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APARTHEID LEGACY

NEVA MAKGETLA: Why SA must bring the neglected former homelands into the national fold

There is no coherent strategy to tackle the extreme poverty and lagging government services in the former homelands

BL PREMIUM

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The apartheid regime shaped the homelands as impoverished labour-sending areas, while influx control kept the jobless, young and elderly out of the cities, says the writer. Picture: 123RF/JOHN WOLLWERTH

Royalty is in the air at the moment, from the wedding to Black Panther. But most fans would never give up their votes to live in a monarchy or willingly pay to maintain hereditary rulers in the name of national pride.

The land debates have brought these questions home to SA. Apartheid shaped the former "homelands" to be impoverished, underserved and governed by unelected leaders. We often overlook the extent to which the 1994 compromise involved concessions not only to white business and politicians but also to rulers in these regions.

Even today there is no coherent strategy to tackle the extreme poverty and lagging government services in the former homelands. Nor is there a consistent approach to the mismatch between the commitment to national citizenship and democracy, on the one hand, and inherited authority on the other.

People are simply voting with their feet. From 1994 to 2016 the share of the population living in the former homelands fell from about half to a third. About 18-million people now live in former homeland regions and 37-million in the rest of the country, mostly in urban areas.

Not surprisingly, given these conditions, almost one in five households in the former homelands said they went hungry sometimes in 2016 — twice the rate of the rest of the country

Outmigration leaves the former homelands with a high share of children, old people and women. Half their residents are too old or young to work, compared with a third in the rest of the country. A million more adult women than men live in the former homelands.

The economic drivers are obvious. The apartheid regime shaped the homelands as impoverished labour-sending areas, while influx control kept the jobless, young and elderly out of the cities. It officially excluded the homelands from SA, avoiding investment in their social services and infrastructure and establishing puppet regimes to govern them, often harshly. When apartheid residential restrictions ended, moving to better-off areas was a rational response.

Even today only a quarter of adults in former homelands are employed, compared with half in the rest of SA. They account for 17% of national employment and just 10% of jobs in mining, manufacturing and business services. In 2016, their median wage was under R2,500.

Not surprisingly, given these conditions, almost one in five households in the former homelands said they went hungry sometimes in 2016 — twice the rate of the rest of the country. And homeland households were twice as likely as other families to have experienced a death that year.

Government services and infrastructure also lag behind the rest of SA, despite vast progress since 1994. In 2016, only 70% of households in the former homelands said they had safe water, compared with 90% in the rest of the country.

Urban youth were three times as likely as homeland residents to attend university. Even with social grants — the main income for most homeland families — half of households lived on less than R2,400 in 2015, compared a with quarter in the rest of SA.

Finally, in these areas democratic and economic rights still largely depend on gender and origins. If you moved from the Eastern Cape for a job in Johannesburg you could buy a house and settle in. But local leaders declared miners who moved to Marikana "foreigners" and barred them from acquiring land, leaving them to squalid informal settlements.

The former homeland regions differ widely in terms of economic potential, depending largely on their proximity to urban centres, viable land, water and infrastructure.

Realistic strategies must adapt to local realities, rather than incentivising investment as if every region can industrialise equally. And they will work only if they empower local residents, including women and other marginalised groups. They will fail if they rely on systems of power and exclusion established by apartheid.

• *Makgetla is a senior researcher with Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies.*

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