



Have We Failed the Poor?

1. Introduction: The Preferential Option for the Poor

Within the Christian faith, the preferential option for the poor goes hand in hand with the epistemological privilege of the poor. It is fairly well accepted by all faiths, ethical societies, and peoples that the rich and the powerful have a duty to help alleviate the struggles and sufferings of the poor. And beyond that, that both the state and private institutions have a duty not to deliberately add to the suffering of the poor by commission or by omission. Article 25 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that:

*(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.*¹

On 8th September 2000, the UN general Assembly adopted the *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, in terms of which heads of state and governments committed themselves to "spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty". They also pledged to improve the lives of a 100 Million slum dwellers by 2020.²

In 1998 Kofi Annan, then UN General Secretary, was quoted as saying: "So long as every fifth inhabitant of our planet lives in absolute poverty, there can be no real stability in the world."³

In the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*: On the Development of Peoples, Pope Paul VI says that the Church judges it her duty to explore problems of the development of peoples:

*This is particularly true in the case of those peoples who are trying to escape the ravages of hunger, poverty, endemic disease and ignorance; of those who are seeking a larger share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are consciously striving for fuller growth.*⁴

The Pope says that all must hear the cry of others and answer this cry lovingly. In setting up the commission on Justice and Peace, the Holy Father said that the world needs to respond to the growing inequalities and cries of the poor. The disparities are not just in terms of possessions but also in terms of the exercise of power, such that the poor "are deprived of almost all possibility of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, and often subsist in living and working conditions unworthy of the human person."⁵ Thus, beyond simply being deserving of society's concern and generosity, the poor have a right not just of being recipients of a just social order, but to have the power to shape that order.

The call to the preferential option for the poor is not limited to catholic voices and teachings; it can be found in all faiths. The Islamic Hadith says: "The one who looks after a widow or a poor person is like a Mujahid (warrior) who fights for Allah's Cause, or like him who performs prayers all the night and fasts all the day." [Sahih Al-Bukhari] Volume 7, Book 64, Number 265

The question of poverty and the poor has haunted South Africa for years and continues to do so. Though government, the state, faith communities and others have been involved in the project of poverty alleviation, this is far from being enough to meet the needs of the poor. What has been of significance is that the poor themselves have become not just vocal about their lot, but have become more and more radical in their cry for their needs. What is even more significant is the

demand from the poor, echoing what the Holy Father has said, that they do not just want to be “recipients of a just social order”, but that they demand the right to be heard and to “shape that order”.

2. “Fighting for What We Were Promised”

On 1st October 2014, the CPLO hosted a roundtable discussion looking at grassroots social movements in South Africa. The aim of this event was to gain a better understanding of these movements and their agenda. Two of them are well known and quite radical. *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, made up of shack dwellers around the city of eThekweni, has been fighting a battle for decent housing for a number of years now. Recently, they have been accused of being proxies for opposition parties by the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal, and of seeking to undermine the ANC government in the province.⁶ The Western Cape has seen the emergence of the *Ses’khona People’s Movement*, referred to in the media as the ‘poor protesters’, due to the lengths they have gone to in highlighting the challenges of sanitation in Khayelitsha. This organization has been accused by the Democratic Alliance, the governing party in the Western Cape, of being a front for the ANC, and of seeking to undermine the DA government in the province⁷.

2.1. Grassroots social movements in post-apartheid SA

In 1994, South Africa was in a dire state, with high government debt, high unemployment, and the country basically bankrupt, with a lot of social unrest. It was recovering from the 1992 recession, the deepest recession since World War II, and was still in recession in 1994.⁸ When the ANC won South Africa’s first democratic elections with an overwhelming majority in 1994, there was hope all around the country, hope for a better future and improved standards of living for all, especially for the poor. This expectation, according to Dale McKinley, was fuelled by the ANC’s adoption of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as a policy priority during the election campaign. The RDP advocated for the government to meet the basic socio-economic needs of the poor majority, and it proposed a living wage as a prerequisite for much-needed economic development. This, he argues, led to South Africa’s poor expecting the ANC to create millions of jobs, meet people’s basic needs, and redistribute large amounts of white-owned land⁹. To a large extent

this did not turn out as hoped. Faced with rising debt and rising demands and expectations, the ANC started to emphasise the need for fiscal discipline, export-oriented growth, and decreased levels of corporate taxation. The adoption of Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme as the ANC’s economic policy in 1996 entrenched this stance and left a lot of those who had hoped for a more socialist approach out in the cold¹⁰. This shift in the ANC’s stance happened at the time when all those organizations that had played an instrumental role in radicalizing the struggle against apartheid, were beginning to get swallowed into the ANC and its alliance partners, COSATU and the SA Communist Party (SACP). This left a gap in terms of radical organizations that could challenge the ANC’s newly embraced neo-liberal stance. Over the years, the economic conditions of some people have changed, but there remain many whose lot still remains bleak.

Speaking at the roundtable, Ibrahim Fakir noted that the poor were basically asserting that “we are fighting for what we were promised”. The general feeling amongst the poor, he said, was that the ANC and the government had turned its back on the promises made before the first election in 1994. This was one of the factors that had contributed to the rise of the social movements. The post-apartheid era was viewed by many of the poor as a period that would usher all South Africans into the ‘promised land’, but a number of issues had seen the poor continuing to remain on the outskirts of the country’s economy. Fakir pointed out such factors as fiscal strictness, resulted in cutting down on public spending, the legacy of apartheid, and huge domestic and international debt, as well as governmental challenges, as having contributed to the non-realization of the South Africa that the country’s poor had hoped for¹¹. Furthermore, Fakir argued that this was why social movements of the poor had emerged, as a way to respond to what was perceived as the government’s neo-liberal policy directives, and to advance a different political discourse with regards to democracy, political participation and citizenship.

2.2. Voices of the poor

Another speaker at the roundtable, *Abahlali baseMjondolo*’s Thembanani Ngongoma, stated that the organization strives for a world where justice and human dignity reign, and where the government serves all of its people. He further argued that today’s government only serves those that are loyal to the ruling party. “The same

government that is meant to be the custodian of the Constitution are the very ones that violate it and they are getting away with it because no one is saying anything about it". Moreover, he stated that Abahlali baseMjondolo feel that South Africa has not yet acquired a freedom that all can be proud of, while people are still living in appalling conditions. It seems, he said, that South African freedom means that those that are in power can trample on other people's rights, with nothing being done about it. These are the things that *Abahlali baseMjondolo* seeks to draw to the attention of the government and the country at large. He further pointed to the fact that one of the biggest challenges that they are faced with as an organization is that when people from their organization bring these problems to the attention of authorities they are criminalized and some of them even killed. Citizens were called upon to blow the whistle when things went wrong, but when they did they were subjected to abuse by the government and even police action. Lastly, Mr Ngongoma called on the government to consult citizens on issues that concern them and to allow them a space to develop themselves.

Coming from a different position, Nkwame Cedile of *Embo* stated that their movement sought to promote self-reliance and self-realization in communities. He argued that since 1994 the South African government had been busy with managing one crisis after another, and had done very little to address the challenges faced by people on the ground. He further argued that, while South Africa supposedly had the one of the best constitutions in the world, the reality on the ground was very different. "If you speak to farm workers and ask them if they are free, you would get a different story", he said. He also decried the state of the education system, calling it a "Verwoerdian system that produces cheap labour". Like Mr Ngongoma of *Abahlali*, Mr Cedile criticized the government for not consulting the poor on issues that concern them, stating that instead of addressing the real issues that affect the people, the government keeps giving them 'lollipops' such as the 2010 Soccer World Cup, in order to shift the focus of the people and that of the world.

Andile Lili of *Ses'khona People's Movement* spoke about how they had come together as a movement to draw the attention of the country to the sanitation challenges in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Before the 2014 general election, *Ses'khona* called on all the political parties to work with them on addressing the problems of the poor, but none of them responded. Therefore they were forced to

begin to fight their own battles. "We cannot wait for God to send someone else to fight for cowards" he stated, pointing out that they will continue to fight until the government delivers on the promises made to the poor. "We cannot eat promises every five years, we will liberate ourselves." Mr Lili also criticized the business sector, arguing that it was not doing anything to improve the current situation of the poor. Furthermore, even the institutions of democracy such as the Public Protector were not doing anything to help the poor.

2.3. A failure of transformation

Mr Fakir argued that South African society today is still divided; too many of those who experienced oppression before the transition to democracy – up to two thirds of the population – still lived outside the mainstream of the economy. There seemed to be a lack of recognition of this by those who were privileged before the transition, and who remained privileged after it, as well as by those who had become privileged after the transition. This lack of recognition, according to Mr Fakir, resulted in a lack of empathy. This was why the poor were forming their own organizations, to make their voices heard, and in his view there was nothing reactionary about that.

In any event, even if these movements were reactionary, and even if they were a front for political parties, this was their right in a democratic system. Society should be asking "who are the poor rebelling against?" Certainly, they were rebelling against the government and the rich, but that was not the same as a rebellion against the state. Furthermore, he said, the poor who protested were not questioning the right of government to exist, but the legitimacy of the way in which the government operated.

3. Conclusion

Considering the conditions under which poor people in our country are living, and if Ebrahim Fakir is right about the lack of empathy from the government and the more privileged citizens, the question arises as to whether the institutions of democracy have failed the poor; and if so, what does this mean for the country's democracy?

Regarding the protests actions undertaken by the social movements, the Constitution affords citizens the fundamental freedoms of speech, association, organization, thought and assembly¹².

These freedoms protect the right of citizens to participate in the democratic process by coming together and devising means of holding the government to account, and of making sure that their voices are heard by creating their own spaces of participation independent of the government.

But more fundamental than giving the poor what the Constitution says they deserve, is the principle that the poor are not objects of society's charity; not merely government's statistical targets. Engaging the poverty in society is not a favour or a job, but a requirement stemming from collective values shared at the UN level, the national level, and at a fundamental human and religious level. Engaging the poor and giving them preferential attention is a duty that flows from their position of weakness, and the call must be not only to alleviate their poverty, but to create spaces for them to be part of the process of regaining their dignity and taking up their rightful place in society.

It seems as if the poor are resorting to the use of confrontation, disruptive behaviour, and even violence to make themselves heard. If they have to resort to such measures, then democratic and ethical processes and spaces are not working as they should. One does not have to agree with how they express their needs, and one does not even have to agree with what they are demanding; even if one believes that they are political, and not simply social in nature, in any decent society one cannot impose on the poor what they do not want, nor ignore them when they cry for what they believe are their basic needs. It is their right to reassert their dignity.

As Pope Paul VI explained, beyond simply deserving society's concern and generosity, the poor have a right not only to enjoy a just social order, but to have the power to shape that order.

Matsepane Morare SJ
Researcher

Mandisa Dyantyi
Research Intern

Mandisa is studying towards her Master's degree in Political Studies at the University of the Western Cape, as part of which she is completing a six-month internship at the CPLO

¹ <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

² <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>

³ <http://www.un.org/rights/poverty/poverty5.htm>

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html # 1

⁵ Here Pope Paul VI is quoting *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World) which says: "While an immense number of people still lack the absolute necessities of life, some, even in less advanced areas, live in luxury or squander wealth. Extravagance and wretchedness exist side by side. While a few enjoy very great power of choice, the majority are deprived of almost all possibility of acting on their own initiative and responsibility, and often subsist in living and working conditions unworthy of the human person."

⁶ eNCA. (2013). 'EThekweni Municipality points a finger at Abahlali <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/ethekweni-municipality>

⁷ Lewis, A. (2014). 'Ses'khona is a front for the ANC'. http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/ses-khona-is-a-front-for-the-anc-1.1738688#U_bhyGMRPNs

⁸ <http://www.npconline.co.za/pebble.asp?reid=38>

<https://www.resbank.co.za/Lists/News%20and%20Publications/Attachments/5664/March%202013%20Supplement.pdf>

⁹ McKinley, D. *The Political economy of the rise of social movements in South Africa*. <http://links.org.au/node/37>

¹⁰ Mitlin, D., & Mogaladi, J. (2009). *Social movements and poverty reduction in South Africa*. Social Movements and Chronic Poverty Research Project, University of Manchester.

¹¹ Fakir, E *Institutional Restructuring, State-Civil Society Relationships and Social Movements*. http://www.academia.edu/7880232/Institutional_restructuring_state_civil_society_relationships_Fakir

¹² Fakir, E *ibid*