

**THE dramatically changed South African political environment has altered the terrain on which many organisations operate. *Democracy in Action* spoke to Idasa's executive director Dr Alex Boraine on the way ahead for the Institute**

## Looking to the future

**YOU HAVE** said recently that Idasa is an organisation working for more than the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela. What role do you see for the institute?

South Africa is essentially a non-democratic country which is reflected in every area of life. In order to redress this and to bring about a democratic system, an enormous amount of work will have to be done not only now, but over many years to come. There is no doubt that Idasa, because of its focus on democracy as an alternative to apartheid, can play a decisive role in creating a democratic culture from which can flow the possibility of a democratic society.

**What does this mean in specific terms?**

There have been two major responses to State President De Klerk's now famous speech of February 2. On the one hand the ANC has made certain responses, including the decision to send a delegation to South Africa so that the discussion can continue. Hopefully this will ultimately lead to genuine negotiations.

The other response - internally - can best be seen in the collapse of the homeland system. No doubt this will continue until that system becomes no more than a nightmare of the past. The response of the ANC and the people living in the so-called homelands has also not gone unnoticed by a wide variety of people - black and white. There is confusion, misunderstanding and fear among many whites which makes them wide open to the propaganda of the right wing. This must be countered. Idasa, through its regular contacts, can play an interpretive role, an educational role and a facilitating role against the background of these contending aspirations and fears.

**So Idasa's role as a facilitating organisation is not over?**

Not at all, facilitating contact between whites and the ANC was just one aspect. There are different kinds of facilitation roles. One of the strengths of Idasa is that it has staff and offices at the grassroots level where wide gulfs exist between communities and individuals. Certainly Idasa's facilitating role in this regard must continue.

**Do you see Idasa moving into any other definite areas?**

Yes. For example we have just concluded a fascinating weekend which focused specifically on land as a food question, an economic question, a residential question, but also fundamentally as a political question. Idasa has always sought to focus on issues



**Dr Boraine: facilitating role must continue at grassroots level.**

which are going to demand debate and decision. As we move towards a post-apartheid South Africa, Idasa is well positioned to raise some of these issues. Because we are able to link up people from different constituencies, it enhances the facilitating role we have tried to play up till now. This certainly would apply not only to the land question, but to the building of a democratic society as a whole and particularly in addressing the economic question, without which the political question is almost futile.

**Does Idasa's independent position create any problems for its credibility?**

On the contrary. The fact that we are not linked with any political party or any other institution gives us a credibility with mass-based organisations as well as with South Africans who operate in boardrooms, top management arenas, education institutions and who might have links with other political parties.

For too long South Africans have been isolated from one another and therefore they don't really understand either the aspirations on the one hand, or the fears on the other, and this causes considerable misunderstanding and misinterpretation. If Idasa can bring people together who seldom encounter each other, it can only speed up the process towards meaningful democracy. This does not mean we will not constantly have to deal with the problems of

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suspicion and criticism which flow from being in an independent position.

**How is Idasa's re-thinking process taking place?**

Two fundamental ways: Firstly, the Idasa staff and those who work closest with us are already involved in this process and will continue to be for months ahead, particularly because we are in a fluid period in our history. But this does not mean we become paralysed and suspend our activities. A whole lot of issues have a direct bearing on the politics of transition.

Secondly, we have always sought to consult widely and are continuing to do so, so that we can receive feedback, criticism, suggestions, ideas and guidance from a wide spectrum of South African thought and opinion.

**At Idasa's recent board meeting certain trustees appealed to Idasa to extend its activities to the black communities. What is your response to this?**

This is an extremely difficult and sensitive question. We have gone out of our way to show that we are not in competition with mass-based organisations. Idasa has never and will never claim to be vying for leadership in the struggle in any way. On the other hand, in a changing situation it is clear that democracy is not the prerogative of blacks or whites. It is a contradiction in terms to think of either/or when building a common democratic society.

Therefore it makes sense that an institute like Idasa, with its focus on democracy and non-racialism, ought to address the total South Africa rather than black or white South Africans.

**Do you have any projects in mind in this regard?**

When the Idasa staff met last August to plan the programme for 1990, we tried to anticipate the areas which would be of priority during the course of this year. Interestingly enough, we seem to have been able to project with a certain amount of accuracy the practical issues which need to be addressed.

This year started with a focus on democracy and accountability, we've just completed the land workshop I mentioned earlier and in April in Johannesburg, we will look at the possible lessons we can learn from Namibia. In May we will host a conference on the burning question of economic justice. In June a national conference is planned on the politics of transition . . . and so I could go on.

Nevertheless, as a staff we are giving serious and urgent attention to new demands to meet the new situation.