

FINAL THOUGHTS

Sihle Dube and Bram Posthumus

The Southern African region, and by extension the rest of the continent, is currently getting a raw deal from the international economic and financial community. Assuming that governments are willing to care for their citizens, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to negotiate their way towards a sustainable existence. The trade environment is hostile, the debt situation is unsustainable and its 'partners' in the rich nations of the world are less and less willing to make any meaningful gestures that will render the SADC countries and their government capable of meeting the challenge of removing the trade traps, getting rid of those debt throes and finding the best escape routes.

Are we any closer to a solution than we were, say, ten years ago? It does not appear so. It even seems that every step forward, like the positive developments in the DRC and peace in Angola, is accompanied by an equal amount of steps in the opposite direction, such as the deepening crisis in Zimbabwe and the seemingly unstoppable advance of the AIDS pandemic.

What seems to be coming out of the articles in this publication is that increasingly large and vocal civil society groups and individuals want the international community to stop causing more damage in the region. Indeed, some prepare compensation claims for past damage. How far can this be taken? Now, there is a claim for apartheid's damages. But could the US government be made to account for its catastrophic 'constructive engagement' policy in the 1980s, or its role in prolonging the deadly wars in Angola and Mozambique? Is the Mugabe regime right in claiming that it is finishing the work of the liberation struggle and should Britain pay up for colonial mischief? Why, then, do Zambia and Malawi not join in, who have suffered similarly? How about going to the Portuguese and the Dutch for reparations for past crimes, which obviously were not seen as crimes at the time they were committed? This is an excellent topic for study.

Removal of trade barriers and far more debt relief than is currently on offer are two measures that could, in theory at least, enable the region to start making its own money. It seems, however, that the cities where the major decisions on these issues are made (principally Washington, Brussels and Geneva) are more like citadels where dissenting views are met with a company of iron-clad guards. It seems difficult to understand why perfectly reasonable proposals like those of Jubilee 2000 (Chapter 3-3) are not even considered. How does one actually lobby the World Bank and perhaps even more crucially the IMF effectively? Is the WTO really the one-eyed trade monster ridden by the rich to their own advantage or are there ways of making it listen to the interests of the poor? There are more questions than answers here.

In spite of all their rhetoric, governments are buying into the neo-liberal logic of a globalising world. Others are not so sure of the blessings of unfettered globalisation and ask whether the time has not come for far more radical solutions. The slogan for the WTO was: shrink it or sink it. Let it return to what it was originally intended for (making trade rules), democratise it - or may it fall to pieces. Which is exactly what a number of NGOs in the region want the IMF and the World Bank to do. Are there radical options available, such as unilateral non-payment of outstanding debts? A tougher and more collective stand on trade issues?

What is also needed, it would seem, is a more robust debate on these matters within the region itself. It is quite clear that the majority of ordinary people have completely switched off politics. This is by far the majority and it should worry political leaders worthy of the name. Nepad is a case in point. Indeed, the political commitment of the African governments (bar two or three) to Nepad is impressive in theo-

ry. And the international community - for the right or wrong reasons - is positively inclined towards the idea. But does Nepad offer anything in terms of solutions for the twin crises of skewed trade and unsustainable debt? Does it, indeed, offer ways in which more sections of the SADC societies can begin to participate in a meaningful way in their societies and economies? Here is another unexplored area.

As was alluded to earlier, it is not fair to say that there is no light at all at the end of the tunnel. Quite apart from the political developments on the giant screen (peace in Angola, talks on the DRC, and the beginnings of a plan to have Mugabe discreetly removed from power, Nepad) there are numerous initiatives happening all over the region. Every day we can witness actions that move us away from the notion that Africans are forever doomed to be 'wards of benevolent guardians' and towards the idea that they can indeed be masters of their own destiny. People do take matters into their own hands. They start small businesses, civil society groups, they become members of trade unions or other interest-based groups. These actions are not insignificant. The concerted efforts of a handful of individuals have often changed the course of history. Is there a way in which the development on that giant screen of world history can be connected to the smaller screens that are flickering in so many places, from Luanda to Maputo and from Cape Town to Kisangani? It may be here that some of the keys to the way out can be found.