

Press Release

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South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas

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Despite our troubles, South Africa is a country in which a lot has gone right

'Life in South Africa: Reasons for Hope'*, the latest report from the Institute of Race Relations (IRR), seeks to remind South Africans of the significant progress the country has made under democracy, and the scope for resuming an upward trajectory towards growth and optimism.

The report highlights progress in areas ranging from the economy to living conditions, health, education and crime.

It notes: 'The effects of higher levels of investment-driven growth, and sensible policy, particularly in the era to 2007, provided the government with the revenues to bring about vast improvements in living standards via its service delivery efforts.

'As much as it courts controversy, we stand on the point that service delivery was one of the key successes of the African National Congress in government. This is not to overlook the many and varied failures both in the extent and in the quality of services delivered. Nor is it to suggest that State-driven delivery is a sustainable path out of poverty ...but the numbers (in the report) are so great that they speak to a profoundly important raising of the living-standards floor in our country.'

Among the positives highlighted in the report are that:

- Inflation dropped from 9% in 1994 to 5,3% in 2017;
- Ten formal houses were built for every shack newly erected;

- The number of black people with a job increased from 4.9 million in 1994 to over 12 million last year;
- The middle class has doubled in size;
- The number of students enrolled at universities has increased almost threefold since 1985;
- The murder rate has been halved through the democratic era.

IRR media and public affairs officer Kelebogile Leepile notes: “The importance of this report is that it reminds us of the good story to tell, which is often lost in the doom-and-gloom narrative about the problems we still face. We hope to restore some balance to the debate about life in South Africa, and to dispel the impression that democracy has failed to deliver a better life. This is also a way of focusing on what needs to be done to resume the path of progress, especially evident between 1994 and 2007.’

The report states: ‘Our sense is that far more has been achieved in South Africa over the past two decades than many people understand. There is a lot to be proud of and in no way is it true to say that “South Africa is no better than it was in 1994”, or that “South Africans have refused to work together to bring about change”. This is a substantively better society to live in than it was in 1994. We think that, as a result of that progress, social and other relations remain predominantly sound.’

A key element of the report is its acknowledgement of the role of South Africans across the board in contributing to the country’s progress.

Noting that the IRR has ‘given the government and the ruling party much credit’ for progress made, the report adds: ‘But more credit must go to the entrepreneurs, investors, employers, and employees, whose hard work and risk-taking generated the tax revenue that funded the free and subsidised houses and services, and social welfare.

‘Too often, these entrepreneurs and the middle classes are hounded as an uncaring and selfish elite who have done nothing to bring about a better future. They have done a great deal and deserve great credit.’

However, the report cautions that “there must be no doubt that the radical inflection of government policy after 2007 did great harm to the South African economy and stalled much of the progress that was being made to that point’.

The IRR is particularly worried that the policy of expropriation without compensation or EWC could do such damage as to erode much of the progress made over the past two decades and completely change South Africa’s living standards trajectory for the worse.

The report concludes, however: 'If policy makers can adopt sensible ideas that draw investment, create new wealth and jobs, and grow the economy, then there is no reason to believe that the trajectory our country was on into 2007 cannot be resumed.'

**The Hope Reports are a series of reports produced by the IRR to highlight the extent to which South Africans have built a better country and better lives since the end of apartheid. Journalists seeking data from the reports should contact the IRR directly.*

Read the most recent full report [here](#).

Ends.