

The politics of poverty

- David Everatt*

Introduction

In the 1998 parliamentary debate on reconciliation and nation-building, then deputy president Thabo Mbeki famously argued that South Africa comprised two 'nations' divided by poverty:

*One of these nations is white, relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal. It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure ... The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. This nation lives under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. It has virtually no possibility to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity.*¹²

Eradicating poverty was fundamental to transformation, Mbeki argued. To a chorus of unhappiness from opposition parties, he reached a bleakly pessimistic conclusion: '[W]e are not one nation, but two nations. And neither are we becoming one nation'.¹³

The issue re-emerged in 2003, when the South African Human Rights Commission released a report critical of government's performance regarding socio-economic rights, following the publication of a number of studies which concluded that poverty levels in South Africa had remained constant or worsened since the advent of democracy. Opposition parties took up the refrain: 'Life is no better now than in 1994'. The African National Congress (ANC) responded furiously, reminding its critics of the massive political changes in the country and the restoration of dignity to black South Africans, as well as of government's not inconsiderable achievements in providing infrastructure¹⁴ – all of which are key elements in contemporary definitions of poverty, if conveniently forgotten by critics attempting to score political points rather than make substantive ones.

Politicking aside, the exchange between the ANC and opposition parties in 2003 was notable in the way it skirted inequality and redistribution. Thabo Mbeki's 'two nations' speech had been similarly silent on inequality while loud on poverty. Both poverty and inequality are South African hallmarks, but this essay argues that inequality poses the most serious threat to the democratic project. Government is caught in the unenviable position of balancing the needs of market stability (in a world dominated by free market economics) and appeasing domestic and international capital with trying to undo the damage of 400 years of colonialism.

While government, opposition and business may all be wary of issues relating to inequality and redistribution, why did Mbeki's seemingly self-evident assertion that blacks are overwhelmingly poor and whites overwhelmingly wealthy generate angry debate? Moreover, how is it that 'the distribution of income appears to have become more unequal between 1991 and 1996'¹⁵ and both poverty and inequality seem to have worsened under an ANC government? This essay suggests some possible answers. It begins by reviewing the status of poverty and inequality in South Africa before turning to the political contestation over how to lessen both. While the political debates are heated and intense, this essay argues that they are (at least partly) fuelled by a more prosaic consideration, namely the fact that 'poverty' has many meanings within government and

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¹² T. Mbeki, *Africa: The time has come*, (Cape Town, Tafelberg/Mafube, 1998), p.72.

¹³ Mbeki, *Africa*, p.72.

¹⁴ *ANC today*, 3:14 (April 2003), (see <http://www.anc.org.za>).

¹⁵ *Transforming the present: Protecting the future*, (Pretoria, Department of Social Development, 2002), report of the Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa, p.16.

the progressive movement more broadly, as it does among academics and commentators. The impact of definitional imprecision has been and remains considerable, affecting development programmes while fuelling ill-tempered, if ultimately rather hollow, debate.

What do the numbers tell us?

Thabo Mbeki's 'two nations' speech generated controversy in and beyond Parliament as critics and supporters clashed over whether or not he was 'raking up the past' or 'playing the race card'. Although political opponents and some commentators have sought to disregard the 'two nations' thesis as 'racial rhetoric',¹⁶ factually, Mbeki was (and remains) quite right: poverty is a defining characteristic of South Africa, and has clear racial, gender and spatial dimensions. Across the myriad definitions used to measure poverty, there is one common finding: 'the majority of black South Africans exist below any acceptable minimum poverty line'.¹⁷

In South Africa, one in ten Africans are malnourished. One in four African children are stunted. Just less than half the population (45 per cent) lives on less than US\$2 a day.¹⁸ Lines dividing the poor from the non-poor give different results depending on where they are drawn, but most suggest that 45–55 per cent of all South Africans live in conditions of poverty – some 18–24 million people.¹⁹

In October 1999, there were an estimated 26.3 million people in South Africa who were aged between 15 and 65 – the cohort considered to be potentially economically active in any given population. Applying the expanded definition of unemployment,²⁰ South Africa's rate of unemployment was 36 per cent. This was far higher for African females (52 per cent) than any other group. Comparing employment data from 1996 and 1999, the rate of unemployment increased from 34 per cent to 36 per cent. Furthermore, while the actual number of people employed during this time grew from 9.1 million to 10.0 million (an increase of 14 per cent), the number of unemployed people also grew – by 26 per cent, from 4.7 million to 5.9 million. In 1999, 22 per cent of households reported that members were going hungry due to lack of money to buy food. Measured by household income, 83 per cent of households in the bottom fifth have no people in employment. Looked at from another angle, 38 per cent of African households in 1999 contained no employed people – up from 32 per cent in 1996.²¹

Poverty has a spatial dimension: just less than half of the South African population lives in rural areas, as does 72 per cent of South Africa's poor. Poverty is also gendered: the poverty rate among female-headed households (60 per cent) is double that of male-headed households.²² As Mbeki noted, poverty has a stark racial dimension: 61 per cent of Africans were poor in 1996 compared with just 1 per cent of whites.²³

Social transfers are hugely inadequate: some 60 per cent of the poor, or 11 million people, are without any social security transfers. Uptake of existing measures is also poor, dropping from 85 per cent for the state old age pension to just 20 per cent for the child support grant; average uptake across all social grants stands at 43 per cent. A 2002 enquiry noted that the existing social security system 'has the capacity to close 36.6 per cent of the poverty gap' if all benefits were

¹⁶ J. Seekings and N. Nattrass, 'Class, distribution and redistribution in post-apartheid South Africa', *Transformation*, 50 (2002), p.5.

¹⁷ *Transforming the present*, p.275.

¹⁸ *Transforming the present*, p.276.

¹⁹ *Transforming the present*, p.276.

²⁰ Statistics South Africa's expanded definition is those people within the economically active population who (a) did not work during the seven days prior to the interview, and (b) want to work and are available to start work within a week of the interview.

²¹ Author's analysis of statistics from *October household survey*, (Pretoria, Statistics South Africa, 1996) and *October household survey*, (Pretoria, Statistics South Africa, 1999) and *Transforming the present*.

²² *Transforming the present*, p.277.

²³ *Transforming the present*, pp.104–105.

distributed to those entitled to them.²⁴ But even with full uptake, still there would be some 5 million people living in poor households but ineligible for existing benefits.²⁵

Current data suggest that at least 15 per cent of all households suffer from chronic as opposed to transitory poverty: that is, they remain in poverty when measured over time (five years, in this instance).²⁶ Poverty also attacks the most vulnerable: researchers noted in 2000 that 'no matter what indicator we choose, child poverty is extensive and its extent and nature varies across the provinces'.²⁷ Little seems to have improved from the preceding decade. A 1997 report found that a third of children aged below five lived in the poorest households.²⁸ Some 60 per cent of South African children live in the poorest 40 per cent of households (measured by income); three-quarters of all children living in poverty can be found in rural areas; and 97 per cent of them are African.²⁹ Worryingly, 'all the indicators of child poverty, with the exception of health indicators, suggest that child poverty is on the increase in South Africa'.³⁰

Thabo Mbeki's 'two nations' speech was notably silent on inequality; odd, given that South Africa is among the most unequal societies on earth. Inequalities in income distribution saw the Gini coefficient continue to rise in the 1990s³¹ despite the ANC's avowed commitment to redistribution. In 1991, 9 per cent of the richest income decile was African, rising to 22 per cent in 1996; the poorest remain obdurately and overwhelmingly black.³² Inequality has been 'changing from being race to class based'³³ as a rich black elite has emerged and whites have become proportionately less wealthy. Put another way, only a small proportion of black South Africans is benefiting significantly from the post-apartheid economic dispensation. It seems apparent that reliance on market forces to achieve anything other than gradualist elite redistribution is misplaced.

Poverty can be measured in many (often confusing) ways, and research in South Africa is patchy and uneven. Government has no central planning or monitoring agency, and relies on survey data from Statistics South Africa³⁴ and *ad hoc* research projects to measure the impact of development programmes on poverty.³⁵ Nonetheless, it is clear that South Africa has appalling levels of poverty and inequality, which worsened during the 1990s if measured in aggregate economic terms. But such observations must be balanced against the massive advances that have been made, most obviously in securing human rights and political freedoms that are critical in allowing the poor (and others) to have a 'voice' in society. The same is true of infrastructure delivery by the ANC-led government, which has been considerable, and which remains in line with the basic needs approach of the ANC's 1994 election manifesto, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). However government is on far shakier ground regarding redistribution and inequality; its concerns about short-term market stability may be short-sighted if redistributive policies do not rapidly give the poor a return on the peace dividend.

Poverty in South Africa has racial, gender and spatial dimensions, a direct result of the policies of the successive colonial, segregationist and apartheid regimes. Poverty is not a historical phenomenon, part of a past now behind us. Until less than a decade ago, full educational and

²⁴ *Transforming the present*, p.115.

²⁵ *Transforming the present*, p.308.

²⁶ M. Aliber, *An overview study of chronic poverty and development policy in South Africa*, (University of the Western Cape, Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies, 2001), chronic poverty and development policy report series no.1, p.36.

²⁷ S. Cassiem, H. Perry, M. Sadan and J. Streak, *Child poverty and the budget 2000*, (Cape Town, Institute for a Democratic South Africa, 2000), p.xi.

²⁸ J. May (ed.), *Poverty and inequality in South Africa*, (mimeo, 1997), second draft report.

²⁹ Cassiem *et al.*, *Child poverty*, pp.36–37.

³⁰ Cassiem *et al.*, *Child poverty*, p.xix.

³¹ *Transforming the present*, p.16.

³² *Transforming the present*, p.17 (citing Whiteford and Van Seventer).

³³ A. Adelzadeh, C. Alvillar and C. Mather, *Poverty elimination, employment creation and sustainable livelihoods in South Africa*, (Johannesburg, National Institute for Economic Policy, 1998), p.10, (quoting McGrath).

³⁴ Statistics South Africa is the agency responsible for collecting national statistical data. Its *October household survey* was an annual tracking instrument that measured the impact of development. Unfortunately it was stopped after 1999 for reasons of cost.

³⁵ See D. Atkinson and D. Everatt, *A national monitoring framework for South Africa*, (Pretoria, Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2001).

employment opportunities were denied to black South Africans, who lived in areas zoned by race, and marked by limited and poor quality infrastructure, and, in rural areas, unproductive land. Those most affected by poverty today are black, live in rural areas and are more likely to be women or children. These should not be controversial statements; there is evidence not merely in statistical reports, but visible in all the cities, towns, villages and rural areas of South Africa.

Poverty and inequality are the illegitimate twins inherited by democratic South Africa. Both cut to the core of ideological differences within the tripartite alliance,³⁶ which are frequently more bitterly fought over than the differences between the various political parties in Parliament. Poverty is inseparable from politics in South Africa, whether looking at origins and causes, its current form, or solutions.

Poverty and politics

The anti-apartheid struggle focused on two key areas: extending rights to black South Africans and alleviating the poverty forced onto them by segregation and apartheid. These intertwined themes were prominent in the RDP:

*an election victory is only a first step. No political democracy can survive and flourish if the mass of our people remain in poverty, without land, without tangible prospects for a better life. Attacking poverty and deprivation must therefore be the first priority of a democratic government.*³⁷

In the early 1990s, Nelson Mandela spearheaded a charm offensive that succeeded in winning broad-based domestic support for poverty eradication as set out in the RDP. This was made possible after his 1991 public re-affirmation of the ANC's commitment to nationalisation (as reflected in the Freedom Charter) had been dropped by 1993 in favour of a 'mixed economy' that lay somewhere between a 'commandist central planning system' and an 'unfettered free market system'.³⁸ It was also helped by the blurriness and unthreatening tone of the RDP as a whole, its failure to define poverty eradication other than in infrastructural terms, the near absence in the RDP of redistribution or any detail regarding economic policy other than its desired outcomes.³⁹ The RDP combined these silences in key areas with rallying calls to action on poverty and human rights. Its 'almost Biblical character'⁴⁰ in combination with astute politicking by senior ANC officials, who argued that the RDP 'belonged to everybody',⁴¹ brought into being 'a unique national consensus on the need for prosperity, democracy, human development and the removal of poverty'.⁴²

Commentators bicker over how much space to manoeuvre the ANC enjoyed during the early 1990s when it was negotiating the end of apartheid and simultaneously developing its own policies, and how much it has now that it is in power. This is important for those who wish to measure the extent to which the movement did or did not 'sell out' on revolutionary or socialist or other ideals. The mere fact of negotiating a settlement (erratically calling for 'rolling mass action' when it was needed to break a logjam) limited the options of the ANC. So did contextual factors, notably the collapse of the Soviet Union and 'existing socialism', leaving a world dominated by Western powers, economies and orthodoxies. The ANC had to balance the need for market

³⁶ Led by the ANC, the alliance includes the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

³⁷ African National Congress, *The Reconstruction and Development Programme*, (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1994), p.4.

³⁸ African National Congress, *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, p.78.

³⁹ See 'Building the economy', in African National Congress, *Reconstruction and Development Programme*.

⁴⁰ Mbeki, *Africa*, p.82.

⁴¹ H. Marais, *South Africa: Limits to change: The political economy of transformation*, (London and Cape Town, Zed Books and University of Cape Town Press, 1998), p.177.

⁴² Mbeki, *Africa*, p.82.

stability with the demands of justice. There were limited options available to the ANC and its allies as they 'went through all [the] ... steps of the dance of the pacting elites'.⁴³

Many now look back on the RDP as a high-tide mark for progressive forces, as if the RDP drafting process somehow floated beyond the circumscribed sphere of policy-making and negotiations to a space where it could operate with greater flexibility and freedom. The document was the result of fierce horse-trading and compromise within the tripartite alliance (it went through six drafts before being released publicly) – let alone the external pressure of trying to appease domestic and international capital – and had many critical weaknesses. One of these was the failure to settle on a clear definition of poverty – despite the priority status given to the fight against poverty by then President Nelson Mandela in his inauguration speech:

*We have at last achieved our political emancipation. We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the constraining bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination.*⁴⁴

Perhaps it is unfair to expect such precision and focus from a liberation movement that had just emerged from decades in exile and which had yet to govern; but the situation has not changed, and poverty is endlessly elaborated but rarely (if ever) defined by government.

Poverty was ascribed to apartheid generally and more specifically to 'the grossly skewed nature of business and industrial development which accompanied it';⁴⁵ the response was standard 1970s basic needs provision delivered through a strong central state. Another key weakness saw redistribution – the central thrust of post-colonial governance and fundamental to poverty eradication – obscured by the language of reconstruction, possibly euphemistically and for political-cum-electoral reasons, but with potentially serious long-term consequences. The ANC's electoral dominance has allowed it a long window period in which to introduce fundamental change; but the period for gradualism is finite, after which (this or another) government may be forced to induce far swifter changes.

Growth: Policy goal or holy grail?

In the first flush of post-apartheid democracy, the weaknesses of the RDP were overlooked, and the hopes of left-leaning ANC members were pinned on the centrally located (but politically weak) RDP Office. The RDP promised to deliver in the three areas – 'openness, civil liberties and land distribution'⁴⁶ – significant to both growth and equality. The RDP Office set socio-economic delivery targets for line ministries and sought to audit their expenditure plans against RDP targets. While the new ruling party was struggling to manage and transform the machinery of government, various infrastructure provision anti-poverty initiatives were deployed, many of high-quality design and not inconsiderable impact.⁴⁷ Social welfare benefits formerly restricted by race were made universally available. School feeding schemes were introduced, alongside advances in access to health care, education and other such services. The 1996 Constitution secured socio-economic rights alongside more traditional civil liberties. In 1996, then President Nelson Mandela could reasonably assert: 'as a government, we have declared war on poverty'.⁴⁸

But 1996 was also the year of betrayal in the eyes of many on the left, as the ANC-led government abolished the RDP Office and adopted the Growth Employment and Redistribution

⁴³ N. Alexander, *An ordinary country: Issues in the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa*. (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2002), p.44.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Mbeki, *Africa*, p.81.

⁴⁵ African National Congress, *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, p.14.

⁴⁶ R. Kanbur and L. Squire, *The evolution of thinking about poverty: Exploring the interactions*, paper presented to the symposium on the Future of Development Economics in Perspective, Dubrovnik, 13–14 May 1999, p.11.

⁴⁷ See D. Everatt and S. Zulu, 'Analysing rural development programmes in South Africa 1994–2000', *Development Update*, 3:4 (2001), pp.1–38.

⁴⁸ N. Mandela, statement on international day for the eradication of poverty, 17 October 1996, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela>, (accessed 31 July 2001).

(GEAR) strategy. GEAR was a classic neo-liberal formulation, reflecting the assumption that market forces freed of external restraint would maximise not merely growth but also the welfare of citizens. GEAR has been criticised from within the tripartite alliance and civil society more broadly as 'a home-grown version of the World Bank's notorious Structural Adjustment Programmes'.⁴⁹ It barely mentioned poverty, and then only in the context of social security and water provision. Despite its progressive-sounding title, GEAR made it clear that economic growth took precedence over other considerations, including poverty alleviation (let alone eradication). This was a reversal of priorities from the short-lived days of the RDP, which had explicitly warned against this approach, arguing: 'Growth ... is commonly seen as the priority that must precede development ... The RDP breaks decisively with this approach'.⁵⁰

'Redistribution' appeared in GEAR's title but was absent from the substance of the strategy, as it had been from the RDP. In GEAR, redistribution was not given programmatic form but was an assumed result of economic growth, a classic 'trickle-down' formulation. The same was true of poverty alleviation, which had to be preceded by (and result from) growth. According to GEAR, economic growth was meant to create a million-plus new jobs: they would be the key vehicle through which redistribution would be achieved. Commenting on GEAR, a contemporary, somewhat timid World Bank-funded report claimed that 'no single blueprint exists for how to simultaneously achieve growth and address poverty and inequality'.⁵¹ Growth may help reduce absolute poverty, it argued, but

*it may or may not lead to a reduction in inequality. In fact, in some cases, depending on the nature and quality of the growth, inequality may increase. There is also evidence that inequality has a negative impact on growth, as well as on poverty reduction.*⁵²

Data suggest this is precisely what has occurred (as we saw earlier), fuelling critics who argue that

*a small black elite has ... joined the upper income ranks, but black South Africans – especially those in rural areas – still disproportionately dominate the ranks of the poor and ultra-poor.*⁵³

Others are less harsh in their assessment of the impact of infrastructure provision on poor communities, but retain scathing antipathy about 'co-opting individual black wannabes into the charmed circle of the ruling elites'.⁵⁴

Growth in and of itself is no panacea for poverty: it only helps the poor if they share in it.⁵⁵ In the event, GEAR failed to trigger significant growth: the 1.3 million new jobs failed to materialise, while over a million formal sector jobs were lost. Its silences regarding poverty alleviation became deafening. Growth has trudged along at an average 2.7 per cent a year since 1994,⁵⁶ but remains a holy grail for which the ANC government searches far and wide.

GEAR has been most costly in political terms. It signalled the elevation of growth and fiscal stringency above the socio-economic priorities of the RDP, while seemingly ditching broad-based redistribution in the process. In Marais's words, GEAR 'lit the faces of business leaders but shocked many within the ANC alliance'.⁵⁷ Although the publication of GEAR caught both Cosatu and the SACP unawares, both have steadily ratcheted up opposition to it – and the Mbeki presidency more broadly, which is characterised as centralist, overly controlling and conservative.

⁴⁹ A. Mngxitama, *South Africa: Country report Social Watch*, (Johannesburg, National Land Committee, 2001), p.1.

⁵⁰ African National Congress, *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, p.6.

⁵¹ May, p.57.

⁵² May, p.57.

⁵³ Mngxitama, p.1.

⁵⁴ Alexander, p.145.

⁵⁵ Kanbur and Squire, p.2.

⁵⁶ S. Terreblanche, *A history of inequality in South Africa, 1652–2002*, (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press and KMM Review Publishing, 2002), p.427.

⁵⁷ H. Marais, *South Africa: Limits to change*, p.161.

But GEAR also provided an opportunity for Thabo Mbeki to stamp his authority on the tripartite alliance, consolidate his leadership, and win support in some quarters for 'taking on' his trade union and communist allies.

Mbeki himself lies at the centre of a culture of suspicion and hostility that has been nurtured by commentators and some journalists.⁵⁸ A number of critics who regard themselves as being to the left of the ANC demonise Mbeki and his 'systematic dishonesty',⁵⁹ which they extend to his key ministers and advisers. As a result, Mbeki's own words are disregarded by former sympathisers, who see ANC policy shifts in negative terms and seem unwilling to accept any other motive than mendacity. As if the damnation of former friends were not enough, a former adviser to the apartheid presidency recently weighed in with a 500-page tome that accused 'a new "distributive coalition" ... forged over the past decade between the old white elite and the new black elite' of ensuring that 'a comprehensive redistribution programme on behalf of the poor is not possible'.⁶⁰

The meaning and status of poverty

But there is more at issue than the symbolic power of GEAR as the centrepiece of opposition hostility or even its apparent failure to significantly address poverty or inequality. GEAR is rarely mentioned by government, and is being allowed to die quietly, away from the spotlight; when mentioned, GEAR is characterised as a dose of unavoidable if bitter medicine, required to raise economic performance to the point where RDP goals can be met by the post-GEAR economy.⁶¹ Neo-liberalism, nonetheless, remains the dominant orthodoxy within government.

But while the tripartite alliance has been involved in its vicious '[b]attle over [the] hearts and minds of the poor'⁶², government has shifted the terms of the debate. Poverty has lost its former near crusade status to black economic empowerment; non-racialism and the 'rainbow nation' have been replaced by a more hard-edged emphasis on race.

Nelson Mandela as president 'sometimes sounded like a philosopher-king';⁶³ Thabo Mbeki has adopted a far more managerial tone. Where Mandela painted on a large canvas and could move audiences through force of personality, Mbeki is a precisian, slicing up poverty eradication into this or that programme for this or that target group, replacing emotion with detail. Put together with government's endless invocation of 'the poorest of the poor' in support of every policy decision, the ongoing battle over whether government's economic policies cause poverty or are its solution, and capital's purblind attitude to redistribution, it is not surprising to find that poverty has been sanitised of politics.

Poverty's political content has been replaced with the language of 'development', a near-meaningless catch-all phrase that covers an enormous range of activities, from building toilets, to training, to supporting micro-enterprises, and beyond – 'development by piggeries' in the words of one observer.⁶⁴ This has happened in large part because poverty was and remains either undefined or repeatedly redefined in ANC policy documents and in the public service; and because redistribution is politically sensitive while stability is at a premium. The ANC is continually treading a tightrope between need and provision.

In a survey of 15 national government departments involved in anti-poverty work, senior managers (directors-general and chief directors) were asked how they and their departments

⁵⁸ See for example the unremittingly hostile set of essays in S. Jacobs and R. Calland (eds), *Thabo Mbeki's world: The politics and ideology of the South African president*, (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2002).

⁵⁹ P. Bond, *Elite transition: From apartheid to neoliberalism in South Africa*, (London, Pluto Press, 2000), p.119.

⁶⁰ Terreblanche, p.436.

⁶¹ Remarks made by the National Treasury's Kuben Naidoo at a seminar at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 20 March 2003.

⁶² Headline in the *Star*, 30 August 2001.

⁶³ A. Sampson, *Mandela: The authorised biography*, (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1999), p.505.

⁶⁴ Aliber, p.52.

defined poverty. Half (7 of the 15) had no specific definition at all. Some argued that none was needed since everything their departments were doing in the post-apartheid environment could be defined as 'anti-poverty', mimicking the way politicians commonly ascribe their every action to helping the poor. Among the remainder, poverty was variously defined, using a mix of indicators including income levels, female-headed households, spatial location and so on.⁶⁵

Multiple definitions are not inherently problematic, so long as they are all compatible with government's overarching policy goals. (Non-existent definitions are a somewhat greater problem.) But government continues to work without an overarching definition of poverty to animate and cohere those of line departments, a decade after poverty went undefined in the RDP. The ANC government is not alone in this: a scanning exercise among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) governments concluded that 'most donors and their partners have not developed a consistent conceptual approach to poverty reduction' and as a result 'do not generally have a clear and precise idea of what a pro-poor strategy might look like'.⁶⁶

The situation is not helped by poverty experts, self-styled or other. Since the 1950s, the world has witnessed a five-fold increase in economic output and a doubling of absolute poverty, at the same time as definitions of poverty have proliferated and 'development' has emerged as an international career. Poverty is no longer seen as an execrable result of skewed economic growth compounding global, regional and local discrimination; rather, it is increasingly regarded as an unfortunate but unavoidable by-product of growth. Where fighting poverty was a cause, it has become a profession, populated by (barely distinguishable) consultants from the private and non-profit sectors. 'Development' is merely one among many services provided by government. Poverty has also been obfuscated by the "meaning-of-poverty" industry⁶⁷ with competing definitions, indicators, strategies, toolkits and the like, each favourite championed by a gaggle of donors, non-governmental organisations (NGO), activists and academics.

Successive global targets for poverty reduction have been set, missed and revised. As one commentator noted:

*[Q]uite what [these targets] might mean is obscured by the bewildering ambiguity with which the term 'poverty' is used, and by the many different indicators proposed to monitor poverty.*⁶⁸

In the 1960s poverty was defined by income; in the 1970s, relative deprivation and the basic needs approach became dominant; in the 1980s, non-monetary concepts were added, including powerlessness, vulnerability, livelihoods, capabilities and gender. The 1990s saw the use of well-being and 'voice' in defining poverty, while the rights-based approach has dominated the first decade of the new millennium. Each has its own (differing) indicators. Each has its own following among governments and donors, programme managers and NGOs – although few stop to make sure they are talking about the same thing.

Commenting on sustainable development, Wynberg noted that its breadth and lack of specificity allowed the concept

*to be embraced by a wide and often disparate group of organisations, politicians and individuals, all of whom interpret it liberally to reflect their divergent ideologies.*⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Atkinson and Everatt, chapter 1.

⁶⁶ J.D. Stryker, *Common diagnostic framework for poverty reduction*, (Washington, Associates for International Resources and Development, 2000), p.1.

⁶⁷ N. Hossain and M. Moore, *Elites, poverty and development: A background paper for the World Development Report 2000/1 on Poverty*, (University of Sussex, Institute for Development Studies, 1999), p.9.

⁶⁸ S. Maxwell, 'The meaning and measurement of poverty', *ODI Poverty Briefing* (1999), <http://www.oneworld.org/odi/briefing/pov3.html>, p.1

The same point could be applied to definitions of poverty. Furthermore, support for this or that approach to poverty commonly becomes a requirement for accessing donor funds and permits entrance to a charmed circle that keeps outsiders away through 'insider-only' jargon and hostility to non-converts.⁷⁰

Maxwell noted a few years ago that a 'small craft industry has developed ... in measuring poverty and deprivation'.⁷¹ Since then it has grown exponentially to become a major trans-national industry (in inverse proportion to poverty reduction, it may be noted). But governments needing help may turn to this industry in vain: experts differ strongly over the value of different definitions and the 'striking[ly]⁷² different results they produce. The different results 'would matter less if the same individuals were being identified by all measures',⁷³ but even this is unclear. Kanbur and Squire have argued that 'broadening the definition of poverty does not change significantly who is counted as poor'⁷⁴ (at the aggregate level, anyway). Stryker countered by claiming that poverty definitions have become so broad 'that it is very difficult to separate the poor from the non-poor'.⁷⁵ Lipton fulminated against those wanting to replace basic needs targets with 'the language of entitlements, livelihoods and rights', which he described as 'a set of complicated and largely unmeasurable goals'; he regarded the move to do so as 'almost wholly harmful'.⁷⁶

A question of definition?

The failure to define poverty is not an academic matter: it directly impacts on delivery. If poverty is undefined, programmes lack focus: it is not clear why this or that service is being provided, or to whom, or where, and measuring progress and impact become near-impossible. As Kanbur and Squire summarised it, 'the definition of poverty drives the choice of policies'⁷⁷ – or should do, at any rate. An evaluation of South African school feeding schemes instituted after 1994, found differing definitions of nutrition among role-players and a consequent failure to identify or reach the supposed target group – the (undefined) 'poorest of the poor'.⁷⁸ Programmes also err in the opposite direction, overloading themselves with principles, objectives, outcomes and the like. An evaluation of government's Community Based Public Works Programme (CBPWP) found the programme had been given successive sets of principles and objectives between 1994 and 2001 and had kept all of them, even though most were undefined and a number were contradictory.⁷⁹

But we should be realistic: politicians and programme managers have opposing needs. The latter require specificity, while the former prioritise political above technical considerations and prefer opacity to a definition of poverty eradication that 'implies ... [that] someone else will have to forego those resources'.⁸⁰ Most poverty experts argue strongly that a detailed definition of poverty is a prerequisite for appropriate policy selection, but ignore the political realm and the balancing act it requires. Friedman and Chipkin argue that interventions 'depend crucially on their political feasibility'; in doing so, however, they downplay what they term 'technical' considerations, which include fundamental issues such as the capacity of the state to actually deliver anti-poverty

⁶⁹ R. Wynberg, 'Sustaining the nation: Environment, sustainability, and economic development in a democratic South Africa', in G. Maharaj (ed.), *Between unity and diversity: Essays on nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa*, (Cape Town, David Philip, 1999), pp.97–98.

⁷⁰ A point conceded by some of the most ardent supporters of different approaches. See, for example, I. Goldman, J. Marumo and A. Toner, *Goodbye to projects? The institutional impacts of a livelihood approach on development interventions*, (University of Bradford, Bradford Centre for International Development, 2002), Department for International Development working paper series no.2.

⁷¹ Maxwell, p.1.

⁷² *Measuring poverty*, (Pretoria, Statistics South Africa, 2000), p.2.

⁷³ Maxwell, p.2.

⁷⁴ Kanbur and Squire, p.1.

⁷⁵ Stryker, p.2.

⁷⁶ M. Lipton, draft notes for keynote address to Dutch foreign ministry/OECD conference, 2000, (see <http://www.worldbank.org>), p.1.

⁷⁷ Kanbur and Squire, p.1.

⁷⁸ *Transforming the present*, p.283.

⁷⁹ D. Everatt, R. Jennings, N. Dube, J. Mulaudzi and M. Ntsime, *Poverty alleviation in rural South Africa: Evaluating the Community Based Public Works Programme 1999/2000/2001*, (Pretoria, Department of Public Works, 2002).

⁸⁰ Hossain and Moore, p.8.

services.⁸¹ Hossain and Moore go further, in arguing that 'fuzzy definitions of poverty can be exploited for good purpose' by 'shaming' the local elite into helping their fellow citizens.⁸²

Where poverty specialists are insufficiently sensitive to political considerations, political analysts pay inadequate attention to the programmatic needs of anti-poverty interventions. Balancing political and technical considerations is clearly needed. Whether that would be sufficient (assuming it can be done) to return poverty eradication to its status as a national priority is questionable. While poverty has been repeatedly redefined and an unceasing string of indicators and targets provided, in South Africa its meaning has suffered a further hollowing out through endless repetition. Poverty and 'the poorest of the poor' have been both undefined since the days of the RDP and ubiquitous in political discourse. 'The poorest of the poor' are invoked by politicians, civil society activists, the private sector and others as the intended beneficiaries of (and thus justification for) their every action, from the privatisation of state assets to black economic empowerment to enhanced social security provision. The unceasing mantra-like invocation of poverty has drained it of urgency.

It is not that poverty is meaningless: it has too many meanings, in the ANC-led alliance and the public service. The overwhelming majority of black South Africans share an immediate experience of poverty. When ANC policy-makers sit together, they share a reasonable presumption that their common terminology describes a shared experience of poverty. But this may be a wrong assumption, masking differing experiences and definitions of poverty as well as how best it can be eradicated. The point is not to conclude, as others have done, that ANC officials are well-meaning but somehow deluded.⁸³ Friedman and Chipkin were closer to the mark when they observed that during the struggle era 'local activists ... claimed an almost organic link with "communities"',⁸⁴ which in turn were regarded as seamlessly devoid of differentiation. There is an apparent need to interrogate the assumptions that formerly united the anti-apartheid forces and those that inform their current policy choices.

Of course the tendency to avoid scrutinising poverty too closely is compounded by contestation within the tripartite alliance over whether government's economic policy is its cause or the solution for it. ANC documents claim that eradicating poverty remains 'the first priority of the democratic government'⁸⁵ – but while government talks the language of delivery, performance measurement and impact monitoring, it has failed to produce a common definition of poverty or a coherent anti-poverty strategy to guide its work and its officials. This is a particularly glaring omission given the emphasis Thabo Mbeki has placed on delivery. The programmatic impact of definitional imprecision has been considerable; as we see below, government's second wave of delivery strategies – the Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Programme (ISRDP) and the Urban Renewal Programme – continue to suffer from a lack of specificity and focus.

[h1]What has been done?

So, how should the poverty-related actions of the ANC-led government be interpreted? The literature is not of great assistance. Poverty lies at the centre of intense inter- and intra-party contestation. One result is that literature on poverty in South Africa falls into two rarely overlapping categories: the technical and the political. As we saw earlier, this is also true of international literature.

A number of worthy tomes and articles have been published on the challenges and complexities of development in South Africa, whether 'sustainable', 'livelihood-based', 'integrated' or otherwise.

⁸¹ S. Friedman and I. Chipkin, *A poor voice?: The politics of inequality in South Africa*, (Johannesburg, Centre for Policy Studies, 2001), p.5.

⁸² Hossain and Moore, p.8 and p.12.

⁸³ See Alexander, p.151, commending Bond in his *Elite Transition* in this regard.

⁸⁴ Friedman and Chipkin, p.27.

⁸⁵ African National Congress, 'Social transformation: Fighting poverty and building a better life', in *Umrabulo*, <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo17/umrabulo17.html>, para. 2.

On the other hand, a growing body of literature published by political analysts includes poverty and development, primarily as an offshoot of analysing economic policy and related matters. Most of this literature in turn falls into an anti or pro dichotomy; either poverty is a stick with which to beat government, or delivery data are trotted out to prove how well government is doing. Few if any authors (on either side) combine an analysis of political conditions and considerations with an accurate understanding of the complexities of anti-poverty work on the ground.⁸⁶ The result is two parallel discourses, each weakened by the other's absence – the political has become polemic, and the technical has become dry and academic.

Most left-wing commentators start from the position that neo-liberal economics causes poverty and is incapable of eradicating it. This has particular connotations in South Africa, where the Congress Alliance for decades pursued a two-stage revolution, in which the creation of a national bourgeoisie was seen as a necessary precursor to more broad-based revolutionary change. Critics argue that the ANC is only interested in creating a 'black elite' and that it is doing so at the expense of the mass of black South Africans.⁸⁷ Arguments by ANC luminaries such as Cyril Ramaphosa, that black businesses would somehow be 'impel[led] ... towards an alliance with the poor' have found little purchase.⁸⁸

Some critics struggle to resist the temptation of ahistorical, rose-tinted hindsight and give the RDP a radicalism it patently lacked. When cholera broke out in KwaZulu-Natal in 2000, it became axiomatic for them that 'GEAR caused cholera'; they were forgetting that user charges, for example, were first introduced by the RDP, not by GEAR. The RDP's silences regarding economic policy are imbued with all sorts of unspecified 'if only ...' possibilities, implicitly blocked by the Mbeki presidency. The two-year lifespan of the RDP Office is presented as a golden moment when progressive forces were in the ascendant, regardless of the chaos and confusion that marked government generally – and the RDP Office in particular – in the immediate post-election years. Thereafter, conservative elements are seen to have wrested control of the ANC, closed the RDP Office, and issued GEAR in pursuit of black bourgeois (read 'self') enrichment.

Those critics who are irredeemably hostile to the ANC often fail to generate analytic frameworks that help us understand the situation or improve it. In part this is because many seem more confused than hostile, and grapple with psychological profiling of ANC leaders, a particularly unrewarding avenue to follow. Alexander for example notes that 'it is relatively easy to explain why an entire political movement such as the ANC found itself compelled to move in the direction of accepting the dominant neo-liberal paradigm'.⁸⁹ Having stressed the importance of separating the conjunctural from the personal, Alexander nonetheless cannot resist trying to understand the psychology of Thabo Mbeki and his key ministers to explain the 'strategy behind this volte-face'. He echoes Bond's patronising conclusion⁹⁰ that ANC leaders – however misguided – 'believe they are "doing good" and ... ultimately, acting for the good of "the people"'.⁹¹

Stung by hostile criticism from within the tripartite alliance and former allies in civil society, ANC documents rebut any suggestion that the RDP is anything other than alive and well, and slavishly insist that '[a]ttacking poverty and thus bridging the gap between South Africa's "two nations" have been at the centre of all government's policies and programmes since 1994'.⁹² Despite being a political party, the ANC adopts a 'technical' tone in its documents; the only concessions it makes relate to co-ordination of existing programmes within government. The ANC has some grounds for feeling harshly treated: critics who hark back to the RDP refuse to accept the very substantial levels of delivery on basic needs achieved since 1994. Government communications

⁸⁶ There are of course some notable exceptions, many of whom may be found writing in journals such as *Development Update*.

⁸⁷ Mngxitama, p.2.

⁸⁸ Cited in Friedman and Chipkin, p.14.

⁸⁹ Alexander, p.150.

⁹⁰ In Bond's *Elite transition*.

⁹¹ Alexander, p.151.

⁹² African National Congress, conference resolution on 'Social Transformation', <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/conference50/resolutions>, (accessed on 31 July 2001), para 14.

head Joel Netshitenze conceded that 'poverty at the level of income and assets ... is staggering', but went on to remind critics of the work done since 1994

*in restoring the dignity of the majority; bringing clean water to more than 9.3 million people; making over 3.5 million electricity connections; housing more than 5 million people and so on.*⁹³

Despite the way in which Thabo Mbeki is portrayed by critics –compounded on occasion by his personality and predilections, most obviously over HIV/AIDS – he commonly provides more eloquent arguments about the problems of poverty eradication than the movement he leads or its critics, although his words seem increasingly to fall on deaf ears. He has written and spoken about the restricted sphere of movement for all developing countries – also true of the ANC during negotiations and in government. He has described the way in which the rules of the game 'serve the purposes of our rich global neighbours'⁹⁴ and the impossibility of autarky; and has made plain his wariness of market forces:

*The new god of our world, the market, is not informed by a tablet of commandments on which is inscribed: Thou shalt banish poverty in the world!*⁹⁵

This should not be misread to mean all criticism is misplaced: the Mbeki era in government and the ANC has been marked by centralism and a seeming dislike of criticism and debate, often accompanied by stinging attacks on enemies both real and imagined. The real concern in many quarters is less about Thabo Mbeki's acerbic tongue than about a more general stifling of debate by his 'henchmen' coupled with attacks on left-wing elements within the ANC and the tripartite alliance more broadly. Given Mbeki's and the ANC's grip on power, the strength of criticism meted out to dissenting supporters seems unnecessary. Cosatu, having described the 'conspiratorial and military' style of a clique of Mbeki-supporting former exiles in the ANC, recently warned:

*There can be no question that the majority of ANC leaders find [their] tactics distasteful. Nonetheless, the influence of this grouping is on the rise. Its divisive tendencies will do more to weaken the democratic movement than any amount of disagreement over economic policies. If members of this group win more power, we can say goodbye to the NDR [National Democratic Revolution], the Alliance, the ANC traditions of openness and serving the poor, and indeed to our democratic victory.*⁹⁶

What is to be done?

Critics have largely failed to offer any substantial alternative to the current economic policy or development frameworks. Those to the right of the ANC, already suffering the indignity of having their free market thunder stolen by a former ('terrorist') liberation movement, can do little more than call for greater market freedom. Terreblanche – who, we are told, held 'numerous clandestine meetings in Britain' with the then banned ANC and helped 'sell' neo-liberal economics to the movement – tortuously describes South Africa as 'a system of African elite democracy cum capitalist enclivity'.⁹⁷ His fear is that in future, interaction between rich and poor 'will be at the level of crime, violence, and contagious diseases, that will be "exported" daily' – not dissimilar from those formerly used to whip up white fears of the 'swart gevaar'. The solution, he argues, is 'a decisive paradigm shift from the *liberal capitalist* ideology of the British-American world towards the *social democratic* ideology of continental Europe'⁹⁸ – although we are not told how such a change in *Weltanschauung* might occur.

⁹³ J. Netshitenze, 'Pushing back the frontiers of poverty is what it's all about', *Pretoria News*, 8 August 2002.

⁹⁴ Mbeki, *Africa*, p.280.

⁹⁵ Mbeki, *Africa*, p.280.

⁹⁶ *Political discussion paper*, (Johannesburg, Congress of South African Trade Unions, 2003), p.16.

⁹⁷ Terreblanche, p.422.

⁹⁸ Terreblanche, p.439 (emphasis in original).

Thabo Mbeki put free marketeers in their place in early 2003, reminding them that, three years of neo-liberal orthodoxy notwithstanding,

*[w]e do not agree and will not support the proposition ... that we should rely solely and exclusively on the market to solve the problems facing our people. We are not market fundamentalists ...*⁹⁹

The gentleness of his rebuke stands in strong contrast to the sharpness that has characterised his responses to criticism from the left, notably from Cosatu and the SACP.

Those to the left have an intense sense of betrayal but are hazy about what the ANC should do differently. Some mouth general Keynesian utterances about increased social spending on public works campaigns and the like – adopted by the ANC in late 2002 – or simply list the failings of the ANC government. Marais has outlined the global and local constraints facing the ANC government, but his main criticism is government's failure to take risks and move beyond economic orthodoxy – despite having described the power of the South African private sector, its deep sensitivity to anything but free market economics and the restricted space to move left open to government.¹⁰⁰ Bond hopes the progressive forces that helped shape the RDP will 'be drawn towards a much more productive campaign defending and amplifying the RDP of the Left'.¹⁰¹ Indeed, if civil society were more robust in offering constructive criticism, the ANC may be more inclined to take the risks Marais identified.

Alexander accepts that the ANC had little option but to embrace neo-liberal orthodoxy, but (with Bond) argues that the ANC's key failing is that it 'is placing its faith in the international capitalist class rather than in the social movements of the common people'.¹⁰² While both regard building social movements as a key task, it is not clear what is to be done until social movements regain the power they enjoyed in the struggle era. Moreover, the likelihood of the ANC's left-wing members winning significant concessions is slender, as Friedman and Chipkin have made clear:

*The multiclass nature of the alliance, and the strong pressures from its business and professional elements for racial preference, do ... limit the options of the ANC left.*¹⁰³

Government put 'poverty experts' to shame by producing an articulate, hard-hitting analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of post-1994 poverty eradication in the (awkwardly named) Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (ISRDS). The ISRDS naturally operated within government's neo-liberal framework and avoided deeper 'political' issues, but offered a critique of government's attempt to make local government the driving force in bottom-up (demand-driven) development. According to the ISRDS, development was 'beset by problems of co-ordination and communication', with the result that assets 'rained apparently randomly from above, with little internal coherence or responsiveness to community priorities'.¹⁰⁴

The ISRDS is a mechanism for aligning all three spheres of government behind local development priorities. But it has telling weaknesses:

*The ISRDS has not one but many goals, and it is unclear whether government sees the ISRDS spearheading a rural economic growth strategy or forming part of its existing rural anti-poverty strategy (heavily reliant on infrastructure provision).*¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ T. Mbeki, response to debate on State of the Nation address, 18 February 2003, (see <http://www.gcis.gov.za>).

¹⁰⁰ H. Marais, 'The logic of expediency: Post-apartheid shifts in macroeconomic policy', in Jacobs and Calland, pp.83–104.

¹⁰¹ Bond, p.121.

¹⁰² Alexander, p.152.

¹⁰³ Friedman and Chipkin, p.19.

¹⁰⁴ *The Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Strategy*, (Pretoria, Independent Development Trust, 2001).

¹⁰⁵ D. Everatt, *The nature and purpose of the ISRDP*, (Pretoria, Independent Development Trust, 2002), p.2.

The ISRDS failed to articulate an unambiguous rural economic growth strategy; rather, it mixed economic and social goals, blurring both in the process. This seemed to result from a prevalent attitude in the public and private sectors – that rural areas are inherently and uniformly unviable in economic terms. Seen in this perspective, rural areas need basic infrastructure, and their denizens need welfare support and basic survivalist skills – development as charity, with the purpose of eradicating infrastructural inequalities and assisting survivalist economic enterprises. No more ambitious economic goal is regarded as feasible.

It has become a truism that the South African government lacks ‘an overarching anti-poverty strategy’.¹⁰⁶ The ISRDS fails to fill this glaring gap, with its emphasis on process and prevarication over economic direction. Additional problems highlighted by commentators from across the political spectrum include capacity gaps and the failure of communication and co-ordination.

But the fundamental problem facing the ISRDS – and thus all the development and anti-poverty programmes that government is tasked with co-ordinating – is that it cannot and will not transform rural poverty by itself. It must form part of, and be sustained by, a broader, long-term redistributive government policy and strategy. But redistribution has been conspicuous by its absence, first from the RDP and then from GEAR. Zimbabwe offers a powerful illustration of the importance of delivering substantive post-colonial redistribution.

Conclusion

Eradicating poverty and inequality in South Africa requires long-term and vigorously pursued redistributive strategies and policy frameworks. Development or anti-poverty programmes by themselves cannot undo the damage of the past; transformation requires that such programmes are embedded in a programme of redistribution. It is of little value training small black farmers in modern agricultural methods if they cannot access land, for example. Redistribution – symbolised by the commitment to nationalisation – lay at the heart of the Freedom Charter, which guided the ANC from 1955 to the late 1980s when it moved away from any form of central control in favour of increasingly unfettered free market capitalism. But ‘the market’ has thus far failed to achieve significant redistribution, while poverty has worsened. The urgency of dramatically enhancing poverty eradication efforts is starkly underlined by HIV/AIDS and the impact it will have on South Africa:

*The [HIV/AIDS] epidemic is deepening poverty, reversing human development achievements, worsening gender inequalities, eroding the ability of governments to maintain essential services, reducing labour productivity and supply, and putting a brake on economic growth.*¹⁰⁷

As the United Nations Development Programme noted, ‘AIDS is a development crisis’ for which the most effective response ‘is sustained, equitable development’.¹⁰⁸

Poverty eradication was a national priority, and must become one again. For it to be sustainable, government will have to elaborate a broader redistributive framework within which its development activities are located. This would also create space for winning back the support of civil society. South Africa cannot afford any other option.

¹⁰⁶ Aliber, p.52.

¹⁰⁷ R. Loewenson and A. Whiteside, *HIV/AIDS implications for poverty reduction*, (Geneva, United Nations Development Programme, 2001), policy paper, p.1.

¹⁰⁸ Loewenson and Whiteside, p.23. (emphasis added)

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