

## THE POOR WAS LET DOWN AGAIN

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The debate in Parliament on the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) offered a golden opportunity to the ANC government to announce a much more comprehensive poverty alleviation policy. Unfortunately, the government did not use this opportunity and as a result the poor was let down again.

But much more than the dismal position of the poor was at stake. A strong perception exists that the ANC-government has been co-opted as a junior partner in a new "compact of power" in which the (mainly white) corporate sector is the senior partner. The terms of this "compact of power" is allegedly such that the ANC government does not have the sovereignty to address the huge poverty problem - "inherited" from the apartheid period - in a proper and effective manner. The perception about the partnership and the ANC's lack of sovereignty have been strengthened by the President's speech.

The government's spending on poverty alleviation and on socio-economic development are considerable higher than what was the case 10 years earlier. But given the dynamic nature of the poverty problem and the destructive effect of apartheid on social structures, the socio-economic condition of the poorest half of the population has not improved over the last years, but has become worse.

Since 1994 unemployment has increased, while 2,5 million young people have entered the (potential) labour market and were unable to attain permanent jobs. Crime and violence - that became endemic in the apartheid era - are being perpetuated in the post-apartheid period, causing havoc amongst the poorest half of the population. Aids and other infectious diseases also act as "poverty traps" that are accentuating and perpetuating abject poverty.

The poorest 50% is almost completely marginalised from the mainstream economy. The ANC was convinced during the early 1990s by the corporate sector and its global partners to pursue an economic policy *as if* the economic system in South Africa can be regarded as a free market system. This, however, was not the case. Consequently, it was a huge mistake to try to "superimpose" a free market ideology, a free market policy and an (alleged and perhaps purportedly) free market system on the ash heap (or rubbish-dump) of apartheid. It is, therefore, not surprising that the poorest half of the population is today to a larger degree marginalised from the main-stream of the economy than in 1994.

President Thabo Mbeki announced in the TRC-debate that reparations would be paid to 22000 people that told their story to the TRC and are regarded as victims of individual deeds of gross human rights violation. The government, however, did not accept the conclusion of the TRC that "a reparation claim against corporations like Anglo-America would be based on the extent to which decades of profits were based on *systemic* violations of human rights".

President Mbeki indicated that individuals and corporations that have been the beneficiaries of colonialism and apartheid can make voluntary contribution to the President fund, but no wealth tax will be imposed on these corporations.

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The request for voluntary contribution has a positive ring to it. However, the systemic exploitation of blacks did not happen voluntarily. It was based on economic and political systems embedded in a network of compulsory legislation, and justified by racist ideologies and corporate propaganda.

It is, however, not correct to regard only 22000 people as victims of apartheid. All blacks - and especially those that were degraded to abject poverty - must be regarded as the real victims of systemic exploitation and of the systemic violation of human rights.

Against this background it is indeed a pity that the President has not used the opportunities of the TRC-debate to announce a comprehensive "War on Poverty" to be financed by additional taxation. The government poverty alleviation programme cannot be regarded as a sufficient and an effective "assault" on the multiple factors that have caused and are perpetuating poverty.

The governments' poverty alleviation programme have a distinct *indirect* character. The GEAR policy is based on the promise that the promotion of economic growth will lead to employment creation and that additional employment will have a "trickle-down" effect to the benefit of the poor. Unfortunately, the growth rate remains relative low, the job-creating capacity of the economy has declined sharply over the last 30 years and the prospect for a "trickle-down effect" is - even if a higher growth rate can be attained - rather slim.

It is of the utmost importance to regard the sub-human conditions in which 50% of the population is living as a problem that has to be addressed *directly* and urgently, by a comprehensive "War on Poverty". These poor people are the victims of colonialism and apartheid and deserve a humane and civilized standard of living as soon as possible instead of in the distant future.

A remarkable political transformation has taken place over the past 9 years. Due to this transformation the first generation of human rights of all South Africans are now duly acknowledged and protected by our new Constitution.

Unfortunately, a parallel socio-economic transformation has not yet taken place. The transformation process is, therefore, incomplete. The government will have to play a much more active role to improve the level of the second generation of human rights (or the so-called economic and social human rights) of the poorest half of the population. The government has the responsibility to build a truly developmental state that will be to the benefit of all South Africans.

The Constitution stipulate that the state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of each of the second generation of economic and social human rights. The President should have announced that the government will take the necessary steps to enable the Constitutional Court to give more concrete content to these second generation human rights on behalf of the realisation of these rights of the poor. Due to the huge wealth concentrated in the hands of the top third of the population, there cannot be any doubt that resources are potentially available for a fuller realisation of the second generation human rights.

It is unbecoming for the ANC, as an erstwhile liberation organisation, to neglect the impoverished majority - who are also the real victims of colonialism, apartheid and the struggle - so profoundly.