

Pushing democracy à la United Nations

Among key international models for training for democracy is the so-called "Model United Nations" conference. Canadian researcher JOAN DEVRAUN, who has done some of the groundwork for Idasa's recently established Training Centre for Democracy in Johannesburg, explains the concept.

While the phenomenon of Model United Nations (MUN) conferences is prolific in North America with almost every university hosting its own, it has only just started in Europe and remains virtually non-existent in Latin America, Africa and Asia, with the notable exception of the International MUN in Tokyo.

Essentially an MUN is a realistic simulation of the actual United Nations and its various organs. The participants are students. MUNs usually simulate the activities of the Security Council (SC) or General Assembly (GA) and its committees. Student participants assume the roles of diplomatic representatives to the UN and consider UN agenda items.

Ideally, through role playing, they will acquire a greater understanding of global issues and the complexities of the international system. Although the GA and SC are the most frequently simulated bodies, virtually any international organisation can be adapted to a model conference.

For example, the Nebraska MUN, hosted by the University of Nebraska, is one which covers a very broad and all-encompassing agenda. In 1992 the following agenda items were discussed by the GA: disarmament, the plight of aboriginal peoples, the situation in South-East Asia, Aids and immigration, Zionism as racism, prisoners of conscience, the Kurdish question, the situation in the occupied territories and ethno-territorial sub-nationalism.

The agenda items for the Economic and Social Council (Ecosoc) were international banking and limiting the profitability of munitions manufacturers. In addition, there was also an Ecosoc commission on ecology which discussed a range of issues in separate working groups.

This agenda should probably be less ambitious and more focused. What becomes apparent from considering the agenda of the Nebraska MUN, however, is that any issue of interest to the UN or one of its many specialised agencies could be addressed.

For example, if Idasa's Training Centre for

Democracy hosted Africa's first MUN conference and simulated the governing council of the UN Development Agency (UNDA), any variety of relevant developmental issues could be addressed by student participants. Pressing current issues concerning democratisation and development, for example, could be dealt with realistically by youth in an MUN format. Certainly if the resolutions passed by MUN delegates are adopted by the real UN it would not be the first time. This was the case with the national Canadian MUN which I attended as the "ambassador" to Afghanistan in 1987. The benefits of an MUN conference in South Africa would, in all likelihood, be similar to those experienced by participants around the world.

Ideally, the MUN serves as an educational forum. In order to persuade other member states, the student "ambassador" must not only know his or her assigned country's position on the issues but also exercise persuasive writing and speaking abilities and exert leadership and diplomatic abilities. Ideally, the MUN experience provides the student with an appreciation of the skills of caucusing, negotiating, consensus building and compromise.

In contrast to the Nebraska MUN, the European International MUN conference (TEIMUN) in The Hague has a more concentrated and, in my estimation, superior agenda.

Having attended TEIMUN in July 1990, playing the role of judge on the International Commission of Jurists, I can attest to it being a superb experience. TEIMUN was established in 1988 by The United Nations Association of the United States of America (UNA-USA) and is now organised by the Dutch Students' Association.

UNA-USA is in fact "more than willing" to assist in setting up an MUN component to Idasa's training centre, which is an option the institute could seriously consider. Invitations to Africa's first MUN could be issued worldwide to past participants of other international MUNs.



Contralesa's David Malatsi: "Large families are a form of security".

with which women have to cope – lack of schools, transport, health care and, added to that, oppression under tribal laws and culture.

It would seem that for now, the political process is the single major factor frustrating efforts to find solutions to the problem.

religions in SA

constitution). Raymond Suttner of the SACP advocated a "secular state with...many religions" and said the SACP recognised the importance of religion in people's lives, but felt it would be imperialist to retain the current preference given to Christianity.

Prof Willem Saayman of the Pretoria Central branch of the African National Congress said the ANC supported as little state intervention in religion as possible. He believed South African society would only be free if it allowed its citizens to pray to the "unknown god".

Kerry Harris is a regional co-ordinator in Idasa's Pretoria office.