

THE POWER OF THINKING WOMEN



Transformative action for a kinder world

Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the newly-elected chair of the African Union Commission

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By Marthe Muller

“When women are excluded from effective economic participation, they are deprived of the right to productive existence and exerting their influence on society and the environment.” (Dr Vuyo Mahlati, in *Women and the Economy*, July 2012)

We are fortunate to live in extraordinary, if deeply unsettling, times. Cracks in the global macro-economic framework and continuing conflicts over resources in various parts of the world are confirming that our most basic survival strategies for life on earth are seriously flawed. Social

unrest around the globe, flowing from the legitimate aspirations of millions of people for equality, social and economic freedom, and for meaningful participation in the governance of their societies, show that, above all, people matter, and that people can only sustain what they can participate in.

Eighteen years after the end of apartheid, a political system that systematically set out to cripple the human potential of the majority of the inhabitants of this country, women and poor families in South Africa continue to face tremendous obstacles to reaching their full human potential.

Given that women are the most likely to be poor and marginalised, due to the continuing impact of gender inequality, power relations between men and women, and the burden of unpaid care-work that women bear, it is women themselves who have to show the way towards transformational and holistic interventions that heal the wounds caused by a brutal and brutalising past; interventions that imbed self-reliance and freedom from drudgery at the household level, that professionalise work women often do for free, that demand an inclusive and compassionate macro-economic framework, designed to serve human needs rather than pander to corporate greed, and that enable girls and women to contribute maximally to the social and economic life of their country, their region, their continent and the world.

South African Women In Dialogue (SAWID) is determined to work towards the material and social sustainability of individuals and communities, not by fixing old systems, but by creating targeted, holistic, and coordinated interventions that will result in measurable changes to the day to day conditions of women and the girl-child.

SAWID: Women as Champions of Change

SAWID traces its origins back to July 2003, when around 1000 women from all over South Africa gathered at the University of Pretoria to develop and share strategies for mainstreaming women's issues, and to discuss the post-conflict developmental challenges.

South African women had gathered, convened by a volunteer steering committee, representing women leaders in government, business, civil society and academia; across the political spectrum, including Zanele Mbeki, Dr Brigalia Bam, Dr Mohau

Pheko, Mandisa Tsotsi, the late Prof Harriet Ngubane, Sandra Botha, Prof Hlengiwe Mkhize, Dr Thandi Ndlovu, Wendy Lucas Bull, Suraya Bibi Khan, Baby Tyawa, Thoko Mpumlwana, Gernia van Niekerk, and others, to celebrate the achievements of women and the nation since 1994, to identify and address on-going challenges, and to envision a plan towards a post-2004 future.

The success of this initiative, and the healing nature of the barrier-breaking and leadership intervention that

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preceded it, led by the multi-lingual Mike Boon of *Vuka South Africa!* and forty facilitators, bolstered the desire of the women of South Africa to use the power of facilitated dialogue to forge a programme of action towards the realisation of a vision for the development of South Africa informed by the experiences and wisdom of women, and which would be measurable in terms of the actual concrete changes in the day to day lives of women around the country.

In alignment with the demand of women for skills development and capacity building, more than 80 training workshops were held during the first SAWID National dialogue in 2003, in collaboration with the University of Pretoria, in areas like the Writing of Business Plans, Project

Management, Conflict Resolution, Effective Parenting, Craft work, Food Gardening and Basic Computer Skills.

The founding Trustees of the organisation included Zanele Mbeki, Irene Charnley, Wendy Lucas Bull and Mathabo Kunene.

In 2004 young women demanded, and received, their own Young Women in Dialogue Forum when they complained that their interests were not being addressed by older women who were out of touch with the interests and challenges faced by younger women. The first YSAWID Chairperson, Oya Hazel Gumedé, was co-opted into the Global Youth Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Forum at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 2005, and later nominated to be South Africa's official representative on the Commission On The Elimination Of All Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of the United Nations in New York, taking over a position that had previously been occupied by another Sawidian, Mavivi Myakayaka Manzini. In March 2007 another Ysawidian, Alidia Modjadji Seabi, organised and facilitated a session at the UN CSW that encouraged young African girls to come together and share information about issues affecting girls in their respective countries. The theme was *African Girls in Dialogue: About us, for us, by us.*

SAWID situates itself within the context, legacy and collaborative efforts of generations of South African women, who in two pivotal moments of our nation's history collaborated to have their voices heard: in 1956, when 20 000 women protested the hated pass laws, and in 1991 when 81 women's organisation united under the umbrella of the National Women's Coalition, combining their efforts to draft a Women's Charter of Effective Equality, where, in February 1994, women claimed "full and equal participation in the creation of a non-sexist, non-racist democratic society."

SAWID nurtures four diverse programmes in addition to the Annual National and Regional Coordination Forum: a Pan-African Peace and Reconciliation Programme,

a Young Women's Programme, an Older Person's Programme and a Development Programme.

Since its inception, SAWID has been characterised by its concerted efforts to influence public policy and influence and empower the state machinery to fulfil the needs of individuals and families at the local level, where people live.

The Role of Women in Creating Social Cohesion

The recent Social Cohesion Summit held in Kliptown on the 4th and 5th of July acknowledged the negative indicators of social cohesion which still affect the lives of the majority of South Africans: issues of "poverty, inequality, unemployment, homelessness, landlessness, poverty of health, violent crime, abuse of women and children, the elderly and foreign nationals and uneven and inadequate local government service delivery in historically neglected communities."

The national social cohesion strategy also points out that South Africa's desire to attain a socially cohesive society would depend on the ability of all its inhabitants to weave together the elements that would ensure social cohesion: "strategies to overcome the social divisions of class, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability and other dimensions of social difference and diversity, as well as address issues of material and social inequalities like apartheid remnant spatial patterns, housing, worklessness, local delivery dynamics, demographic change and school choice, amongst other variables of human choice and agency."

SAWID has consistently worked towards social cohesion in all its activities, through a strict inclusivity checklist which includes race, ethnic origin, language, religion, age, geographic origin, sexual orientation and economic status, through an emphasis on simultaneous translation of all dialogues in all the languages of the country, through the multi-faith devotions that precede any SAWID event, and through a deep respect for the cultures of other people, symbolised by the Voortrekker dress that SAWID Founder and Patron Zanele Mbeki

chose to wear at the Gala dinner at the end of the first SAWID National Dialogue in 2003.

Barrier-breaking, Healing, Reconciliation and Peace

SAWID is well-placed to lead the country in a barrier-breaking, healing, reconciliation and social cohesion agenda, as the organisation, and its Pan African Peace and Reconciliation Forum, grew out of the spontaneous display of support shown by women from South Africa towards their Congolese sisters who were attending the Inter Congolese Peace Dialogue (ICD) in Sun City in 2002 and

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2003. This led to a 5-day Peace and Reconciliation dialogue at Esselen Park in March 2003 between 125 Congolese women and 200 South African women, which allowed women from conflicting parties in the DRC to come together to increase their participation in the dialogue for peace and nation building in their country and to ensure that the post-conflict society provides a framework for gender equality.

One of the highlights of this peace dialogue was the public demonstration of Congolese women with South African support organised on March 6, 2003 at the Union Building grounds to demand that the Inter Congolese Dialogue (ICD) sign the Draft Constitution and the Memorandum on the Army and the Protection of Institutions. The message of the women was also a call for peace, the

implementation of the Comprehensive and Inclusive Agreement as well as the representation of women at all levels of responsibility. The signing of the Comprehensive and Inclusive Pretoria agreement took place at about midnight on Thursday 6 March 2003, directly related to the public display of solidarity and social cohesion by South African and Congolese women.

Subsequent peace dialogues and bilateral meetings were hosted with women from Burundi, the Great Lakes Area, Liberia, Tunisia, Nigeria, the SADC countries and Southern Sudan.

Because SAWID was founded on the lessons learnt in promoting peace with women in DRC and Burundi, it was natural that subsequent SAWID programmes should give pride of place to "Pan-African Peace and Reconciliation". Much of the programme work in this regard within SAWID is grounded on the principles and programmes of the AU and NEPAD, in line with South African foreign policy.

In July 2008, after the brutal attacks on various African nationals leading to killings and the displacement of many from their homes that left the nation traumatised, guilty and distressed, SAWID convened a Women's Peace Dialogue in Alexandra, where the violence had started, under the theme, Grounding Peace in our Communities. SAWID believed that it was incumbent upon themselves to respond timeously because it is the *raison d'être* of SAWID to promote inclusivity in diversity among South Africans and on the continent. It would not have been possible for SAWID to talk peace to women from other SADC countries and to other women on the continent when violent conflict was engulfing many in South African communities.

The Centrality of the Family, Self-reliance and Poverty Eradication

During the first SAWID Forum in July 2003, the women in their Plan of Action identified the Eradication of Poverty as fundamental to improving the status of women and the development of communities. At the 2005 SAWID Forum women committed themselves to

implementing a practical programme to reach poor communities with development resources, and SAWID therefore crystallised its own Poverty Eradication Model based on targeting poor communities with a basket of services (the Development Caravan) to be provided through partnerships with CBOs, FBOs, SOEs, private sector and government.

SAWID's poverty eradication approach involves the training of Social Auxiliary Workers, young matriculated men and women from the same poor rural communities, to enter identified poor families with a basket of services that include personal identification, human settlement (including water, sanitation and electricity), health, education, family dynamics, employment, income and psycho-social support. This is done in close collaboration with the local municipality, social work mentors and supervisors, and a community hosting team.

The Development Caravan Initiative

The Development Caravan is a synchronised poverty eradication system for local communities in nodal areas to mobilise support and catalyse self-organisation through targeting families with a basket of services and through stakeholder engagement.

The Development Caravan has been in progress since January 2008, and has effectively resulted in 60 trained and graduated Social Auxiliary Workers; 21 Social Auxiliary Work Learners, 3 Professional Social Workers, 3 Project managers and an administrator (a total of 87 people) successfully and competitively employed.

The Development Caravan adds value through skills by training jobless youth and creating an adaptable skilled labour force, capacitating municipalities to better utilise skills in the local economy and supporting employment progression and skills upgrading. The role of the Social Auxiliary Workers (SAWs) is to:

- Coordinate and build resources; coordinate access to these resources by the poor families and communities, promote entrepreneurial orientation and create awareness of the importance

and role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

- Coordinate multi-sectoral involvement (private partners, government departments, development communities and other agencies) for infrastructural development and support so that poor families can have access to clean water and sanitation.
- Build self-reliance by linking poor families to health (mental and emotional; physical and lifestyle) and education and training (literacy and skills development) services.

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The SAWs work through existing networks and organisations to promote small holder farming and access to information and technologies by the poor families in the absence of adequate support from agricultural extension and local economic development officers. They link SMMEs' promote partnerships and linkages through bridging gaps within local economic development interventions, established enterprises and small businesses.

The SAWs link poor families to government services and use a case work approach to restore family systems, strengthen community

networks, and increase family participation within and outside of the households.

South African Women in Dialogue is currently seeking to position its holistic family-based poverty eradication approach as a key model for the implementation of the national poverty eradication strategy in the country, and to act as a catalyst for the voices of women and youth to be gathered, captured, disseminated and represented at all levels where decisions are made that affect their lives.

Advocacy for an Inclusive Macro-Economic Framework

In a recent document on *Women and the Economy*, presented at the 5th year review conference of the Progressive Women's Movement of South Africa (PWMSA) in Umtata in July 2012, Dr Vuyo Mahlati, a development economist (who is both the Chairperson of the Development Commission of South African Women in Dialogue, and the President of the International Women's Forum of South Africa) drew attention to the urgent need for what she called a “collaborative and concerted approach to women's economic emancipation for sustainable wealth creation and social equity.” She also highlighted the role that civil society formations have to play “in fast-tracking women's economic empowerment.”

In her role as a member of the National Planning Commission she pointed out that the emphasis on “strategic focus and collective, concerted efforts” honoured the contributions of legendary South African women like Charlotte Maxeke, who championed the establishment of the Bantu Women's League in 1918, Ida Mtwana who was the first ANC Women's League President, and stalwarts of the struggle like 1956 Women's March icons like Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and others who “systematically, consistently and collaboratively fought subordination to patriarchy and white domination” by putting “humanity, dignity, solidarity and equality at the centre of their struggle.”

The India, Brazil, South Africa

Women's Forum, of which SAWID was a founding member, was proposed in September 2007 as an addition to the then Business, Academic and Parliamentary Forums of the India, Brazil, South Africa trilateral partnership, and called for "an inclusive macro-economic framework which makes visible and values the importance and centrality of women's contribution to the development of our economies." SAWID was represented on international fora on this issue by women like Dr Vuyo Mahlati, Nomboniso Gasa, Dr Mohau Pheko and Prof Edith Vries.

Knowledge Management and Monitoring and Evaluation at Local Level

Unfortunately, in the midst of the much-touted "knowledge economy," we lack the most basic knowledge tools to gather, collect, order, package and share meaningful information regarding women's development needs and the achievement of gender and development goals. No systematic gender disaggregated database exists in the Southern African region that collates and maintains gender disaggregated datasets with regularity. No tool has been designed to measure the attainment of global development goals at local level. We also grapple with the eradication of poverty without any structures in place to measure the movement from indigence to self-sufficiency of individual households.

SAWID is a partner to a proposal that advocates, in alignment with the African Union goal of the e-transformation of Africa, the creation of an electronic framework for networking and effective action to support the goals articulated by the women of South Africa (and their development partners). This aims to ensure that a monitoring and evaluation template is put into place to assess whether women at local levels live lives of dignity, with adequate access to health, education, nutrition, employment, income, information and other resources.

SAWID, the Centre for Democratising Information, the Women's and Gender Unit of the University of Pretoria and ICT Works,

a 100 % women-owned ICT company, are currently seeking funding to collaborate in the design of a research methodology, sets of disaggregated data, a knowledge management platform and an M and E tool whereby the development efforts and activities of government, civil society, the private sector, labour and community can be coordinated, aligned and tracked for enhanced effectiveness, based on identified human needs.

Alignment with Strategic National and Continental Processes

South African Women in Dialogue, in partnership with the Independent

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Development Trust, government's largest development stakeholder, has been instrumental in advocating changes in the configuration and focus of government to ensure effective poverty eradication at household level. A study tour to Chile and Tunisia in 2006, to study the poverty eradication strategies of two countries in the world who had more than met the Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty at that time, resulted in recommendations which included the need for a Women's Ministry and a central coordinating Planning Ministry,

and the need for a targeted poverty eradication strategy. Partly due to insights gained during this tour, South Africa now has a Ministry for Women, Children and Persons with Disability, a national anti-poverty strategy, and a National Planning Commission.

The country still has not adopted a comprehensive and holistic poverty eradication approach, however, and the women of South Africa, in alignment with strategic processes taking place in the country and on the continent, seek to contribute to a transformative development agenda that advocates the centrality of women in issues of peace and reconciliation, poverty eradication and economic empowerment, climate change and the green economy, social cohesion and nation-building, community participative research, the democratisation of information, and knowledge management.

These strategic initiatives include the African Decade of Women, South Africa's National Planning Commission's Vision 2030, the New Growth Path for South Africa and the Social Cohesion and Nation-Building Agenda.

The African Women's Decade, 2010 – 2020

The launch of the African Women's Decade in 2010, with its theme of *Grassroots Approach to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*, coincided with the establishment of the National Planning Commission (NPC) by President Zuma.

The special focus areas of the African Women's Decade include poverty eradication and women's economic empowerment, agriculture and food security, health, maternal mortality and HIV and AIDS, education, science and technology, environment and climate change, peace and security and violence against women, governance and legal protection, finance and gender budgets, women in decision-making and the young women's movement. In addition, women attending the NGO Forum preceding the launch of the African Women's Decade in Nairobi urged the African Union Member States to:

- Ensure that grassroots women

are fully represented and actively involved in all platforms of decision making

- Make efforts to bridge the divide between women in decision making and grassroots women in poor rural communities and informal settlements
- Enhance capacities of grassroots women's networks to do community research, situation analyses, and manage and own action plans
- Recognize and publicly acknowledge the critical role that grassroots women play in subsidizing the state in reference to access to basic needs
- Invest in demonstrated ability of grassroots women's groups to mobilize and organize on issues of governance, accountability and development
- Make efforts to engage men at grassroots level, including elders' councils and religious leaders, in the promotion of gender equality at household and community levels.

The National Planning Commission's Vision 2030

In response to the call from the National Planning Commission for civil society input into the Vision 2030, and in response to the opportunity afforded women by the focus on the African Women's Decade, South African Women in Dialogue responded by gathering and amplifying the voices of women in local communities to provide their input into a plan of action to reduce poverty and inequality.

Of the areas highlighted by the Diagnostic Overview, namely unemployment, education, infrastructure, the spatial legacy of apartheid planning, an unsustainable development path, the inadequate public health system, poor public service performance, high corruption levels and poor service delivery, and lack of social cohesion, the women of South Africa prioritised poverty eradication, job creation, early childhood development and civil society coordination for effective action, amongst other themes, and they made a formal submission to the NPC prior to the release of the first proposed National

Development Plan on the 11th of November 2011.

The New Growth Path

The New Growth Path that was launched by the Minister of Economic Development in South Africa following a trend of jobless growth and increasing unemployment, also required a process of engendering to ensure that women's needs were met and taken into consideration when resources were allocated for its implementation.

The New Growth Path presents an opportunity to unravel the feminine face of poverty by proposing a holistic civil society approach to poverty eradication that is aimed at graduating poor families out of a dependence on grants, and unlocking the burden of unpaid childcare by women through the professionalisation of Early Childhood Education. This would help to develop low-wage industries in sectors that women are already participating in. It is clear that there is a need to professionalise traditionally "soft" jobs like domestic work, home-based care and early childhood education or crèches, where large numbers of women are currently volunteering their services or receiving very low salaries.

The professionalisation of Early Childhood Education is a priority in a country where low early education is an indicator of intergenerational poverty, and allows large numbers of women already doing this work to be up-skilled and professionalised.

Women must further ensure that societal tools are designed that allow networking, collaboration and monitoring and evaluation of all efforts aimed at empowering them. Gendered community based research, where income is paid for information, and innovative approaches to Knowledge Management and Monitoring and Evaluation, could prepare the way for women to enter the Knowledge intensive sector in large numbers.

Training of large numbers of rural women as climate change experts and barefoot solar engineers, (based on the successful Indian College of that name, The Barefoot College, and African Barefoot colleges in Rwanda and Sierra Leone), has the potential to create

sustainable environmental outcomes and community resilience while employing large numbers of women in the green economy.

Conclusion

We are living through an era of enormous transformation in every corner of our planet. These transformations include the breakdown of unsustainable economic systems, the dissolution of undemocratic political systems, uncertainty around the extent and implications of climate change, and attempts to coordinate systems and processes that would otherwise result in waste and needless endeavour through the duplication of effort. It is becoming abundantly clear that the hourly choices we make impact profoundly on the web we are attached to.

The women of South Africa are determined to act as Champions of Change towards the eradication of poverty and inequality, with women at the centre of the development agenda, focusing their efforts in alignment with strategic outcomes and goals articulated in the African Decade of Women, the vision 2030 of the National Planning Commission, the New Growth Path and the Social Cohesion and Nation-Building agenda of South Africa.

In collaboration with the Human Sciences Research Council, SAWID has committed itself to show how, building on women's self-reliance and current survival strategies, families can be graduated from grant dependency through targeted and holistic programmes that create jobs in areas where humans experience the greatest needs, including early childcare, food security, poverty eradication through family-based interventions, and the reduction of violence against women and children.

Through the capturing of sustainable and innovative lessons and best practice, the women of South Africa seek to influence policy and ensure the implementation of holistic, sustainable, family-based, psycho-social programmes that nurture human and environmental capital as they advocate compassionate macro-economic systems and revitalised social networks.