

TRANSFORMING SOCIETY AND UNITING THE COUNTRY

Speech delivered at the Occasion of the

Launch of the National Building and Social Cohesion Community Conversations

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by

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Introduction and Salutations

On behalf of the National Planning Commission, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the organisers of today's event, for according us the opportunity to be a part of the remaking of our history. In particular, I would like to direct this recognition to the National and Provincial Departments of Arts and Culture, the local leadership, social cohesion activists and communities that supported today's gathering.

It is most appropriate. A fitting response to the clarion call to action by the country's first National Development Plan. We trust that will be yet another signal to the rest of the country to rally behind the cause to take towards the realisation of our long term dream.

Today's theme is a very important one for our country, as it positions us in readiness to deliver on this dream. It is made even more essential by the fact that the Plan is premised on the principles of a social compact, for its success. In turn, a social compact relies on social cohesion. Therefore, today is a critical foundational date and a key step towards the seemingly elusive social compact, we have always yearned for.

Without the usual niceties, I directly deal with subject matter of today.

Background

The National Development Plan, on Nation Building and Social Cohesion, asserts that

"... in 2030 , South Africans will be more conscious of the things they have in common than their differences. Their lived experiences will progressively undermine and cut across the divisions of race, gender, space and class. The nation will be more accepting of peoples' multiple identities" (NDP 2014).

For this vision to be realised, the following must be done:

- i. Government must invest heavily in providing universal access to quality health care, education and training, clean water and adequate sanitation as well as in reversing apartheid geography and strengthening the social wage.
- ii. The economy must grow rapidly, with at least 11 million jobs be created by 2030.
- iii. Mass economic and cultural redress must be effected. This would include land restitution and redistribution; employment equity and Black economic empowerment as well as the production of stories that facilitate healing, nation building and dialogue.
- iv. The broadcast media, not only the national broadcaster, should objectively air programmes that popularise narratives and visions of a non-sexist, non-racial equal and democratic South Africa.
- v. The sharing of common spaces across race, space and class must be enabled through instituting sustained community¹ dialogues, improving public spaces and services. This should include elevating sports, both at a community and at schools levels.
- vi. Constitutional values must be fostered so as to help forge a proud new South African identity.
- vii. All of society must come together to craft and implement a social compact that should help propel South Africa onto a higher developmental trajectory - as well as build a more cohesive and equitable society.

Within the broader social contract/compact, that of agreeing to be “governed” and expecting a capable state that delivers,

“... there will be collective agreements between important social partners in society ... about how to address major issues that parties to such agreements consider important.” (NPC diagnostic report, 2011).

The NDP is quite emphatic about the sharing of common spaces across race and class. This is to ensure that people who had been physically and emotionally separated by decades of apartheid, can get to know each other better and recognise the common humanity in each other.

The particular element of sharing spaces that will be further developed, is that of getting communities to come together to talk about their racial past, in order to directly confront tensions and divisions, emanating directly from that pillar of apartheid and colonialism².

¹ Communities can be defined as churches, universities, schools or even suburbs or wards.

² Colonialism and apartheid (racism) was mainly about justifying economic exploitation.

Properly conducted, these talks, these facilitated dialogues, provide a solid basis for genuine reconciliation.

“They will help dissipate stereotyping ... and exclusive observations of justice, as well as begin to shape a shared vision of a new future.” (Abu-Nimer 2004 in Desse et al 2006).

Rationale

The Plan is premised on the belief that:

“Sustained campaigns should focus on changing attitudes and behaviour in relation to racist and xenophobic (afrophobic) tendencies. This could include holding dialogues at community (ward) level, where communities discuss their experiences of racism, and how it could be addressed. The Department of Arts and Culture could run such an initiative in partnership with civil society bodies and non-governmental organisations operating in this area” (NDP 2012)”

That is why we are very glad to be a part of today ... an epoch turning event.

One of the major objectives or even outcomes of colonialism and apartheid was domination and discrimination on the basis of race. Access to opportunity and resources was on the basis of race. Whites, or people of visible European descent, were deemed culturally, mentally and physically superior to the rest of the peoples of South Africa. The lowest on the superiority rankings were Africans.

The racist legacy of colonialism and apartheid still manifests through physical and psychological barriers; differential treatment based on race and colour in the media, society and the economy; strained relations between the different peoples as well as the fact that life opportunity and social class still coincide with race.

Besides the high profile cases of the racism such as that of Jozef Johannes Nel who, in January 14 2008, drove to a settlement and killed 4 Africans; or that of the four white male students in the University of Free State - it has been observed that racism presents in shrewd subtlety, in that:

“... the more socially unacceptable explicit racism becomes, the more sophisticated covert or implicit forms of racism are likely to become... These more subtle forms of racism are no less racist or offensive...” (Ratele, 2002)

This is not a recipe for cordial relations, social cohesion and a harmonious society, able to unify behind one vision.

Indeed, research undertaken by Burns on race and trust amongst a sample of students in Cape Town shows that stereotyping is still used to make decisions where information is not available. This could be the reason why race now plays a strong role in determining how educational attainment comes to be valued in the labour market (Keswell 2004). Initial investigations done by the DPRU and University of Johannesburg seem to confirm that Africans are finding it harder to be absorbed in the labour market than their white colleagues with similar qualifications and from same universities.

Dealing with the psychological trauma of centuries of racism is important. The country attempted a mass healing exercise by embarking on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This process of publicly acknowledging and confronting these details was a necessary part of the process of healing. The suggested facilitated dialogues/conversations across the divide will take forward this work, by helping acknowledge the pain inflicted/received thus enabling healing and life beyond the pain.

Besides promoting healing, these dialogues must also attempt to chip away at various misconceptions and stereotyping based on race and other social differences. Through these dialogues people will get to know and appreciate each other better. Furthermore, they will:

- i. Help inculcate a feeling of belonging.
- ii. Build trust.
- iii. Reverse, at the psychological level, ingrained feelings of inferiority/superiority and instil instead, a love of self and fellow human beings; build trust and foster common purpose.
- iv. Eventually lead to community based initiatives to improve our neighbourhoods and thus build bridges across racial lines by developing a common programme of action to improve public spaces of communities.

Having these facilitated conversations at a community level and across race, could facilitate the working together of these communities on a democratically chosen transformative community programme.

But, it must be realised that for these dialogues to succeed, they must provide a respectful, democratic space and reinforce the belief that transformation is possible. (Schoem 2003; Zubizaretta 2002 in Desse et al 2006)

In the South African context, there are a lot of initiatives that mobilise people across race and class in order to transform communities and perform useful work. Some, such as the Community Work Programme, are government led.

There are many other similar programmes in the private sector, which we need to build on as a society.

The Commission is confident that, this intergroup dialogue will improve self-awareness, self-esteem and self-compassion as well as help the participating communities to:

- i. Move towards solutions rather than continue to express or analyse the problem. Enforce an emphasis on personal responsibility, which moves the discussion away from finger-pointing or naming enemies - towards constructive common action.
- ii. Reach beyond the usual boundaries. New partnerships can develop when participants listen carefully and respectfully to each other. A search for solutions focuses on the common good as participants are encouraged to broaden their horizons and build relationships outside their comfort zones.
- iii. Unite through a respectful, informed sharing of local racial history and its consequences for different people in today's society. The experience of "walking through history" together can lead to deep healing.
- iv. Change of heart, not just a change of mind. Dialogues go beyond sharing and understanding to transforming participants. While the process begins with the individual, it eventually involves groups and institutions. Ultimately, dialogues can affect how policies are made and implemented.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to congratulate everyone who has taken the trouble to be here today. After the sacrifices we made to attain total liberation in South Africa, this is the next wave of sacrifice to underpin and preserve this freedom. The difference today, which makes it difference to the past, is that this sacrifice does not come with any bloodshed.

All we require is honesty, frankness, objectivity and a willingness to listen, understand and learn the next person.

We require total commitment towards creating an environment where people do not know marginalisation, but enjoy equal opportunities. An environment defined by optimal equity, and equality where appropriate.

We require sacrifices towards building a country where people cherish their multiple identities and have their histories respected, whilst respecting those of others, in return.

Paramount, is that the conversations must begin. Until we begin to see each other as human, we shall pass on the identities imposed to us by our history to our children.

As a society, we have an obligation to deliver a different life to future generations. If we do not, this will be a heavy indictment, we shall carry to our graves. I am certain that none of us here would want to be that generation.

I thank you.