

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

WHY CIVIL SOCIETY NEEDS TO PLAY A bigger role

We hear from all quarters of the country that we are in a state of crisis. Increasingly, the term 'failed state' comes to the fore due to the disarray in which national and local government, business and ordinary citizens find themselves.

The energy insecurity, which we have been dealing with since the late 2000s, has risen to unimaginable heights. People are losing their lives due to, among other things, the failure of life-saving equipment when power and back-up battery systems run out.

Just recently, more than 40 people lost their lives due to a cholera outbreak in Gauteng. This should never have happened in a country with the richest square mile in Africa. Appallingly, young children still lose their lives after falling into pit toilets.

Pressure on the national fiscus is increasing as more people lose their jobs and are unable to contribute to the tax base. The needs of millions are rising exponentially since we have not significantly improved the lives of the citizens. The reality being endured by the people is further exacerbating the social tension, which threatens our hard-won democracy.

Although South Africa was in a state of distress before Covid-19, the challenges were far deeper than we may have anticipated, and the pandemic was merely the opening of the proverbial Pandora's box.

This anecdotal description of the state of the country is supported by the World Bank's report released in March last year. Titled An Assessment of the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), the report looked at Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa.

It found that South Africa was not only the most unequal country in the SACU region but, measured against the World Bank's global poverty database - which analyses poverty and inequality trends in 164 countries - was also the most unequal country in the world.

The report stressed that the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, rooted in racial and spatial segregation, remained the main driver of residual inequality and the cycle of poverty in the country.

However, we must equally recognise that the real transformation required to reverse these realities has not happened in almost three decades of democracy.

This is further supported by the increase in the Gini

coefficient, an index that measures the degree of inequality in the distribution of income or wealth in a country, in which one represents perfect equality and 100 represents perfect inequality.

South Africa's Gini coefficient has significantly increased since 1994 and remains above 60, which is very concerning. It shows that the country's policies introduced thus far are not having an impact. This must be taken seriously. It is unsustainable that almost 18 million, or 47%, of South Africans rely on social grants to meet their basic needs. This is an indictment on all who claim to be working for a better life for our people.

All this research, the reports and experiences come together in the outcomes of a Wits University survey released earlier this year.

The nationally representative survey, looking at the prevalence of social vulnerability in South Africa, looked at a range of socioeconomic, demographic and geographical variables to see who is socially vulnerable. The survey also investigated the relationship between social vulnerability and household food insecurity in the country.

This study found that the most vulnerable groups were Africans. They are mostly women, people living in the rural areas, those with low socioeconomic status, people without matric and adults older than 45.

The study further showed high levels of social vulnerability in the country, linked to food insecurity, with more than 20.6% of the South Africans, in the sample of almost 40 million people, being socially vulnerable, and 20.4% - almost 7.8 million people - being food insecure.

We can go on and on lamenting the problems in the country which show no sign of abating. But the time has come for a reset. And this must transcend political expediency. The time has come for the integration of the voices, the actions and the energy.

When Covid-19 hit South Africa in 2019, there was a recognition that the depth of the challenges required all sectors of society to come together and the Solidarity

It's time for integration of the voices, actions and energy to make SA work for all, writes **Thoko Mpumwana**



Unity Government, business and civil society must work together to tackle the many challenges the country is facing PHOTO: LEON SAOEDI

Fund was born. In the two-and-a-half years of its existence, it achieved successes in alleviating the hardships millions of people were experiencing, even before the pandemic. By doing the hard work of understanding the heart of the problems to be solved, it was able to put in place innovative solutions that helped the people fish, rather than wait to be given fish.

Because of the brave decisions they took, for example, many people may have food today when they would ordinarily not have had anything to eat.

The fund showed us what was possible if the collective efforts of the country could be harnessed, together with the right analysis and courage to do things that matter.

In 2006, the SA Women in Dialogue (Sawid) undertook a study tour to Chile and Tunisia, which at that point were the only countries to have halved poverty and inequality. Since women make up roughly half of the world's population, this achievement meant that the lived experiences of women would also have improved quite significantly.

From its learnings, Sawid was firmly convinced that the model of a development caravan could be an appropriate response to South Africa's very resistant challenges. The model would also put the family unit at the centre of all the poverty alleviation and social support programmes.

We saw during the pandemic how the lethargic systems in government were a hindrance to the support millions of people needed. We also see this on a daily basis when, for instance, a social grant applicant who does not have an identity document number is not automatically linked to an official from the department of home affairs to ensure this is processed and issued speedily.

One of the most important catalysts for the success of this model is civil society and its role in policy formulation and implementation, capacity building and institutional strengthening.

At the moment, while civil society does raise a lot of pertinent issues that sometimes get addressed, the activists are mostly taken seriously only when these cases come

before the courts. It is very unfortunate that, in a democracy such as ours, service delivery and access to those services must come before the courts to be resolved.

If we are to turn around the plight of the desperate millions of South Africans whose faces and voices we can no longer ignore - those who sit on the roadside looking for work, the hundreds of young people who line up for any available work opportunities and those who queue for their grant payments - it is indeed time for the great reset.

Firstly, we need to work together. We cannot wait for another Solidarity Fund to force this collaboration.

Secondly, the resources government has must be used differently. Government needs to stop ghettoising poverty into various elements, including homelessness, hunger, healthcare and substance abuse, to name but a few.

Poverty is multidimensional and its effects are many. We must get to the root causes and not merely continue to address the ways this manifests. It's time we genuinely put in place durable solutions and not merely plasters.

Civil society cannot merely be an irritant until the matter is before the courts. Civil society has a reach and a credibility that can be harnessed for true partnerships and deliberative actions, which can break the inter-generational cycle of poverty. We saw this work phenomenally during the pandemic.

In fact, civil society can be the link between the people, government and business and it is this sector is recognised for the catalytic role it has the potential to play.

The development caravan is an amazing model and tool. But it can only work if all the partners come together with their respective contributions to make it work. The biggest beneficiaries will be the millions of vulnerable South Africans.

But, aligned to the concept of a virtuous circle, we will all collectively benefit because a rising tide lifts all boats. If nothing else, this should be where we put our collective energies as we look towards another three decades of democracy.

Mpumwana is the chairperson of Sawid. The organisation will commemorate its 20th anniversary in September this year and will be introducing a range of initiatives to capacitate public officials in partnership with a range of institutions and other programmes to support communities in distress

