

Rules of engagement

A debate of global relevance in today's social, economic and political context

Chris Landsberg

To suggest, in the current highly charged political atmosphere, that South Africans should become serious about engagement, would be regarded by some as outright dangerous. But the causes of the current tensions within the ruling alliance, between the governing coalition and opposition parties, and between the coalition and many civil society organisations, are precisely the reasons why we have to become serious about engagement.

The government has, since the 2004 polls, repeated its commitment to transform South Africa into an "activist, transformative, developmental" state. It is important to appreciate that such a state is, by its very nature, engager and participatory.

Such a proactive developmental state is also serious about institutional reform, building strategic and managerial skills, and ensuring that the state and private sector, with development finance institutions, act in concert and move in the same direction to meet commonly agreed-upon goals.

In our case, it is a state in which key strategic actors agree, for example, on how to address the "first" and "second" economy divides. Above all else, it is a state in which its core institutions and civil society, agree on the development and political trajectory society should move in. They will engage each other independently and critically, but confidently and on the basis of mutual responsibility and mutual accountability.

In short, it is a state that affords us an historical opportunity to transcend the narrow "isms" debate — a false choice between "capitalism" versus "socialism". A debate about state and engagement that affords an opportunity to articulate a unique, workable and legitimate ideology — one that will enjoy widespread credibility.

Not only does such a debate have relevance for South Africa, but all countries in Southern Africa. Examples from other Southern African countries may have a lot to teach South Africa.

So, what is engagement in a real



We should all appreciate that engagement is as much about defending our democracy as it is about participation and voice. Photograph: Oupa Nkosi

and strategic sense? Engagement comes with rules of the game — rules of engagement, so to speak. Engagement means, first, that the government, capital and civil society, recognise the need for opportunities to interact; these should include cooperative, complementary and conflictual interactions.

Second, the political, economic and social space should be created

and respected by all.

Engagement must, thirdly, mean the existence of a conducive environment, where mechanisms, processes and procedures are defined. Fortunately, we boast a constitutional and legal, even political order, which recognises the creation and functioning of such instruments.

To date, however, many of our mechanisms — from the National

Economic Development and Labour Council to local government structures, ward committees and *Izimbizo*, have not functioned optimally. But they exist, and we should transform them into operative structures.

Fundamentally, as colleague Ebrahim Fakir would say, engagement subscribes to a subsidiarity notion of power. This point has serious implications, for it suggests that power

and authority should be pooled between the government, state organs and civil society. The government should not seek to monopolise power; sharing power brings with it credibility, legitimacy and burden sharing. Civil society, in turn, should not be short-sighted and view its role arrogantly as oppositional.

Engagement requires maturity by actors, and an end to a tug-of-war characterising state-civil society relations. Furthermore, there is a false assumption that engagement compromises independence, and under the guise of independence, many sins are committed. Engagement should reinforce independence; it should enhance and strengthen autonomy and confidence.

It is vital for government to appreciate that engagement does not mean inviting civil society during the implementation phases of policy and governance processes to merely legitimise grand schemes, but to be involved in all the processes at an early stage. It also suggests that civil society must be invited to influence the crucial policy-making phase, the implementation and to monitor the outcomes of policy processes.

Izimbizo, the powerful and unique avenue for engagement, could be empowered and further strengthened if it is viewed not merely as an information sharing or transmitting mechanism. Indeed, that has been the problem with the government's growth, employment and redistribution (Gear) macro-economic strategy. It was communicated to, even foisted upon, civil society as non-negotiable. But just as the government should learn lessons from Gear and many other processes, so civil society should learn that shouting dictatorship because we feel frustrated and marginalised does not open up space for engagement: it shuts it.

The private sector, for its part, should help to overcome the social devastations caused by decades of apartheid aggression and white minority rule. We should all do introspection and appreciate that engagement is as much about defending our democracy as it is about participation and voice, about equity and inclusiveness, about transparency and openness, as well as about burden sharing and mutual responsibility. It's time — let's engage!

Chris Landsberg is the director of the Centre for Policy Studies

What the experts say:

Kumi Naidoo, Secretary General of Civicus: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

Effective engagement between the government, business and civil society has the ability to result in better delivery of social services. If this is to happen, there has to be more frankness about the power and resource imbalances of the different sectors that are engaging with each other. However, while engagement has the ability of enhancing delivery effectiveness and

impact, much more political cultural change is needed for civil society's input around issues of policy-making and governance transformations that are urgently needed from the local to the global levels.

Riaz Tayob, South Africa Coordinator, Southern and Eastern African Trade Information and Negotiations Institute (Seatini)

Decisions, particularly economic, are increasingly made opaquely and engagement from civil society

requires vigilance to safeguard the mass-based interests that democracies should protect. There is a need for involvement to be across the spectrum of diversity, from those who say "No!" through to those who want to engage. The naysayers can help the engaged stay relevant, while the engaged can help the naysayers be effective. However, it is important, so early in our democratic culture, to recognise that dissent may also be the highest form of patriotism.



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