

Bridging the gap between rich and poor

A genuine commitment to sharing resources is the only sustainable answer to South Africa's mounting social distress, writes Lutz van Dijk

WHEN I first came to South Africa in May 1997 - having been denied entry during apartheid - my arrival coincided with Archbishop Desmond Tutu's opening of the first youth hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Athlone.

As a staff member of the Anne Frank Foundation in Amsterdam, I remember being as fascinated, as many others were, by the ethics of the TRC. In confronting South Africa's recent and painful past, that early experience prompted me to return to conduct further research - with UWC academic Karin Chabé - about the commission's achievements, and also its limits.

Four years later my partner and I moved to South Africa permanently to witness the transformation of society from front-row seats as volunteers in a pilot project for children living with HIV/AIDS in Masiophumelele. It was here, on World Aids Day in 2002, that Archbishop Tutu, keeping his word, opened the first Hokisa Children's Home.

You could say in 2006, that the reflections of a historian and community activist are the last thing that's needed as South Africans prepare for their fourth national elections and celebrate 20 years of democracy.

An economist might arguably be better placed to provide clues to dealing with the biggest challenge of all: how to create a more equal society in which the extremes of poverty and wealth are overcome and the sufficient resources of this country are shared for the benefit of all.

The trouble is, this vision of a more equal and democratic economically strong society seems often either too abstract - like the subject of an academic report - or too remote, as in the excellent National Development Plan for 2009, implementation of the first steps of which already seems to lack urgency in government circles.

Sharing some of my experiences over the past decade as a volunteer with a historian's background in the fields of health and housing in one of the poorest townships south of Cape Town might, however, provide some surprisingly encouraging insights.

This is especially so in a climate of growing social unrest, whether genuine or politically instigated. Marikana is without doubt the most horrifying and desperate symbol of such unrest so far. While the Farlam Commission goes on and on, we all know in our hearts that none of the underlying issues has been resolved. No historian can predict the future. But some obvious lessons from the past can be acknowledged - or ignored at society's peril. It is by no accident that South Africa, despite the early ANC slogan, "A better life for all" has become the world's most unequal society.

This abstract term does not express the real pain of those millions who are still hungry and exploited - and nor does it express the fear of the wealthy (and wealth is not a matter of skin colour alone anymore) who focus more attention on the security of their property than on anything else. If even the president needs a \$200 million security upgrade at his Nkandla estate while the majority of the youth face unemployment, it's likely historians in time to come will describe this phase of South African history as the most obscene since the advent of democracy.

It is obscene in the sense of the indifference to the human dignity of others - the positive counterpart of which was once called ubuntu.

Too often, the inadequate response to this obscenity is charity intended first and foremost to guarantee some peace of mind for those who give, to hand out food parcels



BREAKTHROUGH: So far, the Amakhaya Ngokuk project has provided 232 two-room flats with solar-heated water to the Masiophumelele fire victims of 2006, and a community hall. PICTURE: MICHAEL WALKER

and blankets after disasters or to bring toys and clothes to poor children around Christmas. Don't get me wrong: disaster relief is still needed, sadly again and again, whenever disasters occur. But what is really needed - and what is possible - is land and decent housing in a scheme that lifts people out of poverty forever. If we provide disaster relief, let us call it exactly this, but let us not feel better about it unless we work at the same time on a mutual, respectful plan founded on sharing between those with resources and those without them - not in abstract, not in a general sense or in some distant future, but practically today in our immediate neighbourhood and geared towards those who are still regarded as "the others".

Only true sharing is caring, and nothing less than genuine sharing (without taking away from anybody) is what is needed today. This is no soft version of forced redistribution, but a wake-up call while wisdom and humanity can still prevail, and the spiralling risks of excessive security and growing violence have not become overwhelming.

Our modest township community offers a positive example of what is possible. In Masiophumelele, after a terrible fire in 2006 destroyed 400 shacks in one night, some residents refused the government's "starter kits" - a few poles, a plastic sheet and nails. They did not toy together for better housing, but got together to make plans for housing 400 families on a piece of land hardly bigger than two soccer fields. As this project was not initiated by the local ANC branch, it was met in the beginning with the deepest suspicion. Housing officials from the provincial Department of Human



FOREIGN AID: Co-operation across the divisions of the past can work. Sharing means giving substantially, not just crumbs from the table, and not relying on international donations, says the writer. PICTURE: JOHN SHAW

Settlements at the time told the affected residents there was no way to realise such plans as they would have to wait in line according to the housing waiting list. But the residents persisted. The first support came from a retired architect from the neighbouring "white" suburb of Fish Hoek.

He conceived the idea for blocks of flats, a scheme embraced by about 30 out of the 40 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 a 50-percent stake of \$20 million from private international donations - construction began.

Later, a local ANC leader also joined the beneficiary-elected board of the project, called Amakhaya Ngokuk ("homes now"). So far, 232 two-room flats with solar-heated

water have been given to the fire victims of 2006 - with a community hall. Flats for 130 families are still to be built, as well as a playground next to the hall.

Co-operation across the divisions of the past can work. Sharing means giving substantially, not crumbs from the table, and enables real change that arrests the perpetuation of inequality.

Hope needs visible change, but where hope is fading, populism is rife. Of course, there is no develop-

ment without conflict. In our housing project we also had corruption, never around funding, but in regard to our own waiting list.

"When the government is doing it, we can too," some would say, or "to help family and friends is an African tradition which Europeans never understand". Some intended beneficiaries refused to move from the construction site - "Mafisa promised us houses, not flats" - and some joined a rental boycott as the ownership (due to the government subsidy conditions) could only be achieved after four years of paying a modest rent of R800 a month ("I am poor and can earn more by renting it out to foreigners who pay R1 400 for the same flat").

Each of these statements is based on the kind of populism we will see more of in the weeks ahead of the election. Populism means selecting a piece of reality (which is true) and simplifying it on emotional grounds to make yourself popular at the expense of the complete (and sometimes complex) truth.

Mafisa's EFF is getting much support, especially among young people, because it appeals to their desire for visible change.

At the very least, it brings an emotional upset in an ocean of promises. In Masiophumelele, I meet more and more young people who "like" Jugu, because he was also once poor. A rural boy raised by his goats - and look at him now.

Of course, Mafisa is not "left" or even "radical", despite his talk of nationalisation of mines and banks, but a sexist and authoritarian "commander in chief" who clearly does not think much of democracy and freedom, but may well be "ready to kill" as he offered to do once for Zuma when they were still friends.

If you read eyewitness accounts of the rise of Nazism in Germany in the early 1930s, you will find striking similarities in vocal support, especially among young people, for the new Führer.

There are other striking historical similarities: extreme poverty and hunger, overcrowded living conditions, high rates of unemployment and a young democratic government that was regarded by many as weak, if not corrupt.

How does this relate to Masiophumelele? Fifteen years ago about 15 000 people lived in the area that today houses 40 000. The community is overcrowded. There is not one square metre of unoccupied land, and about 10 000 residents have squeezed themselves into a nature reserve wetlands which is flooded every winter. This community still has only one access road, as was the norm during apartheid, 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 had an excellent high school since 2005, most of the youth are unemployed and desperately looking for jobs. Many of them will not first-time voters.

Let us not say after the next election that we didn't know. We know in history what happens when a majority chooses to turn a blind eye to dangerous developments and divert its attention to the "good things in life".

Of course, there are some cynics who have already prepared for the worst and should Mafisa's EFF get substantial support, are reconsidered to leaving the country and going to wherever they can take their assets.

But, after living for more than a decade in this most resourceful country, I am convinced that the majority of South Africans want their country to flourish, and nobody to live in horrible poverty, yet only lack the vision, or trust, to contribute to meaningful change beyond simply voting in elections.

Again, Masiophumelele provides insights. After having survived many challenges, each of them offering crucial lessons, the Amakhaya Ngokuk Housing Project is nearing the final phase with the building of the last 120 flats for the remaining fire victims still living on an open field. As in the first phase of construction, 98 percent of the private funding is coming from overseas. Rightly, most of these overseas donors wonder why South Africans promised us houses, not flats - and some joined a rental boycott as the ownership (due to the government subsidy conditions) could only be achieved after four years of paying a modest rent of R800 a month ("I am poor and can earn more by renting it out to foreigners who pay R1 400 for the same flat").

One - particular - initiative deserves applause. Some neighbours from small communities around Masiophumelele have formed a group called ubuMethwane (neighbourhood) and have met with Masi activists.

They have learned why neighbours are fiercely against any second access road and 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 ubuMethwane are more and more aware of the challenges and will not turn a blind eye soon again. Let's not forget that "Nokos" is the housing project's name means: Now!

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