
THE LENS

THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED ARTICLE

Reclaiming our shared humanity:
Reflections for Human Rights Month
- **Felicity Harrison**

RECLAIMING OUR SHARED HUMANITY: REFLECTIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS MONTH

Ubuntu: I am because we are. Sawubona: I see you. These are expressions of our shared humanity. I cannot be who I am without you: our humanity is relational.

Ours is a violent history of denying the humanity of the other. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was cognisant of this when it adopted a Transitional Justice framework. While Transitional Justice has been seen as a legal theory, it is much wider than this. It seeks to centre the experience of survivors and victims. It looks to ensure justice for victims; and reinforces the possibilities for peace, justice and reconciliation.

In order to regain our lost sense of humanity we need to restore the humanity of victims and to work with the perpetrators. For this we need truth seeking and truth telling. We have to acknowledge the harm that was done. Without this, the harm continues, like a cancer, to eat at the healthy fabric of our society.

We also need justice for the victims of apartheid. Part of this is to ensure that perpetrators are held to account for their actions. We have seen how the failure to do this in the last 29 years has negatively impacted on the families of victims and on the society at large. Non-prosecution and the attendant lack of accountability has led to a culture of impunity.

There is also the controversial issue of reparations. Those who have suffered – individuals and communities – need to be compensated. We also have to address the international dimensions looking at what we as South Africa needs to do to assist the states that were negatively affected by apartheid; as well as reparations from former colonial powers.

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Institutional reforms are an essential mechanism in Transitional Justice. This is necessary to ensure that a peaceful, just and reconciled society. We cannot continue to use the systems and institutions that enforced oppression without eliminating their oppressive elements.

South Africa has a mixed scorecard with respect to progress in these areas. While we have seen positive change, there are areas we could have done better. In 2021, the South African Reconciliation Barometer reports that only 42% of South Africans say that they, friends or family have experienced reconciliation. At the same time 72% agree that reconciliation is still needed.

We are a nation divided, 71% of South Africans say that they rarely or never have people of other races in their homes, while most interaction between races occurs in commercial spaces. 77% say they never, rarely or sometimes interact at work. In terms of race relations, 34% say that they either don't trust at all, or trust very little, people from other race groups.

All this leads to the conclusion that we simply live alongside each other and that authentic interactions as equals is rare.

But the division is not just between South Africans, but also between South Africans and people from African countries. 52% say that they don't trust foreign nationals from Africa.

37% say that they would likely prevent foreign nationals from operating businesses in their areas. 36% are likely or very likely to prevent African nationals from living in their neighbourhoods, and 35% would prevent people from African countries from accessing jobs and accessing government services.

We are a continent at war with ourselves. We have to stop treating our fellow Africans as an existential threat. For us to move forward, we need to recognise the humanity of the other.

Regaining our humanity means watching our language. Public discourse is appalling and rife with examples of name calling and degrading language. We need to remember the rules of common decency.

For those of us with privilege, we need to recognise how this comes at the expense of others. We must always remember those who have suffered and died. We need to breathe life into sawbona and Ubuntu.

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This was written as preparation for a panel discussion at the Human Rights Festival organised by UN OHCHR, the Department of Justice and the Leah and Desmond Tutu Foundation discussion on “Reclaiming our shared humanity”

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