

GSB panel calls for a 'revolution in how we think and act' to reverse SA's downward slide

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South Africans don't collaborate well and often implement 'solutions' to address major societal issues that are too simplistic and out-of-date in a world of rapidly changing economic, social and environmental realities, says a diverse panel of experts.

South Africa may have staved off a rating downgrade last week, but to tackle the country's big societal issues – including unemployment and corruption – is going to demand a more deep-seated change in the way South Africans approach these issues.

So said Ralph Hamann, a professor at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB). Chairing a forum last week hosted by the Network for Business Sustainability South Africa (NBS-SA) and the UCT GSB chapter of NetImpact, Hamann said that business, government, civil society and citizens must stop pointing fingers and reach out across racial, income, and sectoral boundaries to work more closely together.

“Too much current analysis and policy tries to grapple with the complexity of South Africa by focusing on specific parts and actors, and all too often this results in finger-pointing and destructive conflict. Can we broaden our view and thereby achieve more of the courageous, optimistic, and innovative collaboration that we see in some places, with a more constructive approach to conflict?”

Panellists at the forum including Vanessa Otto-Mentz, Head: Group strategy unit, Santam, Mills Soko, Associate Professor at the GSB and Tasneem Essop, National Planning Commission member and International Climate Policy Advocate at WWF-SA, agreed that current approaches to addressing problems tend to be simplistic and apply out-dated 'solutions' that ignore the deeper, inter-connected nature of the issues and that the country couldn't afford to simply reach for yesterday's solutions. They called for a revolution in how South Africans think and act.

Growing the economy in its existing format, building an unaffordable suite of nuclear power plants, or simply increasing the education budget, will not solve poverty and inequality, establish a carbon and cost-effective energy supply, or produce well-educated and economically active citizens, they said.

There needs to be a much greater recognition of the interconnectedness of these elements as well as the impact of poor leadership, bad planning, energy issues, corruption and unstable industrial relations, said Mills Soko. Tough global conditions are further exacerbated in South Africa by “economic sabotage” including the disastrous dismissal of former Finance Minister Nene and the on-going campaign being waged against Minister Pravin Gordhan, as well as a severe lack of collaboration and trust between business and government, he said.

Otto-Mentz said that the blueprint for a new approach is already emerging globally. “The global financial sub-prime crisis and the growing environmental crisis, with its physically felt impacts, has helped us recognise the complexity and interconnected nature of the local and global societal and environmental systems we live in.” Some businesses, she said, have come a long way and as a result are thinking differently and are tackling the business and societal issues more holistically and by collaborating more widely and deeply.

There was a general call for more leaders with vision and heart, and in the words of Chantel Lindeman, MBA student at the GSB who was also on the panel, South Africans must “listen listen listen” to each other to better understand different perspectives and viewpoints, so that together they can develop and implement shared, innovative solutions.

“This society of ours has lost its heart and South Africans don’t see themselves as partners,” added Tasneem Essop.

Essop, who also refers to herself as an activist, reminded attendees that the National Development Plan speaks to many of the above concerns. “We talk about a holistic or systemic approach for addressing issues, and the plan does this with a suite of proposals spanning economic, health, education, infrastructure, spatial planning, environment, broader sustainability and transition to a low carbon economy, among others.” She encouraged all citizens to read the NDP, discuss it and contribute to its implementation and adds that “immense human solidarity” and “active citizenship” are essential to build a better future for all.

Essop added that in the fight for change, South Africans should not be afraid of conflict. “Conflict is healthy and is important because it challenges all of us.”

“There is no centralised silver bullet that government (business or anyone else) can unleash to solve these issues,” concluded Otto-Metnz. “Solutions need to arise out of many different experiments and collaborations involving the full spectrum of citizens and sectors. Instead of lamenting the lack of ethical and visionary leaders, people must themselves become active citizens and leaders.”

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