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Matsoho a Hlatswana – Hands Wash Each Other

Learning from our past mistakes and moving forward

Cde Lechesa Tsenoli

The novel coronavirus (Covid-19) Command Council led by President Cyril Ramaphosa is providing an interesting state-led campaigning approach to tackle the most difficult challenge we face today. The approach cuts across the boundaries of government departments, spheres of government and other state entities in a targeted and exemplary manner.

Certainly this style of work and innovation can be improved, such as by harnessing the self-organising initiatives on the ground to address creatively the many different economic and social impacts of the pandemic. It is critical to include medium- and long-term considerations in addressing the immediate effects of the pandemic.

Below is what could be an interesting, albeit brief, look at how others have thought about doing work in areas that cut across different disciplines, fields and faculties, and on learning from our past mistakes as we go along.

Plaques of bygone years were defeated not by the medical sector alone per se, but also by work done in other sectors, for example, by engineers providing critical infrastructure, making clean water available, building roads and bridges. This view is according to the enthusiastic and passionate Professor Harry Seftel, in an edition of *Needs and Numbers*, an engineering publication edited by Allyson Lawless, an engineer dedicated and an equally a passionate builder in her sector.

The implicit humility of this perspective is fascinating and attractive – an acknowledgement of the role of another discipline, from the standpoint of a field one is eminently an authority in.

In *The Creative City*, similarly, Charles Landry argues that the cities' problems are now so complex that they cannot yield to solutions by engineers and planners alone, but, effectively, by a wide range of inputs from other professions, including environmentalists, lawyers, architects, historians, public health specialists and others.

In more or less the same vein Thomas Piketty, in his book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, says one lesson he learnt in writing the history of inequality was how critically interconnected different disciplines were to researching his book. He now believes these are interdependent, interconnected and not delinked, separate, the way they are still being treated by many today.

The new technologies, we are told as well, are themselves collapsing boundaries that 'exist' between disciplines.

The 'stubborn' maintenance of these boundaries, especially in academia, is likely to lose its value even more, given the interconnectedness of the solutions, not just to Covid-19, but also addressing our many other social, economic and political challenges.

Ben Turok, in his book *With My Head Above The Parapet*, says 'To create a developmental state that is vigorous and interventionist, but also participatory and humane, will take a great deal of determination. There are few signs of this at present. What we have are empty references to "people-centred and people-driven" programmes, with only token mechanism of implementation and scant practice of the kind of community involvement that is a pre requisite for sustainable development'.

Interestingly, decrying our failure to learn from our mistakes, Atul Gawande, an Indian-American surgeon published a fascinating book titled *The Checklist Manifesto*. In it, he does not only reflect on the medical field in which he is based, but also on these phenomena in the construction and financial sectors.

In all these sectors collaboration came to signify the best modus operandi, aided by a simple checklist. Every step of the way, appropriate input was made by different 'experts' from different disciplines. So the checklist was used to ensure that the problems being addressed did not occur again.

This was, he says, in contrast to past practices of surgeons acting as 'super egos' who lorded over every professional relevant to surgery. In construction it signified the collapse of the master builder who was then in charge of all aspects of construction to the exclusion, similarly, of other professionals. Teams that were so constituted and played their roles together had the best prospects for success, we are told.

In other words, the recognition of the value of learning from our past mistakes and from others, of diversity, of openness, and applying different lenses to look at problems and opportunities, is critical to mounting a successful campaign against Covid-19 and other economic and social challenges.

It sounds that in birds that fly together each one that leads the pack at different phases of the journey has important lessons for us because of our diversity and the complex environment in which we live.

The Covid-19 pandemic, like plaques and others before it, can be defeated if we deliberately learn from our past mistakes.

Birds build their nests using the feathers of other birds. Learning from China, Cuba and elsewhere is critical.

The campaign against Covid-19 led by President Cyril Ramaphosa, co-ordinating the state, civil society broadly and the nation is the way to go to address poverty, unemployment, inequality and other challenges.

The people's focus should be on the agenda all the time. It is also important to work with our neighbours, the continent and world and share experiences.

This virus, like others, knows no boundaries, nor respects any.

Internationalism is the hallmark of our freedom. Humility, learning from Seftel, appears to be the oil that enables the wheels of co-operation and collaboration to turn smoothly and effectively.

If Covid-19 shows us anything, it is the interconnectedness of the world we live in.

We either sink or swim together!

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Mobilise against the invisible enemy, the novel coronavirus, Covid-19

Cde Ronnie Kasrils

At times of grave crisis communists internationally have selflessly responded to the battle cry: “Communists to the fore!” This watchword has resounded at times of war and invasion; against counter-revolutionary onslaught; against different forms of attack on the working class and people; against tyranny and any existential threat. What then is the role of communists as we face an invisible enemy with the coronavirus spreading across the globe? The readiness to respond as a disciplined volunteer is illustrated by a Cuban doctor who on his team’s departure to assist stricken Italy stated: *“We are all afraid but we have a revolutionary duty to fulfil...we take out fear and put it to one side...we are revolutionary doctors.”*

Whilst our government has announced steps to counter the pandemic – with health professionals in the front line – we will need the organised support of our most dedicated activists ready to serve our people.

One of our strengths is the culture of volunteerism developed during the liberation struggle as exemplified by the volunteers in the 1952 Defiance Campaign, and the mass mobilisation of the 1980’s, reinforcing armed and underground struggle, which brought apartheid to an end. Creating brigades of volunteers in auxiliary service to help defeat the coronavirus should become the line of march.

We have witnessed an army of cadres in China turn the tide. A state that puts the people’s safety and well-being first will overcome any challenge. China and Cuba have shown the way. In Britain, Boris Johnson’s government – as with Trump’s in the USA – had to be called to account by the scientific and medical specialists for dithering because their concern was to protect finance capital and the stock market in the first instance – not their citizens. As the situation deteriorated in Britain an emergency call for 250 000 volunteers to reinforce the health system saw 500 000 registering in no time. In the USA, Trump’s view that the virus was just another flu outbreak has forced him to eat his words. Britain’s volunteers will help deliver

medicines and food to the elderly and vulnerable, deliver supplies to the frontline, ferry people to hospital, work in hospitals in supportive non-clinical roles.

Back home no such call for volunteers has as yet been made by government – yet it is in our DNA. Witness the range of social forces who have rushed to the fore to assist those in most need. Inspirational organising is happening spontaneously, largely independently of the state.

The call for volunteers is growing in civil society with beginnings of a volunteer register underway. The SACP and Alliance should add their weight and experience to this initiative. The effort needs to be effectively co-ordinated and planned, otherwise everybody tries to do everything. Even with the best of intentions such actions may become counter-productive.

What can be done?

In the first place, every volunteer, like a good soldier, should understand the nature of the enemy, how to combat the threat, recognise friendly forces and strive for unity of effort in isolating the enemy. We should prioritise care for the most vulnerable; and adapt measures suitable to crowded conditions which those who are poor and marginalised cannot escape from. The government and scientific community need to work on this, learning from the people directly. They need to understand that staying at home is a measure of class privilege.

Among the challenges and tasks facing us:

- Be knowledgeable in order to calmly provide the people with credible information and an analysis of the crisis and unfolding events. To be effective: understand, explain, publicise the rules, regulations, prevention and health issues.
- Explain the need to wash hands and self-isolate. Explain the slogan: 'Break the Chain' which captures the attempt by government and society to enforce forms of physical isolation, quarantine, and treatment to prevent the spread of the virus from one to another.
- Collect and help distribute soap, sanitizers, protective masks, household cleaning products, food, water (In Cape Town, civil society is organising the pairing of better-off and underprivileged neighbourhoods for mutual benefit).
- Assist the homeless and elderly, including single head families often looked after by a youngster;
- Help the orderly formation of queue lines at grant and pension pay-outs, food stores, water points, taxi ranks.
- Inculcate a sense of solidarity – let your neighbours know you support your health and social workers; encourage hanging out national flag and posters from buildings, sing to one another from house to house as reported in Italy; applaud the health workers, develop mutual aid responses, inculcate a sense of community.

- Report burst water pipes, blocked sewers, fallen trees, electric malfunction to the local council; see that they get on with the job.
- Organise refuse removal and clean-ups.
- Raise demands that health workers be provided with masks and safety clothing.
- Support trade union demand for worker safety, the necessity of neighbourhood level organising, income and social security, the rights of those on zero-hour contracts or in precarious employment, and the need to protect those living in poverty.
- Government made a promise that there would be no evictions during the shutdown. Cruel shack demolitions continue. Stand by the shack dwellers and lodge protests with the authorities. The eThekweni Municipality is the worst offender.
- A key problem with physical isolation and quarantine is mental distress. Assist social workers identify those suffering this way. Give them empathy. “Physical distance, social unity” is the slogan of the Kerala Left and Communist-led Government which was swift to act and get on top of the pandemic. We should adapt the slogan and learn their lessons.
- Public action – involving trade unions, and the broad Left, youth groups, women’s organisations, with cooperative endeavours from civil society, cultural and religious groups – of collecting, cleaning and preparing supplies, and assisting in distribution will raise the spirit of the people, encouraging them to trust in social unity and not to fragment in fear.
- Counter xenophobia and protect foreigners; bring all the people who suffer equally from the pandemic threat together in a spirit of solidarity.
- Act as whistle blowers. Report the abuse of power by security personnel, stand by those victimised; counter a military-police state mentality which can come-back to undermine our democratic gains when the threat is over.

Rediscovering our culture of voluntary service will defend and deepen democracy as we return to more normal times, although things as we have known them cannot ever be the same again. Volunteerism has been at the core of overthrowing apartheid. We need to inculcate that fighting spirit if we are to overcome this new monster that has reared its ugly head. Our people’s very survival is at stake. We must win this battle. The battle for a new world order will resume. Amandla!

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