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Notes on the Presidential Social Sector Summit

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The long-awaited Presidential Social Sector Summit was held on 4-5th August 2022 at the Birchwood Conference Centre, Boksburg. The delegates were largely concentrated from provincial consultations, which had occurred in the run-up and a total of 600+ delegates were in attendance. It must be remembered that President Ramaphosa announced the Social Sector Summit in his first State of the Nation Address (SONA) in 2018. Various delays prevented its hosting until 2022, including the outbreak of the global COVID pandemic in 2019.

Prior to holding the Summit some form of truncated provincial consultation was undertaken, which drew largely from previous provincial consultations held in 2019. A range of logistical challenges were encountered and the degree participation was accordingly limited to organisations linked either to the Department of Social Development in the various provinces or those affiliated to the organisations represented at the NEDLAC Community Constituency.

An Opening Address by the Minister of Social Development was followed by presentations from key stakeholders, including the Office of the President, remarks by the Minister of Labour & Employment, Stats SA, NEDLAC and Kagiso Trust, after which 5 Commission sessions were held.

The second session comprised largely of summary presentations from the Commissions presenting their key findings to the President, who was in attendance. Delegates were then addressed by the Overall Convenor of the NEDLAC before the President delivered his keynote address. The PSSS concluded by the presentation and signing of the “Framework Agreement of the Presidential Social Sector Summit”.

The Framework Agreement articulates Principles for Social Partnership and anchors the implementation of the various areas outlined within a proposal to develop an Implementation Plan. It suggests responsibility for this rest with “Coordination Structure for Civil Society (APEX Alliance). Throughout the document reference is made to the role of: NEDLAC Community Constituency; DSD; DPME; Department of Labour; the National Lotteries Commission and the NDA.

The key areas of recommendations are resource mobilisation; capacity building; transformation; job creation and community development. The PSSS concluded with the presentation and signing of the [“Framework Agreement of the Presidential Social Sector Summit”](#).

1. Challenges & Opportunities

The PSSS was not without its challenges. Firstly, while a Steering Committee had been established, it appears that it was not well functioning, and several issues arose between the various departments and the NEDLAC Community Constituency. These conflicts and difference had a negative impact on the overall quality of the process, the deliberations, and outcomes.

Secondly, provincial consultations were conducted in a very short period, and relied almost exclusively on provincial departmental funding, with some support from the NDA. It is obvious that contributions expected from the National Lotteries Commission, as was initially planned, were not forthcoming given the challenges that institution is facing. The result was rushed and under-representative provincial process, largely driven by DSD at provincial level.

Thirdly, delegates protested, correctly that they were not prepared to rubber-stamp something which had already been written and which had not been properly canvassed for their input. The failure to circulate the draft framework fed into a sense of a rubber-stamping exercise which angered many delegates, provoked objections within the proceedings and led to some negative media reports.

Fourthly, as is to be expected given the above, several civil society formations have already called into question the legitimacy of the process and the outcomes of the PSSS, which may lead to contestation and even legal questions being posed by those who feel dissatisfied and excluded.

Despite these challenges, the PSSS created a more tangible set of areas of collaboration between government and civil society, potentially with positive outcomes. It can also be argued that as a contribution towards social cohesion the PSSS was also very positive in the wider range of constituencies and sectors which it brought together. The commitment to an Implementation Plan must also be welcomed, as it will provide a measurable instrument for monitoring what is achieved and could foster mutual accountability amongst stakeholders.

Any optimism must however be tempered by current and previous experiences as it relates to Summits:

“Several summits – on jobs, investment, and gender-based violence – have been held under the auspices of NEDLAC, resulting in several commitments by social partners towards job creation and investments. NEDLAC was also instrumental in ensuring the adoption of the National Development Plan (Vision 2030) published in 2012, which faced resistance from some quarters, notably labour. Despite these agreements and on-going social dialogue, the challenges of high unemployment and inequality persist. The economic recovery plan first agreed by business and the government and endorsed by social partners at NEDLAC ‘was less of a single plan than a lining up or alignment of the priorities of different sector stakeholders, which confirms again the approach of each to their own’ (Kagiso Trust, 2020: 13)”

This might justify doubts about the effectiveness of NEDLAC to negotiate the kind of social compact necessary to fundamentally transform society.

In this context it might well be argued that the PSSS framework agreement is destined to falter, as many others before it, given that there exists no nationally agreed social contract/compact and the trust deficit between the governed (us) and the duty-bearers (government). The government needs to rebuild the foundations for national social cohesion and agreed priorities to take South Africa out of its current crisis. The current framework and processes for new social compact have missed the opportunity to rally the nation along a common plan of action, and instead seems to deepen the divide, with trust levels further widening.

Ultimately, the PSSS must be seen as one of many initiatives currently underway which can positively reshape State-Civil Society relations. The Defend Our Democracy Campaign, the planned Social Justice Sector Summit and many other initiatives can be engaged with alongside the PSSS to enhance the self-activity of civil society. This includes the Kagiso Trust initiated and supported “#Unmute Civil Society Conference”

This National Civil Society Consultative Conference (9-11 November 2022) which is facilitating a wide variety of stakeholders participating in the Steering Committee presents a unique convergence point between events such as the PSSS and the various other efforts currently underway.

2. Conclusion

The PSSS can result in a positive step-forward for development, social cohesion and frameworks for implementation. This hope is more fanciful than factual at this stage. Government's persistent inability to display understanding, humility and openness towards civil society prevents honest and frank dialogue. The inherent failures of institutions designed for consultation and engagement have become widespread, to the point that we may regard them as systemic.

Civil society is not blameless in these failures. However government and its self-selecting coterie of "civil society" must shoulder the largest share of responsibility for this situation. Dishonesty and sycophantic praise-singing does a disservice to a nation, and a sector, in distress. True partnership requires new modes of engagement, articulation and action.

The Presidential Social Sector Summit lacked all of these necessary ingredients and commitments. Civil Society must once more overcome these shortcomings through collective self-reflection and re-alignment.

This critical self-reflection and rebuilding is the real opportunity we now have as civil society. History will judge us harshly if we fail to take it.