

#changethestory

TWO simple English words, accompanied by their emotional states, overwhelmed me this week. The first word was “amateurish” and the second was “ineptness.”

That is my perpetual awareness of the state of local leadership at this time of global crisis. This crisis is not about Covid-19 – it is about the focus placed on land, poverty and inequality by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Indian economist and University of Chicago Professor Raghuram Rajan, in his book *The Third Pillar*, writes about how governments and economists exclusively focus on the relationship between markets and the state and leave the “squishy social issues to other people.”

This Reagan-era doctrine of trickle-down economics still – tragically – dominates the thinking of South African leaders today.

After 30 years of tax cuts, infrastructure development programmes and stimulus packages, including the current Covid-19 bailout funding for corporations, we have seen an increase in the wealth of the top 10% of the world’s population and a decrease in wealth of the other 90%.

The creation of “the middle class” has tragically served only to provide the protection buffer the rich needed



LORENZO A DAVIDS

AMATEURISH AND INEPT

to silence the voices of the poor. When you have just enough – all funded by debt – and are given a title such as “the middle class,” you quickly turn your eyes away from the poor to focus on making sure you don’t end up poor again.

In the Western Cape – as in other provinces – we have several economic agencies such as Wesgro, the Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Accelerate Cape

Town, the Western Cape Economic Development Partnership and the network of City Improvement Districts – many of them state-subsidised. Add in the multiple tourism bodies and the many bi-lateral foreign country trade agencies (Atlanta-Cape Town, China-South Africa), and you will find a system of multiple layers of economic partnerships that is supposed to create a more prosperous society for all.

Here is my question to the president and his premiers and mayors: where are the independent and multiple bodies of similar fashion that are tasked with promoting justice, working on restitution, and serving reconciliation?

Where are the multiple state-funded independent bodies that speak for the landless to ensure that there is no need to invade land but that land and safe tenure are part of a just and sound economic policy managed by skilled leaders?

Where are the multiple state-funded independent bodies that ensure that the causes of violence can be addressed in a sense-making way?

The amateurish manner of political leadership and the inept ways of thinking that guide policies

such as access to land, security of tenure, absence of violence and economic prosperity are all based on this failed trickle-down system that says: if you allow the rich – and the nouveau rich and their companies – to make as much money as possible, the poor will one day be less poor.

Let us not forget: The Great Trek (1835-40) was a revolt against control by the Afrikaner against arrogant colonial landlords and the need for land – much of that prosperity and land later acquired at the expenses of violating fundamental human rights.

We need the president and his premiers to put human rights, justice, access to land, security of tenure and freedom from violence central to every economic opportunity, business deal and tourist visit.

We can no longer allow leaders to use the double-edged bludgeon of ignoring justice and human rights while securing huge trade deals, or who attract foreign business but fail to provide citizens with security of tenure.

They secure international trade deals but de-link it from safety from violence for its citizens, and they provide entertainment for millions of tourists but not justice for the poor.

Soon there will be no business and no tourists left to make deals.