

# The road ahead



Dr Boraine

The rapidly changing political environment has made it necessary for Idasa, and many other political groups and organisations, to examine afresh their role and future direction. Idasa executive director DR ALEX BORAINÉ gives an outline of the course the institute intends following.

**IT IS** wholly appropriate in a rapidly changing environment that Idasa, like so many other organisations, will need to review its role regularly. In doing this, it must avoid becoming so preoccupied with its own identity that it is prevented from doing any good at all.

After much discussion and debate within Idasa itself, as well as wide consultation with other organisations, we have concluded that the institute, in its present form, still has a meaningful role to play and contribution to make in South Africa. Idasa's staff has been engaged in a process of reviewing and revising the goals of the institute, and we recently concluded this process by identifying at least six possible ways in which Idasa could continue to play a significant role.

## Critical Ally

In a time of competing loyalties and alliance-building, it is important that Idasa should maintain its independence. This will not be easy and we will have to be careful that this stance is not interpreted by some to mean that Idasa is neutral on the great issues of our time. In addition, there is a downside which should be acknowledged. By maintaining an independent stance, Idasa could lose out in helping to shape the policy and strategy of the major actors in the lead up to negotiations.

On balance the disadvantages of taking sides outweigh the advantages of being actively independent. In particular, it will make any attempt for Idasa to influence those opposing negotiations extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Obviously in seeking to maintain its independence, it does not follow that individual members of staff should not be able to exercise their own choice of political affiliation.

As a critical ally of the transition process, Idasa will be well positioned to encourage those actions and decisions which assist the transition towards genuine negotiations and

to discourage actions and attitudes which stand in the way of the transition process. In other words, Idasa should be seen as a critical ally of the transition process and not simply as a critical ally of any single political party or grouping.

It should also be understood that to be a critical ally of the transition process is not merely to sit on the sidelines and criticise. It means that Idasa will quite deliberately focus on key areas of transition politics. It should emphasise at least the following:

- transition and economic justice
- transition and education
- transition and civil rights
- transition and the media
- transition and grass-roots involvement

In the period of transition, these key issues should inform much of Idasa's planning and its efforts for the foreseeable future.

## Interpreter

Against the background of considerable confusion in contemporary South Africa which leads to uncertainty, fear and opposition, it is important that those who are work-

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ing directly in the political field, which spans both the government and the ANC, should exercise the role of interpreter. This is not an easy role to fulfil, but a very necessary one.

To interpret does not mean to explain away or to justify. It means rather to help people to understand why the government on the one hand is doing certain things and not others and why, on the other, the ANC or any other group involved in the transition, takes certain actions or remains inactive in certain areas.

To interpret is also to try and put the transition in historical perspective. This will mean at least indicating the costs involved in significant change and also the constraints which flow from the legacy of apartheid.

In seeking to interpret, Idasa's regional

structures come into their own. It is a considerable strength to have access to the grass-roots in most of the major centres of South African society. The importance of the interpreter's role for Idasa is highlighted by the government's inability to educate its own constituency.

## Innovator

One of the distinguishing features of Idasa has been its willingness to undertake high-risk projects which most other organisations could not or would not attempt. A classic example of this was the Dakar Conference in 1987. It brought together key members of the African National Congress and leading whites, mainly Afrikaners, in order to begin the process of demystifying an organisation which by the nature of its considerable support inside South Africa was destined to play a major role in negotiations towards a non-racial, democratic South Africa.

A further example of innovation was the conference arranged by Idasa which brought together leading Soviet Union Africanists, members of the ANC and leading white academics in order to clarify the role of the Soviet Union in the Southern African regional conflict and to understand at first hand the meaning and the extent of perestroika.

A more recent example of the role of Idasa as an innovator was the meeting held in Lusaka in May this year between the military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe, and close to 50 participants from inside South Africa.

Idasa has always sought to anticipate the future and to make possible certain events which inevitably would have to take place but were delayed either because of prejudice, history, isolation, fear or basic resistance to the idea itself. There still remains pioneering work to be done in order to assist the transition process.

## Facilitator

One of the key roles – and probably one of the most important tasks – undertaken by Idasa at its inception and in its short life has been that of facilitator.

There are those who would argue that this

role is no longer necessary because of the new attitude of the government and in particular the unbanning of political organisations which now allows them to participate fully and freely in the process. However, I do not share this view and believe that there is going to be considerable facilitating required, particularly at local grass-roots level. There remains scepticism, suspicion and distrust which has to be broken down. Idasa is well placed to continue its work as a facilitator in this regard. Indeed, where breakdowns occur, as they will occur, Idasa may well be asked to assume the mediating role between groups and individuals.

In understanding its role as a facilitator, Idasa will have to take account of the shift away from old definitions and emergence of new definitions. One example of this is the division between Parliament, (which was seen as the insider) and extra-parliamentary forces (who were seen as the outsider). As long as the ANC was outside the process and Mr Mandela was locked out of possible negotiations, Idasa's focus was rightly placed on that movement and on that particular individual. But now the old definition no longer holds. The ANC, ironically, is the insider and although the Conservative Party is the official opposition in Parliament, it is very much an outsider as far as the transition process is concerned.

Idasa should take very seriously its commitment to "the outsider", whoever that group might be in one time or another in our history. Although it presents many difficulties, it is my view that Idasa ought to take seriously its responsibilities towards conservative white South Africans in order to encourage them to become participants in the irreversible shift towards a new South Africa.

In the same way the Pan Africanist Congress and the Azanian People's Organisation are also on the outside and it does not augur well for a peaceful and united South Africa in the future if they continue to remain there instead of being involved in the transition process or the negotiations themselves.

## Educator

Almost all of Idasa's work, formal or informal, can be seen as fulfilling an educating role. Now more than ever it ought to give flesh to this concept.

In particular it ought to plan constructively and regularly to give people at every possible level a greater understanding of what democracy really means, not only in constitutional terms, although this is important, but more especially as to how it affects their daily lives and the institutions of which they have been a part. Essentially there exists a massive task of building a democratic culture in South Africa. Without the foundation of this democratic culture on which to build,

South Africa will be presented with even more difficulties than are inevitable in future developments. Idasa's media department, and in particular in its monthly magazine, *Democracy in Action*, seeks to present a mirror of its activities. In doing so it does far more than recording the projects. In the very act of describing these projects, the magazine raises important questions relating to democracy. It is of the utmost importance that at a regional and national level, Idasa should concentrate a large measure of its resources in encouraging the growth of a democratic culture.

This raises a very important question which Idasa has begun to wrestle with but has nowhere near reached finality on. The question is: who is Idasa's constituency? For obvious reasons Idasa has concentrated very much on white South Africans and in particular on those in influential positions who in turn would be able to influence others to move away from apartheid.

However, the chairman of the board of trustees of Idasa, Dr Nthato Motlana, has raised a very pertinent challenge.

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begin to think of joint projects.

## Active Participants

Without detracting from the work that Idasa has done in the past, it could be argued that its role up to now could be likened to that of an impresario. In crude terms, Idasa has stage-managed events but has sought to act very much as facilitators. That is to say: its leadership and personnel have not been the prime movers. It has sought to bring together mainly Afrikaans-speaking whites with the leadership of the ANC. At various other levels, and inside South Africa, Idasa has brought white and black South Africans together into a common experience and a common encounter over a wide range of subjects. Inevitably staff members have become involved in the debates and discussions but they have tried to facilitate rather than become active participants in the strict sense of the word.

This is not to suggest that Idasa staff have



**Idasa staff at the planning meeting:**

(Standing) Van Zyl Slabbert, Melody Emmett, Keith Watrus, Sue Valentine, Alex Boraine, Charles Talbot, Paul Graham, Patrick Banda, Nic Borain, Gary Cullen, Mark Behr, Monde Mtanga, Dave Screen, Bev Haubrich, Hermien Kotzé, Sonia Schoeman, Thaabit Albertus, David Schmidt, Paul Zondo (Kneeling) Noel de Vries, Bea Roberts, Silumko Mayaba, Marianne Hilscher, Kerry Harris, Ian Liebenberg, Paddy Clarke, Max Mamase.

What he has said, in essence, is that while Idasa should continue its work among whites, it should enlarge its vision and therefore its constituency to specifically and concretely seek to include blacks in its normal programmes. This means in effect that Idasa should give careful thought on how it structures its programmes and where those programmes actually take place. In a sensitive climate it would be pure folly for Idasa to attempt to enlarge its scope without considerable prior consultation. This question of constituency and the need for a democratic culture in every area of South Africa has been raised with Mr Nelson Mandela, but the consultation will have to take place far and wide and over a period of time. While Idasa has the ability and the freedom to organise in the white community and has involved blacks in all its projects, it does not have the same freedom to do this within the black community. However, if the need is there – and I have no doubt that the need is there – and if the key leadership in the black community believes that there is work to be done and that Idasa can assist in doing some of it, then we could

stood idly by and allowed things to develop or to deteriorate as the case may be. Nor is it to suggest that its role has been entirely passive. Nevertheless, the focus has been to take the role of midwife rather than of father or mother; seeking to enable something new to be born out of the coming together of participants who have, for reasons of history, ideology and law, been on opposite sides of the debate.

Sooner or later Idasa will have to face the question as to whether or not it will have to go beyond the role of being the impresario and actually begin to participate actively.

This is an extremely difficult and sensitive question, and is probably a remote possibility and even a dangerous one to contemplate. But if it decides to continue its previous role and not go beyond that, it should be a considered view seen against the background of rapid change, and the institute should have reasons why it has decided to act one way or another. Idasa's course of action should not be a matter of default but rather a deliberate consequence of serious analysis, wide consultation and deliberate decision.