

Social Dialogue

NEDLAC and the GDS

Ravi Naidoo, Director of NALEDI interviews Philip Dexter, Executive Director of NEDLAC about the Growth and Development Summit.

RN: The Growth and Development Summit (GDS) will be facilitated by NEDLAC. How has NEDLAC been preparing for the GDS?

PD: The idea for a discussion on a growth and development strategy originated at the NEDLAC Summit of 2000, where government tabled the need for an Accord. Not everyone likes this term because it is seen as co-determinist or as corporatist, but the principle of a series of trade-offs between constituencies to deal with South Africa's socio-economic challenges is long accepted. The issue really comes down to how you package it, and this is what is being discussed at NEDLAC.

NEDLAC constituencies have discussed various issues and identified four themes for the GDS. The themes are creating employment, economic opportunities, mobilising investments and (social) equity.

Under each theme each constituency would have to state what it would do to make a viable contribution to addressing the issue. In particular, constituencies will have to look at how the agreed initiatives will be implemented on the ground – in short, how can we ensure the initiatives benefit a place like Lusikisiki, Mitchells Plein or Polokwane?

Regarding the issue of HIV/ AIDS, the constituencies agreed to take this through a separate NEDLAC negotiation. However, if this issue is not resolved at the current NEDLAC process it may be raised in the main GDS process.

RN: There has been some discussion about the unevenness of constituency preparation for the GDS. What is your sense of the state of constituency preparation?

PD: The constituency preparation has been patchy. Some of the constituencies know what they want out of the process but until engagement begins in earnest the trade-offs will not be clear.

Government has recently changed its co-ordination for the GDS from the Department of Trade of Industry to the Department of Labour. Hopefully now that this issue is settled, preparation can pick up. After all, government is crucial to the success of the GDS. The GDS, where a social agreement can be reached, is one area where South Africa and the government in particular can make an excellent impression to the rest of the world.

RN: One of the major concerns about the GDS, particularly if

the preparation is patchy, is that it could turn out to be a symbolic event rather than one where real engagement takes place.

PD: The GDS simply cannot afford to be just a symbolic event. The Summit must deliver on all four themes and this means that it must get down to the micro level. The important thing is that we have innovative thinking about local economic development. We

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really need to look at what is being done in other countries, like the Indian state of Kerala and how the ‘Kerala Model’ successfully and innovatively departed from the usual traditional models of economic development.

We need to recognise that there are good examples of innovative development thinking in South Africa. The integrated development plans and development corridors which government is pioneering are all excellent examples. And we know that some of these strategies are delivering results. The growth rates in the development corridors are up to twice that of anywhere else, for example. The question is how do we do more of this?

Also, how do we do all of this in a

manner that there is collective ownership of the process? This is the really crucial aspect that needs to be built into the GDS agreements. This collective ownership will increase the sustainability of agreed strategies.

RN: You mentioned the need to get down to the micro level. Is there any particularly big ticket issue where you think agreement can be reached?

PD: There are some and the issue of the role of trustees and pension funds springs to mind. There are hundreds of billions of Rands that can be mobilised for investment if there is agreement on this.

RN: What lessons has NEDLAC learned from its facilitation of the 1998 Presidential Job Summit (PJS), particularly regarding the implementation of agreements?

PD: This depends on how you view the PJS. There was a difficult process that led to the final agreements reached at the PJS. Some agreements set out very detailed numbers for delivery, including the numbers of jobs that would be created through certain agreements. Of course when these jobs didn't materialise, this really embarrassed those negotiators and their principals. Clearly they didn't want to touch those issues afterwards. This meant that the actual implementation of some agreements suffered. The lesson is that we need a different type of agreement, one where we agree on the objectives and how we are going to achieve what outcomes, how we work together on this, and who does what.

Another lesson is that we do need to learn from other social agreement processes, such as

in Ireland. The Irish process succeeded because they had a real form of concertation, which is something that we really need. This relates to a real process of people getting together to assess progress achieved and to commit to joint ownership. The Irish process highlighted that successful implementation needs a strategy for governance. We do have a lot being said about the need for partnership in South Africa. This is clearly a good thing, though we need a shared understanding of what we mean by 'partnership'. For me, partnership means both partnership in planning and partnership in implementation.

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RN: The success of the GDS will have an important bearing on how some will view NEDLAC. Some maintain that NEDLAC has outlived its original purpose. They say that now that new laws are passed, what need is there for NEDLAC? This seems a simplistic view since NEDLAC is an important part of participatory democracy, yet these voices are getting ever louder. What do you see as the future of NEDLAC post the GDS?

PD: NEDLAC is important, first, because of our South Africa's historic commitment to people-centred development and ensuring that we go beyond representative democracy. We agreed that we need participatory democracy, and NEDLAC is an important part of that. Second, NEDLAC is important because many crucial agreements and processes come out of NEDLAC (such as the preparation for the World Trade Organisation meetings). These

may not always be 'big news' items like the GDS, but they are important nonetheless. In fact NEDLAC is busier than ever, especially the Trade and Industry Chamber at this point in time.

As to NEDLAC's future role, clearly the role of NEDLAC must change as society changes. For instance, there is less labour market legislation coming through NEDLAC as most of this has already been processed. But social dialogue must go on, whether it is institutionalised or informalised, including through Parliament, NEDLAC or through the executive of government.

NEDLAC's role has already started to change. While it remains an institution of formalised social dialogue, it is also about expanding social dialogue in society. For example, the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), the Employment Conditions Commission and many other tripartite institutions have been created through NEDLAC. Though NEDLAC has created them, they don't have to always work through NEDLAC. NEDLAC isn't precious about all of these things happening through the institution.

An important future role for NEDLAC, particularly the NEDLAC secretariat, is to push the need for debate on the key issues that are not finding their way onto the social dialogue agenda. There are sometimes real political and institutional difficulties for constituencies to raise issues that are clearly in the public interest to have debated and resolved. Where these issues fall off the agenda, the NEDLAC secretariat needs to bring them back into the debate.