

Wealth gap challenges business

By Marc le Chat



Christo Nel

AMONG its other socio-political ills, South Africa also has one of the worst cases of wealth distribution in the world, a problem which the business community will have to seriously address if it is to have some say in the "new" South Africa.

This point was stressed by Christo Nel of the Consultative Business Movement in a recent address to an Idasa "Future Forum" in Durban.

He pointed to shocking levels of poverty and inequality hampering a successful outcome: 65 percent of black households are below the poverty line, one in 27 blacks stand a chance of acquiring land (even to rent), there is an average of 14 people per black household, and 45 percent of all blacks are unemployed.

"It does not augur well on a social level," said Nel.

Furthermore, blacks own only two percent of all assets and occupy less than three percent of all managerial positions. Seventy percent of black people have no electricity supply in their homes and more than 70 percent spend over two and a half hours commuting to work daily.

The lowest-earning 40 percent of the South African population earn less than 10 percent of all income.

"Like it or not, as representatives of the affluent society, business is at the bridge-head. In this type of environment we have to respond," Nel said.

South Africa was too busy catering for the top income groups. "Every road and shopping mall built does not create wealth - it takes present wealth and trades with it. The result is that our people do not have the technical skills to take our economy into the next century - Verwoerd's nightmare has come true.

"Right now we need 2 000 more managers. By the year 2000 we will have to fill 200 000 technical skills positions. The current need is for 100 000 new artisans while only 23 000 are being trained".

In practice, the business community tended to hide behind an apolitical stance or acted individualistically, continuing to operate according to an unaltered investment pattern.

"And so we have a situation where the GDP per capita is getting smaller while the JSE is one of the best performing stock exchanges in the world! It's an irreconcilable paradox which cannot exist."

What must business do?

To begin with, they must empower their workforce in both skills and information. "We must fill fresh positions from inside and implement policies of life-long employment, from bottom to top, as well as create dignity in the workplace - saying to a worker: 'you are a name not a number'."

"We'll also have to look at the debilitating problems of homelessness and the way it affects productivity. Our society is like an over-washed, over-ironed old shirt and it is crumbling at the touch."

He said business would have to ask how it can make its infrastructure available to build a new South Africa.

Nel advocates a "creed" whereby the role of business will be to strengthen black political structures, the unions and the community.

He said it was pointless squabbling over a future type of economic system if business was not even prepared to tackle the problems of the present one.

To make it work, business must roll up its sleeves and be prepared to retire from many of its ivory tower misconceptions.

Marc le Chat is a freelance journalist.

TWO days before the August 6 talks in Pretoria, 400 delegates representing the ANC, Cosatu, Sayco, the UDF and various organisations throughout Natal gathered in Durban for a consultative conference on the Natal violence.

Top ANC leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Joe Slovo, Thabo Mbeki, Gertrude Shope, Jacob Zuma, Walter Sisulu, Pallo Jordan and other national executive committee members, were present.

The size of the ANC delegation was an indication of how seriously they view the violence and the extent to which they are prepared to commit themselves to solving the problem. The conference, co-chaired by the ANC and Cosatu, lasted a full day and continued late into the evening.

Nelson Mandela briefed the delegates on the national negotiations and gave a report-back on what the joint working group between the ANC and the government had achieved so far.

He reported that the ANC had appointed a special sub-committee of four members of the NEC who would be permanently in place to address the issue of the violence in Natal.

He made it quite clear that the ANC was not prepared to tolerate a situation where the government spoke of peace yet carried out acts of aggression against people in Natal. Later on in the conference Mr Mandela also clarified the fact that the ANC did not intend to negotiate a settlement to the Natal prob-

ANC leaders face up to violence in Natal

By Steve Collins

lem in Pretoria. He said the ANC would support an approach which included people from the affected areas.

A crucial discussion was held on what a suspension of armed struggle would mean for self-defence. It became quite clear that the ANC was not saying that people did not have the right to defend themselves if they were being attacked.

On the question of talks with Inkatha, the conference agreed that a meeting between Mandela and Buthelezi was not the "be-all and end-all" of a peace process in Natal. The feeling came across quite strongly that solutions to the violence required a multi-strategy approach. The democratic movement reaffirmed it was prepared to talk peace and was not afraid or unwilling to talk to Inkatha. However, there was a general feeling of frustration over the extent to which talks or attempts to talk in the past were undermined by Inkatha.

The conference resolved that the government must now accept responsibility for ending the violence in Natal.

It was said that there could be no free political activities in Natal while apartheid structures, in particular the homeland system

around KwaZulu, remained in place.

The following programmes were adopted:

- A delegation led by Mr Mandela and consisting of the NEC

and the ANC leadership in Natal would meet with Pres De Klerk in August to discuss the violence.

- A special working group on Natal should be established urgently and would comprise NEC members, delegates from Natal and government representatives. Its task would be to receive reports on the violence and monitor it.

- There was agreement on initiating a broad based peace conference that should be convened in such a way to ensure the participation of all organisations committed to ending violence. This conference should not be limited to the Natal specifically but should also look at other violence in South Africa.

- Agreement was reached that all avenues possible should be explored to meet the five-person delegation from Inkatha who were involved in the initial peace talks.

The time spent by the ANC negotiating team in Natal before the conference gave them a very clear sense of dynamics in the region.

Just before the conference there had been various incidents in the Transvaal, indicating that the violence was developing a national dimension.

Steve Collins works on the Community Conflict Monitoring Service, an Idasa project.