

Keynote address to Civil Society Conference by

Zwelinzima Vavi

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How can we build on the World Cup success and mobilise our society to build a more egalitarian nation

Comrade COSATU President, Sidumo Dlamini Comrade TAC Chairperson, Nonkosi Khumalo Representatives of COSATU, NACTU, FEDUSA and CONSAWU Representatives of civil society formations Comrades and friends

Inspired by the African proverb that says 'If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together', we gather here - as the progressive trade unions, social movements, NGOs, progressive academics, small business and street vendor associations, taxi associations, religious bodies, youth organisations, environmental groups, indigenous peoples' groups and other progressive formations - to say to ourselves that we have the capacity to make a decisive contribution in changing our current situation for the better.

Internationally, globalisation and neoliberal have launched assaults on the working class, which include, but are not limited to: informalisation, flexibilisation, regionalisation of states, deregulation, marketisation, financialisation, and securitisation. The global governance, commercial and trade system is supported by political and ideological institutions, rules and enforcement mechanisms that only broad civil society coalitions have historically been able to challenge successfully.

In South Africa, the GEAR strategy epitomised the dominance of the neoliberal ideology within the leading sections of the government. The neoliberal logic still continues to be dominant, in spite of some talk about a developmental state. Increasingly though it has taken a more crude political expression and there are some emerging elements that tend to perceive the working class and active elements of civil society as merely being a nuisance that must be crushed with the might of the state apparatus.

Today, as we gather here, there is panic in the ranks of the predatory elite, which is a new coalition of the tenderpreneurs. Paranoia elsewhere is deepening with the political elite, convincing itself that any gathering of independent civil society formations to confront our challenges is a threat to them.

Let us right from onset state that we are not an anti-ANC and anti-government coalition. We are not here to begin a process to form any political party, nor to advance the interest of any individual. We have only one enemy - neoliberalism, that has condemned our people to poverty and unemployment.

We want to roll back neoliberal advances and struggle for the adoption and implementation of alternatives. Our struggles have to be both defensive and offensive.

We are friends to all genuinely anti-neoliberal and pro-poor and working class political parties that have an undisputable record of struggle to advance our interests as the marginalised societies.

We gather here to say another South Africa is possible! Another world is possible!

On 11 July, just four months ago, all South Africans were basking in the reflected glory of our successful hosting of the best-ever FIFA world Cup. The whole world saw our country at its best - united, efficient, friendly and enthusiastic.

The question we were all asking was - if we can organise such a brilliant event so well, how can we use the qualities that contributed to that World Cup triumph to create jobs, build houses, provide education for our children, launch a free national health service and solve all the other major problems we face.

So we urged the government and every union, civil society formation, political party, business and faith organisation to sign a new declaration in support of a programme to rebuild our country and build a lasting legacy of the 2010 World Cup.

Today's historic conference takes this decision forward. It brings together the people who are best able to meet this challenge - South African civil society and trade unions. The forces we represent here today can - and indeed must - have a decisive say in the future of our country. Our goal must be to forge a strong, united movement for change.

A similar united social movement - of COSATU, the UDF, civic movements and progressive NGOs - played a critical role - alongside the unbanned ANC and SACP - in bringing the racist dictatorship to its knees in those decisive years leading up to our democratic breakthrough in 1994.

The challenges we face today are different but nevertheless very major and require a similar mobilisation of the democratic forces as we saw in those years.

Comrades and friends

In our 16 years of democracy we have achieved major advances. We have a democratic Constitution and many laws, which have given South Africans basic rights, on paper at least, to freedom, dignity and equality.

There have been significant important improvements in the lives of millions of our people. As examples: In 1996, only 3 million people had access to social grants; today the figure is 14 million. In 1996, 58% of the population had access to electricity; today the figure is 80%. In 1996, 62% of the population had access to running water; today the figure is 88%. We have built 3.1 million subsidised houses, giving shelter to over 15 million people.

Despite our historic victories on the political battlefield, however, in the economic arena, many of the problems we faced in 1994 are still very much with us in 2010.

The central challenge is that our economic structure, in particular the distribution of wealth and income, remains largely unchanged, and in one crucial respect - inequality - has worsened, to become the widest

in the world, and it also still reflects the racial and gender features of apartheid, with wealth and financial power still predominantly in the hands of white males.

The top 20 paid directors in JSE listed companies earned on average 1728 times the average income of a South African worker while state-owned enterprises paid CEOs 194 times an average worker's income.

Typical of everything that is wrong with our society today, is this week's announcement that Standard Bank, whose CEO Jacko Maree received a massive R18, 2m in 2009 alone, intends to retrench over 2000 staff, making workers pay the price for their bosses' extravagance and incompetence.

In the 21 months from January 2009 to September 2010, we have lost 1145 000 jobs, which, as we keep saying means that because each wage earner supports on average five dependents, more than 5.7 million people were thrown into poverty. The latest figures released yesterday reveal that the official rate of unemployment is still rising, even if more slowly, to 25.3%; a further 45 000 jobs were lost in the third quarter of 2010.

In education - although we have made progress in many areas, such as the improved access to education, in particular for girl children, reduction of the teacher to pupil ratio, the introduction of more no-fee schools, etc. - black working class students are still at the receiving end of an unequal system. We have not transformed the education system in either quality or quantity.

The drop-out rate for children who started school in 1998 was 64%. Our matric pass rate last year was 60.6%. A staggering 70% of (matric) exam passes are accounted for by just 11% of schools, where the mainly white rich can buy their children top-quality education. The culture of learning and teaching has collapsed and many of our schools, in particular in the former blacks only residential areas are dysfunctional. Many of our schools have no libraries and no laboratories.

It is the same story in our healthcare service. The apartheid fault lines persist. While the mainly white wealthy can buy world-class healthcare in the private sector, 86% of mainly black poor have to struggle to get any service at all in an under-funded, understaffed public sector where in some parts patients are told to bring their own bedding and with only Panado available, in filthy hospitals where rights of patients are hung on the wall but not their living reality.

Although we rank 79th globally in terms of GDP per capita, we rank 178th in terms of life expectancy, 130th in terms of infant mortality, and 119th in terms of doctors per 1000 people.

The HIV and AIDS epidemic has worsened our situation, with life expectancy dropping from 62 years in 1992, to 50 years in 2006. Yet we know that in terms of South African Institute of Race Relations survey in 2009, the life expectancy of a white South African now stands at 71 years and that of a black South African at 48.

Comrades and friends

The high levels of poverty and inequality aggravate many other anti-social phenomena which we see increasingly - violent community protests, xenophobia crime, corruption and the collapse of social and moral values. We face not just personal and family disasters but a national catastrophe, a ticking bomb, which has already begun to explode in our poorest communities.

This was our reasoning behind calling this summit. We can't stand there making speeches without developing a programme that will mobilise our society to stop this ticking bomb from exploding. "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Corruption in particular is a matter of life and death for our democracy. Day after day we see allegations of trusted public representatives being accused of using their position to enrich themselves and their families. Some allegations may be groundless; most public officials are honest servants of the people. But only full investigations into every allegation will clear the innocent and lead to the conviction and punishment of those who steal from the poor who put them in power. We should give our full support to the government's efforts to bring offenders to justice.

The source of the problem has always been the capitalist system, which is run on the principle of 'me-first'. Whilst workers' universal slogan is "an injury to one is an injury to all" the capitalist mentality daily practises: "an injury to one is an opportunity to another".

For every official who receives a bribe there is a businessperson who gives the bribe to 'persuade' the official to use his or her political power to advance private commercial interests. This is the biggest threat to our efforts to establish a transparent and corruption-free government.

It is even worse when the public representatives themselves, or family members, are getting rich from government tenders. The mere fact that they are in business to make money creates an inevitable conflict of interest when they are legislating in parliament, a provincial legislature or municipal council.

The danger always exists that in formulating policy, they will be guided by the impact this will have on their businesses rather than the broader public interest. We have called on our public representatives and union leaders to choose between being people's representatives or being in business.

It is greed that is inspired by the conspicuous consumption of the new elite - the BEE types who blow up to R700 000 on one-night in parties that makes the public representatives not want to live within the means provided by their salaries and rather hefty perks.

The corrupting morality our public representatives is seen in these parties. where I am told in one party sushi was served from bodies of half naked ladies. It is the sight of these parties where the elite display their wealth often secured in questionable methods that turn my stomach. It is this spitting on the face of the poor and insulting their integrity that makes me sick. Next year this elite will not go out door-to-door to get our people to vote. But soon thereafter they will host victory parties to scavenge on the carcass of our people like the typical hyenas that they are.

Our belief is that if we were to confiscate all the medical aids, that most of us here have; if our cabinet Ministers and MPs were forced to take their children to the public hospitals and be subjected to the same conditions as the poor; if we were to burn their private clinics and hospitals and private schools; if the children of the bosses were to be loaded into unsafe open bakkies to the dysfunctional township schools; if the high walls and electronic wired fences were to be removed; if all were forced to live on R322 a month, as 48% of the population has to do, and if their kids were to die without access to antiretrovirals, we would have long ago seen more decisive action on many of these fronts.

Our society in many ways is a very sick society. In addition to allowing these massive inequalities and for apartheid to continue in the economy, we are now sitting indifferent when the new elite is on rampage, humiliating the very motive force of our liberation struggle.

A few kilometres from where we are today hundreds of workers have not been paid for 10 months by their black empowerment bosses in the company called Aurora. Young people in their 20s and 30s have become overnight multimillionaires. A message is being sent out to our students that says: 'Why work so hard when few correct political-sounding speeches and demagoguery can make you a multimillionaire'. It says to the genuine entrepreneurs: 'Why sweat when political connections and greasing the hand of those in political office can make you an instant billionaire? We are rewarding laziness, greed and corruption and discouraging hard work, honesty and integrity.

In the process we making our political organisations new battlegrounds where we have replaced the apartheid regime in killing and poisoning those identified as a threat to the march to gain these not-worked-for riches. Look at what is happening in COPE, IFP? Now even Lucas Mangophe is not safe. Look at what is happening in the ANC in some provinces. Look at the number of splits in every political party. Genuineness is fast becoming a rare commodity!

But as the poor and the black people in general, we can't afford to sit on our laurels and do nothing about these conditions. Our dream is that of a mobilised poor that takes its destiny into its own hands. Why must we allow our schools not to function when we have numbers to flood the school governing bodies, and insist that teachers must be at school all the time, must prepare for classes and must teach for 7 and half hours for five days a week?

Why are we not mobilising to deal with the ill-discipline of our own kids? Why are we not mobilising to change the culture of mainly working class parents and taking an active interest in the education our children? Why have we not mobilised to change the work ethics of our members in the public sector so that they give the first-class treatment to the poor who have no money to go and get better services in the private sector?

Why have we allowed criminals to take our freedom away and return to our townships after 1994, only to rape and murder us daily, one by one, when we have the power of the numbers to drive them out? Why are today allowing a new class of tenderpreneurs to threaten our freedom and impose stinking morality of greed?

Yes we are angry! Yes COSATU is angry! Yes our tolerance levels are running thin! We can no longer just fold our arms and do nothing. Today we are here to say we want our freedom back from the elite and all these rogue elements of our society. Their party must come to an end. We demand a more egalitarian society today and moving forward!

Comrades and friends

The roots of nearly all these problems lie in the failed economic policies adopted in 1996, centred around the misnamed Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy. It led to growth at a snail's pace, higher unemployment and only redistributed wealth from the poor to the rich! It was a policy based on the misguided free-market, neoliberal policies of the 'Washington consensus', which led directly to the devastating worldwide economic crisis of 2008 and 2009.

The government yesterday announced its new growth path, which aims to create 5 million jobs by 2020, bringing the unemployment rate down to 15%. While we obviously welcome and support such a target, we shall have to study in detail how the government's new growth plan will achieve this.

COSATU has accepted the challenge to produce its alternative strategy.

In "A Growth path Towards Full Employment", we set out a path which will transform our economy into one based on the expansion of manufacturing industry and the creation of decent and sustainable jobs. Let us hope we have persuaded government to base their new growth path strategy on the same principles.

But most important is that the strategy must be turned from words into deeds. It will be a tragedy if we miss this historic opportunity to build a developmental state and turn the economy around. It would be a disaster if the government were to believe that we can continue with the status quo. It would mean condemning another generation of living with no jobs, no money and no hope. So I appeal to every organisation represented here today to sign the post-World Cup Declaration, which will commit us all to:

1. Remain united behind Bafana Bafana and do everything possible to promote soccer, which remains the biggest and most popular sport, yet is seriously under-developed. We need to develop academies to hone the skills of unknown South African Peles, Drogbas and Ronaldos, who have no opportunity for their skills to be recognised.
2. Bring down the astronomical levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality, which blight our land. Even as we prepare to host the World Cup, jobs continued to disappear, inequalities continued to grow and poverty remain widespread after the World Cup. We need a new economic growth path that will help address these challenges with necessary urgency and speed.
3. Address the challenges of our education system. The 1-Goal Campaign and the Nelson Mandela Day celebrations offer an opportunity to take our international icon's dream to new heights. We call on government to prioritise building and refurbishing schools and to ensure that all schools receive adequate support from the education departments at all levels. We must move beyond the call for all to donate books and build school libraries on Nelson Mandela Day and run for 12 months until every school functions and is a centre of empowerment to build a new generation that can take our dreams to a new height.
4. Unite behind a goal of transforming our health system and implementing the National Health Insurance Scheme. We have to fix our public hospitals and defeat the scourge of HIV/AIDS to build a healthy nation and improve our country's life expectancy.

5. Address underdevelopment and poverty in rural areas. This campaign should address food insecurity and empower our people to use land that currently lies unused, so that people can produce the food they need and escape from their deep levels of unemployment and poverty.

6. Lead a campaign against crime and corruption. We can build on the successes of the World Cup by sending out an unequivocal message that crime does not pay. Corruption is stealing from the poor to feed into narrow elites' selfish accumulation interests. Corruption kills the spirits of the majority, black and white, who want to work hard to build their country.

7. Mobilise to fix the energy challenge the country is facing. We need more action and not empty words to ensure that South Africa moves out of the current crisis. Imagine a day when thousands of activists move door-to-door handing over pamphlets to our people educating them about the benefits of saving electricity.

8. Mobilise to address the looming water shortage crises so that we do not wait for 2025 when the problem will be much more intense. Let us through our people hold the mine bosses who have been allowed after making billions to abandon their now empty mines and pollute our water. Let us defend our environment and keep our country beautiful and natural whilst also developing.

9. Mobilise the working class and educate them to appreciate that no matter how bad living conditions are, there can be no excuse for blaming fellow-Africans and other foreign nationals for the country's and continent's economic failures. Let us do everything possible to prevent a new outbreak of xenophobic attacks in some of our poorest communities. They are not the cause but the fellow victims of our unjust and unequal economic system. Workers and the poor must stand united against the common enemies of capitalist greed and corruption.

10. Lastly and most importantly, address the massive challenges of underdevelopment in the continent. Africa cannot succeed in developing its economies and transforming the lives of our people while it is still ravaged by poverty. Let us defeat the tyrants in Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Sudan and elsewhere whose refusal to vacate their positions and allow democracy means that can be no hope of Africa ever rising to ensure a coordinated effort to defeat under development. Let us mobilise to free our people in Western Sahara from their colonial masters!

These are just some of the many challenges we face. I look forward to hearing the outcome of the commissions and hope that we shall emerge from this conference tomorrow united and determined to build a South Africa run by and for the working class and the poor. I wish you a very successful conference.