

How the TAC is emerging as a **social movement**

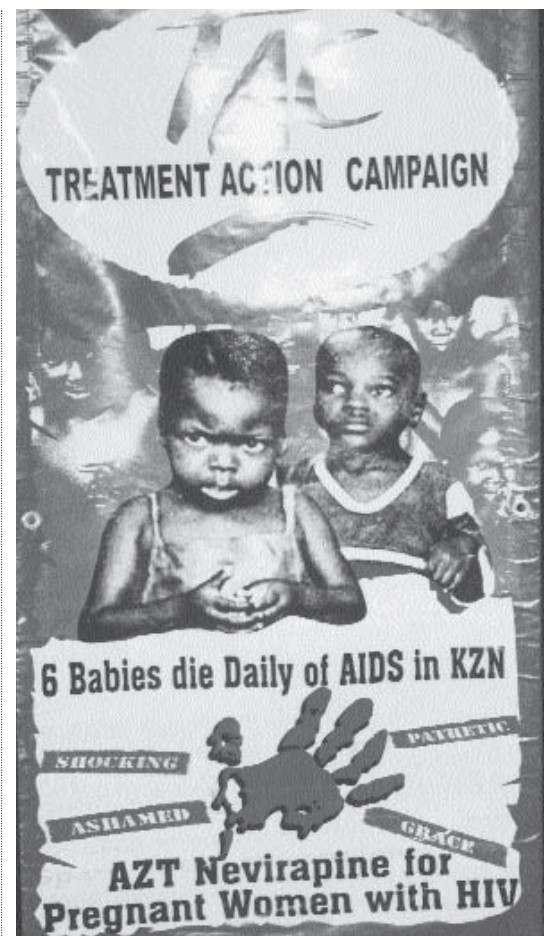
*Hundreds of delegates from across the political spectrum gathered in Durban recently to attend the TAC/Cosatu conference, which aimed to build consensus on a comprehensive strategy to stem the rise of HIV/AIDS. **Reneé Grawitzky** looks at the emergence of TAC as a social movement and its alliance with Cosatu.*

The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) has been likened to the role played by the United Democratic Front (UDF) under apartheid. The difference however, lies in the fact that the leadership of the TAC do not aspire to overthrow the government or any government nor do they want to transform the organisation into a political party. They view the TAC as a social movement, which is forced to fight a political battle because of the policy position adopted by government. 'We are being forced to fight our own government,' the TAC leadership argues. TAC national secretary Mark Heywood says it is political as it goes to the heart of government policy. 'Here we have a health crisis that demands immediate investment in public services in this country,' but this is being ignored because of the denialist tendency that has taken route in government, he says.

TAC's relationship with government

Both Heywood and TAC leader Zackie Achmat agree: 'We are not in business to challenge government for the sake of challenging government.' They acknowledge there are elements in and outside the TAC who would like the organisation to use HIV/AIDS to overtly attack government. That was not the initial approach adopted, as the organisation believed that to succeed it had to win over government. 'We need to ensure the dignified treatment of people through the public health care system.' If the organisation becomes anti-ANC then we will alienate a large number of people who would otherwise be our supporters, Heywood says.

The TAC believes there are a number of people within the ANC who do support the organisation. However, many do not come out openly and



Social movements are traditionally defined as the scenario where there is an organised collective attempt by a group of people to further a common interest through joint action outside the sphere of established institutions. TAC's aim is to forward a common interest – to get access for all to treatment. Sociologists would view TAC more as a reformative social movement that is trying to alter some aspect of the existing health policy because of a sense of injustice around government's failure to grant access to treatment for HIV/AIDS sufferers.

Pregs Govender, former ANC MP (recently resigned her position) made an impassioned speech during the conference about how the status and role of women in society was making them vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS. She ended her speech by reading a poem she wrote following her decision to abstain from voting on the 2001 defence budget. She said: 'because I believe that the over R50bn going to the multi-national arms companies of Britain, Sweden and Germany, belong to SA's people who are dying of poverty, HIV/AIDS and violence'. She wrote the poem prior to the Committee's hearings on 'How best can SA address the horrific impact of HIV/AIDS on women and girls?' and the report of these hearings that 'I wrote on behalf of the Committee':

*We live and speak no longer conscious of our wholeness,
Our connectedness
We have begun to believe we are fragments
That our stories are disconnected from each other's
So often we have sat silently
With our grief, our pain, our horror, our anger,
Our hopelessness, our despair
At how successfully
We have been disembodied
We no longer hear our own voices
We no longer see our own faces*

*I know that in our hearts
We cannot have forgotten who we are
In our hearts
We cannot rubbish our collective dream and vision
And the love that inspired courage across our land
Against the hate and fear of apartheid's patriarchy
Who aimed to destroy not just our communities
But our very sense of self*

*Today is another battle we face
Both men and women
With the patriarch within our minds
Who holds captive our hearts, our souls
His power of fear and hate
His hierarchies of exclusion and silence
His memory of forgetting*

*It is time to reclaim ourselves
So collectively we can reclaim our power of love and courage
It is time for all of us
Women and girls and the men and boys who love us
And whom we love
To subvert the patriarch in our minds
In our homes
In our churches, temples and mosques
In our workplaces
In all our institutions
In our country
In our world*

'... there is a narrow Africanist nationalist male dominated agenda, which is dominating the ANC.'

indicate their support. This is largely as a result of the fact that there are many in the ANC who are still operating in a post-1994 fog of loyalty, which dictates the need to keep the party line. This stance is constantly reinforced by conspiracy theory type claims. This has led to the closing of ranks. 'As a result, instead of openly criticising the official party line, people are getting out,' Heywood says.

Achmat adds 'We will criticise ANC policy if it needs to be criticised.' However, criticism is not welcomed despite the fact that 'criticism is traditionally viewed as the most pure expression of loyalty,' Achmat says. He points out however, that in terms of criticism it would be a mistake to see the ANC as a single homogeneous entity. There is a range of members with different ideas. But at present, Achmat says, 'there is a narrow Africanist nationalist male dominated agenda, which is dominating the ANC.'

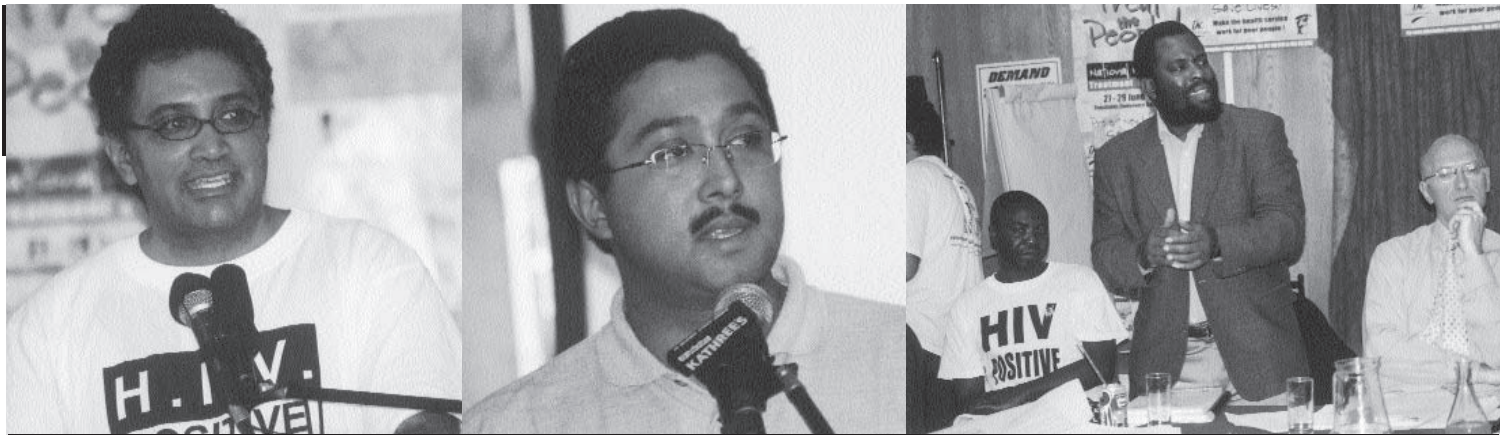
Achmat believes the ANC is creating its own opposition by adopting the position it has in relation to HIV/AIDS. The TAC has no desire to be a political opposition. Its aim is to unite people across the political spectrum to ensure treatment for all. The cross section of delegates who attended the conference in Durban reflects the potential of the organisation to unite people across racial, religious, political and class lines. This in itself is however, potential opposition as the TAC evolves into a single-issue social movement. Political opposition does not only come in the guise of a political party. It emerges in groupings such as the TAC and the strengthening of civil society. Governments across the globe talk about the need for a strong civil society and collective action. In reality, this is

not always what is desired. Anybody in a position of power will try and ensure limited or no competition. This applies to governments, business, institutions, non-governmental organisations and even trade unions. Therefore, organisations such as TAC can be viewed as potential competition. It is therefore not surprising that government is decidedly hostile.

An observer says the irony is that counter-tendencies such as the TAC have been given the space to operate (as other interest groups that could emerge) because of government's position and because people have seen that social mobilisation can deliver. Achmat, who had a history in anti-apartheid politics in the Western Cape in the 1980s, believes social mobilisation should be used whether it is for the provision of antiretrovirals or other socioeconomic demands. The TAC is not questioning the validity of government. Its view is that whatever government would be in power, it would be questioning its position. Achmat says it's ironic that government's official position (with some slight changes) as endorsed by Cabinet on 18 April 2002 is a good one. However, in reality government's position remains a denialist one and the 'ANC will suffer more from its denialist position'.

Who is the TAC's support base?

The TAC is building a support base amongst community-based organisations, the church, labour and individuals within different political parties. The organisation is viewed by some as a safe space for disgruntled people to fall into. Disillusioned ANC members (or others) would not be labelled as the so-called 'loony left' if



Left to right: TAC Chairman Zackie Achmat, head of ANC's Health Committee Saadiq Karim and Cosatu's president Willie Madisha.

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they aligned themselves with the TAC. Achmat says the majority of people in the TAC are in fact ANC supporters. There are different types of people who become aligned to the TAC:

- The majority are drawn to the organisation because of the need to do something for the collapsing health care system.
- A small minority who want to use the opportunity to deal with government. This grouping could include people from the far left to the right. These people, Achmat says, do not last very long in the organisation.
- Others who believe there is something that can be done but might not necessarily agree with all of TAC's tactics.

TAC and its alliance with Cosatu

TAC believes its alliance with Cosatu is important. Achmat says it's important to be seen to be aligned with a critical block that is also loyal to government. This is necessary if TAC is not to be viewed as an oppositional structure. 'We are not attempting to or have any desire to overthrow the government or any government for that matter. All we want to do is get medicines to people,'

Achmat says.

The TAC leadership believes its alliance with Cosatu is a natural progression of a relationship that has evolved over time since the late 1980s.

Achmat believes that the relationship can work for both organisations. As a one-purpose or single issue organisation the TAC can focus exclusively on HIV/AIDS and is therefore, in a position to assist organisations such as Cosatu, which has to deal with a range of issues. Achmat highlights some of the reasons why the labour movement has not sufficiently dealt with the issue of HIV/AIDS:

- Officials and shopstewards need significant medical and scientific experience. Unions do not have sufficient internal support in this regard and it is in this area that the TAC can assist the unions.
- Issues, which were in the past, viewed as so-called soft issues such as gender and health and safety were not always taken seriously. The spread of HIV/AIDS has however, changed this approach.
- Unions need greater support on social issues affecting HIV/AIDS.
- At present much of the campaign is

around the level of leadership. There is a need to ensure shopstewards understand all issues around HIV.

As with most relationships, it is not always smooth sailing. Although both Cosatu and the TAC agree on the overall objective of access to treatment for all, they do not always agree on the tactics, which should be used to achieve this. This is largely based on the different traditions and types of relationships, which both organisations have developed with the ANC-ruling party. The TAC is more prone to utilise the courts to achieve its objective. That has not always been the way and tradition of Cosatu. In response to possible criticism over the TAC's decision to 'rush off to court', Achmat says: 'Only people who are afraid, acting from a position of ignorance or are prepared to make the right noises but will not win the battle,' adopt such a position.

The TAC has begun to build a relationship not only with organised labour but also with the church. 'If we combine with these organisation we will be able to affect the course of the epidemic. However, if government leads this alliance it will change the course of the disease,' Achmat says.

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