

PREFACE

to the South Africa edition of
FROM POVERTY TO POWER

This is a fascinating and important book. The author, drawing on the wealth of detailed grassroots experience which Oxfam has accumulated all over the world, has written a volume which could well serve as a bible for all those wanting to think intelligently and creatively about poverty in our time.

The central message is that the problem is one that can be solved, but the solution requires, everywhere, a combination of active citizens and effective states. Causation in science, as George Ellis pointed out in a remarkable lecture to the centenary conference of the South African Royal Society, happens from the bottom up as well as from the top down. So, too, in the world of economics and politics change is effected both from the grass roots and from above. Oxfam's assessment, backed by considerable chapter and verse, is that in order to tackle poverty effectively there has to be a critical combination of a well-organised state with an energetic and demanding civil society.

Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the book is divided into four main themes: power and politics; poverty and wealth; risk and vulnerability; and the international system. Each of these is subdivided into a number of theoretical discussions backed, from time to time, with well-chosen examples of how meaningful change has actually been caused in different parts of the world. These changes range from the shift in the legal position of women in Morocco, through the remarkable growth and social investment stories of Botswana and Mauritius over the past fifty years, to the successful culmination of the global campaign to abolish land-mines, which have wrought such havoc in Angola and elsewhere. Other stories include the achievement of a National Rural Employment Guarantee

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Scheme in India and, from South Africa, the power of civil society (through the Treatment Action Campaign) in pushing government from below to face up to its responsibilities in the light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

What then are the lessons which South Africans may draw from this book fourteen years after our first democratic government placed the eradication of poverty as its most urgent priority? There is not space in this brief introduction for a long analysis of the successes (and they have been significant) and the failures (some very serious) of our policies over the first decade and a half. But there are two key points on which the analysis and evidence of this book should cause us to ponder deeply.

The first concerns the fundamental importance of what the Oxfam author labels an 'effective state'. Botswana and Mauritius are singled out for the competence and effectiveness with which they have been governed since their independence. And the results are there for all to see. What about South Africa? Much that is important has been very good. Everybody agrees that the Revenue Service is world class. Managing a modern macro-economy has been likened to flying a jumbo jet airliner: whilst one can debate about whether a particular flight should be at 33 000 or 40 000 feet above sea level, there is no argument about the need to ensure that the pilots are professionals who know what they are doing. While some areas of government have demonstrated this competence, not all spheres have.

In some areas, national policy has been bizarre, to say the least; in others, good policy has not been effectively translated into action down on the ground. Governance at local level – municipal or even individual hospitals or schools – is often shockingly incompetent, if not seriously corrupt in the sense of people drawing salaries without doing a full day's work in return. Indeed, one could argue that the most serious problem now facing the country is not HIV, TB or even unemployment, but the failure of such a huge proportion of our state-run schools to teach children the basic literacy and numeracy they will need to function adequately in any economy in this 21st century.

The second key point concerns the crucial role of civil society. Nowhere in the world are governments able to do everything all by themselves. This was a particularly painful lesson which the

communist countries of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and elsewhere had to learn with regard to production in the twentieth century, but it is a lesson which is as valid for civil society as it is for the economy. What is emerging everywhere, as this book attests, is that the only thing which works is a *combination* of an effective state with a well-organised and active civil society. Getting that balance right, of course, is not easy, but it is precisely the tension inherent in the two spheres finding ways of working together that achieves real results. The state needs the energy, the spontaneity, the untidiness, the grassroots knowledge, the demand for accountability of an active civil society. But these citizens, organised into their different societies, committees, pressure groups, action campaigns, NGOs and the rest, badly need the state to do what they cannot possibly manage by themselves. Health care for all; schools and teachers for every child in the country; adequate policing and an effective criminal justice system, all require the resources and the authority of the state.

Historians looking back at this period of South African history may well be struck by the contrast between the respective roles of state and civil society in the fourteen years on either side of the country's first democratic elections. Between 1980 and 1994, despite – possibly precisely because of – the oppressive actions of the state, civil society was electrically alive with grassroots activity of every kind. Much of this history was obscured in the euphoria of apartheid's collapse and the return of the exiles, but it was very real and remains to be written up. But in the years since 1994 the balance tipped the other way and the state became supreme. Much of the energy of civil society dissipated partly because its leaders were drawn into government, and partly (if we are honest) because government was less than enthusiastic, sometimes actively hostile, about others invading their 'turf'. And there was also a sense that one could now leave things to government for 'they would sort it out'.

We are all wiser now and there is growing recognition of the need for government not only to provide space for, but also to harness the energy of, civil society in tackling the social problems of education, health, security and the other areas of our common life. At the same time it is high time that citizens across the board become much more active, as critical participants, in building a better society.

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Of course, much is already happening. The work of the Treatment Action Campaign – highlighted in this volume as a shining example to the world of what is possible – in engaging the South African government to rethink its policy on HIV/AIDS has resulted in a remarkable outcome. In the Western Cape creative tension between state and civil society (manifest in a number of extraordinary organisations including the TAC, Médecins Sans Frontières, ARK, Mother to Mother, Philani, loveLife and others) has generated a process which has created virtually complete coverage in terms of ARV roll-out for all those who need it. Whilst this is not true for the whole country, it nevertheless provides a model for what is possible. The process has also helped to open up the space for others, such as the Autonomous Treatment Centre of the Ndlovu Trust in Limpopo, to do similar work in other parts of the country.

If it is possible to begin to find ways of getting on top of a plague which, until very recently, was seen as being likely to wipe out one-third or more of the country's population, can one not start to think of ways of getting to grips with other chronic problems in our national life? Is the time not ripe for parents of today's and tomorrow's school children to develop some sort of 'Education Action Campaign' to hold the relevant structures accountable and to demand that the children of this generation not be betrayed as they seek the education they need to be full participants in tomorrow's economy?

One of the most hopeful organisations at work in South Africa today is the Impumelelo Innovations Award Trust, whose job is to scour the country each year looking for projects or organisations – whether initiated and led by government or by civil society but hopefully drawing both sides to work together. Each year some 150 organisations apply, approximately half make it to the second round, and these are assessed in detail by a professional who visits them wherever they may be located. Subsequently most of these come to present their work to a panel of judges who, meeting over three days, choose the thirty or so deemed most worthy not only of being awarded a prize but also of becoming more widely known. For all those involved, it is a most exhilarating process, for as organisation after organisation comes before the panel one sees, again and again, what resourceful energy exists in the country – and the ways that people are finding to

make a difference to the lives of those who are poor. The issue, then, is no longer so much one of innovation as of multiplication, or of scaling up. How does one replicate that secondary school in a remote rural part of the country where the headmaster is achieving first-rate maths results, year after year? How does one clone good teachers?

Read this book and ponder. Active citizens and effective states. It can be done.

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