

KAGISO TRUST WEBINAR
SUSTAINING CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE
THROUGH STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY COMPACT
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STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY COMPACT – BUILDING A DEVELOPMENTAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Kagiso Trust should be congratulated for taking the initiative to encourage discourse on the sustenance of civil society and community resilience. Against the backdrop of the multiple crises facing our country and broader global society, the temptation all-round is to focus on state and private sector initiatives to manage the Covid-19 pandemic and instigate economic reconstruction and recovery. The role of civil society gets ignored, as that pesky 'third sector' of society, which revels in narrow sectoral and issue-based campaigns.

Kagiso Trust's work in this area is commendable. I am certain that those who have had the opportunity to go through its papers (2020) on the *Covid-19 Community Resilience Survey* and on the transition *From Covid-19 Relief to Reassertion of the Transformation Agenda* will agree on the depth of the insights in these offerings. They speak to the sector's societal utility even under the most difficult conditions.

The point of today's discussion is not about developing strict definitions of civil society. One proceeds from the assumption that we are all at one that this refers to the collective of bodies and activities outside of government, party politics and business. In the context of Kagiso Trust's core mandate, it seems that we need to narrow this down even further, with special emphasis on those non-governmental organisations referred to in NEDLAC as the 'community sector'.

This presentation reflects on *State and civil society compact – building a developmental civil society*, and it proceeds from that conceptual understanding.

The starting point in this regard is that political power in any society finds expression in control over resources; formal institutions of government represented by the executive, the legislatures and the judiciary; and what Antonio Gramsci referred to as the 'cultural hegemony' around which societal consent is framed.

Civil society nestles largely in the category of cultural hegemony. While it interacts with the domains of economic and political power, it is an autonomous expression of societal consent or dissent in pursuit of the interests of its varied constituents.

Consent is fundamental to the legitimacy any polity. This ranges from the broader ideological and organising framework of society to the details of policies and programmes. In the absence of this, the only other route would be repression or, to use the irony in Bertolt Brecht's poem, *The Solution* (after the 1953 workers' uprising in the then German Democratic Republic: Poems 1913-1956, The Solution p440 Methuen London Ltd, 1987, Ed. John Willet & Ralph Manheim) when 'the people' have 'forfeited the confidence of the government...' would it not be easier 'for the government to dissolve the people and elect another'!

What then is the ideological and organising framework of South African society in the democratic era?

We can refer to the many noble injunctions in the constitution about democracy and the various generations of human rights: political, economic, social, gender, environmental and access to information. In social compacting terms, the starting premise of the settlement of the 1990s was the political compact, premised on the understanding that the political leadership would counsel patience on the part of the marginalised and engender a preparedness to contribute to restitution by the privileged.

Over the years, stability has been maintained because of general progress in improving people's quality of life: in education, health, job-creation as well other basic services. Obviously, not all citizens have been reached by these changes. But two critical currencies have helped sustain social stability, and these are hope and trust: hope that the progress in the neighbouring village would reach our own; and trust that the state is intent on progressively realising people's social rights and has the capacity to do so.

There have been many reversals on this journey; and the overall progress on economic equity has not been edifying. The levels of unemployment, especially among youth and women; the maldistribution of wealth and assets and growing inequality; the horrific pictures of sewage flowing in the streets of many settlements; load-shedding; the instances of rampant corruption even during the Covid-19 pandemic and many other ills – all these, underline the levels of social anomie in our country.

Quite clearly, the current economic, social and health challenges constitute a profound crisis which can imperil our polity in its entirety. The fundamental question is whether the leaders of all the social partners perceive of this as sufficient of a burning platform to nudge South Africa towards a social compact of higher rates of growth and development!

In the past decade, the need for a social compact has sharply arisen in relation to specific turning points in South Africa's political economy:

- In 2012, we seemed to have found the sweet spot – a eureka moment – with the adoption of the National Development Plan embraced by all parties in parliament as well as the corporate sector and most of civil society.
- During the middle of the past decade, the emergence into the public domain of the shameful acts of state capture galvanised large swathes of society in a campaign to inject life into a stagnating economy and, more critically, to defend democracy and demand accountability.
- At the end of the decade, after the 2017 ANC National Conference, there was euphoria around the hope for self-correction and societal renewal, combined with efforts towards compacting through the jobs and investment summits and other such initiatives.

However, by early 2020, we were experiencing the second technical economic recession in two years – even before the Covid-19 pandemic.

For us to be able to forge a state and civil society compact and build a developmental civil society, we need to understand why the post-2017 efforts at social compacting floundered. Why did these

initiatives not congeal into real united action? Why didn't they move the dial on economic growth and job-creation?

It can be argued that turning around an economy does take time, especially against the backdrop of ten years of mismanagement and state capture. But the failure of these initiatives was also due to the tendency to focus on detail, with a long list of actions rather than the most basic and fundamental principles.

We thus need a coalescence around essence as the starting premise of a national social compact and, indeed, one between the state and civil society.

We are all familiar with the evolution of civil society and its impact in South Africa's democratic era. This, in my view, can broadly be characterised into various phases of emphasis. There was the period of mass migration of senior civil society activists into the state and other centres of societal power. Among the remaining ones, a paradigm of 'oppositionism' took root, with political elites seen as people intent on doing bad. In this period and beyond, important campaigns were undertaken on workers' rights, the direction of macroeconomic policy, as well as health, education, local service delivery, gender rights and other issues – with many victories and defeats along the way. Added to these, are the quiet but important efforts in community welfare projects.

In the last decade, the campaign against state capture, with broad fronts forged across the board, was one of the high points of South Africa's civil society. In my view, the outcome at the ANC's 2017 Conference would not have been possible without that intervention. Post-NASREC, there is growing appreciation that, for society to renew itself and for resistance against accountability to be defeated, civil society should, in the same breath, critique and support the state.

The venture into this rather crude and truncated characterisation is meant to emphasise what is a critical point; and this is about the continuum in the operation of civil society: from oppositional activism (based on critique and protest); to facilitative activism (which takes the form of encouragement), and activism of critical support (to combine co-operation and contestation). For its work to be impactful, civil society has used mass organisation and mobilisation, the legal route, formal platforms of engagement with the state and business, and developmental projects.

In the context of all this, we cannot ignore the tendency among some elements within civil society to view their activism as a form of transit station on the way to formal party politics – with many from the #Fees Must Fall campaign, trade unions, and local service delivery protests, for instance, transiting into politics in the legislatures across the spheres – or the private sector. Handled opportunistically, this can encourage flash-in-the-pan radicalism which is more about show-boating. Yet, if handled properly, such transitions can help invigorate formal politics and the corporate sector by injecting new thinking and a new culture.

In the context of this continuum in activism, what should be the pillars of a social compact? How should the notion of a developmental civil society manifest itself in actual practice?

To answer this question, we need what was referred to earlier as coalescence around essence.

This includes an understanding of the fundamental issues in the global domain. Like other countries, we have to navigate changing global power balances, with real and contrived tensions in many parts of the world. Protectionism and the selfishness of vaccine nationalism are the stock-in-trade.

As a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, developing countries are experiencing a devastating slump and there is now a two-speed recovery in which they will lag far behind. Progress in reducing poverty has been reversed by *at least three years* (Financial Times: 2020). Last year, *32 of the world's largest companies* saw their profit jump by about US\$100 billion more (Oxfam: 2020). And the net worth of billionaires has skyrocketed, with one billionaire added every 17 hours in 2020 and the ratio of CEO pay to that of employees at Standard & Poor (S&P) 500 companies has shot up from 182 to 227 (Financial Times: 2021).

So unsustainable has this become that the IMF is calling for the rich to pay for the recovery efforts, partly through wealth and windfall taxes. It also argues that, in the current situation, as much resources as possible should be injected to drive economic recovery, without undue focus on budget deficits. It would seem that a new 'Washington Consensus' is in the making.

These global issues are important in their own right. But they assume critical importance also because South Africa is a global social laboratory on issues of class, race and gender.

It therefore follows that social compacting in our situation should have at its core, two main issues.

For a start, we need to have a common approach on the character of the social system we seek to build. In the typology of 'capitalisms', we have the neo-liberal Anglo-Saxon model, social democratic welfare states and the Southeast Asian developmental model, among others. South Africa needs a combination of a developmental state that leads all of society in pursuing consistently high rates of growth, and social democracy underpinned by comprehensive redistributive measures. This should be the foundational premise of a social compact.

The second and related element is about the objective of socio-economic policy. The National Development Plan (NDP) calls for a decent standard of living for all, which includes: employment; nutrition; housing, water, sanitation and electricity; education; health care; safety and security; as well as a clean environment. This concept, about the level below which no citizen should sink, needs to be agreed on as a national objective.

For there to be a meaningful and lasting social compact, the state itself should be developmental in orientation. And so, among the areas of focus for civil society should be to campaign for a state that has the ability to develop a vision and has the legitimacy and capacity to lead in its implementation. Among others, this requires a developmental pact with public sector unions. The Reconstruction and Recovery Plan adopted last year should be understood in this broad context. As to whether the Plan would take us to the targets set out in the NDP is a matter that should engage civil society's mind; and it should take part in monitoring and evaluation of implementation.

This is the organising framework around which civil society should define its role and work towards a social compact with the state and other social partners.

Of course, the most urgent tasks, under current conditions is to manage the Covid-19 pandemic and ensure that we extricate society from the current rut. There are many issues in the plan on which

civil society should more intensely apply its mind. For purposes of illustration, let us identify a few of these.

- On job creation, many public employment programmes have been initiated, with focus on youth and women. Is civil society monitoring these projects and ensuring that the intended beneficiaries are able to access them?
- On small and micro-enterprises, there were efforts during higher levels of Covid-19 lockdown to register these in the municipalities and provide support; and many of them are run by women. How can civil society improve the implementation of this programme?
- On energy generation, there are many initiatives to manage the crisis, and of course much more needs to be done. But shouldn't civil society be more active in protecting electricity infrastructure in the communities and in ensuring payment for electricity used beyond the free basic services; and if the free basic electricity programme is not being properly implemented, how do we correct this?
- On basic education, besides the commendable campaigns by Section 27 and work in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) terrain, many would agree that Kagiso Trust's Beyers Naude Schools Development Programme has contributed to improving performance where it is being implemented – the question is whether this partnership can be applied on a national scale!
- On informal settlements, there is the initiative about re-blocking. How far has this gone and what role can civil society play in ensuring collaborative implementation? Then there is the matter of access to land and the rights of people in communal areas, recently brought into sharp focus by the Ingonyama Trust and other judgements.
- The level of social dislocation in many communities calls for focussed campaigns around the state of the family, the challenge of drugs and provision of social welfare services in a partnership between civil society and the state.
- Lastly, for reconstruction and recovery to succeed, we need mass mobilisation around Covid-19 non-pharmaceutical interventions and vaccinations.

All these and other areas require joint and varied actions by a developmental civil society and other social partners. Of course, NEDLAC can play an even more important role in this regard; and the issue of whether civil society is adequately represented and optimally involved needs to be resolved. Do we need equivalent institutions at provincial level; and, in communities, is civil society doing enough to ensure citizen participation in such formal structures as Community Police Forums, Ward Committees, and the processes around Integrated Development Plans?

In conclusion, I wish to identify two existential matters critical to the sustenance of our polity. The first one is about accountability in relation to state capture and the resistance from those who want to bring down the temple with all of us inside. Is civil society mobilised to support state institutions in dealing with this challenge?

The second one is about finding the appropriate balance between sectoral interests and the commons. Strategic acumen implies an appreciation that, as in the public sector, the SABC and elsewhere, social compacting also requires compromise and sacrifice.

Thirty-six years ago, in 1985, when progressive sections within the religious community adopted the Kairos document, they characterised that period as 'dangerous time'; but also, a 'moment of grace

and opportunity'. Thus was 'liberation theology' entrenched. What is required today is 'developmental theology'; and more broadly, a developmental civil society.

In this way, we shall not so much build back better from the devastation of Covid-19; but build forward differently!

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