



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

REBUILDING TRUST: THE IMPERATIVE OF THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S FUTURE

By Daryl Swanepoel

President Cyril Ramaphosa's recent announcement with regard to the National Dialogue marks a defining moment in South Africa's democratic journey, because in a country such as South Africa, where the public's trust in its institutions is wavering, where structural inequality remains entrenched and where social cohesion is fraying, the proposed dialogue offers more than just a political tool to pacify the electorate. Instead, it offers a necessary intervention to rebuild and restore the national soul. Encouragingly, the approach announced by the President reflects a meaningful convergence with the Inclusive Society Institute's vision as outlined in its publication "The National Dialogue – Pathway to a People's Plan for South Africa".

Why the National Dialogue is necessary

It is fair to say that South Africa is in crisis. This is not mere rhetoric, it is grounded in evidence. The Inclusive Society Institute's South African Social Cohesion Index paints a sobering picture:

- Respect for social rules stands at just 36.6 out of 100,
- Acceptance of diversity scores only 46.8,
- Trust in government institutions is a fragile 47.9, and
- Perceived fairness in the distribution of resources is an alarming 42.7.

These are not just numbers. They reflect broken trust, frayed communities and a growing distance between citizens and the state. Add to this the reality that South Africa's economy has stagnated around 1% GDP growth, far below the level required to reverse unemployment trends and the urgency becomes clear. With unemployment (under the expanded definition) above 40%, economists agree that at least 3% sustained GDP growth is needed to hold the line and 4% or more to begin reversing the trend.

In this fragile landscape, inaction is not neutral, it is costly. It is measured in missed opportunities, in disillusioned youth, in empty plates and stunted potential. And the people? They have been patient. Too patient. For years, they have waited with quiet dignity for the promise of democracy to deliver the fair, just and inclusive society they were told was possible. They do not ask for perfection. But they deserve progress.

The case for social cohesion as economic foundation

This is why the Inclusive Society Institute will bring to the National Dialogue table a central message: enhancing social cohesion is not optional, it is foundational. Across the world, empirical studies consistently show that societies with higher levels of cohesion tend to experience stronger, more

inclusive economic performance. Cohesion fosters trust, which builds confidence, which in turn attracts investment and stimulates productivity.

South Africa's own history offers proof. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, when our social compact was strong and our democratic project broadly shared, GDP growth peaked at 6%, jobs were created, and a growing middle class emerged. As that cohesion fractured, eroded by inequality, corruption and disillusionment, so too did economic momentum falter. Social and economic renewal must go hand in hand.

A welcome alignment in approach

The Inclusive Society Institute's framework for the dialogue calls for a broad-based, people-driven process. It is rooted in the belief that solutions must be co-created by the people, not merely for them. Inspired by the spirit of the Freedom Charter and the democratic architecture of CODESA, the Institute envisions a structured, participatory dialogue culminating in a People's Plan for South Africa, a new social contract borne out of inclusive, honest deliberation.

It is therefore welcome that the President's announcement mirrors many of these principles. He emphasised that the dialogue will not be a once-off event but a months-long national process. It will reach every community, every sector, from business to labour, from religious organisations to the arts, from civil society to youth. Crucially, the process will not be led by government. It will be guided by a panel of eminent persons, with the secretariat based at Nedlac to ensure multistakeholder integrity. Government will be but one participant, preparing its input under the coordination of the Deputy President.

This rebalancing of power - from state-led to society-wide - is not just symbolically important. It is practically essential. South Africa needs shared leadership to rebuild a shared future.

The Inclusive Society Institute's planned contribution

The Inclusive Society Institute will participate in the dialogue by putting forward a focused and strategic proposition: South Africa must prioritise growing the economy *über alles* - above all else.

But this growth must be inclusive, sustainable and underpinned by social stability. The Institute will argue that economic growth and social cohesion are not sequential objectives, but simultaneous imperatives. No economy can flourish amid deep division and mistrust. No social fabric can remain intact when people are locked out of opportunity.

The Institute will, in its contribution to the Dialogue, make the case that rebuilding trust, reducing inequality and fostering unity are essential preconditions for economic renewal. These are not abstract ideals, they are necessary investments in the nation's future.

From shared vision to tangible results

While some operational differences remain, the Institute, for example, recommends an even more structured national convention model, the philosophical alignment between the President's announcement and the Institute's vision is strong. Both acknowledge that this process must be inclusive, transparent and people-owned. Both accept that reform must begin with honest listening and shared purpose.

Yet ideas alone are not enough. What matters now is execution. The process must avoid becoming a ceremonial talk shop. It must penetrate local communities, reflect real voices and translate dialogue into decisions. The test will not be the size of the platform, but the impact of the outcomes.

A country worth rebuilding together

South Africa is wounded, but not defeated. The people have waited. But the wait must end. The cost of further delay is measured in human suffering, in missed schooling, in breadlines, in lost dignity. The promise of democracy must not be something always deferred, always just over the horizon.

And here is the truth: if we act now, if we take this process seriously and put shoulder to the wheel, it is not too late. This country can be fixed. The values of 1994 are not dead, they are dormant, waiting to be rekindled. But it will take courage. It will take humility. It will take us - all of us - committing to a national dialogue not as a political project, but as a moral imperative.

Let this not be another conversation *about* the people. Let it be a conversation with the people, by the people, for the people, so that the dream of a just, inclusive and cohesive South Africa can finally begin to take shape.

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