

NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE? CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE PRAGMATIC TURN IN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATE IN SOUTH AFRICA¹

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical account of the turn in the religious social development debate in South Africa from its initial critical people-centred disposition to a preoccupation with pragmatic considerations – i.e. its elaborated claim on the need for a formal religious-state partnership in the field of social development on the basis of the extensiveness and effectiveness of existing welfare and social development networks run by the religious sector. After presenting a brief overview of the initial social development debate, the article unpacks and discusses the essential shift in the debate and the respective support that it has found in the idea of social capital and a selective reading of an American case study to sustain its pragmatic argument. Finally, the paper looks beyond the current limitations in the debate and concludes with an argument for renewed critical engagement by the religious sector in South Africa by which it would (i) advance a moral debate about social structure and direction and (ii) become a rigorous exponent itself of the social development paradigm on the level of actual implementation and empowerment ‘from below’.

Introduction

In South Africa no institution has done more to promote the public image of the religious sector as a social development actor than the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (or EFSA Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research). A distinctive trademark of the EFSA debate in recent years, however, has been its increasing preoccupation with pragmatic considerations: its elaborated claim on the need for a formal religious-state partnership in the field of social development on the basis of the extensiveness and effectiveness of existing welfare and social development networks run by the religious sector.

In this paper the meaning and implication of the pragmatic turn in the EFSA social development debate is reflected upon critically. The basic premise of my argument is that this shift raises important questions about the religious sector’s ability to sustain a more progressive and critical debate on development in a democratic context of relative political and economic stability, yet a context that in a rather extreme way personifies the social inequalities and exclusions of contemporary global society.³ Indeed, compared to the debate’s original critical disposition towards the mainstream conception of development and its emphasis on an alternative people-centred paradigm of development, there seems to be little scope for critical theoretical reflection and political challenge in the current pragmatic focus. This absence raises the question whether the current focus in the debate presents the most appropriate and desirable *religious* response in the present South African context, and whether another debate is not called for. Hence my thesis is

that such problematisation reopens the question about the *authentic* task of the religious sector in social development; that in a political economic context of ongoing inequality and exclusion it recalls the ‘pragmatic debate’ in the Christian ecumenical movement in which a concern for social justice in development was juxtaposed with a religious preoccupation with the execution of development projects.⁴ Yet, in its newly South African version, the concept of ‘network’ has transcended the notion of individual development projects. The concept of ‘network’ now equates the sum and interconnection of all the development projects or services undertaken by the religious sector in a given geographic area. The implication is that the debate becomes essentially a celebration of effective network building between different religious agencies and their projects/services, as well as a concern with sufficient partnership with and funding by the state to further enhance such effectiveness.

What follows in this paper is basically an elaboration of the above critical perspective. After presenting a brief overview of the initial EFSA social development debate, the pragmatic turn in the debate is unpacked and discussed in three separate sections that deal critically with the essential shift in the debate and the respective support that the debate has found in the idea of social capital and a rather selective reading of an American case study to sustain its pragmatic argument. By drawing on a fuller reading of the latter case study and other recent literature in the social development field, the paper finally looks beyond the current limitations in the debate and proposes an agenda for renewed critical religious engagement in the social development sphere in South Africa.

Initial debate

In attempting to make sense of EFSA’s contribution to the religious social development debate in South Africa, a clear distinction should be made between three initial conferences on ‘Church and Development’ that this institute initiated during the early and mid-1990s⁵ (see Koegelenberg 1995; 1994; 1992), and the conferences and consultations that followed after these first three conferences. As the general scope and themes of the first three conferences clearly indicate, EFSA initially confined itself more narrowly to the question about the strategic role of the Christian church in development. From this question also emanated a second distinctive feature, namely the debate’s critical disposition towards the mainstream conception of development. In advancing a perspective on the role of the churches in post-apartheid South African society, EFSA consciously linked itself to the national and international ecumenical liberation movement. Whereas, on the one hand, it strove to promote the concept of ‘development’ as the new proactive social agenda in post-apartheid South Africa (Govender, Koegelenberg, Wessels & Witbooi 1992:14), on the other hand, it also wanted to remain faithful to the liberation movement’s aversion to the mainstream notion of development. At the start of the first conference it was emphasised that the history of the concept was embedded in Western ideas of modernisation, technological advancement, and liberal and free market economic ideologies (Koegelenberg 1992a:2). In the new South Africa development could therefore easily be misused to reinforce (as under apartheid) Western culture and colonise the African mind to serve the interests of free market capitalism. It was predicted that such a model of development would very likely lead to a scenario of unfulfilled promise and increased destitution for the poorest and most marginalised of the country (Govender, Koegelenberg, Wessels & Witbooi 1992:16-17).

This critical understanding of development not only determined the tenor of the first EFSA conference but also of the second and third. For the participants in these conferences development had to be understood in the spirit of the liberation struggle against apartheid and colonisation (see Boesak 1995; Bonbright 1992; Christodoulou 1992; Daneel 1992; Govender, Koegelenberg, Wessels & Witbooi 1992; Hanekom 1995; Isaak 1992; Kistner 1995; Kobia 1995; Lapsley 1992; Mpumlwana 1994; Mutambara 1992; Wilson 1994). Development could be defined by a single phrase, namely the empowerment of the oppressed and the marginalised (Christodolou 1992:88-90; Cross 1994:88-89; Mpumluwana 1994:64-66; Nkondo 1995:144; Schenk & Louw 1995:176, 181; Taylor 1994:148). It implied the removing of the legislative, legal and military trappings that prevented their emancipation under apartheid (Mpumluwana 1994:64). It implied the creation of economic and social opportunities (Christodolou 1992:88-89) by which poor communities and individuals could take control over their own destiny and improve the quality of their lives through their own efforts (Banana 1994:55; Bonbright 1992:95-96; Botman 1995:252; Christodolou 1992:88-89; Schenck & Louw 1995:175-188). Development essentially had to do with the development of human capacities through which people could increase their sense of self-respect, self-confidence, dignity, self-awareness and self-expression (Cross 1994:86-87).

The first three EFSA conferences, thus, were clearly rooted in the rather radical development and political economic philosophy of what one participant referred to as 'an emerging global people-centred development movement' (Bonbright 1992:96). It was emphasised by participants that the *people-centred* development paradigm could only be realised in South Africa by opposing the privatisation and neo-liberal policies of mainstream institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank (Banana 1994:46-47; see also Govender, Koegelenberg, Wessels & Witbooi 1992:16-17). South Africans were called upon to become active participants in the project on an 'alternative' development paradigm among the countries of the South, i.e. a so-called 'third way' development option that chooses neither for an outright capitalist or socialist system but a combination of the two (Lapsley 1992; see also Conference Statement 1992; Jain 1995:92-93). On a more decentralised level, the alternative paradigm especially had to involve the large-scale empowerment of women, a new sensitivity towards sustainable and ecological practices, a fundamental reorientation towards labour-intensive and production-sharing development strategies, and the strengthening of indigenous cultural and religious communities in the field of development (Bam 1994; Banana 1994:49-50; Daneel 1992; Jain 1995:89-90; Mokotong 1995; Mutambara 1992; Ngcuka 1995; Nürnbergger 1992; Oosthuizen 1992; Sundermeier 1992; Taylor 1995:116-117; Thomas 1994; Wilson 1994).

Concluding our brief overview of the initial EFSA debate, it should be pointed out how the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP) became an important source of orientation at the third conference. This could be seen as a logical development as the EFSA development agenda could find important support and strategic momentum in the RDP, a document that echoed the people-centred development philosophy promoted at EFSA's first two conferences⁶ and also served as the ANC's election manifesto in the first democratic elections in 1994 (see ANC 1994). The RDP, it was stressed, was much more than a document on economic development; it spelled out a vision for the total transformation of South African society (Koegelenberg 1995a:1; see also Boesak 1995; Ngcuka 1995:104). In this process the churches (and significantly also

the NGO community!) had to play a particularly important role in acting as the moral conscience of the RDP (Turok 1995; see also Boesak 1995), in challenging the existing relations of power (Templeton 1995), in promoting the values of voluntarism (Turok 1995), humanisation (Boesak 1995:17-21), reconciliation (Boesak 1995:27-29; Pilusa 1995) and social justice (Boesak 1995:19; Els 1995; Hanekom 1995; Kistner 1995; Rhode 1995; Taylor 1995:114). In terms of concrete economic policy these RDP values called upon the churches and NGO sector to resist a mere economic growth paradigm of development and to support economic development strategies leading to 'equitable distribution of benefits and resources' (Taylor 1995:115). The churches were required to actively participate in land restitution and to make their own land available in order to meet the basic needs of the urban and rural poor (Hanekom 1995:128-135).

Pragmatic turn

In the EFSA debate a decisive shift (or turn) would take place at a fourth conference that was organised by the EFSA Institute.⁷ Having made this observation, it should immediately be said that this conference, which took place in Cape Town in May 1997, promised much in terms of taking the EFSA debate forward. For not only did EFSA at this conference for the first time include other religious traditions (Muslim and Jewish) in the debate and in that way created the basis for a non-discriminatory approach to the religious social development debate in South Africa (see Koegelenberg & Louw 2003:3, 6, 7, 12; Koegelenberg 2001:106-107; NRASD web page). It also devoted the conference to the question of the 'transformation of welfare' in South Africa,⁸ an issue that had shifted to the centre of the public debate about social development in the new South Africa⁹ and that could also be regarded as crucial to the religious sector's own endeavours to transform its welfare services so that they would adopt a developmental mode of operation.

However, the conclusion drawn in this paper is that EFSA has never dealt sufficiently and properly with the *paradigmatic* challenges posed by the welfare issue, neither at the above-mentioned conference nor in the deliberations and documentation that followed the conference. Instead, its approach to the questions it had been dealing with since the early 1990s became entirely *pragmatic* and effectively nullified the conceptual, political and ideological challenges of the people-centred development paradigm that stood at the centre of the discussions at the first three conferences. As a further consequence, by neglecting the critical ideas of the first three conferences, EFSA and those who participated in its deliberations could conveniently label the welfare projects and services of the religious sector as 'development' projects and services. Although the new concept of 'social development' was now, in line with the post-apartheid public debate on social welfare, used explicitly to define the welfare services of the churches and other religious organisations, no attempt was made to consider the paradigmatic challenges that the social development concept (i.e. challenges similar to the above-mentioned people-centred development paradigm¹⁰) posed to conventional welfare thinking and practice.¹¹

In effect the EFSA debate became nothing more than a pragmatic concern with the strategic mobilisation of the religious sector by which it could obtain formal status as a recognised and funded partner of the state in the field of social welfare and development. In promoting this agenda, the above-mentioned fourth conference was highly strategic. It did not only set the general direction that the debate would take in the years to come, but

importantly also served as the platform for the formation of the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD) – a body that would be representative of all the major religious welfare and development networks in the country and, together with the EFSA Institute, would become co-responsible for fostering the EFSA debate’s argument and actual goal of strategic mobilisation (see Koegelenberg & Louw 2003; Koegelenberg 2001; NRASD web page).

Consequently, it is by and large under the banner of the NRASD that the pragmatic argument in the EFSA debate has been refined to greater sophistication and made public in recent years. Somewhat coincidentally in the light of this paper’s own address, one important venue for promoting the EFSA/NRASD argument became the International Council of Social Welfare’s (ICSW’s) 29th International Conference held in Cape Town in October 2000. In his paper the director of EFSA and secretary of the NRASD, Dr Renier Koegelenberg, presented an extensive argument as to why government had to consider the religious sector as a special partner in the social welfare and development field. First and most basic to his argument was the pragmatic consideration of *effective religious networks* already mentioned in the introduction of this paper. Religious and church-based agencies, according to Koegelenberg, presented a special case as ‘they have proved to be closest to the people in need; they have the best-developed networks – especially in areas where the infrastructure is weak; they provide the most effective network (*sic*) at the most affordable costs available – given the fact that one of the biggest problems with all development aid is the fact that the “infrastructure” or intermediaries normally use a substantial portion of the funds available’ (Koegelenberg 2001:101-102; see also Koegelenberg & Louw 2003:9).

Yet, Koegelenberg would go on to list several other reasons why the religious sector in South Africa could be regarded as a special case – reasons that one could say further specified the nature and extent of this sector’s networks. Firstly, religious welfare and development networks in the country, as elsewhere, could be regarded as unique – especially if compared to the work of secular NGOs – because of the distinctive value component that they brought to the field. Inspired by fundamental religious convictions, it was argued that religious communities and their networks played an essential role in the formation of *social values* such as honesty, compassion and solidarity with the weak and the poor. As a direct result religious social programmes have also proven to be most effective in dealing with symptoms of the moral crisis in the country (such as family violence, drug rehabilitation, and so on). Secondly, in addition to this fundamental qualitative dimension to religious social development networks, a number of quantitative arguments further substantiated the point. Based on preliminary research by the EFSA Institute the *financial capacity* of the religious networks and their ability to raise funding were pointed out.¹² At the same time, the research by EFSA also revealed the considerable *range of services* offered by those networks,¹³ as well as their extensive *voluntary basis*¹⁴ (Koegelenberg 2001:97-98, 102-104; see also Koegelenberg & Louw 2003:9-12; NRASD web page).

It should be stressed that the EFSA debate has basically persisted along the above lines of argumentation. In what appears almost to be an exact replica of Koegelenberg’s paper presented at the ICSW conference, the same arguments were repeated in a ‘position paper’ prepared by the NRASD for a recent meeting by the National Religious Leader’s Forum (NRLF) with President Thabo Mbeki (Koegelenberg & Louw 2003). In this paper,

in more elaborated fashion still than in previous accounts, an argument on a religious-state partnership as the building block of a caring, democratic and equitable¹⁵ society has been presented.¹⁶ Indeed, in this way highly political and value-loaded concepts have been co-opted by a single argument. The principle of public-private partnership has been presented as the ‘magic bullet’ that would unleash the full potential of the religious sector and ensure better coordination of scarce resources in the light of the state’s lack of management and administrative capacity to implement poverty alleviation programmes. Together these two outcomes would secure the basis for the envisioned new society! (See Koegelenberg & Louw 2003.)

Social capital

In grasping the full meaning of the pragmatic turn in the EFSA religious social development debate, it is necessary also to bring into the account the way in which EFSA has in recent years, through consultations and popular articles, initiated a wider interdisciplinary debate on the concept of social capital to further its pragmatic argument.¹⁷ Whereas this initiative has shifted the emphasis to a more general concern with partnership between all sectors (government/state, business and civil society) including the religious sector to promote social development,¹⁸ the important question that it raises in the context of this paper is to what extent the debate on social capital has enriched and broadened the theoretical and ideological scope of the religious social development debate. Thus one could ask whether, by also pursuing the religious social development debate within a wider interdisciplinary debate about social capital, it has brought any significant new elements to the EFSA religious social development debate? In particular, has it lead to a kind of debate that relativises our critique against the pragmatic turn the EFSA debate has taken since the mid-1990s?

In seeking answers to the above questions it can be argued for a start that EFSA’s embracement of the concept of social capital could easily be understood in the light of the new international interest in the concept. Accordingly EFSA’s new enthusiasm for the concept could be regarded as a somewhat late discovery of an idea that has over the last number of years been promoted by a prominent global institution such as the World Bank as the ‘missing link’ in development (see Harriss 2002¹⁹). In this sense the concept could also render significant further momentum to EFSA’s own argument on social development, more specifically its concern with the issue of inter-sectoral partnerships in social development, as the centrality of this aspect in the themes of its recent consultations on social capital clearly reveals.

On the basis of a closer scrutiny of available papers presented at the latter consultations,²⁰ as well as a single newspaper article (Koegelenberg 2004), it appears that EFSA’s promotion of the concept of social capital has been precisely that, namely to render further support and substance to its argument about social partnerships. In this sense the exploration of the concept has proven to be nothing more than a reiteration of ideas that EFSA has promoted all along in its pragmatic concern. Thus, similar to popular international ideas about the concept (such as those promoted by Robert Putman, Francis Fukuyama, and the World Bank), social capital has also been hailed as the ‘missing link’ – or key – to successful development (or the ‘successful society’) in the EFSA debate (see Fransman 2003; Koegelenberg 2004; Landman 2003; Whittaker 2003). In turn the essential meaning of social capital could be captured by those two terms already

cemented in the debate as all-important key concepts. ‘Social capital’, as pointed out by more than one participant in the debate, referred essentially to the importance of *social partnerships* and *social networks* as the building blocks of society (see Fransman 2003; Hitzler 2003; Koegelenberg 2004; Landman 2003; Moulder 2003; Thlagale 2003; Whittaker 2003; Mthembu 2003; cf. also Fransman 2002). More specifically still, social capital pertains to the *relationships* between individuals of a society, which add up to the collectivity of networks and partnerships (Koegelenberg 2004; Landman 2003:1; Moulder 2003:2). And, importantly, in cases where the relationships are grounded in mutual *trust* and *reciprocity* (i.e. the desired social capital), it will lead to networks and partnerships of great effect – in development terms, networks and partnerships of collective effort and mutual responsibility through which the problems of poverty and other social ills will be solved best (see Fransman 2003; Koegelenberg 2004; Landman 2003:2-3; cf. Fransman 2002; Thlagale 2003)

On the basis of the above perspective, it is therefore not difficult to see how the pragmatic arguments of EFSA and the NRASD that were set out in the previous section could find a significant source of strength in the concept of social capital. Whilst the importance of partnerships between all sectors has been emphasised in the EFSA debate on social capital and the discussion’s intention as such was not to focus on the religious sector *per se*²¹ (see Fransman 2003; 2002; Koegelenberg 2004; Mthembu 2003), the latter could be presented as a ‘special case’ by EFSA, the NRASD and (by implication) participants in the discussions about social capital (see e.g. Hitzler 2003; Moulder 2003; Thlagale 2003). Given the quality and extent of its networks, as well as the general trust that it commands,²² the religious sector could be presented as a special agent and generator of social capital. For this reason, the other sectors – most notably government and the state, but also business – had to accept the religious sector as an indispensable partner in meeting the challenges of social development.

However, as already implied above, this is as far as our appreciation of the social capital concept in EFSA’s recent deliberations can go. It appears from the existing contributions that, as an additional element in the debate, the concept has offered very little, if anything, in terms of a revival of the people-centred development paradigm that characterised the initial religious development debate and that the answer to the questions stated at the beginning of this section should therefore be negative. Indeed, judged on what the EFSA debate has offered to date in terms of social capital as a theoretical and strategic concept in social development, it substantiates the argument in international critical development theory about the ‘opportunistic’ use of the concept, which ‘has little to say about the differences of interest or power that underlie its accumulation, use and definition’ (Francis 2001:85; see also Harriss 2002). As the EFSA debate so clearly illustrates, enthusiasm for the concept seems to be confined to a group of intellectual, political and economic elites²³ (cf. Green 2001:69). Hence, it is a debate driven ‘from the middle’ and ‘from above’ that allows little scope (or vision) for popular participation and subsequent critical reflection on the meaning of development itself and the larger political and economic context that determines the actual development process.²⁴ In the words of one critical commentator, which describe the process and outcome of this kind of debate so well:

Emphasis on consensus and finding pragmatic common ground to move projects and budgets forward means there is little ideological discussion. Social partnership processes deny the possibility of

conflictual dialogue. Instead social partnership prides itself on its problem solving capacity. Consensus and problem solving models work by setting aside ideological differences to allow shared understandings to develop... They avoid visioning about the future in order to be pragmatic about the present. There is little actual dialogue between social partners in national agreements, with most cross-communication taking place in formal plenary sessions or bilaterally with government. This not only denies the possibility of ideological discussion but also limits creative approaches to problem solving around inequality issues... The end result protects the dominant economic model and status quo. In effect, the victories of the community and voluntary sector tend to be tokenistic and symbolic. (Murphy 2002:84-85)

American case study

It should be pointed out, finally, how the EFSA debate would also find support for its pragmatic argument in the book, *Welfare in America: Christian perspectives on a policy in crisis* (edited by Stanley W. Carlson-Thies and James W. Skillen, 1996).²⁵ An aspect that features in the EFSA/NRASD pragmatic argument that has continued independently from the social capital debate discussed in section 4,²⁶ this book has been appreciated for its similar assessment of the religious sector's contribution to welfare and social development in the USA. More specifically, and remarkably similarly to the EFSA/NRASD argument on the religious sector in South Africa, the debate has singled out the above-mentioned book's proposal for a constructive partnership between the religious sector and government in the sphere of welfare on the basis of the extensiveness and quality of the former's welfare services (or networks) (Koegelenberg 2001:100). In this regard, this particular argument in the book could also be utilised by EFSA and the NRASD to strengthen its own argument for social partnership with government.

The argument presented here is that the EFSA debate's reading of *Welfare in America* becomes a further illustration of the 'limited debate' (Murphy 2002:86) that we have seen in the previous sections is possible and allowed for in the pragmatic concern. Indeed, the EFSA debate displays nothing more than a *selective* and an 'out of context' reading of the above-mentioned study to further its pragmatic interests. It effectively substantiates its argument on only two essays in the book (i.e. by Monsma, and Sider and Rolland), which gives the impression that the whole book is preoccupied with the pragmatic theme of effective religious social welfare delivery and the subsequent quest for social partnership with government (see Koegelenberg 2001:100, 102).

However, a closer reading of the book (which consists of twenty-two essays in total) reveals a different picture. Beginning with one of the two essays that the EFSA debate refers to, namely by Ronald Sider and Heidi Rolland,²⁷ it becomes clear from this essay that the authors are in the first place concerned with the question about the *causes* of long-term poverty, which they conclude are multiple and complex in nature. This identification leads them to deliver a profound critique of the welfare system itself as a cause of long-term poverty and dependency (see Sider & Rolland 1996:456-462), on the basis of which they then present the central argument of their essay that an holistic solution is required in which spiritual transformation ought to be a fundamental component (see Sider & Rolland 1996:463-468).

It follows that in Sider and Rolland's essay an argument for partnership between government and the religious sector only emanates from a prolonged discussion about the causes of long-term poverty and the paradigmatic changes that the welfare system needs to undergo in order to address the problem effectively (see Sider & Rolland 1996:468-

479) In other words, a discussion about partnership is embedded in a more comprehensive and critical discussion that is first of all concerned with the deficiencies of the system and the alternatives that need to be constructed. It is within these parameters that the aspect of partnership is conceptualised as a significant element to effectuate and give expression to an alternative welfare model.

It can confidently be stated that Sider and Rolland's approach to the welfare theme is also manifested in the book as a whole. This point is, for instance, very well reflected in the structure of argumentation presented in the final synthesising essay by one of the editors, Stanley Carlson-Thies. According to Carlson-Thies, the book has been a direct challenge to the conventional conceptions of welfare and poverty, namely 'that welfare must be either the problem or solution' and 'that poverty can be interpreted as either an individual or structural problem' (Carlson-Thies 1996a:527-528). On the basis of this problematisation the book has presented an elaborate argument for an alternative approach to social welfare that could be structured according to a number of key themes: i.) the multifaceted nature and causes of poverty vis-à-vis conventional conceptions of poverty (Carlson-Thies 1996a:528-533); ii.) the restoration to multiple responsibilities of all sectors and groups - including the poor and recipients of welfare - as solution to the problem of poverty (Carlson-Thies 1996a:533-538); and iii.) the role of civil society, in particular religious communities and institutions, in cultivating the moral fibre (an ethics of responsibility and care) necessary for the alternative approach to succeed (Carlson-Thies 1996a:539-549).

Thus, as Carlson-Thies's synthesising structure likewise illustrates, in the book *Welfare in America* deeper questions about the causes of poverty and the subsequent need for alternative modes of thinking about and dealing with the multifaceted problem of poverty lie at the heart of the discussion. It is only within this critical framework of interrogation that a proposal for a new partnership relationship between government and the religious sector emerges, i.e. more specifically as a *sub-theme* in the discussion about the role of civil society in the new approach to social welfare. Clearly, then, in this way it becomes noticeable how, as part of the theme of civil society, the issue of partnership emerges and in turn prompts profound normative and ethical discussion. A debate about partnership, it becomes clear, is essentially a normative debate about *collective* and *mutual responsibility* that pertains to all sectors and groups in society, not the least to government (Carlson-Thies 1996a:542-549).²⁸ And as evident from the final section of Carlson-Thies's synthesising presentation, if approached in such normative terms a debate about partnership is necessarily founded in the overt religious concepts of *social justice* and *grace*. Hence, it is from this conceptual basis that a perspective on the current social crisis as essentially a 'responsibility crisis' is derived, as well as the subsequent call for action to end the structural barriers to poor people's own emancipation (Carlson-Thies 1996a:549-550).

Conclusion: Towards renewed critical engagement

It seems fitting to have concluded our account of the pragmatic turn in the religious social development debate in South Africa – a debate that has over the years been promoted by the Ecumenical Foundation of South Africa (EFSA) and more recently also by the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD) – with the above corrective view of the book, *Welfare in America*. Indeed, in contrast to the way in which

the religious social development debate has unfolded in South Africa, I want to argue that in this book we encounter far more pointedly the *kind* of debate that one would have desired as process and outcome in the case of the South African debate. In this regard, let me immediately qualify my point by saying that this statement is not directed against a concern with the issue of partnerships as such. Social partnerships, or as one critical commentator has put it, ‘the resolution of problems of collective action’ (Harriss 2002:12), matters and is vital to achieving the desired social change or development outcomes. For this reason the issue of partnerships should also constitute an important theme in the debate about social development.

However, as the above-mentioned book so well illustrates, the crucial matter is what *precedes* the debate about or concern with partnerships. Is such a debate or concern part of a broader critical discussion that challenges the very *practice* of social partnerships and networks on the level of ideological orientation, ethics and politics? Does such a debate or concern emanate from deeper contextual analysis, from critical inquiry about the nature and causes of poverty first of all and, therefore, from more profound theoretical consideration about the paradigmatic changes that are required in terms of thinking and action in order to address the causes of poverty sufficiently? Not least in as far as the discussion would be motivated by and informed by religious considerations, what are the ethical demands put before the various actors that are envisaged for or are already engaged in the partnership networks? Or to go one step further, what notions of an alternative society inform the concern with partnerships and networks?

Indeed, one cannot but conclude that in post-apartheid South Africa the religious social development debate promoted by EFSA and the NRASD has followed the dominant ideological trend rather than persisting in its initial challenge to it. Thus this debate appears to be so absorbed by a concern with partnerships between actors of the new status quo – i.e. between all sectors – that little has remained of the initial debate set out in section 2 of this paper. Certainly one would have expected a debate of a far greater *polemical* nature, if those ideas that informed the initial debate had been sustained and further developed in the ongoing debate - i.e. from the point of view of the people-centred ideological inclination that determined the initial debate, a far greater problematisation of the country’s shift to a neo-liberal ideological paradigm of development and economic organisation,²⁹ a far greater consideration of the *impact* of the neo-liberal arrangement on the actual achievement of social development.

On the basis of the polemical nature of this paper, my plea is therefore for nothing less than a revival of a critical religious engagement in the social development sphere in South Africa. As such, what I am proposing is by no means an agenda based on mere dissent and resistance. At the same time, however, I am arguing that one would expect a sensitive religious sector in South Africa to raise a much stronger moral and critical voice against current social trends in the country. This seems to me to be the *authentic* task of a conscientised, critically minded religious sector in present-day South Africa, namely to pose a serious *moral* challenge to the vast and ever-increasing disparity between rich and poor in the country,³⁰ to the self-obsessed culture of enrichment at the cost of the vast majority,³¹ to the lack of moral sensitivity on the part of the rich, to the ongoing exclusion from development of the poor masses.³² For as one proponent of the people-centred development paradigm has rightly concluded (Cox 1998:514), in such a context of

exclusion it is not only a matter of suffering or severe deprivation, but it becomes a matter of *equity* and *justice*!

I want to argue, then, that such an agenda of moral regeneration along the path of equity and justice comes close to the emphasis on ‘social responsibility’ in the book, *Welfare in America*. Indeed, in South Africa a conscientised and critically minded religious sector will, as part of a constructive agenda, not only have the task of promoting through discourse and action the dignity, participation and creativity of the poor and excluded, but it should also make a demand on poor people themselves to act responsibly, and even in many instances to change their own behaviour and attitudes. Yet, and this should be regarded as most crucial, one would also expect of the religious sector to go further and promote the *kind* of debate about *societal structure* and *direction* that the Dutch economist, Bob Goudzwaard, has in my view undertaken in a most appropriate way in the above-mentioned book. Whilst not neglecting the fact of the poor people’s own responsibility in alleviating poverty (Goudzwaard 1996:75), the central argument of Goudzwaard’s essay is that the essential cause of poverty may be found in ‘the structure of modern society and... its main cultural direction’ (Goudzwaard 1996:66). Thus he claims that ‘[a] society that has set its heart and staked its fate on the promotion of the highest possible economic growth as the means toward wealth and happiness is for that precise reason a very vulnerable society’. For such a society ‘must increase its market efficiency and productivity at all cost, even if that requires extruding from the production process many potential workers’ (Goudzwaard 1996:67).

According to Goudzwaard, there is therefore a vicious circle that cuts deeply. Whereas the expulsion of workers in the name of economic efficiency and gain should be seen as the first direct cause of poverty, the problem is further exacerbated by the continuous demand for increases in income made possible by productivity gains. For as Goudzwaard argues, this demand sets in motion a situation in which employees, particularly from the service sector, ‘will expect and demand income gains that match those in industry’. And this leaves us with an insoluble problem, as ‘no corresponding productivity gains are possible in the service sector’. Consequently, in such cases where ‘incomes are raised anyway’, the end result is a scenario whereby ‘service-sector costs will be driven continually upward’, with disastrous consequences for poor people:

Vital services like health care, public safety, and education will become more and more costly, while industrial products are priced the same or become cheaper. And here we see, indeed, irresistible consequences for poor people, which lead to a kind of paradoxical persistence of poverty. (Goudzwaard 1996:67-68)

Thus, it becomes evident that Goudzwaard’s call for responsibility is directed to the economic *privileged* and *powerful* in society in particular. Whilst concluding that the key to renewing society lies in a common ‘willingness of direction’ – a general ‘intention’ in society as a whole to change its behaviour and direction of thought (Goudzwaard 1996:75) – he goes on to specifically address himself to the ‘citizens of a rich and increasingly rich society’. It is especially this group, he states, that ‘must understand that the necessary expansion of efforts to fight poverty will not be possible if we maintain our incessant quest for higher and higher income and consumption levels’. To the contrary this will only become possible if society ‘becomes willing to save a part of its productive efforts explicitly for the purpose of caring for the needy’. Again, for society to come to

this point will mean that ‘it must change its economic horizon from the unlimited expansion of income and consumption to an “economy of enough”’ (Goudzwaard 1996:78).

However, I want to go one step further by suggesting that the religious sector in South Africa will only gain credibility for advancing such an explicit normative cause if it becomes a rigorous exponent itself of the social development paradigm on the level of actual *implementation* and *empowerment*. Whilst the above agenda for social change would certainly be very appropriate to a conscientised and critically minded religious sector, as it would allow this sector to do what it can do best, namely to appeal to the collective consciousness of society,³³ such a mode of involvement should not exempt this sector from also undertaking a critical introspection of its own prevailing modes of ‘practising welfare’. Indeed, this seems to me exactly what much of the current debate on social development is about, in the South African and international literature. It is a debate that at least shares with proponents of the (neo-liberal) market economy approach to welfare the conviction that conventional remedial, redistributive (or consumption) and maintenance-oriented approaches to welfare are counterproductive to economic well-being and production (see Dolgoff 1999; Midgley 1999; cf. also Midgley 1998; 1995). At the same time it places new emphasis on *social investment* strategies and as such engages in ongoing reflection on ways and means by which poor and excluded people can be empowered to become ‘productive’ and ‘self-reliant’ human-beings themselves (see Cox 1998; Midgley 1999; 1998; 1995).

It follows that the social development debate could be regarded as an authentic expression of the *people-centred* paradigm of development (cf. Korten 1990; Korten & Klauss 1984) as it is concerned both with the creation of an ‘enabling environment’ for people’s self-development and actual ‘strategies of empowerment’ that will enable people’s self-reliance (see Cox 1998:518-519; Sewpaul 1997:4). In terms of James Midgley’s meaningful description, social development advocates ‘argue that efforts are better spent allocating resources that will inculcate the skills needed to become economically active’. Yet, the social development debate ‘is concerned not only with increasing labor market participation but with promoting human capital formation, accumulating assets, mobilizing social capital in poor communities, and developing microenterprises’. And at a broader level, it also explores strategies ‘to remove impediments to economic participation, such as racial and gender discrimination, and to create a climate conducive to economic development’ (Midgley 1999:9).

Finally, it is not difficult to see why it should become imperative for the religious sector in South Africa to also participate actively in the above agenda of implementation and empowerment, both on the level of debate and actual praxis. For committing oneself to a moral agenda of equity and social justice as set out above would be rather incomplete and without real meaning if it does not translate into major processes of *actual* empowerment ‘from below’ (cf. Midgley 1999:16). Indeed, these two elements of an equity and social justice agenda represent two sides of the same coin and in my view will pose the essential challenge to the religious sector in South Africa in the years to come. Put differently, they present the acid test not only for the kind of debates but also the kind of networks and partnerships that this sector wishes to engage in and initiate itself.

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¹Paper prepared for presentation at the 31st International Conference of the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 16-20 August 2004.

²This material is based upon work supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa under Grant number 2054070. Any opinion, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and therefore the NRF does not accept any liability in regard thereto. Financial assistance provided by the Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED) in Bonn to attend the conference is hereby also acknowledged.

³Despite the different ideological positions from which they proceed, economic commentators in general agree that poverty and inequality have been on the increase in post-apartheid South Africa (see e.g. Bond 2000; Landman *et al.* 2003; May 2000; UNDP 2003; Terreblanche 2002). Within this broad consensus some critical scholars have also raised a stronger moral voice and have called for more radical social, political and economic alternatives based on the conviction that the current socio-economic dispensation will continue to exclude the majority of South Africa's population at the expense of a minority of old and new elites (see e.g. Bond 2004; 2000; Marais 1998; Terreblanche 2002).

⁴(i) C.T. Kurien, an Indian ecumenical scholar and economist, formulated this juxtaposition particularly well by stating that it was very doubtful whether the development projects of the churches measured up to the standard of self-reliance and social justice that the ecumenical churches had accepted as new dimensions in development at the beginning of the 1970s. It was becoming increasingly clear that justice for the poor called for radical changes in society's basic economic structures and not just a few projects here and there, however thorough and adequate those projects may have been as far as projects go (Kurien 1974:203-204). (ii) For further expositions and discussions of the 'pragmatic debate', see Elliot 1987; 1971:108-123; Itty 1974:11-14; Swart 2003. For a similar problematisation in the NGO development debate, see Edwards 1989:119-120; Elliot 1987a:58-68; Korten 1990:Chap. 10.

⁵'Church and development: an interdisciplinary approach' (1992); 'Transition and transformation: a challenge to the church' (1993); 'The reconstruction and development programme (RDP): The role of the church, civil society and NGOs' (1994).

⁶In this regard the EFSA debate paralleled the secular debate on social development in the mid-1990s, which had found in the RDP a similar basis for a people-centred development paradigm (see e.g. Midgley 2001; Sewpaul 1997; 1995; cf. Terreblanche 2002:108-112).

⁷Unlike the first three EFSA conferences, the papers presented at the fourth conference were not published. In this section an account of the debate at the latter conference is given on the basis of the few pieces of documentation that followed after the fourth conference and is based rather directly on the proceedings of that conference, i.e. Koegelenberg's paper presented at the ICSW's 29th conference (see further below in this section) and later published in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, the document on the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD) provided on the Internet, and a recent NRASD position paper.

⁸This was also the exact theme of the conference, 'Transformation of Welfare in South Africa'.

⁹In post-apartheid South Africa 'social development' was adopted by government as the new model for social welfare delivery in the country. Defined essentially as a paradigmatic shift from a remedial and casework to a developmental approach to social welfare (see Department of Welfare and Population Development 1997; Department of Social Development 2002), the conceptual and paradigmatic challenges of the new social development model in South Africa have been discussed in the discipline of social work in particular since the early 1990s. See in this regard, for instance, the informative articles by Fouche & Delport 2000; Gray 2000; Lombard 2000; 1996; Midgley 2001; 1998; Patel 2003; Rankin 1997; Sewpaul 1997.

¹⁰In the literature on social development the notions of ‘social development’ and ‘people-centred development’ are often used interchangeably to describe an alternative development paradigm distinguished from and in opposition to neo-liberal economic values (see e.g. Cox 1998; Desai & Narayan 1998; Midgley 2001). See also in this regard note 6, where it is pointed out how the people-centred development framework of the Reconstruction and Development Programme has served as an inspirational source for the social development debate in South Africa.

¹¹See note 9.

¹²EFSA estimated that this amounted to approximately R1 billion per annum (i.e. based on average audited figures of 1996 and 1997) (Koegelenberg 2001:103; see also Koegelenberg & Louw 2003:10-11; NRASD web page).

¹³For a specification of the various kinds of services offered by the religious sector, see Koegelenberg 2001:103; also Koegelenberg & Louw 2003:11; NRASD web page.

¹⁴According to EFSA’s estimations 20 000 part-time workers or volunteers were working in religious social programmes, in addition to the approximately 7000 full-time social and development workers in the religious sector. These figures reflected that the number of volunteers was two to three times higher than the number of fully employed staff (Koegelenberg 2001:104; see also NRASD web page).

¹⁵These, incidentally, were also the values stipulated in official government documentation as foundational to post-apartheid welfare and social development policy (see Department of Welfare and Population Development 1997; Department of Social Development 2002).

¹⁶In this paper examples of existing religious welfare and social development networks in South Africa are also more explicitly listed. In the Christian tradition, ‘Hope Africa Foundation’ (Anglican Church), ‘Order of Dignity’ (Methodist Church), ‘Ministry of Caring’ (Dutch Reformed Church), ‘Development and Welfare Agency’ (Catholic Church), and ‘ELCSA Development Service’ (Evangelical Lutheran Church); in the other religious traditions, ‘Tikkun’ (Jewish), ‘South African Dawah Network’ and ‘Africa Muslims Agency’ (Muslim).

¹⁷In this section reference is made particularly to three consultations that were hosted by EFSA in cooperation with the German Academy of Tutzing and a variety of governmental ministries in the field of social welfare and development: ‘The changing role of government – in the context of globalization: What are the new challenges?’ (2002); ‘Mobilising social capital: financial partnerships and instruments for social development’ (2003); ‘The building of social capital through inter-sectoral development cooperation’ (2004). Whereas all three consultations dealt in a similar way with the issue of inter-sectoral partnerships in social development, the concept of ‘social capital’ was adopted as the framework for discussion at the second and third consultations.

¹⁸Thus, at the above-mentioned consultations the arguments of the NRASD and other role-players in the religious sector would be presented as part of a wider and more general debate about inter-sectoral partnership in social development in which the points of view of representatives from government and business would also be heard independently from the former’s arguments. In this regard the discussions could also be distinguished from EFSA and the NRASD’s ongoing endeavours (as mentioned in the previous section) to present their own independent argument before government about the desirability of social partnership.

¹⁹As Harriss so well records, the idea of social capital was not an established part of the ‘development’ lexicon until about 1997. Since then, however, the idea has been actively promoted by the World Bank in particular and has become ‘the subject of an attractive and well-produced website (accessible at: www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital) that is a mine of information and deserves careful critical reading’ (Harriss 2002:82).

²⁰I want to express my thanks to Dr Renier Koegelenberg, Director of EFSA, for giving me access to the available papers that were presented at the consultations. As in the case of the fourth EFSA conference on the ‘Transformation of Welfare in South Africa’ (see note 7), the papers of these consultations were not published.

²¹See note 18.

²²In the joint EFSA/NRASD argument about social partnerships reference is frequently made to a research finding by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), according to which the religious community was the institution most trusted by the people of South Africa, i.e. by almost 80 per cent of the population. In the EFSA/NRASD interpretation, furthermore, this factor of trust has been attributed directly to the quality and value-laden nature of the religious sector’s social networks (Koegelenberg & Louw 2003:13; Koegelenberg 2001:104-105).

²³The rather exclusive participation of high-flying academics, politicians, opinion-makers, civil servants and business leaders can be regarded as one of the distinguishing trade-marks of the EFSA consultations.

²⁴This, exactly, has also been recognised in the international literature as the great weakness in social development discourse and planning, namely its inability to take sufficient account of the larger socio-economic environment that has an impact on the social development process (see Green 2001).

²⁵This book was the outcome of a 3-year research project initiated by the Center for Public Justice in Annapolis, Maryland, during the early 1990s on 'Welfare responsibility: an inquiry into the roots of America's welfare policy crisis' (see Carlson-Thies 1996:xviii). As the title of the book better reflects, the project adopted an overtly Christian perspective and involved an interdisciplinary team of Christian scholars predominantly from the USA. This factor, i.e. the distinctive Christian orientation of the project, also explains the emphasis of the writers of the book on and their appreciation of the role of the religious sector in the welfare field.

²⁶See note 18.

²⁷In comparison to Sider and Rolland's essay it may be said that the other essay referred to in the EFSA debate, namely by Monsma, is more fully preoccupied with the issue of partnership between government and the religious sector. However, in the case of Monsma's essay we also encounter a prolonged critical account of the current welfare system, on which the argument for partnership is based (see Monsma 1996).

²⁸It can be argued that this kind of normative debate also presents the positive counterpoint to conventional partnership and social capital discourse, which is criticised in more radical circles for undermining the government's own role or responsibility in development (cf. e.g. Harris 2002: 61-74, 120-123).

²⁹This neglect, one may point out, is in sharp contrast with the problematisation of such a shift amongst economic and social development scholars in South Africa (see e.g. Adelzadeh 1996; Bond 2004; 2000; Marais 1998; Midgley 2001; Sewpaul 2001; Terreblanche 2002).

³⁰In addition to the more general observations made in note 3, it becomes appropriate here to point to the extremity of the nature of socio-economic inequality in South Africa. According to figures presented in a recent book by Patrick Bond, for instance, the top 5 per cent of South Africa's population consume more than the bottom 85 per cent, which results in a Gini coefficient of 0.61, which matches that of Brazil and Nigeria as 'major countries with the worst levels of inequality' (Bond 2000:18-19).

³¹See in this regard Adam, Slabbert and Moodley's description of the 'Americanisation' of black elite culture and values in post-apartheid South Africa. They conclude that this would not have been a cause of so much concern 'were it not for the squandering of public money amidst a sea of poverty' (Adam *et al.* 1997:174-175; see also Terreblanche 2002:132-138).

³²Critical South African economist, Sampie Terreblanche, presents a strong moral voice in this regard. He points out that almost a decade after the political transition in South Africa members of the poorest half of the population – i.e. predominantly black people and by far the largest section of the population as a whole – 'are still relatively uneducated, unskilled, without formal jobs, and deprived of information about their rights and opportunities. They are unorganised, and – except in a few isolated instances – unable to exert pressure on the government. Their basic human needs remain largely unmet, perhaps even more so than in the past. Most own no property, not even household goods. They have no reserve funds at their disposal' (Terreblanche 2002:35).

³³Here we may notice how Goudzwaard himself comes close to a 'religiously' motivated language in putting forward his argument. At some point he concludes that a change in direction (a changed society) will only become possible through 'the strengthening and building up of a common public consciousness', a change in the 'habits of the heart' (Robert Bellah) that goes deeper than any form of 'ontological individualism' and penetrates to the level of new responsible communities and institutions (Goudzwaard 1996:76-77).

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