Responding to the growing socio-economic crisis?
A review of civil society in South Africa

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Introduction

The idea of NGOs as value-driven facilitators of change has been adversely affected by the decision of many to implement the welfare, social-net programmes of institutions that are committed to economic liberalisation and concerned to reduce its social cost. At the same time, fragmentation and competition has grown amongst NGOs and encouraged further division within a historically heterogeneous community. The millennium begins with the challenge to NGOs to reflect critically on this reality (Pearce, 2000:36).

The acute sense of socio-economic crisis in South Africa provides the primary context for a review of civil society in the period 2001/2002. If anyone still entertained doubts about the effects of GEAR, the last two years have witnessed the further unfolding of many of the negative predictions made by concerned social and political commentators since the adoption of the strategy in 1996. Similar to many other countries that have adopted neo-liberal economic policies, GEAR has had a devastating impact on the lives of millions of poor and low-income families in South Africa. According to Pearce,

> globalisation, driven by the values of neo-liberalism, has seriously harmed the anti-poverty and anti-exploitation struggle in the world today. The benefits to the few have not compensated for the increased poverty, inequality, and uncertainty which many have experienced (2000:36).

Although neo-liberalism came to South Africa relatively late, it was implemented rapidly, with the Ministers of Finance and Trade and Industry committing the country to timeframes that were far shorter than generally required for the implementation of international trade agreements. More often than not, this led to significant job losses, particularly in the manufacturing industry, as the country was flooded with cheap imports, and these job losses have contributed to the alarming increase in poverty in the country. The implementation of fiscal austerity measures as part of the standard requirements of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have contributed to a slowdown in the delivery of basic services, and influenced the state’s controversial cost recovery policies. This has placed an undue burden on the poor, who face increasing costs of basic goods and services at a time when their income is being steadily eroded or even completely removed. When the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS is considered, and the impoverishing effect that this has on
affected households, there is a full-scale socio-economic crisis in the making. The dimensions of the crisis are examined, along with the responses (or non-responses) of civil society organisations (CSOs). There is also the question of a growing divide between organisations within civil society – most notably between the bigger, more professionalised NGOs, primarily involved in service delivery and increasingly referred to as ‘blue-chip’ NGOs, and the growing number of smaller, less formalised CBOs that tend to be more survivalist and increasingly oppositional in nature. The joint Centre for Civil Society and School of Public and Development Management study on ‘The Size and Scope of the Non-Profit Sector in South Africa’ estimates that this latter category forms 53% of the total of 98,920 voluntary sector organisations in the country (Swilling & Russell, 2002:20). The link between such community-based initiatives and the new social movements will be examined, with the latter presently forming the subject of a number of major research projects.

In the period under review, there has been a more visible manifestation of popular discontent, as witnessed in widespread protests and marches around the country. The high profile marches and other events that took place around the World Conference on Racism (WCAR) in 2001 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002, have been particularly significant. Poor people, together with newly-emerging community leadership, began to make the links between GEAR and the hardships they experience (for examples of this, see Ashwin Desai’s book, We are the Poors – Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa, 2002). Local community struggles, and more notably emerging social movements, increasingly articulate the links between macro-economic policies, globalisation and increased poverty and hardship. Many have formed networks across national boundaries and forged alliances with similar movements and struggles in other parts of the developing world, as well as with the international anti-globalisation movement. This has occurred particularly in the land sector and the anti-privatisation movement.

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1 The term ‘civil society organisations’ (CSOs) is used in this chapter as an all-encompassing category of organisations or organisational forms and includes, amongst others, the bigger and more formalised ‘non-governmental organisations’ (NGOs) and the smaller, less formalised, ‘community-based organisations’ (CBOs).

2 For example, a major new research project, entitled Globalisation, Marginalisation and Contemporary Social Movements in South Africa, is under way at the University of Natal. Conducted in a partnership of the School of Development Studies and the Centre for Civil Society, the project will study about 18 different social movements in South Africa. The Centre’s research grant programme is also supporting a number of research projects in this regard.

3 See Ashwin Desai’s account in his book, We are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa, 2002.

This chapter will not provide a detailed account of events and developments in civil society in 2001/2002, but rather aims to highlight some of the choices and challenges facing this sector in a rapidly changing political and socio-economic environment. Generally based on observations and impressions, it hopes to open up discussion and debate in areas where there has often been an uncritical acceptance of consent and consensus. To this end, the chapter is exploratory in nature and tends to pose questions rather than providing answers.

The growing socio-economic crisis

Poverty and inequality
Various studies (Taylor Report, 1999; Julian May, 2000; Statistics SA, Income & Expenditure Surveys, 2002, etc.) have confirmed what most people in civil society already knew or sensed, that there has been a dramatic increase in poverty in the last few years, with between 45-55% (20-28 million) of the country’s population experiencing ongoing and dehumanising deprivation.

The Statistics SA report on *Earning and Spending in South Africa* (2002) compares income and expenditure data between 1995 and 2000, and concludes unambiguously that,

> household incomes and expenditure in South Africa, in both 1995 and 2000, when taking inflation into account, on average have decreased over time. Individual income and expenditure has also decreased on average. In other words, when looking at poverty in relation to earning and spending, South Africans, on average, became poorer between 1995 and 2000 (2002:32) (own emphasis).

Rural areas, as is most often the case, have been particularly hard-hit, with a poverty rate of 71% (UNDP:1998). Hunger and malnutrition are widespread, with 21.9% of households reporting that they regularly experienced hunger (Taylor Report 1999:70). The more recent Kaiser Family Foundation’s (KFF) report on the impact of HIV/AIDS on households found that almost 50% of their sample of 771 AIDS-affected households reported having insufficient food at times (KFF Report, 2002:18).

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Children are particularly badly affected, as indicated by the same study where “children in these households were reported as going hungry as often as other members” (KFF Report, 2002:14). The long-term consequences of child malnutrition are well-known and have serious implications for the affected children and families, as well as for society more generally. There is furthermore the trauma of orphanhood and the break-up of families as a result of the impact of HIV/AIDS, a situation that many children are already experiencing. This is compounded by the related increasing incidence of early school-leaving, particularly by girls. Given that the level of well-being of children in a society is universally regarded as an important yardstick of a society’s progress towards basic development objectives, the deteriorating situation of children in South Africa is indicative of a broader socio-economic crisis unfolding.

The situation appears to be worsening all the time, with the combined effects of high levels of unemployment, a rampant HIV/AIDS pandemic and the crisis around the affordability of basic services leading to a significant reversal in the living standards of the working class and poor people. While not surprising, the fact that this situation co-exists alongside the upward mobility and conspicuous wealth of a small section of society – the old and new elites – makes the experience all the more bitter for ordinary people. Consistently known as one of the most unequal countries in the world, inequality in South Africa has become more pronounced in recent years, with the Gini coefficient (a standard measurement of income inequality) increasing from 0,56 in 1995 to 0,57 in 2000 (Statistics SA, 2002:48).

As these separate worlds are allowed to drift further and further apart, serious questions arise about the political sustainability of the situation. Many argue that the very essence of democracy is at stake, in that no country can really claim the existence of a stable and workable democracy under conditions of extreme inequality. The social and political instability inherent in such situations calls for some form of political containment, the exact nature of which may range from limited social welfare interventions to outright political repression (or a combination of these). The issue of containment and the role that CSOs are often expected to play in this context will be explored in more detail.

The fact that such a situation exists in a middle-income country with significant economic resources and a well-developed infrastructure is a reflection of the widely predicted consequences of the government’s economic policy. GEAR – like its counterparts worldwide – is fundamentally an anti-poor policy, in that it prioritises economic growth, an export orientation, privatisation, and trade and currency deregulation, and advocates reducing social spending. As previously indicated, neo-liberal economic policies have contributed to increased inequality in most of the

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6 For example, the UNDP’s Human Development Index.
societies in which they have been implemented. Within this policy framework, and with all the structural inequities in society firmly in place, it appears doubtful that ‘poverty alleviating’ measures, whether by government or civil society, can presently amount to much more than minimal welfare intervention.

Unemployment

Unemployment has become a human crisis told in cold statistics. The official unemployment rate was 29.4% in February last year (2002). In reality, it was about 40% – the official figures leave out people too demoralised to get on another taxi, or make another call from a local tickey-box (Mail & Guardian, 6-12 June 2003).

Poverty is, of course, critically linked to the labour market. In a largely industrialised country like South Africa, there is no doubt that labour market failure is directly linked to the increase in poverty. Job losses, at the most fundamental level, translate into loss of income and therefore the loss of the affected person’s ability to provide the family with the most basic needs and services. The Taylor Report examined various categories of low-income households, below R800 per month, and concluded that

10.3 million people ... lived in households that contained no workers, either formal or informal. Labour market failure was thus the key determinant of their poverty (1999:70).

The formal economy continued to shed jobs in the period under review, with total unemployment figures, as indicated above, now varying between 29% and 42%. Leonard Gentle, senior researcher at ILRIG, puts forward two important trends that are emerging in this regard, that ‘the size of the employed working class is shrinking as a result of neo-liberal policies; and the composition of the working class is changing’ (SA Labour Bulletin, October 2002:19). Following international trends in this regard, there has also been a strong move in the South African economy to informalise labour, so that ‘as firms outsource, sub-contract and casualise labour and the public sector downsizes’ (Gentle, SA Labour Bulletin:19), hard-won labour rights are eroded and economic vulnerability increases. The extent of labour casualisation and its impact is examined in more detail in Chapter Two of the Annual Review.

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RESPONDING TO THE GROWING SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS?

Apart from the broader social and economic consequences of the one million jobs lost since 1996, the finding by Statistics SA (quoted in Mail & Guardian, 6-12 June 2002) that three-quarters of the unemployed are young people, is particularly disconcerting. With so few prospects, and in a society as unequal as South Africa, it would not be surprising if more young people turned to crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour. The combination of an absence of prospects, in the context of chronic poverty in which many of their parents and grandparents live, the growing crisis of affordability around and access to educational institutions, plus the impact of HIV/AIDS on young people and the high fatality level, gives rise to a bleak scenario that should give cause for concern to policy-makers and society at large.

Rural poverty
Always intricately linked with urban areas and formal sector employment, rural areas have been particularly badly affected by the high levels of unemployment. Historically, people in rural areas have relied mainly on the remittances from miners and other migrant workers and on welfare grants8 to provide a bare subsistence living. The enormous job losses therefore have a direct effect on increased rural poverty, as many of the newly unemployed (and those who have given up on finding a job) return to rural areas to, with their families, face a life of destitution. Miners have been particularly badly affected, with the restructuring and modernisation of the mining sector leading to the loss of thousands of jobs. The negative socio-economic consequences of these job losses – along with the humiliation and human suffering – have serious repercussions. The prospects for these men and their families are generally extremely bleak.

Joining the ranks of these ‘economic returnees’ – and not always distinguishable from them – is the tide of those sick and dying from AIDS, as well as the growing numbers of children from AIDS-affected urban households sent to stay with relatives in rural areas. Thus, at the very time that incomes are shrinking, or becoming non-existent, the burden placed on already vulnerable rural households is increasing. Characterised by a majority of female-headed households in the past, there is an increase in the prevalence of ‘granny-headed’ households in rural areas, i.e. households headed by elderly women, with a growing number of children to provide for with minimal, if any, support from the state. The KFF study gives the following example from a qualitative interview:

“How many people are living in this house”, I ask.

“We are sixteen and soon we will be seventeen people”, says Thandi,

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8 Both the Taylor and Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) reports have found that the ‘uptake’ of social grants is far below what it could and should be.
“we only get food from the mercy of our neighbours and food parcels.”
“Do you receive old age pension?”
“No, I’m a granny of eight grandchildren but the pension only comes when you are sixty. I am forty-nine.”
“How do you feed everyone?”
“The electricity we take for nothing. The Home Based Care gives us food parcels, but it is not enough for this big family. When I cook I boil the water with no mealie meal till the children fall asleep.”

(2002:30)

Labour tenants continue to be driven off the land, despite new legislation in this regard, swelling the ranks of the poor and destitute in rural areas and peri-urban informal settlements (Gentle, 2000:19). (See also Abdoesalaam Isaacs, “Trapped Farm Labour: Obstacles to Rights and Freedoms in Development Update Vol. 4, No. 2, July 2003, Piecemeal Reforms and Calls for Action: Land Reform in South Africa.) The slow pace of land reform and the government’s radical policy shift (in line with GEAR) towards the support of black commercial farmers has not contributed to new forms of livelihoods in rural areas. In fact, it appears that the notion of ‘rural development’ has fallen off the political bandwagon almost in its entirety since the abandonment of the RDP. Politicians are now only seen in rural areas when natural or health disasters occur or in the periods leading up to elections. (See also Development Update Vol. 4. No. 1, March 2003 Complexities, Lost Opportunities and Prospects: Rural Development in South Africa.)

This begs the question: how are rural areas expected to ‘cope’ with these extra burdens, and in circumstances such as these, what does ‘coping’ imply?

After more than a century of being exploited as labour reserves, there is a limited economic base to support the additional needs for income, food, schooling and health care, among others. The combined effects of poverty, unemployment and HIV/AIDS are dangerously eroding these fragile survival systems. Reports of serious deprivation, including widespread malnutrition – most alarmingly amongst children – have become routine. The bigger question – and one that CSOs should consider – is whether, in the context of globalisation and neo-liberal policies, there is in fact a wider shifting of societal responsibility onto those that can least afford it, and who are least equipped to take it on.
RESPONDING TO THE GROWING SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS?

‘From citizen to customer’ – basic services and cost-recovery

With the steady cutbacks in central government allocation to local authorities as a result of GEAR, the market logic became more prevalent. For municipalities, reduced transfers from national government, coupled with expanded responsibilities, made cost-recovery and cost-cutting measures an almost inevitable choice. In most instances, the most direct and easiest methods were the harshest: cutoffs – either through direct administrative intervention or via installation of prepaid technology (McDonald & Pape, 2002:5).

In addition to the existing financial difficulties, poor households in both urban and rural areas have also had to face the additional burden of the increased cost of basic services. The tighter fiscal constraints required by GEAR have in many instances led to a slow-down in the delivery of basic services to poor communities. Local government bodies, while being given more responsibility for delivery of a range of basic services, have generally had their transfers from the national fiscus drastically cut. As a result, many of the gains initially made in the fields of electricity, water, sanitation and housing provision have been eroded in recent years as local government bodies enforce aggressive cost-recovery policies.

According to David McDonald, academic and co-director of the Municipal Services Project,

local government has been virtually silent on the dramatic cutbacks in inter-governmental transfers, effectively accepting the fate of unfunded mandates, and has been pushing very hard to collect the full cost of municipal services without challenging the state for a larger slice of the national budget (in McDonald & Pape, 2002:32).

McDonald estimates that

close to 10 million people have had their water cut off for non-payment of service bills, with the same number having experienced an electricity cut-off. More than 2 million people have been evicted from their homes

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9 A phrase used by a representative of the Anti-Eviction Campaign in Tafelsig, Cape Town, at the ISTR Conference workshop, July 2002.
for the same reason. [And although] it is low-income African households that bear the brunt of these service cut-offs, lower middle-income families have also been affected (Special report, Municipal Services Project, 2002:3).

The effects of cost recovery policies on the living standards of the poor – what Gentle calls ‘attacks on their living standards’ (2002:18) – have been far-reaching.\(^\text{10}\)

It also seems that, although large commercial and industrial consumers are often ‘the most delinquent, and largest payment defaulters, low income households bear the brunt of cost-recovery’ (McDonald, 2002:31). While local government bodies have generally shown a willingness to negotiate and reach compromises with the former, who owe millions of Rands, “low-income families have been evicted from their homes … for arrears of only R1 500 and some have received threats of eviction for arrears as low as R250” (McDonald, 2002:32). The implementation of cost recovery policies has often been harshly enforced, for example, by threatening legal action, cutoffs, evictions, intimidation and even overt violence’ (McDonald, 2002:31). Many of these actions have been bitterly reminiscent of apartheid-style evictions and removals.

Reversals in past development gains
From a socio-economic perspective, these policies have brought about reversals in past development gains (however basic these appeared at the time). In an already harsh economic climate, with high levels of unemployment, cost recovery policies have added to the financial hardship and daily grind of millions of poor people. There are reports of people in urban areas moving back to informal settlements, unable to afford the payments and/or service charges on their small sub-economic houses. Electricity and water cut-offs have forced many people (mostly women) to revert to fetching wood and water, often from unsafe sources, and to rely on illegal reconnections. In these circumstances, where illegal connections to services are made, debt summonses and eviction notices served, and with the state demonstrating increasingly repressive responses to protests and marches against the impact of its neo-liberal policies, some observers now speak of the ‘criminalisation of the poor’ (see, for example, Desai, 2002).

\(^{10}\) For a detailed and authoritative description of cost recovery policies and their effects on poor families and communities, see McDonald & Pape, 2002, Cost Recovery and the Crisis of Service Delivery in South Africa; and Desai, 2002, We are the Poors – Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa. 2002.
The negative impact of cost recovery policies on basic health and health care is cause for alarm, with outbreaks of cholera, most notably in KwaZulu-Natal in 2000, often directly related to people having to revert to unsafe sources of water (see Deedat & Cottle, in McDonald & Pape, 2002: 81-95; Cottle, E., “Meeting basic needs? The failure of sanitation and water delivery and the cholera outbreak”, Development Update, 2003, Vol. 4 No. 1). The starkest manifestation of this is the many thousands of households taking care of family members in the terminal stages of AIDS – where chronic diarrhoea, vomiting and loss of bladder control is common – without access to toilets or safe running water.11

As a direct result of the crisis of affordability around basic services, provision of home-based and/or hospice care for HIV/AIDS patients remains limited,12 as do the fundamental requirements of basic health care needed to deal with terminal or infectious illness. Besides the difficulties faced by health workers, home care providers and families, and the loss of dignity of AIDS patients, the fact that such a situation persists is a serious indictment of a society and a political system increasingly at odds with the basic needs of its own population.

It is inevitable that a point will be reached where people have been pushed too far and too hard, as a result of the hardships caused by the government’s neo-liberal cost recovery policies. Many of the new social movements, such as the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, the Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Anti-Privatisation Forum, and the Durban Social Forum, have evolved in direct response to the effects of these policies. Gentle states unequivocally that

the struggles that have ensued in this period are no longer about ‘crisis of delivery’ issues, but are responses by communities to attacks by the state’s neo-liberal policies, chiefly service cut-offs and housing evictions (2002:18).

Since local government institutions have had to, in most instances, implement these unpopular policies, they have largely been the focus of attention, as ‘the immediate oppressor’ of the new struggles. The emergence of these more issue-based and localised struggles and their significance, both in the general political arena and for civil society, will be discussed further. Despite the increasing protests, both in communities and at international events such as the World Conference Against Racism and the World Summit for Sustainable Development, there has been no official review of

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12 The KFF report found that about 10% of households in their sample had access to some form of home-based care, from social services or NGOs.
cost recovery policies and their impact. Bureaucrats and politicians tend to be
dissemissive of criticism and adhere to the ‘no alternative’ mantra of neo-liberalism.
According to McDonald, they

accept the mantra of balanced budgets, ring-fencing, and
commercialisation, and forge ahead with a neo-liberal agenda whilst
listening intently to advisors from the World Bank and other like-minded
donor institutions, paying millions of Rands to consultants from the
private sector to help them with their cost-recovery plans (2002:33).

HIV/AIDS: its more ‘visible’ phase
HIV/AIDS continues to devastate poor people and communities, with the pandemic
now moving into its more ‘visible’ phase, manifested by many painful, undignified
and early deaths. Funerals are commonplace, and there are many anecdotal accounts
of almost medieval scenes of suffering, with people being sent home from hospitals
and wandering around streets and villages with open sores and AIDS dementia, and
being physically tied up in small rooms. There are also growing reports of such
people being simply abandoned by families no longer able to cope with the demands.13

The widely predicted increase in AIDS orphans has given rise to many child-headed or
grandparent-headed households. The KFF Report on the impact of HIV/AIDS on
households in South Africa shows that 22% of children in their sample of 771 AIDS-
affected households have lost at least one parent (2002:21). Although they report
that the traditional extended family networks are still absorbing these children, they
acknowledge that these support structures appear to be fraying (2002:23). It is
debatable exactly how far ‘extended families can be extended’, particularly in the
present economic climate. As far back as 1992, a study conducted in urban areas
showed that 62% of Sowetan residents felt that AIDS orphans should be the
responsibility of the state (Steinberg, et al, 2000, quoted by Barnett & Whiteside,
2002:188). There are, however, increasing numbers of cases where neither extended
family nor the state take care of orphans and they are forced to cope in child-headed
households or on the streets.

As in many other situations, the burden of ‘coping’ with the AIDS pandemic has
fallen squarely onto poor households – the one level in society where it is impossible
to avoid the repercussions. It is one of the cruellest ironies of this disease that, for a
variety of socio-economic and cultural reasons,14 ‘it is the poorest South Africans

13 Personal account to the author, by Ms Myra Jantjies of Marianhill, KwaZulu-Natal.
who are most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and for whom inevitably the consequences are most severe’ (KFF report, 2002:7). Apart from the emotional trauma of looking after chronically or terminally ill family members and witnessing their premature and often undignified deaths, the costs involved have major repercussions for poor households and communities.

Tipping from poverty into destitution

The first of these is the loss of income through the illness or death of a breadwinner, or in time taken off from work to care for sick family members. According to the KFF report,

not only were there more AIDS-sick women than men, but the women on average were 33 years of age, compared to 37 for the men. The median age – the most commonly occurring – was 33 years. These are young adults in the prime of their economically active lives, and mostly with young children (2002:11) (own emphasis).

The report found that two-thirds of the households in the sample – most of whom were already poor – experienced a drop in income as a result of the serious illness or death of a family member who had previously contributed to household income (2002:16). A similar study in Zambia found that “the monthly disposable income of more than two-thirds of the families in this study fell by more than 80%” (Barnett & Whiteside, 2002:190). These findings highlight the linkages between AIDS and poverty.

Apart from the long-term social and demographic consequences, the economic impact on poor households, and society as a whole, of so many young and economically active people dying is devastating. Further to the situation of shrinking (or non-existent) household income are the increased medical and transport expenses, on average a third of monthly income and more than 50% in rural areas,15 as well as the high cost of funerals. The KFF report found that 55% of the households in their sample had paid for a funeral in the preceding year, at an average cost of R5 153 or four times the total household monthly income (2002:19); and many households have experienced more than one serious illness and/or death in the family.

The financial burden alone is significant and raises serious questions about how already poor households deal with the pandemic. Increased indebtedness is one likely outcome, contributing to further erosion of already fragile livelihoods. In rural areas,

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14 See Alan Whiteside’s earlier work in this regard.
15 KFF Report, p.18.
it is often more than just the loss of cash income such as remittances but also the loss of labour to work the land and produce food for consumption and/or sale. This contributes to further impoverishment and worsens the already fragile nutritional status of the poor, particularly children, in rural areas. There are also cases of women and children losing access to land in rural areas, either because traditional inheritance patterns remain unchanged, or because family members or neighbours cheat them out of their land. As the KFF report concludes,

in already poor households HIV/AIDS is the tipping point from poverty into destitution (2002:i) (own emphasis).

Many households are eventually forced to sell their already meagre assets and/or get into debt to cover expenses. The sale of assets by the poor should ring clear warning bells for anybody concerned with ‘poverty alleviation’, as it indicates an often irreversible backward slide in the ability of people to survive the personal and economic setbacks brought about by HIV/AIDS. The sale of productive assets, like land or cattle, is particularly alarming, as it erodes the economic base for possible future recovery of consumption patterns. It is, however, in the sale of smaller personal items, though, that one really witnesses people’s economic desperation. Barnett & Whiteside note that

people who are driven to sell the clothes of their dead or their own clothes can hardly be said to be coping: these are the actions of the desperately impoverished (2002:191) (own emphasis).

Hunger and malnutrition

Studies show that families are forced to cut down on consumption of basic needs and services and that their food purchases decrease dramatically. According to the KFF study

Overall, almost half of households reported having insufficient food at times. The problem was more acute in rural areas, where more than half (55%) reported food shortages, compared to 42% in urban households. Children in these households were reported as going hungry as often as other members (2002:18).

16 See Barnett & Whiteside, 2002, p. 189; and KFF report.
Another measure is to remove children, often girl children, from school, as school fees and uniforms become unaffordable and/or the children are needed at home to help take care of sick family members. The combined effect on millions of children of malnutrition, orphanhood and lack of proper schooling – with the plight of girls a particular concern – represents serious setbacks with regard to gender and other developmental goals. There is also the specific danger of a cycle of HIV/AIDS infection, as economic need and related factors can lead to early sexual initiation and exploitation of young girls.

Finally, there is the effect of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on the elderly, the so-called ‘granny’s burden’, where grandparents care for a growing number of orphaned children. Barnett & Whiteside explain that,

First of all they care for their children who are sick, then they bury them; finally, they care for their grandchildren (2002:218).

In many ways, the situation amounts to a radical reversal of traditional care-taking arrangements, whereby adult children look after elderly parents, and has placed a tremendous strain on an already vulnerable and often poor section of society, most of whom are traumatised and impoverished by the impact of the epidemic. The long-term sociological effects of this ‘late-AIDS scenario’, of the elderly and the young thrown together in impoverished households, can only be guessed at.

The question that arises repeatedly is how people cope with all of the above and what does it mean to ‘cope’ in these circumstances? Also, who defines ‘coping’ – social scientists and academics? The simple answer is that people are not coping, and Barnett & Whiteside state that

anecdotal evidence often shows they do not cope, or that ‘coping’ may turn out to be another way of saying ‘desperate poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation’ (2002:189).

None of the above can really be regarded as ‘coping’, and in fact, everything points to a clear backward slide in terms of what most of us broadly understand as development. There is concern about the long-term socio-economic consequences of the present situation, which, if allowed to continue unabated, without major medical and treatment interventions and a radical revision of macro-economic policy and

17 For a more detailed discussion, see Barnett & Whiteside, 2002, pp. 213-221.
development priorities, point to a bleak future. As Rugulema explains,

the very notion of ‘coping’ is deeply ideological and may smack of the
rich telling the poor how to manage their poverty (2000, quoted by
Barnett & Whiteside).

It is this downward spiral of human suffering, loss, grinding poverty, hunger,
optimismlessness, orphanhood and the break-up of entire families – the picture behind
the statistics – that those in civil society need to understand more clearly. Only then
will we be able to develop more value-based, comprehensive and challenging responses
to the government’s apparent lack of political and economic will with regard to
rapid and sustained poverty eradication. It is also crucial, both conceptually and
pragmatically, that leadership and workers in the sector begin to make the linkages
between the international dictates of globalisation, the government’s unswerving
adherence to its neo-liberal macro-economic strategy and the various negative effects
that these have on the broader population.

Challenges facing civil society

From a civil society perspective, it is necessary to look at the reality behind the
disturbing statistics and to pose pertinent questions about our future role, choices and
challenges. Apart from the SANGOCO Poverty Hearings in 1998, there has been very
little public effort to portray the living/lived experiences behind poverty statistics.18
There is sometimes a sense that many in the ‘development profession’ have become
inured to the shocking realities, and over the last ten years the near-obsession with
quantifying poverty has often, in practice, led to the avoidance of a more complex
discussion of the underlying structural reasons for poverty and inequality.

From discourse to action

The more technicist neo-liberal discourse about ‘development’, with its emphasis on
models, measurable targets and development indices, has contributed to this trend.
By keeping the discussion at a more abstract and technical level, it often became
quite separated from the brutal realities of poor people’s lives, thus losing the sense
of immediacy and urgency, and sometimes even outrage required to translate discourse
into action. The endless talk about poverty statistics and poverty research often
became a substitute for more critical thought and decisive action. Even now, ten
years down the line, the standard response of local and provincial government officials,

18 Desai’s book, We are the Poors – Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa, 2002, and
the Kaizer Family Foundation’s report have both made more realistic contributions in this regard.
when confronted with the non-existence of poverty eradication policies, is that first they need a poverty survey done!19

During the post-1994 crisis years in civil society, many organisations – for a variety of reasons – lost their political and intellectual initiative/edge, and were caught up in the demands of donor- and government-driven ‘development’ agendas. NGO staff participated in many workshops and meetings, both amongst themselves and with government and donors. “A lot of talking was taking place”, as economist Azar Jammime said of the recent Growth & Development Summit, “amongst the haves about addressing the needs of the have-nots” (Independent on Sunday, 15 June 2003). The discourse was, of course, rapidly changing, along with the radical shift in economic priorities and policies, but since it remained broadly cast in the familiar terminology of ‘development’ and poverty alleviation, not many people seemed to notice.

The general lack of critical engagement around the major shift in economic policy in 1996 had a lot to do with the unproblematised way in which many in civil society continue to use these terms. For too long, there has been a heavy reliance on a rudimentary set of catch-phrases when talking about ‘development’ – “an intellectually lazy reliance on a handful of concepts and words as a substitute for thought, (which) has weakened and confused practice and ….. contributed to the present crisis of legitimacy within the NGO sector” (Pearce, 2000:32). Most CSOs had never really engaged with purely economic matters, and were therefore unprepared to engage in debate about the adoption of neo-liberal policies, their implications for the country and the changing nature of their own work. As argued by Adam Habib and the writer previously,

Like elsewhere in the world, the language of neo-liberalism has rapidly penetrated, possibly even overlaying old ‘NGO-speak’ in South Africa. The process appeared to have taken place so ‘naturally’ that few people actually seem to have noticed that it involved a massive paradigm shift. The essentially technical nature of this jargon, which lends itself ideally to an easy pretence of ‘neutrality’, probably helped to effect this smooth transition. As a result very few CSOs have attempted even a peek at the ideology behind the technical jargon. And so it has become entrenched, now part of a kind of hybrid terminology, still speckled with some of the older notions and values that refuse to make way (Habib & Kotzé, in Mahone & Edigheji (eds.), 2003).

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19 This observation is based on the author’s personal involvement in and discussions with officials from both the eThekwini Municipality and the Premier’s Office in the KwaZulu-Natal provincial government over the last three years.
In fairness, CSOs were not particularly well-placed at the time to respond to the radical economic policy shift. Faced with a complex combination of simultaneous challenges, many organisations were not able to respond to the demands that a rapidly changing political and economic environment would require of them. For much of the last decade, large sections of civil society have been in varying states of crisis. The different aspects and stages of these crises have been well-documented, but in essence boiled down to the effects of

- a radical reprioritisation and redirection of foreign donor funding in the period leading up to and after the democratic transition in 1994;
- the need to establish new roles and relationships vis-a-vis the new democratic (and briefly developmental) state, and
- the departure of a significant number of senior leaders/managers to fill government positions.

These and other factors contributed not only to a struggle to survive but also to a widespread existential crisis, regarding ‘who we are and what we are going to do’. In their search for survival and new direction, many turned their focus and organisational energies inward, often resulting in terrible internal conflict and near organisational paralysis. Staff turnover increased, with careerism often replacing the characteristic commitment of pre-1994 anti-apartheid CSOs. The resultant lack of continuity and the erosion of institutional memories often led to a reinventing of the wheel and a flurry of unco-ordinated activities and discussions. In many instances, they also lost touch with their very reason for being, the communities in whose name they raised funds.

Finally, the closure of the RDP Office effectively removed the last sense of a shared and coherent development vision, along with the previously understood basis for co-operation with the government. Not known for its homogeneity, all these factors, plus the new shifting alliances and ideological contestations of the post-1994 period, along with the competition for scarcer and/or more inaccessible funding, eventually led to a more divided civil society. Although some coherence/co-operation can sometimes still be achieved around specific issues and campaigns, such as Jubilee 2000 and the TAC campaigns, the CSOs that emerged from the crisis of the mid-nineties tend to be characterised by the same patterns and divisions observed in the rest of the developing world.

A more divided civil society

At its most fundamental, this division boils down to a clear and growing divide between the bigger, professionalised NGOs, largely involved in service delivery, and smaller community-based groupings and social movements generally opposed to the neo-liberal agenda. In many ways, it appears that a radical reconfiguration
of civil society has been taking place in recent years and that the future challenges and battles will be primarily around economic issues and policy. The deeply divided and messy ‘civil society process’ leading up to and around the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002 (see, for example, Munnik & Wilson’s account, 2003) provided an indication of the fundamental faultlines that have opened up in society and also vividly illustrated the degree of tension and fragmentation in this sector.

Facing up to reality?
While people struggle to cope in difficult times, government gives no indication of any significant or structural changes that are being planned. In commenting on the recent Growth and Development Summit, Sampie Terreblanche states that, ‘the summit failed to establish the root causes of unemployment and that the government attended the indaba without wishing to debate its GEAR macro-economic policy, the free market and globalisation, and restrictive labour policies’ (Independent on Sunday, 15 June, 2003) (own emphasis). The parameters appear clear – whatever discussions, negotiations or battles are to take place with the state, it will happen in the context of the state’s essentially uncompromising stance on its neo-liberal economic policy. It seems unavoidable that the socio-economic crisis outlined above will worsen in the coming years, and while it may not yet be clear how this will manifest itself politically, the consequences will run deep.

A new volatility on the ground
Merely talking about the poor has become a worn discourse that has been overtaken by events on the ground. Levels of discontent are rising rapidly, as witnessed in the increase in and variety of marches and protests throughout the country, and are increasingly finding new institutional and political forms and platforms (for a number of examples, see Ashwin Desai’s book, We are the Poors – Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa, 2002). The mood seems to be more of action, as many ordinary people grow tired of promises and political rhetoric. They are increasingly judging the ‘state of the nation’ by their own experience of deteriorating living standards and an intensified struggle to survive, and it would be surprising if they did not also juxtapose their own bitter experiences of poverty and unemployment with the extravagant wealth of some of their erstwhile compatriots.

There is a new volatility on the ground, which provides for fresh forms of expression and mobilisation. Their outstanding characteristic is exactly that they are based in poor communities and, in most instances, are spontaneous and direct responses to the devastating effects of the state’s neo-liberal policies on the lives of the people in these communities. Their struggles are around specific and localised issues – bread and butter issues – and are usually directed against local government institutions.
that have implemented the unpopular cost recovery policies. How all this will manifest politically is not entirely clear, but that it is already changing the political landscape is obvious.

Speaking predominantly (but not exclusively) about community-based struggles in the greater Durban area, Ashwin Desai portrays the elementary nature of many of these struggles and the new organisational energy and the forms generated:

The struggles that began in Chatsworth and spread from there, reveal much about the transition to democracy in South Africa. So often they are aimed at no more than remaining in dilapidated accommodation devoid of basic amenities, without lights and water. And yet they are seen as a threat to the state. The poor are having to fight to remain ensconced in the ghettos to which apartheid consigned them. Are these the revolutionary demands that we make?

But in Chatsworth and elsewhere, communities are organising and fighting back. They have developed networks of communication amongst the different units and interdependent relationships with lawyers, academics, human rights groups and journalists on the outside. Led mainly by women, many of whose biographies tell a story of abuse that once cowered them into submission, they have re-emerged to take on a new bully-boy – the local government (2002:142).

The question being posed is whether the new social movements can combine these more issue-based and localised struggles and make the necessary ‘connections across space that could potentially unite them’ (Gentle, 2002:18). Can they create the necessary networks and alliances that will make them a real transformative force in society? Are they the most direct expression of the frustration and anger that people are experiencing on the ground? While there is no definitive response yet to this, the volume of research presently being conducted on new social movements in this country²⁰ is in itself an indication of the social and political significance of the phenomenon. Desai concludes that

Much remains undecided. But a movement is growing in South Africa, quietly encroaching upon the State’s prerogative to charge for the ‘privilege’ of living. Rooted in communities and with an ideology, if
that is the right word, that springs from ideas of neighbourliness, dignity
and life, these movements proffer winnable demands which they pursue
with considerable imagination and vigour (2002:149).

These new developments represent an important shift, a tilting of the balance, in both
civil society and society at large, in which the voices of the poor are being heard more
directly. It also emphasises the ‘economic faultline’ in society, between the ‘haves’ and
‘have-nots’, drawing clearer boundaries and battle-lines than have existed for some
time. It also poses particular challenges regarding representivity to civil society broadly,
where it had long been standard practice to speak ‘on behalf of the poor’. With
millions of people now reduced to the status of underclass in society, this claim is
wearing thin in many instances, including, for example, that of the trade unions. There
is thus bound to be greater contestation around this issue, as was illustrated by
some of the claims and counter-claims made in this regard at the WSSD.21

NGOs and CBOs: the great divide
While tensions between NGOs and CBOs have been evident in the past, most often
around issues of representivity and unequal resource distribution, the divide has
deepened in recent years. Apart from reflecting the wider inequalities and divisions
in society, the situation has been aggravated by the funding preferences and practices
of government and other donors. In practice, there is a strong tendency to fund the
bigger, more established organisations, which often serve urban working and middle-
class constituencies, to the detriment of smaller NGOs, and particularly CBOs. The
recent study on The Size and Scope of the Non-profit Sector in South Africa, for
example, found that the bulk of government funding that went to civil society benefited
established organisations involved in ‘social services’ (Swilling & Russell, 2002:
35), which can broadly be read as welfare organisations and/or organisations involved
in various forms of service delivery. Although there are some notable exceptions,
similar funding preferences tend to apply to most major foreign donors. This pattern,
as we shall see further on, is similar to that observed in other countries where neo-
liberal economic policies have been adopted.

Those who feel the impact within the South African funding scenario are the smaller
community-based organisations, which are reported to be responding to the basic
needs of the poor and vulnerable in society. These small and less formalised CBOs
constitute 53% of the total number of organisations (estimated at 98 920) in civil
society (Swilling & Russell, 2002:20), and if this figure is accurate, it not only

20 For example, ILRIG; Centre for Civil Society, University of Natal; INTERFUND.
challenges the more ‘traditional’ view of civil society, as comprising better-resourced and formalised NGOs, but also raises serious questions about unequal resource allocation and shifting levels of societal responsibility.

It is not entirely clear from the research findings whether there has in fact been a proliferation of CBOs or whether they have just been ‘counted in’ for the first time. This is an area where more research is needed, particularly of a more textured and qualitative kind that would, for example, locate these groupings, look at the kinds of activities they are involved in and examine their motivation. There are various ways to interpret this finding, one of which is to regard it, as the authors of this study appear to do, as a positive new form and manifestation of the old vibrant energies of South African civil society. In fact, they seem to hold quite an ‘instrumentalist’ view of these groupings, stating:

This substantial sub-group is believed to have an important contribution to make to poverty alleviation, responding to immediate problems at a community level far more quickly than any more formal structures, particularly the government, can. Anecdotally, their response would be particularly effective for the HIV/AIDS crisis, as they would be providing support and care to the poorest of the poor, who have few other channels of assistance (2002:21).

It is interesting to note that in countries where neo-liberal policies have been implemented, the so-called ‘efficiency argument’ – normally applied to the larger, professionalised NGOs – is being extended to community-based groupings. If this proves to be a widely-held notion amongst CSOs, it would not only be cause for concern, but also an indication of how the uncritical embrace of new causes and catch-phrases can hinder a more probing approach. It would also be interesting to find out how CBOs, many of whom have been organising around and against the human fall-out of neo-liberal policies, have come to be regarded in this utilitarian fashion.

Another possible reason for the proliferation of CBOs is that they are a survivalist response to the desperate economic circumstances, combined with the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS, that over half of the population now find themselves in. Is it not possible that, as a result of government’s policy choices, poor people have had no alternative but to return to small survivalist self-help networks? Are these organisations not, in reality, a sad indictment of the default of the state and the consequent realisation by people that they are on their own again, with little or no immediate help to be expected from government? Given the scale of the socio-economic crisis outlined
above, it is difficult to know exactly how CBOs based in poor communities and with minimal resources can make a contribution to poverty alleviation beyond piecemeal emergency measures. It is also difficult to know how, given the alarming situation around HIV/AIDS in the country, CBOs can develop an ‘effective response’ to the disease and its impact on poor households and communities.

**Shifting societal responsibility**

Although there is presently discussion on ways to transfer resources to CBOs, and some funders, such as the National Development Agency, have indicated that they would prefer to fund them directly, the more fundamental issue here is about the shifting of societal responsibility. It is, of course, appropriate to move resources to where these are most needed, but there appears to be a dearth of critical thinking about the broader significance of this trend in terms of societal/political responsibility. If the majority of CBOs are, as is widely surmised, survivalist in nature and are a desperate response to the hardships imposed on poor people as a direct result of the government’s economic policy, how can these very structures then be seen as instruments of poverty alleviation? Is this not a variation on the ‘blaming the victim’ theme?

In many ways, there seems to be a return to the old colonial self-help discourse – of the ‘pull yourself up with your own bootstraps’ variety. Originating in British colonies in the 1940s and 1950s, during the last years of colonial rule, the ‘community development’ approach, with its strong emphasis on ‘self-help’, was essentially used to create an air of ‘developmental benevolence’, whilst incurring minimal expenditure and attempting to ensure social and political stability. Although ironic in a country that has fought so hard against colonial and apartheid injustices, the reappearance of strains of the old ‘self-help’ discourse is not really surprising as a neo-liberalism dispensation shares the ‘colonial’ need for social containment and the preservation of some kind of ‘development dialogue’, in a scenario of reduced social expenditure and widespread poverty. This kind of approach may amount to an avoidance of responsibility, in that it refuses to deal with the structural conditions that cause and perpetuate poverty and effectively makes the poor responsible for their own ‘deliverance’.

The growing discourse around voluntarism can also be seen to be playing neatly into this paradigm. Apart from increasing references to voluntarism and the ‘rolling up of sleeves’ in the political speeches of senior government figures and more recently local government councillors, it is estimated that 49% of the total work force of CSOs consists of volunteers (2002:18). This figure is not surprising, of course, given that 53% of this sector is said to be made up of CBOs that would normally rely heavily on volunteers.

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It is important to consider what voluntarism means in the conditions of acute poverty, unemployment and HIV/AIDS that prevail, and furthermore what it means for half of the civil society sector to be relying on unpaid labour. Is it not possible that this might contain an element of exploitation, as well as emphasising the growing gap between the well-resourced and the under-resourced in civil society? Referring to the so-called ‘voluntary’ contribution that community members are sometimes required to make in service delivery projects, McDonald states that ‘another form of inequality is found in the guise of voluntarism’ (2002:28).

Voluntary work has traditionally been the preserve of middle and upper class women, who often have financial freedom and leisure time at their disposal. Does volunteering in poor, resource-starved communities therefore not, of necessity, mean something different? Although agrarian societies in the past included various forms of voluntary work, for example, around harvests, the question is, how can one understand voluntarism in the current climate of fragmented and poor communities in this country? Is it not symptomatic of the socio-economic crisis and in fact simply another manifestation of the failure of the state to meet its obligations to its citizens? These are just some of the questions that need to be discussed by civil society, if the present trend towards romanticising voluntarism is to be contained and contextualised.

Making choices

In these circumstances, one can assume that the ‘middle ground’ in civil society is shrinking, and that the increase in jobs lost, in poverty, and AIDS-related deaths makes it even more imperative to take a stand on the worsening socio-economic crisis. The choices are becoming starker and there is less and less room for conceptual confusion and political ambiguity, for simply ‘muddling through’, as before. Although the crisis poses serious challenges to society in general, it really goes to the existential heart of mainstream civil society. The majority of organisations or associations in civil society will probably describe their work as ‘developmental’, in the ‘poverty alleviation field’ and/or ‘working with HIV/AIDS’. The critical question, however, is what it means to be involved in the ‘development field’, when more than half of the population lives in poverty and unemployment is estimated to be at least 40%.

With at least 4 million people infected with HIV/AIDS and 600 dying each day, what does it mean to be ‘involved in the HIV/AIDS field’? NGOs will have to start reflecting more honestly about the impact that they can possibly have on the HIV/AIDS cycle, and question whether interventions such as home-based care, for example, in the absence of a comprehensive HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment plan, can amount to anything more than palliative care and death counselling.
With the many reversals that occur and the negative impact on human development indicators, it may become more accurate to speak of 'under-development'. Is it therefore still feasible for 'development organisations' to simply continue their business as usual, such as selected donor-funded projects and service delivery arrangements with government? Has the time not come for a radical self-analysis within organisations and civil society more generally, that will include a critical assessment of the notion of 'development'. Although it has come under scrutiny in post-development academic literature, the concept has generally survived intact amongst development practitioners, and is in need of appraisal and possible overhaul.

**Development as social containment?**

Palliative care, along with welfare more generally, is important as part of a more comprehensive approach to poverty alleviation and HIV/AIDS, which at present is not well-developed. However, if this becomes the dominant discourse or the common response, then perhaps it would be useful to examine the perception of what is meant by 'development', and whether 'development' has now largely come to mean welfare. In examining the shifts and omissions in official 'development language' in recent years, for example, from poverty eradication to poverty alleviation, from 'jobs for all' to improving social grants, there have been many backward adjustments made to earlier development targets.

References to poverty alleviation are less specific; there is more talk about social grants; provision of food parcels is being discussed. While a comprehensive social security system forms the basis of poverty alleviation in any society, there is a growing sense that this discourse has become more singular in South Africa, no longer forming part of a more comprehensive or fundamentally challenging set of measures to eradicate poverty. The fact that government channels the bulk of its financial support to established social service organisations (as indicated above), also provides a sense of its priorities. While not definitive, it would appear that, underlying the confusing and conflicting 'development' discourses, a shift is taking place and that the notion of 'development' has increasingly become more closely associated with social welfare.

If this proves to be the case, it would be emulating the experience of other developing countries, where neo-liberal policies were implemented earlier than in South Africa. The international financial and donor institutions that propagated these policies in developing countries did so in full awareness of the potential social costs, which, if

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23 See, for example, IDASA study on Civil Society, Public Participation, and Bridging the Inequality Gap, 2003.
they were too high, would present a danger of social and political instability that could derail the entire neo-liberal project in a particular country. There was thus a need for social containment, and this became the motivation for NGOs to play a role in picking up or containing the social cost of neo-liberal restructuring, by 'taking the edge off' the inevitable pattern of deepening poverty, inequality, unemployment and declining living standards.

Co-option into the neo-liberal project?
The so-called 'efficiency' argument was that NGOs, unhindered by large bureaucracies and having closer links with beneficiary communities, could deliver a better, more efficient and cost-effective service than government departments. In order to do this, they would either be contracted by government departments or funded directly by foreign donors to implement certain programmes on behalf of the state. The appeal to NGOs was made in more veiled and technical terms and was in all likelihood connected to issues of donor funding – otherwise not even the most deluded NGO would have taken on this impossible task. Pearce states in this regard:

It has to be recognised, though, that increasing numbers of NGOs, however dedicated and efficient, could never offer rapid solutions to a problem on the scale of global poverty, or even alleviate it sufficiently to ensure relative social stability (2000:21).

There is also an inherent sub-text of neutrality. The tendency of NGOs to question and challenge those in power – part of the essential understanding of the role of civil society – tends to make the state uncomfortable and it is therefore in its interest to involve these organisations in ways that would lead to their de-politicisation and bureaucratisation. This is particularly true of governments with centralist tendencies, who often regard it as their prerogative to determine political and development priorities, and see the role of CSOs as simply to follow suit. In this regard, Shubane comments as follows on the situation in South Africa:

...some analysts have suggested that the government’s increasing irritation [with criticism] expresses a desire to ensure that civil society organisations move away from policy debate into direct service delivery in partnership with itself – a role which, of course, would not pose any direct challenge to government decisions and would also create an interdependence which would reduce civil society’s freedom of action (1999:25).
In many countries, governments have responded to this ‘irritation’ by compromising NGOs, drawing them into an agenda they do not always fully grasp, as it is seldom explicit, and trapping them there as recipients of donor and/or government funding. Apart from more immediate concerns such as the limited scale and impact of NGO projects and programmes, this overtly utilitarian approach towards NGOs raises a number of fundamental questions, including that of the nature of the state-civil society relationship under a neo-liberal dispensation.

What exactly is the nature of the much-vaunted notion of ‘partnership’ in such circumstances? NGOs (and other civil society formations) cannot – with the best will in the world – address the structural causes of poverty and inequality and certainly not through unco-ordinated social delivery projects. Unless they belatedly adopt a more challenging stance towards the implementation of neo-liberal policies, it is clear that their involvement will be, at best, of a palliative nature. Commins describes NGOs involved in this kind of social service delivery as “useful fig leaves to cover government inaction or indifference to human suffering” (quoted in Pearce, 2000:20). There is a clear need for NGOs to re-think this essential relationship with the state, as they cannot and should not be substitutes for the state’s roles and responsibilities with regard to development. Given the scale of the socio-economic crisis described here, it is imperative that a lot more thought should be going into how they can make the state more accountable and responsive to the needs of the poor.

At present, it is not clear whether there have been any serious attempts by CSOs in South Africa to take a critical look at these international precedents and their local manifestations. Although there are important differences and variations, the international experience can certainly act as a guideline when assessing the present situation and a way forward. As indicated at the outset, although neo-liberalism arrived in South Africa relatively late, it was implemented rapidly and its effects are evident in civil society, where a very similar pattern of economic and ideological divisions have manifested themselves. The South African government’s record of partnership with civil society is not encouraging, with government showing an early preference to form partnerships with the business sector or to rely on private consultants. The sense of mistrust and alienation that has plagued the relationship between government and civil society since 1994 does not seem to have been resolved, and may yet worsen.

Despite this, many of the larger, more professionalised NGOs have entered into different types of service delivery arrangements with government, with varying degrees of success. Although some organisations may have known what they were getting into, having bought into the ‘no alternative’ mantra that has been part of the implementation of neo-liberal policies worldwide, it would seem that the majority probably did not.

24 The key theme in academic literature about ‘civil society’, since Hegel.
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Facing very real issues of organisational survival, generally loyal to the new ANC government, and often quite confounded by the technical and economistic nature of the neo-liberal discourse, many might have, in retrospect, assisted in “implementing a model with which they felt deeply uncomfortable” (Pearce 2000:23).

What has made this situation particularly acute in South Africa is the fact that enormous amounts of funding, both foreign and domestic, remain confined to government coffers. With the balance of power thus skewed, many organisations have had no alternative but to enter the service delivery domain, often to the detriment of their other or existing projects and programmes, with attendant compromises being made. It is important that these organisations begin to reflect on the outcomes, impacts and implications of their undertakings.

Given the socio-economic consequences of neo-liberal economic policies, it is doubtful whether the mainly project-based work of NGOs is really going to make a dent in addressing the underlying causes of poverty and inequality. Like their counterparts worldwide, many NGOs would seem to have taken on tasks, each in their own way and context, with limited prospects of success. In this process, they have taken risks and made compromises that may well have negative repercussions, as is apparent from their increasing alienation from community constituencies and in the tensions with the smaller, often more radical, community-based groupings and social movements.

The overall implications of these developments are far-reaching and pose serious questions about the essential meaning of civil society in the current environment. Apart from compromising their valued closeness to communities, the question arises as to the effects on a core tenet of civil society, namely its independence from the state. Few organisations, apart from some well-resourced NGOs, have managed to combine their new service delivery activities with a more critical advocacy role, and while most NGOs profess to be involved in policy work, a recent IDASA study found that there was “some discrepancy between intent and actual engagement with policy” (Civil Society, Public Participation, and Bridging the Inequality Gap, 2003:i), noting definite barriers to public participation and serious concerns around the actual impact of such policy work.

Although there are important variations, it appears that civil society in South Africa has broadly followed the pattern described for other developing countries. The question then, assuming that the larger, more formalised NGOs have become mere implementers of donor and government ‘development’ agendas, is who becomes responsible for developing the alternative development agenda? Increasingly, it appears that this task is left to the smaller, more radical community-based organisations and social movements, whose members and supporters experience the negative effects of neo-liberalism at first hand. These critical voices emanate from the extreme end of an increasingly clear ideological and class divide in society.
Many of these groupings have also developed sophisticated links and networks with the international anti-globalisation movement, enabling them to connect local struggles with the broader dictates of globalisation. Events around the WSSD in 2002 clearly illustrated these new developments and networks and provided a challenge to the government’s neo-liberal policies. The openly defiant atmosphere, the large numbers of people involved in the civil society processes and the choices being made, such as which march to join, can be seen as indicative of the impatience and the angry mood on the ground.

Conclusion

NGOs are in danger of holding on to a world that is passing away. The language in many NGO documents, and the design of many of their programmes, reflect the concerns of yesterday, not the challenges of the coming years. If NGOs are to refuse to accept a role only as welfare providers, they need to undertake more radical and deeply-rooted changes than have yet emerged within most organisations. NGOs have a unique depth of experience in both development and complex emergency settings that could feed into models of good practice and innovation, as well as policy making (Commins, in Pearce, 2000:73).

Rapid shifts continued in the political and economic environment in the period under review and, as a result, CSOs face crucial challenges and choices. Over and above dragging along some of their own older and unresolved problems (such as ongoing funding problems), the sector must find new ways to respond to the socio-economic crisis and the government’s continued refusal to review its contentious macro-economic strategy. The old question of stance vis-a-vis government, always at the heart of the civil society debate, is pulsating once again. For a long time, the majority of CSOs preferred, and tried to establish, co-operative relationships with government. Many even tried to span the continuum between co-operative and confrontational, by describing themselves as ‘critical allies’ of the government.

Although understandable at the time, there is a sense that the political and economic common ground – the basis of co-operation with the state – has been seriously eroded in recent years. The fundamental shift to a market-led and growth-oriented economic strategy, the resultant absence of a coherent ‘development’ and poverty eradication vision, the preference of forming partnerships with the private sector
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and the continued blundering around domestic funding25 are just some of the wedges that have been driven between the state and civil society. As previously indicated, the very meaning of the term ‘development’ is being questioned in the present environment of globalisation and neo-liberal economic policy. There are serious challenges being presented to civil society, in all its diversity, to continue searching for new ways of engaging more critically with the state and holding it accountable for meeting the needs of the poor.

Apart from the need to develop new stances and strategies with regard to government, civil society also has to face up to its own internal divisions and fragmentations. Although the theoretical notion of ‘civil society’ is, and should be, one of inherent diversity, contradictions and even conflict, this sector in South Africa now seems to stand particularly starkly divided, this time around fundamental economic issues. Serious contestation around ideas, positions and strategies is taking place across this growing divide. The choices are becoming starker and, as the ideological middle ground shrinks, there is a growing sense of opposing camps – a new “us” and “them” scenario.

Many to the left of the ideological spectrum appear to have made their choices, more often than not because there has been no other choice! Mostly based in poor communities, directly impacted by the negative effects of neo-liberal policies, they have little to lose, and may have something to gain through their new struggles. The critical question is how the more formalised CSOs – those with funding, infrastructure and government contracts – will respond to this very changed scenario. Given that we are talking about tens of thousands of organisations, all with different foci, scale of operations, budgets, etc., it is clearly impossible to predict a general trend, and we may simply, at this stage, have to accept, as we have witnessed in the last ten years, that the notion of ‘civil society’ is extremely fluid and that it eventually – albeit painfully – moves on and reconfigures in new ways.

What is important, though, is for CSOs to accept the realities of diversity, divisions and conflict. Although it refuses to die entirely, the notion of a ‘united voice’ in civil society has never existed in reality and it is now high time to discard this false premise. It is possible that, at least to a certain extent, the ongoing problems experienced by SANGOCO and the National Land Committee, for example, can be seen as an indication of the impossibility of ‘standardising’ this sector. It may have more impact, particularly in the present socio-economic circumstances, to rally around more specific issues, themes or sectors. The Treatment Action Campaign is a

25 See, for example, Gardiner, M., & Macanda, M., 2003, An Independent Research Report on the National Development Agency. Also, Louw, S., 2002, ‘Smoke and Mirrors’ – the National Lottery and the Non-Profit Sector. Both these reports were commissioned and published by the Non-Profit Partnership and the Centre for Civil Society, University of Natal.
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good example of how a focussed campaign, around a specific issue, using a variety of tactics, can have a hard-hitting impact.

In confronting the divisions, tension, conflict and debates, there is at least the possibility of eroding some of the hazy thinking and confused discourse that we have seen in large parts of the civil society sector in the last decade. There is nothing like a cutting edge, adversarial debate to clarify the mind, and it is possible that this could just be the source of the much sought-after new vibrancy in civil society. Many commentators have lamented the lack of capable leadership in the sector, and it may well be that stronger intellectual leadership is the key – clear minds that can facilitate and articulate progressive critical thinking and reduce the internal and intra-organisational focus and obsession. The worsening socio-economic crisis and the terrible price the country’s population is paying for the government’s slow and erratic response to HIV/AIDS certainly provides the pressing backdrop for these crucial discussions.

References
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