

## **“Fixing the fundamentals”- A reflection on SONA 2020**

*“We can succumb to the many and difficult and protracted problems that confront us, or we can confront them, with resolve and determination and with action. Because we choose to confront our challenges, our immediate, vital and overarching task is to place our economy on a path of inclusive growth. Without growth there will be no jobs, and without jobs there will be no meaningful improvement in the lives of our people. This SoNA is, therefore, about inclusive growth. It is about the critical actions we take this year to build a capable state and place our economy on the path to recovery. This year, we fix the fundamentals.” – President Cyril Ramaphosa*

As reflected in the president’s statement above, this year’s State of the Nation Address (SoNa) focused on inclusivity. The speech mentions all the ‘big’ debates in South Africa – energy, just transition, climate change, economic growth and femicide. What links all these together is the idea of inclusive growth that requires a fixing of the fundamentals.

President Ramaphosa, previously in his addresses made his government’s ultimate objective clear – through the concept of social compacting. The concept is a voluntary agreement among individuals, which organized society is brought into being and invested with the right to secure mutual protection and welfare or to regulate the relations among its members. Concepts like social compacting or social cohesion can only be achieved once the socio-economic condition of the poor and black majority have changed. The notion of fixing the fundamentals thus becomes important. The question then becomes, who defines these fundamentals?

The SoNa and the debates that precede the president’s address can be used to identify the fundamentals but further to problematize the ways in which these have played out in the general political discourse of South Africa.

For the majority of South Africans, the fundamentals are directly linked with inequality. High unemployment and poverty rates are as a result of the unequal nature of this country. When we speak about economic growth and economic freedom, the expectations are centred around tangible changes in peoples living conditions.

The president’s address makes mention of inclusive economic growth, just energy transition and femicide amongst other issues, it would be fair to interpret these as the fundamentals from the perspective of the speech. It seems to me that what the president and the people consider the fundamentals are the same, both identify the same issues. All the above-mentioned issues require structural policy changes as well as a shift in the ways that we as societies think about the economy, energy, gender,

violence, and a social change. As a citizen, this is what I was hoping the conversation would largely consist of, as well as an unpacking of practical examples of social democracy through social solidarity policies such as the National Health Insurance (NHI). It is important to engage the solutions proposed by the SoNa, the introduction of the university in Ekuruleni might be seen as a way to deal with youth unemployment, which is currently at 58.20%. There is a problem-solution gap here, the reality in South Africa is that unemployed young people are graduates, the creation of a university without a targeted creation of jobs will add to that pool. It could be argued that in fact, what is necessary is not only the creation of jobs that would absorb the already unemployed but further the rethinking of work as we know it, thinking through the opportunities available within the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution. This rethinking of work will also require the rethinking of education, in particular higher education, in order to provide for the rare skills that are becoming fundamental to the functioning and growth of economies around the world. For us to have a collective understanding of what the fundamentals are and how we fix them it is important for the government to be able to respond to the realities of people, a pro-capital response is likely to be antipoor and thus unable to respond to the needs of the poor majority.

The second issue to problematize is the weaponisation of gender-based violence as a political tool, particular in the SoNa debates. Gender based violence (GBV) was heavily discussed, however, it was not in the most progressive ways. The conversation on gender-based violence (like the other issues) needs to be happening on two levels - the social and the structural. Members of Parliament should be asking questions around norms and socialisation that make gender-based violence so prevalent, what is it about power and violence that makes this country particularly susceptible. What are the policy and statutory interventions that could be developed in order to prevent gender-based violence and what measures will be put in place to come out strong against those who continue to commit the crimes?

The president just last year created a taskforce (national GBV council), as an attempt to help government in the fight against GBV. Steps were identified and debated about creating spaces that allow for the reporting of these kind of crimes to prioritize the victims, the burden of proof during rape trials and the prevention of these crimes. However, the discussion in parliament did not take seriously the issues around gender-based violence but rather chose to use it as political tool to defame one another.

It is our responsibility as civil society organizations in partnership with citizens of the country to ensure that a robust discourse and debate is brought into the forefront. We also need to ensure that the government is discussing the issues that people face on a day to day basis with a specific focus on solutions. We must think collectively on how South Africa's role in the international realm can be used to fix the fundamentals not

only for ourselves but for other African states, with an understanding that regional stability directly affects our domestic politics.

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