

Human rights are embedded in township enterprises

The valuable role small businesses play in social cohesion, economic resilience and dignity is often overlooked

COMMENT
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In Cape Town's townships, the inter-relationship between small businesses and human rights is a concrete reality of daily life. Yet, government policies and actions tend to downplay, if not outright undermine, their important role in social cohesion, human dignity, and economic resilience.

Required are changes in attitudes, laws and behaviour that better recognise and nurture the critical place of local businesses in South Africa's human rights' landscape.

To see this, we need only look at Langa, founded in 1927 as Cape Town's first township, and where on 21 March 1960 citizens were also killed and wounded as police brutally suppressed peaceful protests against apartheid pass laws.

Despite its challenges as one of Cape Town's poorer and more violent suburbs, today Langa celebrates its rich history and continuing legacy of political and social activism, the arts and entrepreneurship.

There, Zone 17 is a new entrant to the hospitality industry. It offers Capetonians and others a comfortable base to call home for the weekend, an "integrator" to accompany them, and a curated array of local experiences where they can immerse themselves in Langa culture (as far as Covid-19 regulations allow), and, importantly, spend on local eateries and other businesses.

Operating in stark contrast to large-scale commercial tour operators that engage in drive-through "poverty porn", Zone 17 emerges from a family with deep roots in the community, committed simultaneously to local upliftment and to reconciliation across South Africa's geographic, economic, and racial divides.

Zone 17 joins other, similarly socially-minded Langa enterprises, including the 16 on Lerotholi Gallery "that uses art as an essential tool to foster understanding, empathy and solidarity within the Langa community", and Jordan's Way of Cooking, which serves local fare to international standards while providing employment, training, and job placement to local youth.

These local examples mirror global research, for example by the World Bank, finding that small businesses are often key peace and development actors, both because they are vital job creators and because of their deep ties in their communities. They have been found to be more likely to play a role in conflict prevention activities or reconciliation than their larger counterparts.

Yet, government at many levels does not appear to have recognised their critical role in advancing human rights, and in many instances, is experienced as being hostile to their aspirations.

Complaints we heard in our research on small businesses in



Pavement specials: Research shows that small businesses, such as these in Langa, are often overlooked in favour of corporate developments and supermarket chains, which have no social role. Photo: David Harrison



Langa range from zoning that favours corporate developers of shopping malls and supermarket chains in the townships over informal traders and small businesses; to government agencies that seek to suppress and control rather than to develop and support emerging businesses; to police participating in theft and racketeering that undermine honest enterprise.

At the core of government policy and action may be counterproductive mindsets and beliefs.

"Growth will come from big companies, with their scale economies, financial muscle and market access opportunities," said Democratic Alliance MP Toby Chance, shadow minister of small business development until 2019, who also stated that "leaving the townships" — to be "absorbed" into "formal and often export-focused businesses" — "is necessary to achieve upliftment".

These statements echo uncomfortably close to those that led to the creation of Langa as a "concentration camp" meant only to supply — and control — black labour for South

Africa's larger enterprises. And yet, even globally, such attitudes towards small, local businesses appear common among those whose focus is GDP growth, as well as among those who see businesses primarily as generators of tax revenues that government will then re-distribute to provide for the poor.

They lead to a preference for investment in large over small, formal over informal, export-oriented over locally relevant — blind to small businesses' more profound social role.

Small businesses in the township are demonstrably much more than minor cogs in the larger economic machine.

Rather, they are community institutions deeply embedded in social networks — including families, churches, neighbourhood associations, sports clubs, jazz clubs and other civic organisations and businesses in Langa and elsewhere — that provide people a port of call for emergency child or elder care, hunger relief, emotional support, employment leads, legal and political advocacy, and business development support.

Small businesses are both dependent on, and contributors to, these webs of multifaceted relationships.

If we want to unleash the potential of business to help address violence, social ills and economic decline, then we must abandon excessively technocratic views of the role of small businesses in our society.

We must acknowledge their special potential as economic actors embedded within the township social system to — in ways that outside and large enterprises never can — recognise trauma, celebrate resilience, build community and situate economic development within a more humane context of empowerment and healing.

When we embrace this broader perspective on small businesses, we will be truer to our constitution's imperative to "heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights".

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