

Social Integration – Public Participation , Equality and Non Discrimination

The commitment in both the Charter of the United Nations and the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ‘ to promote social progress and better standards of life for all in larger freedom ‘ , continues to remain an enduring vision of a just and caring world. The fact that some 60 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights we still live in a world characterised by such stark contrasts – in relation to among other things opportunities , development , resources , capital , income and participation does not render the vision contained in the Charter any less relevant . Rather it must suggest that if we are to have any meaningful chance of eradicating the kind of conflict that emerges within States and between States and that has a devastating effect on human development , our ability to realise common standards , to convert the promise of democracy into tangible outcomes , to move beyond the rhetoric and form of the not inconsiderable human rights charters and convert them into substance – then the fault lines that run deep in our societies occasioned by difference , by exclusion and a disparate allocation of political will and resources will be exacerbated and will serve as a formidable threat to both fragile and well established democracies. In this regard the very idea of the viability and sustainability of a society as denoting a community with shared vision and shared outcomes is rendered illusory when objectively there is more within it that renders it different than which holds it together.

The advent of globalisation and migration has forever changed the demographics and the profile of the world’s nations. The homogenous State is a rare phenomena and indeed the desire of people to retain their diversity in a globalised world requires both recognition and an appropriate response . The 2004 UNDP Report on ‘ **Cultural liberty in today’s diverse world** ‘ captures the challenge eloquently in the following words :-

‘ Cultural liberty is a vital part of human development because being able to chose one’s identity – who one is – without losing the respect of others or being excluded from other choices is important in leading a full life. People want the freedom to practise their religion openly, to speak their language , to celebrate their ethnic or religious heritage without fear of ridicule or punishment or diminished opportunity. People want the freedom to participate in society without having to slip off their chosen cultural moorings. It is a simple idea but profoundly unsettling.’

The report goes on to describe two types of exclusion that such groups may experience – living mode exclusion which denies accommodation and recognition of that a lifestyle that a group would choose to have and participation exclusion when people are discriminated against or suffer disadvantage in social , political and economic opportunities because of their cultural identity . This latter form of exclusion is not confined to cultural identity but

may extend to religion , nationality , race , poverty or some other vulnerability and can have far reaching social and political consequences.

Addressing social exclusion may require different interventions depending on the nature of the exclusion. At one level policies that embrace and recognise differences and the right to be different may go a long way in breaking down barriers and challenging harmful stereotypes about the other. At other levels ensuring the meaningful participation of all in the democratic process and the institutions of democracy , providing social goods in order to meet human needs and creating opportunities for employment for all are vital in giving a people a sense of being part of a society , of being able to experience the responsive of that society to their human needs and of having the opportunity like others to engage in the dignity of work and providing for their families. While this may sound like a self evident proposition it's realisation has proved difficult and in some instances there are formidable obstacles in making it happen.

South Africa's transition to democracy has been widely acclaimed and it's Constitution has been described as one of the most progressive and visionary committed to equality . Yet it has the unenviable record of being the world's most consistently unequal society following a recent study by the University of Cape Town . Violent street protests by poor citizens suggest a disconnection between citizens and the institutions of governance. Under such circumstances social exclusion is exacerbated as people feel marginalised and feel no fidelity to the existing political and social order because it does not work for them.

Strategies to deal with poverty and to provide employment thus have a vital dual function which in broad terms may relate to their intended outcomes and the process in achieving them. Providing social services or creating employment may well deal with and improve the material condition people find themselves in and in that regard may achieve a positive outcome. But social integration is more than just a sum total of material outcomes. it is about how people are valued , about how their views are solicited , it is about their meaningful and substantive participation in matters affecting them and it is about them sharing the responsibility of the interventions that are about them . Too many programs are structured in the hierarchical mindset of provider (State) and recipient (citizen) and while they may deliver significant material outputs they do not address the sense of exclusion that many experience and they ride roughshod over the dignity of all , in particular the poor to be active participants in the processes that affect them.

Participation – distinguishing form from substance

The mechanisms for meaningful public participation should ensure that the form of participation is structured to achieve meaningful participation . In the early years of S.A.'s

parliamentary – the idea of public participation was advanced through open hearings on legislation in the national parliament etc. The effect was that poor and rural communities were hardly able to participate given the cost, the sophistication and rules of the process and the technicality of law making. Parliament now goes to communities to ensure participation. It is now done where people live, under conditions that they are comfortable with and in language they understand – these parliaments of the people generate considerable interest and attendance. In addition it closes the gap between elected representatives and the communities they are meant to serve. Reviewing the bureaucracy and technical rules that stand as obstacles to participation may also be useful.

Equality and Non Discrimination

While equality and non discrimination are important principles that must underlie both outcome and process on discrimination the very nature of social integration and of inequality may require special measures and interventions to deal with those historically excluded or disadvantaged. This does not undermine the equality principle as indeed it may be necessary to treat people differently in order to treat them equally. Under circumstances where the need for social integration efforts are broad and resources are limited it poses additional challenges eg. in South Africa there are substantial housing backlogs and current government programs target citizens and permanent residents. The exclusion of other categories of residents certainly exacerbates their sense of exclusion and deepens the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide. Under these circumstances other initiatives to address the same social need must be considered eg. partially subsidised housing, the role of the private sector in the form of public/private partnership etc in order to address the same social need.

In the same way the principle of non discrimination must ensure that people with special needs are considered eg. people with disabilities, the aged etc. in the design of programs. Again meaningful public participation should identify and address these needs.

Gender discrimination and the under-representation of women should be a key focus and policy makers should be alert to the threat that groups will often use the language of culture and religion as a justifiable barrier to full participation of women. While the necessary respect must of course be afforded to matters of faith and culture it is unacceptable if they are used as a barrier to advancing the role and place of women.

Policy coherence

Very often interventions to address poverty are fragmented within the same State machinery and the need for effective co-ordination becomes essential if programs are to have their desired effect. In the work of the S.A. Human Rights Commission examples of such a lack of co-ordination are legion. The health department builds a much needed clinic in a rural community to serve a broad geographical area. No provision is made for the transport of the communities to the clinic it being argued that the latter is the competency

of the transport department. State pensions and other poverty related grants intended to pay for the necessities such as food are often used to pay user fees at State schools, undermining the very objective of the grant.

Given the pervasive nature of poverty and its centrality in the priorities of government policy and programs, it is a matter of some concern that in South Africa there is no single focal point within government that has the responsibility of poverty alleviation, of co-ordinating the various initiatives and of assessing the progress and impact made. Consideration should be given to the establishment of either a Ministry or division within government to take on such a role.

The role of the private sector

The role of non State actors has become both more visible and more dominant over recent times. Increasingly they take responsibility for the provision of public goods – food, water, drugs etc and have a vital role to play with regard to employment and the provision of decent work. It is thus evident that social integration initiatives must involve the private sector so that there is both a measure of coherence between State and non State action as well as a fair division of labour between the two. In many developing countries private actors wield enormous power which can either be used as a source of social good or become a force that can stand in the path of development.

While there are various initiatives at the international level to attempt to ensure the responsible use of corporate power, States have a duty in interacting with corporate to ensure that public policies relevant to social integration can at best be supported by non State actors and at worst, not be undermined. Clear policy in this regard would assist a State as it pursues foreign direct investment or engages in bilateral and multilateral treaty processes.

Conclusion

The Indian Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen on a visit to South Africa some years ago and in speaking to the topic of democracy made the distinction between what he termed the public ballot perspective of democracy and the public reasoning perspective of the democracy. The former related to the adequacy of the ballot and was relatively easy to secure while the latter referred to what he termed the ability of governments to respond to public reasoning, what he termed government by discussion. An important part of addressing the challenge of social cohesion is to ensure that governments are engaged in real discussion with those they are responsible for and accountable to.

Jody Kollapen

South Africa