

## **No more charity, but cooperation beyond divisions of the past**

The view of a historian and writer might be the last thing that is needed a few months before South Africa has its fourth national elections and will celebrate twenty years into democracy. Probably economists should give the necessary insight for an answer towards the biggest challenge of all: To create a more equal society in which the extremes of poverty and wealth are overcome and the resources of this country are shared for the benefit of all.

As such a vision often seems either too abstract (as in some academic papers) or too far away (as in the excellent National Development Plan for 2030 which lacks the urgent will by national government to implement even the first steps), it might be helpful to share, from a specific historical background, my experience as a volunteer in the fields of health and housing in one of the poorest townships south of Cape Town. It provides some inspiring insights, especially in the face of growing social unrest – of which Marikana is a symbol of the worst culmination so far. While the commission goes on and on, we all know in our hearts that none of the underlying issues has been resolved.

When I came first to South Africa in May 1997 (after I was denied entry during Apartheid times) Archbishop Tutu opened the TRC youth hearings in Athlone. As a staff member of the Anne Frank Foundation in Amsterdam I was fascinated as many others by the ethic of the TRC to deal with the most recent painful past. I returned for more research (together with UWC academic Karin Chubb) about its achievements, but also its limits. Four years later I moved to South Africa permanently with my partner, to witness the transformation of a society from a first row seat: As volunteers in a pilot project for children living with HIV/AIDS in the community of Masiphumelele. The Arch kept his word and opened the first HOKISA Childrens Home on World Aids Day 2002.

One thing is certain: A historian can never predict the future. But some obvious lessons from the past can be acknowledged. I have chosen the two most inspiring (and if ignored most dangerous) ones:

**Sharing is caring (and nothing else than sharing):** It is no accident or error that South Africa, despite the early ANC slogan “A better life for all!” has become Number One of unequal societies worldwide. This abstract term does not carry the real pain of those millions who are still hungry and exploited – and it also does not visualize the fear of the wealthy ones (and as we know this is not only a matter of skin color anymore) who focus on the security of their property more than anything else. If even the president needs an R 200 million security upgrade on his Nkandla estate while the majority of the youth is facing unemployment as a much more burning issue, then it will probably be historians who will describe this phase of South African history one day as the most obscene since the advent of democracy.

Obscene in the sense of ignorance towards human dignity of others (yes, its positive counterpart was once called *Ubuntu* in *Mzansi*). The matching term of these extreme security measures is – charity. Charity, first and foremost to create peace of mind for the wealthy ones. Charity in the sense of food parcels and blankets after disasters instead of enough land and proper housing. Don't get me wrong: Of course, disaster relief is needed, again and again. But what is needed more – and what is possible: proper housing in a scheme which lifts people out of poverty forever. If we provide disaster relief, let us please call it exactly this, but let us not feel better about it unless we work at the same time for a respectful cooperation in sharing between those with resources and those without them.

In Masiphumelele, after in 2006 a terrible fire destroyed 400 shacks in one night, some residents refused the government “starter kits” (a few poles, a plastic sheet and nails) for the first time ever. They did not *toyitoyi* for better housing, but they planned on how to house 400 families on this small piece of land, hardly bigger than two soccer fields. The ANC housing officials from the provincial department for human settlements at the time told the affected residents that they have to stay on their place on the government housing list. And as this project was not initiated by the local ANC branch it was in any case met with deepest suspicion.

The first support came from a retired architect from the “white” neighboring small suburb of Fish Hoek. He created an idea for the first blocks of flats in this community which was embraced by about 350 out of the 400 families. Since 2006 a few provincial housing ministers have come and gone, but it was only once the blocking of many good initiatives between the province and city was over (once the DA ruled on both levels) that the long approved housing subsidy was made available and – together with fifty percent of private international donations of about Rand 20 million – the construction could start. So far, 232 two room flats with solar heated water have been given to the fire victims of 2006 – together with a new community hall. Flats for 120 families are still to be built.

Lesson one: No more charity please, but cooperation beyond divisions of the past. Sharing means just this: To give substantially, not crumbs from the table, but to enable real change and not to perpetuate inequality.

**Hope needs visible change - where hope is fading populism is rife:** Of course, there is no development without conflict. Also in the Masiphumelele housing project we had corruption (“When the government is doing it, we can too!” or “To help family and friends is an African tradition which Europeans never fully understand!”). We had others who refused to move from the construction site (“Madiba promised us houses, not flats!”) and some who joined a rental boycott as the ownership (due to the government subsidy conditions) can only be achieved after four years of paying a modest rent of R 400 per month (“I am poor and can earn more by renting it out to foreigners who pay R 1400 for the same flat!”).

Each of these quoted slogans is based on a certain populism of which we will see more in the weeks ahead of the election. Populism means to select a piece of reality (which is true) and simplify it with an emotional issue to make yourself popular at the expense of the complete (and sometimes complex) truth.

Malema's EFF is getting much support, especially among young people, because it appeals to their real need of visible change. At the very least it brings an emotional upbeat in an ocean of (for them seemingly empty) promises. Also in Masiphumelele, I meet more and more young people who "like" Juj, because he also was once poor. A rural boy raised by his Gogo - and look at him now!

Please do not get me wrong also on this one: Of course, Malema is not "left" and not even "radical" despite his talk of nationalization of mines and banks, but a sexist "Commander in chief" who clearly does not go for democracy and freedom, but for an authoritarian dictatorship (he will be "ready to kill" again as he offered already to Jacob Zuma when they were still friends). If you read statements of eyewitnesses of the rise of the Nazi party in Germany in the early 1930's, especially among young people, you will find striking similarities in voiced support for the new *Fuehrer* (leader).

And there are other striking historical similarities: Extreme poverty and hunger, overcrowded living conditions, high rates of unemployment and a democratic government which is regarded by many as weak if not corrupt.

Back to Masiphumelele: Fifteen years ago about 15.000 people lived in the same area which houses 40.000 today. The community is totally overcrowded. There is not one square meter of unoccupied land left, but about 10.000 residents have squeezed themselves into an area aptly called Wetlands, as it is flooded every winter. Also, this community has still only one access road like in Apartheid times which causes huge stress when emergency vehicles try to get in and out during disasters. More than half of those living under these dire circumstances are children. Despite having an excellent High School since 2005, most of the youth are unemployed and desperately looking for jobs. Many of them will be first time voters.

Don't say after the next election you did not know. We know in history what happens when a majority chooses to turn a blind eye to dangerous developments and divert their attention to the "good things in life". Of course, there are some cynics who already have prepared for the worst case, and if Malema's EFF gets substantial support will easily leave to wherever they can take some of their assets. But after living more than a decade in this most resourceful country, I am convinced that the majority of all South Africans want their country to flourish (and actually also don't want "such poverty"), but just lack the vision of how to contribute to change meaningfully beyond voting next year.

One more time Masiphumelele: After having survived many challenges, with each of them providing crucial lessons, the Amakhaya ngoku ("Homes now!") Housing Project prepares for completion by building the final flats for the last fire victims still living on an open field. Like in the first phase of construction, 95 percent of the private funding comes from overseas. Rightly, most of these overseas donors question why South Africans with resources do not contribute substantially, but only charity-style so far. In fact, again almost R 4 million have been committed from the UK and Germany on condition that the same amount will be raised within South Africa. Impossible ? Let's see.

One initiative deserves applause: Some neighbors from small communities around Masiphumelele have formed a group called *ubuMelwane* (Neighborhood) and have met together with Masi activists. They learned why other neighbors are fiercely against any second access road or why all official “land audits” claim that vacant land is either “privately owned” or if owned by the city “is not feasible for housing”. It probably will never be made feasible unless enough people speak out for it. But those who started *ubuMelwane* are more and more aware of the challenges and will not turn a blind eye soon again.

Lesson two: As important as participation in democratic elections is, it is equally important that, no matter how well-off or how modestly resourced, citizens should be working together to overcome past divisions and create more equality. *Ngoku* in the housing project’s name means: Now!

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