

RECLAIMING THE VOICES OF DISSENT

New Forms of Resistance in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Introduction

This paper explores the changing forms of democracy : from participatory democracy to representative democracy within a global capitalist framework. In this exploration, the drive back to participatory democracy with active civic engagement will be discussed.

This paper will also explore the current socio-economic conditions in South Africa in its transition stage, the changing nature of civil society, the rise of social movements, and the role that the RASSP has played in this context and the research projects that have emerged out of this process.

This paper is important because currently a global movement against corporate globalisation is emerging. Its being regarded as a phenomenon that should be given its due attention. In addition, sustained struggles like the ones emerging from organisations coming out of the RASSP should be shared on such a platform as it has serious implications for the way researchers see civil society globally and more specifically in South Africa.

From Classical Democracy to Contemporary Capitalist Democracy

The classical conception of democracy is firmly rooted in the ideal of popular participation. The cornerstone of democracy was the direct and continuous participation of all citizens in the life of their state. In addition each citizen was qualified to hold public office. This version of democracy removed the need for a separate class of professional politicians and citizens were allowed to rule directly.

More importantly, the notion of democracy as outlined here was not institutionalised and thereby not separated from the people. Democracy in its classical form involved greater civic participation through public meetings, the joining of organisations, the ability to organise and demonstrate in order to hold the representative government accountable. This direct form of democracy was more inclusive and created a more secure environment for citizens.

Today, there has been a shift away from direct forms of democracy and a greater emphasis has been placed on representative democracy. Through representative democracy, a citizen only becomes an active participant in political spaces by casting his/her vote. At a time when trade, economics, labour, and living have been institutionalised in international institutions such as the World Trade Organisation, The International Labour Organisation, The United Nations Organisation and

governments negotiate their international status in these forums rather than in consultation with their citizenry accountability now takes place at a level far removed from the ordinary citizen. The reduction of democracy to a vote within the above outlined context is becoming a point of concern as democracy becomes intermittent in a climate of backdoor international deals. These economic and trade deals get negotiated at an international level without input from the citizenry – hence the disconnection between citizen and state is becoming more pronounced.

Whilst negotiations around the privatisation of water, electricity, education and health care are being done between governments at the World Trade Organisation, international capital, governments at national levels are reducing citizens to a vote. “Your vote is your voice!” is the slogan of today. However, at the same time, statistics from countries around the globe show that voter turnout is low. Even the newly founded democracy of South Africa was not exempt from this. According to McKinley¹,

“The national voting turnout has gradually decreased since South Africa's first, one-person one-vote elections. In 1994, 19,5 million people voted; in 1999 just over 16 million voted; and in 2004, under 16 million (remembering that the country's population has grown substantially over the last decade)” (2004).

McKinley shows further that of the entire population of South Africa, just under 7 million eligible to vote did not register for the elections. In addition, of those registered to vote (20 600 000) over 5 million chose not to vote (2004).

According to Dalton, Bürklin and Drummond, not only is voter turnout down, but also the public's trust in parties and representative institutions are also on a down turn (2001:141). Similarly, Schugurensky states that “Poll after poll, all over the world, tells us that citizens have low trust in politicians and political institutions” (2004)².

In contemporary capitalist democracies, citizens have been given a small confined space to participate, ie. through the election polls. Evidence shows that this form of democracy is clearly in crisis with less and less numbers of people turning out to vote every four or five years. Calling this voter apathy and blaming it on the individual citizen is problematic in that it circumscribes the sphere of our interrogation. What about the broader institutional and social factors that are playing a key role in detaching the state from the citizen (Schugurensky, 2004:2)? What then happens to civic engagement in between elections? Not much, if democracy has been confined to the polling booths every four or five years.

This confinement is dangerous for democracy in that :

- Elections can be more aristocratic than democratic, solitary rather than a community effort;
- If politics is left solely in the hands of politicians, the political class will become accountable only to itself, corporate funders and international capital as opposed to the citizenry;

¹ Taken from “A Disillusioned Democracy : South African Elections ten years on”, April 2004, www.nu.ac.za/ccs . The article also appeared in the Mail and Guardian newspaper as “New Power to the People”, May, 21 2004.

² This is taken from a talk given at a meeting at the Toronto Metro Hall, April 29, 2004.

- The contract of representation that binds voters and elected representatives is losing legitimacy (Schugurensky, 2004:3)

As Mill stated, “[H]ealthy democracies need active citizens but governments prefer passive citizens...A passive citizenry does not hold governments accountable for their actions”³. This is becoming increasingly true as more and more governments are beholden to international institutions, most infamously, institutions such as the World Trade Organisation, The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As more economic and trade deals are being signed in the offices of these institutions and as more people are becoming poorer and poorer under capitalist globalisation, a passive citizenry becomes important to uphold the political classes.

Dalton, et al show that although a passive citizenry is needed to maintain the status quo, “popular demands for new direct forms of political involvement and decision making...have increased...more people today are signing petitions, joining citizen interest groups, and engaging in unconventional forms of political action”(2001:141)

The Discourse on Public Participation and Participatory Democracy

Theories of public participation have focused a lot of its attention on group interests and how they perform, interact and participate in public forums dedicated to policy formulations. The scope of participation in public policy takes into account the breadth and depth of influence, as well as power and authority that determine policy.

Since 1908, theorists have been associating public interest with the character of a political system. Bentley stated that a government was a representation of groups wielding power for their own interests. This phenomenon had its own way of forming, developing, reorganising group interests and forcing group representatives to mediate these changes⁴.

Building on this theory, Beard noted that government was a representation of elite groups developing the constitution for their own individual interests⁵. In his development of pluralism, Truman claimed that interest groups were becoming more politicised in that their involvement in government processes had increased.⁶

However, the development of theories of public participation and policy making have been done in a vacuum paying little attention to socio-economic and political developments. Today, in a global capitalist political and economic system, Putnam’s theory of elite pacting⁷ as well as Walker’s criticism that classical democratic theory is unrealistic and utopian seems better fitted. Walker argued that classical democratic theory is flawed because it fails to take important political developments in society, for example, the influence of those who control concentrated economic power, into account⁸.

³ Quoted by Schugurensky, 2004

⁴ pg 29 of the “Scope of Participation in Public Policy Making”

⁵ pg 29 of the “Scope of Participation in Public Policy making”

⁶ pg 29 of the “Scope of Participation in Public Policy making”

⁷ Discussed in more detail in the following section.

⁸ pg 29 of the “Scope of Participation in Public Policy making”

Hence public participation under the microscope of popular discourse points to the impact or the efficacy of organised and politicized groups on policy intervention and policy making. Much of the emerging theories on public participation from group theory to pluralism to elite theory play around in this restricted space of policy making and intervention with changes being made in terms of how groups organise and interact with the institutions of government in light of policy development. In addition, focus is also spent primarily on electoral politics and public participation, in this sense, gets marginalized or restricted further to citizens access to the vote. This is extremely problematic, for in the case of the citizen's access to the vote, as was discussed earlier, this form of participation is in crisis due to citizen's responses to political parties and the process of voting. Restricting participation to policy making and intervention within prescribed institutional forms restricts the number of civil society actors to those who have the resources to access these institutional forms of intervention.

However, recent writings have begun to focus attention more widely to look at public participation in terms of democratic citizenship and participatory democracy. Hence the field of operation for public participation becomes broader than the details of policy formulation and intervention as well as the engagement with electoral systems. Moote and others are of the opinion that if a participatory democracy approach is taken towards public participation more social discourse and collaboration will emerge (1997:877). Using this approach allows for a wider berth of interests to be represented and that this representation is not just for policy making but is in the broader interests of allowing the public greater access to government processes (from planning to implementation to evaluation) (Moote et.al.:1997).

Following from this, a good public participation process is more than groups being organised as interest groups (politicized or not) interacting in a process that is seen to be fair and competent. According to Webler and others, a good public participation process involves one that can acquire and maintain legitimacy through consensual democratic processes that involves the active and informed participation of stakeholders in "democratic deliberations ... from all sectors of society" (2001:447).

A democratic citizen is not just one who votes or who is part of an interest group accessing the policy making arena, but it is one who is active in the deliberations of political, social and economic policy development, implementation and evaluation, holding the organs of government accountable for the consequences that emerge from these policies. Following from this, a democratic citizen is not just an active person but it also refers to one who is informed : "the democratic citizen is expected to be well informed ... [and] ...to know what the relevant facts are" (Berelson and others quoted in Kuklinski and others (2000:790)). Delli, Carpini and Keeter put this eloquently when they state that "political information is to democratic politics what money is to the economy; it is the currency of citizenship"⁹.

The dissemination of information regarding policies is the responsibility of the government. It is therefore the responsibility of government to facilitate the

⁹ Quoted in Kuklinski and others (2000:791)

development of a democratic citizen for the sole purpose of creating a vibrant civil society that upholds the basic tenets of democracy, ie. active civic engagement.

A misinformed and uninformed civil society will create passivity. In addition, many of the misinformed public might hold onto the wrong beliefs and develop people's preferences incorrectly. Kuklinski and others show that it is the misinformed who, when presented with the correct facts, still cling on to their misinformation (2000:793). Hence misinformation and an uninformed public can create a stagnation and a dissolution of civic engagement which can ultimately destroy a robust civil society as well as a rigorous defence of participatory democracy.

A democratic citizen will also be one who will be active in society. Through a more democratic citizenry civic engagement¹⁰ will increase. More people will participate in civic organisations and more people will begin to feel more integrated into community life. As more people begin to feel that they have the ability to influence public decisions the more they will feel the need to participate (Goldfrank, 2002:68). For there to be civic engagement, "there must be a mass of citizens interacting collectively around issues [that are] important to them" (Goldfrank, 2002:75).

However, public intervention in social, economic and political issues is not organically derived. And whilst effort has to be put into the development of a democratic citizen that can generate civic engagement, we must remember that it is not always in the best interest of governments to have such an active citizenry. That aside, public involvement does have its barriers. Diduck and Sinclair (2002:586) study into the barriers to public involvement reveals that these barriers can include¹¹:

- *Forgone conclusion* : people feel that they will have no impact on the end result because that result has already been decided on by the government (be it local or national).
- *Lack of Knowledge*: a person not being aware of the public processes is one of the barriers that can be included here. Also, the information that is given to the public must also be scrutinised. Sometimes this information is inaccessible or it may be too technical or incomplete.
- *Lack of Interest*: despite the literature showing that apathy was a barrier to public involvement, this study showed that a lack of interest was not a barrier to involvement. Whilst people may show a great deal of interest in a particular issue they may still not get involved in the public processes.
- *Lack of public speaking skills* : people often did not want to engage in public processes because they felt they did not have the necessary skills to speak in public, and so did not have the confidence to engage in a public forum. Also some of the public processes are intimidating and too technical.
- *Lack of financial resources*
- *Lack of knowledge on the process*

¹⁰ Goldfrank defines civic engagement as referring to both actual participation in social and political organisations and to how people perceive their integration into and efficacy in public life (2002:68).

¹¹ Diduck and Sinclair's literature review on barriers to public involvement list "Information deficiencies"; "Lack of resources"; "Opportunities to participate"; "Lack of impact on ultimate decisions" and "Lack of motivation, interest or time" as commonly held barriers to public involvement (2002:579)

Whilst discourses on public participation tries to locate democracy within the realm of representation through elected politicians, statistics show that not only is this blinkered version of democracy in crisis and that in some cases, attempts being made to maintain the status quo of a passive citizenry, participatory democracy is on the increase. The number of people joining organisations and becoming involved in civic engagement is creating new sites of contestation that is enabling an environment of participation in between the ballot boxes. Whilst there may be structural barriers to participatory democracy, the political and economic context in which we are currently located is playing a greater obstacle to participatory democracy. It is to this that we now turn.

Elite Pacting and its impact on Participatory Democracy

Putnam defines the “elite” as those that have more political power than others. He goes further to say that “power” represents those that have the ability to influence other individuals and the ability to influence collective decision making. The political elite then becomes those who exert power over people in an attempt to have power over the outcomes. The political elite have a greater probability of influencing the policies and activities of the state as well as influencing the authoritative allocation of values.

Elitist theory, in summarised form, makes the following points :

- Political power like social goods is distributed unequally
- People fall into two groups : those who have significant political power and those who don't
- The elite is internally homogenous, unified and self-conscious
- The elite is largely self-perpetuating and is drawn from a very exclusive segment of society
- The elite is autonomous

Putnam explored the possibilities of “Who Rules?” and concluded that there are fewer rulers than there are ruled and that power is distributed unequally. At the close of the 19th century, it was well known in society that behind the diverse facades of government, power was confined to the ruling few. The question of “Who Rules?” raises what Friedrich calls ‘power relations’ which he defines as the rule of anticipated reactions. Extrapolating power relations into political systems, we can see that power relations, like a political system, is stratified. Individuals at the bottom lack all the pre-requisites for exercising political power while those at the top have these characteristics. Two options emerge from this, viz. on one hand linkages could be built between the strata on the other hand they can be isolated (elite-mass gap).

Ginsburg makes the point “that elite pacting is integral to transition theory” (Ginsburg 1996). By combining the two, the following theoretical assumptions emerge :

- Negotiations cannot be conducted by the masses themselves, at venues other than the bargaining table, but must be entered into on their behalf by a leadership (elite) that speaks for them;
- Not all members of the contending factions at the bargaining table are keen on pacting (there will be hardliners, reformers and moderates in the process).

Transition theory, like elite theory places only one burden on transitional governments, and that is to be strong enough to govern effectively, but weak enough not to be able to govern against important interests (Ginsburg 1996). In addition, within a transitional arrangement, a distinction is drawn between economic democracy (workers cannot make decisions about the economy) and political democracy (but they can make decisions about human rights). This notion was carried through South Africa's negotiation process.

Within the framework of capitalist globalisation, national governments have relinquished their privilege as being caretaker of their citizenry by handing over policy making to international institutions within. Instead they have become the caregivers to the interests of big business.

Let us use the example of the World Trade Organisation to illustrate this. The GATT Agreement, came into effect on the 1 January 1995. By this time over 100 nations had signed up as members of this organisation that promised national governments a piece of the free trade pie. By signing the GATT agreement, these 217 nations opened up their domestic markets to multinational corporations. In South Africa, this move cost the clothing, textile and leather industry lost over 100 000¹² jobs due to the reduction of tariffs on imported clothes, textile and leather. The General Agreement of Trade and Services signed over natural resources such as water, electricity to private companies. In Cochabamba (Bolivia) this meant that the price of water tripled and hundreds of thousands of people no longer had access to water when the government of Bolivia signed over the supply of water to Bechtel, a US based multinational engineering firm (Roy, 2002:136)¹³.

Whose interests are being served through the privatisation of water and other basic services? Whose interests are being served when a national government signs away its rights to make working conditions more flexible? Whose interests are being served when a national government spends tax-payers' money to build export processing zones to supply cheap, unregulated labour to corporations like Nike so that Nike can make over a billion dollars in profit (whilst the women who work in the EPZ that make Nike earn 25 cents per 18 hour day¹⁴). As Arundathi Roy puts it :

Rumplestiltskin thinks big. Today he's stalking mega-game : dams, mines, armaments, power plants, public water supply, telecommunications, the management and dissemination of knowledge, biodiversity, seeds (he wants to own life and the very process of reproduction), and the industrial infrastructure that supports all this. (2002:137)

It is clear that some sort of pact has emerged between nation states (at a global and local level) and capital (at a global and local level). This pact has had serious implications for the development and promotion of public participation in every single country touched by capitalist globalisation.

The scope of the public's participation in policy making is indicative of the breadth and depth of influence and the power and authority that determine policy.

¹² This was for the period 1996 - 1998

¹³ See also the Municipal Services Project www.???

¹⁴ See Isaacs for more on the Nike story as well as Naomi Klein's No Logo.

To examine the scope of participation in public policy, three basic questions are asked:

- Do we have a government by, for and of the people?
- Are we ruled by a small oligarchy of self appointed elites?
- Do we exercise control over government through interest groups that speak on our behalf?

Within the functioning of capitalist globalisation and the interference of big capital in intergovernmental institutions like the World Trade Organisation, it is clear to see that critical policy issues relating to the well-being of the citizens of a country are being decided at a forum where the public are not invited to make representations. All of the agreements emerging from the WTO serve the interests of an elite few. So it would not be too far off the mark to conclude at this point that globally, we are being ruled by a small oligarchy of self-appointed elites, ie. Big capital. At a national level, we can conclude that through representative democracy we are being ruled by a small class of elected politicians combined with capital represent an elite group.

Against the backdrop of capitalist globalisation, Dahl and Truman's pluralism becomes an oversimplified attempt to explain public participation. All groups in the public participation forum do not have equal access to this public space, as we would like to assume or as governments would like to believe. Using Walker's words:

Public policy is not the expression of the common good as conceived of by the citizenry... This description of policy making is held to be dangerously naïve because it overlooks the role of demagogic leadership, mass psychology, group coercion and the influence of those who control concentrated economic power.

The exertion of political power (and how much of it one has) plays a critical role in determining whose interests get represented. So whilst there may be hundreds and thousands of different groups with different politicized interests, not all gain access to the public forum. Those that have significant political power have the access.

Bearing this in mind, it is worthy to remember that the elite is internally homogenous, unified and self-conscious. It is self-perpetuating and drawn from a very exclusive segment of society. Such a conscious collection of resources (both political and economic power) explains capitals' access to national governments' policy making machinery and the international policy making machinery of the WTO. With its consolidation of political power into one unified, homogenous, self-perpetuating group with the same interests, capital in itself becomes an autonomous, power wielding group. In the era of profiteering and accumulation, capital has more to offer national governments than the poor person in Tafelsig.

A reconstitution of "classical" theory of democracy into the elitist theory of democracy has seen the active and vociferous participation of the citizenry being relegated to individuals exercising their power to decide through the vote¹⁵. It is therefore convenient for institutional intergovernmental institutions like the United Nations to reconceptualise the notion of democracy to the vote. Civilised countries are

¹⁵ This was Joseph Schumpeter's summary of elite theory of democracy.

countries where all people have the vote. So while South Africans have struggled long and hard and now have the vote, we are a civilised nation despite the fact that 10 million people in post apartheid South Africa have had their water disconnected (McDonald 2002).

So what becomes of the citizen? According to Walker, the average citizen still has some measure of effective political power even though he or she does not initiate policy, because of his/her right to vote (if he/she chooses) in regularly scheduled elections (Walker ??). In the stratified political system, the citizenry is demoted to numbers while capital plays an integral part in developing policy for profit.

Post-apartheid South Africa : the macroeconomics of its transition

Pre-apartheid South Africa was structured socially, politically and economically along racial lines. Through the creation of separate systems of operation, including the structure of the economy, larger and wide income disparities exist along racial lines. In addition, this economic disparity between the races was further entrenched systemically through political and legislative measures. For example, black townships were increasingly marginalized in terms of infrastructural development, access to basic services, inferior education systems, lack of housing development, and the availability of inferior jobs¹⁶. A combination of these issues creates an institutionalising of poverty and as a result gives South Africa one of the highest Gini Co-efficients in the world (Saul : 2002).

Theories of labour market structure in capitalist economies have indicated that the majority of people in a society ought to be employed and will be located in the formal sector. However contemporary capitalist economies are reflecting upward trends in unemployment and the shifts in labour market structures. Some of the unemployed are entering the informal sector and creating a far more bloated informal sector with a formal sector that is steadily shrinking.

The informal sector is a nebulous arena : it remains unprotected by labour laws, unregulated in terms of working conditions and worker benefits, and its main thrust is survival. In this sector people will engage in whatever they have to in order to survive.

In South Africa, the colonial and apartheid nature of the labour market has not been transformed. There is still a large mismatch in terms of the skills available and the kind of work that is coming to South Africa. Hence, the majority of the people who were located at the bottom of the apartheid structure are the same people one will find at the bottom of the post-apartheid labour market structure. In addition, with the implementation of neoliberal economic policies in post-apartheid South Africa, many people located in government administration and the manufacturing sector have lost their jobs creating a spiralling effect of poverty. As Ari Sitas explains :

Last year, the same people were designated poor. The same were poor the year before, the year before that and before that, down into a longitudinal graph that spans back before the 1994 democratic turning point, into the apartheid era (2001 : 31)

¹⁶ This is not a comprehensive list but rather gives an example of some issues.

This leads into the argument that Professor Sampie Terreblanche makes in his analysis of the South African economy. From his historical analysis, Terreblanche observes that the structure of the apartheid economy created a situation that served the interest of white capital. An elite grouping of white business developed a pact with the Afrikaner governments during the apartheid era that saw the structure and system of the South African economy being twisted and convoluted to serve the interest of this elite grouping (2002). This system and structure of the economy has remained unchanged in the post-apartheid era.

South Africa's national governments have all had long standing relationships with capital. From the 1860s (diamond mining) to the 1880s (gold mining), the mining industry accelerated the development of capitalism in South Africa. Commercial and agricultural capitalism sunk its roots into the South African economy not so long after the mining industry and flourished through to the 1970s. From the 70s onwards (for the next 50 years) the accumulation strategy of the capitalists became a centre piece for the South African economy. In order to secure heavy flows of capital and cheap labour to the mining industry, the apartheid government integrated the South African capitalist economy into the world economy (Marais 2001). Not only did South African capital play an active role in the economy, they also actively intervened in the policy making process, pushing through policies that would effectively boost their own interests of capital accumulation (eg. The removal of influx control and pass laws was suggested by the mining industry to allow a cheap supply of semi-skilled and skilled African labour (Marais: 2001)).

The old apartheid structure of the economy had a direct impact on the structure and workings of the labour market. The creation of a steady supply of cheap, unskilled labour into mining, manufacturing and farming assisted these white owned industries in developing and amassing large profits. It also allowed for the creation of policies and legislation that developed the architecture for the apartheid landscape. These policies and pieces of legislation were designed to push black people onto the periphery of social, political and economic existence creating a cesspool of poverty and at the same time creating an abundant flow of wealth to a minority grouping of people.

With little transformation to the system and structure of the South African economy in its post-apartheid era and with the same kind of elite pacting taking place during the transitional phase of the South African democracy¹⁷, the labour market maintained its same structure. However, over the years with the implementation of the macroeconomic policy, GEAR, the informal sector and the number of unemployed has increased.

¹⁷ Patrick Bond (Elite Transition) and Hein Marais (Cry for the Beloved Country) describe the process of elite pacting that took place between the ANC, the National Party and the business community. Hein Marais starts his discussion from around 1987 when some of the ANC were in exile where international as well as local business communities were courting them. Patrick Bond starts his discussion from 1990 until 1994 and focuses his attention on the local developments. A lot of their focus is spent on the transitional arrangements that were made to safeguard the economy from any socialist ideas and to steer the economy in the direction of market driven economics, a similar kind of arrangement that existed with the Nationalist Party.

The neoliberal economic framework of GEAR precludes the development of any form of social security system for the growing band of unemployed, informal sector workers and the poor. GEAR argues for a decline in state expenditure. An examination of the budget allocation shows that the greater decline took place in social assistance grants (pensions, old-age homes, children's feeding schemes, the child support grant) (Benjamin:2001).

Some of the key points of GEAR :

1. Government spending, especially with regard to wage expenditure, was too high. GEAR proposed to cut government expenditure by half by 1999.
2. Corporate and personal tax rates were regarded as excessive. The strategy was to raise government revenues through economic growth, increased efficiency in tax collection, taxation of retirement funds and higher excise tax rates for tobacco products.
3. GEAR felt that the monetary policy would remain as it is with the projection that the Bank rate should fall to 7%.
4. Exchange controls will be subject to liberalisation making the movement of money and goods and investment much easier.
5. Trade tariffs will be lowered (according to WTO standards).
6. Maintaining a stable wage and price level despite the anticipated inflation increase.
7. More flexible labour market arrangements will be made were the issues of wages and working conditions will be stabilised
8. A mandatory payroll levy for human resource development will provide for effective investment in training
9. A tax strategy will be implemented to attract investors in the manufacturing sectors. These strategies include a tax holiday for big business.
10. Restructuring of the state assets including privatisation remains a high priority
11. Public-private partnerships in the development of infrastructure and provision of basic services.

Workers and the poor have borne the brunt of GEAR policy. The unemployment rate has been set at between 40 – 45% and over one and half million jobs have been lost since the implementation of GEAR. According to Jillian Nicholson, not only are people losing their jobs but there aren't any jobs being created to absorb the unemployed back into employment. The tariff reductions in the clothing industry has seen 17 000 jobs being lost per year since 1996. Tariffs for imported clothes and textiles are now sitting at 0%¹⁸. In addition, privatisation of state assets in the area of basic services has seen the government, in its preparation for privatisation, working on the basis of cost-recovery.

Whilst this may seem plausible for some, for Saul, McDonald and Desai, this is preposterous in a country where “the poorest 60% of households share of total expenditure is 14%, while the richest quintile's share is 69%. South Africa has the largest GINI co-efficient in the world and tops Brazil and Argentina. Public-private partnerships have seen banks, hesitant construction companies and war-lord styled

¹⁸ The Ministry of Trade and Industry lowered tariffs in this sector faster than the WTO prescribed standards thus rendering the industry disabled.

organisations representing the private and have cheated millions of poor people off a house, water, electricity¹⁹.

In a commissioned study by the World Bank to assess poverty and inequality in South Africa, academics from University of Kwazulu-Natal's School of Development Studies noted that South Africa is an upper-middle income country but that the spread of wealth was extremely disproportionate. The report found that "most South African households experienced outright poverty or vulnerability to poverty" (May : 1998). In addition, the study found that many households in post-apartheid South Africa still had unsatisfactory access to "clean water, energy, health care and education". The Gini Co-efficient was placed at 0.58 making it one of the most unequal societies in the world (May:1998).

The following excerpt from the research report shows the disparity in distribution of wealth that has resulted in South Africa being one of the most unequal societies :

About 18 million people live in the poorest 40% of households and are thus classified as poor and 10 million people live in the poorest 20% of households and are thus classified as ultra-poor. (May:1998)

Out of a population of 46 million, 28 million people are classified as either poor or ultra-poor. Therefore, more than 50% of the South African population is regarded as living in poverty. According to the United Nation's definition of poverty, more than half of the South African people are living below a dollar a day.

In addition, the unequal distribution of income has resulted in :

...the poorest 40% of households account[ing] for only 11% of total income, while the richest 10% of households, equivalent to only 7% of the population, accrue[ing] over 40% of total income²⁰.

The lived experience of the poor tells a far more disturbing tale than the statistics represented by the poverty study done by May. In David McDonald's study into the provision of basic services in post-apartheid South Africa, the fundamental conclusion he comes to is that people cannot pay for basic services, not, according to popular opinion, because they are lazy or because they embody a culture of non-payment, but because they cannot afford to. In addition, many sacrifice basic needs such as food and clothing to be in a position to pay for access to water and energy (2002 :7)

According to Greg Ruiters, in the winter of June 1998 an estimated 90 000 South African homes had their electricity cut off (McDonald:2002). In Soweto, 20 000 households per month had their electricity cut off (McDonald:2002). In Kwazulu/Natal between August 2000 and April 2001, there was a record of 80 387 cases of cholera and 168 reported deaths. This was directly attributed to the change-over to pre-paid water meters making access to clean water a case of 'you-pay-you-get' (McDonald : 2002).

The following excerpt from an interview conducted with a pensioner from Zone 3, Diepkloof sums this up effectively :

¹⁹ See McDonald, Saul and Desai's work.

²⁰ Quoted by Julian May (1998)

We are pensioners. As a result we can not afford the R250 they [ESKOM] say we owe. We pay R100 every month. This is what we can afford. If we pay R250, it means we will not eat, my children won't go to school. Anyway, R250 is too much; where do they think we get this much money. (Mr. And Mrs Ntobong)²¹.

In an additional study done by the Municipal Services Project it was found that of the people interviewed who could not afford access to basic services most were unemployed; in flexible, insecure, unprotected, low paying jobs; or had access to a social grant like a pension :

The main breadwinner is in more than 50 per cent of the cases unemployed or a pensioner, providing that the income in most of the surveyed households is very low. Observation and cross-checks in the questionnaire shows that more than 75 per cent of the households live in modest or poor economic situations²².

In Chatsworth, a suburb mingled with aspects of township life and a stark reminder of the income disparities in the country, there are hundreds of little communities that have also been pushed to the periphery of social and economic existence. Most people in these poorer communities provided a steady stream of cheap labour to the clothing, textile and leather industries that are located close to Chatsworth. However, this industry has been almost decimated due to the tariff reductions imposed by government on clothing, textile and leather imports. In 2000, 17 000 jobs were lost in the clothing and textile sector²³. This has been projected on an upward trend since 2000. In addition the leather and footwear industries have shed 13 000 jobs since 1990 and this is also escalating (Desai, 2002). According to Desai, "the downward spiral of the industry has forced many of the women of Chatsworth into unemployment" (2002:64).

The massive unemployment through the destruction of the clothing, textile and leather industries has torn apart the social fabric of many communities across the country. Other industries and sectors also shed millions of jobs further entrenching poverty and ghettoising the poor. Together with the unemployment and poverty came the inability to pay for basic services such as health care, energy, water and rentals. Combined with an economic system that entrenches poverty rather than alleviates it, a downward spiral into desperate poverty has been exacerbated.

As Gary Adler pointed out, South Africa does not have a comprehensive and holistic social security system. Millions of people have to face the day being HIV positive, having no job, no income, no access to water, energy, food, clothing, shelter and more importantly, no access to medical care, and a trickle of HIV treatment. Post-apartheid South Africa is presented with a problem that will not go away unless drastic measures are taken to guarantee the people's right to life. In an environment where poverty is structurally entrenched and current economic policies are creating a downward spiral, many people are dying from poverty.

²¹ Grace Khunou (2002), "Massive Cutoffs : Cost recovery and Electricity Service in Diepkloof, Soweto" in Cost Recovery and The Crisis of Service Delivery in South Africa, p67.

²² As above, p67

²³ See my article on "Masculinisation of the State and Feminisation of Poverty" in Agenda No. 48 2001

South African Civil Society in Post Apartheid South Africa

Civil society, post-apartheid South Africa, has also experienced a drastic change to its nature, size, shape and operation.

There has been a strong emergence of smaller Community Based Organisations that are less formal in their structure and organisation, less resourced and located more at the level of communities. According to the study done by the Centre for Civil Society, community based organisations form 53% of the total of 98 920 voluntary organisations in the country (Swilling and Russell, 2002: 20). These community based organisations serve a constituency that faces extreme forms of poverty on a day-to-day basis. Some of the work they do involves finding ways to assist the poor in surviving the increasing poverty they find themselves trapped in.

The Non-Governmental Organisations have relinquished a large part of their watchdog role they held during apartheid years. Post-apartheid South Africa has seen the NGO sector becoming more professionalised, involved in service delivery (Kotze, 2004:3). This is normally done on behalf of government. In addition, NGOs have become more institutionalised, operating within the confines of a neoliberal framework. As Habib and Kotze point out, neoliberal jargon has been adopted into the context and environment of the NGO sector without so much as an interrogation of the ideology that lies behind it (Habib and Kotze in Mahone and Edigheji (eds) 2003). Hence, within the confines of the neoliberal agenda as well as finding themselves playing a more co-opted role to government, NGOs have found their ground quickly receding to professional, consultants with little or no access to grassroots communities. Often, in their attempts to act as agents of service delivery on behalf of government, NGOs are seen as abandoning the poor, marginalized people and as being agents of government and answerable to donors rather than people on the ground.

A lot of NGO work in terms of public participation has been fundamentally located in policy intervention. Submissions on policies get discussed in workshops and meetings amongst themselves and with donors (Kotze, 2004: 17) and as Azar Jamine²⁴ puts it, “A lot of talking was taking place amongst the haves about addressing the needs of the have-nots”. In addition, NGOs have direct access to some of the largest pools of financial resources from donor circles that fund the kind of public participation that involves policy negotiations as opposed to more direct forms of civic engagement. The NGO sector has become the elite grouping within civil society, dislocating itself from the realities of grassroots experience with poverty.

The emergence of social movements and community movements onto the political landscape has shown the shift in public participation. McAdam and others state that “social movements and revolutions have, in recent decades, emerged as a common...feature of the political landscape” (1996:1). In addition they are of the opinion that these movements arise out of particular political developments such as “shifting institutional structure and ideological disposition of those in power” (1996:1).

²⁴ quoted by Kotze, 2004:17

Post-apartheid South Africa has seen a surge of community and social movements emerging in response to the state's macro-economic policies. Desai's work located in impoverished communities show that a national movement organised around socio-economic and political rights is emerging in post-apartheid South Africa (2003). These community movements are largely left out of the policy making arena as a result of poverty, lack of access to resources and illiteracy, to mention a few. But this does not necessarily indicate that despite this particular lack of participation, that no public participation is taking place. On the contrary, Desai shows that public participation through participatory democracy and democratic citizenship is taking place and is on the increase. The nature and form of community movements is significantly different to formal NGOs (who are involved in policy development) and so their manner of organizing and the character of their activism is largely at odds with conventional notions of public participation.

The RASSP : helping to reclaim the voices of dissent

The Research and Analysis Skills Strengthening Programme was designed with the specific aim of enhancing the existing forms of activism that has emerged from civil society organizations by introducing the theoretical and practical elements of research into advocacy.

The RASSP is housed at the Centre for Civil Society at the University of Kwazulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. The programme was initially designed to build capacity within formal NGOs. However, after receiving 600 applications from some of the more impoverished quarters of the country, as well as recognizing the fact that the NGO sector was already well-resourced and that in attempting to build capacity in civil society, it was decided to take on board 200 organisations that represented the poorer, under-resourced quarters of civil society. About 95% of the organisations represented on the RASSP are from Community Based Organisations, Community and Social Movements.

For the purpose of the RASSP, progressive civil society was defined as organisations that are

“...interested in public good and issues around governance; are concerned about issues like sustainable development, human rights and socio-economic issues and are concerned about a ‘political project’ in a ‘vision/values framework’”²⁵

In so doing, applicants to the programme had to have existing campaigns that involved engagement with government and the state. These campaigns had to be around issues that dealt with human rights, poverty, marginalisation of people on the basis of political and economic policies.

The RASSP has two streams to it, viz. a training phase as well as a research phase. The 200 applicants taken on to the RASSP had to go through a strenuous and comprehensive training programme that focussed on the skills of research and how to link research with their advocacy plans. Over the two years of training, RASSP

²⁵ RASSP selection criteria document

participants were subjected to selection processes prior to each round of training. The tools for selection centred around research activities that finally emerged as a research proposal. Today, the RASSP has 35 research projects with 40 community activists as researchers. Each of these research projects have received a research grant so that they can actively practice the skills they have learnt from the RASSP training.

The RASSP has given these activists the tool of research, formerly owned almost exclusively by academics, to use for dismantling what they see to be the vehicle causing their suffering. This process of dismantling has created sustained forms of struggle that involves research, strategic planning, organisational development and capacity building, and a strong advocacy programme.

Organisations on the programme have had experiences with civic engagement. Some of these interventions have involved meetings with local government, negotiations with local government officials, policy interventions, national campaigns, mass demonstrations, sit-ins, reconnections and putting people back in their homes when they have been evicted. Some of these interventions have been done on a long term basis, others have been defensive mechanisms based on survival. The approach from government and the state towards these organizations has not been uniform. In some cases, government officials have been open to discussions and negotiations. In other cases, especially when the organizations have been social movements who are directly challenging the government's neoliberal economic project, the response from government has been aggressive and closed off²⁶. Hence the space for participatory democracy and civic engagement is not, as created by the government, a space for equal participation²⁷.

Through the skill of research and advocacy, the desire of community based organisations and community movements in South Africa to start claiming back spaces of public participation that have been taken away from them has been unleashed. In this process they have begun to redefine these spaces, the concepts that go with these spaces and they have invented (reinvented) new (old) ways of organising. They have redefined activism", "participation" and they have forced South African society to take notice of these struggles. Community based organizations on the RASSP have taken on as a political project, the latent desire to create a mass base of democratic citizens that are overtly active in political activities that have produced a rise in civic engagement. Through the RASSP researchers, a body of truly democratic citizens that are informed and involved in building a sense of community through participatory democracy is emerging.

The Research and Analysis Skills Strengthening Programme has assisted these activists in their awakening and has fanned the fires of activism that is creating sustained programmes of action through research and advocacy programmes.

²⁶ See McKinley and Veriava's article entitled "From Swaart Gevaar To Rooi Gevaar: The 'Story' Of State Repression In The South African Transition" on www.nu.ac.za/ccs

²⁷ This can be juxtaposed to the campaign run by the TAC. Running parallel to the TAC campaign, many of the social movements have tried the legal route, the negotiations route, discussions and mass demonstrations and still poor people are being evicted, disconnected and removed from school for not being in a position to pay fees.

They are using this skill of research to inform their advocacy plans that are strategically put together on the basis of short, medium and long term objectives with policy intervention being a key aspect of their advocacy plans.

The RASSP research projects that are currently being done include :

Sibusiso C Mthimkhulu
Tembalethu Community Education Centre
Adult Basic Education and Training as a Human Right

Skombuzo A Mbongwa
SANCO Ukhahlambo Region
Challenges Facing Poor People in Gaining Access to Affordable Basic Services: The Case of Inkanyezi/Colenso Community

Elizabeth Kanani
Union of Refugee Women
Investigation into the Living Conditions, Survival Strategies and Acceptance of Refugee Women in KZN

Naphtal Nzama
Imbumbayogu Co-op Development Centre
How Effective is the Co-operative Legislature and Policy

Malcolm SM Hlongwane
Thokoza Training Centre
What is the Impact of the Cancellation of NPO Certificates for Early Childhood Development Centre

Brandon Pillay, Krishnee S Pillay, Julie Venketsamy
Bayview Flats Residents Association
Investigation of Socio-Economic Conditions of People Living in Bayview, relating this to the Indigent and Relocation Policy of the Council

Bongekile U Kuzwayo, Joseph Sekelo
BESG
South African Criteria of 21 years old age restrict child headed household to have access to Housing

Gugu Thabethe
Sangoco
An Investigation into the Extent to which NGOs & CBOs are involved in Policy Making & Legislation Formulation Processes

Diana R Donnelly
Construction, Engineering & Industrial Workers Union
Addressing the HIV/AIDS Pandemic Amongst our Union Members & how this will affect their Families Wellbeing & Income Status

Bongiwe Dlamini
Midlands Women's Group
An Investigation on Economic Development Services that Rural as Compared to Urban Women are entitled to, what services they are currently receiving

Ibrahim Hassan
International Refugee Service
The Living Conditions of Refugees in KZN

Marcelle Andrews
Wentworth Poverty Alleviation Programme Project
The Reasons for & Impact of Unemployment in Wentworth

Ntokozo Mthembu
Workers' College Research Unit
Survival Strategies of Households affected by unemployment in the Surroundings of Durban

Zama Timbela, Lungiswa Luthuli, Mncedi Nondzube
Youth for Work
Is Education Accessible at all levels to School Children and Youth in Khayelitsha

Thandi Swartbooi
Sokhana
Women Experiences with Domestic Violence

Christina Henda
Cape Town Refugee Centre
**Barriers experienced by Refugee/Asylum Seekers Children in W Cape
Impact of Refugee/Asylum Seeker Identity Document in Accessing Socio-Economic Services**

Latyo M Kamba, Jean de dieu Bakundukize
Cape Town Refugee Centre
**Barriers experienced by Refugee/Asylum Seekers Children in W Cape
Impact of Refugee/Asylum Seeker Identity Document in Accessing Socio-Economic Services**

Neil M Matthys
Community Research Group
Transformation in Middleburg Kaap: A Case Study

Faizel Brown
Community Research Group
Housing Delivery in Cape Town

Ashraf Cassiem
Anti-Eviction Campaign
What Role does the Law play in the Protection of Poor Families in the Western Cape

Tengwa Makwena, Ben Londzi
KTC Coremo
Access to Housing Irregularities

Brian Vel
Northern Cape Khoisan Council
To determine or investigate the impact of Land Restitution on Bucklands Griqua Community near Douglas in Northern Cape

Ivan Steenkamp
Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa
To Assess the Relationship between the Premiers Bursary Trust Fund, Skills Development & Employment of Young People in Sol Plaatjie Municipality: 1997 – 2002

Nonceba E Nduna
SADTU
The Impact of Educational Retrenchments & Restructuring on Society with Particular Reference to Grahamstown

Mokibelo Nshabeleng, Frans Tlokana, Sipho Ngwetsheni
Centre for Youth Development
Challenges faced by Young People in Mogale City

Tsiyisela Themba Mathebula
Legae Empowerment Organisation
Housing Subsidy Benefits in West Rand

Thulani TD Hlatshwayo
CTU/ Consawu
Investigating how the unorganised workers in the Johannesburg Innercity survive without union representation

Lebohang Matete
Lethukukhanya Health Institute
To investigate the Level of Primary Health Care Provision in Johannesburg Inner City

Jeanette M Lesisa
SACBC Justice & Peace Dept
Access to Social Grants

Louisa Plaatjies

SASBO Finance Union
Building Effective Service Delivery in SASBO

Bongani Yezwi
Landless People Movement
Composition of Landless People's Movement

Sebabi Daniel
Nehawu
To Assess the Capacity of Nehawu to Deliver Effective Services to its Members

Researchers on the above research projects identify themselves first as community activists and part of a community and then as a researcher. Each research project has an advocacy campaign attached to it to bring the research to life and not to have it located in a research report. These campaigns are located in the communities that were researched. This is in keeping with the ethics of research but is also a commitment from the RASSP to the vision of participatory democracy.

Conclusion

The South African government, in its transition phase, has entered into pacts that have seen it secure its foot in the door of global economics. This elite pact with big capital has cost the majority of the South African citizenry too much.

Not only has the spaces for participatory democracy or activism (as was reminiscent during apartheid) been closed and restricted (and converted to voting and policy intervention) but people have been allowed to surrender themselves to the downward spiral of poverty.

It is in this context that social movements have arisen to reclaim the right to dissent. They have engaged in forms of resistance that involves direct participation. Through their activism they have called into question the elitist role of politicians, capital and NGOs.

Out of this, the RASSP has harnessed the energies of the social movements and community based organisations and using research as an advocacy tool and a tool for struggle, has fanned the already ignited fires of resistance and activism. This has drastically shifted the terrain of democracy away from the blinkered vision of only the vote and away from the confined spaces of institutional public participation to wider spaces of radical participatory democracy.

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