

OR TAMBO SCHOOL OF LEADERSHIP
YOUTH DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP PANEL
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14 July 2022

ORGANISATIONAL RENEWAL AND THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH

The issue of organisational renewal is an existential one for the ANC, and it should indeed exercise the mind of young progressives, because on your shoulders rest the prospects of success.

Let's start off with a truism: Organisational renewal is not for its own sake; it is meant to be a platform to facilitate the realisation of the movement's vision.

The ANC has historically, at least at the level of policy, pursued that which is in the interest of South African society, especially the marginalised. It straddles the widest array of forces that constitute the majority in society: black workers, the middle strata and entrepreneurs – across age and gender – and it seeks to build a united, non-racial, democratic and prosperous society. It has acted as the glue that holds South Africa together.

In common parlance, we are pursuing the best attributes of social democracy, that is, political freedom with social content; and a developmental state with the vision, legitimacy and capacity to lead socio-economic development.

In the context of a society struggling to deal with the fault-lines of apartheid colonialism, the decline or even absence of this school of thought creates a real danger of social fragmentation. And so, enhancing the movement's organisational integrity is fundamental not only in relation to the ANC's self-interest. It is critical to social change, social cohesion and social stability.

Why does this issue of renewal arise so intensely in this period? This is because South Africa's revolutionary movement is facing three fundamental problems.

The first one is about the speed of social change and the stubborn persistence of exclusion. The black majority has assumed political office; black professionals and entrepreneurs have been integrated into the economy of the internal metropolis (what some refer to as the 'first economy'). But the majority of the black population faces economic exclusion. Compared to 1994, there has been massive progress in providing basic services. But in recent years, the quality of these services has been declining. Movement towards a national democratic society has significantly slowed down.

The second challenge of the current moment is about combating systemic corruption and state capture which took root in the past decade. It is about strengthening the capacity of the democratic state to lead the process of change.

The third problem pertains to organisational deviations which have come to characterise conduct within the movement: social distance, arrogance, corruption and even violence.

Combined, these challenges have led not only to declining trust in the ANC; but also, to waning confidence in the democratic state. This happens as a delicate reformist government tries to manage a polycrisis – generated by Covid-19, the war in Ukraine, natural disasters and attendant socio-economic difficulties – which lends itself to opportunistic exploitation by those opposed to renewal.

Therefore, we are at a strategic moment of antagonistic combat between two countervailing impulses: intensification of the process of social change and the rule of law on the one hand and dissipation of social transformation and anarchy on the other: in brief, revolution and counter-revolution.

It is in this context that we should address the role of the youth in the project of renewal.

We are all familiar with the social demographics of this section of our society which constitutes about 40% of the population; and which straddles the range of classes and strata that make up South African society.

Data show that young people have, since 1994, experienced an improving quality of life, including literacy rates of almost 100% and the doubling of the number of those in tertiary education – with African students now almost three-quarters compared to less than half in 1994. Research shows that young people are more optimistic about the future than other sections of the population.

However, even before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and the current global economic crisis, the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion has played out more intensely among the youth. They constitute the overwhelming majority of the unemployed and their share and absolute number in employment has decreased since 1999.

As such, in spite of the demographic dividend in terms of a youthful population, South Africa is failing optimally to utilise the enthusiasm, vitality and brainpower of this generation. We are squandering the potential of young people to be, in the words of the 2017 Strategy and Tactics document, 'a lightning rod for positive disruptive change [especially during moments] of inertia and excessive risk-aversion'.

However, young people can also be used as shock troops of right-wing reaction. As with the lumpen proletariat in many parts of the world, young people do act as vigilantes against vulnerable groups such as immigrants, women and people of a different sexual orientation. They are pitted against each other in many senseless wars across the world. In other words, youth social agency is capable of misdirection

We need to keep this in mind as we reflect on the role youth can and should play in societal and organisational renewal.

There are many lessons from strategic moments during the ANC's own history from which we can draw. The most prominent of such moments was the 1940s when the newly-formed ANC Youth League intervened to revitalise an ANC that was virtually on its death throes.

The first form of intervention then was at the level of **strategy** when the League sought to deepen the movement's ideals not only of universal suffrage but also social transformation. According to the League's 1948 Basic Policy Document, this was premised on advancing 'the national liberatory creed' of 'African nationalism'.

The second level of intervention was on **tactics**: calling for militant action and rejecting the mindset of a leadership more inclined towards humbling themselves before the colonisers. The 1949 ANC Programme of Action and the mass resistance of the 1950s were a product of this.

The third level of the League's impact pertains to **leadership**, with young leaders in 1949 not only ascending to the National Executive Committee and the Secretariat; but also identifying what they perceived as allies from older generations with whom they could work.

The League's activists were able to assume positions of leadership in the ANC because they understood all these three levels of intervention – strategy, tactics and the science and art of leadership.

Now, let us examine the tasks of the current moment.

With regard to **strategy**, young progressives should be at the forefront of pursuing the twin objectives of social democracy and a developmental state. Among others, this means promoting the kind of economic growth that is geared towards absorbing the mass of the excluded, especially women and youth, into meaningful economic activities. Absorption of the unemployed workers we have, who are unskilled or semi-skilled, is fundamental. Special economic zones and industrial parks, reconfiguration of the agricultural landscape and massive support for small and micro-enterprises would be critical in this regard. Further, in order to address inequality, we need campaigns around a minimum wage, income differentials at the workplace, lowering the cost of living for the poor and a meaningful social wage.

My critique on the matter of strategy is that, in the current discourse, the logic of radicalism is couched in the narrative of black elites, for redistribution mostly to themselves. It is also couched in the slogans of state ownership – ignoring the fact that the fundamental question of political economy is distribution of national income rather than narrowly how the assets are owned. In other words, we should consciously avoid the pitfall of revolutionary slogans that can actually lead to the defeat of the revolution.

On the issue of **tactics**, the young progressives need to master the art of understanding the global and domestic balance of forces; and, in this context, identify opportunities and constraints. They should mobilise the widest sections of society around transformational objectives, what Antonio Gramsci calls hegemony or 'cultural, moral and ideological' leadership. They should strive to strengthen the state generally, but also specifically its capacity to reverse the impact of state capture and eliminate corruption. Young workers and professionals in state institutions, in particular, have a critical role to play in this, rather than behaving as silent observers as these institutions suffer the effects of corruption and sabotage.

My critique on the issue of tactics is around the emergence of a radicalism which claims purity and a 'wokeness' and 'cancel culture' that isolate revolutionaries from the mass of the people; equivocation in acknowledging progress made since 1994; as well as disruptive conduct instead of superior logic. Related to this is the infectious disease of the political opposition, that is, shallowness masquerading as reason. For instance, when faced with loadshedding, the demand becomes, 'dismiss this or the other person' rather than interrogating the root causes and proposing evidence-based practical solutions.

On the third level of intervention, which is about **leadership**, the youth of the 1940s rose through the ranks because of their qualities, premised on their capacity to enrich the movement's strategy, their mastery of the art of articulation and the foresight not to be imprisoned in the echo chamber

of factional politics. Of course, that generation had a healthy dose of ambition which was underpinned by ethical conduct and respect for the image of the organisation – which in the recent period has found expression in Conference resolutions, among others, on strengthening the Ethics Committee and the step-aside rule.

Learning from that generation, young progressives of today need to pay focussed attention to activism in the branches: ensuring their functionality, their enduring links with communities and recruitment of the best among community members into ANC structures. Needless to say, it is also critical to strengthen structures of the SACP and COSATU and ensure that these organisations also renew themselves, to improve their work especially among workers who are today poorly organised and woefully divided.

My critique on the issue of leadership is that some young progressives today seem to have swallowed hook, line and sinker the terrible culture of sins of incumbency: politics as the cycle of money flows – to buy votes so as to ascend to leadership positions in order to make more money. Greed then reproduces itself, with insidious expectations of celebrity lifestyles – for holidays and parties in Dubai, the French Riviera and Ibiza.

As I conclude, I wish to identify three other critical debates that the progressive youth movement may want to enter, based on serious research and reflections.

The first one is about South Africa's electoral system beyond the current stop-gap measures in response to the ruling of the Constitutional Court: in the continuum between 'pure' proportional representation and a constituency-based system, is it correct to argue that one system necessarily leads to better accountability; and what implications would direct election of a President have on power balances within the Executive and in its relation to the legislature and the judiciary?

The second debate is about the mooted amnesty for those who orchestrated and benefitted from state capture: what implications would this have for the rule of law and accountability; would such an approach pass constitutional muster; and why are we not focussing instead on the standard plea-bargain mechanism?

The third debate relates to electoral processes within the ANC, in particular the proposal that all members rather than delegates at conferences should directly elect the leadership. Of what value would this be if the quality of membership remains as it is now?

I am using these issues to again underline the assertion about three levels of intervention at which young leaguers of the 1940s were so adept: enriching strategy; applying appropriate tactics; and acting as leaders of the moment and not of tomorrow.

We must also remember that renewal of society and the organisation is a protracted process. There will be ebbs and flows, successes and failures. But we cannot relent. It is especially in your interest and that of generations after you that we dare not fail!

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