

Support for welfare

President Barack Obama was so impressed with the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) that he decided to replicate it in 20 cities across the US as part of his poverty-alleviation programme called "20 Promise Neighbourhoods". I can understand why. Based in

one of New York's poorest neighbourhoods, this ambitious project aims to rebuild a whole community so that its children can successfully reach the job market. It includes workshops for parents as well as in-school, after-school, social service and community-building programmes to act as a counterweight to "the street".

HCZ began as a one-block project in the 1990s, but now covers 60 blocks and aims to reach 100 soon. This year's budget is \$40m.

I have been the honorary chairman of Johannesburg Child Welfare (JCW) for the past 18 years and on a recent visit to New York I went to see for myself how they've done it. HCZ believes that for children to do well, their families have to do well. And for families to do well, their community must do well. I knew immediately it was an idea that could translate successfully to SA.

With its extensive community-based outreach, JCW has implemented similar community collaborations, especially in the Drill Hall area of downtown Johannesburg. We also deal with drug abuse, prostitution, poverty alleviation and education.

Through a wide range of projects and institutions JCW provides direct services to abused, abandoned and neglected children (annually to 44 000 beneficiaries) with more than 85% of our income going directly to them. JCW has mentorship linkages with 55 community-based organisations, and has become involved in the HIV arena, especially with child-headed households. We have set up a training school in an effort to alleviate the great shortage of social workers.

What really impressed me is how the people in Harlem got Wall Street involved, reaching an amount of over US\$15m in donations annually.

They may be feeling the recession squeeze,

but Obama's poverty alleviation plan will, one hopes, bring some relief.

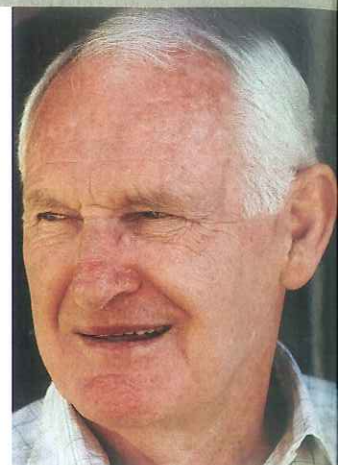
Having run businesses and law practices locally and abroad, I know the SA business community can learn a lot from the Americans, especially when it comes to supporting welfare organisations. We rightly think it is mainly the state's function to provide protection and services to orphans and vulnerable children. The state has contributed, in great measure, to the alleviation of the negative consequences of pervasive poverty.

But the private sector has a vital role to play. Partnering with the state, business and civil society can be, and are, major forces for societal improvement. Yet many businesses in SA think that once they've got their black economic empowerment scorecard right, they've done their bit for transformation.

Transformation is also about ploughing back into society and working with bodies like JCW. It isn't some large hole that money is being poured into. It is gratifying to be able to advise that JCW — which is run like any good business — is able to report a handsome return to our investing partners: the state and donors, both individual and corporate. And that we are making a difference in the lives of many of our neglected children.

In the recession contributions to welfare may be the last thing a person in business will think of. But I believe that is short-sighted. My hope is that we can celebrate our agency's first century this year with the private sector realising that donations to welfare is an investment not only in the country's future, but also in a healthy business environment to come. Today's looked-after, vulnerable children are tomorrow's healthy workers, consumers and business people. ■

Retired businessman King is honorary chairman of Johannesburg Child Welfare



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