Faculty of Humanities
Helen Joseph Memorial Lecture 2009
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Rethink civil society, democracy and development: A global perspective

To pay tribute and to honour one of the most amazing women that was part of our liberation struggle. I feel a little sense of unreality being asked to give this lecture in her honour, because as a young activist I was often in the audiences when she spoke and when I came back from the exile in 1987, I was privilege to actually meet her the second day after I came back in 1990.

This weekend, in the University of KwaZulu-Natal, as it’s now known, there was a commemoration of 9 activists, from Durban, who were brutally murdered, 21 years ago, by Eugene de Kock and the Vlakplaas Unit. The third force unit that some of you might remember. One of the people that we commemorated was one of my closest friends and comrades, somebody called Lenny Naidoo. The last conversation I had with Lenny Naidoo as we both went into exile, he asked me a question. “What is the biggest contribution that anyone of us can make to the course of humanity?” and I said, “that’s an easy question, its giving your life. He said “you mean, going participating in a demonstration, getting shot and killed perhaps, and becoming a martyr.” And I said “I guess so”. He said that’s the wrong answer. “It’s not giving your life, its giving the rest of your life”. I was 22 years old that time. Lenny was a vegetarian, an environmentalist, the first feminist man a met and he was way a head of his time.

Two years later when I was in exile myself and I heard of Lenny’s murder, I had to think deeply of what was in that message. And what he was saying essentially is the struggle to end global poverty, the struggle to ensure meaningful democracy, the struggle to ensure gender equality and human rights and every aspects of human existence. These struggles are marathons and they are not sprints. And those of us that have had the luxury to be touched by the message of social justice and have the ability to contribute to ensuring that there is greater equity, justice and fairness in the world, the biggest contribution we can make is dedicating the rest of our lives. Helen Joseph, I believe, symbolizes this better than most South Africans did. Right until the very, very end she had the energy and the passion and she continued to contribute.

The transition from apartheid fundamentally changed Activist culture in South Africa, in some ways positive, in many ways negative. I think it can be best captured in a conversation that I had with a young student activist, one of the most militant from my grouping in Durban. When I bumped into him driving a really ‘spanky’ car, and he was a little bit uncomfortable about his new wheels. He said, but Conrad you need to understand, I a communist at heart, a socialist in orientation, it is just that right now I’m a capitalist in practice. So that’s a by way of introduction.
In the early 1990’s there was a slogan. “Think globally, act locally.” What was behind that slogan was irrespective of the issue that you were trying to tackle at the local or national level. You needed to better understand how global process, global discourse and global institutions, constrain what you can or cannot achieve at the local or national level. However, one of the ironies of the moment of world history that we are living in, is that precisely at a time, when many countries were securing Electoral Democracy, for the first time, or after a long hiatus, like ourselves in South Africa or the successes states of the former Soviet Union or various countries in Latin America that where coming out of military dictatorship. While that was happening in the 1990’s, real power around a range of issues was actually shifting from the national to the global levels. Therefore, it was not surprising that an organization called Development Alternatives for Woman in a New Era, began to argue by the end of the 1990’s, if we think globally and act souly locally and if real power around trade, environment, even around HIV/AIDS, because the pricing of life saving pharmaceutical drugs is not determined at a national level, it’s determined through an organization called WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organisation). We in particularly, the developing world are then removing ourselves from where power relieve resides. So the logic was, perhaps we need to think local or nationally in terms of what are needs are and if real power sits with the World Bank, the United Nations and The World Trade Organisation, then perhaps that’s where we should also be acting.

In reality the choices are not one or the other. Today civil society is put under huge pressures to make strategic choices about how much energy you put at the local, provincial, national, global level and increasingly the importance of regional institutions. Whether it be the European Union, the Murcosoi in Latin America or in our case, the African Union. In fact what is pretty clear for developing countries, if we do not think very seriously about political and economic integration, we do not stand a chance in this increasingly competitive world. The juice behind the European Union integration is there partly because of recognition on the part of the European political elite, is that they do not stand a chance, and they got is some time ago, with the resurgent’s of China, India or what we now call the brick countries, Brazil, Russia, India and China.

Part of rethinking civil society is about where we actually put our energies to get the kind of changes that we actually need. The bottom line is, even though power is shifted to the global level, most of the global institutions that we have to engage with are stuck in the geopolitics of 1945, particularly the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations. So if you take the United Nations, which for most of these institutions is seen to be a more democratic and more accessible, even when you look at the United Nations you’ll find, it’s democratic deficit is deep and disturbing. If you think of the security council of the United Nations, five countries have a permanent seat and a veto. If you think about France and the UK, given their population size, there is no
justification today for them to have a veto. In 1945, when they where colonial hegemons, controlling large amounts of the worlds population, perhaps there could be warp logic based on the numbers of people they control, that they should have such an enormous power. Today the only justification of the veto is the fact that they have weapons of mass destruction. But if you use that as a criteria then you need India there, you need Pakistan there, you need Israel there and maybe even North Korea.

The problem we have is that all these global institutions are suffering from a legitimacy deficit, a democratic deficit, a coherence deficit and compliance deficit. By compliance deficit, I mean, there are these huge, expensive, global summits that happen on various issues. As fast as the ink dries after the heads of states sign up to these various declarations, they have forgotten the commitments that they have actually made. If you go look at all inter-governmental meetings, whether it's G8, the Kyoto protocol, whether it's UN summits on gender you will be extremely lucky if you can show a 25% compliance rate. So within this context, we have to recognise that we have got a failure of global democracy and the reality is, even if every African country for example had good, competent, anti-corrupt, efficient politic leaders, they can not actually make the kind of progress that is needed to rebuild the economies, because of global trade practice and policy. They can not actually make progress, because of global currency manipulation and management is outside they control. And the list is much longer than that.

Let me talk about the moment that we find ourselves in now. Some people after the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989, talked about a Peace dividend. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan said that now that the Cold War is over all the resources that were going to the Cold War, spying and military will be diverted to address the real issues that humanity faces. However, in reality military expenditure has gone up and what was supposed to be an explosion of democracy actually was an explosion of countries holding elections. There is a difference between the holding of elections and actual, real, vibrant, active democracy. There is a tendency to tick of a box if you have an election, irrespective of how many few people voted, how corrupt is was, how manipulated it was to proclaim, yes democracy has been achieved. Globalisation, the economic side of it in the Post Berlin Wall period was suppose to deliver progress to much more larger numbers of people, but in reality as we look back now we can see that in fact there have been significantly more losers than winners. Importantly, the gap between the rich and poor has grown drastically between every single nation on this planet as well as between rich and poor nations. The important thing is that, that gap is unsustainable. If we continue with the level of inequality on the same trajectory that we are on at the moment, without reversing it, in 30 years from now, the current challenge that humanity faces will look like a Sunday morning picnic.
The very moment that we find ourselves in now is being described as the *Perfect Storm*. This is a convergence of a food price crisis, fuel crisis, climate crisis, financial crisis, poverty crisis and so on. Yet the response of the most dominant countries in the world, including South Africa, because South Africa now sits in the G20, has been really trying to use the same tools, logic and thinking that got us in this current crisis to actually solve this crisis and clearly it’s not going to work. The other problem is that there is a fragmented way of dealing with this different crisis’s rather than thinking in a more integrated way. In sum, what we still have is domination and a blind faith in the market as a all encompassing solution to everything and what some have called a culture of *Casino Capitalism*.

Against this backdrop then, the reality that we face in human terms, is that every single day on this planet 50 000 woman, men and children die from preventable causes, with the majority of them being on this continent. Just to be clear, every day on this continent we loose 7 000 people from Malaria alone. Every single day on this continent we loose 6 000 people from HIV/AIDS alone and about 1 500 from Tuberculosis, just taking three big killers. Much of these lives can be saved and I can tell you this much if those statics were happening in Western Europe and North America the G8 and all the other powers that be would long ago had actually found the resources to reverse that trend. So we in the Global Called Action Against Poverty, for example, have describe what we experiencing as a daily silent Tsunami or a passive genocide and this calls for us to rethink democracy, the role of civil society and development.

Rethinking democracy; the bottom line is, we have been seeing a deepening democratic deficit in many countries around the world. It’s not even; there are some countries that have ebbs and flows, ours has many promising things, given where we’ve come from. It’s important to become vigilant right now, about whether in fact we are excited about the form of democracy or the substance of democracy. In many countries elections have actually become preordained elite legitimation exercises. What we call democracy in many cases is better described as Liberal Oligarchies, which is controlled by the few, in real terms, where voters actually become like a vote bank basically legitimasing the status quo and government and the institutions of government, as described by a Caribbean Politician, have to a large extend become ‘Parasitic Oligarchies.’

The tendency to reduce democracy to the singular act of casting a ballot once every four or five years in electoral terms has to be strongly and vigorously opposed. We have to begin to insert more strongly the notion of participated democracy and to reduce the idea that the main role as a citizen in a democracy simply to vote once in a while is to actually suck out of democracy its fundamental value. So what we are seeing in many countries around the world, majority of countries, fewer people are voting. There is declining memberships in politic parties and declining internal democracy in most political parties. There’s an extremely restricted media environment as there’s been a heavy corporatisation of media. I’ll try and be al little bit academic and quote one
French Sociologist, Louis Althusser, who was a bit of a mad guy. None the less, he had a very good breakdown of what he called *The Depressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatus*. Essentially when we think about the *Depressive State Apparatus* we think of the army, policy and the more direct actions of violence of the state, but basically arguing that in fact the more subtle *Ideological State Apparatus* in terms of its power to control and manipulate. In terms of the media, notions of family that get legitimated and so on and so forth, is a key challenge that those that seek a meaning full participated democracy have to deal with.

The other weakness with democracy right now; if you ask yourself. What is the most important act that any Government, whether local Government, Provincial Government or national Government actually engages in, here or any where else? It is the act of determining the budget for the year. If you look at the process in many, many countries, of how priorities around budgets are actually determined. You will actually find that it’s a very narrow process, heavily driven by senior bureaucrats and in fact in many cases even parliamentarians. Many countries have actually very little real purchase on influencing budget making processes. In terms of what civil society has brought to the table and pushed for. There is a city in Brazil in a state as well, called Porto Alegre, where there’s this idea of participatory budgeting. This has got some track record now, where there’s a city and province wide process where various parts of civic society and citizens are given a change to help their government to actually shape budget priorities. We have to begin to rethink about focus, because in a budget you can see how much a government values woman, peace, children, education, development and so on. We have to begin to look at the budget as a point of contestation.

The problem we have now is compounded since 2001, after the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, and the advent by the Bush administration of the so called War on Terror. Firstly, the idea of War on Terror, it’s not only strategically, tactically, ethically and so on flawed it’s also grammatically flawed, because how do you wage a war on a tactic? But that’s another conversation for another time.

The impact of that is that, as CIVICUS’s done work on, at least 60 countries in the world in the last eight years, have past legislation constraining freedom of association, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, making it much more difficult for civil society groups to actually participate in public life. We have seen racial and religious profiling become the order of the day. We have seen detention without trail. When we were doing work in Zimbabwe over the last couple of years, you know sometimes what we used to hear from the people in the Zimbabwe government. They used to say to us; why is CIVICUS and all these human rights groups putting so much pressure on us, because we are not like the CIA engaged in Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and doing extraordinary rendition. We are not like Gordon Brown and the UK government trying to pass a
42 day detention without a trial law. The bottom line here is the countries that claim to be the promoters of democracy have in the last decade, severely undermine the democratic enterprise as well as the human rights culture. I have given a blank cheque to various times political leaders who are not democratically aligned to actually then pass very serious legislation which will take longer to reverse, because already there’s a fight back in countries with stronger democratic traditions and where there’s more space to fight back. What I worry about is that there are many countries with weaker and shorter democratic traditions where people have been so brutalized and I can give you many examples from personal work that we have done at CIVICUS, for example, Ethiopia, two of the leaders of the global call of action against poverty there, where in prison for two and half years, charged with Genocide and Treason, because they where handing out torches during the elections to the monitors. If any of you who have done election monitoring you know you start early in the morning, finish late in the evening and if you were working in rural areas, electricity is not always guaranteed. The state where able to bring an informal, and while they where handing the torches, and they said, “Well, you rather hold on to this torch, because if this government wins this election again all the light are going to be cut”. Now even if they said that, it does not justify two and half years in prison on a charge, I mean eventually they were acquitted. That story sadly is not an exceptional story. The important thing is, you probably have not heard much about this, because the UK and US government and their allies, are so selective in the outrage against anti-democratic acts, so because they absolutely need the Ethiopia government, given the geopolitics of the region, where Ethiopia is and because of its so called War on Terror they can literally get away with murder. And incidentally I can confirm the Ethiopian government has all the best up-to-date intelligence monetary equipment that the United States have provided to them.

Within this context then; how does civil society think about it self? Now, the one challenge for civil society is that there’s a definitional challenge. If I ask everybody in this room to take a peace of paper and write down, Civil Society is...and we collected it, I guarantee you we’ll have at least about 50 different answers. So let me start on a light note on this. A Scottish civil society leader was addressing a group of business people, and saying civil society and NGO’s are important and so on. An exasperated business leader got up and said, “you know you are going on and on about NGO’s and civil society. What is it really?” and he equally and in an exasperated way responded, “well, if you want to understand what civil society is all you have to do is understand Christopher Columbus. When he set out, he didn’t know exactly where he was going. When he arrived he didn’t know exactly where he was. When he got back he didn’t know exactly where he had been, but he had a huge impact on the world and he did it all on somebody else’s money.”

More seriously, one problem we have with the definitional question is that NGO gets conflated with civil society or used interchangeably and it’s important to
recognise that the NGO is the term we use in South Africa are not for profit organization or voluntary organizations and so on, are only a part of civil society, Trade Unions, Faith based institutions, social movements, informal independent media and so on. Depending how you see it the University environment actually overlaps quite strongly with that definition as well. One of the challenges for civil society in rethinking its role is to begin to develop the ability to work across all of these different categories and to find common ground. Sadly, much as civil society groups often preach for the need of unity, the inability to focus on the considerable number of things that unites civil society and respectfully disagree on the smaller finer distinctions on tactics and policies and so on, is a huge problem. If I can give you a simple example, from the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, which is probably the biggest civil society set of movement, it has trade unions, religious groups, NGO’s and so on. The contradiction between Feminist and faith based institutions in the same room. So like the feminist community within the movement wants very explicit language on reproductive rights, a woman’s rights to choose. Now if you get that language then most of the religious folks are out of the door, because some where in some books it says it’s not a good thing. However, most of the folks in the religious community will find common cause with feminist on domestic violence, on other forms of gender based violence, on economic empowerment and so on and so forth. So in one meeting in Beirut, in 2006, I had a challenge moderating the session where the whole thing almost fell apart, we sent six representatives of the feminist group and six representatives of the religious group and we told them not to come out until they sorted out their problems. So they came out with the language of Global Call to Action Against Poverty supports Reproductive Health. So it was less of the feminist wanted, more than what the religious group wanted, but they both could live with it and that is part of what we have to begin to be able to do. To disunite around issues that are important, of course they are important, but to fail to actually work around those things where there’s agreement. I would say that from my experience at home here in South Africa, that tendency is certainly a major part of our culture as well, in terms of the civil society movement.

The other important thing is that the evolution of the notion of civil society is not an unbroken intellectual threat. Sometimes we talk about civil society as if it’s like a new concept, but already during the Scottish enlightenment, in 1767, one Adam Ferguson, wrote and essay on the history of civil society, in 1767. Then we know Heigel, Marx, Grumpski and I think Grumpski probably for most South African activists in terms of embracing civil society language that he probably brought the ideas of civil society into the South African kind of debate more than any of the other thinkers did.

The modern day usage though of civil society is a contradictory driving impulse. Part of it is driven by anti-Marxist Eastern European activist, like those that came out of the Vaclav Havel from the Check Republic and then Latin American Neo-Marxist. Of course there are people in other continents, but if you look at where
the real energy was, those were the two competing energies. Here in South Africa for example, even when term NGO came in 1990’s, when our exiles were coming back, NGO was not a term that we used in South Africa. We talked about service organizations, alternative organizations and democratic organizations. It was never part of our lexicon until the early 1990’s and I remember being in East London at the National Development forum the first time convened by the ANC department of Economics. I remember somebody getting up and saying, “I’m not an NGO, don’t call me NGO, I’m an AGO” and people said, “What is an AGO?” and he said, “Anti Government Organisation,” because that was a sense of identity.

How do we move forward then in rethinking civil societies role? Firstly, there is a challenge that we dodge quite often and that is the question of values, because in many countries and much of the discourse we talk about civil society as if they are by definition the good guys. But if we interrogate civil society then you actually come up with the sense that all the contradictions in society and the sense of society reflect it selves in the voluntary expressions of the organised citizens, being that society. When I started at CIVICUS, I was addressing a meeting in the southern parts of the United States and I was waxing and waiving about how great civil society was and how important it was to balance government influence and the market influence and so on. Then somebody got up and said, “I’m disgusted by your perspective, because how can you coming from within the South African liberation movement, come here and stand and wax and wave so uncritically about civil society, when in our context the Klu Klux Klan is part of civil society.” So I said, “How is the Klu Klux Klan part of civil society?” So I was told that they are non-profit, their non-governmental, their membership based, apparently they internally reasonably democratic and they work on voluntary basis to advance their interest. So, there is a huge issue about what values does civil society…and therefore there is term now about uncivil civil society. So in Indonesia for example, in the name of civil society the Christian and Hindu minorities have been attacked and brutalized in certain places, by what is in legal terms a non-governmental organization. So those are the kind of issues that we have to challenge.

More importantly there’s a huge attack on NGO’s at the moment. The American Enterprise Institute, which is a think tank, which is almost a personal think tank of Goerge Bush and Dick Cheney, convened a conference couple of years ago called 2003, with the title Holding the unelected few accountable. Basically they said civil society undermines democracy, undermines national sovereignty and it was one of the few times in my life that I issued a statement that read almost saying as a CEO of a big corporation, that is Nike, because Nike also got attacked, for actually cow towing to NGO advocacy in terms of some of its labour practices in Indonesia and the end result of that was setting up of a website that you can visit called ngowatch.org, where all the bad NGO’s are supposedly listed and I’m glad to say that CIVICUS and Greenpeace are both listed on it.
The key issue about rethinking the role of civil society is that most governments are comfortable primarily with the service delivery role of civil society groups. So if we can think about the role of civil society as being a macro; pushing for governance change, mezzo; pushing for policy change and micro; delivering direct services and if you just where to do a percentage allocation of how those resources play themselves out, still I would say at least 80% of investment is at the micro level, maximum 15% at the policy change level and about 5% at the governance change level. So if tomorrow Father Christmas came and gave every civil society group a 5 000% increase in their budget for delivery, they will go from reaching a small number of people and they might multiply their delivery five or six times, but in fact they will still not be getting any where near eradicating a particular problem that they are addressing. That is way it is critically important that we push our governments to be willing to allow greater space for civil society to be engaged in the question of policy influence.

Now, putting all your eggs in the policy basket also doesn’t get you too far. Try to think of during the Anti-Apartheid struggle, if we were trying to change an education policy. How far would we get trying to change an education policy given that policy that gets made within a particular political paradigm and frame work? So if the governance at the macro level is wrong, than in fact we have to actually be putting our energies into governance change and policy. I’m not saying that service delivery is not important. Service delivery and direct provision of services saves lives, helps people get more dignity in their day to day lives, creates opportunities, but if we are honest and critically honest we know that the amount of people that the capacity we have to deliver is still much, much smaller than the amount of need.

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It’s been growth without equity. It’s been growth that has actually intensified inequality in most societies around the world. We are living in a world where there’s a serious over consumption, in a certain number of countries in world. Just to give you a quick statistic. What Western Europe en North America spends annually on pet food can provide the entire African content with three nutritional meals per day. What the European Union spends in subsidies to farmers for every single cow is £2 per day. Half the people on this planet live on less than £2 per day. Just, I’m seeing somebody who I know is very animal sensitive and I just want to say that I have nothing against pets or cows.

The issue here is the inequality that exists between the north and south is unsustainable and if we were to deliver the life style of the rich in the south and let’s be very clear, the consumption pattern of the rich in the developing world is just as problematic as the consumption of some of the general practice in the developed countries, but if we were to deliver that lifestyle for everybody on this planet we would need the equivalent of seven planet earths and we’re not going to find that any where. So part of how we deal with now the climate change
challenge is to insure that we address these challenges in a more integrated way, for example we can turn this current global crisis into an opportunity. If the kinds of money that has been mobilized to bail out banks, if we put it all together, we are talking in the region of $20 trillion, raised in about a period of 18 months. To cancel all of third world depth, just to give you a comparison, would be just over $500 billion and for years now we have been told whenever we’ve campaigned for depth cancelation for poor countries that $500 billion its a hell of a lot of money and we’ve discovered in the last year that in fact it’s actually small change when there is political will. Our governments have to begin, in the developing world to change the terms of the discourse.

I want to quickly round up with a few comments about Africa. The Global Call Action against Poverty has been saying, Africa is one of the richest continents underneath the ground, in terms of our natural resources, historically, presently and for some time to come. Precisely, because we are so resource rich, in literature it’s called The Resource Curse, that’s probably why we were prime for exploitation and so on. But, even if when we to talk about aid which commitments get made never delivered or partially delivered, but still our leadership still engages in the conversation as if we are asking for charity when in fact what we should be talking about is historical redress. The 0.7% target which rich countries committed to give to developing countries was made in 1970. When Nelson Mandela and I launched the May Poverty History Campaign in 2005 in Trafalgar Square, he said that 35 years is a long time to wait for less than 1%.

The basis of our conversations with the rich countries has to be on the basis of justice and on the basis of fairness and right now I think climate change and the climate catastrophe we find ourselves in is another expression of injustice. The poor countries of the world that have been least responsible for the climate catastrophe that we find ourselves are paying the biggest price already. In the interest of time I can’t run through it, but the list is long, in the terms of the impact already. It’s not something’s that’s going to happen in 10, 20 years from now. Already in the Pacific Islands, in parts of Africa, in Kenya, not just the snow mountain but also desertification and so on. We have to begin to recognise that it cannot, it absolutely cannot be business as usual. Environmental challenges that we face now, offers us the best possibility to brake down the dichotomy between North and South, but it requires political will on the part of rich nations and their leaders to actually bring much, much more to the table.

Yvo de Boer, the UN Climate change negotiator, a few weeks ago said that asking developing countries to agree to various cuts and carbon and so on, without the rich countries putting a serious financial package to help to adapt, is like asking somebody to jump out of plane 30 000ft high and saying “don’t worry somewhere down the line when your are about 15 000ft somebody will give you a parachute.”
We will not be able to advance these things if in every country in the world we do not breed new life into democracy, new life into citizen participation and when we think about rethinking the development paradigm, which I would argue is broken, we have to also recognize that its has become far to technocratic, far to bureaucratic and in fact the push for measurement, output, benchmarks and so on, which is fine, but when it becomes a fetish, when it becomes the end all and where innovation, creativity and the core purpose. Where you start thinking that development is simply a delivery of a set of products, rather than a process. Then we have a problem and those that would argue against that, I would say, think about the words of Einstein, when he once said, “not everything that counts can be measured and not everything that can be measured, counts.” And that is what’s been happening.

To conclude, I think, for African civil society in particular, the challenge we have is that on many, many countries on this continent we have a serious tension with our governments around human rights, around gender equality, around democracy and around anti-corruption efforts. What we have said to our governments is that we would stand shoulder to shoulder with you to fight in the global forum for debt cancelation, for a fair climate deal, for the aid that was promised and for the conditionality’s that was associated with the aid to be reduced and eliminated, but you can not blame history, colonialism, etc, etc for not making progress on gender equality, for not eradicating corruption, for not ensuring a respect for human rights. If we are brutally honest that far too often we are far too complaisant and accepting on some of the most horrendous acts of violation that people on this continent actually face. We let ourselves down, but we also let down, freedom loving, human rights loving people, else where in the world who would actually like to support us.

Thank you very much for your kind attention and thanks once again for the University of Johannesburg for inviting me.