

## **A Social Justice Response to the State of the Nation Address**

Quoting from the [UNDP Development Report 2006](#), President Thabo Mbeki, in his [State of the Nation Address](#), acknowledges that as a country, we have achieved our Millennium Development Goal (MDG) related to the supply of basic water because South Africa adopted a rights-based approach to the delivery of water.

Overall, it was a minor reference, but it does speak volumes about the significance of treating development as a human right. For those of us promoting social justice and a rights-based approach to development, not only is the acknowledgement encouraging, it also serves to demonstrate that a prompt and decisive response to the poverty and inequality challenge can be achieved, if undertaken within the appropriate development framework.

The President's reference to water supply offered a glimmer of hope for social justice activists, but sadly, not much else in his address offered any prospect for the injustice of poverty and *inequality* to be overcome.

### **Inequality Falls off the Agenda**

For a country characterised by deep-rooted inequalities, that are perpetuated by a status quo built on a firm and unchallenged foundation of historical privilege, it is disappointing to note that the word "inequality" featured only once in the President's speech.

Dealing with inequality is an essential part of addressing development as a human right.

Article 8 of the United Nations [Declaration on the Right to Development](#) stipulates that "States should undertake, at the national level, all necessary measures for the realization of the right to development and shall ensure, inter alia, equality of opportunity for all in their access to basic resources, education, health services, food, housing, employment and the fair distribution of income. Effective measures should be undertaken to ensure that women have an active role in the development process. Appropriate economic and social reforms should be carried out with a view to eradicating all social injustices".

Some may argue that South Africa shows mixed results in meeting her socio-economic obligations; however, she has not met any of the fundamental goals for economic and social transformation that work in synergy to eradicate the injustice of inequality. In actual fact, it is extremely difficult to find any synchronicity in the state's economic and social policies which demonstrate a serious attempt to create the required synergy to uplift the poor out of poverty and eliminate inequality.

### **A Minimum Needs Approach to Development**

Social justice NGOs have long been arguing that a rights-based approach to development provides accurate indicators for the fulfilment of needs, in contrast to quantitative delivery measures. But the proposals outlined in the President's State of the Nation Address show no serious commitment to adopting anything more than a minimum needs approach to the delivery of social goods and services. This minimum needs approach is based further on quantitative delivery indicators that totally miss the point on quality of life.

For example, the President waxed lyrical about achievements related to the provision of social grants and the allocation of housing subsidies. "The housing programme has seen close to 300 000 new subsidies allocated in the past two years", he said. But those of us working at the coal face of development are well aware that subsidies do not necessarily always translate into houses. We also know that the private sector housing delivery model favoured by the state, creates nothing more than ghettos for the poor. Often these ghettos are located in settlements that perpetuate apartheid planning and continue to be physically dislocated from economic centres of opportunity. Notwithstanding the fact that low income housing is often built on marginal land, which additionally increases poor communities' vulnerability to the effects of extreme weather conditions in our era of global warming.

A divided and unequal society will also remain a manifest feature of the South African landscape if the state continues with its dichotomy of the economy. However well articulated the government's rationale behind the dual economy might be - the fact that the poor are trapped in the so-called second economy, which is unregulated, underdeveloped and completely cut off from the first economy, makes a mockery of the principle of equal opportunity. Disappointingly, the President's wooden response to the plight of the masses trapped in this inferior system was

summed in just one bullet point, which stated that “detailed programmes” would respond to the challenges of the second economy.

At the same time, he was somewhat more articulate about the investment led growth path that he once again endorsed for the first economy – a path that for many social justice activists remains an unconvincing solution to the challenge of inequality, even for the formally employed poor, which number many. Raising the rate of investment in the first economy, which the president specifically referred to, will simply carry on reproducing the economic cleavages of the past. It is not going to address structural inconsistencies, such as wage inequality, that continue to perpetuate the [wealth divide and undermine sustainable growth](#). It sure is not going to touch the lives of the poor that are trapped in the second economy.

### **Mapping Responsibility**

In a paper examining [human rights and development](#), Arjun Sengupta argues that “(w)hen development is seen as a human right, it obligates the authorities, ... to fulfil their duties in delivering that right in a country. The adoption of appropriate policies follows from that obligation. Nationally the government must do everything, or must be seen as doing everything to fulfil the claims of a human right. If the rights to food, education, and health are regarded as components of a human right to development, the state has to accept the primary responsibility of delivering that right either on its own or in collaboration with others”.

But the policies and programmes of the South African state still fail the poor, even as their socio-economic rights are enshrined and protected by our [Bill of Rights](#). The landmark ruling of the [Grootboom Case](#) is an oft quoted example of how the government can be held accountable for its socio-economic obligations. Nevertheless, even though the Constitutional court ruled in favour of this community in need of shelter, to the best of my knowledge, a decade after the ruling, their circumstances remain tenuous. It is quite simply a case of no justice for the poor in a system that prioritises growth over equality.

Again, going back almost a decade - in her article, [Long Way to Gender Equality](#), Zarina Maharaj asserted that: “The racial and gender ‘equality’ guaranteed in our Bill of Rights is the equality of access across the races and across the sexes to all of society’s resources including, for example, income, education, healthcare, land, credit and decision-making power in all fields of human endeavour. It is the inequality of access to such resources that defines the power relations in society, white domination of blacks on the one hand and male domination of females on the other. ‘Empowerment’ in the context of the Bill of Rights is thus about creating the conditions to bring about equality of access to resources between the different groups in our society, mainly between blacks and whites and between men and women.”

From a human rights perspective, the democratic South African state has spent its decade and a bit in power, fiddling with programmes within a broad policy framework, that does not address the issue of inequality - nor create the conditions for equality of access. Not much has changed for the poor. What social justice activists were hoping to hear for from the President’s speech this year was a greater commitment to policies and programmes that have a more redistributive result and engender greater equality. But the President had little to offer us. His admissions of poor delivery were not offset by news of a cabinet shake up or major policy overhauls.

We continue to be disillusioned by a South African government that refuses to wake up to the realisation that the rights of the poor are being violated and that the system which it has created, continues to subject people to unfulfilled lives. Far from creating equality of opportunity, this system undermines the very principle of equality through the perpetuation of policies that are incapable of countering the effects of our segregationist past.

Finally, one wonders exactly what the South African government’s take on human right’s violations is. In his state of the nation address, the President proudly announced that South Africa has taken up its duties as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. However, human rights activists are deeply disappointed that South Africa used its first vote to block a UN Security Council resolution demanding an end to [human rights abuses in Burma](#).

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