

Reversing Discrimination: *Affirmative Action in the Workplace*

ed Innes, D; Kentridge, M and Perold, H
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Reviewed by AVRIL JOFFE*

Reversing Discrimination is an interesting examination of the complex and controversial issues related to affirmative action in the workplace.

The chapters of varying quality which make up the book were edited by members of the *Innes Labour Brief* as well as human resource development and social investment academics, practitioners and consultants. Written for an audience that needs convincing, like white management, the book combines persuasion, research and clear policy guidelines.

Recurring themes include:

- acceptance of equal opportunity practices but belief that these do not go far enough

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- and could entrench inequalities;
- the necessity for affirmative action programmes to reverse both racial and gender discrimination;
- concern over the usefulness of the quota system;
- a forceful rejection of tokenism;
- recognition that affirmative action is a process;
- belief that companies should embrace diversity;
- the idea that affirmative action can yield productivity dividends;
- the link with human resource development programmes for society as a whole.

Part One attempts to 'make the case' for affirmative action with contributions from black business and the trade union movement. In addition there are chapters which outline the issues and strategies in affirmative action, provide an overview of ANC and COSATU human resource policies and present guidelines for action. The overwhelming message is that affirmative action is necessary.

Part Two examines the implementation of affirmative action, with many authors agreeing that diversity can be harnessed as a positive attribute. The chapters span a range of case studies and views to highlight the problems associated with implementation.

Part Three focuses on an often neglected

area of affirmative action – gender in the workplace – with contributions on gender equality at work, obstacles and opportunities for women in employment, changing patterns in work and family life, discrimination at universities, as well as women's experience of affirmative action.

One important argument in favour of affirmative action is the resulting improvement in productivity. The first chapter by Duncan Innes argues that by integrating affirmative action policies with the company's strategic business plan, this long-term investment of human resources "should yield productivity benefits later on".

In a challenging and hard-hitting chapter, Don Mkhwanazi argues for all or nothing. In this way he draws a distinction between economic empowerment and socio-economic upliftment. He quotes Thabo Mbeki: "while corporate South Africa is prepared to accede to the need for redistribution of income, it is unwilling to tackle the critical issues of the redistribution of assets, management, and decision-making power. Failure to rectify these imbalances will render other economic adjustments meaningless."

The union perspective is offered by Ebrahim Patel who challenges 'quick-fix programmes' as tokenism, since they advance only a few select individuals and absorb blacks into 'an essentially white power structure'. It is a sophisticated argument linking affirmative action to the economic empowerment of workers on a mass scale through a number of measures:

- the support of tripartite institutions;
- the acceptance of a wider collective bargaining agenda;
- the extension of trade unionism and union rights;
- the training of the workforce;

- investment experience.

In his overview of ANC and COSATU human resources policies, Innes argues that both organisations view affirmative action broadly 'encompassing the areas of social and economic upliftment and educational advancement, and more narrowly focused on human resources development strategies within organisations'. These policies go further than most affirmative action programmes in that they encompass

- race, class and gender;
- production workers and adults excluded from employment;
- a link between training, grading and pay;
- issues beyond the factory floor such as the need to reform the education and

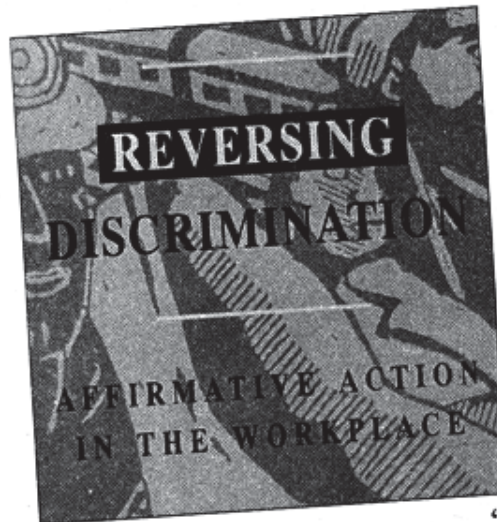
training system.

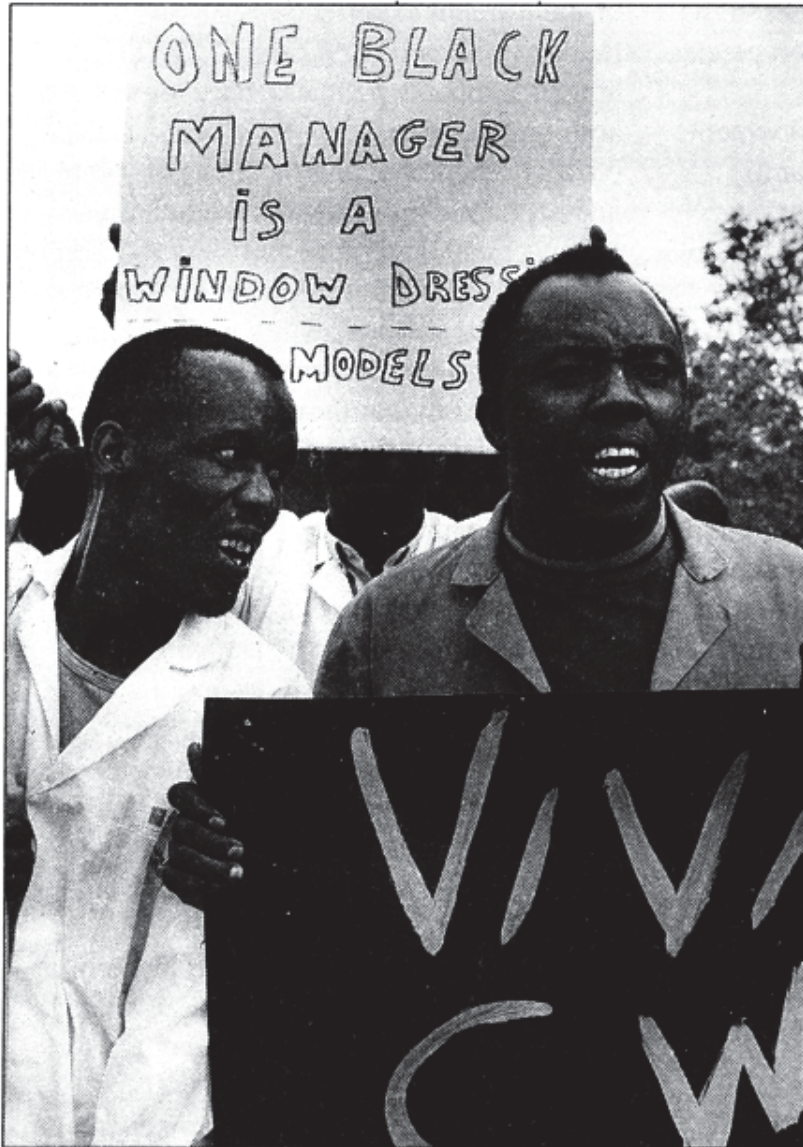
Nevertheless, Innes implicitly dismisses the policies of both organisations as idealistic and utopian. The central criticism he makes of the ANC proposals is the fiscal constraints of implementing such a broad-based strategy. The policy, he says, is couched in 'ideal-type jargon', is not practical and will therefore remain

'empty pipe-dreams'. Of the

COSATU proposals Innes seems particularly concerned to point out their 'socialist' character. Given the audience for whom the book is written, the implication is clear. This is a great pity since these proposals are among the few comprehensive approaches to human resource development and reflect a serious attempt to go beyond the tokenism of advancing a few blacks into management. Are the proposals too far reaching and holistic to be seriously considered?

Humphrey Khoza's chapter emphasises greater worker participation in decision-making and a commitment to workplace democracy. Affirmative action should lead to a more motivated work-force which, in turn, will have productivity dividends. For this to happen, Khoza argues, corporate culture will need to change to allow workers 'more





affirmative action. Not surprisingly, unions see affirmative action as much more than the promotion of a few blacks and some women into junior management positions. Rather, it is "a comprehensive strategy to overcome the imbalances caused by apartheid and racism". Thus unions emphasise collective empowerment while companies emphasise individual empowerment.

The company case studies are particularly illuminating of the dynamism of affirmative action programmes as companies come to terms with the fuller meaning of the term. In two well-researched chapters, the Zimbabwean experience is highlighted to illustrate difficulties South Africans are likely to face both with respect to the civil service and the private sector.

In Part Three, Janet Hersch tackles the difficult issue of 'equal treatment'. She argues:

access to the levers of power through democratic representation and participation'. These are significant views challenging black managers who may well be 'intent on emulating the hierarchical and autocratic behaviour of their white predecessors'.

In Part Two, Ian Fuhr argues against the notion of one big happy family and sees trust-building strategies – which emphasise wealth creation, diversity, leadership and empowerment – as a prerequisite to participation in work-related decision-making. A number of chapters draw on actual case studies to illustrate that significant investment of resources and time is necessary to implement these programmes.

A survey of unions and companies conducted by the *Innes Labour Brief* reveals the different meanings each attach to

"The problem with insisting on formal equality, whereby only those who are the same may be treated as equals, is that our very notion of what is the same and what is special stacks the decks against women." This is a well-written and powerful argument pointing out that the structures of the workplace are built around what is assumed to be the typical worker – a man in his prime. As she says, "it is convenient and contingent, and can be changed". The key to doing this is to develop a conception of equality which allows people to be both different and equal.

Myra Alperson offers a well-researched insight into women's experiences of affirmative action. She offers recommendations to help develop a culture that is not hostile and closed to women.

In the final excellent review of gender

discrimination in universities, Lael Bethlehem provides evidence to support her argument that universities may well have fine mission statements but they do not live up to these pledges and should be made to do so. She argues against the setting and filling of quotas as "too blunt an instrument for this task" and suggests a range of mechanisms as possible remedies.

These include transparency in appointment and promotion criteria, eradicating discrimination in benefits, recognition of teaching and administration, procedures for reporting and handling of sexual harassment and adequate maternity and paternity leave. Bethlehem concludes that pressure groups such as the Gender Forum at Wits are necessary to drive and monitor this process.

Duncan Innes ends the book with a look at middle-class fears of falling standards, tokenism, the end of merit as the basis for promotion and advancement and "South Africa's rapid decline into a banana republic". These are difficult questions with which the proponents of affirmative action have to deal. As the issue of standards shows, it is difficult to ensure these are legitimate concerns rather than "some hidden form of racism" or an attempt "by those presently in authority to justify remaining there".

As Innes concludes, the problem is immense and while reversing discrimination could be perceived as a temporary strategy after which equal opportunity will suffice, "for many in the business world it will be something they must contend with for the rest of their working lives." I have two quibbles with this challenging collection.

First, many chapters (with some notable exceptions) are too general and beg questions such as: Is the concern with

financial viability overstated, and are there policies to address this? What impact has affirmative action had on different groups of workers and management in companies, or on communities outside the workplace? How would we evaluate the success of these programmes given their long-term nature? How widespread are the views expressed?

Second, while there is substantive discussion of what is a serious subject, it is belittled by what could be called "locker-room" joking. While it is legitimate to attempt to reassure white managers, I don't believe sentences such as "the [National Party government's] policy also spawned a plethora of rather amusing Van der Merwe jokes, which just goes to prove that

affirmative action does have its lighter side too", or "I, for one, would dearly like to see affirmative action policies introduced for left-handed people ..." are helpful or educative.

Nevertheless, it is a collection worth reading since it provides important guidelines for establishing

affirmative action criteria in a

range of diverse workplaces. The task is not small. Specific proposals, such as those of the ANC and COSATU's human resource policies, point to the necessity of integrating proposals for reversing discrimination on the shopfloor, with the reform of the education and training system and with broader economic empowerment. Affirmative action will only successfully be addressed within the context of such a coherent human resource development strategy for the society as a whole.

Reversing Discrimination is an important resource for those concerned with human resource development, industrial relations, strategic planning, corporate governance and economic empowerment. ☆

