



Affirmative action symposium aims to build social cohesion
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By Frank Nxumalo

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) is hosting a two day symposium on affirmative action from tomorrow in Pretoria. In South Africa 'affirmative action' (AA) broadly refers to government policies that account for; and/or respond to exclusions based on race, gender, class, ethnicity and disability.

Affirmative action, which is based on the principles of social good, compensatory justice and the ideal of equality aims to redress disadvantages that designated groups suffered under apartheid discrimination. The leader of the project Dr Temba Masilela said the central question to be addressed by the symposium is to find to what extent affirmative action could facilitate or minimise social cohesion and the building of a 'national' identity that accounts for a transformed society in South Africa.

"South Africa's vision and dream enshrined in the Freedom Charter that South Africa belongs to all who live in it is yet to be fully realised. Inequalities in terms of poverty, skills shortages and the impact of disease such as HIV/Aids still prevail."

"Despite government's strong commitment to addressing these inequalities and to building, consolidating and strengthening human and social relations through its policy - including the Constitution and other relevant legislation and programmes, - tremendous disparities continue unabated," Masilela said.

"Through AA, the intention is that all qualified people from designated groups have equal opportunities in the workplace. Following the legal definition, designated groups include all people of colour, white females, people with disabilities, and people from rural areas. A new turn to the legal definition was established in 2008 when the High Court in South Africa ruled that Chinese South African citizens are to be reclassified black paving the way for them to benefit from AA and black economic empowerment (BEE) policies.

Government's policy

Masilela said while AA remains governments policy, some new ideas are beginning to emerge that call for flexibility to help South Africa build a skills base. Speaking to Afrikaner trade union Solidarity recently, ANC President Jacob Zuma said affirmative action should be flexible enough to enable the country to tackle skills shortage. President Zuma said where capacity did not exist locally; the country should look at importing scarce skills, including the possibility of retired professionals rejoining the public service.

Masilela said while the majority white Afrikaner union Solidarity was opposed to affirmative action, they wanted to engage the governing party to find ways of

'accommodating whites' especially where scarce skills were concerned or where there were no suitably qualified blacks. "Accommodation therefore also becomes an important political and social factor in both social transformation and the building of social cohesion that recognises identified groups. With respect to 'accommodation' identified or designated groups could include skilled whites and skilled non-South Africans from the African Diaspora and elsewhere on the continent to combat the scarcity of certain skills," he said.

"This suggests that affirmative action is characteristically complex and controversial. Conceived as race-based, quota-driven, preferential treatment of historically disadvantaged groups, affirmative action contradicts fundamental principles of liberal ideology by prioritizing group or collective rights over the individual as the beneficiary of rights.

Complicated by the legacy of apartheid, some groups in South Africa feel marginalised as a result of AA. Apart from race and class based issues, any investigation of AA in South Africa will need to interrogate related social aspects such as gender, disability, age, and ethnicity".