Social reformers face no mean task

THE government of national unity has defined some admirable social goals, such as the elimination of poverty, and has articulated many of these in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Progress has, on balance, been better than can be expected under the circumstances. Presidential projects have been initiated and others await the necessarily slow and cumbersome passage of government – green papers, white papers, cabinet approval, standing committee hearings, parliamentary debate and so on. The important point is that there is progress, not paralysis.

Problems exist, one of which is that at a general level the government faces a classic social democratic dilemma. It is trying to mobilise an economy that is privately owned and privately run to embrace social goals. Simultaneously, this economy must remain profitable and competitive, a problem which is exacerbated by globalisation and its consequences.

What makes the South African case doubly difficult is that the state administration is not well geared to service the RDP. Proper delivery presumes co-operation and bureaucratic persistence from the civil service, neither of which seem to be readily forthcoming. It also presumes the existence of functioning provincial governments and managerial expertise at local government delivery end, which, as we know, are far from being in place.

Instead of recognising the progress made in the face of certain obstacles, or of simply providing an account of the obstacles, sections of the press have focused on the salaries and perks of elected and appointed officials.

This, of course, is a legitimate preoccupation, especially when the new government commits itself to openness, transparency, accountability and good administration. The contrast between the lifestyle of the new political elite and the misery of the squatter camps makes for some powerful and painful imagery. The people who need the most have to wait the longest, while those who need the least are instantly gratified.

It does not help much for government officials to be hurt, bitter and defensive about the contrast implied without providing the public with a convincing philosophy about the structure of state salaries. Full disclosure is not enough. One wants the benefit of an argument. But having said that, the obsession with salaries has the deeply undesirable effect of confirming negative stereotypes about what happens to people, particularly black people, when they begin to run a country.

It is also a distraction from the real problems of a democratic South Africa. A hesitant and truculent civil service must be persuaded to genuinely throw its weight behind the RDP. The development ethos of the RDP has to become part of the bureaucratic culture of every department of state, such that the bureaucratic state also becomes a developmental state.

Down the road, the intended beneficiaries of reconstruction and development must ultimately receive their just desserts, an outcome that depends on an efficient, competent, honest and dedicated delivery route.

We must show some appreciation and insight into the extraordinary difficulties faced by social reformers within the state. It must also be pointed out that efficient delivery is not all that matters. It is also fundamental that the process of social reform be conducted in a democratic fashion.

I am worried by all the injunctions to the effect that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) must shape up and rationalise to assist in RDP delivery. This smacks of central planning and of making civil society an extension of the state. Some NGOs and CBOs should and must service the RDP, if they have the capacity and inclination to do so; others play a different role and have varied functions.

For the sake of democratic values and practices, the latter should remain independent of the state.

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Idasa's mission:

► *What*   To promote and consolidate democracy and a culture of tolerance.

► *How*   By designing and facilitating processes and programmes that transform institutions and empower individuals and communities.

► *Why*   As the basis of sustainable development.