

Globalisation and its discontents

By Stephen Martin

With reports from Monique Viljoen and Gillian Walters

THE deepening of inequalities in societies worldwide is a feature of the end of the millennium. At the same time, there is much talk of "globalisation" and macro-economic reform. Is there a connection? And if there is, what does it mean for faith communities.

These were the questions explored in a workshop held on Tuesday and sponsored by the Ecumenical Fellowship of South Africa, the National Religious Association for Social Development and ME99. The theme of globalisation crystallised around three issues: the impact of globalisation on women and children at a grassroots level, its impact on policy-making, and its implications for faith communities.

"Sacrificing the women and children"

The impact of globalisation is usually judged in terms of abstract numbers. Denise Ackermann however suggested that women and children ought to be the lens through which we understand poverty. For leading African theologian Mercy Oduyoye, globalisation "sacrifices the women and children" of Africa. Ultimately, for Oduyoye, globalisation has to be judged by the criterion of what it does to human-ness. In this regard, whatever the numbers say, it fails.

While she identified with the importance of assessing the impact of policy through the eyes of the most marginal in society, Minister of Welfare Geraldine Fraser-Molekete cautioned against simplistically connecting macro-economic policy to the increase of poverty. There is "a need to build the capacity of our people so that they can engage in labour markets, so that they are not disempowered through lack of skills". The forces which globalisation brings are challenges which can be responded to positively through empowerment, allowing people to act on a world stage.

"An old struggle in a new arena"?

Fraser-Molekete and her colleague, MP Ben Turok, were both concerned to present the government's Growth, Equality and Redistribution programme (GEAR) as the best approach to empowerment given global constraints. The Government's shift from the Reconstruction and Development Programme RDP, a "people-centred" policy according to Stellenbosch economist Sampie Terreblanche, to GEAR was the subject of heated debate.

For Terreblanche, the government lacked the political will to implement the RDP. In the three years since the implementation of GEAR, growth, employment and redistribution have not been enhanced. In fact, according to Terreblanche, distribution of income has become more unequal.

In his response, Turok drew a distinction between the government and the ANC, identifying a tension between the external constraints which the government is under, and the continuity of vision the ANC remains tied to. This is not, as Ter

reblanche had argued, a matter of "sitting in two ideological' chairs". It is for the sake of the revolution that the government: undertakes its policy-making within realistically appraised constraints, such as international currency markets and the economic environment.

This distinction occasioned lively debate. Surely, noted Molefe Tsele of ESSET, a government is elected on the basis of its', party's policies. Is it right for a party elected on the basis of certain policies to change once it has achieved power? And who is 1 responsible for fostering vision? If government must obey the market, Russel Botman asked, who will safeguard justice? This touches the important area of values, cultural and religious, and their relation to policy

Mike Potier argued that it was not enough simply to search for the "correct" economic policies, which "advance only technical solutions to a problem that requires both technical and attitudinal approaches." While it is important to be involved in, policy debates, such will never provide the ultimate solution. The priority is to form the social consciences of people so that good policies have a chance to succeed. Tsele agreed, acknowledging that values are more fundamental and inclusive than policies. They ensure that policies represent the soul of people's beliefs.

But what of the role of religion with reference to these values? While Potier said that promoting such values was fundamental to religions, for Tsele, the legacy of religion in South Africa is ambiguous and contested, having spoken often from and for the centres of power rather than the margins. Religion's voice in speaking of policy matters must be "a troubled voice". And yet the call for the church to get its own house in order must not mean it should be forever silent, nor, as Potier added, that its house must be "perfectly in order" before it proposed something with humility to society

Changing loyalties

Whether it's house is in order or not, the church is under external threat from globalisation. When privatisation becomes the norm, the fundamental pastoral question, for Russel Botman, concerns the way "globalisation reduces the space for mercy". Thus faith communities, which are called to be "heralds of mercy, grace and justice", are squeezed out.

The market, Botman continued, recognises only individuals and excludes groups and communities and their values. It creates a situation where both God and mammon have to be served. But the contradictions are becoming too sharp. Materialism exercises great power over the hearts and minds of people. A choice will have to be made.

Botman therefore extended the debate which insisted on a distinction between values and structures into a debate on the kind of God which should be honoured. For despite its eschewing of "values", the market also has a God, one antithetical to the God confessed by Christians.

Redeeming globalisation?

Perhaps the concept globalisation can be thought rather in terms of a "global solidarity" (Fraser-Molekete) that empowers the crossing of boundaries, not their erasure. Lionel Louw called to mind the importance of the global identification with what was happening in South Africa on the moral level. A global church-network based on common faith still exists to mobilise values to oppose the unbridled pursuit of profit.

Globalisation, in whatever way it is understood, represents a challenge to local communities. There was a concern in the discussions to move away from a simple identification of global forces with the forces of "oppression" and local communities with being "victims", as also with the need to build coalitions between communities. This also is a challenge, as relations between different religious communities in South Africa, such as the Muslim and Christian communities, are adversely affected by global forces. This is made more complex by the way Christianity is

often identified with neo-liberal ideology, and by its historical ties with colonialism. And so local Christian communities can be accused of having divided loyalties. It was pointed out that this is a way in which the church remains a site of struggle.

Globalisation and its discontents

The topic engendered some important debates. Depending on the context of the discussion, globalisation could be opposed to "the local" or to "the pensionery"; speaking of something that transcended boundaries, indeed the nature of which is to transcend boundaries. Or the term "globalisation" could be used not as a metaphor of "location", but as stating the policy constraints under which vision must function.

No hard and fast answers were given to the problems of globalisation, though as Denise Ackermann observed in her conclusion, the workshop was not a place to give answers but to raise questions and take challenges into local communities. It is clear that globalisation cannot be thought of apart from its profound impact on local communities, and especially women and children living in poverty, as well as the constraints under which policy is made. With its ambiguities exposed, its professed neutrality is debunked. Globalisation, finally, is a matter of faith... and a matter for faith to reflect upon.