



**TRUTH – YES, RECONCILIATION – MAYBE:
SOUTH AFRICANS JUDGE THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION PROCESS***

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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11 June 2001

To be cited as:

Gibson, James L., and Helen Macdonald. 2001. "Truth– Yes, Reconciliation – Maybe: South Africans Judge the Truth and Reconciliation Process." Research Report, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. Rondebosch: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.

*The research is supported by the Law and Social Sciences Program of the National Science Foundation (SES 9906576). The project is a collaborative effort with Amanda Gouws, Department of Political Science, the University of Stellenbosch.

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Despite widespread domestic and international media coverage of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, little is known about how ordinary South Africans react to and judge the truth and reconciliation process. Based on a recently conducted nationally representative survey of ordinary people¹, this report examines the views of South Africans toward the Commission and its work (including amnesty and victim compensation), as well as peoples' understandings of the country's apartheid past and attitudes toward reconciliation. Since racial differences in such attitudes are pervasive, we report many of our findings broken down by the four major racial groups in the country. Our principal findings are as follows.

SOUTH AFRICANS DIVIDED ON HOW TO JUDGE THE TRC

Vast racial differences exist in how people evaluate the TRC, with the extremes being defined by black and white South Africans. For instance, while 76 % of black South Africans approve of the work of the Commission, only 37 % of whites are so inclined. Coloured respondents hold fairly negative views toward the TRC, although they are not as critical as whites, and Asian respondents tend to be relatively

¹A methodological appendix is available that describes the technical details of the survey. In sum, face-to-face interviews were conducted with a sample of 3,727 South Africans. The sample is representative of those 18 years old and older, throughout the entire country (urban and rural). The interviews were conducted in English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, North Sotho, South Sotho, Tswana, Tsonga and Venda, according to the preference of the respondent.

positive, although not as favorable as blacks. The task on which the TRC is most charitably rated is that of helping the families of the victims to find out what happened to their loved ones – uncovering the truth about the past. A majority of South Africans of every race agrees that the TRC has done a very good job on this function. The least positive aspect of the truth and reconciliation process has to do with compensation, although even on this difficult issue a majority of blacks and Asian South Africans rate the TRC positively. In terms of punishing human rights abusers – a job not even assigned to the TRC – the Commission also receives very high marks from blacks and South Africans of Asian origin. In general, it appears that blacks are positive toward all aspects of the work of the TRC, while whites judged nearly all of the TRC's work negatively.

AMNESTY – UNFAIR, BUT NECESSARY

Generally speaking, amnesty is judged by most South Africans to be unfair. Even in terms of fairness to the individuals seeking amnesty, the process is *not* evaluated as overwhelmingly fair. Moreover, amnesty is thought to be particularly unjust when it comes to those who died during the struggle over apartheid.

Attitudes toward amnesty are one of the few instances in which the opinions of black and white South Africans generally converge. Nonetheless, while amnesty is popular among only a small fraction of the South African population, irrespective of race, blacks (but not those of other races) seem to conclude that amnesty is a price that had to be paid in order to secure a peaceful transition to democratic rule in South Africa.

MOST SOUTH AFRICANS AGREE ON COMPENSATION – BUT DISAGREE ON WHOM SHOULD PAY

This survey makes plain that South Africans of different races have quite disparate views of the breadth of responsibility for compensating victims. White South Africans would hold very few

institutions or groups responsible for compensation; black South Africans cast their nets quite broadly, asserting claims against most of the major institutions in South African society. By a margin of 8 to 1, blacks are more likely than whites to attribute responsibility for compensation to white South Africans. These contradictory positions on the compensation issue no doubt reflect vastly different understandings of who is, or should be held responsible for gross human rights violations during the struggle over apartheid.

Nevertheless, we are surprised by the finding that a majority of white South Africans support a policy under which the government would pay compensation to the victims of gross human rights violations. This implies that whites recognize to a least some degree responsibility for correcting some of the wrongs of the past. Of course, whites do not want themselves to pay – no one wants to be held responsible for paying compensation, everyone wants someone else to pay. But a large majority of South Africans, including whites, hold the government responsible for paying compensation to the victims of gross human rights violations.

THE VERDICT'S OUT ON APARTHEID

Our survey reveals that most South Africans of every race agree that apartheid as practiced in South Africa was a crime against humanity. Nonetheless, views about the country's apartheid past are complicated. In principle, apartheid is *not* perceived as inherently evil by everyone, even if most agree that the implementation of apartheid ideas was a crime against humanity. Not surprisingly, whites are more forgiving of the failures of apartheid, but blacks, Coloured people, and South Africans of Asian origin hold incredibly tolerant views of the apartheid past (most likely as it pertains to the idea of separate racial development, not racial hierarchy and domination). Substantial racial differences exist in judgments of whether whites benefit today from apartheid – with whites only half as likely as other South Africans to accept this view. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that *almost 40 % of whites* agree that white people are

beneficiaries of the country's apartheid past. Generally speaking, the truth and reconciliation process has been successful at exposing human rights abuses by both sides in the struggle over apartheid (thereby contributing to the country's collective memory), even if people disagree about the degree of white knowledge of the abuses.

RECONCILIATION – A WORK IN PROGRESS

How much racial reconciliation is there in contemporary South Africa? Our data are ambivalent on this matter. On the one hand, large majorities of South Africans of every race reject the view that the country would be better off if there were no people of other races in South Africa, an encouraging finding. At the other extreme, most South Africans find it difficult to understand people of the opposite race, and substantial minorities (sometimes majorities) subscribe to negative racial stereotypes. Thus, the evidence of reconciliation is mixed.

One of the most interesting aspects of these data is the tendency among black South Africans to express more racially hostile attitudes than whites, Coloured people, and South Africans of Asian origin. Blacks hold negative views of whites in part due to their lack of interactions with white people, which we find is widespread. Black South Africans do not understand whites, they feel uncomfortable around them, do not trust what they say, and find it difficult to imagine ever being friends with a white person (and in fact few claim to have any white friends). For instance, 68% of black South Africans agree that it is difficult to understand the customs and ways of white South Africans. We do not argue that to "know" one's counterparts is necessarily to "love" them – knowledge may contribute to the conclusion that a group holds reprehensible views and should not be tolerated – but it is difficult not to be suspicious of groups with which one has had little personal contact and experience. In this sense, racial isolation impedes reconciliation, even if racial integration does not necessarily result in greater racial harmony.

Finally, it is important to try to put these data into perspective by imagining how these

respondents might have answered these questions a decade ago. Today, 36 % of blacks agree that whites are not racists, and another 22 % is uncertain. Would not these figures have been much higher ten years ago? Today, only 19 % of white South Africans find it hard to imagine being friends with a black fellow citizen – would that have been true of whites in 1991? Today, more than three fourths of Coloured South Africans and South Africans of Asian origin assert that the country would *not* be better off without any blacks; surely, there would not have been such consensus a decade ago. From the perspective of the vitriolic debates about race that are so prominent in South Africa today, these data portray substantially more racial reconciliation than would be expected. South Africa is far from being a contented “Rainbow Nation,” but it is also a country in which many seem to reject the intense racial animosity of the past.

SOUTH AFRICANS HOPEFUL ABOUT THE FUTURE

Many questions are left unanswered by this report, especially the issue of what causes what. We certainly have not unequivocally established that the truth and reconciliation process has made a positive contribution to developing a collective memory about the country’s past and to creating a more reconciled South Africa. But most South Africans are hopeful about their future, and a majority (or nearly a majority) of each racial group is hopeful as well. That hopefulness so dominates among black South Africans is especially noteworthy. These data, as well as the preponderance of the data presented in this report, do not support the view that South Africans are on the precipice of despair and racial *irreconciliation*. Important issues face the country, and many of these issues divide South Africans by race. But at the end of the day, most seem committed to a multi-racial South Africa, and many hold attitudes compatible with a harmonious future for the country. Few would have predicted such findings a decade ago.