

## **For Amandla:**

### **Discussing Education and Skills in post-Apartheid South Africa.<sup>1</sup>**

**Enver Motlala: 25 August 2009**

The ascendancy and dominance of particular conceptions of ‘skills, competencies, and knowledge’ is disconcerting and alarming. There is the constant refrain that "If we want to become a strong economy, the best thing we can do is have an educated workforce." It seems as if the only way to talk about the question of skills, education and training is that which has been shaped by the agenda of big business and those officials in government who support its approach. Even a casual reading of the media or a listen-in to the many ‘chat’ shows on it, will show how unfettered and dominant the power of a particular way of thinking about skills and knowledge has become. The nation, and regrettably it seems even organisations of the working class, has become hostage to this way of thinking and are largely paralysed by it. Its main proposition is the idea that there is a great shortage of skills in our economy and that in particular areas of skills these are so critical as to make any possibilities for economic advancement unimaginable; that the education and training system is hopelessly out of sync with the demands of the economy, that the lack of skills is one of (if not *the*) the greatest obstacles to achieving high levels of economic growth, that the lack of skills is the primary cause for low levels of productivity. And because of this the country cannot compete internationally and will therefore fall further behind relative to the more developed and other developing economies of the world.

Of course knowledge, skills and competencies are important for all societies, critically important even – for the well-being of nations. But to reduce the discussion about knowledge, competent and skills to its use for employment in a capitalist economic system is a serious limitation on how the question of skills and knowledge can and must be understood. This is because in the first place no capitalist economy in the world or in any period of its history, outside the periods of worldwide war, has been able to provide full-employment in the economy. In fact, the reality for most developing countries is high levels of unemployment *as a structural condition* of the economy – as an inevitable and crucial element of the economic system and as necessary to its reproduction. Capitalist profitability has and will always be dependent on the availability of ‘surplus labour’. In South Africa that level of ‘surplus’ has hovered around 28-30% even in the period after apartheid and if we include those who have given up looking for work, its much higher. Indeed if the figure is disaggregated to some parts of the country or for gender, that figure is frightening. Secondly, knowledge is essential to the development of a citizenry, for the fullest expression of ones civic rights and responsibilities, for such elementary rights as numeracy and literacy, accessing public goods, making choices, understanding the complexities of the market and importantly for ensuring greater levels of democratic accountability of public representatives and organisations. It involves understanding the many cultures, values and belief systems in society, rebutting race, gender, ethnic and other stereotypes; the ability to evaluate ideas and systems critically, for tolerance

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and independent thinking, the ability to communicate socially and to work for oneself *and* for society.

In developing countries in particular there are a wide range of socially useful activities which members of society can be engaged in. Take the case of health and the general welfare of working class and poor communities in particular. In this sector of public provision, we know about the shortage of health care workers and professionals and the urgent need to train community health educators, engage community health forums. And all this is related to skills and knowledge relating to the mobilization of communities through educational processes that link health and human rights and increase public awareness and participation in this area.

A good health care system responds to the needs of providing basic health care especially to the communities of the poor. It is the platform on which the health and well-being of societies must be built. Concentrating on the provision of high-end care to the exclusion of basic health care delivers the health care system as a whole to the purveyors of the market for 'health care products' defining patients as customers and clientele who need to be 'serviced'. It speaks to the culture of service-promotion instead of the culture of public work and democratic rights and limits the development of skills to the interests of private profit making enterprises.

A wide range of activities are possible to support the lives of working class families from child care and the processes of early childhood development to care for the aged, frail and disabled. Communities can and must be supported in these endeavours since they have limited resources to do so themselves and yet continue to do these things. There are a wide range of community projects which can be supported relating to areas like primary health, the local economy, housing development, service infrastructure, land usage, recreation and cultural activities and support for schools. Indeed, there are examples of communities who support the unemployed through finding useful activities such as child care, community and school meals servicers, and school renovation, maintenance of public spaces, etc. And these activities are undertaken collectively, leading as in the case of the Argentinean factory occupations to co-operative forms of production and distribution. There is a rich history of worker co-operatives, even in this country and these must be re-examined for their strengths and weaknesses. Simply assuming that the only forms of labour are those associated with individual ends and private profit is the *only* possible form work is the core of the problem societies face in capitalist systems.

Reducing the role of knowledge production to an instrumental role serving the interests of the business sector alone is wrong, self-seeking and myopic. Limiting the discussion to skills and knowledge for the 'economy' is also problematic because in effect it places the blame for the lack of skills and knowledge on the poor themselves or on the government alone. The poor are blamed for a predicament they are placed in through historical circumstance and the implication that that they have 'no one to blame but themselves,' in the language of the skills discourse is insulting and hypocritical, especially since these views are held by the very ideologues that supported apartheid. These ideologues are fearful of discussing the combination of social and economic circumstances which make the acquisition of knowledge and skills difficult for the poor, not the least of which are questions of access and costs, the pedagogical barriers confronting learners who have no educational resources, the absence of

locally based educational infrastructure for workers and the poor, and the social circumstances which face them daily and its impact on education. Blaming government too is unhelpful—since business itself was hugely complicit throughout the past decades for erecting the structural barriers to high quality education for the working class and the poor. It too, lest that is forgotten as so many things are, acquiesced to the idea that black people were only good as ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’. The expectation that government will resolve the skills crisis re-enforces the false idea *that supply side interventions* are adequate in and of themselves in resolving the skills crisis. This idea hides from view, once again, the culpability of capitalists in regard to the low levels of employment creation and the inadequacy of its investment in jobs in the first place. Several other factors attributable to the behaviour and choices made by capitalists too affect the level of jobs in the labour market, including the ability of multinational corporations to relocate to centres of cheaper labour in the world, the unthinking replacement of workers by technologies, the privatization of parastatals which served as important sources of demand for artisanal and other skills, the low levels of training investment in occupational skills following sea-changes in technological innovation and the absence of a protective and supportive environment for workers. All these *demand side factors* are largely ignored in the propagandistic approaches adopted by those who insist that the poor supply of skills is the only cause of the knowledge and skills crisis in South Africa. The reality is that low paid and insecure jobs, low levels of investment in skills acquisition, unsatisfactory conditions of work, and the spectre of unemployment are an inherent part of capitalist systems of production and no amount of blaming the government and the poor themselves will change that fact.

Another important issue to free the discussion about education and skills from its current bondage concerns the idea that for members of the working class and their families only technical knowledge, knowledge useful in the workplace, is possible. This it is argued is because they are not capable of having the conceptual grasp required for ‘higher learning’. This is a conceit which is also fostered by some academics, and despite the fact that many of them have working class backgrounds they have come to accept this smugness uncritically.

Yet the history of human civilisation over tens of thousands of years reinforces the idea of collective knowledge, is dependent on and has been built upon the knowledge of ordinary human beings going about their daily lives and fashioning new ways of doing things, of thinking, of observation and experience, of trial and error and practical application, intelligently solving many of the vexing issues that faced humanity over the millennia. Without these contributions to human knowledge there would be no civilisation as we know it. Knowledge and skills are indispensable human attributes and not the preserve of special castes or classes in society; they are what makes us human and are derived from the mutually reinforcing socialisation that makes possible the progress of society. They are utterly reliant on the idea of sharing, collective learning and caring in the community of all nations. And they are cumulative over time and are interdependent. This is despite the great tests and tribulations suffered in some moments of extreme inhumanity such as the period of the Nazism in Germany and Italy or indeed, Apartheid here. The fact that some individuals have made outstanding contributions to the stock of civilizational knowledge is entirely due to its collective social origins and to the fact that they were able to rely on the pre-existing body of knowledge bequeathed to humanity by previous generations wherever they may have been

located. These great leaps in human understanding that occur at some times in human history are entirely reliant on the slow and steady accumulations of generations of knowledge produced by humanity over time. This humanity is no other than the vast multitudes of those who toil to produce the socially useful labours in all societies throughout the world. And the Continent of Africa –especially its Eastern and Southern parts – has been the source of perhaps the greatest contribution to such human understanding and knowledge since it was in that part of the world that humanity, as a single species, has resided for most of its existence.

Human civilisation is therefore dependent on cooperative forms of social labour as its essential building block. Without such socially connected cooperation, sharing and caring humanity would not have survived to the present day because such sharing and cooperation has provided a framework for the allocation of resources and for social agreement about how the necessities of life must be distributed. Now, however, after thousands of years of such collective and cooperative behaviour, societies are being torn apart and each person is required to care for him-or-her-self. Individualism has come to rule the roost and threatens the very foundations of civilised behaviour. Especially over the last few centuries, at a time of exponential growth in human productivity - a process of intense competition between private and social interest has gripped all of human civilisation threatening to tear all societies apart. Now the destructive urges of private accumulation wealth, avarice and greed accompanied by power and domination have become the hallmarks of ‘modernity’ and ‘civilisation’, driven by passionate self-interest, and the amassing of private riches. While it is true that these tendencies have also existed in previous periods in human history, especially in periods of empire building, the present represents an unparalleled epoch of insatiable greed and acquisitiveness which moreover is the cause of the almost continuous national and international conflict since the Second World War. The great paradox of this phenomenon is that it has come to be at a time when humanity has the ability to produce goods in greater abundance than at any other time in history.

Against these realities the question about ‘what kind of knowledge and skills best serves humanity’, needs to be re-asserted even more forcefully than before. Only then will societies be able to answer questions about what education, knowledge and skills are important to society and towards what ends. It places a grave responsibility on democratic organisations – those that function on the basis of principled mandates, humanising goals and the quest for expanded freedom. It is they who must strongly assert their right to represent the voices of the urban and rural poor and of the working class and unemployed. These are the organisations that must demand the spaces for a fuller discussion about the future of this and all societies – the future of humanity.