

Fighting Environmental and Social Injustice

Bluebuck Summit

Eden Grove Blue, Rhodes University

15 July 2011

Introduction

Molweni, good evening, dumelang

Welcome to Rhodes University and thank you for the privilege of addressing this first Bluebuck Summit.

This summit is a gathering of people who are acutely aware that our natural environment is in myriad ways hugely important to our quality of life and the quality of life that future generations can expect to have.

Understandably, and admirably, you are deeply concerned about the nature of the interaction between humans and nature and about the multiple negative impacts of humans on our natural environment.

Hopefully, your concerns also extend to, and I will say, must extend to, not only our abuse and damage of our natural world but also that of our fellow humans. Indeed, the violence that we do to nature is not unconnected to the violence we do to fellow humans; frequently the rationales are the same and the key actors are the same.

It is in this context that we can speak about the four-fold development challenge that confronts South Africa and underdeveloped, or so-called 'developing,' countries: that is, how do we pursue **economic development**, with **social equity**, and do so in a way that is **environmentally sustainable** and also recognises the need to extend, deepen and consolidate **democracy** in our

societies? And crucially, how do we do all of this simultaneously and not consecutively or sequentially?

For many good social reasons it is not an option to postpone one or other elements of this four-fold development challenge or to tackle them in sequence. They have to be confronted, by and large, simultaneously.

Further, we need a thick conception of development that is simultaneously human, economic, social, cultural and environmental and not just reduced to economic growth.

This is a formidable challenge, and requires great imagination, creativity and boldness with respect to how we define our social and economic goals, how we develop and implement policies and how we monitor the impact of our policies and practices.

There is, however, no other way – not if we wish to be stable equitable and just societies and leave a world that future generations can inhabit without the threats of great calamities that we seem to be so selfishly and recklessly keen to bring upon ourselves and bestow upon our children, grandchildren and their children.

As the Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen puts it, we need to view ‘development as human freedom’, as ‘a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy’, instead of reducing human development to ‘growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance’.ⁱ

We have to find a way that creatively balances the social (human livelihood), the economic (agricultural and industrial production), the political (what kind of society and regulated how) and the ecological (biodiversity conservation and more generally the conservation of the natural environment).

Injustice

There are many kinds of injustice – political, social, economic, cultural, environmental - and injustice takes many different forms.

First, there is the readily recognisable injustice that is rooted in beliefs, prejudice, stereotypes, chauvinism, intolerance and fear of the 'other' – whether the 'other' are people of different 'races', social classes, sex, gender, sexual orientation, cultures, religions, languages, nationalities or live in different geographical areas.

As South Africans we ought to be all too familiar with racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and similar kinds of injustice. These and other pernicious ideologies and practices create patterns of unjust social inclusion and exclusion, privilege and disadvantage, and domination and subordination in our society and have caused and continue to cause tremendous pain and suffering for individuals and particular social groups.

Second, and fundamentally important, there is the often ignored and largely unrecognised injustice that is deeply woven into the social and economic structures and relations of our society.

These social and economic structures and relations have the appearance of being natural, pre-ordained and god-given. Over time we come to forget that these structures are produced and reproduced by our own thinking and through our own actions.

These structures and relations underpin the coexistence of unbridled accumulation of wealth and desperate and grinding poverty, great privileges for a small minority of rich and huge deprivation for a large majority of poor, unbound economic and social opportunities for some and the denial of such opportunities for many others.

Before his tragic murder deprived the world of an outstanding humanitarian and fighter for justice, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador observed that 'when the church hears the cry of the oppressed it cannot but denounce the social structures that give rise to and perpetuate the misery from which the cry arises'.

The late Archbishop Dom Helder Camara who worked among the poor of Brazil was another who questioned the structures, systems and policies that produced great inequalities in Brazil. He once observed that 'When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask WHY they are poor, they call me a communist'.

Jody Kollapen, the Chairperson of our Human Rights Commission, eloquently observes that:

...the reality remains that for millions of people the promise of human rights and the vision of a just and caring world remains an illusion. Intolerance, war and impunity; starvation and greed; power and powerlessness all combine in a conspiracy of the powerful against the weak that invariably deepens the faultlines that exist in the world and within nations.

(T)hese millions... see a world where disparities in wealth, resources and opportunities have grown, where human rights norms and values seem invariably to yield to the dictates of the rich and powerful; which expresses shock and outrage at arbitrary killing but at the same time is complicit in the killing of many more thorough hunger and disease – which could have been avoided (Kollapen, 2003:26).

Romero, Camara and Kollapen all draw attention to the injustice that is a consequence of how our societies are economically and socially structured and conduct their affairs; that it is not accidental that are wealthy and poor, well-fed and starving, privileged and disadvantaged, and powerful and powerless.

Take our own country, South Africa. During the past seventeen years of democracy there have been some important economic and social gains and improvements. Yet the reality is that South Africa continues to be the most unequal and unjust society on earth in terms of disparities in wealth, income, living conditions, and access and opportunities to education, social services and health care.

The Gini coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality, increased from 0.665 in 1994 to 0.685 in 2006 (Presidency, 2007:22). This means that the social grants that are provided to 12 million people and new jobs that have been created have been insufficient 'to overcome widening income inequality' (ibid.).

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994 from 2.0% to 1.7%; conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994 from 72.0% to 72.5%. At the same time, the per capita income of the richest 20% has risen much faster than that of the poorest 20% (Presidency, 2007:21). 43% of our fellow citizens continue to live on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year (Presidency, 2007:23).

The cleavages of 'race', class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, flaunted wealth, crass materialism, unbridled individualism, and a vulgar mentality of "greed is cool" runs rampant in our society.

We can highlight a third form of injustice. This is rooted in the abuse and irresponsible exercise of power, or the ethical failure on the part of those who wield economic and political power to appreciate fully their responsibility to ensure that 'everyone has...the right to have their dignity respected and protected.'

Do those who are entrusted with governing, leading, managing and providing public education, health care and social services fully grasp their profound moral, political, social and organisational responsibilities?

Is there an appreciation of what is at stake and what the implications of particular choices, decisions and actions (and non-actions) are for our society and future generations?

Any number of examples can be provided to illustrate the injustices that can arise when those in power fail to act or act irresponsibly. Two will suffice

One was the initial response of the state to the HIV/AIDS pandemic that afflicts our society. The fruitless debate on the cause of HIV/AIDS resulted in a stultifying absence of leadership in dealing with the crisis while the initially myopic and tardy responses created unnecessary delays in the provision of treatment and tragic loss of lives.

Another example is the devastation injustice that we, but especially those who make political and economic decisions and control huge resources, cause to our environment and our natural world through our unrelenting pursuit of what we call 'progress' and 'development'.

Indian Americans have a saying that we inherit the earth in safe-keeping for future generations. We may wish to reflect on what indeed are we leaving for future generations given our reckless degradation of our environment and the climate change that we are causing globally in the names of 'progress' and 'development'.

As intellectuals and scholars, as students, graduates and citizens, and as universities and governments we need to re-think and re-make our world and our societies on the basis of other principles and logics.

This new logic must first and foremost put human development, people's needs, social justice and human rights at the centre of all our actions.

It must more greatly appreciate, respect, and affirm difference and diversity related to race, gender, language and culture as well-springs of social vitality and strength.

It must also embrace the idea that our natural environment cannot continue to be abused in the way it has been and that we simply must reconceive 'progress' and 'development' in ways that do not destroy our natural environment and ultimately the possibly of human society.

The new logic requires people to recognise the harm of injustice and to stand up against and fight injustice in all its forms: to have the commitment to critique injustice, on the basis of the recognition of the oneness of humanity, irrespective of whatever differences may exist between fellow humans; to have the willingness to boldly confront and progressively erode and eliminate the different kinds and forms of injustices that pervade and blight our society and cause suffering for millions of our fellow people.

To stand up against and fight injustice is to possess an intellectual, ethical and social vision of a society based on the values of human dignity, equality,

social equity, non-sexism and non-racialism, human rights, and economic and social rights and freedoms for all people.

None of us can be genuinely free unless all people possess not just political rights, but also the social, economic and human rights that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives; unless the marginalised and disadvantaged 'can assume their place in society as equals with their fellow human beings without regard to colour, race, gender, age or geographic dispersal' (Mbeki, 1996).

We must refuse 'to accept the logic of inequality and the repression that it involves', and continue to 'search for human agency, for the means through which inequality can be undone' and an equitable, just, and humane society can be built (Hammami, 2006:32).

The unfortunate and harsh reality is that people and the environment continue to be violated on a daily basis. The rights of people and the care of the natural environment that sustains us, social and environmental justice, is *indivisible*.

The measure of our humanity as a society ultimately is how we think about, and the extent to which we respect, affirm, defend, promote and assert the rights of people and the value of our natural environment.

In Closing

In the *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Arundathi Roy writes ‘the only dream worth having ...is to dream that you will live while you’re alive and only die when you’re dead’. This means

..to love. To be loved. To never forget our own insignificance To never get used to the unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.

Leaders ‘never forget’ or ‘look away’ or ‘get used to’ our social structures and relations, which underpin the coexistence of unbridled accumulation of wealth and desperate and grinding poverty, great privileges for a small minority of rich and huge deprivation for a large majority of poor and, alongside environmental devastation to feed wealth and privilege.

ⁱ Sen, A. (1999:3).