

Ndungane, N
CPSA

Poverty and the church¹

Goeie môre en baie dankie vir die uitnodiging om met julle vanoggend to praat. I am particularly happy to speak at the Kweekskool because in my many different capacities as an Anglican priest, I was once the principal of St Bede's Theological College in Umtata.

I am here today to reflect briefly on the transformation process that we, as South Africans, have journeyed through during the last 10 years of democracy in our country. While there have been many changes with regard to policy and practice, we still have a long and difficult journey ahead of us, especially in the fight against poverty. A poverty which robs our citizens of their right to live lives of dignity, peace and joy.

I hope to reflect on the challenges facing the church in Southern Africa, and the significant partnerships that the church could form to create a new society where all God's people share in the wealth and resources of the land.

The South African government had the challenge of momentous institutional transformation, when our country attained democracy in 1994. Together with institutional transformation the government was also challenged with the creation of policies that are consistent with our new democratic constitution. As you may know the South African constitution is now rated one of the most progressive and liberal constitutions in the world, that emphasises human rights, freedom, equality and human dignity for all the people of South Africa, regardless of race, gender, age or sexual orientation.

During the apartheid era, all policies were skewed to favour the minority white population of the country. In addition education, health and other social spending were also skewed to favour the so-called white sector of the population. This deliberate exclusion of the majority of the South African population from access to the aforementioned, resulted in widespread black poverty, unemployment, low paying jobs, low education levels and low skills levels as well as minimal ownership of land and other assets.

The government claimed, in 1994 and all post 1994 policies, to adopt objectives that would create the required environment for the country to address poverty and inequality and to restore the dignity of citizens. This process, defined in the reconstruction and development program [RDP] identifies five key objectives:

- Meeting basic needs.
- Building the economy.
- Democratising the State and society.
- Developing human resources.
- Nation building.

As we review the performance of government in the last 10 years it is necessary to ask the questions:

¹ Address of Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane at the annual opening of the Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch on 9 February 2004.

- Has the government achieved its policy objectives?
- Are these objectives appropriate?
- Has our society transformed so that the lives of all the citizens of our country have improved?
- What is the emerging role of the church and civil society in the new democratic society?

Research has shown us that the democratic government of South Africa has striven to create and introduce a new constitutional and legislative framework. However, as civil society, we see the need for more efforts on the part of government to ensure implementation so that the rights enshrined in the constitution become a reality to the people.

While most development plans of the government have attempted to consult with communities, there remains much more to be done to improve the poverty alleviation plans and programmes. A large number of the poor are not organised and thus do not have the power to influence programmes that affect their communities, this also is a huge challenge to the church and civil society organisations.

Redistribution and redress have been slow and therefore the majority of the poor and marginalized still remains so and has become demoralised and apathetic. This makes community development programmes, facilitated by the state, civil society, business and partnerships difficult to implement and the results are not always positive.

South Africa as a hybrid first/third world country ranks as one of the most unequal societies in the world. It is generally rated as a middle-income country. These average per capita income ratings conceal the fact that a very large number of people are extremely poor while a much smaller number are extremely wealthy. There is strong evidence from various international studies that income inequality is an important factor in determining poverty outcomes. High inequality can raise serious barriers to the successful implementation of poverty reduction strategies because it can limit the poverty-reducing effects of growth. The existing high level of inequality in South Africa is a major obstacle to effective poverty eradication.

During the last decade, especially since the end of apartheid in 1994, significant political gains, incremental improvements in basic social services, and continuous macro-economic growth have been achieved in South Africa. At the same time, poverty and racial economic inequality have increased, making pro-poor, socio-economic growth one of the greatest challenges facing the new South Africa. The people attained political liberation, but for most economic liberation has stayed out.

The effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic could nullify the impact of otherwise successful anti-poverty strategies. Presently 4.2 million people, including 20% of adults, are infected with the HIV virus. South Africa is one of the countries with the highest number of people living with AIDS. The Medical Research Council (MRC) estimates that in 2000 about 40% of deaths in the age group 15 to 49 years were due to HIV/AIDS, which has now become the single biggest cause of death. Without effective treatment to prevent AIDS, the number of cumulative AIDS deaths can be expected to grow to about six million in South Africa by 2010. This will result in more than one million AIDS orphans by 2010. If all other factors remain constant during this decade, we project that the AIDS epidemic will substantially increase the overall percentage of long-term impoverished households by 2010.

At the same time, a crisis is posed by the increasing number of AIDS orphans heading towards a catastrophe characterised by traumatised children, child-headed households, and grandmothers who in their frailty, grief, and poverty have to look after many grandchildren. How will the rights of these children to a secure future be secured, rights to education, a home, food, and a life without constant trauma?

HIV/AIDS deaths are also a major cause of chronic poverty. There is a classic cycle in which a head of household contracting AIDS leads to reduced earnings due to ill-health, higher expenses on medical bills and traditional cures, asset depletion (sale of assets, withdrawal of children from school), and further drops in income. When the head of the household dies there are funeral expenses and the remaining household members are left in an assetless or indebted state of persistent poverty.

There is a strong correlation between HIV prevalence and poverty. Poverty increases people's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS by increasing their likely exposure to unsafe sexual practices. Migrant workers, most of whom are from poor households, are often at greater risk because they cannot live with their families. Some children see sex work as the only possible means of survival. Poor women and children living in overcrowded households are in greater danger of being sexually assaulted. Poverty can prevent women from gaining information about or access to means of protection, and it can further reduce women's ability to negotiate about condom use with sexual partners.

The notion that AIDS-sufferers have brought it on themselves, i.e. that they are to blame, is not useful. HIV/AIDS are also contracted by women in faithful monogamous marriage relationships, especially with the ongoing dominance of men in households, and their ability to have their way through financial sanctions. Numbers of children are also born HIV-positive. AIDS is not a punishment from God – it is a disease that is manageable, preventable.

Poverty also causes many undesirable and unwanted social problems. Some of the symptoms of poverty that we see in South Africa are crime, violence, abuse, loss of societal values, the total destruction of family life, the loss of human dignity, disregard for human life and in general for us South Africans the concepts that we hold dear have little or no meaning in the face of deep poverty. It is clear, therefore, that unremitting poverty is the *first* major challenge which needs to be addressed without delay at this point in South Africa's development.

Hunger is perhaps the most extreme expression of poverty as the most basic bodily needs are not met. A very high proportion of the poor experience extended periods of hunger and are caught in the ruinous downward spiral of chronic and severe poverty. Since the majority of poor people are particularly dependent on their physical strength as a source of livelihood, the effects of food insecurity on poor health are devastating. A medium-term strategy would thus inevitably have to involve forms of food relief targeting impoverished households and impoverished regions, districts and neighbourhoods. Although fostering dependency on food aid is an unfavourable long-term intervention, large-scale food relief can effectively prevent further decline into destitution. The long-term costs of not acting in this area are extremely high.

Related to this is the call from civil society in South Africa to our government to introduce a basic income grant for all citizens as one strategy to reduce poverty.

At least 22 million people in South Africa – well over half the population – live in abject poverty. On average, they survive on R200,00 per person per month. A Basic Income Grant would provide rapid and sustained relief to all South Africans by:

- providing everyone with a minimum level of income,
- enabling the nation's poorest households to better meet their basic needs,
- stimulating equitable economic development,
- promoting family and community stability, and
- affirming and supporting the inherent dignity of all.

The South African Council of Churches has also called on the government to formulate a comprehensive social protection policy in consultation with all stakeholders, reiterated its

commitment to working for a Basic Income Grant as part of a comprehensive social protection package and urged that military spending be redirected to finance investment in health, poverty eradication and environmental reconstruction.

The *second* (and more long-term) challenge is to ensure that all of our people be given the capacity to support their own existence. At the South African National Poverty Hearings people said: "We have brains and hands, give us the wherewithal to live." The poor do not need luxury items but ask only for basic necessities: access to clean, running water, shelter, healthcare, sources of energy and food and a job to sustain not only these needs but their own human dignity. In this regard long-term strategy in rural development would require a focus on agriculture, especially with 70% of South Africa's poor living in rural areas.

The *third* area in which churches and civil society bodies can have a major impact is that of HIV and AIDS. After much struggle, we have managed to get the South African government to agree to provide antiretroviral drugs. These drugs, albeit imperfect, are one of our best defences against a disease that permeates every aspect of our national life. But the provision of drugs is not the only requirement. There is a need for a holistic approach in terms of prevention, nutrition, teaching young people responsible sexual behaviours and fighting stigma.

We in the church have developed programmes to address these issues but our challenge now is to create one-stop healthcare centres where we can ensure that people take their medication and are adequately nutritionally supported.

The *fourth* major challenge to church and civil society is in the area of advocacy, policy development and implementation, with a strong focus on equality and justice for all. Here the church can link with the Global Fund in advocacy for all nations to make contributions to the Global Fund and also support the Millennium Development Goals. With the possibility that half of the world population may be living in poverty by 2015, improvements in education and the systematic eradication of hunger have become major goals.

South Africa has a strong civil society where the churches have made significant impact, and indeed some commentators have suggested that it was the vitality of civil society organisations, which enabled a peaceful political transition following the mass organisation epoch of the eighties. Religious organisations also acted as a channel for overseas funding and this was significant as other organisations were prevented by the apartheid government from receiving external funds.

Community based civil society organisations, including churches, are suitably placed to address community-based care and support.

I am convinced therefore that church and other powerful civil society organisations are able to create programmes at community-based levels that begin to create sustainable livelihoods. Our efforts can only be enhanced by partnerships with churches and civil society organisations both inside and outside of South Africa.

I would therefore like to encourage the partnerships between denominations, that we may together strive to address the needs of the poor. In addressing these needs it is crucial to participate in current public policy debates, influence programmes, develop the capacity of civil society and of course listen to the voices of the poor. In this way we will be bringing hope to a nation and the people will rejoice in their new developments and growth.