

## **Why the Freedom Charter is still important after 60 years**

**By Zwelinzima Vavi**

All South Africans should celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Freedom Charter, adopted by the Congress of the people in Kliptown on 26 June 1955, with great pride. It was not only a milestone in our own struggle against apartheid, but a model for people around the world who are struggling for liberation from injustice and tyranny.

The English are currently commemorating the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Magna Carta (Great Charter), which restricted the power of the king and enshrined certain basic rights for the barons, who were then the ruling class.

In my view our Freedom Charter is a far greater document. Magna Carta promised nothing to the overwhelming majority of the people of England, but entrenched the powers and privileges of the feudal aristocracy which enslaved and exploited them.

The Freedom Charter on the other hand not only laid out a programme to eliminate colonialism and racism in South Africa, but also dealt with all the economic and social problems existing alongside apartheid. It gave us a stunning vision of a totally new kind of society, in which everyone shared in the country's wealth and was treated equally and fairly.

That is why it is still so relevant sixty years later. Yes, we have made great progress by abolishing apartheid and outlawing racial discrimination. We have adopted a constitution and many laws which reflect clauses in the Freedom Charter and give better guarantees of social justice, human rights and equality than those of most other countries in the world.

We have achieved the highest expansion of social grants in the world and one of the best records for providing the poor with houses, electricity, running water and access to education and health services.

We still have to ask however: How far have we succeeded in implementing the lofty ideals so well articulated in that historic Freedom Charter? Have we built a society in which:

- The people shall share in the country's wealth;
- The national wealth of our country, the heritage of South Africans, shall be restored to the people;
- The mineral wealth beneath the soil, the banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole;
- All other industry and trade shall be controlled to assist the wellbeing of the people.
- The doors of learning and culture shall be opened for all.

These surely have to be the cornerstones of the society envisaged in the Freedom Charter, but the sad reality is that in practice millions of South Africans are denied these socio-economic rights, because the inequalities and

injustices we inherited from apartheid remain in place in employment, income distribution, healthcare, education, housing and transport.

Inequality has increased across the board. The Gini coefficient, which measures income inequality, stands at 0.65, the highest in the world. Stats SA shows that from 1994-2010 the share of South Africa's gross domestic product (GDP) going to labour in wages, as opposed to capital in profits, fell by around 7%.

A PwC report - *Executive Directors' Remuneration: Practices and Trends, July 2013* - found that the gap between the remuneration of the lowest-paid workers and of the chief executive officers of companies listed on the JSE averaged more than 50 times.

According to an Oxfam report, the two richest South Africans (Johann Rupert and Nicky Oppenheimer) owned wealth equal to the poorest 50% of the country - 26.5-million people. 54.3% of South Africans live in poverty and 14 million go to bed hungry every night despite the country producing more than enough food

And inequalities in income and wealth are still racialised. 56% of whites earn more than R6 000 per month whereas 81% of Africans earn less than R6 000 per month. The means of production remain concentrated in white hands: almost all the top 20 paid directors in JSE listed companies are white males.

This is far away from the South Africa the drafters of the Freedom Charter imagined.

And there is no sign that things are getting better. With unemployment at the appalling level of 36.1% by the more realistic expanded rate including those who have given up looking for work. 8.7 million South Africans who could be working, earning a living for their families and contributing to the country's wealth are excluded from the country's economic life.

Economic growth in the first quarter of 2015 crawled along at a miserable 1.3%, so the prospect of any early relief for the unemployed is fading fast. Deindustrialisation continues, and more and more jobs are being casualised, leading to a rise in the number of the working poor. There is painfully slow progress in reversing the racial and gender inequalities in wealth and employment which we inherited from apartheid.

The yawning gulf between the extreme poverty of the majority and the excessive wealth of the minority lies behind the mushrooming of often violent service delivery protests, which tend to be in poor communities Diepsloot which are just a short distance from the wealthiest suburbs of Sandton. We are sitting on a ticking time-bomb and the prospect of a completely incohesive society, unless we get back to the principles of the Freedom Charter.

And all this is made worse by the scourge of corruption and the looting of public money by tenderpreneurs, corrupt politicians and officials, even a few union leaders, who exploiting the climate of 'anything goes' to get rich quick at the expense of the workers, consumers and the economy. This is having a devastating effect on so many of our public institutions, which are embroiled in scandals.

We face the biggest crisis since the birth of democracy in 1994, epitomised by the statement by the Minister of Police, Nathi Nhleko, on the repayment of money spent on Nkandla, in a disgraceful move to dodge taking responsibility for the grossly excessive amount spent on the project as a whole – R246 million - and for all those who corruptly benefited from it.

There is no longer any argument that we face a national crisis and need a radical shift of policy to tackle the triple challenge of corruption, unemployment and inequality.

Although the Freedom Charter does not specifically advocate socialism, it is implicit in many of its pledges that the new South Africa must be one in which wealth is shared equally.

This is completely at odds with the free-market capitalism which now dominates our society. GEAR in 1996 and now in the National Development Plan, have moved us further away from the wealth-sharing values of the Charter in favour of a neoliberal programme based on the philosophy of 'get-rich-quick' by any means possible, but especially by exploiting the workers and looting the tax-payers' money.

The only way to fight back and truly celebrate the Freedom Charter is to work together to take us back to our dream of creating a truly egalitarian, united, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous South Africa. The mass march against corruption in Pretoria on 19 August must be the first step in this campaign.