
THE LENS

WHAT IS RECONCILIATION IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT?

The word “reconciliation” is often used in our public discourse. In many instances it is used synonymously with the term “transformation”. This highlights some of the ambiguity which exists about the meaning of the term. This presents us with a number of challenges, which include linguistic misunderstanding and as a consequence, how we measure progress.

If one looks at the information from the South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB), this confusion is apparent. In 2021, there were sixteen different understandings of the concept. At the top of the list is the understanding of reconciliation as forgiveness. This is understandable but problematic.

THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED ARTICLE:

*What is reconciliation in the South African context? - **Felicity Harrison***

An Ipsos Mori Poll of 2017 showed 88% of South Africans say that religion is important to their lives. We are a country with deep spiritual roots and it is thus not surprising that reconciliation is linked to forgiveness. Christianity is the largest religion and, following that tradition, forgiveness of others is seen as an important precondition to forgiveness of self (“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive the trespasses of others”).

This link was heightened with the association of Archbishop Desmond Tutu with the truth and reconciliation process. The association between religious understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation was indelibly etched onto the national consciousness.

In our context, however, the association is particularly unhelpful. Forgiveness places the burden of work on the oppressed. It is up to those who are wronged to “find it in their heart” to forgive the unspeakable acts committed against them. While some faith traditions emphasise a reciprocal restorative process, this is not always the case.

This can be seen in the findings of SARB (2021) where 9% of respondents said that only those who were oppressed by apartheid are responsible for reconciliation, and 23% said that mostly those who were oppressed are responsible. This means that about a third of South Africans believe that the onus is on the victims to forgive in order for there to be reconciliation.

In a similar way, “moving on” is seen as the meaning of reconciliation. One quarter of South Africans believe this to be the meaning of reconciliation.

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The concerning element of this definition is that “moving on” implies leaving the past behind. This fundamentally ignores the reality of the trauma and wounds that remain unaddressed and unhealed. Looking at countries in transition, it is evident that where countries have not dealt with the past, lasting sustainable peace is elusive.

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One of the key elements of reconciliation needs to be truth-telling and the full exposure of the extent of the abuses which have taken place. Memorialisation and recognition are important aspects of acknowledging what has happened and allowing people to process the atrocities.

The Pact of Forgetting in Spain has not resulted in closure, but rather in the lingering of pain and suffering.

It is important to recognise that reconciliation is not one thing: it is a combination of processes which, taken together, have the desired results of addressing the past, building trust, building social cohesion and creating sustainable peace.

In looking at the way in which South Africans view reconciliation, it is important to note that many of the elements of Transitional Justice are mentioned. Peace, making amends, respect, improving relationships, truth, justice, democracy, addressing racism, retribution, dialogue and memorialisation are all mentioned in SARB 2021.

SARB findings in 2019 indicated that 77% of South Africans believe that reconciliation is still needed; 66% believe the TRC was a good foundation for reconciliation; 57% said that progress has been made since the end of apartheid but only 51% indicated that they, their friends or family have experienced reconciliation since the end of apartheid.

These figures indicate that South Africans have a variety of different understandings of what reconciliation is, making it difficult to measure progress and success. It can be argued that reconciliation is key to the future of a peaceful, fair, democratic and inclusive society. As such, it is important that as part of our national conversation, we discuss what it is, what it means and that we can develop a common understanding so that we can tackle the legacies of the past that stand in the way of its achievement.