EVIDENCE ALONE is not enough:

Prof. Adam Habib on the role of the HSRC in social sciences research

In an interview with the *HSRC Review*, Prof. Adam Habib, vice chancellor of the University of Witwatersrand and former executive director of the HSRC's Democracy and Governance programme, from 2004 to 2007, shares his thoughts on the relationship between the HSRC and the state, and the role of social science in South Africa.

In the mid-eighties, the HSRC released a report, which concluded that the apartheid model for intergroup relations had reached an impasse. The findings caused a stir in the National Party government, yet the HSRC pushed forward in its efforts to distribute it. Was the HSRC freeing itself from its role as an apparatus of the apartheid state? And how should a research organisation negotiate its relationship with the state?

For a research institution like the HSRC in the mid-1980s to believe that apartheid was a possibility, and that segregation was a moral right, is problematic, says Habib. He believes the organisation only began to shift during the period of transformation in the 1990s, when a new generation of researchers built it into an institution that was more progressive and supportive of a democratic era.

Prof. Adam Habib

Photo: Dr Ian Edelstein

Funding and a public mandate

A major weakness of the HSRC was that it did not know how to raise money. Everything it did was dependent on the largesse of the state, and it believed that the funding of research was the state's responsibility. "But it wasn't going to happen, not in the kind of state that we had in the 1990s, and the HSRC got into a financial crisis," says Habib.

Dr Mark Orkin, HSRC CEO from 2000 to 2005

According to Habib, Dr Mark Orkin, HSRC CEO from 2000 to 2005, stabilised the finances of the organisation in a way that very few leaders were capable of doing at the time. It contracted with the state, brought in millions of rands, and created a huge organisation. "But let's be honest, money drove the system and if you could make the money and the public mandate talk, it kind of worked. If you couldn't, the public mandate got sacrificed in the process."

Need for a research system

Habib believes that the HSRC operated too much as an institutional player in its own right, rather than as part of a research system. "If you want a really useful HSRC, one that is capable of fulfilling its mandate to do the kinds of research that the state requires in a critically independent way, it needs to become a research broker that occupies the space between the state and the research community. It needs to package the research in a manner that can be digestible and broker the engagements with the state," he says.

"If, for instance, President Cyril Ramaphosa needs to understand what concrete policies he needs to implement in the next 12 to 18 months, he would come to the HSRC. The HSRC would marshal the best brains in the system and get them to undertake [the research] and mediate the tensions that would inevitably emerge between a variety of researchers [with] different agendas."

Evidence alone is not enough

If the HSRC wants its policy recommendations to be taken seriously, it needs to understand that evidence alone is not enough, says Habib.

How to package and marshal evidence, and how to broker the political will for the implementation, is as important as the evidence itself, he says.

So, strong personalities are needed at the helm of an organisation like the HSRC, who can engage with the state and are committed to transforming society but at the same time have significant backbone to stand against the state when it tries to muscle them.

In the early 2000s when Habib was working at the HSRC, the state still determined many of the research questions. "But we had people who were saying, yes, we can take those research questions, but there are two or three other research questions that you should be asking too," says Habib. And, the HSRC was not setting itself up to become an institutional vassal of the state, but was declaring that it was a completely independent public institution. This came from the HSRC leadership, a set of individuals who were authorities in their field but could stand up and ask the hard questions.

> "IN EVERY SINGLE RESEARCH AREA, THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION SHOULD BE **HOW TO ENABLE INCLUSION**"

Addressing inequality

But what are these hard questions then? asks Habib. At the heart of the policy equation, these include what trade-offs need to be made between growth and inclusion, and between unemployment and decent employment. "And those are the questions we've got glib answers for. That's where the research should be going," says Habib.

He says inequality is the biggest question of our time. "The danger of inequality is that it informs people's perceptions of hope and politically polarises society. It creates the political toxicity that you're seeing with the rise of the far right around the world and with the emergence of proto fascist movements in South Africa."

The question is, how to address inequality in a manner that can keep growth going and attract investment? "And these do not have to be zero-sum games. South Africa has grown in inequality, every single year, for 24 years," says Habib.

"The goal is about enabling inclusion, because if you enable inclusion, you address inequality. In every single research area, that should be a fundamental question: how do you enable inclusion? And how do you do it in a way that is sustainable, which means that it enables hope and it enables growth in society? It's how do you do both?"

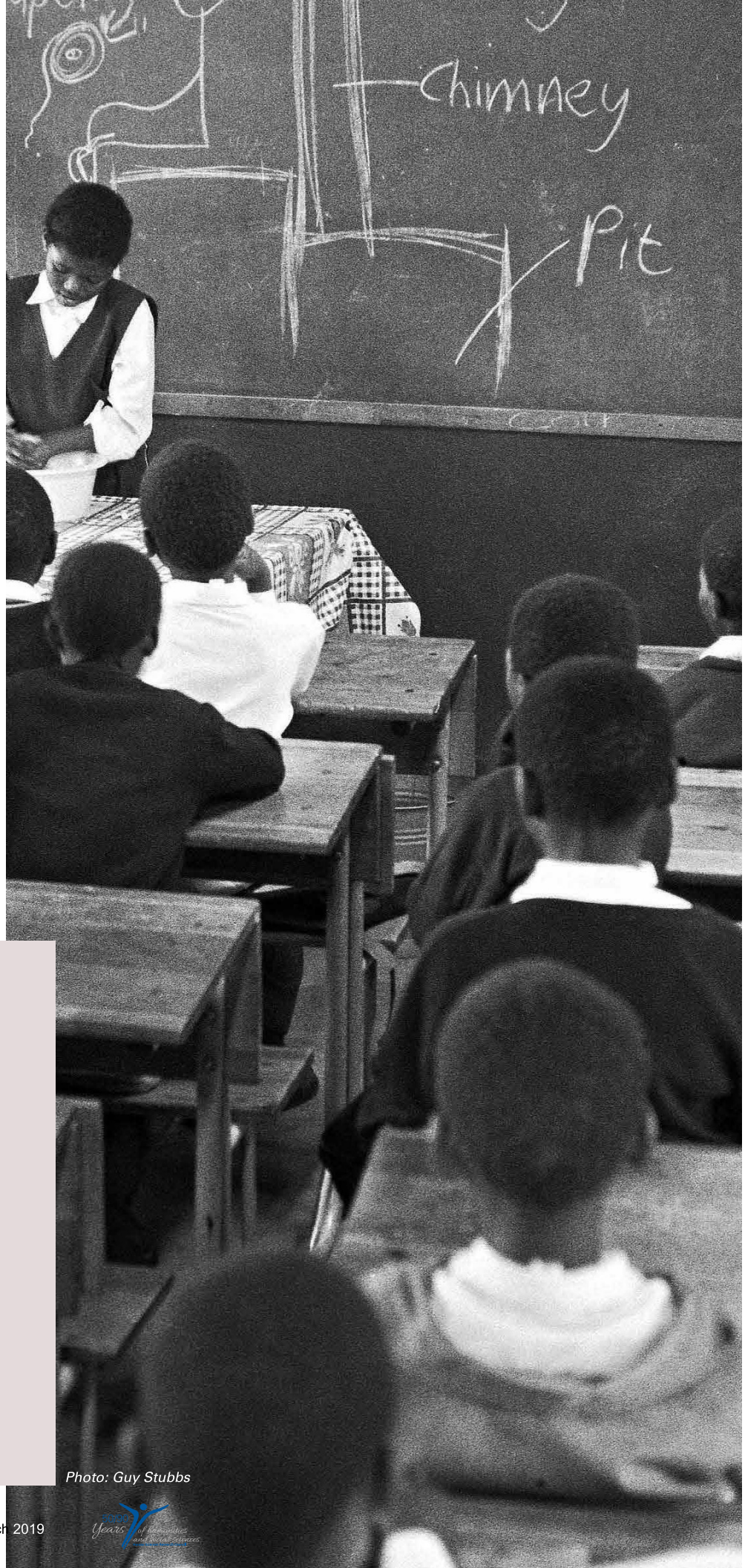
According to Habib, building democracy and inclusion requires thoughtful engagement, a quality that is missing from many of the public authorities and researchers.

Compromising future generations?

Habib believes transformation alone is not enough to build a modern research institution in South Africa. "Frankly, if I got transformation happening without increasing research output, without increasing graduate throughput, without stabilising finances, I haven't done my job."

Using public schools as an example, Habib says while transformation and access happened, the standard of education is so poor that some black parents, who "might go on about toxicity and the politics of whiteness," are sending their children to private schools and former model C schools.

"In public schools, we have changed the colour, but give them a [poor] education. We haven't addressed inequality; we've just reinforced it. So, how do you fulfil your mandate while transforming? That dilemma is the fundamental question that should be at the heart of all of our research today, when we're talking about schooling, about education, about health, about economic policy, about how to build institutions. How do you make those trade-offs? What are the balances to be struck? What is the balance today? What will the balance be five years from now? What is the role of social struggle in enabling that balance? Those are the hard questions that have to be confronted in the social sciences and that we very rarely tackle, exactly because they're hard questions. Instead, we revert to formulaic answers, and that's why we grapple with the legitimacy of social sciences today."



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