



Diakonia Council of Churches

Submission to the 10th Anniversary Poverty Hearings held on 9 September 2008 at Edendale Lay Ecumenical Centre, Edendale, Pietermaritzburg

Introduction

Diakonia Council of Churches is an ecumenical agency which, in partnership with local churches, serves the eThekweni Municipal area. Our vision is a transformed society actively working for social justice.

A key aspect of the work of the organisation is enabling people to take responsibility for their lives and to promote prophetic action, especially in the area of economic justice.

Background

In 1967, Oliver Tambo penned these words to ES Reddy, UN Special Secretary in the Special Committee on Apartheid: *“The fight for freedom must go on until it is won; until our country is free and happy and peaceful as part of the community of man, we cannot rest.”*

In 2005, the Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Honourable S’busiso Ndebele, reflected on these words in his address to the UN Development Programme, when he commented: *“Yet, the scars left, in the first instance, by racist apartheid planning and latterly by rampant political violence, are there for everyone to see. Our province is among the poorest provinces in our country. Eleven years after we attained democracy, we still have people who do not have access to basic services like water and sanitation, housing, energy and roads. It is a province where unemployment and HIV and AIDS rates are high.”* Premier Ndebele went on to conclude: *“Clearly, as Oliver Tambo told us, we cannot rest. We need to intensify our efforts to bring about a better life for all of our people. This is a task we need to carry out with the urgency it deserves. We dare not rest.”*

It is understood that Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane has defined the purpose of these hearings here today as being to *“report back to the people and to hear what has changed and what has not changed in their circumstances”*.

Poverty in KwaZulu-Natal

The province of KwaZulu-Natal is arguably the poorest in South Africa. More than 50% of the people of KwaZulu-Natal are considered to live in poverty. A study conducted by the Development Bank in 2003, five years after the last Poverty Hearings, concluded that the number of people living in poverty in South Africa had increased over the preceding five years, from 17 million to 21 million.

Whilst reliable poverty ratios and lines are most often debatable, the National and Provincial Departments of Agriculture has funded research which has been presented in a report by 'Provide Project', released in August 2005, which indicates "a poverty headcount ratio of 49.8% for South Africa. The KwaZulu-Natal poverty rate of 54.3% is higher than the national average." (PROVIDE Project Background Paper 2005:1(5) August 2005) Notably, rural areas are worse affected, with the Ungungundlovu region reaching a level of 80%, compared to 24.6% in the eThekweni Municipality.

While the poverty rate measures the proportion of a region's population living below the poverty line, it does not give any indication of how far below the poverty line poor households are. For this, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) has used a measure called the poverty gap that measures the required annual income transfer to all poor households to bring them out of poverty. In 2001, the HSRC study showed that the poverty gap had grown from R56-billion in 1996 to R81-billion in 2001 indicating that poor households had sunk deeper into poverty over that period. In 2001, KwaZulu-Natal had the largest poverty gap of R18 billion, and among municipalities, Durban had the largest poverty gap, followed by Johannesburg and East Rand.

The UN Development Programme reported that whilst, over the period 1995 to 2002, the proportion of people living in poverty in South Africa, fell from 51.1% to 48.5%, the absolute number of people living in poverty increased from 20.2 million to 21.9 million as a result of population growth.

There exist various indicators which support these findings. At the end of the day, figures become less and less impressive, when we accept that millions of people, mostly women and children, live lives which are less than full, in the eyes of God. Millions of people continue to suffer daily, with the challenges presented by poor service delivery, lack of resources and infrastructure, lack of access to basic goods, the effects of HIV and AIDS and other treatable diseases such as tuberculosis and cholera, rising food and fuel costs, lack of access to land for homes and agriculture, lack of housing, worsening climatic and environmental conditions, etc. Clearly, the experience of most people living in KwaZulu-Natal is that living conditions have not improved since the last Poverty Hearings.

'The Oikos Journey'

In 2006, Diakonia Council of Churches published '*The Oikos Journey – A Theological Reflection on the Economic Crisis in South Africa*', which has received worldwide interest and acclaim. It was presented as a challenge to the church and the state. It used the image of 'oikos' – meaning a home or household – to express thinking on the economy and our ecology, believing that both relate to the establishment and undergirding of a society reflecting God's will.

As with the first Poverty Hearings, the process leading up to the publication of '*The Oikos Journey*' document, included interviews with people living in cities and in rural areas.

Interviewed at a soup kitchen in Durban North, a man from KwaMashu said that, from his point of view, "*things got much worse since 1994. ...AIDS contributes to poverty because the main source of income dies....there is no difference between the time before 1994 and today.*"

An elderly woman from Umlazi felt that since apartheid "*many things came alright, but again many things came wrong, very, very wrong, because people thought they were free, that is why they left their homes and flock to town. It is full up in town, because they think there is no more apartheid, we are free to go to town and leave our places. It was proven that it is worse than before.*"

These two stories are indicative of the sentiments and experiences of millions in our province, and in the eThekweni Municipal area, whose hopes were high that the new government would, in spite of the massively disadvantaged situation it had inherited, be able to put into practice the pro-poor policies developed and advocated by its own economists and sociologists. These were policies designed to ensure that first priority was given to redressing the grossly unequal economic order.

However, the world imperative for a market economy has prevailed. By 1996 evidence was clear that economic policies were changed to fit in with global requirements. Although we saw some investment in sanitation, housing, health and education, people were expected to pay for these basic necessities. The millions of people with no income, in a society without a universal social security net, were simply unable to follow the rules and pay for these services, leaving clinics and schools without staff, resources, water and electricity, and therefore of little or no benefit to the very people for whom they were intended.

HIV and AIDS

The pandemically high percentage of people affected and infected by HIV and AIDS exacerbates, and is in turn worsened by, the situation of poverty. KwaZulu-Natal is reported to have amongst the highest rates of HIV infection, AIDS

mortality and mother-to-child HIV transmissions - in the world. These rates have worsened since 1998 and the face of our society has changed as we have witnessed the impact of the proliferation of child-headed households and orphans on local communities.

Government's commitment, at a national and local level, to combatting the pandemic has been erratic and slow, characterised by political tensions which have not served the interests of the millions affected and infected. Roll-out strategies for anti-retroviral medications have been sporadic and funding for these and other research initiatives has been low, when compared to other areas of expenditure, such as arms or sports and recreation.

The burden of addressing the effects of this pandemic has been laid at the door of those least able to do so – the poor and the elderly, often shared by civic society, which is challenged by its own limited resources.

Women and children

'The Oikos Journey' states that poverty is not gender neutral: it affects women more than it affects men, and women suffer disproportionately the effects of an unjust economic system. Indeed, women are still less likely to be able to find employment and become dependent on men for their livelihood.

These trends are exacerbated by traditional and colonial systems which are patriarchal and which continue to deprive women of equality and equity, at all levels within our social and economic structures.

Whilst certain legislations have been introduced which encourage a fuller participation of women in all aspects of organised economics, the reality of these has yet to be felt by the majority of women at grassroots level. Women remain the primary caregivers and income providers in many households; they have least access to education and skills development; they remain marginalised by male 'peers'; and they are excluded from participating fully in many aspects of social life, which includes faith practices, in many instances.

The document also states that *"all of South Africa's economic growth of the past few years – and more – has gone to pay company shareholders. In spite of the success of black empowerment schemes in creating wealthy black middle-classes, recent research shows that the vast majority of shareholders are still white, and male."*

Gender-based violence remains a scourge, with our society reflecting one of the highest rates in the world. Poverty is an exacerbating factor with regard to domestic violence. Women are twice as likely to become victims of violence, than men, and poor women even more so. Families living in poverty are subjected to greater psychosocial stress and these are worsened by unemployment, illness, alcohol and drug abuse. Violence perpetrated against children, by adults and

other youth, has increased 400% over the past ten years (*Childline findings published by Profile KZN, Vol 2, No 5.*)

Environment and ecology

Over the past ten years, the enormity of various environmental challenges which face the world have been spelt out in various ways – most notably by an increased reporting in the media and the many international fora and protocols which have attempted to address the likely scenarios for our planet.

In reality, the effects of global warming, deforestation, development of biofuels, nuclear energy and genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and the myriad of other related phenomena, will be worse for the poor.

As our leaders collude in the economic corridors, to conclude arms and energy deals, land and fuel deals, so the vast majority of our people, especially those in rural areas, are increasingly marginalised and excluded from access to land and other resources.

Despite vociferous opposition from civil society, government has proceeded with GMO seed and plant proliferation, through research and implementation, despite calls for increased safety awareness and alarm around the economic effects on the poor.

The growing demand for, and support of, biofuels as an alternative source of energy, has impacted on world food prices with devastating effects on those least able to afford basic foodstuffs. Worse yet, will be the increased demand for land and the expected effect this will have on those already competing with industry and formal agriculture for subsistence living.

Despite international attempts to combat global warming, our municipality here in Durban, has shown little commitment to ensuring a better quality of life for its people through the punitive and intentional guarding of health standards in water, air and soil. This is evidenced by some of the highest pollution levels recorded in the world, affecting the lives of the poorest communities in the eThekweni Municipality. It is further evidenced by corporate and municipal disregard for internationally accepted protocols for health and safety standards, most noticeable in the poor areas in the South Durban Basin and in areas of informal settlement, where toxic waste is dumped and where air and water standards compromise the lives of those living there, sometimes with fatal results.

Access to land and land reform

Land reform and redistribution in South Africa has not met either the goals set out by government, or the aspirations of those who are landless. The department of land affairs, in a request to the national treasury this week (September 2008), said it needed R75 billion over the next five years to finance the land

redistribution programme to reach the target of placing 30 percent of farmland in the hands of black people by 2014. So far, only 4 percent of land has been redistributed. The Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies (Plaas) at the University of the Western Cape's School of Government, recently released a report which notes that *"Of particular interest, therefore, is not so much the chronic underperformance of a policy area that many saw as critical to post-apartheid transformation, but the ability of the government to persist for so long with an approach that enjoys so little popular support and is clearly failing to deliver on its ostensible objectives."*

Xenophobia

Despite recent examples and experiences, government has illustrated very little interest in the development of disaster management strategies. This was evidenced at a national level during the June 2008 outbreak of xenophobic violence, but also at regional levels in times of flooding and fire. It is expected that the ability of government to respond appropriately to national and regional disasters will, in the future, be greatly tested, and the lives of those living in poverty will be affected the most. It is widely agreed that poverty was the root cause for the outbreak of xenophobic violence across South Africa, which occurred most notably in urban and peri-urban areas with high population densities and low access to basic services. The frustrations of those most challenged by their daily quest for food, housing and employment, were channeled towards those most vulnerable, so-called economic and political refugees, often with less security and greater hardships. The phenomenon of xenophobia is not new to South Africa, nor to KwaZulu-Natal, and yet little has been done by local government to address either the root cause – poverty - or the symptoms and daily realities faced by those seeking refuge in our society.

Conclusion

It is the submission of Diakonia Council of Churches that, in spite of the so-called democratisation of the country, since 1994, and since the Poverty Hearings held in 1998, there has been little improvement in the lives of the majority of South Africans.

As a faith community, we submit that this is not accepted by any religious or spiritual tradition – whether these be the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Prophet Mohammed, the Buddha, the Jewish prophets, African Traditional Religion, the practice of *ubuntu*, or the universalists of the “new age”. *The Oikos Journey* contends that *“no-one would accept that any human being is intrinsically less worthy than any other. If this is true, poor people’s apparent inferiority must be the result of something else”*.

“This reveals itself in the inferior access to the resources our world, (and indeed our province,) has to offer. And this is the outcome of a system that regulates that access. This is the political economy, which defines how people relate to

each other about resources.”

We submit that our leaders, particularly those tasked with governance and the welfare of the people of KwaZulu-Natal, have not fulfilled the mandate entrusted to them by the people of the province. We submit that our leaders have been resting – on their laurels – and so we once again echo the call of Oliver Tambo:

“The fight for freedom must go on until it is won; until our country is free and happy and peaceful as part of the community of man, we cannot rest.”



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