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Review

Ammunition for the ‘war on poverty’ in South Africa

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Poverty is a multi-faceted phenomenon that goes beyond mere paucity of income. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reflects an understanding of poverty as human deprivation by including indices for health and education in its Human Development Index (HDI). This article reflects on South Africa’s chequered HDI performance. It cites China’s record in reducing poverty and hazards the suggestion that a similar economic approach, if adopted locally, could have the effect of freeing the business sector from regulations that have inhibited entrepreneurship, and by extension, pro-poor growth. South Africa has haemorrhaged skills at an unacceptable level and, where this is attributable to post-apartheid legislation, this legislation needs to be revisited.

Key words: Poverty alleviation, South Africa, business regulation, human development index.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2008, then President Thabo Mbeki announced that South Africa was embarking on a “war on poverty” (SouthAfrica.info, 2008). “High and sustained economic growth” was to be a “key part” of this endeavour.

This article is concerned with how legislation, especially as it affects business enterprises in South Africa, could be revised to alleviate, if not altogether eradicate, poverty. As a preliminary, poverty is characterised as being more than a simple deficiency of income. Instead, following Sen (1999), Nussbaum and ul Haq (Murphy, 2006), it is shown to consist in a constellation of deprivations that results in individuals being unable to fulfill their potentials. The United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI) is resorted to as a useful proxy for the measurement of deprivation within a society and an historical analysis of this index, as it applies to South Africa, is used to tease out the components of poverty in South Africa. It is clearly evident from the data that HIV/AIDS is a major factor inhibiting the country’s poverty alleviation efforts.

An approach to policy and lawmaking that stresses the creation of an investment climate that is inimical to the spread of poverty and by extension, poverty’s deadly concomitant, HIV/AIDS, is advocated. This argument draws on ideas propagated by an erstwhile senior World Bank economist, Nicholas Stern, and it uses China as a case study to illustrate what might be possible for South Africa. It is submitted that there is a tendency to over-regulate business in South Africa, and that the resultant ‘micro-management’ of the workplace must be overcome before genuine progress can be made. It is also intimated that this regulatory heavy-handedness exacerbates the ‘brain-drain’, and that it betrays the presence of a debilitating level of mistrust in South Africa. This is a mutual mistrust, between the State and the commercial sector, of one another’s motives. Policy should liberate, not suffocate, but liberation presupposes faith and trust. Without that, the country will continue to suffer from development within a straitjacket instead of ‘development as freedom’.

According to Terblanche (2008), “the more the state gets involved in the minutiae of business support - advice, loan schemes, grants, training, information dissemination - the more it wastes money. Either that, or bureaucratic oversight of its support programmes becomes so tight and unbusinesslike that very few businesses want to use them.” Augment this intrusiveness with employment quotas, and distortions occasioned by onerous ‘equity’ and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) strictures, and it is little wondered that better-educated individuals seek to take their skills elsewhere (SAIRR, 2008).

DIMENSIONS OF POVERTY

It has become a commonplace of the development literature that there is very much more to poverty than paucity of income. As Murphy (2006) reports, in his history of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Amartya Sen remembers discussions with ul Haq in their undergraduate digs in 1953, talking about life expectancy and literacy and other measurable things beyond money that might provide a better indication of whether people have been given a chance for a complete human life." It is to a more detailed examination of these "measurable things" in South Africa that this discussion will now turn.

Defining and measuring poverty

The UNDP's maiden annual *Human Development Report* (HDR) in 1990 declared that "income [is] not an end in itself but a means to acquiring human well-being" (UNDP, 1990). Thus, adequate income, without a commensurate level of well-being, might still constitute a poverty of sorts. As US senator Robert Kennedy puts it shortly before his 1968 assassination:

… the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes our life worthwhile (quoted in Murphy 2006).

Granted that Gross National Product (GNP) is not quite identical with the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) value used by the UNDP, Kennedy's point is nevertheless well taken. The UNDP's approach is to supplement a conventional economic measure of poverty with measures relating to human and social deprivation, or satisfaction, so as to arrive at an index of development.

To this end, the UNDP devised its Human Development Index (HDI) which has remained essentially unchanged since 1990, apart from some methodological adjustments that were brought to bear in the 2002 report. The very first HDR was in fact written out by Mahbub ul Haq "by hand at a table in a 'little room at the UNDP where the supply stuff was kept"' (Murphy, 2006).

The HDI, given the widespread usage it enjoys and its ready accessibility, may therefore be considered as a useful composite index with which to gauge the level of poverty, in an expanded sense, within a society. The HDI consists of three elements, namely: life expectancy, education, and GDP per capita. These are accorded equal weighting in the calculation of the composite HDI value (UNDP, 2003). The education index is the only one of the three that is in itself, a composite. A two-thirds weight is given to adult literacy, and one-third to a combined gross enrolment ratio at primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions.

There are any number of other considerations (for example, access to clean water, access to telecommunications, freedom of assembly, gender representation) that might usefully be brought to bear on the mix, but it is felt that the three indices selected are sufficiently powerful proxies for this host of subsidiary considerations. The addition of yet more indices to the 'brew' would be unlikely to result in a significant deviation from the value yielded by the HDI's current constituents. Some commentators also see any proliferation of constituent indices as likely to result in "policy gridlock" as governments dither over which impediments to prioritise (Murphy, 2006).

Sen (1999) in his influential explication of poverty as 'capability deprivation' has focused on intrinsic versus instrumental deprivations by way of providing a fuller "understanding of the nature and causes of poverty." This more nuanced appreciation (so to speak) of the nature of poverty is echoed in the studies of a number of other scholars. Bauman (1998), for instance, in an analysis of the part played by the compression of space and time in a globalising world, typifies the unemployed, and those caught on the wrong side of the 'digital divide', as follows: "people marooned in the opposite world are crushed under the burden of abundant, redundant and useless time they have nothing to fill with. In their time 'nothing ever happens'… They can only kill time, as they are slowly killed by it."

This is perhaps over-fanciful but it captures the psychic desolation of unemployment, and the sense of not having been invited to join the world's 'party of plenty'. This is something which is also elaborated upon by Sen (1999), and it is essentially at one with his characterisation of poverty as a paucity of options (freedom) which subsumes the more narrow conception of poverty as being nothing more than a lack of income.

As Collier (2007) astutely observes: "development is about giving hope to ordinary people… Take that hope away and the smart people will use their energies not to develop their society but to escape from it." No country can well afford to be an exporter of skills yet according to the erstwhile National Productivity Institute, in a survey of 55 countries, South Africa had the "biggest skills exodus" coupled with the "worst skills shortage" of all the countries surveyed (SAIRR, 2008).

Poverty in South Africa

If one is prepared to grant the validity of the HDI rankings, then a summary of South Africa's performance since 1987 provides a useful overview of this country's

Table 1. HDI data for South Africa (1987 to 2004).

Year	Life expectancy	GDP per capita. (PPP)	Rank	No. of nations rated (*n*)	Relative ranking (rank/*n*)	Human dev0. Index
1987	61	4981	63	130	0.48	0.731
1988	62	5480	57	160	0.36	0.766
1989	62	4958	70	160	0.44	0.674
1990	62	4865	85	173	0.49	**0.673 (0.734)**
1991	62	3885	93	173	0.54	0.650
1992	63	3799	95	174	0.55	0.705
1993	63	3127	100	174	0.57	0.649
1994	64	4291	90	175	0.51	0.716
1995	64	4334	89	174	0.51	**0.717 (0.741)**
1997	55	7380	101	174	0.58	0.695
1998	53	8488	103	174	0.59	0.697
1999	54	8908	94	162	0.58	0.702
2000	52	9401	107	173	0.62	**0.695**
2001	51	11290	111	175	0.63	**0.684**
2002	49	10070	119	177	0.67	**0.666**
2003	48	10346	120	177	0.68	**0.658**
2004	47	11192	121	177	0.68	**0.653**

Source: UNDP human development reports 1990 to 2006.

Table 2. South Africa HDI indices - key components 1998 to 2004.

Year	Life expectancy index	Education index	GDP index
1998	0.47	0.88	0.74
1999	0.48	0.87	0.75
2000	0.45	0.88	0.76
2001	0.43	0.83	0.79
2002	0.40	0.83	0.77
2003	0.39	0.81	0.77
2004	0.37	0.80	0.79

Source: UNDP human development reports 2000 to 2006.

progress in reducing poverty (Table 1).

The values in bold reflect the revised methodology adopted in the 2002 report and the retrojected figures for 1990 and 1995 (UNDP, 2003) are provided for illustrative purposes. There are no figures for 1996 because, as of the 1999 report, the timelag was improved from three to two years – thus the 1999 report contained 1997 and not 1996 data. South Africa's precipitous decline in life expectancy from 64 in 1995 to 55 in 1997 is noteworthy as is the substantial leap in GDP per capita over this period.

The 'relative ranking' column reveals that in 1988 South Africa was almost a third of the way up the 'developmental league' (57th out of 160 countries). After some years of deterioration from 1989 to 1993 the country regained the halfway point in 1994 and 1995, but has since slipped to the point where it seems to be stuck at just over two-thirds of the way down in the rankings. The correlation of this second period of decline with reducing life expectancy is readily discernible from the table. Had South Africa managed to hold onto its revised HDI value of 0.741 achieved for 1995, it would in 2004 have ranked 98th in the HDI table, a position occupied by the Maldives, instead of languishing at the 121st position. Table 2 takes a closer look at the constituents of South Africa's HDI values as gleaned from the seven most recent Human Development Reports to hand.

From Table 2, it can be seen that GDP and life expectancy are diverging despite the 2002/3 dip in the GDP value. The large drop in the education value for 2001 (from 0.88 to 0.83) is attributable to a decline in school enrolments from 93 to 78% between 2000 and 2001.

It is particularly distressing to note that this trend has continued to deteriorate with the result that the value declined further from 0.83 in 2001 to 0.80 by 2004. This may well be consonant with childrens' education being

Table 3. Contextual HDI ratios for South Africa (2004).

Country	Ranking	Life expectancy index	Education index	GDP index
Guatemala	118	0.71	0.68	0.63
Vanuatu	119	0.73	0.71	0.57
Equatorial Guinea	120	0.30	0.77	0.89
South Africa	121	**0.37**	**0.80**	**0.79**
Tajikistan	122	0.65	0.90	0.41
Morocco	123	0.75	0.54	0.63
Gabon	124	0.48	0.71	0.70

Source: UNDP human development report 2006.

Table 4. Five most extreme divergences in HDI from GDP ranking (2004).

Country	HDI rank	GDP rank	No. of places adjusted	HIV prevalence rate (%) age 15-49	HIV prevalence rank (*n*=177)	Gini coefficient 100= perfect inequality
Equatorial Guinea	120	30	**90**	3.2	26	n/a
Botswana	131	58	**73**	24.1	2	63.0
South Africa	121	55	**66**	18.8	6	57.8
Namibia	125	75	**50**	19.6	5	74.3
Swaziland	146	96	**50**	33.4	1	60.0
Norway	1	4	**-3**	0.1	>150	25.8

Source: derived from UNDP human development report 2006.

interrupted on account of AIDS deaths although it must be noted that neither Botswana nor Zimbabwe, both of which have very high HIV+ prevalences, recorded a similar decline in enrolments. It is cause for concern that according to the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR, 2008), among 156 developing countries, South Africa's school system ranks a mediocre 50th taking into account, among others, "universal access… [and] the quality of inputs."

South Africa's anomalous GDP and life expectancy values are well illustrated by the snapshot (Table 3) of its immediate neighbours in the HDI rankings as of 2004 (although it must be acknowledged that Equatorial Guinea presents the life expectancy/GDP mismatch to an even more extreme degree).

Table 4 reflects those rankings that are most affected by the relevant countries' GDP weightings (income poverty/wealth) being negated by their levels of the 'social delivery' HDI constituents of health and education. The Gini co-efficients, which reflect the degree of income inequality within a country, are reflected as presenting a telling concomitant to the imbalances which characterise these countries. The appropriate values for Norway have been appended to the table to provide a contrast with a fully 'developed' nation.

The HIV prevalence rankings given in Table 4 might suggest that social deprivation (as indicated by the GDP-adjusted rankings) is being driven, or at any rate maintained, to a quite abnormal degree, by HIV/AIDS in Botswana, South Africa, Swaziland and Namibia. The Gini co-efficients are arguably more likely to mirror the dissonance than that they reflect income inequality as being *causative* per se. It must also be borne in mind that 'good' Gini co-efficients are not *necessarily* indicative of high levels of development (Marais et al., 2008) - Ethiopia had a value of 30.0 recorded in 2000.

The foregoing analysis has attempted to isolate a culprit for South Africa's relatively mediocre performance in combating a poverty understood as capability deprivation. On the face of it, it is HIV/AIDS that is constraining South Africa and its immediate neighbours. Although, South Africa seems unlikely, even in the long-term, to drop to Swaziland's HDI value of 0.50 (less than 0.50 relegates a country to the 'low human development' category), its high HIV prevalence rate could see an inexorable sinking towards the bottom of the medium human development division. South Africa, both absolutely and relative to the rest of the world, has for a decade been falling behind in the fight against poverty understood as deprivation. Given that the primary trend is downwards, can education and the economy come to the rescue of South Africa's flagging HDI ratings?

AN APPROACH TO ALLEVIATING POVERTY

In the introduction to his A Strategy for Development, the then-Chief Economist at the World Bank, Stern (2002:

13), said: "I believe firmly that when historians look back at the past quarter-century, they will identify as the single most important event the massive – indeed, unprecedented – poverty reduction that has taken place in China."

When such a senior official declares himself in so categorical a fashion, and selects an issue which would hardly have been the first 'event' to have sprung to the minds of his readers, one should perhaps take notice. What happened in China, this nation of the catastrophic 'Great Leap Forward', after it decided in 1979 to open up its economy to international market forces? In the words of Deng Xiaoping in 1987, speaking of China's "rural reforms":

What took us completely by surprise was the development of township and rural industries. All sorts of small enterprises boomed in the countryside, as if a strange army had suddenly appeared from nowhere. This is not the achievement of our central government. Every year, township and village enterprises achieve 20 percent growth. This was not something I had thought about, nor had the other comrades. It surprised us [own emphases] (quoted in Stern, 2002).

As Stern (2002) proceeds to point out: "the number of poor in rural China fell from 250-million in 1978 to around 34-million in 1999, if China's provinces were treated as separate countries – not an unreasonable notion, given their size – the fastest-growing countries in the world between 1978 and 1995 would all have been Chinese."

It is impossible within the compass of this brief discussion to do justice to the reasons for China's extraordinary performance, but one could put the issue in a nutshell by averring that China, albeit hesitantly and with many reverses, stopped trying to be 'all things to all its people' and gave its aspirant entrepreneurs a freer rein to do what comes naturally to them – that is to seek to maximize the returns to be had by risking their capital. China loosened its vice-like grip on the economy (Kynge, 2006; Yatsko, 2001). Interestingly enough, in the course of this process, "greater income inequality was not only inevitable, but also desirable… as it helped to provide the [necessary] economic incentives" (Stern, 2002). This puts one in mind of Sen's (1999) caution that "attempts to eradicate inequality can… lead to loss for most – sometimes even for all."

The lesson for South Africa in this is that it should foster an investment climate which, in Stern's elucidation of the concept, is one that treats the SMME sector "as a spawning ground for millions of fish" rather than as "a nursery for a few well-favoured babies or milk cows for local officials"; with the clear "recognition that only some will thrive" (Stern, 2002). Central to state involvement in this particular investment climate is to facilitate 'empowerment', and pivotal to empowerment is education (Jansen, 2009). But the state must at the same time resist the temptation to invade the sphere of the private domain by seeking to micro-manage business (De Soto, 2000; Landes, 1998). As Moyo (2009) bluntly states, "Doing business in Africa is a nightmare" partly due to its "highly circumscribed regulatory and legal environment." Yet in South Africa government has elected that "development must be state dominated" (Bernstein, 2007) with the result that the state often appears more concerned with policing and harassing the private sector than with championing and supporting it. The efficacy of policy must be judged by its consequences and not by its intentions. Thus it is that ostensibly 'pro-poor' legislation might, in fact, produce outcomes that are inimical to the interests of the poor whereas legislation that, on the face of it, is pro-business (to avoid using the misnomer 'pro-rich') may well result in pro-poor outcomes (Stern, 2002). Policy is not a 'quick-fix' for social ills - a magic wand, or a big stick, that can be wielded like a conductor's baton to produce instant gratification. But it can certainly be used to facilitate the creation of environments which are conducive to the pursuit of poverty-diminishing development. Education policy, in particular, may only bear fruit decades later as those countries (particularly in Asia) which invested in Early Childhood Development (ECD) in the 1980s can now attest to (Keeley 2007; Young and Richardson, 2007).

Palmer and Mullins (2000) describe the following sequence of events in the inexorable downward spiral HIV/AIDS sets in motion: the infected are less and less able to work > healthy family members devote more and more time and energy to caring for them > progressively less time is given to vital livelihood activities > a squeeze on income ensues > assets are sold off to stay afloat > a reduction in the range of options for subsistence > increased vulnerability and poverty > greater likelihood of infection of the remaining healthy > vicious cycle becomes self-reinforcing. This is the 'blueprint' that plays itself out in a thousand ways but always to the ultimate detriment of the human capital involved. HIV/AIDS becomes both consequence and cause of poverty in a myriad of ways wherever it is entrenched. It is a self-reinforcing phenomenon *par excellence*. It creates the conditions for its propagation.

An investment climate that is positively self-reinforcing, and that generates prosperity which is then channeled into education and health, is arguably the best antidote to the vicious cycle of HIV/AIDS-occasioned deprivation. This is not to advocate a rush for growth at any cost; growth which might, or might not, 'trickle down' to the poor. It is instead a plea to unshackle the economy by way of a more inclusive, trusting approach to development (Moyo, 2009) that, all things being equal, should help to buoy up the poor. As per Dichter (2003): "private capital is becoming the main fuel for development… Read large it is capitalism – the for-profit sector – that is now driving development in an area where heretofore the public and the nonprofit sector (NGOs), relatively recently allied with governments, had been in the driver's seat." This sentiment is echoed by Easterly (2001) when he asserts that, "growth has been much more of a lifesaver to the poor than redistribution."

LAW THAT KILLS OFF ENTERPRISE

China's approach to freeing-up its economy, and thereby uplifting the poor, involved doing away with laws that burdened business with unnecessary transaction costs. In Shanghai, for instance, the number of official 'chops' (stamps of approval) that were required to open up a business was reduced from over a hundred to just one (Yatsko, 2001). South Africa, by contrast, sometimes moves in precisely the opposite direction. The 2003 National Health Bill (NHB), as approved by the National Assembly, typified this trend. The example is a dated one but is used for illustrative purposes as it so perfectly exemplifies the controlling, mistrustful mind-set of government. It might also serve to explain why "almost half of the health professionals questioned in a study in 2008 said they were likely to leave South Africa in the next five years" (SAIRR, 2008).

The NHB contained a clause which stipulated that "a medical practitioner will only be allowed to practise his or her profession if the director general judges there to be a need." 'Medical practitioner' included "the biggest corporate businesses" as well as doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and so forth. A "certificate of need" would only be granted once "a host of criteria" had been met and would be valid for a maximum of 10 years. The certificate would not only determine that practitioners might conduct their professions but it would also stipulate where those professions might be conducted (Mail and Guardian, 2003).

This was the thin edge of a totalitarian wedge. That the clause was contested on constitutional grounds is irrelevant to the argument here. The point is that it speaks volumes for a certain type of meddlesomeness that the clause ever got as far in the lawmaking process as it did. It is symptomatic of a mind-set that is anathema to economic development. The Minister of Health defended the clause on the grounds that it would not only "promote good organization" but that it would "protect the providers" as well. Her justification was that it would prevent service providers from trying to operate in areas where the market was 'saturated' – environments where they might have lost their start-up capital.

In other words, the Department of Health, by means of recourse to law, wanted to shield medical professionals from their own bad commercial judgement – protect them from themselves. This strikes at the heart of a free market and was a lesson the Chinese came painfully to learn – that it is necessary for business failure to be possible, "real freedom to fail" (Klein and Hadjimichael, 2003; Stern, 2002). But, given the Minister's arguments, why stop at doctors? Why not tell legal practitioners where they can operate from? Farmers, accountants, storekeepers, freelance journalists, consultants…? The very same Health Minister subsequently turned her unwanted ministrations to private hospitals in an effort to dictate their pricing policies (SAIRR, 2007).

This type of intrusive legislation finds its echo in a whole array of restrictive labour legislation (racially-based quotas, minimum wages, equity plans, compulsory 'employment equity consultative forums') that is at least partially responsible for a flight of skills from the country unprecedented in its history. Even as early as 2003, the Deputy Foreign Minister, Aziz Pahad, was complaining that "wherever you go in the world now, South Africans are running the hospitals, South Africans are running the service industries like tourism. South African nurses are out there in their thousands. Teachers are out there in their thousands, architects, engineers…" (IOL, 2003). As anyone who has recently visited the Middle East will know, this still holds true (in an environment where, ironically enough, the Department of Home Affairs has ceased to collect emigration figures) (SAIRR, 2008).

The South African Institute of Race Relations reported that 800 000 South Africans, mainly economically active young white males, forsook the country of their birth between 1995 and 2005 (IOL, 2008). The question is why this should be the case. Why are they "out there", in Pahad's turn of phrase, when they could be 'here'? Granted that crime is a major contributing factor, might it also have something to do with discriminatory laws? A study published by accounting and advisory firm Grant Thornton in May 2008 suggests this is the case (SAIRR, 2008). Could it be then, that much of the 'post-apartheid' legislation, far from being pro-poor as was arguably intended, is in fact proving to be pernicious to the best interests of the poor?

Legislation should be aimed at running the country so that people can run their own lives and fulfill their potentials. South Africa has generated much promising development policy and legislation (Scheepers, 2000) but it is too often used to influence how people conduct their personal affairs instead of to create a context within which they can flourish.

CONCLUSION

Poverty has dimensions that go well beyond mere paucity of income. South Africa is falling behind in its attempts to reduce human deprivation levels largely due to the inexorable spread of HIV/AIDS. By stimulating pro-poor growth, the law could be used to ameliorate the impacts of HIV/AIDS. China offers valuable lessons in this regard. Unfortunately, South African lawmaking seems to have become unnecessarily preoccupied with soliciting political control through the imposition of crudely-conceived, arbitrary quotas and misguided labour legislation. This has been partially responsible for precipitating a flight of entrepreneurial skills which the country can ill afford. This situation will not be reversed until the law is used to create a pro-growth environment within which people, both the poor and the skilled, can self-actualize and give fuller expression to their capabilities.

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