

Declaration of the Civil Society Conference held on 27-28 October 2010, Boksburg

By *moderator*

Created 2010/10/29 - 4:25pm

29 October, 2010 - 16:25 ? moderator

The Civil Society Conference held on 27-28 October 2010 was a historic turning point in the history of South Africa. Over 300 delegates from 56 mass-based civil society organisations, with a combined membership of millions of South Africans, came together to rebuild a strong, mass democratic movement which will work with the people and the government to tackle the massive social problems with which we are confronted.

South African citizens have a constitution and laws which give better guarantees of social justice, human rights and equality than almost anywhere else in the world. Yet in practice millions are denied these rights, especially socio-economic rights, in what has become the most unequal nation in the world.

The apartheid fault lines remain in place in employment, healthcare, education, housing, transport, and across the spectrum. A rich, mainly white, minority gets the lion's share of wealth and economic power, access to world class services in the private sector and a lifestyle amongst the most luxurious in the world.

The rich elite earn millions by exploiting the labour of the working class. A minority, including some of our own former comrades in public office, make their millions by corruptly manipulating opportunities to win tenders, bribing officials or using political connections

Meanwhile the mainly black poor majority suffer from deep and widespread poverty, huge levels of unemployment, pathetic levels of service delivery in healthcare and education, housing and transport, and little hope of escaping from a life of struggling to survive from day to day.

We are one of the most unequal countries in the world, and unless we mobilise for change, the levels of inequality will become entrenched.

The conference agreed that corruption goes to the heart of social justice and that as well as backing the government's efforts to investigate corruption allegations, we need a civil society anti-corruption mechanism should be a civil society owned initiative.

The conference debated three main areas:

1. Social justice

The conference agreed to the concept of a Social Justice Charter, which can be used as a campaigning tool to mobilise society, particularly workers and communities, around issues of social justice.

We have many good laws and policies, but implementation is lacking.

We must carry forward implementing real justice rather than stopping at passing laws and adopting policies on paper. Laws are often too complex in design and content and not accessible to ordinary people whom the law is supposed to protect.

Access to justice is unaffordable, so that those who can't afford to access the institutions of justice are excluded from exercising their rights and achieving social justice. The current system favours those who can afford to access judicial institutions and therefore creates barrier to access justice rather than promoting access.

The Charter can also help to mobilise and empower people on ethical issues, especially the fight against corruption in health care, local government, the education system and other key areas.

The Charter must trigger the implementation of existing policies and laws and assist poor communities to be aware of them. Any new Charter must speak to strategy and reflect civil society values. It can't simply repeat principles already in the Constitution but must expand on principles such as public participation to enforce social justice

It must reflect the duty of civil society to hold government accountable - to achieve social justice delivery, and acknowledge the fragmentation and weakness of our organisations, which has led to deepening of poverty in South Africa, while expressing the need for solidarity and unity of civil society.

The conference agreed that the Charter must be used to get municipalities to truly engage communities in public participation, ensuring that public broadcasting reflects the voice of the people and addressing related issues of economic and gender justice.

Delegates also agreed on the need to develop a communication strategy to build a coalition amongst social justice organisation working in different areas across the country to support each other's work and have a greater voice. There will be annual meetings of labour and civil society to take forward the social justice movement.

Refugees and immigrants must receive exactly the same standards of justice, not the appalling service many receive today.

Civil society must engage in public education on the Constitution to empower poor communities to fight for their rights and change the current balance of power.

2. Economic Growth

The delegates endorsed the COSATU Growth path for Full Employment document but agreed that it must be simplified and articulated in the vernacular so it serves as a weapon of empowerment for labour and the unemployed and a popular tool for the people.

Conference called for a broad political programme which will focus on the concrete, tilt the balance of forces and become a catalyst to drive change.

Conference urged COSATU to advance a social solidarity economy, particularly in regard to workers in the informal economy. Decent work programmes should be formalised, with workers dictating the agenda.

There is a need to strengthen the regulatory framework to regulate and improve working conditions, particularly in areas the retail, agricultural and hospitality sectors. Self-regulation by business is dangerous, particularly if we depend on external investment because of the revolving door between regulators and capital.

We support the creation of co-ops, but have to guard against fake co-ops, which are sometimes created to by-pass labour legislation, and to guard against disguised forms of exploitation.

Conference expressed concerns about the idea of a social pact. Workers should not be coerced into pacts with government or employers that will lead to lower wages or worse working conditions. It was also noted, however, that some pacts can be positive and that it is not the pacts in themselves that are problematic, but the potentially harmful content. We should be cautious about an across-the-board dismissal of social pacts as they are a reality in trade union work.

On labour market flexibility, it was noted that the government blames labour broking for unemployment, but continues

to propose to regulate labour brokers. We need to run serious campaigns for banning of labour broking in order to facilitate job security.

The blacklisting of people by the credit bureaus needs to be addressed urgently because it is affecting unemployed people's ability to penetrate the job market.

The tax-GDP ratio in South Africa is far lower than other comparable countries. There is space to increase tax which could furnish the government with billions of rands more to implement important programmes, such as NHI, and help to eliminate inequality.

The document needs to be clearer on the idea of the "green economy" and sustainable development. We need to move towards sustainable energy, to migrate the economy from one based on a coal to a low carbon or possibly carbon-free economy. The renewable energy sector will grow, needing different skills and different locations. We have to make sure that we are in charge of this process and do not become the objects of it. We need to reduce carbon in the economy and increase zero-waste jobs.

We need an integrated, unified strategy if this notion is going to be made a reality, including lobbying and engaging with the private sector. We must build industrial townships linked to eco-agriculture and green buildings. Land development and housing programmes are of little use if they come without access to sustainable energy and water. Nuclear power must be explicitly rejected.

Water and electricity are the first conditions of growing the economy, therefore we must mandate to audit what is actually happening. Green jobs need to be expanded beyond households. It is very important for energy to be absorbed into the national grid.

There is a need to drive innovations that appeal to consumers so that they buy local goods.

The issue of gender needs to be stronger in the document. South Africa should take the lead in making policies and institutionalising gender equality and empowerment in the economy.

We shall oppose infrastructure development that only serves the rich, for example the high-speed train from Durban to Johannesburg.

We need increased transparency around the treasury and the use of public money. In this light we reject the Protection of Information Bill as it is incompatible with the right of access to information.

The document is quite strong on skills development but the new SETA landscape lacks detail. Employers must be forced to meet skills targets. There should be more specific skills training within employment, so that there can be greater mobility between work areas.

We must ensure that these inputs from labour and civil society gatherings are formally integrated into the COSATU document. There is a need for further joint COSATU-Civil Society meetings and institutions to fight corruption. The institutions must be fully resourced so that they are not just platforms of discussion, but bodies that have teeth.

Conference affirmed its support for a basic income grant to cater for those millions of the poor who do not qualify for the existing grants.

It was agreed that policies must acknowledge the role of traditional leaders and the place of tradition culture in South Africa.

It was agreed that 2011 should be declared a year of mass mobilisation on economic policy and against unemployment, poverty and inequality.

3. Advancing Rights to Health and Education

Conference supported the National Health Insurance in principle, but expressed concerns regarding the model to be used, the implementation strategy and the many unknowns around the content of the NHI envisaged. We caution against an NHI bureaucracy that will become another feeding trough for the predatory elite. We call for government to publicly release an NHI policy to be discussed in an open and transparent manner.

While the NHI policy is developed, the Department of Health must continue to move forward on the Minister's 10 point plan in order to strengthen the public health care system in the interim and for when NHI begins to be rolled out.

Implementation of NHI must start in under-served areas where it is most needed and rolled out from there.

Community Health Workers are a critical component of public health care, but are exploited by the failure to respect their rights as workers. Community Health Workers must be formally brought into the health care system as employees of the Department of Health and unionised.

The Department of Health must fill all vacancies and stop the practice of freezing posts across the country as a cost curtailment measure.

Self-regulated, industrial- and sector-based healthcare facilities should be supported and strengthened by the NHI, not undermined.

While National Health Insurance is a necessary intervention, we must also combat the social determinants of health, including unemployment, poor housing, stress, alcohol abuse and poor education.

A campaigns committee should be formed that will co-ordinate the campaigns of labour and civil society around many of the questions that cannot be answered in the absence of a specific government plan on NHI.

Education is a cornerstone of any country, but the system in South Africa has been in crisis now for more than 10 years, with little improvement and insufficient attention from both government and civil society. Civil society has not sufficiently mobilised around education and too often even parents are uninvolved in the education of their children.

The conference agreed to a national campaign on education, to ensure the proper functioning and resourcing of schools, a National Fund for Education, funded by business, to improve the training of teachers and the curriculum. We are calling for all public representatives to enrol their children in public schools and to use public health institutions

The models for how we move the education system forward must be debated, for instance whether the Model C and private schools should be brought into a unitary public school system or allowed to co-exist.

There is no and there will not be a magic bullet that can resolve the problems in the education system as they are complex but the poor quality of the system and of teaching trap learners in a cycle of poverty and drag down the whole country by poorly preparing students for the working world.

To begin addressing the crisis in education, labour and civil society must rally together to build campaigns around:

- The urgency of infrastructure in schools - particularly at schools that are in crisis.
- The curriculum that will be taught to ensure that it produces adequate students with the learning they will need in the working world.
- Budget monitoring of the education department and the fair distribution of resources to urban and rural areas.
- Post-provision that is proper and re-distributive between areas that are relatively well resourced and those that are not.
- Better co-ordinated teacher development and training and ensuring that teachers, and other public-sector workers, are paid the salaries that they deserve.
- Civil society, trade unions, parents and learners must all be responsible for education. There must be an active campaign to attract parents into the school system and make sure that parents are taking an active role in the

education of their children and the education system.

- Building a culture of learning and reading in South Africa.

- Improving the governance of the school system.

It was agreed that Civil Society Conferences like this should be held annually and replicated in all provinces and regions within three months, and that a consolidated directory of civil society organisations be drawn up, with the first edito to be published in 2011, and that we help each other to access funding.

Conference agreed to support and campaign for the post-World Cup Declaration, launched by COSATU after the successful hosting of the 2010 World Cup, which will commit us all to:

- Remain united behind Bafana Bafana other national teams and do everything possible to promote soccer, which remains the biggest and most popular sport, yet is seriously under-developed. We need to develop academies to hone the skills of unknown South African Peles, Drogbas and Ronaldos, who have no opportunity for their skills to be recognised.
- Bring down the astronomical levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality, which blight our land. Even as we prepare to host the World Cup, jobs continued to disappear, inequalities continued to grow and poverty remain widespread after the World Cup. We need a new economic growth path that will help address these challenges with necessary urgency and speed.
- Address the challenges of our education system. The 1-Goal Campaign and the Nelson Mandela Day celebrations offer an opportunity to take our international icon's dream to new heights. We call on government to prioritise building and refurbishing schools and to ensure that all schools receive adequate support from the education departments at all levels. We must move beyond the call for all to donate books and build school libraries on Nelson Mandela Day and run for 12 months until every school functions and is a centre of empowerment to build a new generation that can take our dreams to a new height.
- Unite behind a goal of transforming our health system and implementing the National Health Insurance Scheme. We have to fix our public hospitals and defeat the scourge of HIV/AIDS to build a healthy nation and improve our country's life expectancy.
- Address underdevelopment and poverty in rural areas. This campaign should address food insecurity and empower our people to use land that currently is misused, so that people can produce the food they need and escape from their deep levels of unemployment and poverty.
- Lead a campaign against crime and corruption. We can build on the successes of the World Cup by sending out an unequivocal message that crime does not pay. Corruption is stealing from the poor to feed into narrow elites' selfish accumulation interests. Corruption kills the spirits of the majority, black and white, who want to work hard to build their country.
- Mobilise to fix the energy challenge the country is facing. We need more action and not empty words to ensure that South Africa moves out of the current crisis. Imagine a day when thousands of activists move door-to-door handing over pamphlets to our people educating them about the benefits of saving electricity.
- Mobilise to address the looming water shortage crises so that we do not wait for 2025 when the problem will be much more intense. Let us through our people hold the mine bosses who have been allowed after making billions to abandon their now empty mines and pollute our water. Let us defend our environment and keep our country beautiful and natural whilst also developing.
- Mobilise the working class and educate them to appreciate that no matter how bad living conditions are, there can be no excuse for blaming fellow-Africans and other foreign nationals for the country's and continent's economic failures. Let us do everything possible to prevent a new outbreak of xenophobic attacks in some of our poorest communities. They are not the cause but the fellow victims of our unjust and unequal economic system. Workers and the poor must stand united against the common enemies of capitalist greed and corruption.

- Lastly and most importantly, address the massive challenges of underdevelopment in the continent. Africa cannot succeed in developing its economies and transforming the lives of our people while it is still ravaged by poverty. Let us defeat the tyrants in Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Sudan and elsewhere whose refusal to vacate their positions and allow democracy means that can be no hope of Africa ever rising to ensure a coordinated effort to defeat under development. Let us mobilise to free our people in Western Sahara from their colonial masters!

The conference agreed that a timetable for action be drawn up for the implementation of all these campaigns.

Finally the Conference agreed to back the call by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu on the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra to cancel their planned trip to apartheid Israel

Source URL (retrieved on 2017/06/23 - 12:10am): <http://tac.org.za/community/node/2959>