

MARKET ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, LOCAL ECONOMIC EXPERIENCE AND THE FAITH-BASED MOVEMENT TOWARDS SOCIAL ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CITY REGION¹

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Abstract

This paper presents an argument about the potential of the faith-based sector to become a movement for meaningful social economic alternatives in a particular local setting in South Africa, the city region of George. Central to the purpose of the discussion is an indication of the way that the need for alternatives derives from local citizens' own experience of distorted market economic development. The relevance of the argument is further highlighted within the dual theoretical framework of a new moral debate on market economic development in South Africa and the Christian theological debate on alternatives. In the light of these aspects, the social economic activities of three faith-based organisations in the region are described. It is argued that the activities of these organisations can be considered as important and appropriate examples of an emerging movement that is beginning to address the widespread social neglect in the region and, at the same time, is beginning to create an awareness of the need for social economic alternatives.

¹ This material is based on work supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa under Grant Number 2054070 and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Any opinion, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and therefore the NRF and Humboldt Foundation do not accept any liability in regard thereto. Financial assistance provided by the Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED) in Bonn to present this material at the 1st International Conference on the Social Economy is hereby also acknowledged.

I believe that for us to ensure that things do not fall apart, we must, in the first instance, never allow that the market should be the principal determinant of the nature of our society. – Thabo Mbeki (2006:25)

At the turn of the century, the post-apartheid growth path is not squaring the circle of poverty eradication, job creation and economic growth. – Hein Marais (2001:207)

1. Introduction

This paper derives from work that was first undertaken for a book project of the International Institute for Development and Ethics (IIDE) and South Africa–Vrije Universiteit–Strategic Alliances (SAVUSA). Intended as a sequel to a publication by Dutch scholars on issues of Christian-inspired development work by organisations from the North,² the aim of the book publication (published by Brill Academic Publishers) has been to stimulate an ethical development agenda for Christian leadership in the South and more specifically South Africa.³ In addition, a significant and in fact unique trade mark of the book is the way in which the authors had to cooperate with “community partners” – that is, practitioners and/or organisations on the ground engaged in a particular aspect of development-related work – to construct their respective chapters. In so doing, the planners of the book wanted to strengthen the interrelation between development theory and practice, and present an overall perspective that would more authentically reflect the actual problems and challenges of development.

In the discussion below the contribution of the partners to this paper version is likewise reflected in the way in which I have written the text in collaboration with them through the data, documentation, information obtained through interviews and opportunities for dialogue that they provided. More specifically, the partners of this contribution all hail from the George

² See Buijs, G. (ed.) 2001. *Als de Olifanten Vechten: Ontwikkelingsamewerking in Christelijk Perspectief*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Motief.

³ See De Gruchy, S., Koopman, N. and Strijbos, S. (eds.) 2007. *From Our Side: Emerging Perspectives in Development and Ethics*. Leiden: Brill.

region where they work as pastors and/or volunteers⁴ in the faith-based organisations (all from the Christian faith tradition), whose work is reflected in the penultimate section of this paper.

In our contribution to the book publication we made it clear from the outset that our contribution would focus on the socio-economic aspect of development. In this regard we could claim that the city of George presented a particularly relevant case study, given its location in the centre of one of the fastest growing areas economically in South Africa – the booming south coast region of the Western Cape. At the same time we could also refer to a new moral debate about personal wealth accumulation and market economic development that had emerged in contemporary South Africa; in a meaningful way this constituted the broader social ethical framework in which the socio-economic situation in the city region of George could be debated. In particular, we argued that the new moral debate was given special momentum by South African president Thabo Mbeki, in his Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture at the University of Witwatersrand on July 29, 2006. For us this address by President Mbeki represented the high point of a new concern in the country about the manner in which the value system of the capitalist market had become the all-determining factor in South African society. Consequently, in this new concern it has been recognised not only that this value system has entrenched a mindset amongst South Africa’s people in which personal enrichment is seen as the principal goal in life, but also that it has undermined the goals of “social cohesion” and “human solidarity” in post-apartheid South African society in the way that it has impacted on development policy and strategy in the country. As a whole, it has been recognised that post-apartheid South African society has not achieved the outcomes of new-found opportunity, inclusiveness and people-centred commitment once envisioned by the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the document that constituted the core

⁴ They are: Rev. Pieter van Niekerk, Rev. Sidwill Thelejane, Rev. Albertus Louw, Rev. Johan van der Merwe, Ngamso Nzuzo and André Buitendag.

of the Election Manifesto of the African National Congress (ANC) in the first democratic elections in 1994 (see Mbeki 2006).⁵

It is against this background of a new moral debate that it has also been important for me and my partners to stress the point of our own distinctive faith identity as the source of our similar concern about market economic development and its entrenched value system in South African society. As a group we could claim that we are all in our own respective ways committed to the life and work of the Christian church and the broader tradition of faith-based organisational initiatives that derive from the church. Furthermore, it was on the basis of this faith identity and that sense of social justice and moral sensitivity that we believe this faith instils in us that we claimed the right to make a statement about our current situation. Whilst not one of us could claim the position of “economic expert”, we believed at the same time that our statement of faith had a direct bearing on the reality of social and economic life that we and our organisations are confronted with in our daily work and what we, as persons orientated by our faith, see and experience in our everyday lives. To us, this experience called for serious moral reflection.

This paper, then, as in the original chapter contribution, represents a similar attempt by me and my partners to articulate something of our own experience and observations of our socio-economic reality. At the same time, however, the paper also reflects our preoccupation with the idea – or hypothesis – of a new faith-based movement in the making in the community that represents the focus of our attention – the city region of George. Through its various organisations, it can well be claimed that this movement is at the very grassroots level beginning to contribute to what may be described as social and economic alternatives on the level of practice and ideas. Yet, in proposing and starting to develop this idea of an alternative

⁵ In addition to Mbeki’s lecture and as a further expression of the above-mentioned new public debate, see for instance the responses by a number of intellectual high-flyers (Blade Nzimande, Adam Habib and Saki Macozoma) to the “Nelson Mandela Memorial Lecture Debate” in the *Sunday Times* of 6th August 2006. See also the *Mail&Guardianonline* for various further responses to the debate under the headings, “The dilemma of accumulation” (Ben Turok), “Mbeki: Don’t worship material wealth”, “The new and improved Mbeki” (Rapule Tabane, Vicki Robinson, Zukile Majova), and “We must preserve the ANC’s soul” (Vicki Robinson, Tumi Makgetla).

faith-based movement in the making, the intention here is nothing more than to point out once again the potential of the faith-based sector as a source of new-found consciousness and initiative in our society. In this regard, however, the point also needs to be emphasised that the notion of “alternatives” and the faith-based sector’s contribution to them should not be romanticised. What is required here is indeed an acknowledgement of the latter sector’s often simplistic approach to matters of economics and development and, furthermore, also for the need for alternatives that could address the complexities of our contemporary world and be viable options at the macro-level of society

Taking into account the above-mentioned qualifications, the argument of this paper is nevertheless steered by the belief in the potential of the faith-based sector to make a meaningful, if not indispensable, contribution in a time that calls for serious moral introspection and reconsideration of the modes of living and operation of South Africa’s people. Accordingly, by reflecting in this paper on the socio-economic reality of the community of George in particular as well as on the local faith-based organisational initiatives in which my partners have been involved in this same community, the aim of the paper is to highlight something of this potential. In the process of this undertaking, moreover, it will become evident how we have deemed it necessary and appropriate to also locate these particular aspects of the reflection within the new moral debate already referred to earlier in the introduction and the ongoing Christian theological debate on economic alternatives

2. Market economic development in South Africa: contours of the new moral debate

It has already been suggested above that President Mbeki’s Nelson Mandela Memorial lecture delivered in July last year could be taken as a decisive moment in the unfolding of the new moral debate on market economic development in South African society. Yet, in our own analysis this debate has throughout the post-apartheid years been shaped by a consistent stream of critical voices and in fact dates back to the earliest period of the new dispensation.

In this regard we identified six elements that could be highlighted as distinctive features of this debate.

Firstly, within the development of this debate the contribution of a noteworthy group of academics and intellectuals from the fields of economics, politics and development who have been persistent in their criticism of the line of economic development in the post-apartheid dispensation could be acknowledged. Indeed, this group of critical thinkers could well be regarded as the perpetrators of a critically and socially minded⁶ intellectual tradition in post-apartheid South Africa. Whilst they are often marginalised and stereotyped by the academic mainstream, they have been playing a major role in keeping a moral voice alive in post-apartheid South Africa, in acting as a (continuing) voice for the poor, marginalised and exploited, in reminding the establishment of the ongoing and escalating inequalities between rich and poor, and in pointing out the limitations of the current policy and structural arrangements in achieving a society of greater equality.⁷

Secondly, in the new moral debate the notion of an “elite transition” (see Bond 2000) has become an important catch-phrase to define the nature of the post-apartheid South African society. In essence, we may understand by this notion the reference to a new societal dispensation that, through its economic operations, continues to advance the material interests of an old privileged minority, whilst at the same is enabling a new minority group from the historically deprived black majority to enjoy the same privileges (cf. e.g. Adam, Slabbert and Moody 1997; Bond 2000; Marais 2001; Terreblanche 2003). Together, then, these two groups on both sides of the old divide represent South Africa’s elite citizens, a state of affairs that has

⁶ In the construction of this paper we consciously decided to avoid notions such as “leftist” and “progressive” as we found them too ideologically loaded and implying an ideological orientation that we not necessarily subscribe to. Instead, we rather opted for less loaded notions that do not necessarily represent a unified ideological position – as also reflected in the literature that are relied on in this paper - but capture an ongoing moral sensitivity to and critical disposition towards persisting socio-economic deprivation and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa.

⁷ It was impossible for us to do justice in this paper to all the representatives from this group. Whilst we found our own meaningful orientation in a small selection of literature that is acknowledged in the points that follow in this section, it should be recognised at the same time that similar valuable contributions have been and are still being made by many other individuals and in numerous forums and intellectual think-tanks around the country.

led one critical commentator to refer to the reality of “an uneven deracialization of inequality” (Marais 2001:200) taking place in post-apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, in present-day South Africa this group stands out in the way it enjoys unprecedented material privileges amidst wide-spread and increasing instances of poverty and impoverishment.⁸

Thirdly, as a corollary of the previous point, a striking feature of the debate is the manner in which the whole issue of “empowerment” - or more specifically black economic empowerment (BEE) – is increasingly problematised. In the name of a process that should lead to the eradication of vast inequality and a better life for the large majority of historically deprived citizens, critics in the debate point out how the enterprise of black empowerment has become little more than “a euphemism for more control by a small privileged elite” (Adam et al. 1997:204). These critics note that it is not so much a matter of affluence being associated with immorality, but that it involves the question of “how an elite becomes wealthy, what it does with its capital and how it rationalises inequality in the light of its own historical struggle for a more equitable, just order” (Adam et al. 1997:2; cf. Marais 2001:240-3; Terreblanche 2003:132-138; Turok 2006).⁹

Fourthly, in the new moral debate we may also recognise what can be considered particularly significant in the light of the thematic focus in this paper, namely a new-found sensitivity to the actual sufferings of ordinary people on the ground.¹⁰ Indeed, in the new articulations of

⁸ Whilst it is by no means the intention of this paper to relativise the seriousness and extent of poverty suffered amongst South Africa’s black majority – which indeed demands ongoing priority – one may also point out the diminishing privileges and increasing impoverishment amongst a growing number of the white population who benefited historically from apartheid. See in this regard, for instance, my own social theological discussion, which took as its point of departure the new phenomenon of poverty amongst South Africa’s white Afrikaner population (Swart 2004).

⁹ For critics the vulgarity of the prevailing attitude towards black economic empowerment is also well personified by pronouncements from leading individuals, such as that “Blacks should get filthy rich,” “I didn’t struggle to be poor” and “Why should BEE capitalists behave differently from other capitalists?” (quoted in Nzimande 2006:34). For these critics such pronouncements reflect nothing less than the crude capitalist disposition of personal enrichment, a point of criticism that we may notice was also central in President Mbeki’s above-mentioned lecture and his reference to “the deification of personal wealth as the distinguishing feature of the new citizen of the new South Africa” (Mbeki 2006:16; cf. Macozoma 2006:35).

¹⁰ Such expression of sensitivity is even spelled out in apologetic terms by one author in referring to his own inability to comprehend the emotional experiences of people on the ground. “The gut feeling of joy (even if temporary) when acquiring a new collective water tap in a desperately poor rural area, or conversely the fury and indignity of a water cut-off due to inability to pay, are, frankly, beyond the comprehension of any white, petit-

people's deprivation in real life we find implicitly and explicitly the recognition that what matters most is the actual faces of human suffering and deprivation at the local level. It is these realities of actual suffering that expose the system for what it is: its neglect of the majority's needs and aspirations, its failure to deliver and secure a humane life for the larger majority of the country's citizens. In terms of the description of one of the contributors to the debate, which suggests that the following features could be taken as typical of the average local community in which the country's very poor – i.e. approximately half of the population (see Terreblanche 2003:32-36) – found themselves:

Members of the poorest half of the population are still relatively uneducated, unskilled, without formal jobs, and deprived of information about their rights and opportunities. They are unorganised, and – except in a few isolated instances – unable to exert pressure on the government. Their basic human needs remain largely unmet, perhaps even more so than in the past. Most own no property, not even household goods. They have no reserve funds at their disposal. Because of the absence of complementary assets (such as infrastructural services) and a scarcity of opportunities, they cannot take advantage of the few assets they do own. Although younger people have received (and are still receiving) much better schooling than their parents, they do not have reasonable prospects of finding formal jobs. (Terreblanche 2003:35; cf. Bond 2000: Chap. 3 & 4; Du Toit 2004; Marais 2001:198-199)

Fifthly, and equally significant in the light of the thematic focus of this paper, in the new moral debate an almost unanimous call for social and economic alternatives to the current economic model is also apparent. Whilst it would be impossible here to do justice to the range and depth of the perspectives on alternatives that are offered (see e.g. Bond 2000:Chap. 6; Marais 2001:Chap. 7, 8 & 9; Terreblanche 2003:Part 4), in these perspectives a common identification of South Africa's neo-liberally oriented economic policy arrangement - an approach that relies basically on market-driven processes and forces to achieve growth and development - as the root cause of the current socio-economic dilemma may be recognised (see Adelzadeh 1996; Bond 2000; Marais 2001; Terreblanche 2003; Nzimande 2006; cf. also Mbeki 2006). In the light of such problematisation, what also seems apparent is a similar kind

bourgeois male academic.” (Bond 2000:4) Compare this statement with the observation by another author about the inability of statistics to “convey the realities of intense poverty and inequality... its texture: the dull ache of deprivation, the acute tensions generated by violence and insecurity, the intricacies of survival and all its emotions – despair, hope, resentment, apathy, futility and fury” (Marais 2001:198).

of argument by contributors to the debate for a new economic arrangement that remains essentially capitalist in nature,¹¹ but (1) redirects itself towards a strategy of broad-based domestic capital investment in order to achieve a far greater degree of inclusive growth, ownership, income generation and employment; and (2) also allocates a restored proactive role to the state in such a strategy¹² (see Marais 2001:Chap. 7 & 8; Terreblanche 2003:Chap. 11).

Finally, a deeply rooted questioning of the current value system in South African society could well be regarded as the most outstanding feature of the new moral debate. Indeed, it is with reference to this element that President Mbeki's recent lecture takes a special place in the debate, as already suggested in the introduction of this paper. More than in any other contribution to the debate thus far,¹³ we find in this lecture an extended consideration of the moral foundations of South African society, a problematisation of the current market value system of personal acquisition that is dominating our society, and a consequent call for an alternative set of values as fundamental prerequisite to restore a collective endeavour towards the common good (see Mbeki 2006; cf. Macozoma 2006).

Yet, it is especially with regard to this last element of the debate that we may see a new opportunity for the religious sector in South Africa to play an important role. As the question about the forces, actors and institutions that are relied upon to enable the new internalisation of an alternative value system will become more urgent, one may foresee the possibility whereby this question will tilt increasingly in favour of religion. Such an understanding is

¹¹ Thus it can be noted how one contributor to the debate refers to his proposal for an alternative arrangement as a "social democratic version of democratic capitalism" (Terreblanche 2003:419); in a similar manner another contributor, whilst remaining open to the idea of a post-capitalist order in the distant future, observes that none of his own propositions for change "are predicated on a bid to move beyond capitalism" (Marais 2001:226).

¹² It may be noted in this regard how contributors to the debate reiterate their preference for a Keynesian kind of economic model in which the state is allocated a leading role (Marais 2001:259-260; cf. also Adelzadeh 1996:4; Terreblanche 2003:446-449).

¹³ This qualification, however, is not meant to diminish the importance and significance of other contributions to this aspect of the debate (see e.g. Terreblanche 2003:441-446), but rather to highlight the way in which President Mbeki has, in comparison to other contributions, become fully preoccupied with the aspect of values and the current value system in his contribution. Given the political profile of the President's contribution, it has naturally also rendered considerable prominence to this element in the debate.

also meaningfully guided by President Mbeki's own call for a balance that needs to be achieved between a "materialist" and "idealist" approach, between "material" and "spiritual" considerations, in meeting the current challenge (Mbeki 2006:22). For it is exactly in this regard, of meeting this dual challenge of a dynamic interrelationship between ideas and practice, between matters of the spirit and the body, between conscience and behaviour, between matters of concrete economic operation and alternative values and principles, that few other forces or institutions, if any, can match the potential of the religious sector to address the issues.¹⁴

Indeed - in the context of the sixfold framework of the new moral debate above – our argument in the rest of this paper should especially be understood as an attempt to express, on the part of the Christian religious sector, something of the above-mentioned potential at that level of society where religion could play its most potent role as a conscientising and integrative force.

3. Local economic experience in the city region of George

At the foot of the Outeniqua mountains, in the most southern part of South Africa between the two large metropolitan areas of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, lies the city of George. This city can be seen as a microcosm of the new "developing" South Africa and it bears testimony to the global reality of rapid urbanisation. The population doubles at a rate of 10,6% per year. This large-scale migration is taking place on two fronts. On the one hand, there are the affluent, who are bringing wealth and economic activity to the city, whilst on the other hand, the poor and impoverished are pouring into the city in the hope of having their needs met. Both groups are making their presence felt, and their combined effect tells a story of the gross divide and neglect of the majority described in the previous section.

¹⁴ This potential may also have been implicitly recognised in President Mbeki's lecture, as evident from the numerous references to biblical texts and the elaborate reliance on religious metaphors and language.

In order to more fully understand these dynamics, the question was posed to Rev. Sidwell Thelejane, a member of our contributing group and pastor of the Anglican Church in Thembaletu, the black Xhosa township of mostly poor and impoverished people in the city region: “Why are the thousands of young and middle-aged Black people flocking to George?” The Reverend is a wise man. As a retired cleric he has seen his people come through the time of apartheid, and move with their hopes raised into the “new” South Africa. He states:

The migration of the poor to George, and surrounding areas, is the result of the migration of the rich, who are mostly White. They came from rural areas where there was little prospect for employment. Now the poor, who are mostly Black people, are following the White people because they believe that these people will create jobs.

The sound understanding behind Rev. Thelejane’s statement is evident from the official statistics of the 1996 and 2001 Censuses. According to these statistics, the average growth rate for white people has only been 6%. However, when the exodus of young white people from the city is taken into account, the realisation dawns that there must have been real growth in other age groups to give the positive growth figure. Statistics relating to the age groups above 55 substantiate the Reverend’s statement. The growth in their numbers can be understood when compared to the far lesser numbers in the corresponding age groups of the other ethnic groups, especially the Coloured people, who have always been the dominant group in the city (see George Municipality 2004:par. 2.5.3).

Our contributing group’s own perception has been that at the heart of this development is the factor of “property” and the security and benefits that it offers. The coast of South Africa has always been popular with people living inland, and with the changes taking place in South Africa and the “Baby Boomer” generation retiring from the economy, a portion of the white population, who are in a strong economic situation, is resettling at the coast. The South Coast is in exceptional demand because of its mild climate, and also because of its relative stability in terms of crime compared to other urban areas of South Africa. Property in this region has

over the last 40 years been an excellent investment. Extensive and quality health services have also been established for those who can afford it.

Areas previously snubbed by wealthy white buyers are today in high demand and record prices are paid for property. The coastline also bears proof of this expansion, with mansions overlooking the sea all along the coastline around George. But the investors and property buyers are not only South African. Overseas investors equally consider the South Cape coast a good investment and an indication of their numbers can be seen in the numerous golfing resorts under development.

Indeed, it could be observed that these wealthy groups well resemble the profile of “the increasingly global and extraterritorial elites” of contemporary society to which a renowned social thinker such as Zygmunt Bauman refers in his work. According to Bauman, a particular cause for concern is “the progressive breakdown in communication” between these elites and “the ever more ‘localized’ rest” in society (Bauman 1998:3). He identifies them with a “new version of ‘absentee landlordship’”, which “like the absentee landlords of yore... [are] notorious for their much resented neglect of the needs of the populations which fed them” (Bauman 1998:3, 10). However, Bauman also qualifies this statement by noting that this comparison does not do full justice to the kind of freedom from worry and responsibility that the mobile capital of our contemporary era has acquired but which the absentee landlords never could (i.e. because of the latter’s inescapable bond to the locality from which they drew their life existence) (Bauman 1998:10-11). This mobility indeed has become the outstanding feature of the contemporary elites and their accumulation of wealth, which enables them to move and invest where it suits them best without the accompanying burden of any responsibility beyond their own needs and comfort. As Bauman further explains:

The mobility acquired by ‘people who invest’ – those with capital, with money which the investment requires – means the new, indeed unprecedented in its radical unconditionality, disconnection of power from obligations: duties towards employees, but also towards the younger and weaker, towards yet unborn generations and towards the

self-reproduction of the living conditions of all; in short, freedom from the duty to contribute to daily life and the perpetuation of the community. (Bauman 1998:9)

This description aptly describes the profile of an estimated 5 to 10% of the citizens in the region – such as global golf star Ernie Els, residents of Fancourt golf estate and other golf estates, and selected suburbs and beachfront houses – who live in extreme wealth and find George a safe haven from crime, either permanently or when they find themselves temporarily in the area. Consequently, it is the life style of this group that stands in sharp contrast to the larger majority of extremely poor residents and brings us to the point of introducing another one of our fellow-contributors.

My real name is Ngamso, a Xhosa name which means ‘you can do tomorrow’, but I prefer the name Soso. Today I am a happy and cared for resident of Thembaletu. But this was not my situation when I came to George in 2003 and for the first two years of my stay in the city. For that period I was a statistic, one of the thousands of young Black people who have flocked to George in the hope of finding employment.

Whilst Soso may be one of a fortunate minority who have found some kind of economic and social security after migrating to George, as the discussion highlights in more detail in Section Five of the paper, her life story resembles that of a substantial group of young Black people who, in contrast to their departed White counterparts¹⁵ (see the observation earlier in this section), have chosen George as their destiny for a brighter economic future. Most of these young people are poorly educated, but there are also those like Soso who have a high-school education and yet are unable to find employment. Their problem is that the supply of labour far exceeds the demand. In some instances they are under-qualified for positions and in others over-qualified.

Yet, data provided by the George Municipality reveal that the large number of young Black people living in George today only constitutes a part of the migrated Black people and the

¹⁵ It is stated by the George Municipality in its Integrated Development Plan for 2004 that the 0 to 19 age group of the Black population in George increased from 46 to 83 percent in the period 1996 to 2001. This stands in sharp contrast to the negative growth in the age groups of whites below 24, which varies between 0 and 17 percent. It is furthermore stated in the document that: “The above indicates that the White population group is ageing, that white youths possibly still leave George to study elsewhere or to work abroad (age group 20 – 24). New white migrants are also in the higher age groups.” (George Municipality 2004:par. 2.5.3)

poor and deprived communities in the city region as a whole. In its Integrated Development Plan for 2004 the George Municipality states, amongst other things, that the numbers of the Black population increased dramatically from 5 200 in 1985 to 36 900 in 2001 and that the present estimate could be as high as 50 000. Moreover, a further indicator of the growth of this population group, as well as their inability to function within the growing market economy, lies in the increase in the number of households in the “Nil” and “Low” income groups (see George Municipality 2004:par. 2.5.4). Together with the established communities of Black and Coloured people living in the numerous township areas in the city region (Thembaletu, Pacaltsdorp, Heather Park, Rosemoor, Parkdene, Blanco, Lawaaiikamp, etc.), they constitute the core of the poor and very poor in the region. In contrast to the living situation of the mainly White population already described above, they are in desperate need of greater employment opportunities,¹⁶ housing, running water, energy and better health and education services.¹⁷ At the same time, they are clearly the ones who bear the brunt of the escalating social costs of crime and violence in the region and in whose communities the poverty-related ills of tuberculosis, HIV/Aids, alcoholism, fetal alcohol syndrome, illiteracy, teenage pregnancies, and women and child abuse are most visible. The words of a recent local newspaper report convey some picture of the situation:

In a gulf of violence every weekend, women and children get raped and stabbed. Alcohol and substance abuse plays a role in the majority of the incidents. At the George Hospital’s trauma unit over 250 cases are handled every weekend. This includes family violence, traffic accidents, assault and rape. 14 of the 29 child victims between June and August of this year were under the age of 17. (*George Herald*, 2 November 2006)

We may conclude this section, then, by stating that the city of George could be seen as one of the best examples of the escalating economic divide in South Africa. This state of affairs, as

¹⁶ Thus Pieter van Niekerk, one of our contributors, noted that he has observed an increase of 100 to 200 percent in job seekers at strategic points (e.g. hardware shops) over the last five years in the city of George.

¹⁷ In a proposal presented to the Restitution Foundation another of our contributors, André Buitendag, refers to a social analysis that was conducted in the black township of Thembaletu by the Stellenbosch-based Unit for Religion and Development Research in 2003. In this analysis employment, food supply, adult education, health services, skills training, tarred roads, substance rehabilitation and housing were identified as amongst the greatest needs by members of the community (see Buitendag 2006:4).

the discussion in this section has tried to make clear, has been made particularly visible by the arrival of the two contrasting groups of White and Black people in the city region in recent years, that is, those with an above-average and very high income, and those with no, or very little, income. Amidst unprecedented investment we are not only witnessing a situation in which the economy has not been able to absorb the new migrants with lower levels of skills, with considerable social cost, but also a serious decline of a strong “middle-income group” in this community. The impact of the influx of the high-income group has been that property prices have increased so rapidly that people with middle incomes can no longer afford a home in previously middle-class suburbs.¹⁸ Therefore many leave. On the other hand, the influx of the poor, hoping that the wealthy will provide work for them, puts a severe drain on resources. Most are unable to pay for services and have to be subsidised, or else they lose their possessions (in most cases an “RDP house”). And to recover this money, the authorities have to increase charges for those who can pay.

4. Orientation within the Christian theological debate on economic alternatives

In shifting the focus of the discussion more pertinently to the issue of economic alternatives and the extent to which this has been finding expression in the local context of George through the activities and thinking of particular organisations from the local faith community – in our case more specifically from the Christian faith tradition – our group has been well aware of the fact that we were not the first in the broad tradition of Christian theological thinking to attend to the topic. There is indeed today “a wealth of Christian reflection on the

¹⁸ The statistics drawn from the George Municipality’s Integrated Development Plan for 2004 confirm the impact that the arrival of the high- and low-income groups has had on the city of George and can best be seen when their relative status in 1996 and 2001 is compared to that of the medium-income group, i.e. the “average income” group that represents the backbone of a community. (i) In 1996 the “nil” income group was less than 5% of the community, but by 2001 had increased to 13,78% - an increase of 222,64%! (ii) The “low” income group had decreased from 36,13% to 34,41%, a decrease of 4,75%. (iii) The “medium” income group also decreased from 54,98% to 43,66% - a decrease of 20,58%!. (iv) The “high” income group increased from 4,64% to 8,15% - an increase of 75,75%! (George Municipality 2004:par.2.6(d)).

It therefore becomes clear that, in terms of numbers, the increase in the population of George is taking place among those with no income, and those with very high income. Considering the actual increase of property prices over the past six years, the ability of the middle-income owners to afford a home is based on their income and the bond repayment of thirty percent of such income. It is a common fact in the City of George that people in the middle-income group are marginalised by their inability to buy property.

market economy” (Heslam 2002:14), as one observer has noted, which, from our point of view, required that we also located ourselves more pertinently within this tradition of thinking in order to give structure and direction to the further development of our argument.

Whilst it would be impossible for us to do justice to the full range and depth of the Christian theological debate, we at the same time found a very useful framework for orientation in a recent study by Peter Heslam, *Globalization: Unravelling the New Capitalism*. Written in his capacity as Director of the Capitalism Project at the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, Heslam points out in this study that we encounter a sharp division in Christian opinion on the market economy. At one extreme one finds the “radical” response that challenges the churches to oppose the status quo and exert themselves for an alternative economy. At the other end of the spectrum one finds the “conservative” response that appeals to Christian teaching in order to legitimise the market economy (Heslam 2002:14).

Heslam points to the work of Ulrich Duchrow¹⁹ – whose ideas as pointed out further below have also inspired and continues to inspire the thinking of members of our contributing group! – as a supreme example of the radical response. In this response the quest is “for radical change rather than piecemeal reform” and the “new capitalism²⁰... is rejected outright on the basis of justice and equality”. In particular, in this critique the new capitalism is denounced because it regards “the economy merely as a means of wealth accumulation on the part of those with capital”, with the end result that, through its drive towards deregulation, it “delivers vast riches for the few but poverty and death for the many”. For this reason global capitalism is denounced in the same manner as apartheid, nuclear warfare and the Holocaust, and theology’s task is seen accordingly as a prophetically and ideologically critical one (Heslam 2002:14-15).

¹⁹ We restrict ourselves in this paper to a reference to the two most recent publications by Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism: Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action* (1995) and *Property for People, Not for Profit: Alternatives to the Global Tyranny of Capital* (written with Franz Hinkelammert) (2004).

²⁰ In Heslam’s discussion the notion of the “new capitalism” refers to what would otherwise be known as global capitalism or neo-liberalism, which is characterised by the tendencies towards deregulation, privatisation and absolutisation of the market as mechanism for all economic regulation.

For Heslam the conservative response is best articulated in the work of Brian Griffiths, a leading banker, politician, academic economist and evangelical thinker in Britain. According to his way of thinking, the market economy is seen as “the best, most efficient, and least harmful way to achieve the creation of wealth”. Underlying this position, furthermore, is the conviction that the contemporary problem is poverty itself and not the inequality between rich and poor. As such, cultural restraints on economic modernisation and unstable and corrupt governments are seen as the main causes of global poverty. It follows that for Christians the main task is to “Christianise” the market economy “through the application of biblical principles” and a “revival of Christian social values”, as it is seen “as the only system that can secure the creation of wealth”. In a nutshell, Brian Griffiths’s view is that “(t)here is no alternative to the market economy ... it is the answer to global poverty” (ibid.:16).

In his own response to the positions of Duchrow and Griffiths, and thus by implication the “radical” and “conservative” responses in the Christian economic debate, Heslam concedes that both positions offer valuable contributions. For him Duchrow’s work is “a reminder of a fundamental critique of the contemporary economy and one that looks for alternatives”; it represents “a concern with the roots of theology and economics and with addressing systemic issues”, whilst it is at the same time “also intensely practical in application” (ibid.:15, 17). In a similar way, Griffiths’s arguments are seen by him as a reminder of the importance of working for the reform of the market economy on the basis of Christian principles (ibid.:17).

For Heslam there is therefore “no reason why both projects cannot be considered valid”, since “the quest for alternatives and reform are not mutually exclusive”. In the case of Duchrow and Griffiths in particular, one also needs to appreciate the common commitment in their work “to the value of Scripture in addressing the economy”, which in turn “stimulates a re-examination of the relevance of biblical themes” in addressing economic issues (ibid.).

Yet Heslam also comes to argue that there are noticeable deficiencies in the arguments of both Duchrow and Griffiths. He criticises Duchrow and the radical school for among other things

laying “too much blame for material poverty at the feet of capitalism”. He argues accordingly that there are also other important factors which are given too little attention by this group, such as bad governance, corruption and the making of harmful cultural choices. Given the apparent benefits of economic globalisation, he finally also argues that “it is difficult to see how global capitalism can be considered on the same terms as the apartheid or Nazi regimes” (ibid.:15).

In a similar vein Heslam also criticises Griffiths’s overt support of the market economy to society’s economic problems and his argument that this economy promotes both strong individuals and strong communities. He comments that he finds it difficult to see how Griffiths’s “promotion of competition and the deregulation of financial markets can in practice avoid the rational individualism he claims to reject” (ibid.:16-17). What is at stake here, Heslam ultimately argues, is a situation in which the foremost institution of the market economy – the corporation – becomes “the repository of values in society” and dominates all other domains of life (ibid.:17).

It can be concluded that the upshot of Heslam’s argument is a new-found attempt to strike a balance between the different approaches in the Christian economic debate. As he comments himself, the problems that we encounter may well be rooted in a paradox. This paradox calls for recognition of both the positive contribution of economic globalisation by means of technological and commercial growth, but also of its failures with regard to worldwide poverty, social justice and sustainable development (see Heslam 2002:25). Taken together, however, there is according to Heslam no compelling reason why taking this range of interests seriously cannot be reconciled with a thriving economy. And “(n)either are there any good theological or ethical reasons to resist the further development of the economic, scientific and technological potential of the created order ... so long as the integrity and limits of creation are fully taken into account” (ibid.:26).

The implication of Heslam's argument, therefore, is not that economic globalisation and by implication the market economy should be resisted without qualification, but that it should be reoriented towards the common good of society. Furthermore, within such an approach there would still be very much room for alternatives, yet not in the sense of mere resistance or distance from the mainstream economy (or economic globalisation processes), but in the sense of directing and shaping its benefits differently. In the words of Heslam, which indicate the wide spectrum of change that should still be prioritised in such an approach:

Business and finance need to strengthen their social and environmental commitments; governments need to increase their resolve to meet existing targets in the fight against poverty and environmental degradation; individuals and households need to develop lifestyles that reject consumerism and exemplify an holistic approach to creation. Above all, there needs to be a willingness on the part of the rich to make room for the poor. Realistic solutions can only be found if an apparently unrealistic condition is met: that the lifestyle concerns of the wealthy are made subordinate to the survival concerns of those in poverty. The challenge is to handle the *resources* of the earth in such a way that the needs of the *people* of the earth are met without imperilling the future of both. Rich countries need to spread the benefits and shrink the burdens of their economies. Without self-restraint on the part of the rich, no serious long-term solutions or alternatives are possible. (ibid.:27)

It can be pointed out how our group has claimed a similar position to that of Heslam. Indeed, in our ongoing thinking we have continued to feel ourselves very much attracted to the ideas of scholars like Ulrich Duchrow and others from the "radical" school. And in our search for innovative practices in the economic and development arena, we have in particular also been inspired by the ideas of someone like Duchrow (see e.g. Swart 2006a:197-2005; 2004:335-337). Yet we at the same also reached a stage where we became convinced that it was time for a fresh approach in the way that Christian theologians and practitioners deal with the economic question. In order to overcome our own schizophrenic thought and what we may even call our own dishonesty – we are after all also benefiting substantially from the fruits of the current system! – we have therefore set ourselves the challenge to develop a new openness and realism in our own thinking. In this new mode of thinking or approach we likewise want to overcome the traditional dichotomies in Christian thinking about economics and develop an

approach that takes the complexities of our current reality seriously, as well as the positive contribution that the current system could make towards a better economic and social life for those still excluded from its benefits. With Christian thinkers such as Heslam and others that seem to follow suit,²¹ we want to reconsider positively the idea that there might be much good and beneficial also in the system of capitalism and that the best and most viable alternative might in fact be to work for an alternative form of capitalism – one in which a new trade-off between the different problems of economic life is achieved (see Finn 1995).

To conclude, and only by way of a brief elaboration, the development in our own thinking leads us to propose that the working concept of the “social economy” might be one fruitful avenue for Christians to explore in the endeavour towards developing a more constructive approach to the economic problem. Promoted and explored increasingly by scholars active in the field of social economics (see e.g. Amin, Cameron and Hudson 2002; Molloy, McFeely and Conolly 1999; Rifkin 2000), this concept captures a new-found appreciation of the social activities of that sector of society of which the churches and their related organisations are also an integral part, namely the so-called Third or Voluntary Sector. Whilst not in principle taking an antagonistic position towards the mainstream market economy and its primary institutions, proponents of the social economy concept seek to point out the potential of the numerous social service and voluntary activities in the Third Sector to counter social exclusion, create income and employment opportunities on a large scale and newly integrate the social and economic dimensions of human life. As such they also appeal to other sectors, within government, the state and business, to invest in and structurally support Third Sector activities on behalf of the well-being of society as a whole.

²¹ We are referring here to numerous contributions in the seminal book, *On Moral Business: Classical and Contemporary Resources for Ethics in Economic Life* (1995), in which the authors argue in a similar manner that the traditional dichotomy between capitalism and socialism is outmoded. They accordingly all make a call for “new paradigms” in Christian thinking about economics, which point in the direction of a reformed or alternative form of capitalism. See esp. the essays by Benne (1995), Sherman (1995), Finn (1995), Stackhouse and McCann (1995), and McCann (1995).

Indeed, it is within such a constructive framework that we still very much see a place for the ideas on alternative economic practices by radical scholars such as Ulrich Duchrow to inform and enrich our perspective about what may be possible within the realm of Christian faith-based social economic activity, to contribute to a sophisticated basis for interaction and partnership with other sectors, but also to challenge the other sectors on the level of practice and ideas. Moreover, and in response to those critics who criticise current conceptions of the social economy as rather “cast... in the image of the mainstream and in the interstices that the mainstream has abandoned” (Amin *et al.* 2002:125), we do not see such an open-minded approach within the conceptual setting of the social economy to be inimical to the larger calls for social and economic justice. In a local and national context such as our own - which is characterised by immense wealth and extravagant ownership of property for some - the voice of radical Christian scholars such as Duchrow and Frantz Hinkelammert to the effect that property exist for the well-being of people at large and not for the profit maximisation of a few (see Duchrow and Hinkelammert 2004) should be fully integrated into the overall Christian response. This is part of our response that we cannot neglect on the basis of our own sense of justice demanded by our faith, with the single qualification that it should not discard those activities in which the churches and their related organisations would seek to engage more constructively with the mainstream.

It is within this frame of mind that the discussion is continued in the remaining part of this paper.

5. Organisations in an emerging faith-based movement towards alternatives

There is no doubt that the community of George can be regarded as very religious. This fact was particularly well illustrated by the results of a recent socio-demographic research project, which pointed out that no other institution was so well represented in the various communities of George as the Christian churches. On the basis of the results the hypothesis was consequently also promoted that the churches were probably the only organisation that could

claim to have contact with virtually every household in the whole community (Swart 2006b:355-356; cf. Buitendag 2006:4).

It is in the context of such a broader statement about the inherent potential of the faith-based sector to constitute a source of meaningful social outreach and transformation in the George community that we become more specific in this section by focusing on the activities of three faith-based organisations in which all the partners have been respectively engaged. These three organisations, which have all been the product of distinctive and widespread interdenominational initiatives in the last five to six years, are the Christian Medical Service and Relief company (CMSR), Christian Research Evaluation and Development Opportunities (CREDO) and Action Cross Roads (ACROS).²²

At this point the statement at the beginning of the paper should again be reiterated that the intention here is nothing more than to emphasise the potential of the faith-based sector to become a driving force of social and economic change in the context of current market economic development trends in the George region. In the words of one of the contributors, Rev. Johan van der Merwe, who in our collective reflection and on behalf of the CMSR, offered the following meaningful qualification with regard to this organisation's contribution to date in addressing the current socio-economic predicament in the city of George:

Our focus is of a socio-medical nature and therefore we probably only in a very indirect way challenge any prevailing market economic developments in George, e.g. in demonstrating that part of a sound and healthy economy (οικονομία = household) is caring for those who cannot contribute (any more) in any manner to the economic growth of the town. It is also aiding at least some of those who are in a very bad state (some nearly dying) when referred to us to go into remission and to, on occasion, reach a stage where they are again able to do some work, albeit in a limited way. It is, furthermore, also supporting children whose lives have fallen apart and opening windows and doors to a better future for them. In the sense, thus, that we are serving the weak in our society, we may, indeed, in a small way be challenging the prevailing way of thinking of the strong in the community.

²² For more detailed background information, see the websites of two of these organisations: <http://www.cmsr.org.za>; <http://www.acros.co.za>.

We may find in the above observation a useful perspective on what may be regarded as a distinctive feature of our three organisations – and certainly many other faith-based (and other voluntary) organisations on the ground in the region. Whilst these organisations’ contribution towards challenging the current socio-economic situation may at the first glance not be so evident and should certainly be appreciated with a sense of modesty, it could also be noted how they are in a meaningful way beginning to fill the vacuum of gross neglect that has been left by the current situation. In this sense they may be regarded as an emerging counterpoint to the self-centred actions of the elite citizens of their community referred to in Section Three of this paper, that is in the way in which they are beginning to restore a culture of care and responsibility towards the weak and excluded in the community and in the process giving such people a new sense of being valued and looked after by their fellow human beings. Indeed, in this way our organisations are beginning to redefine their own immediate society and pose a challenge to others to follow suit.

It may be noted how in the case of the CMSR our statement of appreciation is given concrete evidence by the ever-increasing network of caring services that has been developed by this organisation. In the six years of its existence as a registered Article 21 company, the CMSR not only took over the running of the St Mary’s Children’s Home, but are today also in charge of the Bethesda Centre, a hospice for Aids-infected children and mothers where currently some 28 patients are being cared for. In addition, a programme of home-based nursing was also launched somewhat later, which is currently rendering a service by 15 health care workers to about 220 patients in 5 geographical areas in George (Thembaletu, Conville, Lawaaikamp, Parkdene and Rosemoor). Taken together, the CMSR today offers comprehensive support to a substantial number of destitute people, especially in the field of palliative care to HIV/Aids and cancer patients, as well as the care for about 45 children from broken homes. Currently it has a staff of 74 motivated people, including a pastoral care manager and professionals who offer compassionate therapeutic support to destitute and

traumatised children, and similar support to the patients and families of patients both in the hospice and those cared for in the home nursing services. A clear indication of the quality of the services rendered by these staff members is the fact that the CMSR was nominated by two provincial government departments as a best practice model in 2004 and selected as best practice model by the National Department of Health in the same year.²³

It is in close connection to our observation of a new culture of care and responsibility to which our organisations are beginning to contribute that a second level may be identified on which their contribution is becoming apparent. This point could be explained by more specifically recalling the activities of CREDO, the second of our three organisations, and the way these activities have involved the participation of Soso, the partner from our group who was introduced in Section Three of the paper.

An organisation that strives to strengthen the strategic engagement of the broad church community by conducting demographic research, establishing partnerships and creating opportunities for voluntary action in order to begin to address the major challenges of unemployment and other social problems, our recalling of CREDO's activities dates back some two years ago when this organisation established a partnership with the Provincial Education Department to address the need for literacy in the community. This partnership, named Word Power, opened the door for church congregations to serve the needs of the community in local schools through volunteers.

Soso, at this stage a young unemployed woman from the community, was one of the volunteers who came to serve at a school in the Thembaletu, the black township in George. It was here that her path crossed that of CREDO and a new dimension entered her life.

At the time I was unemployed, but when Word Power crossed my path, I realised that it was here that I could live out my passion – the needs of the children of my community.

²³ The information about the CMSR in this paragraph was provided by Johan van der Merwe. Cf. also the information on the CMSR's activities provided on the website of this organisation (CMSR 2006).

Together with other volunteers Soso was trained by the Education Department to serve effectively in the school. But unlike other volunteers Soso did not want to serve as an assistant in a classroom. Her passion was seeing to the personal needs of children.

In living out this passion Soso was also trained by two NGOs, OPTIONS and FAMSA, in crisis pregnancy counselling and family counselling. At the school she introduced a prayer group for the children, as well as a support group for children traumatised through alcohol abuse in their homes. But what about her own needs in terms of income and security? How could these be met without depending on the mainstream economy? The reality was that the Education Department did not have the finances or budget to pay volunteers. Neither did the school have the necessary finance, especially against the background that it serves one of the poorest communities in George. Soso further explains:

Is there hope for a person such as myself, who has only partial high-school education, and is only informally trained to serve as an effective volunteer. Can I have a fulfilled life, while also enjoying economic stability?

Through this dilemma CREDO was confronted with a reality that extended beyond emotional and spiritual support, namely also meeting Soso's financial needs. The following paragraphs describe how this was done through a sequence of further events, which illustrate the value of information, partnerships and caring support.

During 2004 CREDO did extensive research on the extent of the social challenges of HIV/AIDS, TB, crime, poverty, substance abuse and families in crisis. Soso also attended the workshops resulting from the research and was introduced to other role players in the community who shared her passion. One was an unemployed social worker, who was part of the CREDO research team and was to become the head of the George office of the S.A. National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (SANCA).

In the Word Power partnership a strong focus is placed on the development of the parent body of a school, especially those in communities such as Thembaletu. Unfortunately a tragedy of

this community is the prevalence of alcohol abuse and in many cases subsequent family abuse, which creates the need for people such as Soso in a school. Through Word Power a further partnership was established with SANCA, which could play a meaningful role in addressing the issue of alcohol abuse among parents. Subsequent to the appointment of the CREDO supporter as head of the SANCA office, the role of Soso in Xhosa-speaking schools was discussed and presented to the board of SANCA. Realising the valuable role she was playing in her community in the fight against alcohol abuse and its effects, the SANCA committee decided to appoint Soso as a paid volunteer. CREDO was also able to purchase a house in Thembaletu with funds donated to them and this accommodation, together with the remuneration received from SANCA, gave Soso the financial security she needed to have her own needs met while serving others.

CREDO's engagement with Soso has been described at some length to illustrate how this organisation's activities of care have also created new-found opportunities for economic empowerment. In becoming the basis through which someone like Soso could find meaningful employment – an outcome that has inspired CREDO to continue building similar kinds of partnership with diverse role-players – we encounter a mode of contribution that correlates well with our reference to the “social economy” in Section Four of this paper. Indeed, it is a level of contributing to the social good in the George society that should not be confined to the activities of CREDO, but could also be attributed to many other organisations in the faith-based sector in the region, which through their work and activities are providing some kind of employment and life purpose to local citizens. We should here also pertinently refer to the contribution of the CMSR, the first of our three organisations. In the description above we have seen how this organisation, through its ever-expanding network of caring work, is today the employer of a substantial number of caring workers – a number that one can expect will further increase in the years to come.

In seeking to describe the collectivity of social activities of our three organisations in this section, the third organisation, ACROS, can be regarded as something of an exception. Emerging from a poverty-alleviation initiative of one of the local congregations in George that sought to create employment opportunities for needy people in the city, ACROS came into being as an inter-denominational organisation and was subsequently registered as a Section 21 company in 2002. In the process of its establishment several directors from different denominations in George were also appointed, with the Bishop of the diocese of the Anglican Church as the current chairperson. An executive committee with different portfolio committees was established in order to assist with inter-denominational cooperation and involvement as well as with a view to facilitating a metamorphosis within the church community of George.

In comparison to the CMSR and CREDO, ACROS has from the outset not understood its role as being directly involved in practical initiatives or programmes on the ground. From its website it becomes clear that this organisation sees its role instead as facilitator of what is referred to as far-reaching transformation “in the minds, hearts and physical conditions of people” (ACROS 2003a:7). This is an objective that ACROS seeks to achieve across denominational boundaries, by making Christians aware of the root causes of the contemporary problem of large-scale poverty and social degradation. It furthermore seeks to contribute to the solution of the problem by making Christians newly aware of their fundamental dependence on God and facilitating a new spirit of cooperation, support and inter-dependency amongst Christian people (see ACROS 2003a, b, c); in other words, “a society where people are concerned with building the Body of Christ as opposed to feeding an insatiable desire for power, pleasure and material possessions” (ACROS 2003a:7).

Of particular importance in the context of this paper is to note ACROS’s specific concern with the economic sphere of life. Thus not only are the problems of contemporary society expressed in terms of the widening gap between rich and poor, but it becomes clear how

ACROS also wants to facilitate awareness on a concrete level and the manifestation of more cooperative forms of economic operation in the George community (see ACROS 2003a, b, c).

This interest and objective are stated on the website as follows:

During months of deliberations and prayer ACROS was conceptualised and the mission, the vision and the strategic objectives began to take shape... As the deliberations of the initiators and their collaborators advanced, it was realised that a replicable model of personal and community metamorphosis should be established in close cooperation with the local church denominations, capitalising on the principles and experiences of *stokfels*, the successes of co-operatives in South Africa, of the German co-operatives and communal banks and especially of the Mondragon co-operatives in Spain. (In and around Mondragon, in the northern part of Spain, more than 160 cooperatives have been established since the middle of the last century at a stage when unemployment reached 40%-50%. Almost 100% of these co-operatives were successful and their annual sales amounted close to 10 thousand million Euros in 2001. Their productivity and profitability count among the highest in Spain.) (ACROS 2003a:5)

Thus, if compared to our other two organisations, ACROS's contribution may be appreciated for the way in which it has sought to operate more outright on the level of ideas by promoting an alternative life orientation and mode of economic operation in the George community. This it has done since its inception through numerous radio talks, articles in newspapers and on the internet,²⁴ presentations at schools and to business people and government officials, motivation of volunteers to support teachers in disadvantaged schools, sermons across denominational boundaries and formation of partnerships that emphasise self-help initiatives, highlight the benefits of co-operative undertakings and encourage people to start communal banks.

It appears from the ACROS website that much thought has also been given by its leadership to the development of a strategic plan to realise its economic vision. In this plan mention is made of, amongst other things, an envisaged ACROS Funding and Savings Union as well as ACROS Products and Services Cooperatives that will facilitate and mediate the establishment of cooperative economic undertakings in the local communities (see ACROS 2003a, b, c). At

²⁴ See the various articles presented on the ACROS website (<http://www.acros.co.za/articles.htm>). See also an article by Pieter van Niekerk (2004:30) in the newspaper *Rapport*, “'n Kopskuif nodig oor ryk en arm” (“A mindshift needed on rich and poor”), in which pertinent reference is made to the mission and vision of ACROS.

present, however, the realisation of these structures remains a commendable ideal and there is no evidence yet that the ideas of ACROS have made an impact in actual practice.

Despite the latter qualification, ACROS's sustained endeavours to raise awareness in the communities and mobilise them towards cooperative action and self-help initiatives nevertheless deserve ongoing appreciation and the active support of the faith-based sector in George. It may be noted, for instance, how this organisation has in recent times been particularly involved in the community of Blanco in the George region. Its aim is to mobilise the seven denominations in this community to join hands by accepting the mission of ACROS and to help them to be instrumental in the community as agents of change. Furthermore, and perhaps of greatest significance, reference can be made here to the recent establishment of an Association of Christian-Based Organisations in George (ACBOG). This is an initiative in which ACROS has played a prominent facilitating role and that promises much not only in terms of the effective mobilisation of the faith-based sector in the George region, generally speaking, but also in realising ACROS's own ideals.

6. Concluding remarks

The basic aim in this paper was to develop an argument on the potential of the faith-based sector and more specifically organisations from the Christian faith-based sector to become a movement for far-reaching social and economic alternatives in the city region of George. Having indicated how such a need for alternatives derives especially from current experiences of distorted market economic development in the George region – a development that could be taken as a salient case in the South African context and one characterised by its tendency of creating increasing inequality between rich and poor citizens, gross neglect of the needs of the latter and social degradation on a large-scale – the relevance of the argument was further highlighted within the dual theoretical framework of the new moral debate on market economic development in South Africa and the Christian theological debate on economic alternatives. In both of the latter theoretical frameworks it was pointed out that the quest for

alternatives was not an argument against capitalism *per se*, but rather for an alternative formation of capitalism that would reorient it towards the common good of society. In both frameworks it was also confirmed that the faith-based sector – and for our part, the Christian faith-based sector in particular – had a distinctive role to play on the level of ideas, inner orientation and devising practical alternatives.

We may conclude this paper by identifying the activities of the three organisations described in the penultimate section – organisations with whom the partners in this paper contribution have all been involved in one way or another – as a positive manifestation of the above-mentioned potential. As such the activities of these organisations could be regarded as important and appropriate examples of an emerging faith-based movement in the region – a movement that through its growing networks and considerable range of actors is beginning to address the widespread social neglect that has been the consequence of the system and its elites and, at the same time, is beginning to create an awareness of the need for social and economic alternatives. Indeed, these activities may in many instances not be perfect and considerable challenges remain in developing them towards greater sophistication in terms of the perspectives set out in both the new moral debate and the Christian theological debate on economic alternatives in this paper. Yet, having said this, they are also another manifestation of what is today recognised in a considerable body of international literature as the new-found contribution of actors of faith towards societal renewal and alternative modes of living and outlook on life. In the city region of George, at least, they present perhaps the best hope for social transformation in an era of seriously distorted market economic development.

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