

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AS A PATHWAY TO TRANSFORMED AND PEACEFUL SOCIETIES

**VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL TENSIONS
STRETCHING SOUTH AFRICA'S SOCIAL FABRIC**



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Jan Hofmeyr and Jaynisha Patel

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Institute for Justice and Reconciliation
105 Hatfield Street
Company Gardens
Cape Town 8001

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------------|---|
| AsgiSA | Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa |
| ANC | African National Congress |
| CDE | Centure for Development Enterprise |
| COSATU | Congress of South African Trade Unions |
| ERRP | Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan |
| GDP | Gross domestic product |
| GEAR | Growth, Employment and Redistribution Plan |
| IJR | Institute for Justice and Reconciliation |
| JIPSA | Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Aquisition |
| LPI | Lived Poverty Index |
| NDP | National Development Plan |
| NGP | New Growth Path |
| NP | National Party |
| PAC | Pan-Africanist Party |
| RDP | Reconstruction and Development Plan |
| SALDRU | Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit |
| SARB | South African Reconciliation Barometer |
| WGI | World Bank World Governance Indicators |
| WIL | World Inequality Lab |

SUMMARY

This research report considers the relationship between social cohesion and inclusive economic development in contemporary South Africa. An examination of patterns in unemployment, inequality and poverty – South Africa’s so-called triple nexus of structural challenges to inclusive development – it points to dysfunctionalities in the country’s governance system that obstruct the state’s ability to undo historically-entrenched, racialised patterns of resource distribution. These dysfunctionalities, that manifest in the absence of policy continuity and consistency in implementation, have the dual effect of reinforcing social fragmentation and eroding trust in the state’s capacity to create a democratic and inclusive South Africa. As a result, both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion are being eroded. This weakening of the

country’s social fibre makes it vulnerable to threats to the rule of law. Evidence of this are rising levels of protest, accompanied with public violence. In light of this, the research concludes that urgent reforms are required to restore the efficacy and, by implication, the integrity of the state as a source of social cohesion. This should start with a prioritisation of a professional and truly independent civil service that is insulated from party politics, and the strengthening of oversight institutions to enable them to execute their respective mandates without fear or favour. In addition, this research report calls for a stronger focus on the creation of human agency to reduce dependency, through quality education that meets the needs of economy and the creation of an enabling environment for young people entering the labour market.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly three decades since South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, the country remains deeply fragmented. Its political transition has not been matched by a similar transition in the creation of an inclusive post-apartheid economy and, as a result, the continued reproduction of racialised wealth distribution patterns renders the country vulnerable in terms of the sustainability of its political system. Alongside the deflated economy and high levels of deprivation among South Africans, there is an intensifying competition over scarce resources. This not only forces people to live in survival mode, but also heightens tension amongst people and exposes parts of the population to capture by populist narratives.

This paper traces the causes and effects of this inability to create a fairer and equitable society, and pays particular attention to the weaknesses in the system of governance to respond with more urgency and

efficiency. In Section 1, it outlines South Africa's political and economic landscape since transition in 1994, and proceeds to examine how governance shortcomings has entrenched the sustained exclusion of historically-marginalised communities. Section 2 unpacks the triple challenge of inequality, unemployment and poverty, using data to show how each of these are on the rise. This is having a direct impact on national wellbeing, forcing people into competition over scarce resources, and eroding societies ability to cooperate and mediate. Section 3 uses national representative public opinion data to show that the political and economic realities have eroded trust. This has had a profound impact on social cohesion, seen through growing waves of civil unrest, that have become more violent alongside sluggish economic growth. Section 4 concludes with key reflections and recommendations for the way forward.

SECTION ONE

Background

BACKGROUND

South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 marked the end of successive political dispensations that formally and informally entrenched unequal development. While the British colonial ethos inherently presupposed the existence of racial hierarchies in governance processes up to the first half of the 20th century, it was the electoral victory of the Afrikaner nationalist National Party (NP) in 1948 that culminated in formalised, legislated racial discrimination that reproduced unequal developmental outcomes during the latter part of the century.

Mounting pressure from the international community in the form of economic sanctions created the internal impetus for reform

It was under the rule of the latter, where the banning of mass political movements, such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), closed down the remaining political space for peaceful resistance to economic

disenfranchisement. This became the catalyst for a protracted armed struggle between the apartheid state and liberation movements. This conflict escalated, with casualties on both sides, and at its peak in the 1980s led to successive harshly enforced states of emergency.

As the day-to-day injustice of apartheid, interspersed with gross human-rights violations, became increasingly evident, mounting pressure from the international community in the form of economic sanctions created the internal impetus for reform within sections of the ruling white political order during the latter quarter or the 1980s. This coincided with significant changes in the global political landscape, which among other developments marked the implosion of the so-called Eastern Bloc countries. This development posed a threat to the financial sustainability of the liberation movements, and the ANC in particular, which received substantial financial support from the Eastern Bloc. At the same time, it also nullified the National Party's contention that it represented a bulwark against communist expansion in Africa.

The confluence of these circumstances paved the way for South Africa's negotiated political settlement. This settlement did, however, not undo the country's extreme economic disparities that had sustained cycles of conflict over centuries. As a result, one of the democratic state's key objectives in the post-apartheid era has been to create an institutional framework capable of responding to the sources of material conflict that divide its citizens. Social cohesion, which at its very minimum rests on the political legitimacy of the state, is therefore largely dependent on the successful pursuit of an inclusive economy that disrupts the distributional patterns of South Africa's past.

Tasked with unifying a deeply divided society, it has been the ANC's own internal rifts that have been responsible for an incoherent and half-hearted response to the successive electoral mandates it had received

In light of this, it is important to underscore the obvious: The end of apartheid signalled the achievement of a necessary – but by far not sufficient – political precondition for the creation of new, more inclusive society. It provided hope for a new start, but from the outset it was the responsibility of the political custodians of the 'New South Africa' to use the tools of democracy to shape the contours for material justice in this new society. Such a transition was always going to involve deep structural reform that would require sacrifices from key constituencies.

In its favour, however, the country could count on the fact that South Africa's first democratic government, the ANC, was able to draw on a vast reservoir of social capital that it accumulated as one of the world's oldest liberation movements, led by possibly the most iconic figure of the time, Nelson Mandela. This positioned the ANC, more than any of its political peers at the time, to effect the reforms that were needed to set the country on a more inclusive path.

The analysis provided in the section that follows suggests that the ANC largely squandered its social capital windfall. After tentative initial gains in addressing the structural challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment, the critical official indicators for each of these dimensions show that the country is heading in the wrong direction. Poverty, inequality and unemployment are once again on the rise, while public opinion survey measurements, such as the Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI), show that South Africans have in recent years experienced growing levels of deprivation in terms of their access to basic necessities.

Tasked with unifying a deeply divided society, it has been the ANC's own internal rifts that have been responsible for an incoherent and half-hearted response to the successive electoral mandates it had received. And while it would be unfair to hold it solely responsible for an economy and society that continues to display historical patterns of distribution and social interaction, no other political actor has had so much power to wield and so little to show for it.

The reasons for its governance failures are manifold. Most important, however, has

been the ANC's dismal record in creating policy coherence and predictability. Afflicted by perennial factionalism, the party's obsession with its own internal politics has come at the expense of day-to-day governance of the state.

At first, factionalism manifested most visibly along ideological fault lines, with key policy directions mirroring the ebb and flow of influence between the left and right of the Tripartite Alliance of the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party. As a result, macroeconomic policy and planning documents first launched with fanfare simply disappeared into obscurity as the guard changed. This was the fate of macro designs, such as Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP), the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) Plan, the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA), the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA), and the New Growth Path (NGP). With an ANC National Conference approaching in December 2022, many are also justifiably sceptical about the longevity of the current Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan (ERRP) that was crafted amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Factionalism, however, took on a more ominous personality-based dimension in the mid-2000s, with patronage networks replacing ideology as the major schism within the tripartite alliance. Although it may be oversimplification to single out the ascendance of former President Jacob Zuma's administration in 2009 as the defining turning point in this regard, patronage politics during his tenure had particularly

damaging consequences for the state and citizens of South Africa. Evidence presented before the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (the Zondo Commission), a public enquiry established in January 2018 to investigate allegations of state capture, corruption and fraud in the public sector, suggests that Zuma and his inner circle used the institutions of the state to extract financial gain through the preferential awarding of state contracts to politically connected individuals. The institutionalisation of state capture not only drained the fiscus, but also the overall systemic competency of the state at all levels of government under challenging circumstances. During this period, key ministries, particularly in the economic and security clusters, were weakened by the appointment of pliant, and frequently incompetent, cronies whose sole objective was to keep the patronage system intact.

The institutionalisation of state capture not only drained the fiscus, but also the overall systemic competency of the state

This state dysfunctionality, which has resulted in the implosion of a host of state functions and services, has had a profound impact on the achievement of key development targets. While not a macroeconomic policy per se, the National Development Plan (NDP), launched in 2012, provided a blueprint with clear developmental targets for 2030. Ten years on, it is already evident that most if not all of its targets will be missed by substantial margins. Quite predictably, the NDP has

SECTION ONE

all but disappeared as a reference point in South African public policy discourse.

The results of the 2021 local government elections brought a number of key issues to light which have bearing on the country's future development trajectory. The substantial decline in ANC support that forced it into coalition governments in key municipalities, firstly, suggests that the ANC no longer possesses the social capital associated with a movement that perceives itself as a force for social change. Subsequent bi-elections have confirmed this trend towards coalition governments. In a body politic

characterised with low levels of trust and deep fragmentation, this could very well further weaken capacity, at least at local government level, to reach consensus on developmental targets and the means to achieve them. The low overall voter turnout, secondly, pointed to declining confidence in the capacity of the democratic system, during and between elections, to effect meaningful change. And it can, thirdly, be speculated that within a context of declining state resources and heightened political competition to control these resources, the state will not only become increasingly vulnerable to corruption, but also political instability.

SECTION TWO

2

An enduring legacy of
unequal development

AN ENDURING LEGACY OF UNEQUAL DEVELOPMENT

As suggested in the preceding section, South Africa faced formidable structural and economic challenges as it entered a democratic political dispensation in 1994. Although much more complex, these challenges were largely underpinned by the mutually reinforcing triple challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment. Future stability now hinges on how the country addresses the triple nexus of constraints.

During apartheid, discriminatory laws robbed black families of the ability to accumulate wealth and substantial capital stocks. By implication, it also impeded their ability to transfer wealth from one generation to the next. The apartheid system, moreover, created educational and institutional barriers to entry into the labour market, which forced many into unemployment or tenuous forms of low-income employment. These factors combined resulted in a widening chasm between the earnings of black and white South Africans, who were not subject to the same constraints. At the dawn of democracy, these deep intergenerationally transferred inequities formed part of the lived reality of the majority of South Africans.

While not legislatively in force, apartheid's unjust legacy continues to manifest in inherited patterns of material exclusion of those who either cannot afford access to the resources that reproduce material agency, or are sidelined by entrenched networks of privilege. The systematic and incremental eradication of these material dimensions arguably constituted the core mandate of the post-apartheid South African state. It can, therefore, also be contended that its sustained legitimacy, as practically manifested in respect for the rule of law, depends on its achievement in this regard.

Apartheid's unjust legacy continues to manifest in inherited patterns of material exclusion

In the subsections below, the authors report on South African poverty, inequality and unemployment patterns over time, before proceeding to discuss their implications for human development and inclusive growth. Thereafter the impact of the conflation of

these trends on social cohesion will be discussed.

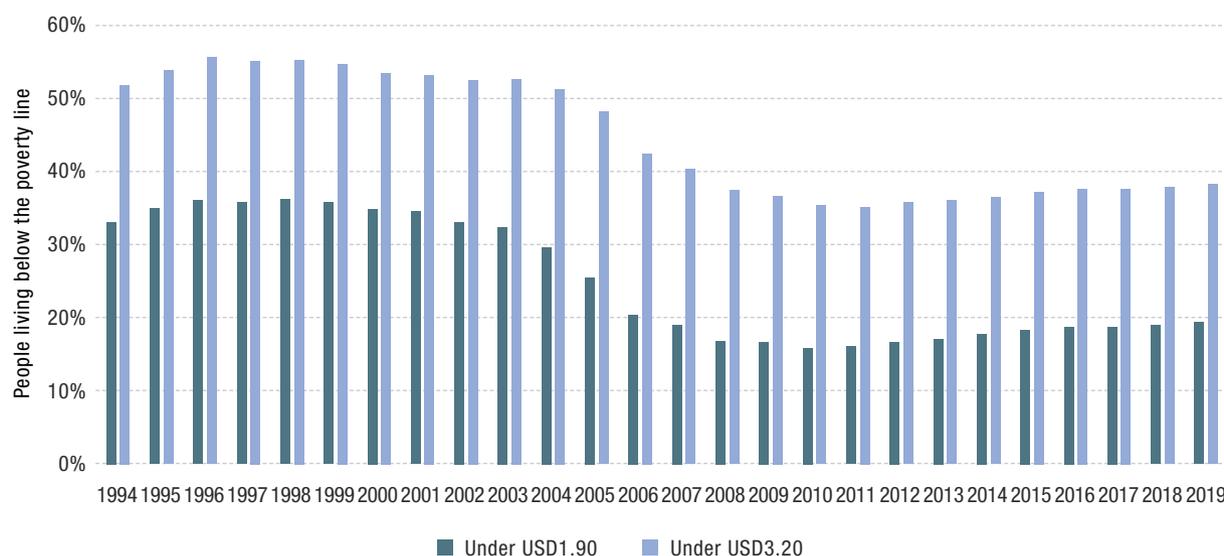
Poverty in South Africa

Poverty has been a perennial challenge for South Africa. Available data shows that the poverty headcount decreased in the first decade of the new democratic dispensation, but as depicted in Figure 1, started to rise again in the 2010s both at the US\$1.90 and US\$3.20 per day levels.

Those at the bottom end of the income distribution, who experienced material gains during the first decade of the 2000s, proved most vulnerable to stagnant GDP growth in the decade thereafter. A 2017 study by the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) showed just how tenuous these initial post-apartheid gains were. The Unit developed a multi-layered social class model that displays the

upward or downward mobility of different classes, with particular consideration for a group's vulnerability to poverty. The 'middle class' and the 'poor' are both subdivided by a threshold defined by their average probability of falling into or out of poverty. The middle class has two groups, with the one at risk of falling into poverty and labelled the 'vulnerable' middle class. The poor also has two groups: on the upper end are the 'transitory' poor and, at the bottom of the class structure, the 'chronic poor'. This model shows that, even within the middle class and the poor, large segments of a population are at risk of remaining or falling further into poverty. The risk of falling into a lower sub-class brings into question the potential effects of a human tendency termed 'loss aversion' whereby the human brain has an asymmetrical fear response to losing something already possessed rather than losing out on gaining something new. Considered in this context, then,

FIGURE 1: Poverty headcount



Source: World Bank

SECTION TWO

when larger portions of society are pushed towards poverty from the middle class, there are more people making decisions from a position of fear. This has a consequent negative impact on their willingness to cooperate or mediate,¹ ultimately eroding the cohesiveness of a society.

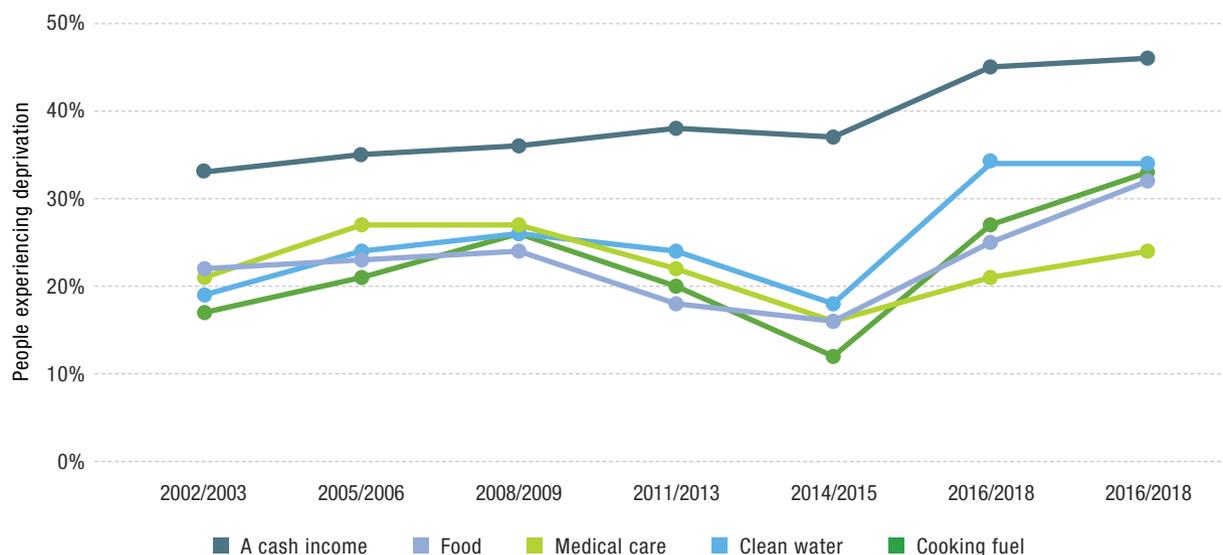
The SALDRU authors found that, between 2008 and 2014/15, 14% of the population were vulnerable to slipping into poverty from the middle class. 'Poor' was by far the most populous social class, with 20% of these considered 'transient' poor, and a far larger 80% falling into the category of 'chronic poor'. Importantly, black South Africans make up more than 90% of the 'chronic poor' and the middle class 'vulnerable', and also around 80% of the 'transient' poor.

In addition to widespread vulnerability within society, there is also a high reliance by the 'poor' on social welfare. Over half

(54%) of the 'chronic poor' derive their income from social grants, while grants make up one quarter of the income of the 'transient' poor (25%), and one fifth of that of the 'vulnerable' in the 'middle class' (19%).² With a strained fiscus and a growing reliance on social welfare, questions around the sustainability of the programme give rise to concerns that this might further push some sections of the middle class into poverty, while plunging those below the poverty line deeper into the depths of 'chronic' poverty.

Other non-monetary indicators, like Afrobarometer's LPI, also point to a deterioration in the material wellbeing of South Africans. Measuring the extent to which people experience deprivation from essentials such as food, clean water, income, medical care and cooking fuel, the LPI showed that respondents with 'moderate' or 'high' levels of lived poverty

FIGURE 2: Material deprivation in South Africa, 2021



Source: Afrobarometer

increased from 38% to 43% between 2018 and 2021.³ The different components that make up the LPI are shown in Figure 2. In 2021, nearly half of South Africans report having to go without an income on a regular basis (46%), followed by one in three experiencing deprivation of clean water (34%), cooking fuel (33%) and food (32%).

From this discussion it is evident that post-apartheid economic policy has failed to create a sustainable and inclusive economic growth path. Instead, it has reproduced the conditions that sustain poverty. Moreover, this failure also perpetuates cycles of violence around the competition for scarce resources. A zero-sum game has emerged, whereby individuals feel that what others possess has been taken from them. Inevitably, this has longer-term implications for social cohesion.⁴

Inequality in South Africa

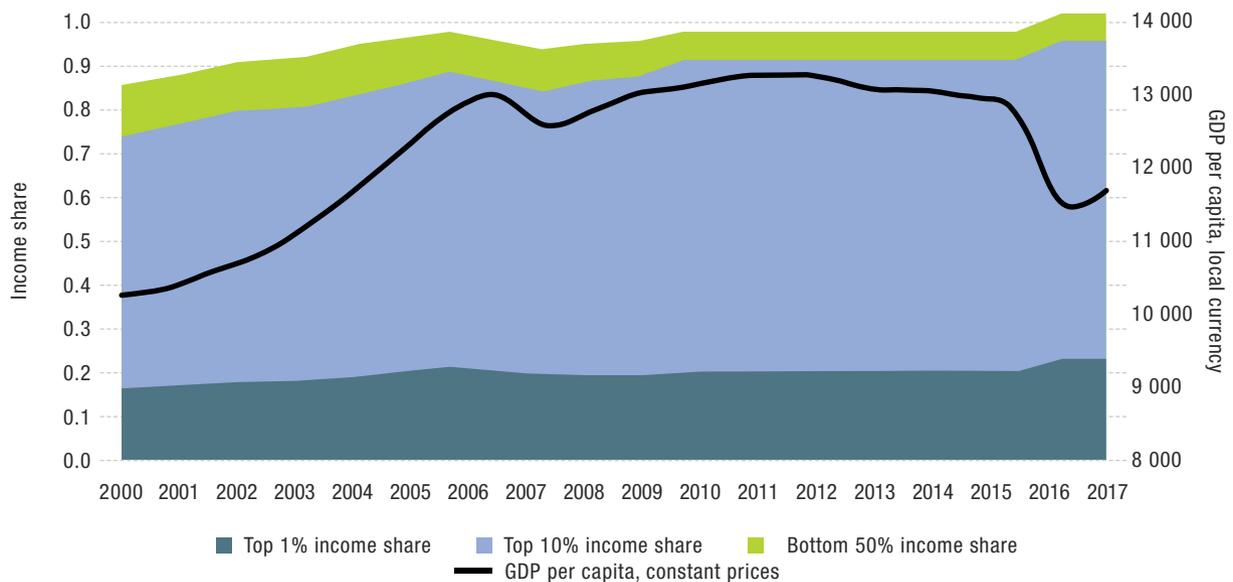
Following the country's political reforms in the early 1990s, international restrictions to South Africa's participation in the global economy were lifted. The timing of the country's readmission to global capital markets and financial institutions, which occurred at the height of neoliberal economic paradigm, has not been inconsequential to the country's development trajectory in subsequent years. While the lifting of these restrictions created opportunities for everyone in theory, the practical reality dictated that only those with historical access to capital could leverage it to its fullest. As a result, the economic dogma of the 1990s not only reinforced historical inequality, it also accelerated the pace at which the gap between rich and poor widened. Stemming

from this, the proceeds of growth accrued disproportionately to those with historical wealth – or those who, through their political connections, had access to capital via government procurement. The post-apartheid state's most significant failure since the country's political transition resides in its continued incapacity to alter these historical distribution patterns. While it focused on redistribution of existing wealth, which benefitted a few connected individuals, it has been unable to create an environment that is conducive to the creation of new capital.

The post-apartheid state's most significant failure since the country's political transition resides in its continued incapacity to alter these historical distribution patterns

By most metrics, South Africa ranks among the most unequal societies in the world. The World Inequality Lab's (WIL) 2022 World Inequality Report⁵, for example, notes that South Africa's top 10% of income earners capture two thirds (66%) of national income, while the top 1% of earners capture one fifth (20%) of the country's income (see Figure 3). In spite of a decade of GDP per capita growth, the most recent data point in 2017 shows that the bottom 50% of earners captured only 5.3% of national income (compared to 16% in 1994, and 8.6% on average in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2021). Although the promise of equal access was a prevailing narrative, the capital disparities among the population prevented the realisation of these promises, which now

FIGURE 3: Income inequality and GDP per capita



Source: World Inequality Lab; World Economic Outlooks, authors' own calculations

seem more ideological than concrete. Today, these capital disparities remain unchanged. According to data from the WIL, the bottom 50% own –2% of the economy's capital (the same amount as in 1994).

Intrinsic to these persistent trends of income and wealth inequality is an inequity in access to the means that enable human development and, ultimately, economic agency. When adjusted for inequality, South Africa's human development index (HDI) score is reduced by a third, from 0.709 to 0.468. These stepping stones to advancing societies' basic capabilities include access to services like education, healthcare and opportunities. Of these, unequal access to quality education represents a critical initial barrier that lays the groundwork for the exclusion from other basic requirements for development and progress in life. In an assessment of the South African

education system since 1994, the Centre for Development Enterprise (CDE) concluded their study with the following:

As it stands, the South African education system is grossly inefficient, severely underperforming and egregiously unfair.

The CDE identifies those inequalities in the system as playing out across socioeconomic status, location and language. It describes two separate types of public schooling systems: One that is smaller, wealthier and producing better learning outcomes; the other larger, poorer and, with exceptions, producing outcomes of up to three years behind key learning milestones. They, for example, found that grade 3 students from a former white-only school scored higher on a test than grade 5 students from a former black-only school.⁶ Indeed, in 2021 the South

African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB), a nationally representative public opinion survey, found that accessing ‘the right type of education’ is a barrier for goal attainment for about a third of South Africans (35%).⁷

The impact that inequality, in its various forms, has on economic agency for the individual and for development prospects for the nation is a growing concern as gaps widen and more of society is left behind.

Unemployment in South Africa

High unemployment levels lie at the heart of South Africa’s poverty and inequality woes. In the absence of gainful employment, a majority of South Africans lack the agency to influence the quality of their livelihoods. In terms of its narrow unemployment rate (which excludes economically inactive people of working age), 35% of South Africans were unemployed at the end of 2021. This is 10% higher than the 25% of a decade earlier. In terms of the expanded definition, which include economically inactive people, the unemployment figure stood at 46%, compared to 35% a decade earlier. Probably more revealing is the actual percentage of working-age South Africans that were employed at the end of 2021 (the so-called labour absorption rate) of 36%. In other words, only about one in every three working-age South Africans find themselves in any form of employment.

This speaks to numerous structural constraints of the pathways to prosperity. The first of these are poor educational outcomes in a large part of the public schooling system, as cited in the CDE study, which creates a barrier to entry into the tertiary education

system. A second constraint relates to the affordability of tertiary studies, with high fees precluding many of those that make it through the public system to pursue their studies. Efforts at leveraging the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to broaden access has largely fallen short in terms of meeting the massive demand that exists. As a result, tensions around student funding have on several occasions given rise to student demonstrations, such as the Fees Must Fall protests, that further disrupted teaching at tertiary institutions.⁸ A third important factor is the misalignment between the skills demand of the labour market and those supplied by the tertiary education sector.⁹ Many of those lucky enough to make it to the tertiary education level graduate in fields that are not necessarily in high demand with employers, resulting in a growing cohort of unemployed graduates. Finally, there is also a spatial dimension, resulting from the enduring legacy of apartheid spatial planning. Typically, the poor is located furthest from economic centres, making access to the labour market expensive. This is further exacerbated by a decrepit and ailing public transport system¹⁰, maligned by poor management and corruption¹¹

Public opinion data shows that this dynamic represents one of the biggest sources of frustration for the majority of South Africans. The 2021 Afrobarometer Survey, for example, found that six in ten South Africans (60%) rank unemployment as the country’s most critical challenge, while one in two people (53%) believe that job creation is the most important priority for youth investment.¹² In fact, South Africans’ dissatisfaction with the state’s efforts at job creation has been mounting over the last decade. According to

Afrobarometer data, in 2008 37% of South Africans thought the government was doing 'very badly' at creating jobs. In 2021 this number had risen to 53%.

Where patterns of distribution have been unequal (Figure 3), South Africans who have been systemically barred from acquiring wealth prior to 1994 are wholly reliant on employment to both earn an income and improve their prospects of upward mobility. However, unfavourable labour market prospects not only prevent the poor from improving their living standards and accumulating capital; it also has the effect of creating greater vulnerability within the middle class. SALDRU finds that it is the middle class that rely most on the labour market for its income. Income from the labour market constitutes 88% of household income for this group. Unlike the poor, whose main source of income is derived from social welfare benefits, middle class households mainly rely on labour market earnings for their material wellbeing.¹³

Like poverty and inequality, the unemployment crisis affects some more than others. Two groups disproportionately affected are youth and black South Africans. By the middle of 2021, youth unemployment set a new record, peaking at 64%, or two in three youths.¹⁴ In an interview with a social cohesion advocate in KwaZulu-Natal, a young respondent in this study shared the following observation:¹⁵

'There are groups of young people in South Africa that will never know what

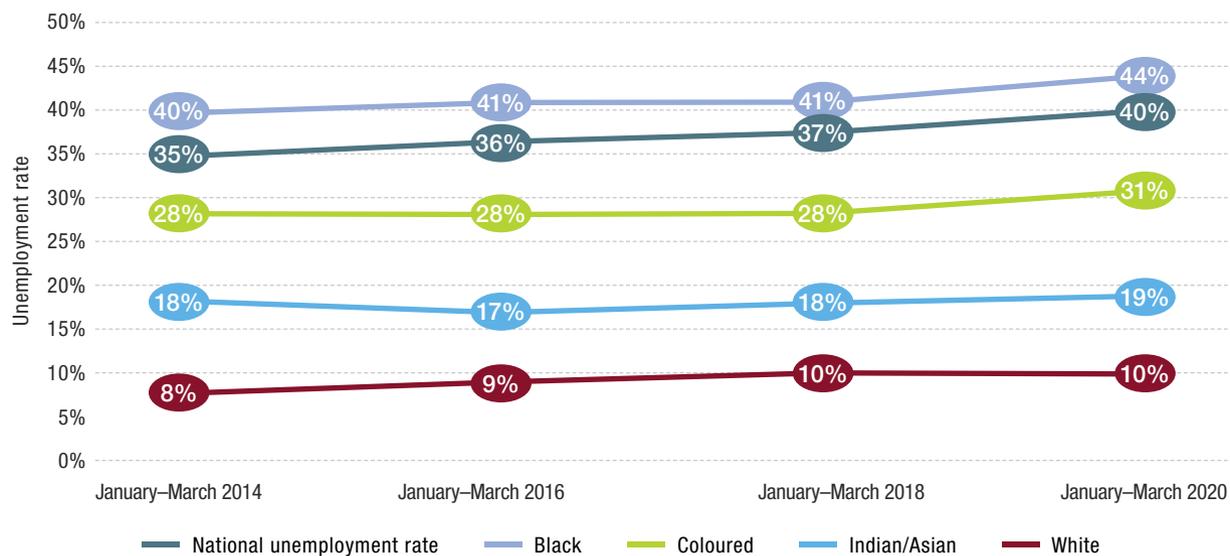
it is like to work or have a salary and this breaks their dignity, their promise for a better life and overall trust in the system.'

In interviews with social cohesion advocates it was commonly noted that hopelessness from a lack of opportunity has made youth more likely to participate in risky behaviour such as violence, drugs and crime – all of which leaves long-lasting scars on the nation's social psyche.

Amplifying this is the fact that unemployment has distinct racial characteristics in South Africa. When it comes to race, the structures of the labour market mirror trends seen in poverty and inequality. Black South Africans', having been systemically prevented from acquiring wealth, must now look to employment and income as a means of overcoming not only poverty but intergenerational wealth deficits. This presents a significant long-term challenge, because unemployment levels within this group, firstly, remains the highest and, secondly, continues to grow at the fastest rate, as depicted in Figure 4.

In interviews with community leaders from several economically and socially marginalised communities across the country, respondents report distress from too much competition in the labour market (in addition to increasing competition over other scarce resources), that has had the effect of creating persistent anxiety among people and tensions borne from intensified crowding within the unskilled labour market.¹⁶

FIGURE 4: Unemployment by race



Source: Statistics South Africa, authors' own calculations

SECTION THREE

3

Impact of governance
on human and inclusive
development, trust
and cohesion

Impact of governance on human and inclusive development, trust and cohesion

The preceding discussion evaluated post-apartheid South Africa's performance in the creation of a more equitable and inclusive society. The evidence presented suggests that it has fallen far short of both demand and expectations. As a result of growing frustration, social cohesion and the country's longer-term stability hangs in the balance. Against this background, the urgency for inclusive solutions is growing. Nearly three decades after the country's political transition, South Africa has little to show in terms of inclusive development. In many instances, this boils down to the quality of governance.

Although the country has been sluggish in its recovery from the Global Financial Crisis, there have also been troubling developments related to governance. The World Bank's World Governance Indicators (WGI) show a decade of decline across indicators like 'control of corruption', 'regulatory quality', 'government effectiveness' and 'political stability or the absence of violence'.¹⁷

In light of an historical legacy of deep inequality and a constrained fiscus at the dawn of democracy, the challenge in creating

an inclusive society was always going to be a massive one. When evaluating the post-apartheid government's achievements in this regard, this context is important. Equally important, is to recognise its achievements in consolidating the country's dire finances in the wake of apartheid, allowing for improved access to financial markets and the expansion of the state's services to people. Unfortunately, as highlighted in preceding sections, these initial gains have since been compromised by a neopatrimonial mode of governance that has put the party's interests ahead of that of the state. In light of this, many have started to lose faith in the abilities of the democratic state to improve their material plight.

As a result of growing frustration, social cohesion and the country's longer-term stability hangs in the balance

These negative perceptions about the governance capacity of the state are widely shared within South African society.

SECTION THREE

According to the Afrobarometer, the portion of South Africans who believe that most or all government officials are corrupt has increased by 19% since 2011 (from 23% to 42%) but peaked in 2015 at 55%. In 2021, South Africans remain dissatisfied with the government's performance on fighting corruption with three in four people (75%) saying that the government is doing very or fairly badly.¹⁸ Vertical trust (i.e. between state and society) was also fractured during this decade. The portion of South Africans that had at least some trust in the president dropped to one in three (34%) in 2015, from 69% in 2006. Despite a change of government from former President Zuma to current President Ramaphosa, in 2021 trust in the president remained at a low 38%.¹⁹ Today, the most trusted institutions in the country are independent broadcasters (63%) in contrast to the least trusted, local government councillors (72%).²⁰ The 2021 SARB found that confidence in local government was as low as 13%.²¹

Incidences of maladministration and corruption continued to mount as the Public Protector uncovered abuse of public funds through the totality of state institutions – from national government through to municipalities and even the Johannesburg Road Agency.²² From the plethora of allegations investigated by the Public Protector, one example illustrates the unfortunate impact of corrupt state officials on inclusive human development. In 2017, the Ngaka Modiri Molema District Municipality made appointments without following due process, fired other employees for alleging mismanagement, and hiked some employees salaries

by 185%.²³ Irregularities, such as these, inevitably came at the expense of communities that were deprived of basic services and other building blocks of human development. Today, this municipality is unable to provide basic services, such as clean drinking water, refuse removal, and the maintenances of road infrastructure.²⁴

One social cohesion advocate observes that local councillors in Gauteng are typically only present within communities during elections or after a crisis. In addition, the political competition among local councillors can impact the cohesion within a community, especially during elections. In the Northern Cape, another social cohesion advocate reflects that when there is a change in local councillors, they have to work at building new partnerships, which takes time and sets back their community development work.²⁵ This has all had a negative impact on South Africa's democracy, with the 2021 local government elections having a historically low voter turnout.

One social cohesion advocate observes that local councillors in Gauteng are typically only present within communities during elections or after a crisis

In essence, the state of governance and the self-interest of state officials have been an obstacle in the way of inclusive development, rather than a springboard to a more just, equal society.

Impact of poor governance on social cohesion and stability

In the background section to this paper, the authors have contended that, although the country had undergone a profound political transition in 1994, stubborn structural legacies of apartheid continued to entrench the country's resource distribution patterns, in terms of both income and access. In light of this, it can be said that, at best, the events of 1994 enabled the dismantling of the political conditions that sustained the socio-economic injustices of apartheid. In that section we noted that, apart from a brief period where fiscal prudence and a global commodities boom converged to bolster state coffers, the South African state fared poorly in its efforts to leverage the political tools of democracy for the creation of a more inclusive society. While other societal factors also contributed to this state of affairs, the blame must largely be apportioned to the ANC-led government that, in spite of its electoral dominance, failed to provide consistent policy leadership to this end. During the 2010s, the ruling party's blatant mismanagement added to the country's economic woes, resulting in a surge in public debt during the latter part of the 2010s, which left the country highly exposed at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

As the pandemic sowed devastation, poor public finances and weak institutions stood in the way of a commensurate response to the scale of the pandemic. From the outset, it emerged that the government failed in the timely procurement of vaccines. Further scandals involving the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) tarnished the integrity of a state that was

already perceived as overbearing in its enforcement of emergency regulations. While tales of heroism and resilience emerged from pockets within the public sector, the system as a whole was compromised in its ability to respond to a crisis of this magnitude.

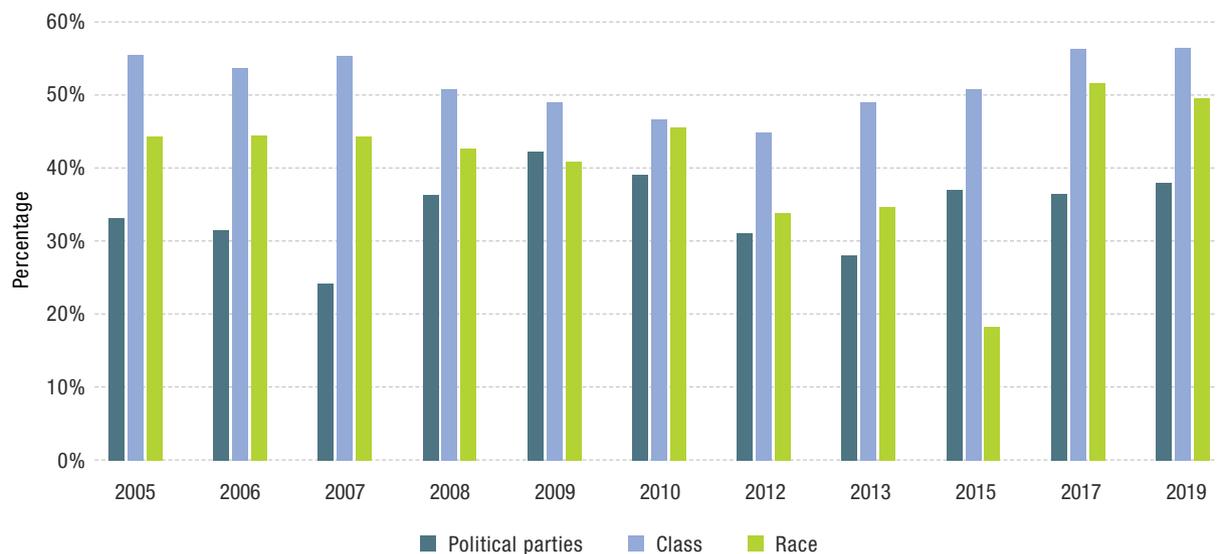
At the time of writing in 2022, large numbers of South Africans feel economically vulnerable and insecure. With unemployment having reached record highs, a sense of existential dooms pervades the country. While everyone was affected, the pandemic's impact has nevertheless been felt unevenly. Given the economic legacy of apartheid, not all groups can draw on the same resources to provide a buffer against the impact of the current conditions. As such, it can be contended that the pandemic may have further exacerbated historical inequalities and, at the same time, reinforced the structural dynamics that kept them in place in the post-apartheid years. Data from the IJR's 2021 SARB Survey²⁶ shows the central role that economic inequality still plays in South African society.

As the pandemic sowed devastation, poor public finances and weak institutions stood in the way of a commensurate response to the scale of the pandemic

Figure 5 shows SARB data, which reports on the three most consistently reported items that divide South Africans. The survey, conducted by the IJR, presented respondents with a list of multiple sources

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FIGURE 5: Most prominent sources of social division in South Africa



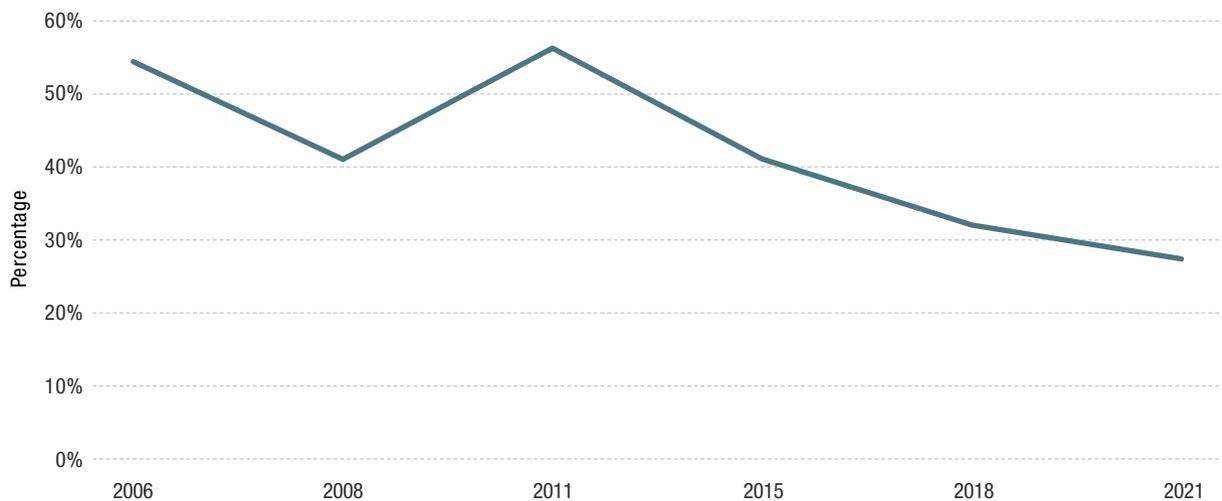
Source: SARB 2019

that could potentially polarise South Africans. They were then asked to identify the first and second most divisive traits of the South African society. Figure 5 presents feedback from respondents over time, which combines the first and second choices by respondents. The results clearly point to the fact that a majority of respondents within a representative sample of South Africans have indicated since 2005 that they regard income inequality as the strongest divisive aspect of South African society.

How does this economic schism influence social cohesion within the country? In answering this, we make use here of the contention that social cohesion is largely composed of two forms of trust, namely vertical trust between the state and citizens, and horizontal trust, consisting of the degree of trust between citizens

themselves. In the paragraphs below, we will briefly look at trust in state institutions, using the National Parliament, as the apex democratically representative institution as a proxy, before we proceed to report on levels of interpersonal trust, as reported in the 2019 SARB.

Successive rounds of the Afrobarometer's South African Survey have pointed to a general decline in trust that ordinary South Africans have in key public institutions. Probably one of the starkest declines was recorded for one of the most central democratic institutions of the South African state, the National Parliament. National legislatures are key institutions in all democracies, but in South Africa its role as an impartial symbol of national unity is of particular importance for the prospect of cohesion. Figure 6 shows that over the past 15 years the general trust trajectory for the

FIGURE 6: Public trust in the South African Parliament

Sources: Afrobarometer

Parliament has been a negative downward one. In 2006, when the first measurement was taken, 54% of respondents indicated that they trust the South African Parliament ‘a lot’ or ‘somewhat’ to execute its democratic mandate. In the most recent round of the survey, which was conducted in 2021, this figure has dropped to 28%.

This precipitous decline in trust can be ascribed to a variety of reasons. Key among these, however, has been its weakness in providing critical oversight of governance and state power in particular. Given the ANC’s substantial electoral majority in the course of more than two and half decades, the ruling party displayed a profound lack of vigilance in scrutinising the actions of its deployments in the national and provincial legislatures, as well as the civil service. This has given rise to a host of controversies about alleged mismanagement and corruption, which frequently escaped scrutiny as a result of

majority votes in Parliament. Such practices paved the way for the extent to which blatant attempts to capture the state and its resources reached their peak under the administration of former President Jacob Zuma. In a case relating to state-funded improvements to the private residence of former President Zuma, the country’s apex court found in 2017 that the Parliament failed to hold the former president accountable, in spite of substantial evidence that was put before the house to decide on this matter. As in previous instances, this evidence was disregarded by loyal ANC cadres in parliament. Such blatant abuse of the national legislature arguably, which denigrated its legitimacy in the eyes of many, also provided fertile ground for populist parties like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) to disrupt house procedures on several occasions to garner sympathy from potential voters. The impunity with which this was done further tarnished the image of the Parliament.

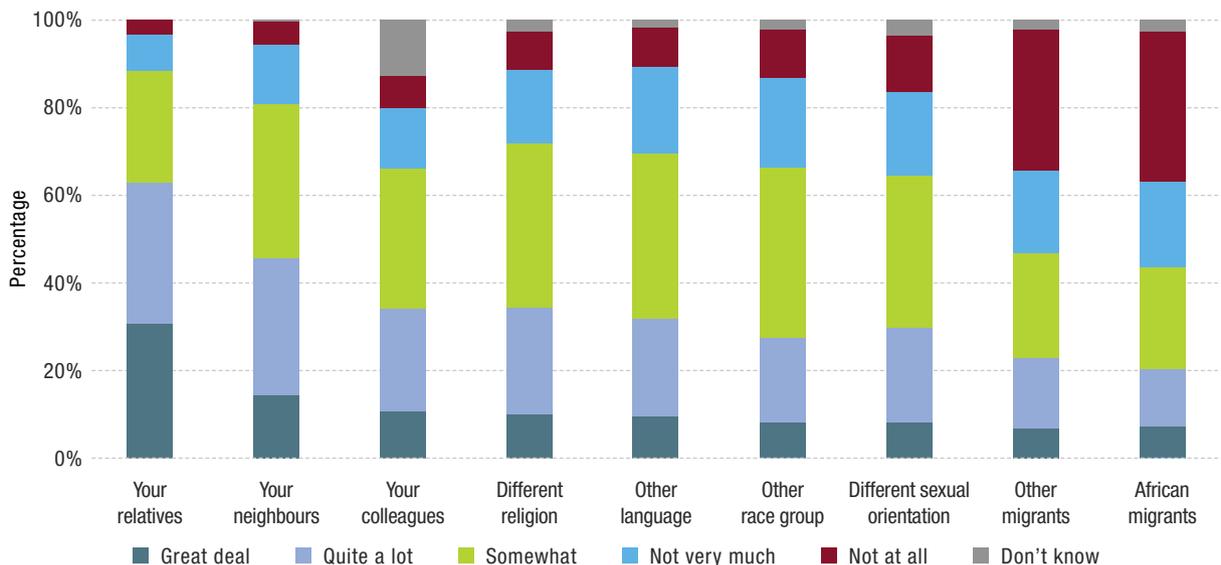
SECTION THREE

Interpersonal trust represents the second important dimension that we use to gauge the strength of social cohesion in South Africa. It focuses on the mutual, horizontal relationships between South Africans from different backgrounds. Given the country's protracted history of legislated racial segregation, the extent to which South Africans manage to trust each other today is an important indicator of the country's ability to create a more united society. Figure 7 below show responses from the 2021 round of the SARB Survey, gauging the levels of trust that respondents have in different groups of people in their environment. According to the results, family is the only grouping in which more than half of respondents either have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of trust. The corresponding figures for neighbours and colleagues are 43% and 35% respectively. Trust for people from other racial groups stands at 31%, while

that for migrants from other African states is 24%. Quite concerning is the fact that more than half of South Africans (52%) indicated that they have little or no trust in the latter grouping.

The picture emerging from the results in Figure 7 points to a society that remains highly fragmented, not only along the lines of ethnicity and culture, but increasingly also in terms of nationality. In this regard, the country has witnessed successive waves of xenophobia, putting the lives of foreign nationals, particularly from African states, in danger. This too has the underpinnings of economic deprivation, as unskilled workers and small business owners often report feeling threatened by foreign nationals entering the already competitive labour market. Findings from the 2021 SARB Survey suggest that nearly four in ten South Africans would be 'likely' to prevent an African foreign

FIGURE 7: Interpersonal trust in South Africa



Source: SARB

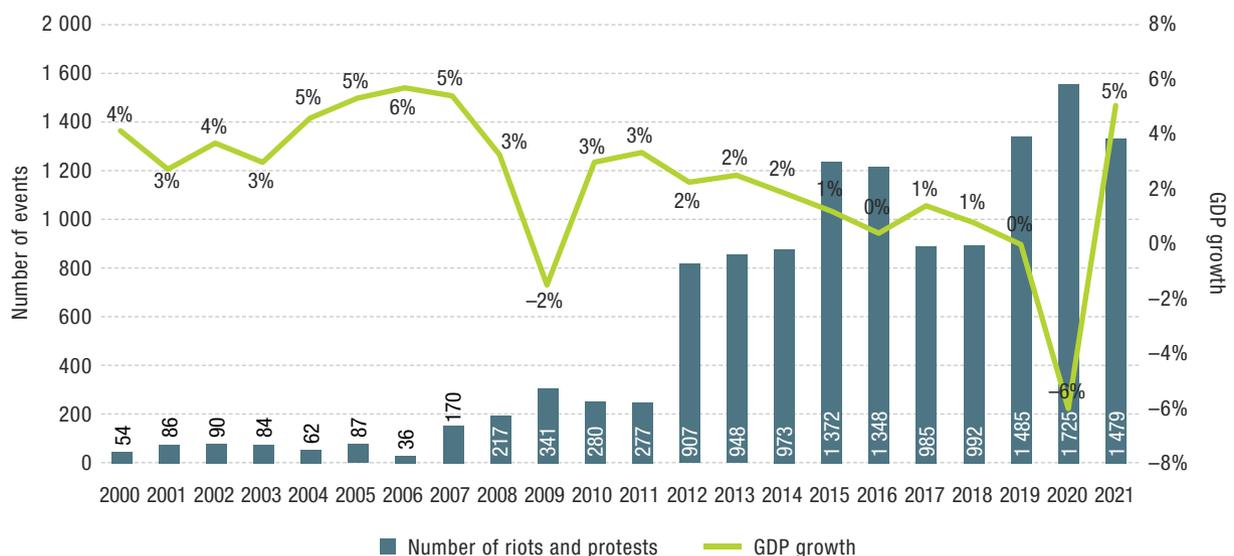
national from operating a business in their area (38%) or accessing jobs (36%). As such, an 'us vs them' narrative has emerged in economically strained communities where competition over scarce resources has intensified continuously. In consultations with social cohesion advocates, it was suggested that locals sometimes perceive NGOs and government to be disproportionately allocating resources to migrants, which has led to hostile attitudes and violent actions.²⁷

The challenge emerging from these trust deficits (both vertical and horizontal) is that a constrained fiscus faces harsh trade-offs between servicing debt costs, spending on enabling economic infrastructure, and responding to the desperate needs of the country's poor through social support. Budget cuts and other drastic policy options require trust, without which people will be unwilling to endure the consequences of these trade-offs.

Today, that risks opening the door to populist narratives as the political system becomes more competitive and the ANC begrudgingly accepts its seat at the opposition bench in a growing number of metros.

High levels of social marginalisation, trust deficits and slow progress towards improving the basic capabilities of society (a process that reduces vulnerability) all contribute to the depletion of social capital. When economic growth fails to reduce vulnerabilities in society, an economic downturn can have consequences for social cohesion. Figure 8 shows this relationship, drawing on data from the Armed Conflict and Location Data (ACLED) project and GDP growth. Despite a decade of strong economic performance in the early 2000s, we have seen that the nature of GDP growth was uneven (refer back to Figure 3 on income inequality), that revenue surpluses

FIGURE 8: Social cohesion and economic growth



Source: Armed Conflict and Location Dataset; World Economic Outlook, authors' own calculations.

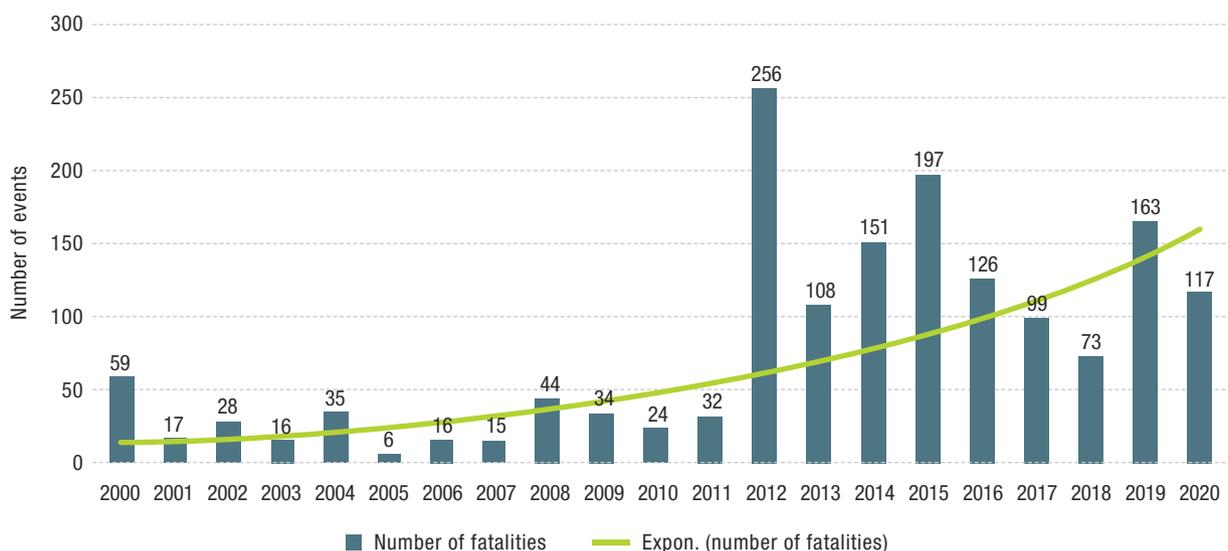
SECTION THREE

were depleted by state mismanagement, and that a financial crisis coincided with a decline in commodity prices. As such, economic growth has not sufficiently laid the foundation for human development and other mechanisms that work to reduce vulnerability in the economy. The onset of the 2007 global financial crisis depleted livelihoods alongside GDP growth. Once its effects took hold in the South African economy, there was a severe uptick in events of civil action and unrest. Tracked on the left axis of Figure 8, these events consist of protests and riots. While causation cannot be inferred, the authors find that increasing civil action coincides with a period of low economic growth and depleting vertical and horizontal trust (the causes of which have been discussed above).

Although peaceful protests have a long and important history in South Africa, the swell in civil unrest has also seen an increase in

violence. The proportion of protests to riots has changed drastically across the last two decades. In 2006, the year that saw a 6% expansion of the economy, peaceful protests accounted for 81% of the events depicted in Figure 8. By 2019, peaceful protests made up a much smaller 57% of the 1 725 events recorded, while riots accounted for 43% of these (as opposed to 19% in 2006). More worrying is the number of fatalities recorded at these waves of protests and riots. Figure 9 shows that fatalities have been increasing through the last decade, with the exponential trend line depicting a steep incline over the same time period. An index by the World Bank measuring political stability and the absence of violence also suggests a worsening situation. The index, ranging from an impeccable score of 2.5 to a dismal -2.5, gave South Africa its best score of 0.22 in 2007; this score has declined in the years since. In 2019, the most recent data point

FIGURE 9: Recorded fatalities at events of civil action



Sources: *Armed Conflict and Location Dataset*, authors' own calculations.

available at the time of writing, South Africa scored -0.22 . This downward trend also coincides with an economic decline and an increasingly distrustful and mobilised civil society, whose civil action is resulting in an overall higher number of fatalities.

The growing violence, fatalities and lawlessness borne from events of civil action seen over the last decade were perhaps a warning of what was to come in July 2021. The events that took place in parts of Johannesburg and KwaZulu-Natal were reflective of a divided and materially deprived nation, open to capture by political elite and populist narratives. The widespread looting and lawlessness that lasted for nine days may have begun as an ANC factional dispute, prompted by the Zuma camp within the fractured ANC, but spiralled out of control as political actors were able to incite lawlessness by manipulating widespread deprivation in society (see Figure 2). During consultations, a social cohesion advocate in KwaZulu-Natal shared an encounter with a young man in the aftermath of the looting:

'I was talking to this young man in the community [where I've been working

on the ground] who was looting. He said 'today is my birthday, and I am a graduate of commerce but I have been sitting at home for two years and for the first time I am able to get my mother something new – this was like Freedom Day for me.'

This depicts not only the extent of hopelessness and anxiety amongst many South Africans but also highlights the importance of being deliberate in creating opportunities and agency that can catalyse human development. The struggling labour market continues to exclude even those with tertiary education, creating a combustion of unmet expectations and gnawing anxiety that can easily increase receptiveness towards populist narratives that may give rise to violent actions.

Through the last decade, South Africans have lived under the unrelenting strain of anaemic growth, poor governance and waning trust, all underpinned by an unjust dispensation of access to resources that has begun to fray social cohesion. Societal vulnerability to shocks is higher than ever before, and economic downturns now act as a prompt to greater political and social instability.

SECTION FOUR

4

Reflections and
recommendations

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After almost three decades of democracy, South Africans find themselves in increasingly precarious material circumstances. Economic deprivation is on the rise once again, pushing millions towards the margins of existential threat. Despite a peaceful political transition in 1994, the unjust nature of South Africa's economy that makes it inaccessible to a growing segment of the population remains entrenched. Persisting inequity in the distribution of wealth and capital have prevented those historically barred from free economic participation from acquiring wealth, trapping millions at the bottom of a class structure which provides little prospect for upward mobility. Access to the stepping stones of human development, such as education, have also been wrought with inequalities of access and quality. For the marginalised, secure employment is the only means to acquire capital, but even the labour market has been constrained by an inequitable economy that leaves most behind.

Presently, unemployment is higher than ever before and threatens to push many in the middle class into poverty. Simultaneously,

increasing poverty and inequality continue to put strain on the wellbeing of the population.

For the marginalised, secure employment is the only means to acquire capital, but even the labour market has been constrained by an inequitable economy that leaves most behind

Overseeing these worrying developments has been a government that seem to have grown more concerned with its self-preservation than with the greater good of South Africans. Throughout the course of the ANC rule, macroeconomic policy has been subject to frequent alterations influenced by shifts in ideological dominance within the ruling party. These have all failed to create a more equitable economy, despite a decade of strong growth supported by high commodity prices for most of the 2000s. However, the greatest losses for inclusive development were borne from state capture

and state mismanagement that peaked during the tenure of former President Jacob Zuma. Through the length and breadth of the state, factionally aligned officials on the public payroll – from high profile political actors to bureaucratic administrative officials – became complicit in the looting of public funds and assets. This has had a damaging impact on development prospects and service delivery (important for human development), eventually creating trust deficits.

Nationally representative public opinion data shows that both vertical and horizontal trust have been in freefall for more than a decade. In terms of the former, trust between the state and society has continued to plummet since 2011. Between 2011 and 2012, civil action more than tripled and continued to increase in the years thereafter (Figure 8). Horizontal trust has also taken a knock, with South Africans citing race, class and politics as the most divisive facets of South African society (Figure 5). This, alongside the deflated economy and high levels of deprivation among South Africans, has created an intensifying competition over scarce resources. Not only does this force people to live in survival mode; it also heightens tensions between people and exposes parts of the population to capture by populist narratives.

Amid an increasingly bleak economic outlook and growing debt servicing costs that crowd out other spending, the state appears incapable of implementing its Recovery Plan. At the same time, South Africans' patience is running out with a government that is increasingly being forced into austerity. In the medium to long term, this environment, combined with rising interest rates, inflation

and unemployment, could provide fertile ground for populist politics and growing instability. All of this has consequences for peaceful transformation and social cohesion.

Recommendations

In light of the above, key social stakeholders will increasingly be forced to collaborate in the creation of interventions that reduce human vulnerability. This will not be easy. Amid growing global complexity and uncertainty at the start of the 2020s, a balance must be struck between consistency in the pursuit of long-term goals, on the one hand, and adaptability on the road towards achieving them, on the other. Sustained peace and prosperity in South Africa hinges on such partnerships to find ways to ensure that profit no longer comes at the expense of livelihoods. The persistence of poverty and inequality and the growing competition for access to services and resources can no longer be sustained. In response to this, the following recommendations are made:

- **Prioritise the creation of a professional and independent civil service as a means to insulate the state from the whims of party politics.** This is critical for continuity in the delivering of services to citizens, but also the predictability that is required for domestic and international investment.
- **Strengthen the state's anticipatory capacity amid growing global complexity and uncertainty.** This can take the form of a dedicated strategic foresight unit within the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME),

which employs futures methodologies, such as scenarios, to guide long-term planning towards the achievement of key human development goals.

- **Strengthen constitutional checks and balances by ensuring that oversight bodies can exercise their respective mandates without fear or favour.** This can be achieved by bolstering the independence of these through transparent appointment processes and sufficient funding commensurate with their mandates
- **Prioritise skills development in areas where labour market mismatches are most prevalent.** This includes collaboration between government and the private sector in the creation of job opportunities. Such public-private partnerships must be founded on a mutual commitment to serve society and progress human development.
- **Prioritise expenditure that creates agency at the community level.** Government funding should be targeted at sustainable outcomes that assist communities to adapt and thrive in all circumstances. This involves shifting the supply of human agency from central state-led programmes to adaptive and innovative community-led programmes. These can often be more cost efficient and easier to manage and monitor, while also creating space for innovative solutions that are too risky to pilot at a national scale.
- **Capacitate communities to mediate and cooperate in spite of growing scarcity.** Teaching these transferable skills can help increase the resilience of society in the face of economic decline, creating potential opportunities for mutually beneficial solutions to shared problems. This is integral to rebuilding a cohesive society.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jan Hofmeyr

Jan is the Head of Research and Policy Programme at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.

Jaynisha Patel

Jaynisha is the Project Leader for Inclusive Economies at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) was launched in 2000 by officials who worked in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with the aim of ensuring that lessons learnt from South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy are taken into account and utilised in advancing the interests of national reconciliation across Africa. The IJR works with partner organisations across Africa to promote reconciliation and socio-economic justice in countries emerging from conflict or undergoing democratic transition. The IJR is based in Cape Town, South Africa.

For more information, visit <http://www.ijr.org.za>, and for comments or enquiries contact info@ijr.org.za.

Institute for Justice and Reconciliation
105 Hatfield Street
Company Gardens
Cape Town 8001

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