Finding solutions to complex social problems in South Africa
By Barry Smith, March 2007

Development in a world of complexity
Under the apartheid regime, South Africa was marketed as a tourist destination with the slogan "A World in One Country." Ironically, the marketers of the racist past may have got one thing inadvertently right. South Africa's development challenges certainly reflect world-scale complexity and mirror the unequal distribution of wealth in a globalized world.

In the midst of political stability and strong economic growth, post-apartheid South Africa is faced with the stubborn reality of widespread poverty and growing inequality. As economic empowerment benefits an expanding, mainly urban black middle class, the majority of people continue to live in poverty and mass unemployment. As the country's remarkable and peaceful transition to democracy unfolds, millions -- both urban and rural -- are trapped on the margins of society, contending with the multiple crises of unemployment, landlessness, homelessness, lack of basic services, HIV/AIDS, food insecurity and unacceptable levels of crime and violence.

All these contradictions persist under the leadership of a government that has unprecedented legitimacy, democratic credentials and popular support. If nothing else, this vexing situation confirms that we continue to underestimate the depth and complexity of the problems we face.

Bridging divides, working for systems change
Confronted by the complexity of our development challenges, one of our biggest failings is a lack of trust, common purpose and collaborative leadership between the various sectors and stakeholders in development. South Africa remains a polarized society, in which the fault lines of race, class and sector run deep. Nearly thirteen years after the end of apartheid, a "silo mentality" remains widespread. Some leaders in government, business and civil society still lack a basic understanding of the role or potential of other sectors. At worst, cross-sector collaboration is subverted by underlying patterns of mutual hostility, arrogance or indifference.
In this climate of fragmentation, many anti-poverty interventions fail to bring all the relevant players to the table. Too often, inclusive processes are sacrificed for "quick-fix," project-based solutions. Some initiatives are top-heavy on policy but light on system-wide delivery mechanisms. Others are premised on principles of centralist social engineering, top-down technocratic approaches or "one size fits all," market-based models. Too few initiatives really grapple with systemic blockages, marshalling the resources and creativity of all sectors, and working for system-wide change.

Even where progressive policy frameworks, positive intentions and partnership structures exist, the results of anti-poverty work are often disappointing -- characterized by:

- Inefficient utilization of resources
- Creation or perpetuation of unwieldy bureaucracies
- Failure to move resources and power to community level beneficiaries
- Lack of real public participation
- Failure to capitalize on the diverse contributions, innovation and civic energy of different "stakeholders."

**Systems change requires inclusive partnerships**

The rhetoric of "partnership" is all the rage in development. There is growing acknowledgement that no one sector, or set of actors, can take exclusive responsibility for meeting the challenges of entrenched poverty and social exclusion. But we need to get beyond the conventional discourse of "public-private partnership," that often amounts to little more than a technical model or a variation on the privatization of public services. A wider and more inclusive notion of "partnership" and "the public interest" is needed, premised on the requirement for broader public accountability, transparency, good governance and cooperation from all sectors.

South Africa's constitution outlines a compelling vision of a more just and giving society, entrenching basic civic, socio-economic and cultural rights. It also proposes a leading role for a robust, democratic and truly developmental state. Internationally, the Millennium Development Goals reinforce the importance of an effective public sector and pro-poor public policy. They provide government with a powerful rallying point around which dynamic, long-term and values-driven partnerships can be forged.

With its pivotal resources of finance, technical capacity, management expertise and innovation, business has a major role to play in effective partnerships. Emerging business imperatives around "corporate citizenship,"
"transformation" and "broad-based economic empowerment" offer a bridgehead for transforming conventional notions of "public-private partnership."

In the realm of civil society, there is increasing evidence that no one contributes as much to the survival and development of the poor as the poor themselves. Through a range of informal and formal mechanisms -- like the extended family, neighbour helping neighbour, "stokvels," savings clubs, burial societies, local voluntarism, etc. -- the poor enact citizen participation and social solidarity on a daily basis in a very concrete way.

Citizens' organizations, including community-based organizations, NGOs and social movements, play a vital role in giving voice to the poor, mobilizing resources and collective action, and taking forward agendas for pro-poor change. They perform a public service by ensuring independent monitoring of both government and business performance in relation to poverty and social justice objectives. "Civil society strengthening" is not by itself a sufficient strategy for poverty reduction; but it is a necessary strategy for the achievement of more effective and inclusive collaboration to shift the systems that entrench poverty.

In South Africa, collaboration between government, business and civil society -- including a vibrant social giving and philanthropy sector -- is a necessity if the past's massive and complex social deficits are to be overcome. More effective dialogue and partnership building is required to bridge deep socio-economic divides. Governments and business in particular need to recognize the necessity for "bridging dialogue" with other social partners -- to hear the "voices" of the poor and the civil society sector in both policy making and "delivery;" to protect and expand the public spaces in which the poor can access power and mobilize as citizens; and to create a more level playing field in which civil society organizations and citizens can play a meaningful role in multi-sector partnerships.

Partnerships are not a substitute for politics, leadership and citizen action. New possibilities for social justice will continue to emerge from popular mobilization, socio-economic upheavals and the everyday struggles of politics, ideas and the economy. But if we can engage a representative cross-section of the actors that experience and affect a social problem; begin to perceive the problem anew through each other's eyes; and forge both trust and common purpose despite our many points of divergence; then the complex world of poverty and injustice just might be shifted enough to
produce some everyday miracles in the lives of poor and marginalized South Africans.

**Fostering a culture of giving and social justice philanthropy**

South Africa still lacks a coherent, joined-up "social giving" or "philanthropic" sector. Much lip service is given to the need for multi-sector collaboration and partnership for sustainable development. But the reality is that enormous gaps and divides remain among the various development resource providers -- business, government, local foundations and grantmakers, NGOs and community-based organizations, religious organizations, private philanthropists, Northern NGOs and international donors.

Synergos (with strategic partners like the Social Change Assistance Trust) works to promote a more inclusive partnership around social giving and a practice of "social justice philanthropy." Broadly, a paradigm of social justice philanthropy promotes equity, tackling the power and resource imbalances which reinforce poverty and powerlessness. As well as vertical exchanges of resources, it values and respects horizontal exchanges of support within and between local communities. Social justice philanthropy doesn't just mobilize financial, material and voluntary resources more strategically; it also promotes empowerment of communities through access to knowledge, ideas, and decision-making. In contrast, traditional philanthropy tends to stress the mere act of giving without challenging the social and economic systems that perpetuate poverty and inequality.

South Africa a country of vast natural assets, human potential and wealth. If mobilized effectively, these resources would go a long way to reduce or eliminate poverty. The emergence of a broad partnership to build a vibrant culture of giving would be a significant advance in tackling the challenges of poverty and inequality. Such a partnership would help to connect formal and informal patterns of mutual aid and giving. It would take forward the Constitution's vision of social justice, human rights and human obligations. And it would be a powerful force to release the potential of all sectors -- state, business and civil society -- for a more profound engagement with complexity and social change.