



### SIDBlog

## 11 November 2013: SID Lecture with Benjamin Barber

An impression by Siphephile Nzimande

The passionately delivered talk on Increasing Power of Urban Agglomerations by Dr Benjamin Barber did not only leave the audience with an interesting assortment of questions, but also with the realization that cities are rising up. Mayors are taking charge and are successfully solving large scale cross border problems, while the national states remain in a position of dysfunction. His stance and positive presentation of effective, pragmatic and trusted “homeboys” brought to light that cities are at a position to bring about change and solve global issues by working together and ultimately restoring global democracy - “Most issues are city problems”.

Dr Benjamin Barber began his lecture by comically simplifying and ultimately encapsulating “urban agglomerations” as cities. He casually began by highlighting cities as the oldest and most enduring institutions, naming a few in the different corners of the world which are by far older than their currently known states. Pointing out that it’s in these establishments where fundamental governance principles were birthed, therefore being cradles of civilisation, democracy and governance. Even in this modern age, it’s where personal identity is rooted, as we are born and laid to rest here and therefore have a sense of entitlement as citizens.

This led to Barber further explaining the rise of nation states, as scale changes such as the rapid increase in populations occurred, creating difficulties in democracy and sustaining governance. These nation states were then a solution, recreating new identity, extending solidarity and rescuing democracy among millions of people and acting as a fundamental political unit from a global perspective. He pointed out that nation states, which were the hope and solution to exclusive and monocultural urban structures in the past are now not serving their “function” and are inactive, paralysed, and in the words of Barber, dysfunctional. More so now where there is an

increase in interdependent, cross border issues which are globally interlinked. Nation states are not dealing with central problems such as democracy, terrorism, immigration and climate change, while cities on the other hand have mobilised and are re-emerging as problem solvers. Unlike state officials, mayors have been able to uphold public interest, gathering people and together finding suitable solutions. He labelled mayors as pragmatists who do what needs to be done, influenced by their sense of locality as citizens identifying with a town or city. They are trusted “homeboys” who are held with higher regards to other governmental institutions. This being a key factor for democracy, as it empowers citizens and draws majorities into finding solutions together.

In summary I found Dr Barber’s main message particularly intriguing: people are in need of a level of government which is effective and can be trusted. Mayors and city councils fit these criteria and have proven to be successful and they therefore need to be involved in solving global issues. The point was driven home when he began to give examples of many cities, locally making better, more meaningful and impacting changes, cities interacting, forming associations and working together, thus unifying efforts of global impact. Cities and mayors are finding solutions which ultimately tackle global issues without the state involvement. And that may be the dawn of something new!

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