

Let's use the space

Alec Erwin's article spells out yet again the limitations that individual national governments have in determining their economic and political destiny.

We all know that government is not an NGO. We also know that NGOs have more flexibility and space (in some instances) to pronounce on the social and ethical issues facing humanity. I want to argue, however, that there is much more space for governments to manoeuvre than Erwin suggests.

The ANC government has invited the envy of many other countries, particularly in Latin America, where the space to defy US foreign policy dictates are much more constrained. When the ANC government says "we will meet Cuba irrespective of what the United States says", we are, in fact, pushing the boundaries of political possibilities and getting away with it.

Neo-liberalism

In order to understand what contribution South Africa needs to make to combatting injustices in our global environment, we need to acknowledge that the dominant paradigm of neo-liberalism does inordinately influence the responses of government.

In Latin America, the programme of the political left has varied significantly over the last decade. In the past, the left called for armed struggle, protected industries, nationalisation, subsidies and so on. Today, the Latin left is mainly united by its opposition to neo-liberalism. In common "

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with the South African left, its task of identifying what it is *for* is a much more different enterprise in the current conditions.

Even fairly conservative economists are now beginning to accept that the key flaw with neo-liberalism is that it is not helping the poor. Countries are being divided into a small group of wealthy businesspeople and a large group of poor, marginalised people. There is a growing acceptance amongst governments and even international banks that there is a need to put a 'human face' on neo-liberalism.

If neo-liberalism is not the answer, what is? New thinking emerging from progressives in Latin America suggests that government has a key role, but perhaps a very different one from in the past. Instead of simply spending money to reduce the suffering of the silent majority, governments must pursue locally designed policies to draw the poor into the global economy.

Like our Latin American counterparts, we must not give up the notion that there could, indeed, be alternatives to economic paths that generate greater inequality and poverty. It is in this context that we need to look at the interrelationship between trade policy and global human and socio-economic rights concerns.

Sanctions

When we evaluate whether sanctions might work as a strategy in the current economic and global order, we should not regurgitate the very arguments which were used against us when we called for sanctions. Unfortunately, many of us suffer from the disease of South African exceptionalism. We believe our struggle against injustice had so many exceptional circumstances that what was appropriate in our case is not appropriate for most other instances. It is true that the injustices in South Africa enjoyed a much higher level of prominence on the global agenda than struggles elsewhere. It is also true, as Erwin points out, that sanctions on their own would not have won democracy. They made a much greater contribution, however, than he is willing to concede.

The suggestion is not that the South African government must behave rashly and impose sanctions on countries where there are some or other forms of justice. Certainly, however, there is a need for South Africans to explore seriously and earnestly what contributions we can make to support the cause of global justice. We also need to recognise that some form of sacrifice may be necessary. The realities of globalization and our own economic interests should not prevent us from even giving serious consideration to just appeals for assistance.

This raises a bigger question about how individual countries in the South can chart their economic and political destinies, given the global economic order we confront. Do we all just try and make the best of a bad situation, or do we develop our economic policy frameworks with some semblance of discussion and co-ordination?

The space for NGOs

Other countries are looking at government legislation and how it affects the space for

civil society organisations to be able to flourish and contribute towards building participatory democracy and contribute towards development.

The South African government has shown considerable vision in thinking through the space for the functioning of NGOs. That is why it was so unfortunate to see COSATU representatives being bundled into police vans for protesting against former Indonesian president, Suharto's visit. As subsequent events have shown, these concerns were more than valid.

A strong NGO and civil society sector is critical if development challenges are to be met in South Africa. The NGO community itself needs to guard against a narrow nationalism based on economic self-interest. Notions such as the 'Rainbow Nation is a winning nation' promote the cynical notion that the world can be divided into winning and losing nations. If the recent poverty hearings are anything to go by, the vast majority of South Africans are not so triumphalistic about our achievements.

We cannot accept that trade and political relationships can be divorced from human rights. There has to be sensitive consideration, both on the part of government and civil society, about how to find the appropriate balance. Complexity should not be a deterrent for engagement with thorny issues, nor should it be an excuse for evasive indifference, which leads to inaction and silence in the face of inequality and poverty. ★

Reference

Rosenberg, T. "Listen as the left argues with neo-liberalism", *The International Herald Tribune*, 7/7/98

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