, lamenting and lobbying... I am not convinced that the churches have kept a close enough relationship with the poorest of the poor, the most vulnerable members of our society, the 'little ones' over this period. Indeed I doubt that radical South African Christian theology – or what remains of it – has served the new democracy as well as it could have. But I am willing to be persuaded otherwise.

4. PARTNERSHIP AND THE FABRIC OF ENGAGEMENT

The discussion thus far reveals that ecumenical bodies, in their attempt to possibly become good partners in development, would need to fulfil an agency role that goes beyond Korten's first- and second-generation strategy categorisation to serve in a third- and fourth-generation mode. These ecumenical bodies are well placed and textured to contribute toward democratic reconstruction through the 'symbolic politics' style that Castells noted. Here these bodies are appealing directly to people's solidarity and playing out advocacy roles in the public domain as they engage critically and constructively with structures and institutions as well as groups and individuals in society with the intention of making a difference around particular issues that impact on people-centred development.³

Maluleke's challenge to such ecumenical bodies is that if they are struggling, whether it concerns structural or financial or existential reasons, their stuckness may very well be a 'wake-up call' to them vis-à-vis the particular mode(s) of engagement they have assumed. They are possibly reflecting a mode of engagement that worked well in the past (i.e. as 'protest'), but which is no longer appropriate in the present (i.e. as 'advocacy, lament, lobbying'). Past successes are often seeds of stuckness in the present. Maluleke's call that "lament and lobbying must now be honed as one of our main instruments in order to change the world" (2005:118) now finds certain congruency with the insights of Korten and Castells.

There is, of course, the disturbing reality of aloofness among ecumenical bodies. De Gruchy refers to the apartheid struggle as one against "an ideology of apartness and exclusion" that ironically "provided the churches in South Africa with a sense of unity and cohesion", but which has saddled the ecumenical churches in the post-apartheid era with "the emergence of denominational myopia and internal ecclesial concerns" on the one hand, while on the other hand with "a diffusion of focus in regard to the witness of the church in the face of a plethora of concerns in the public arena" (2004:223).

These churches and other ecumenical agencies would need, at the very least, to be exposed to the rich public orientation of their belief systems and history and to be educated and directed in their understanding of the complex development challenges in society that demand their participation and transforming theological capital. A meaningful and propitious mode of engagement by the ecumenical church and public theology is therefore of critical importance for realising the development agenda. But, more specifically, how do we talk about the nature and fabric of this partnership more concretely?

3 The ethos of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology at the University of Stellenbosch reflects very well the ethos of such ecumenical agencies with their networks of intent and action. See the Centre's website where its background information, strategic objectives, teaching and research programmes, and various activities are noted: <http://www.sun.ac.za/theology/bnc.htm>.

4.1 Partnership – and context

In the foreground of the perspectives of Korten, Castells, De Gruchy and Maluleke is the context of globalisation. Meaningful and effective partnership for development cannot overlook or trivialise it. Ecumenical agencies as partners for development will need to wrestle with the realisation of the development agenda in tension with the ambiguities of economic and other dimensions of globalisation.

The formal ecumenical tradition has in recent decades grappled with the negative consequences and effects of globalisation for peoples' being human together (cf. Witte-Rang et al. 2005). Anthropological concerns include peoples' exclusion from participating in and experiencing their constructive development towards human wellbeing. Economic globalisation is perceived as being narrowly concerned with a 'homo economicus', whereby peoples' participation becomes limited to economic activities without any concern for one's relation to neighbour, nature, and God. Individualisation reigns at the expense of participation with others (cf. Bauman 2001, 2003, 2004; Witte-Rang et al. 2005).

The ecumenical movement employed the motif of 'participation' to launch into critical discussion and response around globalisation through various projects (cf. Dickinson 2002: 298ff; Witte-Rang et al. 2005:163-218) – "The responsible society"; "A just, participatory and sustainable society"; "Justice, peace and the integrity of creation", but also through the respective projects of the different confessional churches. A critical and current challenge to ecumenical agencies will be to explore the meaning, content and implications of being human and developing together in the context of such a globalising world.

4.2 Partnership – and method

As ecumenical agencies forge an awareness of the contextual dynamics and significance of working for development in a globalising world, they must seek to contribute to local and global change for realising the development agenda through their constructive activities and strategic networks of advocacy and influence. For, as Witte-Rang et al. (2005:299) rightly point out, while it is impossible not to participate in globalisation, the crucial question is "hoe op een verantwoorde wijze geparticipeerd kan worden" (i.e. how to participate in a responsible way). Concerning method, our ecumenical agencies must critically engage with the development agenda against the problems of globalisation by drawing deeply from the wells (i.e. theoretical, theological, ecclesial, organisational) of their respective traditions.

For theological organisations and their networks, they must never lose perspective of their *theological* tradition that must serve development in this context. Paul Tillich's 'method of correlation' (1951:59-66) aptly serves as a noteworthy case in point of the necessity and value of allowing the deepest beliefs of faith to serve as meaningful answers and responses to the deepest existential questions posed by ordinary people in contemporary society. As a method that "explains the contents of Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence" (Ibid., 60), "it makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are the answers to these questions" (Ibid., 62). Were Tillich's correlation method taken more seriously in theological engagement vis-à-vis development and globalisation, Maluleke might be "willing to be persuaded otherwise" (!) concerning how theology might serve democracy and public life (2005:118).

Christian theologians in their method of engagement serve best as *theologians*, rather than pretending to suddenly have become economists, sociologists, political scientists, etc. in the development struggle. In this regard, M Volf rightly argues against a preoccupation with "social arrangements" rather than a concern with "social agency" that is informed and directed by the

traditions of those deepest and dearest beliefs and convictions (1996:21). Theologians are certainly to fulfil responsible roles of being “helpmates” of economists, political scientists, social philosophers and others, but “should concentrate less on social arrangements and more on *fostering the kind of social agents capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies, and on shaping a cultural climate in which such agents will thrive*” (Ibid.).

4.3 Partnership – and content

Drawing deeply from the wells of their respective traditions, the ecumenical agencies of the ecclesial communities have expressed their convictions on various fronts. R D N Dickinson confirms that while the development issue presently prevails as “a major preoccupation of the churches”, this has not been characterised by an uncritical participation of the churches in the broader development discourse about goals and methods that might promote development (2002:303). On the contrary, the ecumenical bodies “have challenged fundamental assumptions and conceptions, and they have called into question many existing patterns for trying to achieve development at both the macro- and micro-levels” (Ibid.). Moreover, “they have continuously explored the possible implications of these new insights for their own theories and actions” (Ibid.). Given this ecumenical tradition of critical participation, Dickinson concludes: “The pressures for justice, dignity and ecological sanity guarantee that, despite their complexity, the issues of development will remain a compelling challenge, conceptually as well as practically” (Ibid.).

As far as theoretical and theological content on development in a globalising context is concerned, churches have not in general reflected a coordinated joint account and response. Instead, the different theological traditions typically conducted reflection in their own distinctive ways, informed by their own central theological perspectives (cf. Witte-Rang et al. 2005:98).

This notwithstanding, these differing theological perspectives do not necessarily shut others out, but actually present many opportunities for fruitful debate and action (Ibid.) among Reformed, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and other theological and ecclesial bodies. The respective theoretical traditions comprise promising theological emphases that include the following: *human dignity and value as bearers of the imago Dei; the social nature of humanity; human participation in creation and recreation; creational integrity*; and so on.

Out of such theoretical convictions, ecumenical bodies are positioned to critique development-related agendas, as was the case in the formal ecumenical tradition, with the following as some noteworthy examples: *that the traditional understanding of development was focused too narrowly on economic development; that ‘people-centred development’ was to be the distinctive feature of an ecumenical understanding of development; that some structures were supposedly working in the name of development but were actually perpetuating or reinforcing structures of injustice* (cf. Dickinson 2002:300-301).

4.4 Partnership – and transformation

Beyond an understanding of the globalising context, beyond the attempt to correlate existential questions with theoretical convictions, beyond developing theoretical and theological frameworks that can potentially serve the development agenda, the ecumenical community must also act for social transformation. Armed with this gear, ecumenical bodies might then explore various practical avenues through which to promote and fulfil the development agenda.

This is facilitated and conducted in collaborative fashion and with the hope of impacting in modest and radical ways the public arena – politics, economics, civil society, and public opinion. Ecumenical agencies engage in all spheres of society for the realisation of ‘a better life for all’. Their roles of advocacy, critique and change within their local and global networks become vitally important for affirming the human rights and human dignity of all people in a globalising world.

It is particularly at this point that the manifold expressions of the church demand recognition and are explored for how they serve as practical avenues through which to contribute constructively to development as part of their calling and witness – (a) the worship services of (b) the congregation; (c) denominational and (d) ecumenical forms; (e) individual believers and (f) their voluntary actions, initiatives, organisations, associations, etc. (cf. Smit 2004:1ff).

5. CONCLUSION

The ecumenical bodies in the manifold spheres of society should contribute to transformation and service in the church and world. Already in the seventies, R McAfee Brown (in McCord 1976) contended that the overall ministry of the churches must find connectedness in application with the burning issues of the human family, instead of only wrestling with intra-church matters. He states (Ibid., 2-3):

We do not live in the 'Christendom' era any more, but in the time of the *diaspora*, the dispersion, of the church... We live in a time when the burning issues for the human family *and for the church* are going to be centred much more on questions of poverty, hunger, war and racism, than on the subtleties of 'real presence,' multiple sources of revelation, or fresh nuances on Mary's role in the economy of salvation.

In his state of the nation address in February 2005, South African president Thabo Mbeki (2005) acknowledged the important gains that had been made during the young democratic life of South Africa, and then immediately shifted his focus to the future:

As a consequence of the victories we have registered during our first ten years of freedom, we have laid a firm foundation for the new advances we must and will make during the next decade. This foundation must help us to move even further forward towards the consolidation of national reconciliation, national cohesion and unity, and a shared new patriotism born of the strengthening of the manifest reality of a South Africa that belongs to all who live in it, united in their diversity. It must help us to take the detailed practical steps to achieve better results today and tomorrow than we did yesterday.

The president continued that in order to follow through into "our Second Decade of Liberation", the nation needed to "achieve new and decisive advances" in the following areas:

the further entrenchment of democracy in our country; ... transforming our country into a genuinely non-racial society; ... [and] into a genuinely non-sexist society; ... eradicating poverty and underdevelopment, within the context of a thriving and growing First Economy and the successful transformation of the Second Economy; ... opening the vistas towards the spiritual and material fulfilment of each and every South African; securing the safety and security of all our people; building a strong and efficient democratic state that truly serves the interests of the people; and, ... contributing to the victory of the African Renaissance and the achievement of the goal of a better life for the peoples of Africa and the rest of the world.

"These objectives," he contended, "constitute the central architecture of our policies and programmes, intended to ensure that South Africa truly belongs to all who live in it, black and white." What clearly emerges from Mbeki's speech is the ongoing mandate to work for the transformation of a society still wrestling with the brokenness of the past. As churches, with their leaders and theologians, grapple with the nature and orientation of their role within South African society, and specifically with how we might contribute to the public good, it becomes increasingly imperative to renew our ecumenical commitments.

It is reasonable to embrace ecumenical agencies in and beyond South Africa as potentially good partners for development in the light of the methodology, mode and fabric of engagement that behoves them in the contemporary public arena. One of the ways forward, for a start, is to revitalise the life of the ecumenical bodies in the post-apartheid milieu by learning from the lessons of the past (De Gruchy 2004: 255-260), while another rests with a renewed assessment of the nature and import of theological education at present for serving not only the church gathered, but also the church scattered and its broader society. To this end, ecumenical agencies might hopefully be received and embraced as constructive and propitious partners in the quest for being human with integrity in society today.

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KEY WORDS

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