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## **The greening of South Africa is basic to its healing**

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**Abstract:** It is environmental issues which are crucial in restoring the disastrous impact of the apartheid system in South Africa. The denial of natural resources in the rural areas to the majority of the people in the country is largely responsible for most of the problems which confronted the new government. Land reform, provision of clean water and sanitation, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and other diseases, education, crime and basic social services were among the main issues to be addressed. Much progress has been made in the 11 years since the fall of apartheid, but much still needs to be done.

**Keywords:** the greening of South Africa; Albie Sachs; land reform in South Africa; poverty alleviation in South Africa; employment equity in South Africa; education in South Africa.

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Barnett, U.A. (2006) 'The greening of South Africa is basic to its healing', *Int. J. Green Economics*, Vol. 1, Nos. 1/2, pp.169–173.

**Biographical notes:** Ursula A. Barnett holds a Master's degree in Journalism at the University of Columbia, New York. Prior to earning her degree, she worked for a feature and photo press agency. Later, she became interested in literature by black South African writers which led to a PhD and two published books, *A Vision of Order* and *Biography of Ezekiel Mphahlele*. Barnett was active in opposing the apartheid regime as member of the Federation of South African Women, continuing in London as member of the ANC and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Now, as the ANC Support Group, one of their main projects is the building of a nursery school in one of the poorest rural areas. The first part is complete and should be opening soon.

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More than almost anywhere in the world, environmental problems in South Africa stand in close relationship to human and economic issues. It is environmental issues which are crucial in restoring the disastrous impact of the apartheid system that ended in 1994. The denial of natural resources in the rural areas to the majority of the people in the country is largely responsible for the disastrous poverty, disease, lack of education and crime which confronted the new government. The rural problems also spill over in that they cause migration to the cities resulting in overcrowding and unemployment.

The deprivation of land of the black population preceded apartheid. In 1913, the Land Act limited the land it could own to 7%, raised to 13% in 1913 as 'compensation' for the withdrawal of voting rights of the black population. Apartheid policy set out deliberately and methodically to herd the black majority into 'homelands', consisting of 13% of the land for 42% of the people, and the least fertile land at that.

Overpopulation led to overgrazing and overcropping which in turn led to soil erosion. The land became increasingly degraded and thus less productive. The loss of soil is estimated at 300–400 million tonnes per year which is almost 3 tonnes for each hectare of land. Much of this loss is irreversible.

After the end of apartheid it took a while for the urgency of addressing environmental degradation to be accepted as a priority. To quote McDonald (1993) in a review of two books, *Going Green: People, Politics and Environment in South Africa* by Cock and Koch (Eds.) (1991) and *Restoring the Land: Environment and Change in Post-Apartheid South Africa* by Ramphela (Ed.) (1991): "Why should we, the saying goes, be told by industrialists and academics in the North that we can not do what they did to their environment, and must sit by and watch our people suffer in order to save a rhino or a tree."<sup>1</sup>

Sachs (1990), in a contribution to one of the books under review, made clear that "the greening of South Africa is basic to its healing. Apartheid not only degrades the inhabitants of our country, it degrades the earth, the air, and the streams", he said.<sup>2</sup> It was soon realised, after the fall of apartheid, that land reform, with a fairer distribution of land, was essential. The pace has been slow but all interested groups were agreed that the problems with land reform must be better understood and constructive ways forward must be found. Many groups of land reform practitioners and researchers became involved in discussions including the Department of Land Affairs, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Oxfam-GB and others. A land reform policy was launched by the state in 1996 with targets later set by President Mbeki's government to increase land owned by the black population from 13% at the end of apartheid in 1994 to 30% by 2014. Redistributing the land by a willing-buyer-willing-seller policy, the buyer being the state on behalf of landless blacks, has so far still left it wide of the mark at 16%. Gwanya, Chief Claims Commissioner, said recently that "(w)e are thinking of setting a ceiling on land prices depending on the region and the land and to establish our own valuers as those used by white farmers are in cahoots with them".<sup>3</sup> The political aspect of land reform is a sensitive issue, partly because of developments in Zimbabwe, where forcible relocation of land has led to economic disintegration and political violence. All are agreed that this must not happen in South Africa. "There is no chance of Zimbabwe happening here", the claims commissioner said. There has been progress in providing secure land-tenure to labour tenants. Arbitrary and unfair evictions now rarely occur.

Economically, South Africa differs from other countries in that the country experiences both first world and third world problems. While South Africa achieved democratisation in 1994 based on one of the most advanced constitutions in the world, and has a stock exchange ranking tenth in the world, it must cope, as the most industrialised country in Africa, with matters like nuclear waste from power stations and at the same time with those affecting the poor: lack of clean water, trees cut down for fuel, land degradation and unemployment to name just a few.

The provision of clean water and sanitation has been a key government policy and there has been considerable improvement. Between 1994 and 2001 some eight million people were provided with water for the first time. But there are still many millions without access to clean water. In 2001, the government introduced a free water scheme, allowing households 6000 litres of water per month, enough for about 40 baths. For everything used above that, consumers have to pay. This has caused some hardship. In one community, however, it was found that much of the water above the free limit dripped away from leaking taps, with one household registered as consuming more than 700 baths a day! The Water Leaks project in Harare, Khayelitsha near Cape Town, a joint initiative of environmental NGOs, trade unions, and a community forum aims to reduce this unnecessary wastage, and at the same time give young volunteers marketable skills in plumbing, business and finance. Mangwana, one of the volunteers, told the Cape Times he was excited at the idea of starting his own small plumbing business, and liked showing people how to read their bills and save water.<sup>4</sup>

At the centre of the government's development agenda since 1994 has been the alleviation of poverty among the majority of South Africans. With the help of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), it is hoped to halve poverty by 2015. According to a report, 'UNDP in South Africa', the challenges include a broader understanding of the poverty-environment-growth nexus, the HIV/AIDS epidemic affecting a quarter of the population, the constraints faced in the government system in delivering services to the poor and the need for strong linkages between development programmes and environmental conservation. There has been some progress. According to Asmal (2004) as Minister of Education in 2004 the figures for Aids have reached a plateau and are slightly tapering down between ages 15 and 24. In crime, too, there has been progress. South Africa's most frightening crime, the hijacking of cars which often includes murder of driver and passengers, has shown a significant decrease. The South African Police Service 2003–2004 national crime statistics show a 13% decrease since 2000. Car thefts have come down by 18% over the same period.<sup>5</sup>

A government report<sup>6</sup> points to its record of the past decade of transforming South Africa by rolling out basic social services and alleviating the poverty of the most needy members of society. In 1994, social grants totalling R10 billion (just under £1 billion) were distributed to 2.6 million people. In 2003, R34 billion (£3 billion) were paid to 6.8 million people, especially the aged, young children in poor households and people with disabilities. Six million people received housing between 1994 and 2003 and more than 70% of households now have access to electricity, compared with 30% in 1996. These social grants have alleviated poverty to some extent but, despite attempts to improve grant distribution, a lack of documentation particularly in the rural areas, means that the uptake of the grants is much lower than it should be.

Closely linked to poverty is South Africa's high unemployment rate, estimated at approximately 30.5% or 4.8 million people, though other researchers claim a figure as high as 40%. Job creation in the past decade has not been the hoped-for success. Some economists believe that South Africa's economy needs to grow by 5%–6% a year to absorb job seekers. The Employment Equity Act is aimed at redressing the employment disadvantages of black people, women and those with disabilities in order to achieve employment equity but, as another legacy of apartheid, there is an overload of unskilled workers and a lack of skilled workers. Also there is a consistent loss of jobs in the formal sector, as the economy moves away from labour intensive to capital-intensive operations.

Education and training is the answer to redressing the neglect of the apartheid regime. Asked by *Education Today*, a UNESCO newsletter<sup>7</sup> what was the most pressing educational challenge facing South Africa today, the then Education Minister Asmal, said the first fundamental challenge, the biggest disability from which children suffer, is their poverty. The effects of apartheid, the dual education system with the well-funded white schools and then the old 'homelands' schools in the rural areas and in the townships, must be removed. Although all schools are open to all under the new dispensation this only works in the very slowly integrating urban areas.

In the old black schools teachers are undertrained and facilities are lacking. "How can you have information technology when you don't have basic things like water and sanitation", asks Asmal. The South African government spends 22% of its national budget on education. It has embarked on a major campaign to upgrade teachers and facilities. For example, it has reduced the level of underqualified teachers from 77 000 to about 30 000. The supply of water and sanitation is also receiving attention. Every effort is being made to deracialise schools.

"...(W)hat we have embarked on", says Asmal, "– being a multiracial multicultural, multireligious, multilingual society - is to celebrate our diversity".<sup>7</sup>

One of the starkest effects of poverty on education is the inability of children to learn, and often even to attend school because of hunger. Six years ago in one school, Banareng Primary School in Atteridgeville near Pretoria, someone suggested a solution. Part of the playground was turned into a cabbage-patch. Now the school produces enough vegetables to feed all 670 students every day for free. "For some, the lunch they get at school is the only meal they eat", says Sethole, the head-teacher.<sup>8</sup> Other schools also have nutrition programmes. Projects like the one at Banareng not only feed the students but become teaching tools. At Ikaneng Primary School, in Soweto, the vast township south of Johannesburg, children bring bottles of water in the morning to tend what was once an empty lot strewn with rocks and weeds. "We don't need fancy equipment to teach subjects like science, mathematics, technology and commerce any more", says Memela, a teacher. "We just use our gardens. The students have to measure up a plot – that's mathematics. When the seeds germinate and grow – that's science. When the pupils have to price and sell the goods, that is commerce".<sup>8</sup> The originating force behind some of the gardens is an organisation called Food and Trees for Africa, a Trust and NGOs in association with the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry.

There is also a school greening and food gardening programme called EduPlant, funded by the South African electrical giant Eskom's independent Development Foundation. In 2003, at a ceremony to recognise the achievements of schools that designed projects to improve the environment and quality of life it awarded a prize to Ikaneng school. The children, who have involved parents and other members of the community, grow over 15 varieties of vegetables, fruit, herbs and flowers. They have developed windbreaks to stop the dust blowing into the classrooms, make organic compost, farm earthworms and recycle most of their waste. Head-teacher Lesele points to the broader benefits of the gardens:

"The apartheid regime taught us as blacks that we can do nothing. If you believe that you are poor, you can do nothing, you are telling your mind to be lazy. My learners know that we don't say 'we can't'. Being black does not limit you. You must believe that you can."<sup>8</sup>

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## Notes

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- 3 *Interview* by Agence France Presse in *The Namibian*, 15 April 2005.
- 4 *Cape Times*, 14 March 2005.
- 5 *UNESCO Newsletter Education Today*, January–March 2004.
- 6 Quoted by Agence France Presse in the *IRIN News Organisation of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* on 11 April 2004.
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- 8 'Reading, writing and a celery stick' by Govender and Kotch, South African Institute of Internal Affairs, *eAfrica*, Vol. 2, July 2004.

Greening Africaâ€™s Cities: Enhancing the relationship between urbanization, environmental assets and ecosystem services Preface and Acknowledgements. Africa is urbanizing late but fast. This brings many benefits but, as this report shows: Thus far, urbanization in Africa, unique in a number of respects, is having deleterious and largely unchecked impacts on the natural environment; The degradation of natural assets and ecosystems within African cities carries tangible economic, fiscal and social costs; Urbanization, the environment and green urban development in Africa. They do not want non-black South Africans who are now a minority in their own country, to leave South Africa because they know the economy of South Africa is suffering because of this brain-drain of the best doctors, teachers and farmers etc. There are no prospects for our youth in SA today because of the war like murder and rape rates caused by the ANC Communist 'People's War' and because of racist Communist laws like BBEEE and Affirmative Actions against the minorities who have always held the economy of South Africa together. The ANC and PAC were and still are trained by the... Learning from others. Believing the warnings. Acting before its too late. It is written down over and over again that the Europeans settled on uninhabited land.