



South Africa's Poverty Crisis

So, what now?

While the rest of the world is dealing with the deadly Coronavirus pandemic which has severely disrupted both economic activities and lifestyle norms, a section of the South African citizenry seems to have thrown every caution into the wind as the nation witnesses a disturbing trend of rioting and looting of both food and non-food products. This prevailing public dissonance, which erupted on the 10th of July continues to grow in different parts of the country. Especially as images of retail stores being looted, vandalized, and set ablaze continues to dominate the news and social media channels. What initially started as a show of political defiance following the recent imprisonment of the country's former president, has quickly degenerated into a form of pseudo-anarchy. This raises the questions of 'could there more to this than meets the eye? and could this really be a political battle?' Let us take a little dive into some critical matters.

Socioeconomic challenge

South Africa faces what is known as a triple challenge. This is the symbiotic occurrence of inequality, poverty, and unemployment. This multiplex challenge weighs enormously on

social, economic, and political makings of the country. Compounding this even more is the issue of poor governance. Since the dawn of democracy in 1994, the mandate of government has always been to improve the socio-economic status of all its citizens. However, almost three decades later, the situation has not improved. Instead, political leaders are often implicated in money laundering schemes that only seek to enrich a selected few whilst leaving the poor and the middle-class majority impoverished.

The riots and the looting

Looking at the existing socioeconomic divide, it is safe to say that South Africa's endless protests and looting occurrences strongly correlate with the afore-mentioned triple challenge. Poverty rates are a result of high unemployment and a large number of people that are systematically excluded from the economy. A recent report by Statistics South Africa reveals that 32.6% South Africans are unemployed, and regrettably a high number of young people do not participate in the labour force (46.3%). More recently, the country's economy got severely impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic as government enforced a series of hard and partial lockdown

restrictions as measures to curtail the spread of this deadly virus. Consequently, many businesses registered irrecoverable losses which led to large scale retrenchments and permanent closure of businesses. This invariably resulted in increased hardships as the poverty rate skyrocketed. Thus, it is of no surprise that most citizens resorted to looting as the only viable survival strategy.

So, what now?

Although it might take a while before the country recovers from the current economic catastrophe, government needs to direct its efforts towards practical short- and long- term solutions. It is imperative to embark on a systematic engagement of the growing number of aggrieved unemployed youth and previously disadvantaged persons. Opportunities should also be based on potential and ability rather than experience. So, to answer the question 'what now?', the country needs to be led by people who are ethical and accountable for their actions. The mass crippling of the economy has everything to do with the political decisions taken by the leaders of the country. People's voices have been silenced for far too long and now their actions are speaking volumes.