



# Nation Formation and Social Cohesion

An Enquiry into the Hopes and  
Aspirations of South Africans



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Aspirations of South Africans**

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# FOREWORD

Among the vexed questions in the evolution of humanity's systems of social organisation are issues of nation formation and social cohesion. Nations, widely understood, date back centuries and have reflected different forms in various parts of the world and in different historical epochs. More strictly organised as nation states, nations and their geographic configurations are associated with the industrial era and the emergence of the capitalist mode of production. The organisation of humanity into nations provides a functional utility to human relations. Yet the notions of nation states, nationhood and citizenship – conferring a sense of belonging and exclusion, representing organisational forms around which endowments are appropriated, and reflecting markers of collective identities – do evoke much emotion. Indeed, in most parts of the world, blood was shed in building nations and in asserting their rights in relation to other nations.

This is even more acutely manifest in postcolonial polities, straddling the very acts of conquest and dispossession, imposition of geographic entities, enforcement of discriminatory policies, mobilisation for national emancipation and building of new societies. Contained within these processes are ebbs and flows in self-definition and the evolution of identities. While mobilisation for a sense of nationhood contains within it a homogenising tendency, pride in the roots from which a variety of identities originate and the ordering of social status within a nation can have a centrifugal effect.

It is from this perspective that this treatise on nation formation and social cohesion in South Africa is approached. Drawing from literature that defines nations as, among others, political, cultural, economic and territorial constructs, the study seeks to assess the extent to which South Africa satisfies the theoretical prerequisites to be a nation. This forms the foundation of the

report's assessment of progress that has been made since the attainment of democracy. In doing so, a hornet's nest is necessarily stirred. Besides geography as well as economic and political systems, to what extent do South Africa's people constitute a nation? Do the erstwhile colonial settlers – who unlike in most other parts of the postcolonial world have decided in large numbers to make the country their permanent home – deserve equal recognition as members of the emergent nation? Given the many languages, sets of culture, the legacy of racism and socio-economic deprivation, and varying political interests, how strong are the centripetal impulses; how have they played themselves out in the past twenty years and what are the prospects for the future? In other words, the many complexities that characterise the challenge of nation formation find acute expression in South Africa.

Against this background, two issues arise which have informed the texture of this study. First, the various attributes that are identified to define a nation are inadequate; and they have to be combined with the more recent and somewhat diffuse notion of social cohesion which also embraces people's dignity and welfare and the legitimacy of the State. Second, nation formation and social cohesion can be theorised and assessed at a generic level, but the lived experience of 'ordinary citizens' does add the kind of flavour that macro-indicators can hardly capture. Thus an 'actor-orientated approach' was adopted, represented in the case studies that are outlined in the report.

The concept of 'nation formation' is used to emphasise the fact that, unlike with the more popular notion of 'nation building', the emergence of nations is a process that does not lend itself to artificial homogenising impositions. Yet the role of agency – from the State to civil society and individual citizens – is not

underestimated. This understanding informs the recommendations in the concluding chapter. The researchers themselves will be the first to admit that there are many gaps in the report. MISTRA did not set out to pen the final word on this matter. Rather it aims to add another drop to the fountain of ideas, debate and knowledge on the 'national question' as experienced in post-apartheid South Africa. We do hope that, through its insights and inadequacies, this report has met that modest objective.

Our profound thanks to the project team, from the thought leaders and the field workers to the administrators, whose labours gave life to this undertaking. MISTRA is also indebted to the funders of this project and to the Institute as a whole, whose generosity has afforded our minds the space to wander, so South African society can continue its journey to discover and nurture its humanity.

**Joel Netshitenzhe** — Executive Director

# INTRODUCTION

This research report is the outcome of one of the priority projects of the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection publicly launched in 2011. It focuses on the processes of nation formation and social cohesion in postcolonial and post-apartheid South Africa. It dwells on the challenges and the advances made with respect to these political and social developments since 1994.

The report invariably engages with history, as well as with social and political theory, in relation to the prospect of developing a politically stable, socially inclusive and integrated society capable of meeting the needs of all its citizens and other members in a rapidly changing local, regional, and global environment.

While processes of nation formation and social cohesion are by definition inward-looking, insofar as they pertain to local and national developments in a particular country, in this case South Africa, they nevertheless also relate and respond to global developments. This is so since societies across the globe, no matter how insular, are never ever completely cut off, and thus quarantined, from regional and global forces and developments. Hence, the project links theories of nation formation and social cohesion to actual practises, both focused on the attainment of a just society founded on the irreducible equality of all its members on the one hand, and the factors militating against achieving this, on the other. While its focus is South Africa, its history and its local and national challenges and choices, it draws on contemporary theoretical and critical perspectives pertinent to South African society and the path it set out on since 1994.

In the context of fixed and predetermined historical outcomes, nationalist discourses inevitably draw on nationalist projects, close to home and further afield, in an effort to avoid errors made elsewhere. While this is unavoidable, it should be expected that apparently successful social and political processes related to the construction of a

national and sub-national cohesive society will come up against specific local and national conditions that would require context-specific strategies and solutions forged in the sweep of unfolding developments and actualities. In other words, there is no master plan available that can be transferred unmodified from elsewhere. Even if it could be presumed such a plan were available, it would be defeated by the historical experiences and contextual conditions and forces of societies.

Accordingly, this study proceeds by interrogating the theoretical suppositions of nation formation and social cohesion with South Africa in mind. This serves as a starting point for a thorough reflection on these two processes, with the aim of arriving not at a synthesis, but at a conceptual position where their interdependence, specifically for postcolonial societies and South Africa in particular, could be interrogated effectively and critically.

The study conceives of nation formation as a political project that does not begin after national liberation, but well before in the struggles to defeat national oppression. As has been the case in South Africa and other colonised societies, these struggles involved protracted efforts to construct a united front of people of diverse cultures and classes, capable of defeating either external or internal minority domination.

The report consists of eight interrelated chapters, variously authored. Chapters One, Two and Four are written by Andries Oliphant. Chapter One discusses the theoretical and methodological aspects which underpin, inform and guide the research.

Chapter Two investigates the two main aspects of the study, namely the theories and processes of nation formation. The term, nation formation, is used in the place of the term nation building to avoid the coercive associations the latter term has acquired and to suggest an ongoing, gradual and perhaps never finalised process.

The third chapter by Yacoob Abba Omar contextualises past and present debates on the national question in South Africa. Joel Netshitenzhe is the author of the annexure to Chapter Three, a paper produced in the early years of South Africa's democracy. Chapter Four discusses social cohesion and links it with processes of nation formation in national and subnational constellations.

A unique and creative element of this project was to examine the lived experiences of communities in various parts of the country – the actor-oriented approach – among others, to establish how communities interface with one another in their diversity, how they relate to institutions of authority, and how these institutions advance or hinder both nation formation and social cohesion. Chapters Five, Six and Seven by Shepi Mati, Feizel Mamdoo, Robert Gallagher and Leslie Dikeni respectively, consist of the four field reports conducted at sites in the Western Cape, Gauteng, the Northern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. These reports vary in content and scope as a consequence of the varied conditions under which they were conducted.

The final chapter concludes the study by drawing on the findings to outline some possible interventions aimed at enhancing the processes of nation formation and social cohesion in South Africa.

Informed by the twin subjects of the research project, namely nation formation

and social cohesion, cases were selected that the research team postulated variously had potential to reveal, among others, the following:

- How individuals and groups devise their own strategies for improving their social circumstances in local conditions where there is a competition for resources.
- How intermediate personnel such as government technocrats attempt to deal with the pressure on them from local people and the national government; how they interpret their tasks and relate their formal obligations to personal career or political aspirations.
- How individuals and groups deal with interventions by public authorities such as political parties using 'race' and ethnicity to foster divisions, exclusions and conflict.
- How, in some instances, the South African government responds or reacts to international developments, in particular within the United Nations, to deal with inequality, prejudice and discrimination.
- How individual economic or political careers and family-based enterprises are developed over time as alternatives to broad-based economic transformation.
- How political, economic, social and cultural change, initiated by public authorities or individuals and civic organisations, is viewed in relation to building bridges between, and solidarity among, diverse communities.

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## CONCLUSION

As the reader would have seen in the case studies, one cannot but be struck by the deep despair many South Africans express about the fortunes of our 20-year-old democracy, which leads us to revisit the question asked at the beginning of our study: Has there been a 'regression of the liberating ideas' that were dominant in the years of struggle? In looking at the prospects of the South African nation, through the hopes and aspirations of its people, we have to distinguish between the national

mood of this moment (part of which may reflect the pace of progress rather than the lack of progress as such) and the protracted process to attain nation formation and social cohesion. Faced with a myriad difficulties – problems in governance, economic development and demographic changes – the tendency may be to focus on the negative of the national mood instead of the beauty of the unfolding nation formation process.

But the reality is that national identity does not fill the leaks in the roof, the potholes in the road; nor does it fill empty stomachs. It may fill us with pride if our national team performs well, but such is the nature of the South African nation: that it all depends on who is the 'us' and which national team we are talking about. There is no doubt that even among the elite one part would rather watch football while others would be more energetic about the national cricket or rugby teams.

The study confirms the persistence of the historical patterns of exclusion of the majority of the population. This disturbing aspect of post-apartheid South Africa calls for further reflection on the nature of nation formation and the question of national identity in the context of South Africa's cultural diversity. Further, this reflection must take into consideration the objective of the national liberation project – to overlay racial and ethnic identity categories with an inclusive South African national identity. This objective is meant to render the designations 'blacks' and 'whites' irrelevant, in favour of an inclusive national identity, while acknowledging diversity.

How attainable is this, given the race-obsessed ethnic engineering of the past and the cautious transition to democracy?

It could be argued that an inclusive national identity has been constitutionally attained at one level and qualified, if not exactly contradicted, at another. More specifically, in the light of the questions and challenges raised in the chapters on nation formation and social cohesion, as well as in some of the findings in the case studies which confirm the persistence of race-based exclusions and inequalities across several indicators, the process of nation formation and social cohesion, it seems, requires further theorisation.

We will be doing not just the people of Imizano Yethu a huge disservice if we do not address the deep concerns and mistrust of other races, their disillusionment with cronyism, and the persistence of crime and corruption. Whites visiting their areas are assumed to be looking for drugs. Their children are growing up with an

anti-establishment gene in their DNA, aspiring to become the poachers and gangsters they so admire in their townships. Kids playing in the shadow of a spaghetti junction of illegal electrical connections grow up thinking that it is natural to steal, poach and live life illegally. The limits to this anti-establishment attitude are shown in the experience of Thembelihle: when the criminals who were being protected by its residents started turning against the community itself.

The two related insights, posited by the theoretical and historical chapters on nationalism and social cohesion, are corroborated, however scattered, by the case studies. First, the process of nation formation in South Africa historically involved a movement to construct a trans-ethnic national political identity. From the point of view of the majority, this was initially conceived in inclusive African terms and later extended to fully embrace non-racialism. Arriving with the collapse of the bipolar order of the Cold War, to which the colonial and racial form of capitalism in South Africa was integral, and seemingly impelled to underplay the class dimension during the political transition, it is precisely this multi-class African nationalist political project that is now showing signs of internal tensions and contradictions along class lines, based on the continued economic exclusion of the majority of South Africans. The stark inequalities laid bare in Chapter Four that reveal the barriers preventing higher levels of social cohesion are pertinent here. In other words, the construction and consolidation of a non-racial national identity in South Africa has to negotiate political, economic and cultural factors and translate these into tangible forms of equality in relation to what Manackjan terms the 'specific peculiarities of every context' (1967, p.63).

Accordingly, Neville Alexander's conclusion (1986) that insistence on 'the principle of "one language, one nation", is not a universally valid definition' (p.67) unable to account for alternative processes, atypical trajectories, and different forms of nation-state constructions, is being historically confirmed. While the methodology used in this study privileges local circumstances, the relation between

local identity and national identity presents an important dynamic. As one respondent from Fietas said: 'You carry your roots with you.' Yet another respondent observes that 'cities are formed by migrants' – alerting us to the potential for identities to be continuously shifting, buffeted by experiences with neighbours as much as with national leaders.

The monolithic cultural model is thus inappropriate for South Africa, given its diverse population. As a postcolonial state there has been a sufficient level of unity derived from the juridical equality bestowed on all South Africans, regardless of linguistic, cultural and religious differences, within a geographically unified country, furnished with all the institutions that constitute a legitimate national state. This thus constitutes the national political identity of South Africa.

What about the toxic attitude towards migrants, especially African and South Asian immigrants? As Mdu the Senegalese car guard points out, there are all kinds of stereotypes attached to those who speak with a foreign accent – drug dealer, criminal, etc. Areas where migrants from other parts of Africa concentrate are anachronistically labelled 'OAU'. Mdu is emblematic of several million people who have been attracted to the opportunities South Africa provides. The average South African is more likely to hit the empathy button when we hear of migrants dying to get to the European heartland, or the plight of Hispanics in the US, yet we are conflicted when it comes to those migrants who live in our midst: who – even though they may have a legal status – have to live in the shadows lest they become the victims of various acts of discrimination or even another outbreak of mass lynching.

However, the greatest challenge facing society remains the eradication of historical and emerging inequalities. These inequalities – material, social and cultural – are discussed in Chapter Four and in the field reports of the four cases studies in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. There can be no more heartbreaking description than the picture of residents of Thembelihle fighting over the skins of chickens discarded by their neighbours in Lenasia. And how can

South African society become so inured to gender-based violence that one of the female respondents talks of 'the ordinary assault against women by gangsters, rape and so on' 111?

In relation to the Lenasia/Thembelihle dynamic, the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation is doing admirable work in improving understanding between different races. But it is clear that for the poorest in our society there seems to be no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. In its stead there is hand-to-hand combat for survival. Similarly, the 'Coloured' identity – replete with its centuries old complexities – continues to bedevil discourse on the South African national identity. Mampi captures one part of the dilemma when she says, 'Afrikaans is part of their culture' – a notion that will surprise a fair sprinkling of those labelled 'Coloured', not only those from KwaZulu-Natal whose language may not be Afrikaans, but also across the board, given the historical hierarchy of racial discrimination and neglect, even among Afrikaans speakers.

The issue of race relations has many dimensions, including an appreciation of contributions made in the struggle against apartheid, issues such as intermarriage and the simple courtesy of greeting people on the street.

In the light of this, it is clear the future development of South African society depends on the peeling off of fear and mistrust of 'the other', and the cultivation of a deeper sense of belonging and inclusion. This can only come about as historical, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, educational, religious, social, economic and spatial inequalities identified by the development indicators in the study are progressively eliminated at all levels of society.

The research alerts us to the many and varied examples of civic-mindedness that still persist. Denis of Hout Bay contributes to the development of young musicians; Bhayiza of Thembelihle ploughs his personal wealth into soccer development; Mampi in Thembelihle says that 'some Indians are blacker than myself' in terms of their philanthropic contributions. While black entrepreneurs provide many examples of generosity, a number of them prefer not to be seen as beneficiaries of the government's

black economic empowerment policy. This is especially true of those who were in business before the first democratic elections in 1994. It needs to be emphasised that the modern phases of nation formation in South Africa did not commence in 1994 with the transition to democracy. As Mzala (1998, p.14) explains, it goes back to the early emergence of a national aspiration among colonised Africans in this country to establish a unified and non-racial democratic state. Netshitenzhe (1997) points out that a national consciousness developed and intensified in the active struggle for liberation during the twentieth century.

The democratic breakthrough of 1994, however, did not and could not sweep away the deep divisions, exclusions and inequalities historically imposed by law and enforced administratively, and through coercion, on South African society. All South Africans, categorised in negative terms as non-Europeans at the time of the formation of the (national colonial) Union of South Africa, and

as 'non-whites' during apartheid, were, in a sense, 'denationalised'. Chapter Three underscores the point that, under these dispensations, political oppression and economic exploitation were applied differentially between the colonised, with the African population bearing the full brunt of exclusion and oppression. This strategy was aimed at fragmenting resistance and preventing national coalescence and mutual solidarity among the majority of South Africans to safeguard minority rule.

The case studies contained in the report throw light on a number of areas that require co-ordinated attention. The proposals identified below derive in the main from the content of the report. At one level are issues pertaining to material conditions and, at the other, matters to do with value systems, social outlook and identity. All these should co-articulate in the long journey towards genuine South African nationhood and social cohesion.

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## OUTCOMES

### 1. Vision and its pursuit

Critical in this regard is socio-political compacting. The political transition of the 1990s was a seminal moment in South Africa's history that ushered in a legitimate democratic state underpinned by formal political equality as enshrined in the country's Constitution. For the first time since the 'racial union' of the early twentieth century, South Africa formally became an inclusive nation state built on an inclusive political compact. Though the Constitution enshrines socio-economic and other generations of rights, these have yet to be attained for the majority while the well-off live in the insecurity of material comfort. It is therefore critical to ensure that South Africans embrace and act out a common socio-economic vision which many would argue is contained in the National Development Plan. In brief, this vision calls for the attainment of decent conditions of life for all.

Pursuing a common vision requires new forms of civic-mindedness and enhanced citizen activism. At the generic level, leaders of various sectors of society and their constituencies should be prepared to contribute to, and to sacrifice for, the realisation of the common interest. At a micro-level, this can take different forms such as a conscious effort by all to take the initiative in endeavouring to better their conditions, professionals going back to their schools to run tutorials, undertaking maintenance work in their neighbourhoods and generally getting involved in the securing of their communities.

The NDP cogently argues for a capable developmental state that is able to meet its obligations to society. This requires an appropriate socio-political outlook and value system, capacity to win over and provide leadership to society, and state structures and

systems that ensure consistent implementation of programmes to improve people's conditions. Further, the public services at all levels need to be re-oriented towards direct and sustained partnerships with civic society in matters related to social cohesion at a sub-national level, informed by an understanding of the relationship of this task to nation formation.

## 2. Decent standard of living

A genuine sense of belonging – which is fundamental to both nation formation and social cohesion – is to a large extent dependent on whether the material conditions of all South Africans, especially the poor, are in fact improving. While it can be argued that poverty as such does not determine the existence or otherwise of national unity and social cohesion, a variety of research material, including the case studies cited in this work, do illustrate that 'relative poverty' or inequality is a critical inhibitor to unity and cohesion.

At the same time, some minimal level of unity and cohesion – undergirded at least by a common vision and common aspirations – is required for a united pursuit of such a vision. In other words, nation formation and social cohesion are both cause and effect. A decent standard of living would include, among others:

- The absorption of the majority of the population into economic activity, as employees, employers and the self-employed.
- Improvements in the quality, reliability and timely provision of services in local communities with a special focus on rapid improvements in neglected areas.
- Access to assets such as housing, and acceleration of land redistribution coupled with resources, skills and capacities to grow the farming population.
- Reducing the cost of living of especially the poor, particularly with regard basic foodstuffs, transport and administered prices such as municipal rates and cost of basic services.
- Quality primary and general health care services.

To 'free the potential of each person', as the Constitution enjoins, requires appropriate focus on the quality of education across all the levels, ensuring that such education prepares young South Africans for the world of work and active citizenship.

## 3. Building a common humanity and eliminating social barriers

The foundation of the social relations expounded in the Constitution is human self-worth, respect for others and empathy for the most vulnerable in society. This should inform the content of the education system and broader civic education.

Eliminating spatial and physical barriers on which racial segregation was founded is also critical to promoting nation formation and social cohesion. This is aptly illustrated in the case study above on Fietas. As such, in order to facilitate racial, ethnic, class and immigrant interaction, a systematic and orderly dismantling and reconstruction of South Africa's living spaces is required.

Building relations across racial and ethnic lines should also include the promotion of multi-lingualism which must incorporate understanding of cultures and the encouragement of friendships outside the classroom and the workplace.

It is subject to debate whether the current provincial dispensation – with some of the provinces carved virtually along 'neat' ethnic lines – is appropriate for nation formation. Are there other ways in which geo-cultural integration can be promoted?

## 4. Value system

Human self-worth, respect for others and empathy for the most vulnerable in society are, as indicated above, among the core values that should define relations in society. This should

inspire the fashioning of individual interactions at the micro-level between individuals and within geographic communities; and at the macro-level between employers and the employed, between educators and learners, between those who wield state power and authority and the 'ordinary citizens', and so on.

Linked to the above should be targeted campaigns and programmes that combat the habit of (negatively) 'othering' those who are not South African.

Combating the manifestations and tendencies towards corruption in the public and private domains and discouraging approaches to self-advancement that are inspired by a 'dog-eat-dog' mindset would contribute not only to the promotion of the legitimacy and authority of the State but also to the sustainability of the whole political and economic edifice of the South African nation state.

Both the public and private sectors at all levels should consciously and convincingly be seen to pursue non-racialism, inclusivity, corrective action and skills development.

The fostering of the nation's value system should also be reflected in how South Africans observe designated national (holi)days: there is need to redesign the observation of these days to promote both political and cultural inclusivity.

This also applies to activities such as sport, which have great potential to promote nation formation and social cohesion.

Various longitudinal studies are being conducted to gauge the extent to which South Africa is making progress in attaining national unity and social cohesion. Within the context of the enhancement of the place and role of humanities and social sciences – and in transdisciplinary partnership with other relevant fields – a concerted and systematic effort should be made to develop a set of indicators that can be used as a local, provincial and national barometer of progress (or the lack of it) in this regard. We do hope that the treatment of these issues in this study will make a modest contribution to such an effort.

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The research into Nation Formation and Social Cohesion has spanned some three years involving a large team of researchers, writers and project team members coming from academia, CBOs, as well as the private and public sectors.

Through different case studies in the different provinces of South Africa, the researchers provide us with interesting narratives on the experiences of a variety of local actors' experiences on the concept of nation formation and social cohesion. The collaboration has brought to the fore a body of work that has informed and shaped this publication.

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## **Core Team**

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## **Editorial**

Joel Netshitenzhe, Yacoob Abba Omar, Leslie Dikeni and Rachel Browne

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An Enquiry into the Hopes and Aspirations of South Africans

The Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA), which was publicly launched as a think tank in March 2011, was founded by a group of South Africans with experience in research, academia, policy-making and governance, who saw the need to create a platform for engagement around strategic issues facing South Africa. The Institute combines research and academic development, strategic reflections and intellectual discourse. It applies itself to issues such as economics, sociology, governance, history, arts and culture, and the logics of natural sciences.

*Nation Formation and Social Cohesion* is the publication of a MISTRA research project that set out to examine different interpretations and meanings that diverse social actors attach to the calls and prospects for nation formation and social cohesion.

The publication links theories of nation formation and social cohesion to actual practises, both focused on the attainment of a just society founded on the irreducible equality of all its members on the one hand, and the factors militating against achieving this, on the other. Ethnographic research in four provinces provides the substance or practise to the theoretical framing of the discourse. The study proceeds by interrogating the theoretical suppositions of nation formation and social cohesion and this serves as a starting point for a thorough reflection on these two processes. Thus a synthesis, and not a conceptual position is arrived at, where the interdependence of nation formation and social cohesion, specifically for postcolonial societies, (and South Africa in particular) can be interrogated effectively and critically.

This publication, with contributors Andries Oliphant, Yacoob Abba Omar, Joel Netshitenzhe, Leslie Dikeni, Shepi Mati, Vincent Williams, Robert Gallagher and Feizel Mamdoo, is intended to add to the debate and stimulate new thinking around the difficult processes that are being sought to build a nation in the 21st century.



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