

THE NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL POLICY INITIATIVE

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It's very difficult to talk about the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI), for two reasons. Firstly because I think that there is quite a lot of information that one would need to put across, and I don't think that should be necessarily my aim here. Secondly, NEPI is still in progress, so to try and reflect on it would be a bit difficult. But I think that we should be reflecting on the process of policy research as it actually evolves. Because if we simply judge it in terms of the end product, I think we would actually miss a whole lot of issues that people have been raising in this symposium.

Basically what I want to raise about NEPI are the problems that I am picking up, as well as the lessons we could draw from the process of policy research. So in that sense it's not an official position by the NEPI structures or the NECC structures; it's my own reflection.

I want to talk very quickly about the origins of NEPI. They are important because, to a large extent, they are shaping the way that the process is going. Basically NEPI was a project that was conceptualised out of a meeting of the Education Policy Units in consultation with RESA (Research on Education in South Africa), which was still underground those days, based in London, to try to map out some form of coordination amongst the EPU's as well as some kind of specialisation. We never planned on NEPI. But we realised at that meeting, for instance, that we do not have the capacity to do that. The moment we started talking about capacity, about how to improve our capacity to deliver, then NEPI was born.

Another related development which is very important is that, already by late 1989, there were signs that the political conjuncture was likely to change. The defiance campaign was very crucial, and the re-emergence of the NECC even though it was still officially banned. These plus the CDS initiative shaped NEPI. I hear it's very nice for people to actually slam CDS left, right and centre, but they don't acknowledge one thing, that in fact CDS was a very important experiment from which we could learn. And in fact we have learnt a lot, by saying, 'Let's not do like the CDS did here and there.'

However the most important thing was that there was a rush at the same time. Some of big business and the state was saying to the NECC, 'If you want us to sort out this problem, what is your view on primary education?' Sectors of capital saying, 'We've got four million rand which we want to invest in primary education. The NECC is an important body. What should we do?' And then the NECC started saying, 'Oh, well. What should we do?' They rushed into the EPU's saying 'Can you come up with something?'

NEPI in fact tries to cover the entire field of education, with about 12 working groups that are looking at different areas. There are some problems that I think it's

important we grapple with in a symposium like this. Firstly is the relationship between NEPI and the NECC structures. How does NEPI as it proceeds actually fit into the NECC and also how does the NECC fit into NEPI? A very critical issue in terms of process is that whilst we are researching we have to take into account what is going on. But how do we take into account what is going on at this point in time - new state strategies, advances by capital - how do we incorporate that without diverting from meeting the deadline that we have set ourselves to produce reports by August this year.

NEPI classically represents the problem of this division of labour, that your experts are your academics, university-based people largely, who are predominantly white; whilst the NECC structures are mass-based, community people who are predominantly black. That has got the potential of creating severe tensions, on the one hand. On the other hand, of course, I think it provides an opportunity - because I don't think we should look at it one way - of actually forging a relationship in practice during the progress of research between university-based intellectuals and mass-based organisations.

An additional problem is the notion that critique equals the period of what is called politics of resistance in South Africa, whilst the period of reconstruction equals policy research. I think it's a severe distortion of our struggle to say that it's only now that we are entering a phase of transformation.

But the big problem arising out of that is that with policy research emerging in South Africa in such a big way, particularly in education, it's the very same people who are doing very important work in education - which some people recall was in a critique mode - that have moved into policy. In fact there is a void, and there is no bridge, no link, between that work that they have been doing and policy. Because now the preoccupation is actually generating policy options at the expense of critical analysis of what is going on.

The third problem arises from NEPI having emerged as an NECC project. This has led to a tendency from some people working in NEPI saying that it must remain an NECC project to strengthen the NECC as a social movement, as an organ of civil society.

There are two issues here. The first one is that there could be a tendency of wanting to hold NEPI away from the ANC. But secondly, there is a tendency now to say that we are the intellectuals that are looking after strengthening organs of civil society. I want to make a very provocative point here, deliberately inviting comment or criticism, that in fact this notion of civil society represents a major theoretical retreat amongst the left. In fact we are actually taking basically a liberal paradigm. I've been struggling to find in Marx and Engels the concept of civil society as is used by people who claim to be Marxists, including Gramsci himself. I would strongly argue that the way civil society is being used in South Africa is a severe distortion of Gramsci. Gramsci never meant what people mean by civil society. I want to put that as a deliberate challenge, because I think that we are becoming liberals unawares, and couching our language in a sort of Marxist discourse.

In conclusion I would like to comment on some of the lessons to be drawn. We are

now just looking at policy options concerning a democratic South Africa but we are not looking at how we get there. How does the policy research process fit into contemporary struggles that have to bring about that democratic South Africa where we'll have to implement these policy options that we are generating?

If we accept that the struggle will be crucial in saying what kind of policy options will be implementable, then policy options cannot be a set of fixed research proposals. They can change as the conjuncture changes.

Jakes Gerwel in a meeting, not so long ago, asked a very crucial question: 'What would we be doing now if the national liberation movement had seized power?' I think that question is important because for me it raises how we measure the implementability of the policy options that that we are coming up with in a democratic South Africa? How effective are they? Particularly because we are not theorising the transition. For instance, I would like to hear more about the array of class forces at this particular conjuncture in South Africa, what kinds of policies they are pushing for, the level of contestation, the nature and form of organisation that we should come up with in order to be able to implement this or that policy.

The other lesson which has been raised here, is that the weaknesses of mass organisations have become the strength of policy researchers and intellectuals. It looks like we are benefitting from the weaknesses of the organisations by the organisations now relying more and more on us to deal with the complex situation that is in front of us.

Finally a comment of what we have not done. We need consciously to insert within policy research an analysis of the link between policy research and political struggle. Because our policy options are as good as they are a reflection of the advances that we have made in struggle. Let me make an example. I think that we would take a different policy direction when, say, students first form an SRC through struggle and force the formation of SRCs in schools rather than to ask someone to go and research how SRCs should be formed and how SRCs should operate. Those are two different moments. To clarify the first route let me take an example concerning where we failed on the question of land in this country. Instead of saying, 'let's form a land court that will actually decide on claims about land', people start physically reoccupying the land that was taken away from them. Policy directions that are likely to emerge out of that, because we could possibly be stronger, are different than waiting for the land or to prepare a position or a submission to the land courts.

In short we have not successfully reflected enough on the policy research process, particularly in relation to political struggle.

DISCUSSION

Editorial Note: This session was energetic but inconclusive, with discussion moving fairly rapidly over some important issues such as civil society and social transformation. Unfortunately the critical issue for this symposium - ie the relation between policy emanating from research and initiatives to transform society emerging from civil society - was lost in the heated debate over the status of civil society. Editorial strictness demanded that we reflect none of the discussion. Instead we have chosen to present a taste of the flavour of the discussion in the interests of political relevancy.

SIPHO PITYANA: The question of relating to the ANC as a legal, formal political organisation is demobilising research activity. People are retreating from political organisation, and saying, 'Our allegiance is with the mass movement'.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI: The concept of civil society, whether understood in the sense of Marx or understood in the sense of Gramsci is still a very specific historical construct. It presumes the existence, the relative separation, of the economy from the polity, state from society, etc. It is a concept entirely inadequate for the analysis of a society which is partly rural, partly urban. It gives us no concepts for the analysis of either the peasantry or relations in the countryside. The spread of this concept of civil society in Africa today is not totally coincidental. It is somehow also connected with the spread of social movements, which appear to be almost wholly urban and appear to have very little basis in the countryside. We need to reflect on this rather than uncritically taking over either the concept of civil society or critiques of that concept.

MIKE MORRIS: Blade's is a dangerous position that in the end leads to the depoliticisation of mass social movements. Because the consequence of it is the incorporation of those mass social movements into political parties and political organisations. The result of that is going to be a form of statism in the last analysis, and the disorganisation of those particular organisations because in the last analysis the whole question of independence of those organisations goes by the board. I think that Mahmood's point is absolutely correct.

ABDOULE BATHILY: In the present political situation in South Africa, can we design a policy which does not take into account the social forces at work in the land? In other parts of Africa, after the euphoria of the first years of independence, the ruling elite have smothered all the social movements in the country - trade unions, students movements, other social organisations - under the pretext that, 'Keep quiet! We are developing the country in the interests of the nation'. Is that what the social movement, the trade unions, fought for? So I think it's important for African social scientists and for the left, to start to think about these things. Are we all defending the same social forces? Can we design a policy which will meet the needs of all the sections of South African society equally?

CHERRYL WALKER: There's a point that you made, Blade, about the difference between policy initiatives coming out of struggle and policy initiatives coming out of research. You say they were different, and you seem to be saying that the former were more correct or more authentic or would somehow more properly embody the will of the people.

BLADE NZIMANDE: It's the masses in struggle that make policies, that also influence those policies, that also make it possible for certain policy options to be implemented.

FRANCIE LUND: Did you say, 'It is the masses in struggle that make policy'? Or did you say, 'that should make policy'?

BLADE NZIMANDE: That do make policy, and also that should make policy.

FRANCIE LUND: Those are completely different.

BLADE NZIMANDE: No, they aren't.

PAULUS ZULU: Isn't there actually a difference between the struggle and the policy that emerges out of the struggle? I think we have to go back and say, 'What were the struggles about?' We probably misinterpreted the nature of the struggle in education. To me the struggle was basically on the issue of access. If the problems of the 1980s were the problems of access and we misinterpreted them to be broader and otherwise than the problem of access, then we reached the problems that we are in today, because we misconstrued the very causes of the struggles within education.