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## **Articulations between global and local development agendas in South African adult education and training policies. Whither social transformation?**

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**Abstract: Convergences, tensions and contradictions between global and local development agendas in South African adult education and training policies undermine initiatives to redress the adult education and training inequalities which plague the lives of 13 million black adults.**

### **Introduction**

The South African society is characterised by vast inequalities in the distribution of income, wealth, employment and educational opportunities. After the 1994 democratic elections, the government inherited a situation in which the rates of illiteracy and the skills shortages among black adults were alarming. The prospects for redressing these adult education and training inequalities and the broader society during the 1990s seem to have been eclipsed by the insurgence of neo-liberalism. The society's transition from apartheid seems to have been caught in the maelstrom of a global shift to neo-liberalism, which has manifested in a range of international, foreign and domestic policies.

An analysis of the evolution of the South African government's adult education and training policies reveals the emergence of a dual commitment to social transformation and neo-liberalism. When the democratic government came to power, it demonstrated a strong commitment to social transformation. However, as events unfolded, neo-liberal elements began to appear in the government's economic, development, and adult education and training policies. The appearance of a neo-liberal agenda in the South African government's policies resonate with the promotion of a neo-liberal agenda by international organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF which stresses economic growth, global competitiveness, productivity and trade liberalisation. Since the 1994 democratic elections, the World Bank and the IMF have developed close relationships with the South African government to the extent that World Bank economists were involved in formulating the government's 1996 macro-economic strategy, entitled, "Growth, Employment and Redistribution". This strategy, which captures the government's development agendas, promotes economic growth, global competitiveness and trade liberalisation. The influences of the World Bank and other international organisations on the South African government's political and economic development agendas are therefore apparent.

Based on an empirical study, this paper analyses the articulation between the development agendas in the South African government's adult education and training policies and those in development assistance policies of international organisations. The central research question was formulated as follows, "How do the convergences, tensions and contradictions between the political and economic agendas in the development assistance policies of international

organisations and those in the South African government's development policies in which the adult education and training policies have been framed, constrain the potential of adult education and training to effect social transformation in the context of the emerging global political economy?"

This paper, which analyses the findings of the empirical study, makes the following arguments, (1) that the scale of inequalities in adult education and training, which are inextricably linked to broader socio-political and economic inequalities, warrants a government role in redistribution; (2) that the neo-liberal political and economic development agendas of international organisations have permeated the South African government's economic; development; and adult education and training policies; (3) that there is an articulation between the global political and economic development agendas and South African political and economic development agendas; (4) that the articulations between the global and local agendas in respect of the government's role in redistribution, embedded in the dual commitment to social transformation and neo-liberalism, undermine the government's efforts to redress inequalities in adult education and training.

### *Political and economic inequalities; and adult education and training inequalities: compelling imperatives*

Political and economic inequalities continue to plague the South African society. May et al asserted that in 1993 "50% of the population could be considered poor and that the gap between rich and poor was among the largest in the world" (May, 2000: xiii). Classified as an upper middle-income country, yet 50% of South Africa's population occupy the poorest 40% of households and 27% of the population, referred to as "ultra-poor" occupy the poorest 20% households. In real terms, the 10 million 'ultra-poor' are those who earn less than US\$1 per day. The 1996 General Population Census indicates that 13.2 million have had less than grade 9, of whom 8.5 million have had less than grade 7; and 4.2 million have had no schooling at all (Aitchison et al., 2000, p. 16).

Skills shortages are apparent in recent statistics: "Of the economically active population (EAP), only 3m were skilled or highly skilled (some 20%); 7m were employed in so-called semi-skilled or unskilled jobs (80% of the EAP); and 4m were unemployed" (Forgey et al., 1999/2000, p. 411). Statistics provided by Statistics South Africa shows that 64% of adults who are unemployed, have had no education (Aitchison et al., 2000 p. 21). These statistics suggest a significant correlation between unemployment and illiteracy. As the unemployed and the illiterate are usually among the poorest in a society, it can be assumed that illiteracy is also an indicator of poverty. Given this scenario, it would seem that interventions through adult basic education and training, and skills development, could in effect, address problems of unemployment and poverty and contribute to redressing socio-political and economic inequality.

### **International organisations and neo-liberal development assistance policies: the case of South Africa**

Since the 1960s development assistance has become a means through which foreign governments and international organisations seek to contribute to the growth and advancement of developing countries. Development assistance policies, have however, changed over time and since the 1970s there has been a notable shift to neo-liberalism.

The rise of neo-liberalism, which is associated with the emergence of the New Right in the North during the 1970s has its roots in 18th century liberalism. Prompted by the advent of neo-liberalism, countries in the North witnessed a transition from welfare statism, reflecting the ideas of James Maynard Keynes to neo-liberalism. This development has prompted a shift towards the dominance of the market over the role of government. The ideas of Milton Friedman, which have become an intellectual pillar of neo-liberalism however, is an expression of Adam Smith's notion of the spontaneous order of the market. Predominantly promoted by the New Right, the World Bank and the IMF, Smith's ideas, as the intellectual mainstay of neo-liberalism, have permeated the development policies of several international organisations.

These neo-liberal political and economic agendas concerning the role of government, the market, and redistribution are reflected in the development assistance policies of international organisations. Since the 1980s the powers of the World Bank and the IMF have become expansive in developing countries and have assumed prominent roles in the spheres of international and national economic, development, and education policy. As a consequence, the World Bank and the IMF have promoted a prominent role for the market as opposed to that of government in respect of the political economies of several developing countries.

Since the 1960s international sanctions against the apartheid government limited South Africa's engagement with foreign governments and international organisations. As South Africa emerged from isolation and began to integrate itself into the global political-economy in the early 1990s, it was caught in the maelstrom of the global shift to neo-liberalism. South Africa's search for political and economic alternatives, amidst the internationalisation of neo-liberalism, became ensnarled in the neo-liberal shifts in the foreign policies of foreign governments and the development assistance policies of international organisations in the North.

As the democratic government became imminent during the early 1990s, the World Bank and the IMF began to turn their attention to South Africa. They embarked on various missions to South Africa during which time they held meetings with the apartheid government, the African National Congress (ANC), the business community and the trade union movement. These visits were complemented by studies of the country's economic, trade and education sectors.

The election of the democratic government in 1994 represented another turning point in South Africa's international relations with foreign governments and international organisations. After the elections, the South African government entered into several bilateral agreements and multilateral agreements with foreign governments and international organisations in respect to trade and development assistance. Consequently, international organisations formulated development assistance policies to govern development assistance for the newly-elected democratic government. These included the World Bank, Britain's Department for International Development (DFID), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The direct and indirect influences of the political and economic development agendas embedded in the development assistance policies of international organisations on the development, economic, adult basic education and training, and skills development policies of the South African government are apparent. The World Bank's involvement in formulating the South

African government's 1996 macro-economic strategy, Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR), is a critical demonstration of the World Bank's direct influence. However, the influences of World Bank and IMF political and economic development agendas on the South African government's policies should be viewed in a broader context. The argument here is that the World Bank and the IMF occupy a dominant position among international organisations and as a consequence, they take seriously the studies, analyses, projections, and recommendations of the World Bank and the IMF. Through their global dominance, the World Bank and the IMF have asserted their agendas as global political and economic agendas, particularly in the sphere of international development assistance.

*Government, the market and redistribution: convergences between global and local agendas in the South African government's adult education and training policies. Implications for social transformation.*

There is evidence of convergence between World Bank's development agendas and those in the South African government's development and economic policies in respect of the role of government as such, and the role of government in redistributing resources for adult education and training. There is no evidence of an explicit statement by the World Bank of its position on the role of the South African government in the afore-mentioned respects. Its projection of the role of the South African government is however evident in its 1999 Country Assistance Paper. The World Bank captures the difficult challenges confronting the South African government as follows: (1) How to generate employment and sustainable livelihoods for the poor on a large scale - at the lowest fiscal cost? (2) How to improve the access of the poor to assets, services and markets (education and training skills especially, but also land, housing, health, and water)? How can Government best re-orient its own programs and build partnerships with the private sector and NGOs to speed up delivery and help the poor consolidate their assets? (3) How to re-orient public expenditures to have the greatest impact on poverty, within an overall fiscal constraint? (World Bank, 1999, p. 10). Posing these questions within certain parameters, parameters suggests a role of government which is associated with fiscal discipline and committed to addressing social issues through partnerships with the private sector and NGOs. There is little to indicate the promotion of an interventionist government with a strong commitment to redistribute new resources for the poor to access, among others, education and training skills.

These political and economic agendas in respect of the role of government and redistribution resonates with those found in the South African government's development, economic, and adult education and training policies. Since the 1994 elections, the democratic government has played a low-key role in adult basic education and training and allocated a minuscule budget for its initiatives in this sphere. At the same time, it has played a leading role in mobilising funding for skills development. Through the creation of a national Skills Levy Fund, the government has legislated contributions from employers for skills development in the workplace. Some contradictions are evident, especially in relation to the role of government in relation to skills development. Although the government's neo-liberal macro-economic policy promotes a low-key role of government in the economy, the role of the government, through the Department of Labour's initiatives in workplace skills development, reflects the contrary. A proposition is made that the government's initiatives in relation to workplace skills development could be regarded as a form of government intervention. This is not to say that the government has adopted an

interventionist position. The postulation that these initiatives almost exclusively address skills development in the workplace, lends caution. To add, this form of intervention, in the form of formulating policies and developing systems for skills development, is solely directed toward the needs of the economy. While criticizing the neo-liberal orientation of the government's development policies, there is also an acknowledgement that these initiatives may firstly, address the adult basic education and training needs, and the skills development needs of employees in the workplace, and secondly, contribute to poverty eradication among workers classified as poor (social transformation through neo-liberal development?). The government's initiatives in the economy however, do not preclude government intervention in addressing the adult education and training needs of the 64% of the unemployed population who have had no education (Aitchison et al., 2000 p. 21).

The low key role of government, embodied in the ABET policies, combined with the government's inadequate distribution of resources for adult basic education and training, demonstrates a withdrawal from the interventionist position conveyed in the White Paper on Reconstruction and Development. The retreat of government from an interventionist role in redressing the high rates of illiteracy among black people, demonstrates a lack of commitment to social transformation, aimed at redressing social, political and economic inequalities. These developments also show that the government does not consider an investment of resources in adult basic education and training a significant means through which redistribution can take place and economic growth can be stimulated, nor a vehicle for redressing the broader social inequalities. A final criticism is that the government's conflation of the goals of social transformation and those of neo-liberal, macro-economic development in its policies has undermined the redress of social inequality.

### **Conclusions**

The convergences and divergences between the development agendas of the South African government and international organisations, particularly in respect of redistribution, the role of government and poverty eradication, which are reflected in the South African government's adult education and training policies, lie at the heart of the tensions, contradictions, and dilemmas in the South African government's initiatives to redress inequalities in the sphere of adult education and training and beyond.

A simple statement summarises the challenge, 'unless government redistributes resources to redress the adult education and training inequalities among the poor and the unemployed, adult education and training will be limited in its contribution to transformation of the broader society'. A critical question concludes the paper, 'Will international organisations re-consider its policies with regard to the role of the market and the role of the government?'

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