

WSF and Africa

The recent meeting of the World Social Forum in Nairobi affirmed the world historical significance and distinctive institutional character of this transnational social movement. Its heterogeneous social and ideological composition--united through a common commitment to fight against the deleterious effects of global capitalism, and expressed through a multiplicity of discourses from feminist, radical religious, neo-anarchist, ecological to "open Marxist" --was voiced across the numerous panels, self-managed workshops and alternative cultural events.

Most striking about this gathering, sitting for the first time on the African continent, was its affirmation as the collective conscience of the world. For Africa, this has emboldened thousands of activists attempting to claim the 21st Century as Africa's. More importantly, it has strengthened a caterpillar like process - clumsy, haphazard, contradictory and open-ended - that is shaping and forming the next generation of progressive activists and intellectuals required to lead transformation on the continent. The significance of this cannot be underestimated given the pathologies that have afflicted Africa's ruling elites, reflected in rampant corruption, authoritarianism, megalomania and a penchant for betraying the national interest in global processes.

Hence, the World Social Forum process in Africa, unlike other places in the world, is an essential politicising vehicle to renew a post-colonial radicalism in theory and practice. This was starkly displayed when African progressives convened a session to launch the outcomes of a 3-year research project for Alternatives to Neoliberalism in Southern Africa (ANSA), which has its roots in the 1990s challenge by Zimbabwe's trade union movement to the consequences of structural adjustment policies. The ANSA project, championed by the Southern African Trade Union Coordinating Council (SATUCC), and intellectually fathered by the late Professor Guy Mahone, is a historical turning point for progressive struggles in the region and potentially for the continent and should be supported and built on by progressives.

The outcomes of this research project are contained in a 500 page book entitled *The Search for Sustainable Human Development in Southern Africa*. Many of the chapters provide alternative policy approaches to different aspects of economic and social policy. The emphasis is on getting champions of policy to think beyond a market based paradigm and to think differently about macroeconomics, labour markets, agriculture and rural development, mining, manufacturing, regional integration, public services, health, education and technology development. These perspectives take as a point of departure an empirical investigation of the failed impacts of neoliberal policy approaches. More importantly, these alternative policy perspectives are underpinned by a gender perspective that places women at the center of the development process and a recognition that development on the continent has to be informed by cultural realities and practices of local societies. In other words, Africanised development is embraced, but not a globalised and homogenizing Americanism with its self constructed racial and cultural superiority.

However, the ANSA approach is not about providing a basket of policy approaches. It is

about demonstrating intellectually rigorous and heterodox approaches to development challenges in the sub-region. Beyond the policy ideas, and at the core of the ANSA approach, is a set of ten principles which ANSA believes should be the basis for approaching any area of development policy and strategy for the sub-region. The ten principles are grounded in decades of development debate, learning on the continent and searching for indigenized development philosophies. These principles are: (1) development led by the people; (2) autocentric development based on domestic human needs and local resources; (3) regional integration led from the grassroots; (4) selective delinking and negotiated relinking; (5) alternative science and technology; (6) national, regional and global progressive alliances; (7) redistribution to empower the non-formal sectors; (8) gender rights as the basis of development; (9) education for sustainable human development; and (10) a dynamic, participatory and radical democracy.

Recognition of the importance of the ANSA project shatters an almost 17 year deafening continental silence about alternative development paths for the continent. The attempt to provide radical African solutions to Africa's problems was defeated by 1990. The various left wing projects - African socialism (Ghana and Tanzania) and scientific socialism (Angola and Mozambique) all failed on the continent for complex internal reasons, but most importantly because of pernicious external factors tied into the Cold War. Also attempts for progressive structural reform through the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in the 1980s, was marginalised and eclipsed by World Bank and IMF imposed neoliberal orthodoxy as part of overcoming Africa's debt crisis. Since then neoliberalisation of Africa has intensified and most progressives embraced defeat and others have degenerated like in Zimbabwe. The ANSA project confronts squarely this crisis of progressive political agency.

In addition, support for the ANSA project has to be deepened because it is not presented as a blue-print or prescriptive remedy for Southern Africa's ills. It does not advocate for a capitalism with a human face and neither does it go to the other extreme of calling for a state-centric socialism, as alternatives to neoliberalism. Instead, it provides a non-dogmatic framework that can be built on by progressive nationalist, capitalist and socialist possibilities that would emerge in the context of people-led structural reform.

As a corollary, the ANSA project in placing the needs of Southern Africa's people at the center of development and policymaking, calls for a reinvented political practice. This practice has to be distinguished from old style AK-47 revolutionary zeal and the new trans-national brand of modernising elite practice displayed by the current crop of Africa's leadership. Instead, the ANSA project calls for a transformative practice that works with the moral, procedural and substantive aspects of democracy. In other words, the form and content of mass-based democracy envisaged in the conceptual approach of ANSA is about ensuring political leadership is accountable and embedded in national development and not globalised to serve the interests of unelected transnational corporations.

Finally, the ANSA project should be engaged with by South Africans, across the political spectrum, because it reminds us through its analysis of how South Africa's economic

development has historically and currently skewed the development of neighbouring countries in its favour. The African Renaissance debate in South Africa has not confronted this and worse its neoliberal version advocates for a regional integration model that would deepen dependency links with South Africa and reproduce underdevelopment within neighbouring countries.

Progressive struggles on the African continent will not be the same again with initiatives like ANSA, which seek to build momentum for progressive change from below and within existing struggles through articulating transformative alternatives. Given the high stakes facing Africa and the failure of almost three decades of neoliberalisation, lets hope Africa's trans-national elites in the African Union, SADC, the African Development Bank and other continental institutions are open to dialogue with such alternatives emerging organically from the continent and fully supported through the World Social Forum process.

Author: Vishwas Satgar is the Executive Director of the Cooperative and Policy Alternative Center (COPAC) and was a respondent at the launch of the ANSA project book at the World Social Forum. For more information on ANSA contact their website at: www.ansa-africa.org