Human insecurity:
The problem of poverty, unemployment and social exclusion

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Introduction

Much of the conflict troubling South Africa and the African continent today – whether it is poor-on-poor violence in a community (such as the xenophobic attacks that occurred in South African informal settlements in 2008 and what Mahmood Mamdani calls non-revolutionary violence), marches against high food and energy prices, or resistance to forced removals in squatter settlements – is a result of poverty, unemployment and social exclusion. This article looks at what can be done to eradicate poverty in such a way that people can lead better lives and ensure a better future for their children.

The low purchasing power of agricultural and pastoral producers with little or no productive capital prevents them from meeting their basic human needs with respect
to nutrition, literacy, health and security. Without sufficient income and political structures which are responsive to their needs, people cannot meet their minimum nutritional requirements, pay school fees for their children and ensure for themselves and their families access to a healthy environment that includes the housing, health care, food, water and social security that are guaranteed by the Constitution. Failure to fulfil these basic needs reinforces poverty, leads to greater social deprivation and may aggravate conflict.

Lack of transformation in agriculture and other economic activities in rural areas through education, training and agricultural extension and credit programmes have led to a relative lack of improvement in production tools, methods and techniques, low productivity, and the continuation and expansion of poverty.

It is in pursuit of their right to earn a living wage that rural people migrate to urban areas, where they hope to enjoy a better standard of living. Unfortunately, South African urban areas are characterised by expanding populations but without concomitant expanding economies. The result is a growing unemployment rate, an increase of the informal economic sector and an inability by large segments of the population to pay service fees and municipal rates for the social services they require and use. This also results in communities clashing with authorities over service delivery.

On the other hand, it is in urban areas that poor people are more likely to have access to social services like education, health, water, sanitation and public transportation. This explains the increase in squatter settlements, a major cause of conflict stemming from the housing question.

**The housing question**

There are two interconnected aspects to the housing question, namely the housing shortage and the struggle for space. The housing shortage and the related issues of unsanitary living conditions and squalor are structural problems, and ones that cannot be dealt with in a technocratic manner as simply a case of improvements to the habitat. These issues cannot be solved without major changes to the economic structure, an argument made by Frederick Engels in his 1872 book *The housing question*. The struggle for space, particularly urban space, is an outcome of the failure or reluctance of the government to promote the interests of the poor against those of the richer classes.

The housing shortage is a structural problem because property capital, like commercial capital, simply entails buying commodities (land, dwellings, office buildings and floor space) in order to sell or rent them to others at a higher price. However, investors are more interested in expensive buildings and locations, which bring in more profits.
South Africa decent housing is priced out of the reach of low-income groups (and some sections of the middle classes), most of whom find shelter in overcrowded townships or build their own shelters in squatter settlements.

As a struggle for an economically viable space, the struggle over urban space is connected to the following:

- The urban question, or the organisation of those economic, social and cultural activities on which the daily lives of urban residents depend

- The ecological question, or the relationship between land use, economic activities and the quality of life

These two questions influence people’s interaction with bureaucrats over plot allocation, and their political protest against the state through squatting as an affirmation of their right to urban space. Squatter settlements (Joe Slovo in Langa, Ramaphosa, and the like) allow poor people to avoid high rents and the constant threat of evictions for non-payment of rent; to live closer to their place of work or trade and thus avoid the need for costly transportation (this was one of the reasons advanced by residents of Joe Slovo for their refusal to be relocated to Delft, further away from Cape Town); and to have easier access to essential services such as clean water, health centres and schools. Squatters regard these as major social gains, which are worth protecting against anyone, including state authorities. Hence there are organisations like Abahlali baseMjondolo (the South African shack-dwellers movement), the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and the Landless People Movement who fight for and defend these social gains. These groups are willing to use violence to defend their settlements if these are threatened with destruction.

Because the poor see squatting as a form of resistance, they will continue to regard it as a partial solution to their problems. This will only change if squatters are gainfully employed and have sufficient incomes to enable them to take advantage of low-cost housing and sites and services programmes. Because they have a right to earn a decent living and have easier access to social services, they need to be empowered economically, politically and culturally to overcome poverty and social exclusion.

Although poverty eradication has purportedly been a major priority for the present government, it has not been realised on a large scale. The government has followed the ‘shopping list’ approach of international organisations by looking at issues like healthcare simply as a technical package of services which deals with ill health stemming from poverty without seeking to eliminate its causes. This approach looks at the effects of poverty rather than its roots, which have to do with economic, political and cultural problems. That is why the poor must organise themselves to eradicate the causes of ill
health, inadequate housing and the like, and to create the conditions to prevent them from recurring. Without this, it is submitted that targets such as that of Department of Housing to ‘eradicate squatter settlements by 2010’ are empty slogans, however laudable the intention behind them might be.

The question that needs to be answered is whether the South African state, as structured at present, can create an environment that would allow the poor to organise themselves and find a solution to their problems.

For this to happen, in the housing or any other sector, the state must be restructured from being a network of relations built around a dominant individual to a set of impartial institutions serving the general interest. The institutional structures of good governance must also include devolution of power to provincial and local authorities (as provided for in the Constitution) and a greater role for civil society organisations and other mechanisms of popular participation in public policy-making.

Poverty eradication is not going to take place through ideologically loaded slogans like ‘war on poverty’ and target dates adopted by government or elites at conferences. It will come about only through concrete policies and programmes designed to transform those economic, political and social structures perpetuating poverty in South Africa, at the local, national and international levels. A major aspect of this transformation concerns changing the definition of what is needed and realising that this should not be regarded as handouts from the government but as part of the basic rights and means to which people are entitled for increasing their ability to improve their lives. In this regard, since housing, health care, food, water and social security and other basic amenities of life are both conditions of development and basic human rights, the kernel of the question is not what the state can provide for the people (within its available resources), but what kind of control the latter can have on their access to these services. Who should control housing, healthcare, water supply, waste disposal, and so forth – the state, private corporations or the people?

Answers to these questions depend on South African politics as it is played out in front of our eyes. Nicolas Machiavelli’s understanding of the essence of politics is most relevant to our understanding of South African politics. *The Prince*, this Italian political philosopher and diplomat’s most famous book, can be regarded as a practical manual/guide on how to rule. In this book the ruler receives concrete and practical advice on how to remain in power and survive, based on such ingredients as ruthlessness, deception, cruelty and manipulation. Those in power must be seen to be generous (offering company shares to workers’ unions, donating money to charitable organisations) whilst maintaining their power. They must appear to be compassionate (visit people whose shacks have been destroyed by fire, show compassion to victims of xenophobia and crime) while ruling with an iron fist (criminalising unemployed youths and students,
arresting progressive community, religious and workers’ leaders, using terror campaigns and performing mass murders in the name of anti-imperialism and neo-colonialism, as happened in Zimbabwe). It would seem that politicians say one thing, mean another and do yet something else. However, there are principled people in politics, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral, Patrice Lumumba, Steve Biko, Robert Sobukwe and Nelson Mandela, who led the way in a more liberating political leadership, based on the struggle of the people and their needs.

**Populist versus popular leaders**

What is the difference between a popular leader and populist politician? They are a world apart. The defining features of a populist is that he or she:

- Focuses on power

- Is a demagogue, saying and using slogans that people want to hear (for example on the creation of jobs or building of houses), and using primitive prejudices of race, tribalism, religion, gender or age

- Exploits prejudices to his or her advantage

- Leads from behind

- Is an opportunist

- Wants to be and remain ‘popular’ even if that means employing deception and conspiracies

A popular leader, in contrast, is one:

- To whom the cause and principles are important

- Who tells the truth, even if this makes him or her unpopular

- Leads the masses

- Who does not crave power or popularity

Populists leader want to remain popular. They use deception and false promises (promises of a better life for all, war on poverty, jobs for all) to gain popularity and when they cannot deliver and their popularity wanes, they become dictators. Herein lies the
danger of a popular leader becoming a populist one – if a popular leader has an obsessive belief in the morality of his cause, his popularity could degenerate into populism.

In this regard intellectuals play a critical role. Intellectuals are supposed to hold up to the society its wrongs and assist it in understanding where it is coming from and where it is going. Hence South African intellectuals should critically assess the experience of the liberation struggles (especially in the Southern African region as these often reflect what is happening within our borders) to discover the basis of its degeneration into fascism – as has happened to Zanu-PF (the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front) in Zimbabwe. This requires a close examination of the issue of organisation (of particularly liberation and political parties like the African National Congress, Pan-Africanist Congress and Azanian People’s Organisation) as well as its leadership (for example Mugabe, Mbeki, Zuma). Intellectuals should be able to go beyond a formal understanding of an organisation, beyond its constitution, rules and its own description. A prison is not necessarily an institution where criminals are punished for their crimes and receive rehabilitation and education on the morals of society (its definition), as some offenders leave prison as graduates in the art of crime! Hence we have the phenomenon of recidivism. When analysing political parties, it is therefore imperative that a distinction be made between popular participation and control, and between membership and leadership.

Some parties, such as the African National Congress, have a popular base, but its direction comes from a particular class. An analyst must be able to identify the particular interests (or constellation of these) that are manifest (be it the populist forces aligned to Jacob Zuma or the neo-liberal forces around Mbeki) in the functioning of an organisation. On the question of leadership, some leaders seem to be surrounded by an aura of majesty or glory and are regarded with reverence. People seem then to forget that they are supposed to represent the people and be the servants of the people. Such leaders are at times regarded as the ‘elder’ or ‘utata’7 (representing the original first president who has attained the status of the founding father and became a god-like figure), the ‘sage’ (representing the teacher president, a fount of knowledge to whom people have to listen), and the ‘warrior’ (who continues the legacy of the anti-colonial struggle).8

The question is: Why is this exaggerated importance of an individual in politics allowed? The solution is that individual importance should be demystified by means of an objective political analysis by which the personality and charisma of the individual are situated within the political process. To paraphrase Karl Marx: ‘Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one can not judge a period of transformation by its consciousness, but on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life.’9 However, this is easier said than done.
Notes

1 The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not reflect the position of the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development.

2 ... violence in which different groups of more or less equally impoverished and disempowered people are pitted against each other. Fanon called such people the wretched of the earth. When the wretched of the earth divide into contending groups that take it out on one another, that violence is non-revolutionary', in M Mamdani, Making sense of non-revolutionary violence: some lessons from Rwandan genocide, Westville: University of Durban Westville, 2001, 1. See also F Fanon, The wretched of the earth, New York: Grove Press, 1963.

3 'Of the more than 6 billion people living in the world today, the United Nations estimates that close to 1 billion suffer from chronic hunger. But this number, which is only a crude estimate, leaves out those suffering from vitamin and nutrient deficiencies and other forms of malnutrition. The total number of food insecure people who are malnourished or lacking critical nutrients is probably closer to 3 billion – about half of humanity. The severity of this situation is made clear by the United Nations estimate of over a year ago that approximately 18 000 children die daily as a direct or indirect consequence of malnutrition, in F Magdoff, The world food crisis: sources and solutions, Monthly Review, New York: Monthly Review Press, May 2008, http://www.monthlyreview.org/080501magdoff.php#Volume (accessed 18 August 2008).


5 During the 1870s Engels contributed to the polemics unfolding in Germany’s press on the shortage of housing available to workers because of their influx into industrial centres. The crux of Engels's argument for solving this problem was that the revolutionary point of view of the industrial proletariat cannot be replaced by reformism. He argued that the abolition of capitalism, eradication of the antithesis between town and country and solving of the agrarian problem were the only possible ways of solving the housing question.

6 There have been many legal challenges with regard to evictions and the realisation of the right to housing. The Constitutional Court has on many occasions made pronouncements on the legal enforceability of socioeconomic rights. In the Government of the Republic of South Africa & Others v Grootoom & Others 2000 (11) BCLR 1169 (CC) the court was emphatic on the position held in the First Certification case that socioeconomic rights cannot exist nominally. The link between socioeconomic rights and political/civil rights was noted in the Grootoom case and the fact that ‘affording economic and social rights to all people enables them to enjoy the other rights in Chapter 2’ (the Bill of Rights). It is also important to note that South Africa is a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Therefore the South African state has a constitutional and an international duty to observe and protect socioeconomic rights. In the Grootoom judgment the respondents (510 children and 390 adults) were rendered homeless as a result of being evicted from their informal homes around the Cape metropolitan area. They applied to the High Court for an order requiring government to provide them with adequate basic shelter or housing until they obtained permanent accommodation and were granted relief. They based their action on section 26 of the Constitution (housing), which places a duty on the state to take reasonable legislative and other measures within available and limited resources to ensure progressive realisation of these rights. In section 26(3) the Constitution further provides that ‘No one may be evicted from their home, or have their home demolished, without an order of court made after considering all the relevant circumstance. No legislation may permit arbitrary evictions.’

7 A Xhosa word for father.
