

American Committee On Africa

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The Soweto man who started disinvestment

DUMISANE KUMALO sits at his desk in a cramped office, cooled by a beaten-up fan which makes no headway in the summer heat of New York. There are no give-away signs that tell you Kumalo's work is to move billions of dollars in stocks and assets, dealing with big business and government.

Kumalo was the prime mover behind the US disinvestment campaign in 1978.

Today, the movement has gained popular acceptance in the US, as a way of putting pressure on South Africa. So far, he estimates \$4-thousand million (R10-thousand million) has been diverted from South Africa in stock holdings and direct assets.

He left South Africa in 1977, nearly a year after the Soweto riots. As a former journalist for the Sunday Times and marketing executive for Total Oil in Johannesburg, Kumalo could logically have chosen another life.

But experience had taught him, like many of his contemporaries, that the promise of material or business success is meaningless for black South Africans.

"On May 8, 1977, in the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto riots, the police wrecked my home and threatened me. They threw the woman I was living with against a wall. She was three months pregnant and later miscarried," he recalls.

Kumalo says he realised his life was endangered. He left his family behind in Evaton, outside Johannesburg, and travelled to the US.

The American Committee on Africa offered Kumalo a job soon after he arrived. As director of projects, he has educated people about South Africa and tried to get the US to work for policies supporting freedom instead of apartheid in Southern Africa. The organisation worked single-handedly in the beginning; as disinvestment caught on, it

The refugee from Soweto who helped get the disinvestment ball rolling in the United States during the seventies, talks to LOUISE HAYSON



Dumisane Kumalo

orchestrated and directed a nationwide campaign.

Kumalo has seen the movement gather impetus against mighty and powerful opponents. Many US multinationals with large South African holdings argued vehemently against disinvestment. Then the South African government set up 10 consular offices around the country, more than any other foreign mission to the US, to channel propaganda and fight the tide of popular opinion.

Last year, Kumalo exposed the discreet use of South African funds to win favour in political campaigns, such as that of New York mayor, Ed Koch. The funds were distributed through a Washington-based law firm, Baskin Sears, which promptly ceased to have any more South African dealings, because the stigma would do irreparable harm to business.

"No self-respecting American politician will openly support apartheid now, although five years ago the picture was quite different," Kumalo says. The disinvestment movement had no popular platform five or six years ago anywhere in the world, least of all in America.

"We had to find a way of attracting attention to the wrongs perpetrated by apartheid," he says, "and a way of informing people about South Africa." Major US organisations wanted to help but did not know how they could put pressure on the SA government.

"The only effective way to achieve this was to get city and state governments to disinvest the millions they had invested in SA," he says. "We had to persuade local governments, corporations and banks that what appeared to be in their interests, doing business with South Africa, was, in fact, not."

On a budget probably smaller than that allocated by Ford Motors for paper clips and coffee in a month, ACOA has taken on some tough opponents. By lobbying and forming coalitions all over the nation, the disinvestment movement created enough waves to make US involvement in apartheid unacceptable.

Making corporations and banks sensitive to public opinion on South Africa, Kumalo says, is not an end in itself.

What the disinvestment movement has done is similar to throwing a sobering glass of icy cold water in the face of government leaders.

The impact of disinvestment is the threat it poses to South Africa's

economic wealth and stability, a devastating threat for any political economy.

US sanctions have been threatened in Nicaragua and tried in Poland, but never before have sanctions been generated by such sustained public protest.

Forty states in the US are debating disinvestment legislation — it takes between three and four years for the legislation to go through various levels of government.

Several have adopted legislation which make it illegal to do business with companies with investments in South Africa. Others have divested pension funds and channeled them into "hometown" projects which help local communities, often showing better yields than the South African investment did.

Kumalo says 32 cities, including all the major US cities — New York, San Francisco, Miami, Boston — one after the other have voted to divest city funds from South Africa.

The issue of US Government and corporate policy on SA was brought into sharp focus after the US election campaign last year, says Kumalo. When Bishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, he focused attention on what was happening in South Africa. Since then, South Africa has provided its own testimony. Trade union leaders, students "from Columbia to Kalamazoo", church officials, ordinary citizens and politicians have lobbied for a change in US policy towards South Africa.

As Kumalo puts it: "We got Americans to get other Americans to take up the issue of US involvement in South Africa."

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