

Apathy and blame fester in new democracies

“people start looking for someone to blame”. There was also the danger of misunderstanding – “that in a democracy you can do what

you like and that only the majority can be right.”

Commenting on the difficulties of trying to reconstruct Poland, she said it was always easier to be in opposition and to denounce things than to assume responsibility. “It is much easier to deconstruct what is happening than it is to create a new reality.”

Kuratowska said that education for democracy was necessary at “every level” of her society. People needed to understand what exactly was meant by civil society.

“The general feeling among people is that they have no influence on the decision-making process – even though we now have a democracy. We had a very unpleasant surprise in May 1990 during our first local elections when only 33 to 53 percent of people voted – it was a very apathetic turnout.”

However, she noted that despite her pessimism, there had also been many successes in Poland since 1989. It was ironic that the vote of no-confidence in the Polish parliament that had been passed so recently came after figures showed that for the first time, industrial productivity had increased during the first quarter of 1993. It was also the first time the unemployment rate had not risen.



Zofia Kuratowska, Polish medical professor, activist and politician.

asm and people flocked to the polls on election day.

However, once a government was in power and began to implement economic reforms, differences quickly emerged.

“We must remember, democracy is a difficult system: during the transition the expectations within society are very high. In Poland, people believed there would be prosperity and a better life. When this did not happen immediately it led to frustration, disappointment and apathy. The expectations are always greater than the real possibilities.”

Another danger, said Kuratowska, was that of extremism from the left and right –

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IN A sobering and moving address, at Idasa’s Education for Democracy conference, Polish senator and a member of the once-underground Solidarity movement, Professor Zofia Kuratowska, spoke of the harsh realities confronting a new government after years of repression.

Such was the state of Polish politics that the day before she spoke at the conference she heard that the Polish parliament had been dissolved. “So I am no longer a senator nor a member of any senate foreign or health policy committee,” she said with a smile.

Before proceeding with her talk, she said that while she could not feel responsible for the actions and behaviour of all Poles, she wanted to record how sorry she was that it had been a Polish national who was allegedly responsible for the assassination of Chris Hani.

Kuratowska reminded the conference that Poland had been the first central European country to succeed in changes without bloodshed in 1989, and despite the troubles it was experiencing now, Poland was still the most developed country in central and eastern Europe.

In June 1989 when democratic elections were held, there were practically no political parties, except for the weak Communist Party. A national civic committee and local civic committees were organised to prepare for elections amidst much popular enthusi-

Keeping an eye on the horizon

I THINK there is a central message in doing education for democracy: that is that we need to keep one eye on the horizon and one eye on what is right in front of us. That means living with the tension of what we have now and what we want to have.

It means building our education around the realities of people’s lives – violent lives, insecure lives, intolerant lives – so that we can work towards a non-violent society, a tolerant society, a more secure society.

The starting point of education is where people *are at now*, not where we as educators want them to be.

Right now, elections are uppermost in people’s minds. So if we go into a workshop or training course talking about democracy

Extracts from an address delivered at a Voter Education Fair in Johannesburg recently by ALISON CURRY of Idasa’s Training Centre for Democracy.

as an abstract concept without connecting it to people’s lives and without talking about the role of elections, people will simply switch off.

But, on the other hand, if we just talk about voter education – about how to make a cross – then we run the risk of another Angola, where after the crosses were made, no-one accepted the results and civil war erupted again. We simply cannot afford



another Angola when already there has been so much bloodshed and so many lives lost in the struggle to reach this stage of the transition process.

If we are working to build a democratic country, it is not some mystical magical product “out there” that we will finally attain after elections. If we are building democracy we need to be democratic *while we build*. We need to live democracy, not just talk about it. We need to give people the