

LAW, DEMOCRACY & DEVELOPMENT

Journal of the Faculty of Law at the University of the
Western Cape

VOLUME 15 (2011)

Editorial

January 2011

Breaking new ground – the only way to go?

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LDD's first year as an open-access electronic journal has flown by, and two things can be said: while it's been a learning curve, we are still just beginning to discover the potential of this medium of publication.

Google tells part of the story. Any search for the journal now brings up large numbers of hits. It is hosted on a growing number of scholarly websites, including *African Journals on Line* (AJOL), Sabinet's *African Journal Archive* and *Academia.edu*; it is even listed among the databases of the Southern African Legal Information Institute (SAFLII). There is no way of telling how many researchers have visited *LDD* on these websites or, indeed, our own. But it is safe to say that the exposure we, and our authors, are now enjoying is much greater than it was a year ago.

A glance at the 2010 table of contents tells a bit more. As always it reflects a rich variety of topics, ranging from international trade to a special collection of articles under the heading "Working on the margins: Poverty and economic marginality in South Africa". It also suggests that we were off to a somewhat slow start, the number of articles being slightly fewer than we would previously have published in a year. This was mainly due to the effort it took to get the electronic journal up and running. On closer inspection, however, the total number of pages is no less than the average in previous years; indeed, it is well up on 2009. What this means is that articles have become more substantial. Only two are less than 20 pages long; one runs to 43 pages.

Authors, in other words, are no longer constrained by length to the same extent and can develop their analyses and arguments in greater depth.

And that other great benefit of the electronic medium, speed of publication, has proven every bit as effective as we could have hoped. Once the reviewing process is complete and the author has put the finishing touches to an article, it can appear online within hours.

Armed with the experience of 2010, we look forward to 2011 with interest and anticipation. The old year has ended, and the new year has begun, with various harbingers of change in the air. 2010 saw ongoing stabilisation of the world economy following the crisis of 2008, but also some unresolved questions and fault lines with the potential of triggering renewed shock waves – for example, the weaknesses that have emerged in the European Union and the ongoing uncertainty hanging over the future of the euro. In Africa, to take another example, the year has started with turmoil boiling over in Tunisia, previously seen as one of the most stable countries on the continent. These and other indicators warn us not to take anything for granted. There is too much loose cargo in the ship of the global economy, to coin a metaphor, to be sure of the course it will be steering, the changes of tack that may lie ahead and the effects these will have on us.

In South Africa the outlook is no more settled. While the economy has suffered no major setback, growth rates remain too low to provide a basis for the kind of development and transformation that society is crying out for.

Against this background the New Growth Path, the long-awaited economic policy framework of the Zuma administration announced in November 2010, could mark a turning point.¹ Its significance lies in the fact that it recognises the inadequacy of existing policy and calls on the state to play a more active role in creating conditions for growth. Ambitiously, it takes the concept of the “developmental state” as its model – a term applied to a range of countries in east and south-east Asia, starting with Japan, where the state took the lead in galvanising underdeveloped or stagnant economies to high levels of performance.

Of course, that growth came at a price, not least in terms of workers’ rights and democracy in general. Can South Africa replicate the successes of the Asian “tigers” without paying the same price?

This is not the place to analyse the NGP in detail. Suffice it to say that the debate about following the “Asian route” is an old one, overshadowed by dense clouds of scepticism. South Africa has a democratic Constitution; government cannot impose its policies by decree but needs to persuade organised business and labour to buy in. And

¹ See “The New Growth Path: The Framework”, available at <http://www.pmg.org.za/node/24614> (accessed 29 December 2011).

this is a tall order. Business and labour are inherently mistrustful of each other and guard their interests jealously. On top of this many regard the South African state, in contrast to its Asian counterparts, as lacking both the capacity and the integrity to play the constructive role that the NGP envisages.

Having said that, what are the alternatives? The present impasse, combined with unpredictable fall-out from international events, may begin to concentrate minds. Could we be reaching a stage where breaking new ground is the only way to go?

The labour amendment bills to be debated this year may be a litmus test, containing proposals for state intervention and tougher enforcement to address problems which employers, trade unions and a relatively laid-back Department of Labour have thus far been unable to resolve. As with the NGP, this is not the place to consider the merits of the proposals in their existing form. The question is rather: will the antagonistic “social partners” cooperate in seeking to construct a more effective labour dispensation geared to achieving (in the words of the NGP) “broad-based employment growth, or will they confine themselves to defending their own territory? It is early days yet, but the way that this process unfolds may give some indication of the prospect of implementing transformative policy changes by way of democratic processes.

These issues, and many more, we hope to see reflected, analysed and debated in *LDD* in the months ahead. New developments stimulate new thinking. By this measure, 2011 promises to be a year of extremely exciting research.