

By MOIRA LEVY

Unity in Africa is becoming the catch phrase most frequently heard in all the countries visited by Idasa's Africa Programme, according to the co-ordinator of the project, Shelagh Gastrow.

It is a theme running through the discussions and debates her tour groups have had with politicians, aid workers, writers, journalists and church representatives. All speak of the urgent need for Africa to join forces – and that includes South Africa – in building the economies, infrastructures and civil societies of the continent.

And most agree that South Africa leads the way in growth and development. Ms Gastrow, who is based in Idasa's Natal office, found that wherever she travelled in Africa, she encountered huge expectations about what South Africa could contribute in investments, skills redistribution and aid.

The Africa Programme, aimed at creating working relationships between South Africa and the rest of the continent, has taken her to seven countries across east, west and central Africa.

On her return from her latest venture – a three-week visit to Dakar and Senegal – she told of her impressions of the growing trade and investment links between South Africa and the countries further north. Her travels in Africa, says Gastrow, have reshaped her understanding of South Africa's problems and helped her look with new eyes on the strengths and weaknesses of the continent as a whole.

Her strongest impression, she said, was that South Africa leads the way in the development of civil society. Nowhere in the countries she has visited is there the plethora of institutions of civil society that South Africa enjoys – the women's and youth organisations, the human rights groups, the relatively unrestricted press which includes some vigorous alternative media, the professional bodies, the churches with their tradition of opposition and defence of individual rights.

"We have never encountered anything like Idasa; there are no institutions or organisations promoting the culture of democracy," she said.

"In Angola, for example, there was very little organisation on the ground. Except for a few individuals and the political parties who were seeking political power, there was nothing that could be called civil society.

"Everywhere we went in Africa, people are battling to build a civil society. There are signs of it." Gastrow cited the growth of an

Into Africa, where



OAU hall, Addis Ababa: Shelagh Gastrow with, from left, a Mozambican official, S A Chinouriri of the Zimbabwe embassy, André Zaaiman of the Gorée Institute and Serai Andrew Moche, chief representative of the ANC in Ethiopia.

UNITY is the catch phrase

independent press in Senegal which includes a satirical publication, the *Free Cockroach*. And during a trip to Ethiopia in April she heard of plans for an independent newspaper and publishing venture to be called *Eureka Press*.

In Angola, some individuals appealed to Idasa for assistance in setting up a democracy think-tank; in Eritrea moves are afoot to launch the Regional Centre for Human Rights and Development "to make sure that individual rights receive proper attention in the future".

"There are signs of a pro-democracy movement emerging in Africa," Gastrow said, but she cautions that these fledgling efforts are bound by all sorts of constraints.

State authorities, who perceive them as a threat, apply internal pressure; externally, they face a lack of funding. World powers no longer prioritise Africa; what funding does come in is aimed at efforts like famine relief.

"Africa has become marginalised from the rest of the world," Gastrow said. And countries in sub-Saharan Africa are increasingly looking to South Africa for a massive inflow of capital and technology. She cautions against too much hope: "South African business is setting up some contacts, but South Africa has to attend to its own welfare needs, and what investment does take place will most likely benefit only the elites. It won't change those countries' economies."

That is not to say that links are not proceeding apace. A sign of this is the burgeon-

ing migrancy south which started some years ago with unskilled traders, mainly Zaireans, entering Natal, Transvaal and parts of the Western Cape. This is now developing into a fully-fledged brain drain, with highly skilled and educated people opting for the relatively higher salaries and better living and working conditions offered in the south.

Gastrow says since the 1990 unbannings of the ANC and other organisations the universities, particularly, have experienced a "flood of applicants".

"When they bring skills South Africa doesn't have this could be of enormous benefit to the country, but if they are skilled workers and professionals who are prepared to work for lower salaries, this could lead to intense competition, conflict and tension."

Gastrow paints a picture of a continent that, tensions notwithstanding, is fast coming to the realisation that it holds a shared ideal, symbiotically defined problems and a common future.

"There is a big effort towards solidarity in Africa to counter the marginalisation that is happening from the rest of the world. There is a feeling that African countries have a common experience of hundreds of years of suffering. When Africans talk about South Africa they talk with passion; there is no hostility towards Idasa visitors, only a huge amount of sympathy and solidarity and support for us to get on with the business of becoming part of Africa."

Moira Levy is media facilitator with Idasa.