

Swimming naked in the tide of the coronavirus – Sowetan Live 3

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The dawn of the year 2020 was greeted by many with a sense of hope and renewal, with others throwing in clichés such as “2020 vision” and “#20Plenty”. No one could have predicted that in a mere two-and-a-half months, the country and the economy would grind to a halt, with health fears gripping the entire world.

In many ways, the novel coronavirus has caught the world napping. In a matter of weeks, the coronavirus has forced the world to re-imagine the way it works. This has meant that the world has had to face up to how it currently works, and this has not been a comfortable exercise.

There is a saying that goes: ‘When the tide settles, you discover who’s been swimming naked’. Within this context, South Africa Inc. is one institution that has been swimming naked, particularly looking at our gross inequality and the dire lack of economic transformation.

When the coronavirus hit, we were found to be in the worst position in terms of the economy, which led to a ratings downgrade by Moody’s. Unemployment is at its highest levels and businesses have been struggling. The education system has been the very picture of inequality. Urban human settlements have barely surpassed the apartheid template in terms of humaneness and equality.

The health system is still trying to re-imagine itself into NHI’s driven equitability. A working public transport system was long stuck at blueprint stage. The coronavirus found us in the darkness of loadshedding, at the wilderness of a barely functioning local government system. Industrialisation of the economy has not made it past the speeches and presentations in high-profile conferences and workshops.

We were letting go of one of our most prized assets, South African Airways, and our R&D (research & development) capacity and capability was somehow rusty when the coronavirus bundled us up into our battered settlements. The public procurement bill was still waiting for the opinions of the public, and the PPPFA (Preferential Procurement Policy Framework Act) – believed to have denied black business equitable participation in government procurement – reigns supreme. When the coronavirus invaded us, blacks were still playing the role of middlemen in the economy, without ownership of the economic value chains.

The effects of the coronavirus are now exposing all these weaknesses. We realise suddenly that taxis are not safe for our people, that shack dwelling poses the greatest health risks, that lack of e-learning material and infrastructure in public schools means that about 80% of our children are being disadvantaged. We realise under the grip of the coronavirus that at certain thresholds of infections, our health system will not cope with the situation.

We realise that the supplies and imports we relied on are now under threat, and our industrial capabilities are not strong enough to summarily localise their manufacturing. Perhaps the

biggest realisation, from which we should draw some hope and strength, is indeed that we have been swimming naked.

It is now the time that we take a long look at ourselves in the mirror and face the demon of our past misdoings, so that we can move forward a changed people. A people who always care that we are fully and properly covered.

Thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, the time has come for us to, with renewed energy and vigour, fix all that is and has been broken. One such thing, and the most important of all, is us as a nation.

We must look past our personal interests as individuals, and through the spirit of ubuntu, commit ourselves to serve the interest of the nation at large. Whether we like it or not, black and white, our fates have become one, and the coronavirus is forcing this truth into our midst. It is up to us as individuals and groups to assimilate and let this truth guide our actions henceforth.

We need to capitalise on the momentum that comes with the effort to fight this virus and build our industrial base, strive to localise the manufacturing of everything that we can localise in order to create the much-needed jobs. We must invest in digitising our education system to gain efficiencies, increase quality and oversight, as well as reduce inequality. We must also recapitalise, modernise and corporatise the taxi industry into a flourishing, authentically black-owned transport value chain.

Practical and deliberate programmes with named and set targets to support self-driven black entrepreneurs to become real players in each one of the key industries must be prioritised moving forward. These industrialists can and should create value chains that also find their way to the townships and rural areas. This must be done to ensure economic inclusivity, which, in turn, will unleash the country's true economic potential. Yes, unlocking potential, not taking away from white businesses as others have chosen to view these kinds of initiatives. Pulling the 40 odd million blacks out of poverty is good for white businesses too.

Many of these transformative interventions will allow space to create new, quality human settlements that can organically follow an ever-expanding economy. Giving people RDP houses without job opportunities is neither sustainable nor desirable. We need to create an environment in which people can afford to pay for quality settlements. The same goes for health facilities. It will be fatal to create an NHI for an unemployed, hungry and sick society. The system will simply not afford to carry such a load. People must be able to pay for their health from their own sweat, and subsidised where necessary. So, when we were found naked after the tide settles, the proverbial swimming shorts we did not have on was a transformed economy.

Let the coronavirus be that dose that mutates us into a citizenry that cares about its collective wellbeing. Let us enter into a partnership to transform the economy and strengthen our nation against any future attacks. Lest the tide settle on us again.

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