

## **RACE AND IDENTITY IN 2015 SOUTH AFRICA: A Nelson Mandela Foundation Position Paper**

### **Background**

The Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) has been engaging in a focused way around the interlinked issues of reckoning with oppressive pasts, reconciliation, inherited societal divides, inequality, xenophobia, race and identity since 2005. This period has seen continuing dialogues on the imprints of South Africa's past, an international dialogue series (2013-2014) enabling us to view ourselves through the lens of comparative international experience, community dialogues on xenophobia (2008-2011), and dialogues focused on the question of race in 2009, 2014 and 2015. Most recently the NMF has partnered with the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) in convening three focus groups on race and identity in an attempt to fashion a deeper intervention in this fraught terrain.

This position paper draws heavily on these engagements, especially from the inputs provided by participants in the focus groups.

### **Contexts**

While the racial orders of our pasts might have been buried formally, we believe that those pasts are far from done with us. Race is still a critical faultline in South Africa's social landscape. A faultline separating people and cleaving the hearts of individuals. Truth be told, generations of South Africans are profoundly damaged around race. Centuries of racial politics have hurt us, in ways that we are not always aware of.

Public discourses on race, in our view, are dominated by expressions of denial, alienation, obfuscation and even self-hatred. Listen to the spiteful chattering on social media and radio talk-shows, in letters to newspaper editors and at dinner parties. Listen to the often laborious constructions and deconstructions of the

academy. Listen to the platitudes of politicians and bureaucrats either papering over or playing fast and loose with the pain and confusion of daily experience. More disturbing is a tidal wave in incidents of racism. Complaints to the SAHRC are dominated by the question of race. Our media are awash in reports of the most recent incidents.

Can we even name the hurt of petty humiliations experienced by black South Africans in their daily encounters with white South Africa? Can we name the denial by many white South Africans of deep-rooted patterns of privilege inherited from the colonial and apartheid eras? Can we name the hurt felt by black South Africans treated with contempt by black service providers who fawn over white clients? Can we name the prejudice of white progressives towards other white South Africans who must prove to the former that their whiteness, or their Afrikaans-ness, doesn't establish them as reactionary? Can we name the hurt felt by all South Africans when they must classify themselves in terms of apartheid-era racial categories in their dealings with the state? Can we name, beyond the unhelpful label "xenophobia", the rage many black South Africans feel towards other black Africans?

What happened to the robust narratives of non-racism and of Black Consciousness? Narratives which defined identity in terms of a political vision and a concomitant way of life, or praxis? Narratives which shaped our struggles for liberation and our negotiating of a post-apartheid polity? Narratives which asked the painful questions while avoiding simplistic answers? Narratives which knew that the "so-called" were also the "called"? Where are they now? What are they saying to the painful negotiating of post-apartheid identities and the weaving of a liberatory social fabric? All these questions underpin the work that must be done by South Africans, black and white. Much of the work to be done involves black South Africans working with themselves and for themselves, and white South Africans working with themselves and for themselves. We have to reach beyond discourses in which white South Africans tell black South Africans what their work is, and vice versa.

## Definitions

Discourse on race and identity in South Africa is characterised by a confusion of terminology. But in any context meaningful dialogue is premised on a shared vocabulary. Without it there is the danger of simply talking past one another. In its deliberations the NMF has encountered numerous definitions of key terms, some more scholarly in nature, some geared to popular audiences. For the purposes of this paper we mean the following by the terms:

**Racialism:** the identifying of people in terms of 'race' on the basis of signs linked to the human body, such as skin colour or accent.

**Racism:** the attribution of negative and/or inferior qualities to people based on identification in terms of 'race' and other acts of violation stemming from such attribution.

**Non-racism:** action by individuals, institutions and systems informed by respect for difference and/or otherness and rejection of the attribution of negative and/or inferior qualities to anybody based on the category of 'race'.

'Race' is a social construct inviting dismissal in principle. But that would be to avoid the messy realities of both the human condition and the specificities of a society like South Africa's. Clearly 'racialism' is at once a slippery slope and an unavoidable instrument for redress in contexts like those being experienced by 'post-colonial' and 'post-apartheid' South Africa. Which makes the embrace of 'non-racism' critical to finding sustainable solutions to the challenges being confronted by the country in the terrain of race and identity. Racism expresses itself systemically, interpersonally and in the deepest recesses of individual psyches. Non-racism has to address simultaneously the challenge posed by frames of reference which foster racism and the challenge posed by individuals – 'perpetrators' and 'victims' - who have internalised those frames of reference. It has to challenge systems in the public, private and civil society sectors deeply rooted in oppressive pasts and resistant to transformative endeavour. And it must reference heavily the South African Constitution's clarion call to us to find unity in our diversity.

## **Analysis**

The single most compelling insight to emerge from the focus groups convened by the NMF and SAHRC was that racialization, racialism, racism and incidents of racial abuse must be understood within long South African histories, structures and systems of power, and dominant discourses. The systemic, interpersonal and intra-personal nature of the challenge must never be lost sight of. Systemic dimensions are located across all sectors of South African society – from the state to business, from institutions of higher learning to organised labour, from NGOs to religious organisations. To begin to understand both the challenge confronting us and the causal factors informing it, we believe that we have to return to the reconciliation project crafted by Nelson Mandela's government in the 1990s. In our analysis government in this period adopted three primary interlinked and overlapping strategies for coming to terms with the past: nation-building, through the deployment of symbols and metanarratives (big explanatory stories); the putting in place of special instruments to effect redress and reparations for past injustice; and the longer-term restructuring of society (including the state and other actors like big business and civil society) to ensure the sharing of both wealth and opportunity. These strategies relied for success not only on the initiatives of the state, government and the ruling party. Support from civil society, the private sector and individual South Africans was a necessary ingredient. For instance, it was imperative for big business to acknowledge its role in the eras of colonial and apartheid rule, embrace the imperative to share wealth and opportunity, and proactively implement policies like employment equity.

Nation-building was spearheaded by Mandela, for whom national reconciliation was the priority for his presidency. He drew the National Party and the Inkatha Freedom Party into the Government of National Unity. He accepted FW de Klerk as one of his deputy-presidents. He undertook a series of grand symbolic gestures for reconciliation – from having tea with the wives of apartheid-era heads of state to embracing the Springbok emblem for the national rugby team; from visiting former President PW Botha to insisting on the inclusion of elements of the old national anthem in the new one; from overseeing the adoption of eleven official languages for the country to retaining the services of white bureaucrats and security officials among

his staff. And he both promoted and attracted new metanarratives to replace the dominant ones of the old regime – these new narratives foregrounded concepts like ‘the rainbow nation’, the ‘new’ South Africa, ‘the struggle’, ‘truth and reconciliation’, ‘the people’, and ‘Madiba Magic’.

Under Mandela, government decided on an array of special instruments for redress and reparation. The centrepiece was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the key mechanism for confronting the past and the one around which the other instruments were constellated. Established in 1995, the TRC delivered its main report to Mandela in 1998 and concluded its business in 2003. Other instruments were put in place either simultaneously or thereafter, and most are ongoing:

- A land restitution process aimed at either returning land or providing compensation to people forcibly removed in the period 1913-1994.
- A broader land reform programme, aimed at transferring 30% of white commercial farmland to black farmers by 2014.
- The implementation of employment equity policies (affirmative action) favouring previously disadvantaged sectors of society (by race, gender and disability), across government and the private sector.
- Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), a policy and a programme designed to increase ownership, management and control of businesses by black South Africans, to make finances more accessible to black entrepreneurs, and to use ‘preferential procurement’ by the state and its agencies to spread empowerment across the private economy.
- A special investigations unit to spearhead the prosecution of perpetrators of human rights violations who did not receive amnesty from the TRC.
- The awarding of special pensions to persons who made meaningful contributions during the struggle for freedom.
- The establishment of a missing persons programme within the Department of Justice with a mandate to locate the remains of persons murdered by the apartheid state and return them to the families. The programme is a response to one of the TRC’s recommendations.

Arguably, the success of the strategies outlined above hinged on the ability of the post-apartheid governments to restructure the state and the economy to ensure a systemic sharing of wealth and equal access to opportunity. Before coming to power, the African National Congress had already adopted the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as its blueprint for achieving these objectives. From 1994 it became government policy, with a cabinet minister in the President's Office tasked with driving the RDP as the key cross-sectoral shaper of state transformation. However, two years later the RDP was dropped in favour of a new blueprint, GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution), which has been typified as either setting or being closely aligned to a global neoliberal agenda. Time constraints do not allow an interrogation of government economic and related policies, nor an exploration of the global economic and other constraints on the South African state. Suffice it to note that despite prioritising social welfare (approximately 12 million South Africans now benefit from social grants and pensions), the state (working both with and against other sectors of polity) has had little success in shifting resilient apartheid-era socio-economic patterns. So that South Africa, by most measures, remains one of the most unequal societies on earth.

This fundamental, underlying and growing inequality has bedevilled South Africa's attempts to come to terms with its past. More specifically, it has led nation-building to wear thin and has subverted the work of the country's special instruments for redress and reparation:

- The impact of the TRC process has failed to meet the expectations either of its creators or of its intended beneficiaries.
- Since 1994 over 76 000 land restitution claims have been settled, but it is estimated that close to 90% of these have related to land in urban areas. Progress in rural areas has been painfully slow.
- Rural land redistribution more broadly has also been slow. The target of 30% was not reached by 2014. Present estimates place the figure at between 7% and 9% and note a disturbing trend of beneficiaries selling land soon after its acquisition, in many cases back to the 'original' owners.
- Employment equity programmes have seen representivity targets reached to a significant degree in the public sector. However, progress has not been good

in the private sector – for instance, in 2011 roughly 70% of senior management positions remained in white hands.

- Black Economic Empowerment has had disappointing results. Despite its broadening base, it has been described by one respected commentator as contributing to inequality, buying a small black elite into the established club of white business rather than redistributing wealth to the masses of black South Africans. Not surprisingly, the 2011 Census estimated the average income of white households as six times greater than that of black households.
- The special investigations unit is now moribund, only a handful of perpetrators were prosecuted after the conclusion of the TRC process, and effectively South Africa has implemented a blanket amnesty despite the TRC's mandate to effect a conditional amnesty.
- The special pensions process has been concluded, with well over 20 000 individuals benefitting, while the missing persons programme is ongoing and has seen the return of remains to nearly 100 families.

In our view the strategies adopted in the 1990s, as outlined above, were necessary and appropriate. However, the failures of implementation have undermined the reconciliation project fundamentally. We would go so far as to say that the project is now experiencing a crisis of legitimacy. A crisis deepened by perceptions that the project has been used to smooth the replacement of one elite by another. Liberation has reached too small a number of South Africans to be an enduring energy of unification. The notion of a South Africa “belonging to all who live in it” seems now to be an impossible ideal. South Africa belongs increasingly to the few who can afford to access the instruments of democratisation, the few who benefit from resilient colonial and apartheid patterns of privilege, the few who can feed from the troughs of patronage, protection and graft. In these contexts the metanarratives of ‘the New South Africa’ are unravelling. Social cohesion is elusive. For the many, the many encumbered by the chains of a too-old South Africa, for the many, we would argue, learning simply to get on together has become a lot harder now than it was in 1994. And this is why race and identity are flashpoints in the South Africa of 2015.

## Finding solutions

Here we focus on key insights and suggestions to emerge from the focus groups convened by the NMF and SAHRC. In our reading of the dialogues these are as follows:

- A long road lies ahead of South Africa in this terrain. It will require endurance, courage and a commitment to asking the right questions.
- While action must be taken in response to specific incidents of racism, it is imperative that these incidents be understood within the contexts outlined in the analysis above. To offer meaningful ways forward, interventions need to hold the deep structural and systemic dimensions of the challenge front and centre.
- In 1994 South Africa was a deeply damaged society, the product of centuries of oppression. It was clear then that it would take generations to 'fix', but too easily thereafter we lost sight of the nature and scale of the challenge and, arguably, began to believe in a 'quick-fix' and to adopt concomitant strategies. Whatever work we do now must embrace a 'long-haul' perspective. For the foreseeable future it is about planting the seeds and nurturing growth. The eating of the fruit is for the future that we are striving to make.
- Clearly meaningful shifts in this space are dependent on South Africa addressing systemic inequality and rooting out resilient apartheid-era societal patternings. Although all sectors of society will need to be mobilised to achieve these objectives, the state and private sector carry a fundamental responsibility. Interventions will have to address this imperative.
- We have to acknowledge and confront the roles played by capitalism, tradition and official racial categorisation in entrenching apartheid-era societal patternings since 1994.
- Interventions will also have to create space for South Africans to learn to listen to one another, to undertake the hard work of introspection, and to build cultures of hospitality, ubuntu and respect for 'the other'.
- We have to find ways of fostering understanding of the subtle forms of racism expressed in the use of terms like 'we', 'them', 'us', 'my people' and so on.



- There needs to be an emphasis on initiatives and partnerships which can engage communities in dialogue. The need to 'move on' from the terrible eras of colonialism and apartheid is acknowledged. But to attempt to move on without addressing the questions and the issues raised in this Position Paper would be to court disaster. *How* to move on is critical. This Paper is an attempt to suggest a mode for negotiating a way forward.