

# Creating Action Space

*Creating Action Space The challenge of poverty and democracy in South Africa*

The shifts in government's macro-economic policy and the embrace of neo-liberalism have received much attention from those on the so-called 'left'. Much of the debate has centered on macro-economic issues and has been divorced from grassroots participation

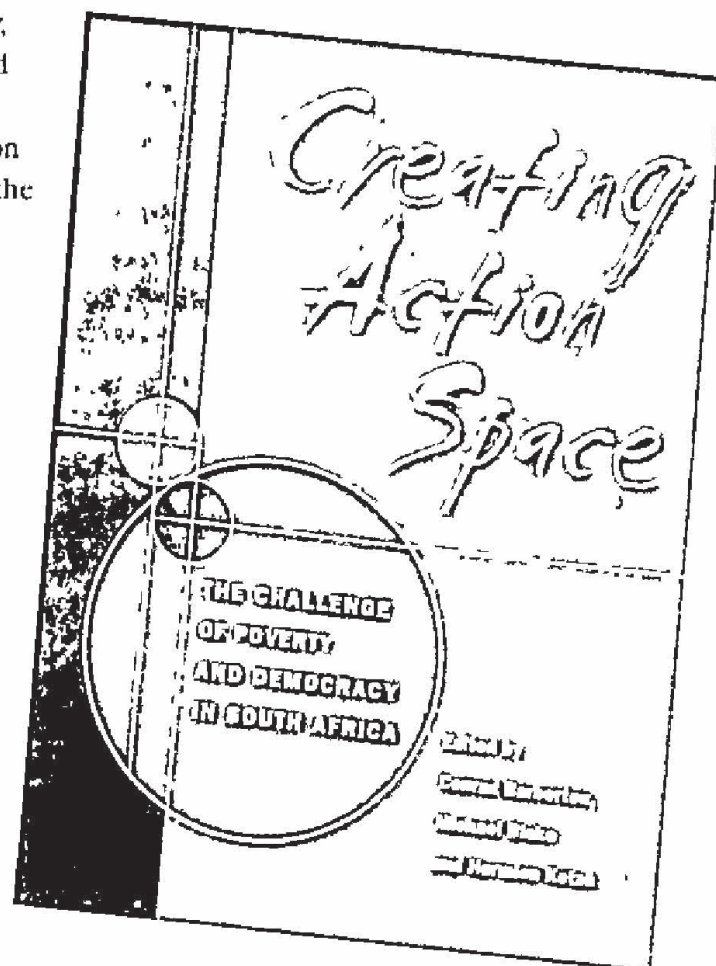
A recent survey undertaken by SWOP, *Taking Democracy Seriously*, examines worker expectations and shows that only 33% of workers know what GEAR is. By comparison over 80% of workers knew about the RDP.

This book is an informative collection of articles by some of South Africa's leading progressive thinkers. The articles were commissioned by IDASA's Poverty Reduction Monitoring Service.

The book examines the changes that have taken place for the poor since the democratic elections in 1994. It traces the changes in terms of the experiences of the poor. It focuses on the dynamic relationship between democratic practice and conditions of poverty and inequality.

*Reviewed by Claire Horton.*

The book poses a series of questions, such as 'Can poor people use democratic forms of organisation to take control of their lives? Do poor people have real influence within democratic institutions? Are democratic institutions influencing social outcomes in favour of the poor?'



These questions are dealt with by examining a number of case studies. This book is valuable because it goes beyond simply looking at service delivery but looks at the institutions and processes that impact on delivery.

Section one, 'Poverty and democracy in South Africa: The context', provides a quantitative overview of the extent of poverty and inequality. It also looks at what it means to be poor, people's own understanding of poverty and their priorities.

The chapter by Michael Blake traces the policy changes from the Freedom Charter to the RDP and finally to GEAR. Blake argues these policy changes have marginalised the poor economically and have narrowed the opportunities for the poor to mobilise their own interests.

Section two, 'Poverty and democracy in South Africa: Lessons from experience', has case studies which look at local government, civil society and 'participation from below'. It examines the different levels in which communities can participate in democratic processes to ensure that the poor benefit. It argues that without such community participation, democratic institutions and processes do not automatically benefit the poor.

The chapter 'Rural women and local government', examines the under-representation of women in local government and decision-making bodies. It makes suggestions on how to strengthen women's participation in local government structures.

The section 'participation from below', provides two case studies of how people have organised themselves democratically in order to meet basic needs. It suggests that while there is a need for government support, there is also a need for space within which communities are able to

determine their own development objectives and how to achieve them.

The last chapter focuses on the obstacles to effective participation. It argues that those with power and privilege have used the very instruments aimed at reform, such as the new Constitution, representative institutions at local level as well as government economic policies, to entrench their position of privilege.

The chapter provides a number of obstacles hampering effective participation by poor people. These obstacles are discussed in terms of their effect on organisation and in so doing encourage the reader to think about these constraints and come up with possible solutions.

As the title of the book suggests, the space within which poor communities can act to address poverty is limited. The book highlights the immense challenges faced by the poor and the disadvantages that they face.

Despite these obstacles the case studies show that communities have been able to establish, challenge, and broaden areas of active involvement.

Although the book is based on case studies and therefore relates to specific experiences, many of the challenges and lessons learnt can still apply to broader community participation.

The book should be of particular use to activists and those who wish to familiarise themselves with grassroots level participation.

The overriding theme throughout the book is that democracy should not be taken for granted, nor does it ensure that current power imbalances will be addressed to the benefit of the most marginalised or poor. ★

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