
Watch this space!

IFAA set to research psycho-social disorders that beset SA

By Zunaid Moolla

Zunaid Moolla is Director of the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA).

IFAA is planning to introduce a programme that focuses on psycho-social disorders in South Africa. Our aim is to assemble clinical studies and analyses of some of the best psychologists in the country and undertake groundbreaking research on how psycho-social disorders manifest themselves in different communities, writes Director ZUNAID MOOLLA.

The buoyancy of the first decade of South Africa's transition to a democracy has given way to pessimism, despondency and a huge drop in confidence levels by all sections of the population. Among the many factors that caused this ship to sink are the inappropriate economic policies, poor governance in State-Owned Enterprises, changes in the global economy that have led to deindustrialisation and financialisation, the ease with which elites and insiders were able to loot state coffers, state capture, and latterly, the climate crisis and the Covid pandemic.

As the country drifts towards total economic collapse, increasingly high levels of social disorganisation are manifesting in communities across the country. Violent protests now flare up almost on a daily basis and the few gains that were made in previous years

seem to erode before our eyes with whole sectors of the economy sliding into paralysis.

Attempts at social and economic improvement seem to encounter obstacles at every turn. The burning of schools, libraries, clinics and other social infrastructure proceeds with painful regularity, which prompts us to ask: how do we fix this?

Two broad approaches will likely influence the choice we make. The first says "change the structures (or the system of capitalism) and people will change." The other argues that economic progress won't make a difference because we're dealing with a wounded society and we have not attended to these wounds.

The former approach is advocated by a small but significant minority and there is merit in their demands. After all, would the creation of jobs not alleviate some of the poverty in the country? Would that, in turn, not change behaviour as the prospect of hope for a better life rises? Yes, very likely. Consider though, a society after being at war for years, with thousands suffering physical disabilities. Without medical attention, including the provision of prosthetics, rehab programmes and support with mobility, productivity may take years to improve regardless of the number of jobs created.

This brings us to the latter approach which has not been a subject of much discussion in mainstream discourse but is gaining traction from some analysts and academics. A few psychologists

have recently presented research which purports to show that trauma is lodged in the amygdala and victims are prone to act out anti-social behaviour for successive generations. If this is true, we can see why the effect is likely to be much worse in a society such as ours which has experienced centuries of trauma.

The ideas flowing from this approach offer a fresh perspective on South African society. They are particularly relevant to a society that presents as a toxic cocktail of trauma and material deprivation. Violence is often associated with high levels of poverty but not all countries with large sections of extremely poor people exhibit violent patterns of behaviour.

In his recently published book, *Nation on the Couch*, Professor Wahbie Long explores the psychological make-up of South African society (see extract below and book review on page 49). He delves into the history of colonial conquest and its effects on the psyche of its victims and enters that realm so potently captured in the works of Frantz Fanon that argues colonialism is not just the military and economic subjugation of a country but also the psychological occupation of its people. Fanon counselled us 60 years ago that the complex path of identity and material progress is paved with interruptions and disturbances that all too often scupper the best plans of politicians and bureaucrats. We would do well to heed Fanon's counsel and take note of Prof Wahbie Long's pioneering analysis of South African society. **NA**