

Moment of great significance?

First Labour Civil Society Conference

In October a Civil Society Conference went almost unnoticed by the media. Delegates vowed to work with government to tackle South Africa's massive social problems and engaged on what campaigns to launch. If this unity of labour and civil society becomes a reality in 2011 this would have been an historic conference. Below is a short version of the Conference Declaration.

Declaration of Civil Society Conference

'Workers and human rights activists unite! Advance social justice through unity in struggle. Popularise and advance constitutional rights.'

'There will be panic in the ranks of certain political elite today as we gather... it is a threat to them any gathering of civil society. We gather here today to say another situation is possible. We will make a new declaration to build our country.' Zwelinzima Vavi (Cosatu)

The Civil Society Conference was a turning point in the history of South Africa. Over 300 delegates from 56 civil society organisations came together to rebuild a strong, mass democratic movement that will work with the people and the government to tackle massive social problems.

South African citizens have a Constitution and laws which give better guarantees of social justice, human rights and equality than anywhere else in the world. Yet in practice millions are denied these rights, especially socio-economic rights, in the most unequal nation in the world.

'The Constitution is the highest law in the country. It is part of our armoury. We can challenge any policy that moves contrary to the Constitution. The courts can be used to advance poor people. We must combine mobilisation, education, activism and litigation.' Mark Heywood

Apartheid fault lines remain in place in employment, health care, education, housing, transport and across the spectrum. A rich, mainly white minority, gets the lion's share of wealth and economic power and access to world-class services in the private sector.

The rich earn millions by exploiting the labour of the working class. Some former comrades in public office make millions by corruptly manipulating opportunities to win tenders, bribing officials or using political connections.

'The top 23 directors earn 178 times more than workers... Unemployment is still on the rise and has reached 45.3% of the adult population.' Vavi

The mainly black poor majority suffer from huge levels of unemployment and pathetic levels of service delivery with little hope of escaping from a life of struggling to survive.

Unless we mobilise for change, levels of inequality will become entrenched.

Corruption goes to the heart of social justice and that as well as backing government's efforts to investigate corruption, we need a civil society anti-corruption mechanism.



Civil Society delegates at the conference.

‘South Africa is one of the 50 wealthiest countries in the world in GDP terms, but it has experienced a decline in the Human Development Index (HDI) and is 125th out of 175 countries in the world.’ Heywood

The conference debated three areas:

1 SOCIAL JUSTICE

The conference agreed to a Social Justice Charter which can be used as a campaigning tool to mobilise society, particularly workers and communities.

We have good laws and policies, but implementation is lacking. We must carry forward real justice rather than passing laws and adopting policies on paper.

Access to justice is unaffordable. Those who can't afford it are excluded from their rights and social justice.

The Charter can help to mobilise and empower people on ethical issues, especially corruption in health care, local government, education systems and other key areas.

‘Corruption is stealing from the poor. Such people see an injury to one as an opportunity for another. Public representatives and even trade unionists must choose between identifying with rich or poor people.’ Vavi

The Charter must trigger the implementation of policies and laws and assist poor communities to be aware of them. It must speak to strategy and reflect civil society values. It should not repeat principles in the Constitution but expand on principles such as public participation to enforce social justice.

It must reflect the duty of civil society to hold government accountable to achieve delivery, acknowledge the weakness of organisation which has led to deepening of poverty while expressing the need for the unity of civil society.

The Charter must be used to get municipalities to engage communities, ensuring that public broadcasting reflects the voice of the people and addressing issues of economic and gender justice.

We need to develop a communication strategy to build a coalition amongst organisations to support each other's work and have a greater voice.

Refugees and immigrants must receive the same standards of justice.

Civil society must engage in education on the Constitution to empower poor communities to fight for their rights and change the balance of power.

‘We need continual mobilisation around objectives. We must improve legal challenges, improve advocacy and research and develop new leadership in a new generation to fight for justice.’ Heywood

2 ECONOMIC GROWTH

Delegates endorsed *Cosatu's A Growth Path Towards Full Employment* but agreed that it must be simplified and put in vernacular as an empowerment weapon for labour, unemployed and a popular tool for the people.

Conference called for a broad political programme which focuses on the concrete, tilts the balance of forces and becomes a catalyst for change.

Conference urged Cosatu to advance a social solidarity economy with regard to workers in the informal economy.

There is a need to regulate and improve working conditions in areas like retail, agriculture and hospitality sectors.

We support the creation of co-ops, but guard against fake co-ops which by-pass labour legislation.

Workers should not be coerced into pacts with government or employers that lead to lower wages or worse conditions. We should however not dismiss all social pacts as they are a reality in trade union work.

Government blames labour broking for unemployment, but continues to propose regulation. We need a campaign for the banning of labour broking to facilitate job security.

'We need a strategy to turn words into deeds. It will be a tragedy to miss the opportunity to build a developmental state and turn the economy around. To leave another generation living with no money and no hope.' Vavi

Blacklisting of people by the credit bureaus needs to be addressed.

The tax-GDP ratio in South Africa is lower than other comparable countries. There is space to increase taxes to furnish government with billions of rands to implement important programmes.

We need to move towards sustainable energy away from coal to a low carbon or carbon-free economy. We must be in charge of this process and not the objects of it. We need a strategy to make this a reality, including engaging with the private sector. We must build industrial townships linked to eco-agriculture and green buildings. Land development and housing programmes are of little use without access to sustainable energy and water. Nuclear power must be rejected.

Water and electricity are essential for growing the economy. Green jobs need to expand beyond households. It is important for the national grid to absorb other energy sources.

There is a need to drive innovations so consumers buy local goods.

South Africa should take the lead in making policies and institutionalising gender equality and empowerment in the economy.

We shall oppose infrastructure development that only serves the rich.

We need transparency around the treasury and use of public money.

'We must strengthen the People's Budget Coalition and all of civil society must expose issues around the budget all year. We must engage with the Parliamentary Budget office.' Heywood

We reject the Protection of Information Bill as incompatible with the right to access information.

Employers must be forced to meet skills targets.

We must ensure that inputs from labour and civil society are integrated into the Cosatu document. There is a need for joint Cosatu-civil society meetings and resourced institutions with teeth to fight corruption.

Conference affirmed support for a Basic Incomes Grant for millions of poor who do not qualify for grants.

Policies must acknowledge the role of traditional leaders and the place of traditional culture.

2011 should be declared a year of mass mobilisation on economic policy and against unemployment, poverty and inequality.

'The biggest challenge is to increase the working class conscience and mobilise it. Two million Cosatu members can participate in leadership and membership in all activities in all parts of society and help people to mobilise around rural poverty, education, health...' Vavi



William Matlala

Worker delegates to the conference.

3 HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Conference supported the National Health Insurance (NHI) in principle, but expressed concerns regarding the unknowns around its content. We call for government to release an NHI policy to be discussed in a transparent manner.

While NHI policy is developed, the Department of Health must move on the minister's ten-point plan to strengthen the public health system. NHI must start in under-served areas where it is most needed.

Community health workers are a critical component of health care, but are exploited. They must be brought into the health system and unionised.

The Department of Health must fill all vacancies and stop freezing posts as a cost curtailment measure.

Self-regulated, industrial and sector-based health-care facilities should be supported by NHI.

We must combat the social determinants of health, including unemployment, poor housing, stress, alcohol abuse and poor education.

A campaigns committee should be formed to coordinate campaigns of labour and civil society in the absence of a NHI plan.

'Two and a half million people died in ten years of HIV/AIDS. Life expectancy of black people is now 46 years.' Heywood

Education has been in crisis for over ten years with insufficient attention from government and civil society. Civil society has not mobilised and parents are often uninvolved.

The conference agreed to a national campaign on education to ensure the proper functioning and resourcing of schools and a National Fund for Education funded by business to improve the training of teachers and the curriculum.

Public representatives should enrol their children in public schools and use public health institutions.

We must debate models for the education system as no magic bullet can resolve the problems.

To address the education crisis, we must build campaigns around:

- infrastructure in schools, particularly schools in crisis;
- a curriculum to ensure students will learn what they will need in the working world;
- budget monitoring of the education department, including fair distribution of resources to urban and rural areas;
- better coordinated teacher development and training with salaries they deserve;
- civil society, unions, parents and learners all being responsible for education – there must be a campaign to attract parents into the school system to take an active role in the education of their children;
- build a culture of learning and reading;
- improving the governance of school system.

'In 1998 there was a drop-out rate of 44% from schools. Only 11% of schools achieved matric pass rates, the culture of learning and teaching has collapsed. We must insist that teachers are at school every day and teach for seven and half hours.' Vavi

Civil society conferences should be held annually and replicated in all provinces within three months. A directory of civil society organisations must be drawn up and published in 2011.

Launch campaigns to:

1. Remain united behind Bafana Bafana and other national teams and promote soccer, the most popular yet seriously under-developed sport.
2. Bring down astronomical levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality. We need a new economic growth path to address these challenges with urgency.

'The challenge is to find common ground on key campaigns and democracy. Trade unions and civil society must find common ground.' Vavi



William Matlala

3. Address the challenges of our education system.
 4. Unite behind a goal of transforming our health system and implementing NHI. We have to fix our public hospitals, defeat the scourge of HIV/AIDS and build a healthy nation with improved life expectancy.
 5. Address underdevelopment and poverty in rural areas. This campaign should address food insecurity and empower people to use misused land to produce food they need and escape unemployment and poverty.
 6. Lead a campaign against crime and corruption. Corruption is stealing from the poor to feed elites' selfish interests.
 7. Mobilise to fix the energy challenge. We need action to ensure we move out of the current crisis. Imagine a day when thousands of activists move door-to-door handing over pamphlets educating on saving electricity.
 8. Mobilise to address a looming water shortage crisis. We must hold mine bosses to account who have been allowed after making billions to abandon now empty mines and pollute water. We must defend our environment and keep our country beautiful and natural whilst also developing.
 9. Educate the working class to appreciate that no matter how bad living conditions are, there is no excuse for blaming fellow Africans and other foreign nationals for the country's economic failures and do everything to prevent a new outbreak of xenophobic attacks. Workers and the poor must stand united against the common enemies of capitalist greed and corruption.
 10. Address the massive challenges of underdevelopment in the continent.
- The conference agreed to draw up a timetable for implementation of all campaigns.

Some comments by Civil Society Conference delegates

AIDC Unemployed People's Movement: 'We need the right to work enshrined in our Constitution. Unemployment is a protracted war not an overnight struggle.'

Civil society delegate: 'GEAR continues to dominate the post-Polokwane period.'

Civil society delegate: 'Why has Cosatu not mobilised more against Nersa's electricity tariffs? We need safe renewable energy for the poor.'

Civil society delegate: 'We need to live by example. There should be sexual harassment education workshops in all organisations, not just policies.'

Black Sash: 'The capitalist market economy destroys social solidarity.'

Worker delegate: 'The investment arms of Cosatu, their profits must be directed to creating jobs.'

Ditsela: 'We need practicable solutions and we need to reflect on the 'me first' ethos amongst ourselves and in society and how this undermines our struggle.'

South African Municipal & Allied Workers Union: 'On the corruption challenge we need strategies to promote the political will to deal with this. We feel in the municipality we are the minority.'

Peace Action: 'We need to invite African unions and civil society to discuss and address migrant issues.'

Legal Advice Centre: 'Many workers are not represented by unions in our society, and these workers' cases are often thrown out because they are not articulate enough.'

Save our SABC: 'The SABC is important for advancing constitutional rights but it is in a parlous state.'

Civil society delegate: 'We cannot rely on government alone. We need to be active and we need a movement to empower people in local communities.'

Southern African Bishops Conference: 'The small sizes of land poor people live on. On the radio a caller was asked to turn off her radio but in fact it was the noise from the radio next door. We need better planning.'

Civil society delegate: 'Messages to poor people must be transmitted in language that they understand.'

Civil society delegate: 'I have a problem with life expectancy, because I'm now only left with six years! The government has been 16 years pregnant and they have yet to deliver - if we have to operate on them we must do so. Their GEAR was simply reverse gear.'

Lesbian & Gay Community Project (LGBTI): 'We ask Cosatu to support us in the townships.'

Young worker National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa: 'Cosatu took a resolution on young workers but only Numsa has a young workers' structure.'

South African Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union: 'There are many mergers and acquisitions. Now Walmart wants to take over Massmart and the Competition Commission stands by and let's this happen. How can we ensure it is more interventionist?'

Civil society delegate: 'Government unilaterally implements. It does not ask people and it does not come back to find out how it is going with people.'