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The ANC should not be scared of independent campaigns against corruption and for service delivery, human rights and public accountability

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Civil society is taken aback by attacks on the motives of the recently held civil society conference emanating from the ANC?s National Working Committee (NWC) on 1 November 2010. We are surprised by the insinuations that the conference is part of a plot against the ANC. We expect better of the post-Polokwane ANC.

Statement by the TAC and SECTION27, co-hosts of the Labour/Civil Society conference

3 November 2010

The Civil Society Conference held on 27-28 October 2010 will hopefully come to be seen as a historic turning point in South Africa. It may mark the revival of co-ordinated community based activism that aims to achieve social justice and better the lives of the poor in South Africa. It was attended by more than 50 independent organisations that believe in social justice and that fight for it every day.

Civil society is therefore taken aback by attacks on the motives of the conference emanating from the ANC?s National Working Committee (NWC) on 1 November 2010. We are surprised by the insinuations that the conference is part of a plot against the ANC. We expect better of the post-Polokwane ANC. This is conduct reminiscent of the paranoia of the Mbeki era. It is a conduct that suggests the ANC, or some of the people who hide under its flag, have something to fear.

Why did the conference take place?

Over recent years, for the most part, civil society organisations have worked separately on a multitude of struggles for service delivery, human rights and public and private accountability. The purpose of the conference was therefore to:

- Attempt to rediscover unity amongst civil society organisations;
- Find common causes and common strategies in our various campaigns for social justice.

The conference organisers recognise that it is better to fight together for social justice than apart. Civil society and the trade union movement are unified in our vision of building a better country based on the rights and laws enshrined in the Constitution.

Fortunately in the democratic South Africa we don?t need anyone?s permission to meet. The ANC is a liberation movement and political party that most of us still support. It is not big brother.

The conference was neither anti-ANC nor anti-government. It stayed clear of debates about party politics and sought to be inclusive of various strands of political opinion amongst campaigners for social justice. But it did discuss the politics of service delivery, corruption and the major political challenges facing the country. It gave special attention to our

deeply vulnerable and poor health and education systems. The conference was pro-poor, pro-justice and pro-democracy.

We welcome the fact that COSATU participated and played a leading part in the conference. COSATU vociferously draws attention to the wrongs of our society and has called for a new economic growth path. The conference was an opportunity to learn about and debate COSATU?s ideas.

COSATU represents organised working people. But they are tied through unemployment, poverty and squalid conditions to the issues for which civil society organisations fight daily: the fact that millions of people in South Africa are still homeless; declining life-expectancy due to HIV/AIDS and the enormous problems facing our health system; the terribly low levels of education that millions of children receive exacerbated by inequality between well-resourced private and former Model C schools and government schools; the need for accountability to communities especially by local government; the inadequate sanitation and insufficient access to electricity and other basic services endured by so many; and the high levels of crime.

What next?

The Conference was not a once off event. As stated in the Conference Declaration, we have agreed to further meetings at Provincial and district level and on key campaigns. This includes debating and developing a Social Justice Charter in coming months, which we hope the ANC will support.

The Conference also agreed to intensify human rights education and organisation among the poorest of the poor ? people who are ignored by politicians and elites, and insulted by shameless sights of conspicuous consumption that mark out the new and old elite. (Please note: Commission reports from the conference will be issued in coming weeks.)

We believe the ANC NWC should have welcomed the conference. It should particularly have welcomed the affirmation of the Constitution and rule of law that is at the centre of the Conference Declaration. It should welcome an additional ally in the fight against corruption.

Effective government depends on a vigilant, capable civil society that knows the law, protects human rights and can act against what is wrong. The Civil Society/COSATU Conference did not challenge the ANC-led alliance; it only challenged the alliance to deliver.

In conclusion therefore let us state that:

- As progressive social justice organisations committed to the poor and constitutional rights, we will continue to engage both the ANC and the government. Where necessary we have also used the courts. The conference commits us to continue to do so.
- That we call on ANC to reconsider its ill-advised statement and provide effective leadership to society and instead affirm and support our objectives.
- That we call on civil society and COSATU not to be intimidated by this statement but to work patiently, harder, and with discipline in taking forward the conference decisions.

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