The government’s Reconstruction and Development Programme: an ethicist’s personal appraisal

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INTRODUCTION

In his preamble to the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) President Nelson Mandela says that the Government of National Unity (GNU) is committed to alleviating ‘the problems of poverty and gross inequality evident in almost all aspects of South African society’ (White Paper 1994:i). To do so, he argues, the country’s economy must be in a healthy state; in other words it must be in a growth phase. In fact he goes on to say: ‘Growth and development are more than interdependent. They are mutually reinforcing’ (White Paper 1994:i, see also Todaro quoted in Swanepoel et al 1993:44). He believes that by improving the lot of people through development one will also create a larger domestic market. This will help local manufacturers to dispose of their products, thereby creating jobs and generating profits. There will therefore be positive effects for the whole economy. It would also stimulate investment, increasing the stake that people have in the economy, and broaden the tax base.

Although Mr Naidoo, the former Minister without Portfolio, who was responsible for the the programme, has been moved to another ministry, the various aspects of the programme are still continuing, the major difference being that services such as the provision of housing, reticulated water, and health are being managed by the line departments. This is probably a more efficient way of doing it. The task of coordinating the programme has been transferred to the Office of the Vice-President.

In his inaugural address to the first democratically elected parliament in 1994 the President staked the legitimacy of the GNU on its delivery of the RDP. He regards the programme as the centrepiece of the government’s policy. Judging from the document, the whole programme is intended to
revolve around the needs and participation of the people whom it is intended to benefit. Indeed the aim of the programme is to uplift those people in South Africa who are deprived. Deprivation is regarded in the very widest sense, as we shall see below in a quotation from the President's inaugural speech to a joint sitting of parliament.

I shall use social ethical values to evaluate how far the main thrust of the policy and its proposed means of implementation measure up to morally acceptable criteria. In my assessment of the RDP from an ethical perspective I shall examine the purpose of the RDP, as stated in the GNU's official document, and the means of accomplishing its objectives, rather than a detailed investigation of the programme itself. Naturally various projects will also be mentioned but these will be secondary to the main aim of this investigation, which is to assess the RDP as such.

The GNU's White Paper on reconstruction and development largely reflects the ideas put forward in The reconstruction and development programme; a policy framework (1994), the policy document published by the African National Congress prior to the first democratic elections. The documents are not identical, although it is clear that the White Paper had its origins in that document. I shall confine myself to the White Paper, however, which is an official document of the GNU and lays out its proposal for the upliftment of those who have been left behind, and not a party-political document aimed at securing votes.

CREATING A SOCIETY IN WHICH PEOPLE CAN LIVE WITH DIGNITY

In the President's address to Parliament he defines what he sees as the core of the RDP in its purpose of fundamentally transforming South African society.

My Government's commitment to create a people-centred society of liberty binds us to the pursuit of the goals of freedom from want, freedom from hunger, freedom from deprivation, freedom from ignorance, freedom from suppression and freedom from fear. These freedoms are fundamental to the guarantee of human dignity (White Paper 1994:1).

From this statement it becomes clear that people are the central concern of the government and that the various factors which are mentioned are seen as necessary conditions for a society in which expression can be given to human dignity. In the very significant encyclical on human development, Populorum progressio, Pope Paul VI said something rather similar. He held that development was a 'transition from less human conditions to those that are