

Developing and Adopting a Comprehensive National Action Plan and Strategy to Combat Racism

Introduction

As the world prepares for the Third World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in South Africa in 2001, not only has racism and racial discrimination not being combated, but the world enters the 21st century having to deal with new forms of racism, racial discrimination and related intolerance. Domineering and even genocidal racial practices not only persist, but also seem to flourish in our modern world.

This Third World Conference will take place after fifty-years of concerted effort on the part of the United Nations to eradicate all forms racism and racial discrimination, three decades after the adoption of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination ¹, and mid-way through the Third Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination.

According to the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, the fight against racism 'has been at the heart of the mission of the United Nations ever since its founding in the horrors of the Second World War'. In terms of structures, laws, resolutions and monitoring bodies, the United Nations has certainly made a commitment to deal with racism and racial discrimination:

- the Committee to Eliminate Racial Discrimination is the oldest of the UN treaty monitoring bodies
- there have been two international world conferences on racism
- three international decades to combat racism
- in 1993 the UN Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance to study and report on institutionalized and indirect forms of racism and racial discrimination against national, racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities and migrant workers and their families throughout the world.²
- the year 2000 has been declared International Year to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination

But despite all these efforts, the world still does not seem any closer to eradicating the scourge of racism or to finding lasting solutions to conflicts that have their origin in racial discrimination and related intolerance.

¹ The treaty was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1965, came into force in 1969 and has since been ratified by 155 states (there are 188 member states).

² Mr. Maurice Glele-Ahanhanzo

Our own country is no exception to this reality. The renowned sociologist, John K. Galbraith, once remarked that a good society is a society that is at peace with itself. A cursory examination of our society will reveal that we are certainly not at peace with ourselves.

Deep racial divisions cut across South African society: from our national defence force - which is perhaps the most frightening because of the potential for civil conflict; to our farms - where racism often manifests itself in its most violent forms; to our schools - where racism is perhaps the most disturbing because we expect better of the leaders of tomorrow; to our places of work, our places of leisure and entertainment and to our very homes - where racism is at its most subterranean but also at its most pervasive and persistent.

If we are a rainbow nation - as Archbishop Desmond Tutu likes to remind us (and the world), then we are also a nation obsessed with colour and the politics of race. A nation which thinks, eats, sleeps (and dreams) in black and white; a nation, it seems, trapped by its past, uneasy about its present and not able to contemplate finding that elusive pot of gold in its future.

How do we explain this persistence of race as the main dialogue of the 'new' South Africa? A good beginning would be understanding racism.

Core components of racism

Racism is fundamentally about power and power-relations. In its most essential form, it is about one group or groups asserting its supremacy over another group or groups and being able to maintain this dominance through force, either physically or ideologically, and invariably through a combination of the two.

Racism at its heart denies the essential equality of all people. It discriminates on the basis of physical features and/or perceived cultural differences. As such it is a basic violation of human rights.

Racism manifests itself in various forms – mental/psychological, structural and attitudinal. Its impact is felt either directly or indirectly. But the way in which it manifests itself is always and invariably influenced by the historical context, the principal aspect of which is the power relations, both those of the past and the present. Racism always includes domination and an ideology of superiority.

Racism shows its face through hatred, disempowerment, biases, discrimination, domination, attitudes of superiority and inferiority.

The key manifestations of racism:

- domination of one group/s over other groups
- discrimination against particular groups defined in racial terms
- violence against members of particular racial groups
- notions of cultural superiority (white is better, more civilised, etc.)
- unequal access to resources, opportunities and so forth

- differential treatment based on race and colour
- strained/conflictual inter-personal relations between people of different colour
- class stratification coincided with racial classification
- affluence and poverty coincided with race and colour
- how people are represented in the media

Responses to racism vary from denial to violence to retaliation to real confrontation with the problem.

Most people would acknowledge the existence – even prevalence – of racism in South African society. But there is a lack of a common understanding of how to tackle this problem.

A National Action Plan and Strategy to Combat Racism

Almost a decade after the political normalisation of South Africa and into our seventh year of democratic rule, are we better off as a country? Are we more reconciled as a nation? Are we better prepared to enter that brave new world that our Constitution so loftily speaks about?

It is an open secret that the underlying dialogue of almost everything that happens in our country is about race – how we express our political allegiance; how we read and comment on what is in our newspapers; how we approach questions of crime, education, employment. And of course, the issue central to building a non-racial, democratic country: reconciliation. Fundamentally, we are speaking about racial reconciliation.

So, what are the future trends with regard to racial reconciliation? This year will see a concentrated focus on the questions of race and racism:

- the South African Human Rights Commission will make public the report on the National Conference on Racism held – at the request of President TM Mbeki – in August/September last year
- the South African Human Rights Commission is facilitating the development of a National Action Plan and Strategy to Combat Racism, which has to give effect to the South African Millennium Statement on Racism and Programme of Action adopted by the National Conference on Racism
- the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act will come into full effect this year
- in August/September this year South Africa will be hosting the Third UN World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Forms of Intolerance

Does this concentrated focus on race and racism bode ill or well for our country? Like with everything else, opinion is divided, and, invariably along racial lines.

Ironically – given the centrality of race and racism in our country and our history – until August/September last year, there had been no conscious, national focus on the question of race and racism.

To be sure, there have been a number of initiatives by different groups and organisations. There have also been various investigations, for example, the SAHRC's investigations into racism in our schools, racism in the media, etc. A number of organisations have been involved in anti-racist work – education, training and so forth.

But at a national level, there had been a deafening silence. If – and when – the issue of race and racism was broached it invariably was in response to something that had happened – an incident in the army, racially motivated attacks, problems at our schools and so forth. In almost all cases, the response was reactive, ad-hoc and incident-related.

This kind of response contained within it a strange paradox. On the one hand, it was almost as if we were too afraid to tackle head-on the issue of race (until the issue of race tackled us head-on). On the other, it opened up addressing the issue of race to accusations of opportunism and politicking. Addressing issues of race and racism was reduced to playing the race card.

Reconciliation in our country will mean nothing if it is not racial reconciliation. At the heart of dealing with the question of reconciliation is race and racism.

If we are to move forward on reconciliation then we have to reconcile ourselves to this fundamental reality.

Let me now turn directly to the proposed framework for the development of a comprehensive national action plan and strategy to combat racism, which I will do as a power-point presentation.