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SA still needs strategy to reduce poverty

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POVERTY eradication is a long-term project that SA began in earnest only eight years ago. The post-apartheid government has introduced an array of antipoverty initiatives, programmes, and projects.

Among the more notable antipoverty strategies presently within government's arsenal are the Poverty Alleviation Fund, the Integrated Rural Development Programme, the Urban Renewal Strategy, and various public works programmes.

Efforts to eliminate poverty have been frustrated by continued shedding of jobs from the formal economy, and the fact these poverty eradication steps' success depends in large part on government and civil society capacity, which is still being built up.

In the rush to address poverty from various angles, there is pressure to disregard some sustainable development tenets, lest adherence to them impede delivery. However, this strategy tends to be self-defeating.

Taking the case of conservation-oriented public works programmes such as Working for Water and LandCare. Their best-known poverty-reducing effect, by work on labour-intensive tasks, does not achieve an appreciable measure of poverty reduction, if considered on a national scale.

Meanwhile, they appear to have the effect of diminishing low-income communities' sense of ownership of the resource management process, ultimately at the expense of the economic benefits communities derive from their natural resources.

For example, initial indications are the implementers of the Urban Renewal Strategy have serious lapses in their regard for participatory processes. The strategy's inaugural project was the Alexandra Urban Renewal Programme. A controversial feature of the R1,3bn project was the relocation last year of 11000 families, mainly those living in informal dwellings on the banks of the Jukskei river.

While the relocations were certainly necessary to promote a healthier and safer environment, the heavyhanded way in which they were undertaken sparked intense protest. Complaints were made about lack of consultation and the hardships endured by those moved to distant temporary shelters. The SA Human Rights Commission asserted the relocations represented a human rights violation.

The irony was that Alexandra was the site of an earlier urban renewal strategy that earned similar scorn.

While these may be counted as singular instances, the real threat to poverty eradication through sustainable development in SA is the continuing, conspicuous absence of an overarching poverty reduction strategy, especially

one that marries content and a practicable implementation plan.

In this environment, it is unsurprising that many ground-level antipoverty interventions do not rate more highly in terms of sustainable development. In essence, what is necessary is something akin to what our African neighbours engage in, a national dialogue resulting in the production of a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy.

In this, goals and objectives are defined and refined, activities are identified which relate to these aims, and a sober evaluation is done to determine whether proposed steps are commensurate with the magnitude of the poverty problem we seek to address.

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