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'BALANCE SHEET'

# Putting SA back on track

IN LESS than 18 months we will mark 30 years of our democracy (1994-2024).

The question is: What will we be able to show for it? What will our balance sheet look like in terms of assets and liabilities, given that at present we seem to be on course for hitting an iceberg – will we sink, swim, or change course in time to avert utter disaster?

There is no gainsaying that we are a nation in decline. Our early euphoria and optimism is giving way to the harsh reality of a post-democratic slump and a disillusioned citizenry.

It's time to take stock. Rip the blinkers from our eyes and focus on what needs to be done to gain back those democratic rights of a stable, growing, and socially cohesive, economically active, materially sound, politically wise country.

One of the benchmarks to check where we are in terms of our aspirational goals is our National/Sustainable Development Plan.

No doubt when we look at the performance of our government, especially over the past 10 years, we are lagging – by far – behind our targets.

This is not so much because of extraneous factors, but because of our own misguided actions, such as a few powerful individuals deciding it was time to loot state resources and collapse all governance controls and systems to allow corruption to reign supreme.

Pressing challenges needing our urgent attention include:

- **Congestion of cities and towns** – in a failure, post-apartheid, to anticipate the rush to urban areas from people previously prohibited from doing so and all seeking the proverbial pot of gold, our infrastructure has become overloaded.



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To bring about the mitigation or reversal of the rural/foreign-urban migration as countries such as Taiwan have done, we must mobilise appropriate funds for infrastructure development, focusing on areas like transport – road (car, bike, bus or taxi) and rail – to make commuting between rural areas smooth and seamless.

Vitality, infrastructure needs to be developed that will encourage economic growth and opportunities in the rural areas themselves, to lessen the influx of people to existing urban areas, thus encouraging families to stay together, too.

Decongesting urban areas should also include an aggressive approach to creating smart villages, such as the project being undertaken at Nkuzana village, in Limpopo, by property developer Mike Nkuna. This programme could be fast-tracked, ensuring that in every province there is a smart village/town and ultimately, a city.

Having access to the internet and such basics as communications will

fast-track growth, obviating the necessity to migrate to urban areas to look for opportunities. Leaving would then become a matter of choice.

- **Decaying and old urban infrastructure** – the sheer numbers of people flooding urban areas has exacerbated the lack of investment into and maintenance of existing infrastructure. This has resulted in the wholesale breakdown of basic services.

Mobilising financial resources on an unprecedented scale to attend to this mega-need that affects the rich and the poor is needed now.

Add to this, affordable and accessible communication networks and a comprehensive public works programme.

- **High levels of crime** – The country is experiencing ever-increasing levels of crime. The desperation in young people without education and skills is also exacerbated by drug trafficking in the country, which many fall into, either as pushers to earn money, or as users to detach from reality.

There are good men and women in our police force, but they are few and far between and often lack the resources to combat crime.

Often, opportunistic crime is committed by people with low levels of education, who have no skills to sell to the market, and are thus forced to hustle to survive. To do so, they may prey on other people, falling foul of the law, and end up in prison, where they learn how to be better criminals and frequently land up being guests of the state.

The government has been extremely remiss in developing and deploying education for the unemployed to upskill themselves towards new industries such as 4IR. Unfortu-

nately, this tragedy starts at the early childhood stage where the absence of access to development and education is a crime.

- **High rate of unemployment** – with a growing majority of our people being younger than 35, it is highly concerning that as Statistics SA reported a few days ago, our youth aged 15-24 and 25-34 recorded the highest unemployment rates of 59.6% and 40.5% respectively.

The speed at which the digital realm is moving can be quite intimidating, but it is a warning to the government and the private sector that we need to get a bustle on to catch up; otherwise, people will simply be left behind.

For us to prepare for a celebration of 30 years of democracy, it would be good to start work now on the new trajectory for the country, to start the fourth decade, 2024 onwards. We owe it to ourselves and to posterity to make sure that we put in place a new foundation, including a moral code.

There is much to be said about the resilience of South Africans, who have survived crisis after crisis. The hope of a better tomorrow has always been our mainstay; what we can imagine, we can also make a reality.

It is the kind of hope that Vaclav Havel had in mind when he said: "I am not an optimist, because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist because I am not sure that everything ends badly."

"I could not accomplish anything if I did not have hope within me, for the gift of hope is a big gift of life itself."

Let us pull ourselves together and put our country back on track and stay the course.