

Rebuilding South Africa, Recovering our Vision and Renewing our Society

Opening remarks by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba to launch a national conversation on the Socio-Economic Future of South Africa

Friends, good afternoon.

On behalf of the steering committee which has driven this initiative -- Professor Binedell, Marius Oosthuizen, Charles Robertson and the Revd Moss Nthla; on behalf of my fellow patrons -- David Lewis, Russell Loubser, Roelf Meyer, Professor Ndebele and Bishop Siwa; and of the organisers of the conversations which we will initiate, thank you for being here.

I don't need to preach to you that South Africa is in a state of crisis (or epidemic distrust), perhaps one more serious than any we have faced since those dark days of the early 1990s when we risked being torn apart by violence. This too is a crisis that threatens to tear our social fabric apart and to send us into a downward spiral from which we will struggle to escape.

To name just a few of its elements:

- Our unemployment rate remains stubbornly high.
- Although there are sectors of the economy in which there are good jobs, the Minister of Basic Education herself tells us that many in the system are failing in their duty to provide our children with the knowledge and skills they need to do those jobs.
- There is nationwide student unrest at higher and further learning tertiary institutions, involving not only the destruction of the very facilities which are meant to provide for the education of our people but also the real danger of racial violence on our campuses.
- Our growth rate remains stubbornly low and we face the risk of recession. Two cycles of negative growth would bring misery to millions -- the poorest of the poor, the under-employed and the unemployed.
- The failure to deliver basic services is setting off thousands of social uprisings in communities across the country. These are so widespread that they are no longer news -- we hear about the blockading of roads and the burning of tyres in radio traffic reports rather than in news bulletins.
- From municipal to national level, good governance is threatened by failures ranging from inefficiency as a result of the appointment of people who cannot do their jobs, to corruption which has reached endemic levels in certain parts of our government. A number of state-owned enterprises have become a drain on the economy.
- Hundreds, possibly thousands, of good public servants are waging a quiet, behind-the-scenes struggle for clean government. It has been reported to me that some of those who resist pressures to sign off on corruptly-gained tenders live in fear of their lives. The outgoing editor of Business Day has reported that last year a former CEO of a state-owned enterprise told him that he resigned after receiving death threats so serious that they were delivered to his office.

- There is growing pressure on the health system from HIV/Aids, diabetes and tuberculosis, and we are faced by other critical health challenges affecting millions of our people such as institutional mismanagement.
- Freed from the crippling effects of apartheid, business has enjoyed significant returns since our country's political liberation -- but it has failed to drive our economic liberation and has made only a meagre contribution to the betterment of the broader society.
- Civil society is fractured and constrained. The religious sector is no exception to the general picture I have sketched. I cannot speak for any but my own church, but we too have our own internal crises over corruption and power struggles.
- As one of the nations that form part of the emerging markets sector of the global economy, South Africa is significantly vulnerable, and therefore subjected to commodity price fluctuations, currency valuations, and investor grade determinations that, in large measure, are out of our hands.
- And as if we needed a straw to break the camel's back, the current drought is turning many breadbaskets of our country into agricultural emergency zones. Five provinces -- KwaZulu-Natal, North West, Free State, Limpopo and Mpumalanga -- have declared drought disasters and food prices are rising.

Our nation is experiencing an unprecedented and historic crisis of distrust. Industry doesn't trust government. Labour doesn't trust government. Civil society doesn't trust government. Traditional leaders and religious leaders don't trust government. International banks and markets don't trust government. And in response, government says, it doesn't trust anyone either. In fact, I believe the most endangered species in South Africa is not what you think it is. It is trust.

Each of you here could enumerate other challenges. Suffice it to say that we have lost the sense of success and promise for the future that we shared during the early years of our democracy.

That is not to say that our achievements in the last 20 years have been insignificant. We sometimes lose sight of just how far we have actually come from the dispensations based on dispossession, slavery and social injustice that were the stark reality for most South Africans. We have hundreds and thousands of new houses and many new clinics. In areas where we have replaced mud schools, the new schools are first class. We have water, sanitation and electricity where we never had it before. I know some of our infrastructural development is cosmetic, and also that unscrupulous contractors sometimes build houses that crack and fall down, but we really showed the world what we are capable of when we hosted the 2010 World Cup: the new stadiums, the upgraded airports and the improved roads and what our police and security abilities.

Immense changes have brought significant improvements to the lives of millions of people. They have rebuilt social, cultural, political, economic and faith paradigms, vastly different from the past. South Africa is now firmly grounded within a constitutional order and many institutions are in good working order.

However, it is those very achievements which tell us we can do better than we are doing now. So although the social compact which inspired our liberation and the early achievements of our democracy is fractured, we can, if we act together, realise SEFSA's objectives, which are to:

- Rebuild hope and confidence among South Africans
- Recover our vision and create a growing economy, and
- Renew the soul of our nation and build a united, prosperous and healed South Africa.

Our social compact was premised on certain principles that we all must accept as binding, including the transformation of our entire economic, social, cultural, political and spiritual framework. We need to retool, restructure, rebuild and reconcile so that we create a society that is just, socially stable, compassionate, fiscally prudent, culturally conscious, spiritually grounded, culturally cohesive and economically sustainable.

How do we do that? Well, that is up to all of you here, and those whom you will draw into this process.

Professor Binedell has been quoted as saying: "I often think of South Africa like a jigsaw puzzle - and someone has gone off with the box. And we are left with the pieces and we're trying to figure out what belongs together and how do we find each other."

If I can develop his metaphor further, your job is not to waste time looking for the box with the picture of the completed puzzle on the cover -- it's probably been thrown away, to be pulped and recycled. Your job is the more demanding exercise of looking at the pieces each of you holds and collaboratively working out how to fit them together.

It is not as if we have to start from scratch in this process of rebuilding, recovery and renewal. People at every level in every walk of life are already carrying out countless acts of goodwill. Far too many people are doing good in silos, failing to achieve the multiplier effect which coordination could achieve. We now want to combine their efforts into a force for good, guided by the values entrenched in our Constitution with the objective of realising its promises.

We want to come together to overcome the unsustainable situation we find ourselves trapped in, where there is not only inequality but inequality of opportunity, which denies people the chance to advance themselves by their own efforts. We have become a society in which "me" has replaced "we" – one in which we place our personal and family interests ahead of the interests of all of us. We want instead to build a courageous society in which we tap into the good in each South African instead of preying on their fears and promoting hate.

SEFSA then is not so much a movement as a broad national platform for ongoing consultation and consensus-building, aimed at finding agreement on what our challenges are and mobilising the means to address them. It is not a political campaign -- we have democratic institutions to deal with voter disgruntlement. It is a civil society-driven initiative guided by social, economic, spiritual and cultural imperatives.

The faith leaders who form part of this initiative are saying that we as a nation have lost our moral compass, partly because we in the faith community have been too quiet for too long. We are asking and I am asking, what has led us to this epidemic level of distrust, this crossroads? South Africans have been tranquillized by unkept promises. They have been lied to and sedated into thinking that the promised answers are around the corner. For decades, the promises of equality haven't been kept. The promise of equality of opportunity has failed to be delivered or achieved. We can't just feel and preach. We want more than just talk - we want action.

For me as a Christian, observing Lent and approaching Easter, the Sefsa process reflects the workings of the movement of the Holy Spirit, transforming people, offering them new alternatives and encouraging them to be bold. This initiative offers the faith community an opportunity to express our support for those in government who are fighting to eradicate corruption. Perhaps it offers us all an opportunity to create support mechanisms for honest public servants. It offers us a chance to appeal to the humanity of both students who threaten violence and destruction, and those in authority who are tempted to demonise them. It gives us the space to say to the country: Stop! Vuka! Let's think calmly and rationally and look for a way out of this crisis.

It also offers a chance to take a hard look beyond the issues that urban elites normally focus on, and to address less popular ones. One example is land tenure and redistribution, where there is no appetite to reconsider the fairness of the 1994 compact which said we would not redistribute land seized before 1913. Another is whether business is willing to get its hands dirty by going beyond its collaboration with popular high-profile individuals and working for the common good with small businesses on the ground in places like Alexandra up the road from here.

Although our crisis is at heart a moral one, the economic question is key. As I asked recently: do we want a society in which the economy grows for all, creating jobs for millions and spreading wealth? Or do we want a society in which a small politically-connected elite appropriates public resources for their own benefit? SEFSA needs to address urgently the underlying structures of socio-economic exclusion and alienation within and between our communities. It is therefore also a socio-economic project which seeks to draw all stakeholders and interest groups into a national dialogue and the action plans we aim to foster.

We know that to achieve anything of lasting value and importance involves struggle. So I would like to end by challenging each of the constituencies here today to join what I call the "new struggle" for the future of South Africa. Let us ask ourselves, what is the role of business in meeting society's needs? What is the role of labour? Of civil society? And of traditional and independent religious leaders and communities?

To enter into a struggle involves courage. For how will we pose the hard, unpopular questions if we don't have courage? So let's also ask ourselves: what is the role of each of our constituencies in initiating a new, courageous fight against corruption? What are our roles in coalescing around a new educational strategy for the nation?

We can't answer these questions alone, even with our levels of resolve and deep commitment. There is a degree of urgency in these matters.

The alternative to this struggle, my friends, is allowing our South Africa to sink further into becoming a shameful nation of corruption driven by self-interest, where there is a perverse amount of inequality in every home in our country. It is time for South Africa to stop chanting "this must fall" and "that must fall"... and together, create a deafening chorus of what must rise.

Ask yourself as we prepare for the work of this gathering: what do you want your children and grandchildren to say about the contributions you made here? Let us indeed be the change we want to see in South Africa.

Beginning today, SEFSA wants to set the country ablaze with debates over constructive, courageous,

solution-based action. We will begin here, then go on to host provincial and regional consultative forums at all levels of society. As is characteristic of a project, SEFSA has an end date -- we must achieve our objectives over the next five years. So let's get down to the urgent task of rebuilding our country, recovering our vision and renewing our society.

God bless you, your family and God bless South Africa.

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