

Get SA's challenges into perspective – and **act**

by Wolfgang Thomas

A state of gloom and pessimism is lately threatening to dominate public perceptions about South Africa's state of socio-economic and socio-political development. Fed by publicly debated symptoms of several serious problem areas, this state of mind is a major force behind the current emigration wave and it also dampens investor plans and clouds forward planning in both the public and the private sector.

Getting challenges into perspective is a precondition for firm action in South Africa.

The issues shaping our concerns include:

- global warming and climate change – and how this is likely to affect the different areas in South Africa (increasing drought in the West and storms in the East)
- escalating fuel prices which impact heavily on our transport network
- price inflation in agricultural staple products, which worst hits the poorest
- high levels of corruption in both the public and the private sector
- exceptionally high crime rates, spreading wider in lower and higher social strata
- weaknesses in our national infrastructure, dramatically illustrated by electricity outages and fears of water shortages
- openly violent xenophobia, aimed at the rising flow of foreigners into the country's working class areas
- critical skills gaps in a wide range of public as well as private sector job categories – aggravated almost daily by the steady emigration of skilled people.

To these concerns could be added those which are – in the minds of some – linked to the different dimensions of South Africa's transformation and Black Economic Empowerment process.

If we look at the list, it is indeed formidable and can easily give rise to a gloomy mindset. Negativism is easy, unless we

view each of these challenges in a broader perspective, both globally and within our local, longer-run development process.

Learning from comparisons

Probably the most fruitful way to create a broader context is to look around at the world and see whether other semi-developed or emerging countries, like ours, face (or have faced) similar challenges and how they approach (or have approached) them. During the worst of the electricity crisis we could read about many other developing countries suffering under regular blackouts. Shifting to our road network, we are often reminded about the potholed long-distance routes in other parts of this and other continents.

During the 1960s, as a student traveller abroad, I experienced first-hand Eastern European crime waves hitting tourists, and Rio de Janeiro beach strollers being warned against wearing jewellery. After the 1990 fall of the Berlin Wall, Russia sank into a morass of corruption from which, in many people's minds, it has not fully recovered. We now also hear that Aids is increasing rapidly in parts of South East Asia. And, let us admit it, xenophobia is sadly visible in many parts of the world where immigration flows reshape local business opportunities.

Even our BEE strategies are not without precedents, like Thailand's efforts to reduce the dominance of the Chinese minority after the 1970s.

If we look at the latest series of global 'threats' – e.g. food and petrol price escalation and environmental challenges – we can almost daily read how other countries and their leaders react and (often fail to) adjust.

How can these comparisons serve us?

- They should tell us that there is nothing intrinsically wrong, hopeless or devious about our complex South African society experiencing various crises or challenges.
- They teach us that crises and challenges are part of the longer-run process of

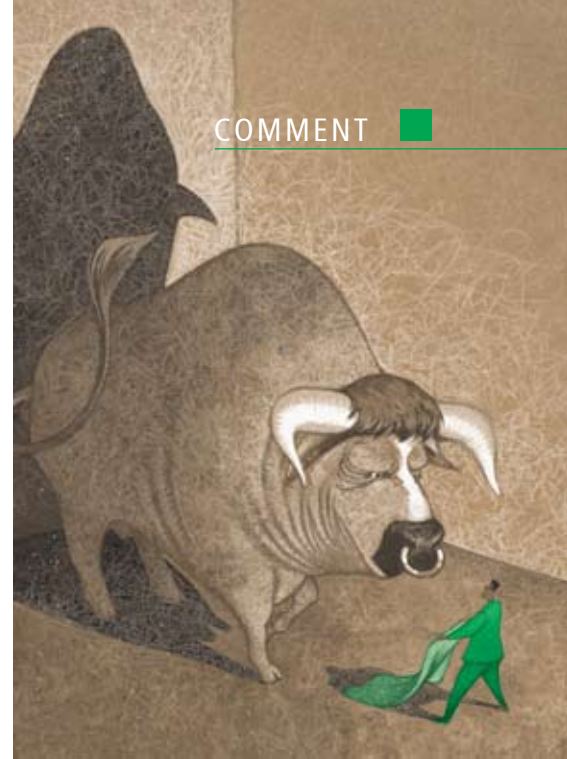


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development which we have to master as best as we can.

- They give us a wealth of opportunities to learn from others – both their successes and failures in dealing with the issues.
- They also offer opportunities for cooperative efforts, working with leaders and others in those countries, to strengthen and reshape our own initiatives.

With our South African society itself being so complex and multi-cultural, it is easy for us to play down or neglect in-depth study or observation of those processes in other countries – in Chile, Brazil, Mexico, North Africa and the (ex-USSR) republics of Central Asia. This neglect robs us of many opportunities to learn and (maybe) even get some encouragement from seeing how other leaders grapple with seemingly intractable challenges.

Awareness of this neglect calls for serious rethinking of priorities in some of our training programmes, research agendas and international leader-exchange initiatives. ■



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