

*development  
dialogues*



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OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTH AFRICA

# THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND TRADE UNIONS IN GOVERNANCE

## \* monograph 2

ISANDLA INSTITUTE / OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION

### About Development Dialogues

*Development Dialogues* is a joint initiative of Isandla Institute and the Open Society Foundation – South Africa. The aim of the public dialogue series is to create a space for critical reflection and dialogue among key development stakeholders in South Africa. In doing this, the organisers seek to make a (rather modest) contribution to enhancing the quality of debate in the development sector. Through *Development Dialogues*, Isandla Institute and the Open Society Foundation intend to bring about creative and constructive multi-stakeholder meeting opportunities that push stakeholders to think beyond the confines of their immediate interests and theoretical paradigms.

This monograph captures the speakers' inputs and discussions at the second *Development Dialogue* on 'The role of civil society organisations and trade unions in governance', which took place on 8 September 2005 at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town.

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**T**en or 11 years after democracy the discussion around civil society and labour in respect of the question of governance has to be located within some kind of context. This has got to be the unfolding events that forged many unique relationships. For COSATU that is the tripartite alliance, but also the UDF (United Democratic Front) and the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM). These were all people who had varying ambitions, but were committed to changing South Africa into the kind of society that was reflected in many of the founding documents of our country, like the Freedom Charter and afterwards the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

What that says is that we have a rich history around alliances. The one thing we were singly successful in achieving was in changing the political context, and the changes in the political context were to a large extent driven by these alliances.

But the movement also had a set of aspirations. It was not only about making sure that we replaced the apartheid state with something else. It was not only to ensure that we got rid of apartheid and that we put in place what could broadly be described as basic human rights. The struggle ultimately was also about undoing the socio-economic consequences that were the legacy of apartheid and no transition, no change, no liberation of people could be complete without us addressing those questions.

Ultimately the question about struggle in South Africa was about putting in place a new order that would have to fundamentally speak to the relationship with the economy – because of the unfolding struggles of the 1980s, the uprisings in Soweto and across the country and the protests against apartheid taking the form where at some stage there was no doubt that there was dual power in South Africa, with the possibility of revolution and really radically changing our society.

That made a lot of people nervous, because radical change in society speaks to those questions about economic relations and power relations within South Africa and globally. So what happened was that there was an encouragement towards some kind of political deal that settled political questions, but that left the areas related to the economy completely aside.

That was a sad moment in our history, because in South Africa it could have served to galvanise us in a way where we spoke to the fundamental questions, but it could also have served as a beacon for the rest of the continent and the rest of the world. Latin America especially was grappling with dictatorships that existed there and their own struggles to some extent were about the generals being replaced by people who became part of the new political elite and then left the economic structures largely in place.

And so what we see in our own society is that a new civilian elite has emerged. The technocrats that are in the main responsible for driving the government agenda have taken over and put the government and the country on a path that has left the socio-economic structures largely in place, and that did not bring about a response to the difficulties that we had.

All that we were really focussed on overseeing was South Africa's integration into the global economy and all of the measures that came with that: the question of labour market regulations, the trade liberalisation programmes that we put in place, pushes for privatisation as well as commercialisation under GEAR – the macro economic policy that was meant to bring stability to the economy. There are people who have different views on it. The fact is that one of the key ambitions, to stabilise the currency, certainly has not come about. I think in the last 23 months the currency had both appreciated and depreciated by close on 23%.



So those key objectives were not met, but in the process of introducing that policy you not only marginalised people politically, but also economically and socially. What we were doing was putting in place an entirely foreign structure in South African society, one that really undermined the very values and the very energies that were generated during the struggles against apartheid.

I think for us – as civil society and labour – we need to ask some hard questions, because it was our responsibility to keep the political process true, and we did not do that. We got caught up in the whole notion that compromises had to be made in the common good, and some of the compromises I suppose were inevitable. But when the consequences of those compromises visit themselves so extremely on our society there has got to be a re-look at both the consequences of our policy choices and also at the very architecture that we put in place.

On questions of unemployment, whether you say that we have unemployment levels of 32% or 40%, either way it must represent a national crisis, because of the deepening levels of poverty associated with that. You see it in a range of features, both within the labour market and those people displaced from formal decent work to the new casualised or outsourced or temporary forms of work that the bottom 60% of the society engage in, and in the large percentage of people who have less of the national income than they had in 1996. So people, poor people – the main constituents of the ANC, of government – are essentially poorer.

But whilst that is happening, the levels of inequality in our society grow. And as the inequalities grow it must speak to undermining the fundamental vision of trying to build a coherent society, trying to promote this notion of a South Africa incorporated, where we all working together in a common good, because clearly there is not a common good. And there is a range of circumstances that could elaborate that point.

Essentially what is happening is that the social fabric of our society is falling apart and the

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consequences of that, whilst really being localised in the past in many of the townships and the Cape Flats and elsewhere, for the purposes of our discussion here in the Western Cape, are now starting to be more democratised. So the aberration that goes with poverty – the violence, the abuse and the disregard for human life – is starting to demonstrate itself across the board.

So we need to take stock. We are sitting at a point where we have a constitution that is essentially really democratic and promotes the principles of participatory democracy and puts in place mechanisms that ensure that civil society has all the institutional levers to be part, technically, of policy-making and engagement within government, whether it is at local level with the Integrated Development Plans, at provincial level with the Provincial Development Council, or nationally where government has an obligation with laws that effect socio-economic policy to have those engagements at NEDLAC. We have the institutional framework that is meant to facilitate that.

The institutional framework becomes a con if its legitimacy is not maintained, and the government itself to an extent undermines the legitimacy of those institutions. In 1997 and in 2001 we had big job summits and a Growth and Development Summit where a number of pre-decisions were crafted between the different social partners that we believed could respond





to the difficulties. All of those key agreements were largely ignored. Those that stand out most obviously are the commitment to increasing levels of investment by the finance houses, including to some extent the unions and the investment companies themselves. No one has complied with that, not even the unions.

That must challenge us to examine the questions about what it is we are doing in these relationships, and in our relationships in the alliance, in the different formations that are meant to drive this participatory democracy and hold the government to its course.

How are we giving expression to that? Well, we are not doing very well even in what is probably the one enduring relationship that has achieved the great successes at least in liberating South Africa, the tripartite alliance. We do not believe that there is any adherence to the decision that came out two months ago when there was an agreement between the alliance partners, dealing with fundamental issues.

The first one was to do with the exchange rate and the need to put in place some measures to ensure a more competitive exchange rate. For the first time there was an acknowledgement that the market alone could not be allowed to set the exchange rate and that it is a fundamental vehicle of governmental policy.

There was also the question of trade policy, of what we do about the imports that are coming into South Africa and are leading to huge job losses. We have not supported infant industries or established industries and we have not made sure that maintaining jobs and creating new jobs is a key objective of government policy. And there is a range of vehicles and institutions that we can use, amongst them the International Trade Advisory Council.

We reach these agreements within the alliance – the SACP, SANCO, COSATU and the ANC – and the next day in the news these are really denigrated by the Finance Minister and what they call the economic cluster. Ministers Trevor Manuel and Alec Erwin say there will be no intervention around the exchange rates.

So we keep talking past each other, because there

can be no continuation of the illusion that there is micro-economic stability when we have the kind of levels of unemployment that we have and we have the devastating fluctuation in the exchange rate that just wiped out many of our industries.

The one thing that we would like to say is that there has got to be an appreciation of the fact that there is a large and looming crisis in South Africa. Unemployment, poverty and inequalities must represent the greatest challenge. We all talk the talk, but does anybody actually do anything that changes the policy choices and puts us on a different development path that can respond to these questions? Well, one of the ways we are going to be able to respond to those questions is by defining new relationships.

A technocratic approach has been taken to governance in South Africa, because the politicians and the political imperatives play a very small role in the choices that we are making, irrespective of where the country should be going. The main considerations are questions related to how we are seen to promote global confidence in the economy and how our credit rating is with the World Bank and the other institutions.

But clearly there are many options for co-operation, both with the historical allies that we have, as well as with new organisations. The issue is

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how we manage that and how we manage the difficulties that we have, but also the very important question of holding politics to what it is that is required. The ANC might have great difficulty in marching against government policy, but there is nothing that stops the ANC from some kind of show of solidarity with the statements that it does align itself with. And here I am referring to the policies of the retailers or the Proudly South African campaign or the fact that there are large sections of our industry where the ANC agrees that there does need to be an intervention.

Those are areas that we can collaborate on, but we spend too much time trying to be too politically pure in defining the basis for collaboration. And whilst the history of South Africa would say that our key strength is our ability to engage with one another and to build a relationship that can respond to these issues, sometimes this very relationship and that very history is our greatest weakness.

We had this launch a few weeks ago, not even a launch, of what was broadly termed a UDF and I think everybody roundly denied that it was the UDF. The big thing that came out of that was the fact that there was a challenge to the political framework, there was a challenge to the ANC. The SACP felt nervous about it, some of the allies who work with us, who are more to the left of COSATU were nervous about how they collaborate, how they could be seen to be reformers. So in defining our terms of collaboration, we are more obsessed with how we are viewed personally and how our organisational credentials will be seen into the future.

The deciding factor of any action that we take should be: Is this in the best interest of the majority of South Africans? Does it take forward the country? Does it take forward the ambitions that we have set for ourselves? But that is never the question; that is never the central consideration.

In conclusion, I want to say that there are many relations existing, that are forming, that are enduring

and that have to be the key component of how we are going into the future and confront the difficulties that exist in our society. The fields that we have got to spend a bit more time on are how we build capacity in those organisations, because there is no doubt that many of them have lost political focus and lack a clear programme, because of the euphoria of the end of apartheid and also where the people position themselves in future. So that is going to have to be a big challenge.

But the beauty of the matter is that here we have a society that talks about a contract with the people. It is the governing party's electoral slogan. But when people organise themselves in some kind of form and shape that gives them the capacity to engage in that contract, in that conversation, then everybody becomes nervous. So there is a need for us to put aside some of the political aristocratic behaviour that we have and find a way in which we can build more coherence within our movement, develop this new development path and also build more trust.

Ultimately we are never going to agree going into a relationship or an alliance about the purity of this movement or what the purity of our association is. The only way we are really going to be able to collaborate in the short term is to say what we want to achieve. And then say how we work together to reach those objectives, and not to be too consumed upfront with how we define ourselves, how we define the interaction.

What is clear is that we need to ensure that we respond to the obvious crisis. We have got to build solidarity in a way that both defines the broad criteria for collaboration and appreciates that, whilst in our country we made important advances to change the political construct, if we do not change the economic construct all of that good work will be undone. Our society will implode on us if we do not take on board the fundamental questions of jobs and poverty as the key driver of any programme that emerges in our contract. ■



**W**hen we talk about civil society in development and governance it is necessary to do something which I know is vaguely offensive to most right-thinking people: to talk a bit about political theory. Unless we do that, we cannot really understand the issues we confront.

So what is civil society there for? This is something that is debated at length and I think the rest of the society feels that it is great that we academic types debate it, because we would be committing anti-social acts if we did not. But I think the debate has substance which makes it useful to real people, because it is very important for us to understand that civil society is fundamental to democracy and, I would argue, that it can only really operate in a democracy.

Civil society in a democracy is the place in which citizens are meant to get together to ensure that they are heard by government. This is a very simple but also an indispensable democratic function. All the screeds that are written by our colleagues about democracy tend to forget that at base democracy is a system of popular rule, in which power is meant to be wielded by all citizens. Because of a variety of logistical and other reasons, it does not make sense for the citizens to do this directly and so this function is delegated to elected representatives. But if democracy is to remain rule by citizens, that cannot mean that the citizen ceases to be heard between elections. Indeed, democracy can only operate if those who are meant to be in charge, the citizens, continue to be heard. The vehicle through which the citizen's voice is heard is civil society.

Because not all citizens have the same values and interests, there are also always a multitude of voices in civil society: if civil society is operating in a vigorous fashion, it cannot be saying only one thing. It will be saying many things and what some parts of civil society are saying will be in some respects in conflict with what other parts are saying.

It is necessary to say this because we continue in our discussions to talk about what civil society is doing or not doing without necessarily remembering that on these occasions we are talking about what *part* of civil society is doing. And the part of civil society that concerns all of us today is that section which is concerned with social inequality and concerned about poverty. Thus, the question is: what is the function of that particular part of civil society in the 11 years of our democracy?

I would argue that one of the misconceptions of civil society's appropriate role which has arisen over the past 11 years is the notion that we judge it by whether or not it forms a partnership with government or provides useful skills and ideas to government. There is a perception, I would argue, in parts of the section of civil society we are talking about today that in the first five years of democratic rule the section of civil society which was involved in the anti-apartheid struggle was meant to find a seat at the table from where they could assist government in rolling out progressive social policies.

**We have a shallow civil society, which remains** the preserve of a section of South African society; there are a great many South Africans who remain excluded. Essentially you cannot be part of civil society unless you organise to influence government and many South Africans are excluded from organising in this way.



That did not happen in the way many in that part of civil society hoped. Thank Heaven for that. Had those sections of civil society simply become sources of useful skills and practical advice, then this very important dimension of citizen voice would not have been heard.

And this is crucial because I think that if we look at the development record of the first 11 years of democracy we see that, through all the hand-wringing in some circles about post-apartheid government's technical and administrative capacity, that, while this sort of capacity is clearly a problem, the real deficit of the last 11 years, the real albatross around the neck of dealing substantially with poverty and inequality, has been a lack of clear and effective voice for poor people on their needs and priorities.

I feel confident in being able to say this because one can demonstrate quite clearly consistent mismatches between what the policy-making elite feel poor people want and need, and what research and behaviour on the ground shows you that people think they need.

We would still have had this mismatch – perhaps in much greater measure – if civil society had been absorbed into taking a seat at the table to advise government. Many people within that section of civil society we are talking about, felt that the end

of apartheid meant it was natural that they be comfortably absorbed in this way, and that, when it did not happen this was an indication of bad faith or lack of commitment on behalf of government.

The reality is – and this is entirely appropriate – that even in a situation where there is a close alliance between government and sections of civil society, the purpose of civil society associations remains to speak independently for their constituents. And they perform a useful role at the table and, if necessary, as part of that alliance, only if they are able to speak on behalf of significant sections of society. If, for example, the labour movement ceased to speak vigorously for workers, there would be not much point in ensuring it a seat at the table.

We therefore had a pleasant surprise when we convened, six years ago, a series of discussions among sections of civil society at a time when people were agonising on what appeared to be a shift in priorities from the Mandela to the Mbeki administration. What we expected to hear was what one was then hearing in the public debate: hand-wringing from people saying 'the previous president used to love us and this one hates us and what are we going to do about this?' What was refreshing about the meeting, and I think entirely appropriate, is that people around the table said: 'If there is a change in the environment, it is our fault. If government is not listening to us in this context, it is because we are not organising effectively to ensure that it has to listen. If it can afford to ignore us, it is because we are not effectively representing a constituency, we are not practicing democratic politics in a way which makes sure that we have to be heard.' And I think that is correct. Exercising voice is a constant process of influencing debate by demonstrating that you have a constituency, that you are speaking for citizens. And so there is a problem of assuming that somehow this relationship between progressive government and progressive civil society is the natural order of things

**At base, democracy is a system of popular rule.** This function is delegated to elected representatives, but that does not mean that the citizen ceases to be heard, and the vehicle through which the citizen's voice is heard is civil society.



and that it does not have to be earned and worked at the whole time. It does have to be earned, it does have to be worked at the whole time and, quite bluntly, to the extent that civil society has not been heard over the last 11 years, it has to ask itself why it has not developed the social power to ensure that it is heard to the extent that it should be.

That said, I do not agree with this notion which I have read in some of my colleagues' writing that civil society has now simply become a conveyor belt for government. This is not what we see in our public debate or on the streets. Civil society has independently been part of the political environment in various ways for much of the democratic period. And the record of the Treatment Action Campaign demonstrates that engaged civil society activity can make gains in which government is forced to change policies which for various reasons it would not like to change. So I do not think that we have had a problem of a demobilised, de-motivated and compliant civil society.

What I do think is that we have a shallow civil society which remains the preserve of a section of South African society; there are a great many South Africans who remain excluded. Essentially you cannot be part of civil society unless you organise to influence government and many South Africans are excluded from organising in this way. This has to do with changes in our economy and society, which some of us are trying to understand. But because time is short, let us simply say that we are in a situation in which civil society has not succeeded in penetrating deep down in society to be able to speak for the poor, and to be able to speak for people at the grassroots.

One of the major constraints on our development performance is the mismatch between what is done and what seems to be required on the ground. But this is not a criticism only of politicians. It is also a very pertinent indictment of civil society organisations

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themselves who have failed to express accurately the needs and demands of the poor. This is a point I will continue to make until somebody fixes the problem.

We have operated for several years in this country with a housing policy which was not formulated by a bureaucrat behind a desk – it was the outcome of years of negotiation within the National Housing Forum. Civil society was there, the political parties were there, the entire spectrum of organised South African society was there and they spent five years negotiating how we get mortgage finance to poor people. But the evidence is overwhelming that poor people do not want mortgage finance. Clearly then those civil society associations which participated were not in touch with grassroots needs and preferences. Has civil society penetrated to the poor if people spend that amount of time arguing and lobbying for things which those on whose behalf they are arguing can be shown not to want? This is a major challenge for civil society – how to penetrate deep enough into society so that poor people have a voice.

This does not mean that effective civil society action on behalf of the poor relies only on strength in numbers and on using organised strength to force those in power to do what poor people want. In a democratic environment, if you are engaging with government, as the Treatment Action Campaign has done to achieve the rollout of anti-retrovirals, at a



particular stage no matter how conflictual your relationship may be with particular people in government, you acquire at least a partial interest in ensuring that government does what it promises to do. You have a partial stake in government success, which does not mean you contribute to that simply by handing out useful advice and skills; you very often do it by taking the government to court or by using the Constitution in another way – to mobilise peacefully on the streets. You are in a tension in a sense because you have to work with a government that at the same time you are opposing. There is this wonderful statement from a TAC leader who said: 'We continue to offer the olive branch to the Minister of Health while telling the entire country that she is mad.' There is certain logic in that.

Another key challenge is to build alliances. The last time I inquired, the Treatment Action Campaign had little more than 9 000 members. There are millions of people in this country living with HIV/Aids.

TAC is effective despite its small membership because it has built what Zackie Achmat calls a moral consensus, it has built moral alliances and reached out to people within society who may not necessarily be allies, and is taking them with it on a moral quest. We need to look at the extent to which that section of civil society we are talking about is able to reach out across the boundaries to build the alliances and partnerships which will mean that the voice of the poor is not only heard but heeded.

So the true challenge which that section of civil society that wants to fight poverty and inequality has to begin confronting is: how does it put down roots into the society so that the poor, the weakest, the most vulnerable, the people that are most victimised by poverty and inequality are part of this process and that their voices are heard? And how does it play the politics of alliances in a way in which it can make gains, not only by confrontation, but also by winning moral arguments? ■



**S**hortly after I received this invitation I was invited to speak at a public meeting in Harare at the same time. I was quite tempted to say that I cannot make it after all, but duty called.

The public meeting in Harare is a different thing from a public meeting in Cape Town. For one thing it is illegal and for another thing it will be much fuller than the meeting here. So I think there is something to say about our people having the right to gather – if they have the rights, they will not gather, but if they do not have the right to do it, they will be there.

It is a pleasure to be here. I want to discuss civil society in a much more continental way, and not in an intellectual way, looking at the notion of civil society in the continent. In 1980 I studied in Senegal at an institute where there were civil servants from all over the continent studying. One learnt a lot about the rest of the continent and one of the perennial discussions was the issue of democracy and dictatorship in Africa. In some societies you had what you might call civil society, but in most of the continent you had an absence of civil society. I became convinced – more convinced than ever – that the absence of civil society is the reason why we do not have democracy in so many parts of the continent, and that you have what you can call a democracy in South Africa, because of the existence of a relatively strong civil society.

Tony Ehrenreich described the relationships in an articulate way. I liked his notion of changing the political construct and that you had the liberation movements here, but that the political change was more than just the liberation movement. It was actually changing the political construct and part of that was creating a vibrant civil society. One can debate whether it is vibrant or not and whether it is demobilised or de-motivated or not, but it certainly is vibrant compared to other parts of the continent.

One feels very free in South Africa, despite the complaints we have. The notion of civil society is

essentially intertwined with the notion of democracy. It is about voice and denial of voice. An issue in South Africa is that civil society is essentially middle class. Steven was talking about how civil society does not go down to the grassroots, and suggests that people at the grassroots are not actually part of civil society. Civil society has to go to the grassroots. It has to find ways of speaking for the poor, or the poor finding a voice in civil society.

In South Africa if you think about what you define as civil society – even COSATU or the tripartite alliance – you are essentially talking about a middle class entity. The poorest of the poor in this country, certainly the rural poor, really have no voice in civil society. All the media that existed before 1994 – Speak, Learn and Teach, Upbeat and other alternative media which was really a voice for the poor – disappeared after 1994. So the notion of civil society, even in a country we would see as having one of the most vibrant civil societies on this continent, is still a very narrow definition.

One looks at the economic crisis in South Africa, and talks of an unemployment rate of 30 to 40 percent – in other countries in the region you are looking at 70 and 80 percent. I did a study for the World Food Programme last year between April and June and it was really a life-changing experience for me. I went to Swaziland, Lesotho, Namibia and Angola and looked at food distribution points. The World Food Programme wanted to find out how to disseminate information about HIV/Aids, nutrition and education through their food distribution channels.

You know, going to those food distribution points was such an education because this is something the middle-class communities of the region just do not see. Swaziland is a very small country and from Mbabane to the place where we went to it was barely 120 km, yet it was completely another world. People were congregating there for food distribution. There is a whole culture around how the food is distributed



and there is a kind of market while it is happening. There is a whole process. You could read the Swazi newspapers for a decade and you will have no insight into the levels of poverty and hunger in Swaziland, not just in terms of figures, but in terms of being there physically. In Lesotho people, old people, climb from the top of the mountains to get this food and carry it up the mountains again.

The biggest shock for me was Angola, with 14 000 people coming to the food distribution point. Over a period of three days food was distributed to all those people from a radius of about 30km or so, and because the transport system is so bad many of them walked. Many are suffering from HIV/Aids. These are internally displaced in Angola. I said to one of the people: 'Your government cannot even provide a decent system of food distribution, or improve the roads so that people can come and get food, or do something about reviving the agricultural economy'. And his comment was, 'we do not have a government, we have oil barons and diamond merchants – that is what we have in Angola'. There is just a complete level of cynicism of ordinary people for government.

There are cans of produce of the United States of America. All through the region, wherever there is a food crisis, you have peasants carrying this produce from the United States of America. And the irony of this situation, where you have an elected government, or a rhetorically elected government, is that the peasantry of the country are daily reminded that it is being fed by the United States of America.

I saw a picture the other day of a Zimbabwean peasant carrying this big can of produce. I thought about the irony of a government that presents itself as a model of anti-imperialism, but which has made the country much more dependent on the produce of the USA than the former settler regime, which actually closed out that produce forcing us to rely on local produce. These are some of the ironies of the economic crisis in our region.

The other thing is that what we call civil society is completely unconscious of this. I asked myself standing in that food distribution place: what is reality? You know, we talk about the man in the street, and when we are in those places this is a large majority of people. In Angola you are talking about 70 percent of the population being in that situation, so that is the reality, not the reality of the civil society in Luanda. I think the same thing would apply to Zimbabwe where you have a situation where over five million people are in distress, and a significant section will starve within the next year. Civil society in the region has not reacted to this.

I experience this at a kind of intersection, being a Zimbabwean by birth and training and education and being in South Africa and being a South African and, in some ways, with the policies of the South African government on the Zimbabwean issue. The absurd ironies I find is that the very people who articulated so well notions of human freedom, human rights, the right to freedom of association, freedom of expression are the ones who now refuse to acknowledge the denial of these rights to the Zimbabwean people. The ANC was the first political movement to have a human rights document on this continent, a very well-articulated one in the form of the African Claims document of 1943. The very movement that has had this discourse over the past 40 years is suddenly the one which sanctions forced removals, which sanctions torture, which sanctions detention without crime and without trial, which sanctions the deliberate use of food as a political weapon in a neighbouring country and continues to do this consistently.

At the United Nations when there is the issue of human rights, when there are motions to send a special rapporteur on torture to Zimbabwe, South Africa is at the forefront of protesting against this. And it is interesting to find that some organisations on the left will actually dismiss human rights and in fact President Mbeki did it in one of his ANC on-line





letters in which he said human rights were a tool which Kissinger put forward against progressive movements during the Cold War. Suddenly the movement which had a strong human rights discourse is dismissing and delegitimising a human rights discourse in Zimbabwe.

Yet this is the same movement and the same government which supported the African Union and gave wonderful praise for the launch of the African Union and the new era in which we are embarking on the political freedom on the continent. Yet, the principles enshrined in Constitutive Act of the African Union and the Charter for African People's Rights are just trampled upon daily in countries such Zimbabwe, Angola, Swaziland and in fact most of the region.

My feeling is that often Zimbabwe is isolated as a special case but it actually is not. In this region we had settler governments and we have had liberation movements which have taken on the mantle of government but not changed the political construct. I think South Africa has gone a little further in changing that construct than the other ones, but even in South Africa it is a contest. Certainly it is in Namibia, Angola, Zimbabwe and even Botswana, which is often upheld as the beacon of democracy in the region is a democracy that does not survive very close examination as soon as the ruling party is threatened.

My belief, especially now in Zimbabwe, is that the discussion and the response of the region is that there must be an engagement beyond the political movements. The whole crisis is reduced to the political crisis. We spoke about the political deal that settled the political questions but left the issues of the economy aside. This is very much what has been played out as far as the Zimbabwean crisis is concerned. As representatives of the major civil society organisations in Zimbabwe we argue of course that there cannot be any solution in Zimbabwe that in which civil society is not fully engaged – even if that civil society, to tell the truth, is very much a middle-class elite. At least one would go beyond this political reductionism.

Looking at the issue and the way Zimbabwe is analysed in South Africa, I find it quite interesting to consider some of the parallels and some of the differences. Just in the way Tony referred to South Africa's integration into the global economies since 1994, one had the same with Zimbabwe's integration into the global economy after the decade of sanctions. Zimbabwe had growth with equity, which one would equate to the RDP. Like the RDP it was quickly abandoned, and then you had the economic structural adjustment program (ESAP) which really is much the same as GEAR.

I find the analysis of some sections of the ANC, especially the President, very interesting and to me it is a profoundly flawed analysis. It says that the reason why you have an economic crisis in Zimbabwe is because of the huge investment in education, health and social services in the first years of the 1980s after independence. It is an analysis which is profoundly flawed because it is precisely that investment, which was at least the one success of the Mugabe regime, that has produced an educated class of Zimbabweans who have managed to market themselves internationally and who form the source of the remittances that are actually one of the major sources of foreign currency to Zimbabwe.

Also the levels of inequality between rich and poor actually increased up to independence, and I think the same process has happened in South Africa. Someone was saying the other day that the Gini Coefficient in South Africa is now the highest in the world – even higher than countries like Uruguay in Latin America. On issues of economy, there is an irony between a civil society, much of which has its roots in leftist politics, actually walking right and moving increasingly towards the right.

A source of hope to me in South Africa as it is in Zimbabwe now is in the continued vibrance of civil society and I think that hopefully that civil society in South Africa would have some bearing on what ultimately happens in Zimbabwe, or in Angola for that matter. ■





### AFTER THE INPUTS, THE FLOOR WAS OPEN FOR QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS. ISSUES THAT WERE RAISED INCLUDED:

- The 'Zuma issue' that is clearly a source of strain within the tripartite alliance, yet has not been mentioned by Tony Ehrenreich.
- The existence of churches, sports clubs, and women's and children's organisations, which are also organisations of civil society.
- The role of trade union members who are responsible for the welfare of millions of households and who share their wages with a large number of people.
- The N2 Gateway project in which citizens and communities have been very badly engaged in a top-down manner, and which raises questions about how people on the ground could participate in policy choices.
- There is a problem with the word civil society, as civil society organisations are wide ranging, but not all are aiming to transform society.

### IN RESPONSE, THE SPEAKERS MADE SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS:

#### Steven Friedman

I do not think that in themselves churches and sports clubs are part of civil society. Civil society happens in a particular context, for a particular reason. It is about voice and about holding government to account. Civil society participates when they express voice. The question is not whether civil society is transformative or not transformative, as this is very much in the eye of the beholder. Churches may sometimes be, and sports clubs less so. Stokvels are very important social actors, but they are not civil society unless they have voice.

There are a lot of organisations of the poor, but if people do not have access to power, to local government, and opportunities to access power, their voice will not be heard.

Regarding COSATU and its members, my analysis is not a materialist one. I am not arguing that COSATU is a labour aristocracy. The reality is that the majority of poor people are no longer located within mass production, which makes collective action that much harder and gives workers very little bargaining power. There is now a distinction between ordinary labour and the poorest sections of

society. Until the organised trade unions rise to the challenge, the question remains: how do we organise this section?

#### Tony Ehrenreich

Regarding the N2 Gateway project, the targets are never going to be met and there is no plan to meet the scale of the problem into the future. The protests will continue and no one is going to have homes. People have been historically excluded, but should be engaged to participate in these processes. Yet, people's voices have not been taken seriously. If there was a serious conversation, something else would have been put on the table and we would have seen that this is not a solution.

The Zuma question is difficult to answer. It is the greatest threat that the ANC and the Alliance have faced in a long time, with the threat of a split. There has never been that kind of challenge, and there are a range of reasons for this. This can only be solved with some kind of political deal within the ANC. Seeing the VIP Protection Services and the Scorpions drawing guns against one another is a microcosm of the conflict. There is a lot of unhappiness because the approach that is being taken is 'pure as the driven snow', yet we have forgiven worse thugs, who committed crimes under apartheid.

#### Elinor Sisulu

On the Zuma issue, you have a situation in KwaMashu where people lived through the violence of KwaZulu-Natal and still have warlords living among them who have never been held to account, and who continue to dominate local government and local business. The view there is: why should someone who saved many lives in KwaZulu-Natal be victimised in this way? The take of Zimbabwean refugees is about issues of consistency in how the country views Zuma and Mugabe, and a feeling that consistency should be applied. Many people feel very conflicted about this.

On the issue of voice, there is debate that takes place on the radio and other forums, and it is fascinating and very instructive. It is most healthy that you do have this debate going on, and for me this is one of the most positive aspects of South African society. The succession debate has not happened anywhere in Africa. This debate is a positive aspect of the Zuma saga. ■



## THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND TRADE UNIONS IN GOVERNANCE

8 SEPTEMBER 2005

CENTRE FOR THE BOOK, CAPE TOWN

### ABOUT THE PANEL:

**TONY EHRENREICH** is Provincial Secretary of COSATU in the Western Cape. He has fought for labour rights since 1990 when he joined NUMSA as a labour organiser in Cape Town. He is an international labour representative on the World Trade Organization and the International Confederation of Labour Trade Committee, among other international trade organisations. He represents the labour constituency on the boards of WESGRO and the Provincial Development Council, NEDLAC Trade and Industry Chamber, and the South African Trade and Investment Council. Ehrenreich is qualified motor-mechanic and hold a Diploma in Adult Education from UCT. He is currently completing a Master's Degree in Comparative Economics at UWC.

**STEVEN FRIEDMAN** is Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Policy Studies and Visiting Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Rhodes University. He has edited two books on South Africa's negotiated transition and is the author of a study on the South African labour movement. He has written many monographs, book chapters and newspaper articles on democratisation and related issues. He is currently studying the relationship between inequality and democratic politics.

**ELINOR SISULU** combines training in history, English literature, development studies and feminist theory. She has published studies of women's work in Zimbabwe and as a freelance writer and editor since moving to South Africa in 1990. In 1994 she published an award-winning children's book *The Day Gogo Went to Vote*. She is a member of the South African Children's Book Forum and has been instrumental in the establishment of a Children's Literature Network in South Africa. Her biography about her mother and father-in-law, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime*, was published to critical acclaim in December 2002. Elinor is currently advising on projects to restore democracy in Zimbabwe. She is in the process of setting up a South African office for the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, the major umbrella body of Zimbabwean non-governmental organisations.

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