

Education delivery in the poorest nodes



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South Africa enjoys a rare distinction of having gone through all the convulsions and outpouring of anger associated with regime change – without actually changing the ruling regime at all.

After the Polokwane conference of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) which unseated President Thabo Mbeki and was soon followed by his recall, politicians and commentators moved speedily to blame him and his government for closing down debate, defensive posturing, denialism in multiple areas, nurturing a cronyist black bourgeoisie at the expense of the poor, and other sins. Service delivery problems are still laid at his door, frequently without regard for the substantial successes achieved under his tenure. This phantasm of regime change, where ANC replaced ANC but acted as if it were new and different, created a need for distance between ‘what was’ – under Mbeki – and ‘what is’ in the present. Senior Ministers and other politicians – as well as senior civil servants – have had to talk about the past as if they were either unwilling prisoners or powerless spectators, bearing no responsibility for what occurred between 1999 and 2008.

Education has emerged as one of the hotter potatoes being juggled amongst commentators anxious to find fault with the past. According to the Treatment Action Campaign’s (TAC) Zackie Achmat, “the intellectual dispossession of African and coloured working-class children is far greater today than it was under apartheid”.¹ Businesswoman Wendy Luhabe and commentator Mamphela Ramphele both “caused a sharp intake of breath” at a public debate by claiming that Bantu Education was better than the education provided under democracy, and a spate of bloggers followed up to complain that ‘the kids of today’ are illiterate, ill-mannered, and ill-suited to the 21st century.² Andile Mngxitama raised the stakes by talking of “educational genocide against a whole generation”.³

The point of this brief piece is to consider the views of those who don’t normally get to dominate the headlines or have their views sought by breathless journalists, and yet should be central to this story – poor citizens, living in the poorest parts of the country, some in former homelands or other rural areas without significant local economic activity, others in sprawling townships providing labour pools to the South African economy. They are the people who most needed a decent system to replace Bantu Education. In many cases this had to start with building classrooms, with school feeding schemes to give the calorific intake needed to maintain concentration, and building an educational culture from ground zero. And they are the people who we should listen to in these debates.

But of course that is naive, given the perilously slippery surface of post-Polokwane politics. Trying to separate ‘what was’ from ‘what is’ has failed. The words of critics (and others) have taken on greater urgency during 2009 as violent community protests have spread across Gauteng and the Western Cape in particular, focusing on poor service delivery. Many commentators have (albeit tentatively) argued that

the Zuma Presidency has shown a real commitment to delivery and rooting out some of the most unappetising self-enrichment of the Mbeki years, but ordinary citizens seem to have had enough, and are increasingly resorting to protest action to express their feelings.

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Coupled with the relative ease with which one segment of the ANC was able to unseat a President who had seemed so unassailable, for so long, and rapidly remove his coterie of advisors, deployees and henchmen, it is apparent that failure to deliver is not something that can easily be by-passed: it can lead to the abrupt end of political careers. And it can dramatically launch new careers. What matters, therefore, is to keep our eyes firmly focused on what really is happening on the ground, and avoid getting too caught up in the hysterical post-Mbeki scrummage whether regarding education or any other service provided by government.

A passport out of poverty

Education does deserve special attention. Providing sanitation, refuse removal and clean water are fundamental to human dignity and the right to a healthy life. Roads matter, so does telecommunication, electricity, and all the other key components of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). But education can be a passport out of poverty for individuals and whole families. Poor families often contribute to the education of one child that shows academic promise, knowing that his (or, less often, her) future can lift the entire family out of poverty.

Most obviously, this is true for children being born in the poorest parts of South Africa, many of which were dumping grounds for surplus people whose only function in the past was to migrate and sell their labour. Consider the bleakness of their options: unemployment is especially high and economic growth conspicuously absent in rural areas and informal settlements. For example, the rate of

unemployment in nodal points making up the Urban Renewal Programme (URP) stands at 62.6%, rising to a staggering 79.1% in the nodes of the Integrated Sustainable Rural Development Programme (ISRDP)⁴.

A decent education for children is their passport to a (possibly) better life elsewhere. And when respondents were asked about the range of government services provided in the ISRDP and URP (in two surveys, a large baseline in 2006 and a smaller measurement survey in 2008) their voices sounded quite dramatically different from those commentators cited above. Let me say quite clearly that I am not an educationist, and am not seeking to make arguments about the relative merits of Outcomes Based Education (OBE); but it is striking that poor people living in South Africa rate their education so highly, while voluble critics are slamming it.

In Table 1 (right), we asked respondents to tell us about the quality of the various services they receive; and in the 2008 survey, we added an option (which runs down the right-hand column) of 'no service received'.

Simply running your eye down that right-hand column shows the extent to which the 'two nations' thesis can be spun quite differently from the simplistic white/black rubric given it by Mbeki, to rather differentiate between the rural and urban worlds within South Africa. Look at the top two rows: a fifth (19%) of respondents living in ISRDP nodes get their water from streams, rivers and other unsafe and irregular sources – i.e. they do not receive water to RDP standard – only true of 1% of those in URP nodes.⁵ In the next row, 22% do not have any electricity, dropping to 4% of URP respondents. And so on, across the range of services.

But look at the bottom rows. In all, 4% of ISRDP and 2% of URP respondents cannot access education where they live. This should be cause for concern for all policy-makers, given that these 22 nodes have been the focus of government attention since at least 2001, when the ISRDP was launched.

That said, look at the left-hand cells on the bottom row, and you see that half (or more) of respondents rate the education available in their nodes as 'good quality' – and in the case of respondents from URP nodes (remembering that most service delivery protest

Table 1: Service access and quality, ISRDP/URP baseline (2006) and measurement (2008) surveys

	% Good Quality		% OK		% Poor Quality		None
	2006	2008	2006	2008	2006	2008	2008 only
Water ISRDP	35	28	23	23	43	30	19
Water URP	65	55	25	34	10	10	1
Electricity ISRDP	42	33	24	28	34	17	22
Electricity URP	50	46	33	32	17	18	4
Water-borne sewerage ISRDP	9	10	12	9	79	14	68
Water-borne sewerage URP	41	42	35	28	24	15	15
Refuse removal ISRDP	11	10	12	10	77	15	65
Refuse removal URP	53	55	35	33	12	8	4
Affordable housing ISRDP	19	14	22	21	59	20	45
Affordable housing URP	28	34	42	42	30	20	5
Public transport ISRDP	24	23	33	33	44	34	10
Public transport URP	46	51	41	39	13	9	2
Roads ISRDP	21	18	24	25	56	52	5
Roads URP	37	45	38	32	25	22	1
Health care ISRDP	27	32	31	34	42	23	12
Health care URP	35	45	43	40	23	13	3
Security ISRDP	16	21	24	27	60	29	23
Security URP	28	38	36	36	36	18	8
Education ISRDP	54	51	32	34	15	12	4
Education URP	47	57	42	36	12	5	2

has been in urban areas) this rose by 10% between 2006 and 2008. At the lower end of the scale, in 2008 just 5% of urban respondents complained of poor quality education, rising to 12% among ISRDP respondents (down from 15% in 2006).

There are clearly some locale-specific challenges, not reflected in the table. Respondents from Galeshewe in the Northern Cape were especially strong in complaining of poor quality education, followed by those from Mdantsane, Inanda and Bohlabela. On the positive side were respondents from Zululand, Sekhukhune and Umkhanyakude.

These voices should be borne in mind. These respondents are meant to be the prime beneficiaries of post-apartheid policies: they live in some of the poorest places in South Africa, many suffering from chronic economic and psycho-social challenges⁶. Yet in the midst of the challenges facing them, they have singled out education as by some margin, government's most successfully delivered service.

Perhaps it would behove us all to spend more time listening to the poor rather than assuming to speak for them about matters that affect their lives so directly.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in the Sowetan 2/11/2009.

² Marianne Thamm at <http://www.women24.com/women24/pregnancyparenting/TalkingPoint/Article/0,,1-9-34-21463,00.html> [accessed 21/08/2009].

³ 'Unite in igniting opportunity from crisis' in City Press 22/08/2009

⁴ (Everatt et al, 2006)

⁵ It is worth noting that URP nodes are all formal townships – Alexandra, Mitchell's Plein, and so on – and do not include the massive informal settlements in urban areas, which would undoubtedly have given quite different scores for urban areas if included.

⁶ David Everatt, Matthew Smith, Khanya-AICDD: Building sustainable livelihoods (Department of Social Development, 2008).