



Praxis

- Analysis
- Media
- Events & Action
- Discussion
- CCS Publications

CCS Events

- Seminars
- Wolpe Lectures
- Workshops & Conferences
- Films

CCS Libraries

- Online library
- Research Reports
- Image Library
- Media Archive
- Resource Centre

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About CCS

- The Basics
- Centre People
- Centre Visitors
- CCS Reports
- CCS Pamphlet

CCS Research

- CCS Grants
- Energy Advoc
- African Integ
- Economic Ju
- Social Movem
- Social Giving
- General Noti

The State of the Nation

"Percy Ngonyama 6 February 2006

Thabo Mbeki's neo-liberal state of the nation address at the highly militarised opening of parliament last Friday, was a further blow for the poor masses, who the corporate-owned media had made to believe that Mbeki's speech would lift them out of misery.

While re-committing South Africa to market-friendly economic policies, he failed to outline specific programmes to meaningfully deal with the country's worsening poverty and underdevelopment. The SA's 'have-nots', who have suffered severely in the last ten years as a result of government's conservative economic policies, should therefore brace themselves for more hardship.

It is very hypocritical for parliament to have chosen the theme "All shall have equal rights"-derived from the Freedom Charter- given the sad reality that the annual opening of parliament and parliament itself are a very good reflection of growing inequalities between the rich and the poor.

The annual event has become a Hollywood-style fashion extravaganza for a few rich. The SABC's fashion commentator skilfully scrutinized numerous trendy outfits worn by the elite on the ANC's Black Economic Empowerment gravy train and the country's fat cat parliamentarians-whose function in Mbeki's technocracy has been reduced to merely rubberstamping unpopular policies.

Despite SA's worsening levels of poverty and inequalities, Mbeki, as a result of recent surveys, is very optimistic and hopeful that the economic policies are taking the country in the right direction. Unfortunately, reality on the ground paints a very gloomy picture.

As widely expected, economic growth and government's 'Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative' [ASGISA], featured prominently. This, and other government's neo-liberal initiatives, have seen South Africa's ruling politicians, 'prostituting' themselves to the financially well endowed corporations and the markets that they control in an attempt to attract the much craved foreign investment, with dire consequences for the masses.

ASGISA sees increased exports as fundamental for economic growth and the projected six percent annual growth rate in the next few years. However, in recent years, the country has managed to drastically increase its exports, but this has come at a heavy price for the working class. While output growth has increased, employment growth has declined in major sectors, such as manufacturing, business services, agriculture and mining.

As the Cape Town based Alternative Information and Development Centre [AIDC] points out, export oriented growth also means increased competition which, in many instances, has meant cost reduction which leads to unsafe working conditions, retrenchments and cutting of working hours and wages.

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A large proportion of the public is, even after 12 years of so-called democracy, without the basic needs guaranteed by our internationally acclaimed constitution which celebrates ten years this year. While Mbeki, may have managed to fool many with phrases such as “people centred” and “accelerated delivery”, his government’s anti poor economic policies speak volumes.

Indeed, as Mbeki himself conceded, in yet another one of government’s desperate pleas to the private sector for investments, “the years of freedom have been very good for business”. Life has never been this good for local and international capitalists. Amongst other things, they have benefited handsomely from government’s annual tax cuts.

At the expense of the poor, the ANC government has put too much reliance on the private sector. The problem with this however, is that the private sector’s primary aim is to increase profitability. Private companies are not accountable to no one, but shareholders. South Africa, with its heavy apartheid induced services backlog cannot afford this situation.

The Expanded public works programme (EPWP), which government sees as THE solution to the worsening unemployment crisis, relies heavily on small, medium and large corporations for infrastructure development.

The EPWP-government’s response to the prevalent unemployment virus and skills shortage- is being touted as a brilliant strategy-, which, we are told, will result in 1 million job opportunities in the next five years.

EPWP, however, has proved to be a major fiasco in many parts of the country. It has been characterised by wide spread corruption and cronyism. Also, the jobs are very temporary and pay next to slave wages.

Moreover, given the country’s 41% unemployment rate [using the broad definition], the EPWP is just a drop in the ocean. Only a fool or a liar can therefore claim the programme will significantly improve the lives of the poor.

Upcoming celebrations on June 16 and August 09 marking the 30th anniversary of the Soweto youth uprising and the 50th anniversary of the women’s march to the Union buildings, respectively, mean very little for the majority of women and youth who, as a result of government’s policies, are confronted with extreme poverty on a daily basis.

It is estimated that 70% of the unemployed are young people. Most have never worked in their life. Only about 14% of those graduating from tertiary institutions, each year, find secure employment in the formal economy. Yet, none of our so-called ‘experts’ see the connection between this hopeless situation and youth involvement in crime, survival sex, substance abuse, etc.

Instead, in true South African-style, the government plans to deal with the symptoms and not the causes. Mbeki mentioned a plan to improve resource allocation within the justice system to ensure that “crime does not pay”. The fact that a large majority of those overcrowding our prisons are arrested for what most sociologists view as “poverty related” crimes is immaterial.

As the country will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the women’s march to the union buildings on August 09 1956, except for a few ANC aligned, the majority of our women live under conditions most would consider unsuitable for their pets.

Should the success of government’s so-called women and youth empowerment programmes not be measured by the number of women and youth that have been lifted out of the life of poverty? Phumzile Mlambo

Ngcuka's appointment as deputy president and the increasing number of women members of cabinet has not translated in a better life for all women. The empowerment of young ANC aligned people has also not changed the lives of the youth.

Because of government's strict fiscal discipline, and Mbeki and Manto Tshabalala-Msimang's AIDS denial, the life saving anti retroviral drugs are only available to a fraction of infected persons-mostly women and youth-at government hospitals. Only about a hundred thousand of about six million HIV/AIDS patients are on anti retroviral medicine at public institutions.

Is it therefore not an insult and insensitive for Mbeki to suggest that we should be proud of this horrific situation?

While Mbeki is optimistic that, with increased private sector investment, poverty will be halved by 2014. His government's pro rich developmental agenda can only exacerbate the current situation.

Opposition parties, who have, in the backdrop of electioneering for the March 01 local government elections, portrayed themselves as an 'alternative' to the ANC, whilst having raised a few minor misgivings about Mbeki's speech, are in full agreement with the overall anti-poor capitalist agenda.

The failure to acknowledge that it is the top down capitalist policies of the ruling party that breed corruption and poverty, give the lie to their claims.

The complacent Mbeki boasts that 7 million children and 12 million other persons are on social grants. The fact that government's meagre social grants are hardly sufficient to pay for outsourced and privatised basic services, let alone put food on the table and send kids to school, is not a matter of serious concern.

The assertion that South Africa can play a positive contribution towards "global peace" is undermined by the fact that the state-owned arms manufacturer, DENEL, continues to export arms to dictators and countries at war, thus fuelling global armed conflict. On its website, the company describes corporate globalisation, which is, undoubtedly, a nemesis of many global citizens, as a wonderful opportunity to increase its markets and profit margins.

SA's ruling politicians and proponents of ASGISA do not see DENEL's growing involvement in the international arms trade as a major obstacle towards "global peace", but as crucial for economic growth.

Furthermore, South Africa cannot claim to be committed to the resolution of the Palestine-Israeli conflict. To the detriment of the oppressed Palestinians, the growth obsessed South African government has legitimised the oppressive Zionist regime by signing trade deals with it.

Certainly, there is an urgent need to conduct an intensive nationwide debate of government's economic policies that have rendered freedom and democracy enigmatic for many South Africans.

Whether Bafana Bafana win or not should be the list of Mbeki's worries. A "winning nation" should not be measured by its national soccer team's performance on the pitch, but by its poverty levels.

Is it not the right time then to demand an end to privatisation and outsourcing? Was the struggle against apartheid also not about decent and secure jobs? With more than eight million of the economically active population unemployed, should we not be demanding urgent steps to curb the unemployment virus?

Will the inclusion of the Right to Work in the Constitution not be a step in this direction?

Isn't equal re-distribution of wealth the genuine solution to poverty and under development?

Clearly, the suffering masses should demand a genuine "people centred" developmental approach that does not prioritise profits over people's basic needs.

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