

Namibia at 20: Time to rethink “development”

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As Namibia celebrates her first 20 years of independence, there is a need to expand the analysis of Namibia’s achievements and challenges and include the structural constraints that continue to uphold a very skewed distribution of wealth and income. For the past 20 years, Namibia held relatively peaceful parliamentary and presidential elections, although several political parties alleged irregularities and fraud during the 2009 elections. By and large, Namibia’s election campaigns remained shallow on substantive issues as key challenges such as mass unemployment, poverty and inequality were treated as mere side issues by political parties. Even when they were afforded platforms to present their ideas, they seemed entrapped in common sense arguments and unable to think “outside the box”.

However, the fundamental challenges facing Namibia are structural and will not just disappear. The unemployment rate has reached 51% in 2008, according to the latest figures available. Given the reported retrenchments in late 2008 and 2009, it can safely be estimated that our unemployment now stands at over 55%. Last week, the deputy minister of youth pointed out that every year about 30 000 young Namibians leave schools and tertiary education institutions, while only about 9 000 new jobs are created.

The UNDP’s latest human development report of 2009 indicated that Namibia today is the country with the highest levels of income inequality in the world. These figures point to a fundamental crisis and thus the governor of the Bank of Namibia, Tom Alweendo, called for a “paradigm shift” in order to achieve the goals set out in Vision 2030, which outlines the Namibian government’s ambitious development goals. For the past 20 years, Namibia has left economic structures unchanged and pinned its hope for development on market-driven initiatives and private sector investments, particularly foreign investments. Despite achieving what mainstream economists would describe as “macro-economic stability” with relatively low inflation rates, low deficits and moderate GDP growth, social progress has been slow. Alweendo is certainly right when he points out that Vision 2030 cannot be achieved by continuing down the same path.

Alternative options?

The past 20 years have clearly shown that inequality and mass unemployment will be perpetuated unless decisive steps are taken to redress them. Namibia’s particular development challenges are not unique as many of them are also confronting our neighbours in SADC and elsewhere in Africa. Thus regional and continental approaches towards finding solutions are promising initiatives. One of the most comprehensive set of alternative policy proposals is contained in the book “Alternatives to Neo-Liberalism in Southern

Africa” (ANSA), which is an initiative of labour movements, activists and academics in the SADC region. The book draws on Africa’s experiences of the past 30 years and proposes an “auto-centric development”, based on meeting local human needs and using local resources. ANSA calls for a dynamic, participatory democracy, grassroots-driven regional integration as well as a selective de-linking from the global economy to create more conducive conditions for Africa’s development. ANSA further proposes the establishment of new, progressive alliances on the continent and globally and new approaches towards science, technology, education and gender relations. It also points out that systematic support must be provided to the informal economy, which currently caters for the majority of working people in Southern Africa.

Changing economic policies, structures and approaches is not merely a question of having the “right ideas” but also requires political commitment. Such a commitment cannot be taken for granted as there are vested interests at play. The state is not a neutral agency but a creation of history and a product of struggles between various social groups with vested interests. Its role and orientation depends on the balance of forces in society and thus the task is for people at grassroots level to transform existing states into independent, truly developmental, accountable and ethical states.

Building a movement from below

The most fundamental step in this process is to build a movement from below that can shape the state. As in other African states after independence, the strongest community based organisations such as the students’ movement and trade unions were demobilised to a significant extent. This was made possible due to the confidence that such movements had in liberation movements once they became governments of independent states. However, in most cases the hopes and aspirations of the majority were disappointed, while ruling parties retained political control. On the other hand, most community-based mass movements never regain the strength they had during the “struggle days”. Thus they now face the task of rebuilding a movement knowing that any serious initiative to change the current development paradigm requires political “conscientisation” and mobilisation among working people (including workers, peasants and the unemployed) at grassroots level. Such mobilisation must be based on a clear understanding of the current crisis and the possibilities for an alternative development strategy. Grassroots mobilisation has to include a constant engagement with the state to transform it into an ethical, responsible and developmental state that acts in the interest of working people instead of those that ANSA calls “the Empire” (i.e. organisations representing the interests of the industrialised states and global capital such as the G8, the World Trade Organisations, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank etc). As it will be almost impossible for individual countries like Namibia to resist the pressure by “the Empire” on their own, there is a need to build an effective regional block in Southern Africa that can achieve higher levels of self-reliance and self-determination.

ANSA considers three basic pillars on which an alternative development strategy has to be based. These are:

- a) The “social factor”, meaning how people’s basic human rights are safeguarded and how vulnerable people are protected against poverty and exploitation.
- b) The “democratic factor”, meaning how the political system functions, how decisions are made and implemented, how resources and opportunities are distributed and how justice and fairness is achieved.
- c) The “global factor”, meaning how the system works at global level, how decisions are taken and implemented, how global resources are controlled and distributed and how this global system affects Africa.

An alternative strategy has to deal with all three factors at the same time. It cannot succeed without human rights for all or without free political participation or without a fair distribution of resources. An alternative strategy cannot succeed without limiting the influence of “the Empire” at the global level. Therefore, ANSA calls for the promotion of social and democratic factors by fulfilling working people’s material and social needs and by creating a system of governance that is democratic and accountable. At the same time, there is a need to eliminate (or at least minimise) imperial interventions by the global actors such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

A human rights approach to development

Development is not just about economics but must also include human rights, community rights and the right to national or regional self-determination. It also deals with issues of equity and fairness in the distribution of resources at local, national, regional and global levels. The provision of social services such as water, energy, health and education cannot be guaranteed for all if they are left to market forces. Social services are not matters to be privatised as they are part of basic human rights and states have the responsibility to secure them for all their people. The state must, therefore, be developmental as well as ethical, responsible and accountable to the people.

Development must lead to a better life for working people and eradicate poverty. This can only be achieved if development is based on the promotion and protection of human rights, which include:

- Political or civil rights (also known as “blue rights”)
- Economic rights (also known as “red rights”)
- Social and cultural rights (also known as “green rights”)

ANSA argues that all these rights must be ensured and defended at all times and there can be no compromise, for example, granting only political rights while economic rights are violated. Taking all human rights seriously means addressing the distribution of wealth and income in our societies. ANSA proposes a “livelihood approach” to human rights because they are not just individual rights but also include community and national rights. Important aspects are the right to national self-determination (as enshrined in the United Nations Charter) and the right of local communities to develop their own lifestyles and livelihoods.

A neo-colonial economy and possible alternatives

After 20 years of independence, Namibia's economy still shows all the characteristics of a classical neo-colonial economy. Its exports consist mainly of unprocessed (or semi-processed) minerals, diamonds and fish while the vast majority of consumer goods are still imported. Namibia's former colonial power, South Africa, still accounts for a large percentage of the imports but in recent years, Chinese and European imports increased as well. The proposed Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are still resisted by the Namibian government as they will further open Namibia to products and services from European corporations while making a more endogenous economic growth path almost impossible. Namibia's key economic resources like land, minerals and fish are still controlled by foreign corporations and foreign citizens to a large extent and thus the independence of Namibia can only be described as partial. Economic independence is certainly still a distant dream unless Namibia takes decisive steps to encourage and promote local control over economic resources with a view of providing the benefits for the majority and not just a select few.

A key strategy in terms of job creation and economic development has to be the systematic promotion of manufacturing. This needs to be embedded in a regional strategy to establish value addition and value chains in Southern Africa. The starting point has to be the beneficiation of local raw materials as well as the promotion of local suppliers to meet consumer demands for food, clothing, furniture and other basic goods. Measures such as requiring retailers to source an increasing part of their goods and services locally are steps in the right direction and Namibia has begun to take such measures.

Another key aspect is to reduce the dependence on foreign capital and to become very selective when dealing with foreign investors. Some of the South-East Asian countries have set a good example in this regard, showing that a coherent industrialisation strategy can lead to skills- and technology transfer while building local capacities.

Such ideas, coupled with redistributive measures to narrow wage gaps and the introduction of a Basic Income Grant (BIG) for all certainly run contrary to the neo-liberal ideology of globalisation. Thus Namibia and her African neighbours will have to strategise how best to increase meaningful African economic co-operation while selectively de-linking from those aspects of globalisation that prevent endogenously-driven development and the transformation of Africa's neo-colonial economic structures. The power of the drivers of the current globalisation process such as the transnational corporations (TNCs), their key allies in government (G8), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) will have to be challenged to create global conditions that are more conducive for the achievement of social justice and to overcome poverty and mass unemployment. Thus new progressive global alliances have to be built while struggling for the necessary changes at national and regional level.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need to revive constituency-based working class organisations in Namibia (and Africa in general) and to give new meaning to the famous slogan of the Mozambican revolutionaries “*A luta continua*”, which captures the crucial point that struggle is a daily business, a continuous process. The struggle for basic services, for example, is part of the everyday battles. When governments privatise services for personal gain of the elite or under pressure from the IMF, World Bank or donors, they affect people’s lives immediately – not at some future date. In Ghana and South Africa, for example, community-based organisations have taken up the battle against water privatisation. These are battles that have to be fought today and they are crucial to pave the way for more fundamental changes that are needed to overcome exclusion, poverty and inequality.

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