



ECONOMIC COMMENTARY

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*For every one to attain
financial well-being*

IF LEADERS FAIL, CHILDREN SUFFER

South Africa's (SA's) post-apartheid dream of a prosperous nation remains unrealised for many. While political freedom was achieved in 1994, economic freedom and opportunity have lagged. Poor leadership, particularly in government, is a key cause of this. A lack of accountability has resulted in flawed policies that hinder economic progress, leaving millions in poverty.

Leadership failures and policy missteps

Much of SA's economic hardship stems from leadership failures during critical moments. For more than 30 years, under the African National Congress (ANC), decisions lacked accountability and a focus on long-term goals. Despite initial successes after 1994, the government failed to create policies that would foster sustainable growth and economic freedom. Corruption and mismanagement became entrenched, leading to a failure to deliver on promises of economic development. Instead of encouraging entrepreneurship and attracting foreign investment, the government turned to populist rhetoric and short-term solutions. This has led to failing infrastructure, unreliable energy supply, and a regulatory environment that discourages business growth.

Rising unemployment and deepening poverty

The lack of sound economic policies has resulted in a persistent unemployment crisis, which is one of SA's most pressing issues. In 1994, job creation was a central promise of the new government. Yet, three decades later, unemployment, particularly among the youth, has skyrocketed. Youth unemployment often exceeds 50%, leaving an entire generation without hope or opportunity. High unemployment, in turn, directly leads to deeper poverty. Families are left without income, and children suffer the most. When parents are jobless, their children face the consequences – poor access to education, healthcare, and nutrition. These children are trapped in a cycle of poverty that is difficult to escape.

Childhood poverty: The toll of poor governance

The suffering of children is the most visible sign of a government's leadership failures. Statistics show that about 60% of South African children live below the poverty line. These children face an uphill battle, lacking access to quality education, adequate healthcare, and proper nutrition. Schools are underfunded, infrastructure is inadequate, and many educators lack the necessary training. As a result, millions of children receive substandard education, which limits their chances of breaking free from the cycle of poverty. The long-term impact is profound: A poorly-educated population cannot contribute meaningfully to the economy, which further hinders growth.

A shift in the political landscape

Despite this bleak situation, there are signs of change and hope in SA's political landscape. The ANC is losing its grip on power and disillusioned voters are turning to alternatives like the Government of National Unity, a coalition of opposition parties that offers a fresh approach to governance. The Democratic Alliance (DA), a key coalition player, has demonstrated that action-oriented leadership can lead to tangible improvements (although they have lost much of their vigour in recent years). In areas under DA control, such as Cape Town, there have been clear signs of progress – better infrastructure, improved service delivery, and policies that support economic growth. This shift towards more accountable, results-driven governance is offering hope to a weary population.

The way forward: Action-oriented leadership

SA is at a crucial juncture. The next decade will be pivotal as the country moves away from a leadership style that failed to deliver sustainable growth. Action-oriented, accountable leadership, as seen in the private sector, is essential to reversing the country's fortunes. The focus must be on creating an environment that is conducive to economic growth, which includes improving education and rebuilding critical infrastructure.

For the millions of children who suffer under the weight of poverty, these changes are vital. If political leaders can adopt policies that prioritise long-term growth over short-term growth, SA can begin to break free from the cycle of poverty. Leadership that values accountability and measurable outcomes can ensure that children grow up with opportunities for a better future. The legacy of poor governance has left a lasting mark on the country but, with political shifts and a focus on action, there is hope for recovery.

If leaders fail, children suffer. But if leaders succeed, there is hope for a better, more prosperous future for us all.

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