

# The longer walk to freedom: MAKING SENSE OF RACE RELATIONS



There is much unfinished business in post-apartheid South Africa. Over the past year, a series of racist and bigoted outbursts on social media have generated widespread public debate about the state of race relations and social cohesion in the country. An HSRC team considers the trends in attitudes towards race relations, issues of trust, feelings of marginalisation and optimism.



These debates include the nature of free speech and hate speech, the difference between personal incidents of racism and the systems, structures and institutions that keep racism and racial inequalities in place. A series of student protests has also drawn attention to economic inequality, the slow pace of transformation in general, and institutionalised racism in society and on university campuses.

Against the picture emerging from social media of acute racial animosity in the country, we considered the trends in attitudes towards race relations over a number of years based on data from the HSRC's South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) series.

The results suggest that there is general recognition of steadily improving race relations, particularly among black African adults. However, feelings of inter-racial dislike and mistrust persist at consistently high levels. Besides providing a measure of the improvement or deterioration of race relations, the data's value lies in the fact that as well as giving us a more balanced national picture, it also points to the permeation and breadth of the 'race relations' problem.

The HSRC has conducted SASAS on an annual basis since 2003. The survey series consists of nationally representative samples of South African adults aged 16 and older, living in private households. The authors examined SASAS data from recent rounds of the survey series to understand how perceptions of race relations have changed in South Africa from 2003 to 2015. The survey sample ranged between 2 500 and 3 300 participants.

### Perceived changes in race relations

Contrary to public sentiment, many in the country feel that race relations have been improving. Since 2008, participants in SASAS have been asked if they felt that race relations in the country had improved, stayed the same, or deteriorated in the last year (Figure 1).

## There is general recognition of steadily improving race relations... however, feelings of inter-racial dislike and mistrust persist at consistently high levels.

In 2015, 51% of South Africans indicated that race relations have improved, 36% indicated that they have remained unchanged, and only 13% felt they had deteriorated. These results are similar to what was observed in most rounds of SASAS since 2008. Looking at Figure 3, we can see that only the 2010 results show a marked difference, probably due to the euphoric effect of the FIFA World Cup.

When asked about perceived changes in the nature of race relations since 1994, two-thirds (66%) of those participating in the 2015 SASAS round responded that relations had improved, compared to 22% who were neutral and 11% who believed they had worsened. The average across the full 2003-2015 period based on this measure is virtually identical.

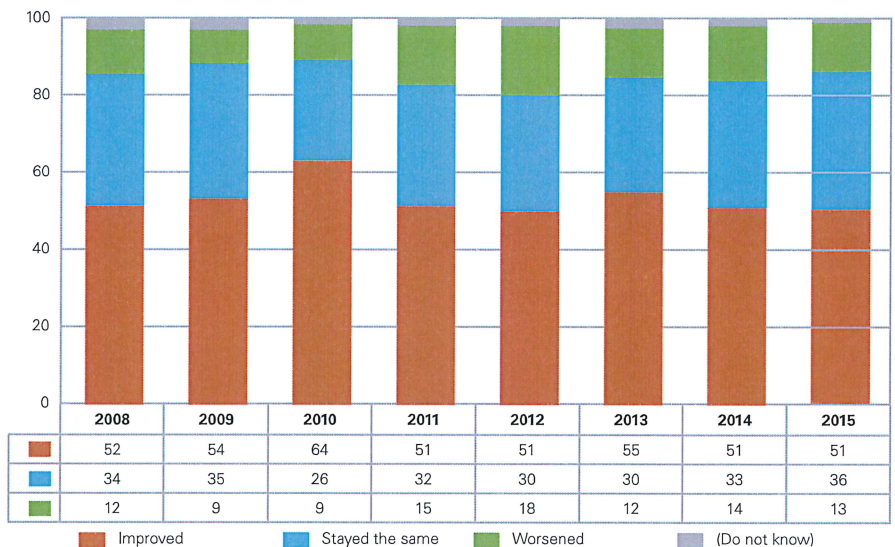
## Who is optimistic about racial relations?

There is significant optimism among black African adults about race relations in South Africa. Less than a tenth of black African adults (7%) felt that race relations in the country had worsened between late 2014 and 2015, while 55% reported improvements and 36% saw no discernible difference.

Black African youth were even more optimistic, with 71% of those aged 16-24 years expressing the view that race relations had improved since the end of apartheid and 56% reporting improvements since 2014. Somewhat more unexpected, a class gradient is evident among black African adults, where those with high living standards are moderately inclined to be pessimistic about race relations relative to those with low living standards.

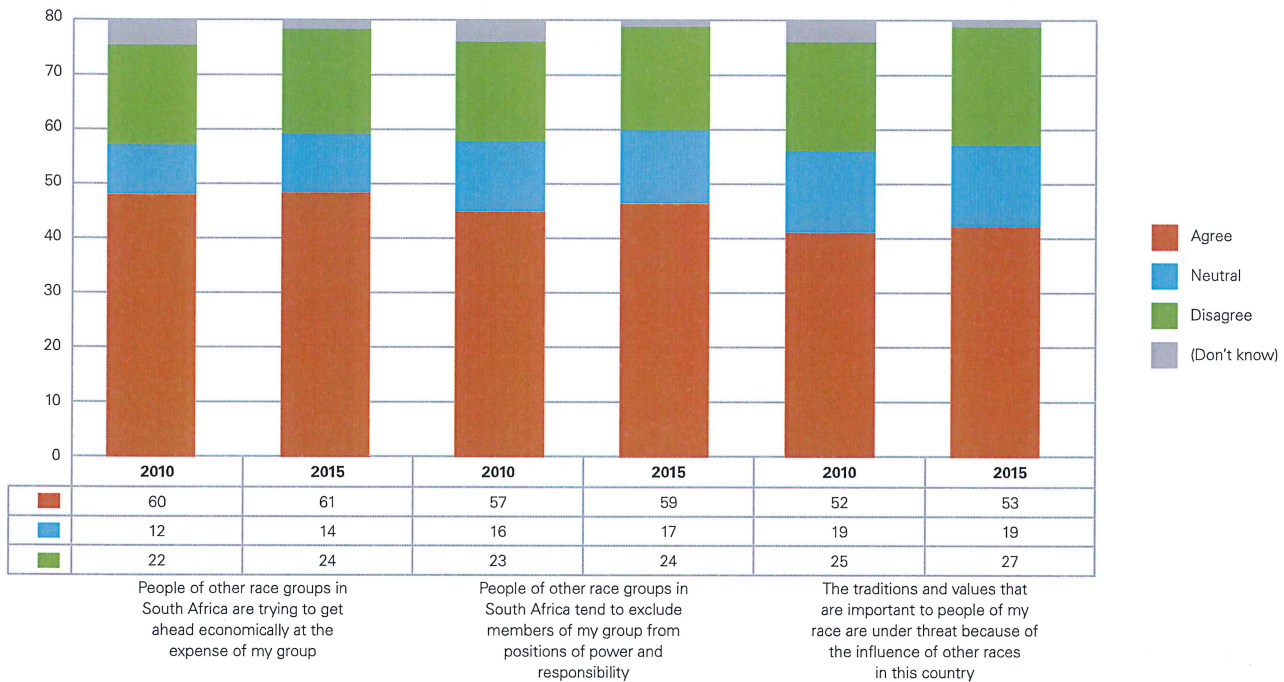
In contrast to black adults, white and Indian adults were found to be less optimistic about race relations. Two-fifths (40%) of white adults felt race relations had worsened since 2014 and roughly a third (34%) thought race relations had worsened since 1994. Similarly, about a third (32%) of Indian adults believed race relations had worsened between 2014 and 2015,

**Fig 1** Changes in race relations in the last year, 2008 – 2015 (%)  
In the last year, do you think that race relations in the country have improved, stayed the same, or gotten worse?



Source: HSRC SASAS 2008-2015.

Fig 2 Concerns about racial marginalisation, 2010 and 2015 (%)



Source: HSRC SASAS 2010, 2015

while nearly a third (30%) thought that relations had deteriorated during the post-apartheid period. Among these racial minorities, the youth on average tended to voice more confidence about progress in race relations compared to older generations.

### Feelings of racial marginalisation

While a general sense of improved race relations has emerged post-democracy, many South Africans express concern that their racial group's position – economically, politically and culturally – is under threat from other groups (Figure 2).

In 2015, 61% of the population thought that people of other race groups were trying to get ahead economically at the expense of their own group. More than half (59%) thought that people of other race groups were excluding members of their own group from positions of power and responsibility.

Finally, almost half (53%) believed that the traditions and values that are important to people of their race group are under threat because of the influence

of other races. These figures are not appreciably different from those reported in the 2010 round of the survey series, and indeed the other four annual rounds of interviewing in between.

Fears of marginalisation are shared by all race groups in South Africa, with a majority in each group expressing concerns about the marginalisation of their own group. This is evident from the fact that there is only a 4 to 8 percentage point difference between race groups for each of the three measures presented in Figure 2. Given how widespread these beliefs are, it is perhaps not surprising to learn in 2015 that more than half (53%) of all adult South Africans felt that other

race groups will never understand what members of their group are like.

### Can people of other races be trusted?

Trust is central to an individual's ability to form social relationships and reject harmful stereotypes. It is also a commonly used measure of social cohesion. Since 2003 SASAS respondents have been asked their level of agreement with the statement 'People of different racial groups do not really trust each other' (see Figure 3). In 2003 nearly three-quarters (72%) agreed with this statement, with the figure remaining relatively stable until 2007, when levels of agreement began to decline gradually.

...to individualise and criminalise [racism], we ignore longer and wider trends that are pointing us elsewhere...our work must happen at the levels of individuals and groups but must also address the systems, structures and institutions that keep racism and racial inequalities in place.



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In 2011, it fell to below two-thirds (64%) of the general public. Since 2011, public agreement with the statement began rising again, reaching 69% of the adult public in late 2015.

In addition, respondents to each round of SASAS since 2003 have been asked to register the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement 'People of different racial groups will never really trust each other'. At the time of the first round of interviewing in 2003, three-fifths (60%) of the adult public agreed with this statement. Since 2003, there have been only modest variations, with total agreement ranging between 51% and 60% over the period, and standing at 55% in 2015. This pattern suggests fairly broad-based scepticism about the future of race relations in the country.

## Conclusion

The SASAS series points to widespread recognition of improvements in race relations on a year-on-year basis since 1994. However, a considerable proportion of South Africans continue to feel threatened by other race groups and believe there to be limited interpersonal trust across racial lines. This raises a question about the kind of national conversation we seem to be having (in response to racist Facebook and Twitter posts), which tends to individualise and criminalise singular acts of racism. Yet if racial mistrust and dislike are as prevalent, consistent and widespread among South Africans as the data suggests, then we need to begin the conversation with the recognition that this burdens, shapes and constrains everyday interactions in a myriad of difficult and complicated ways (of which social media outbursts are simply a small indication).

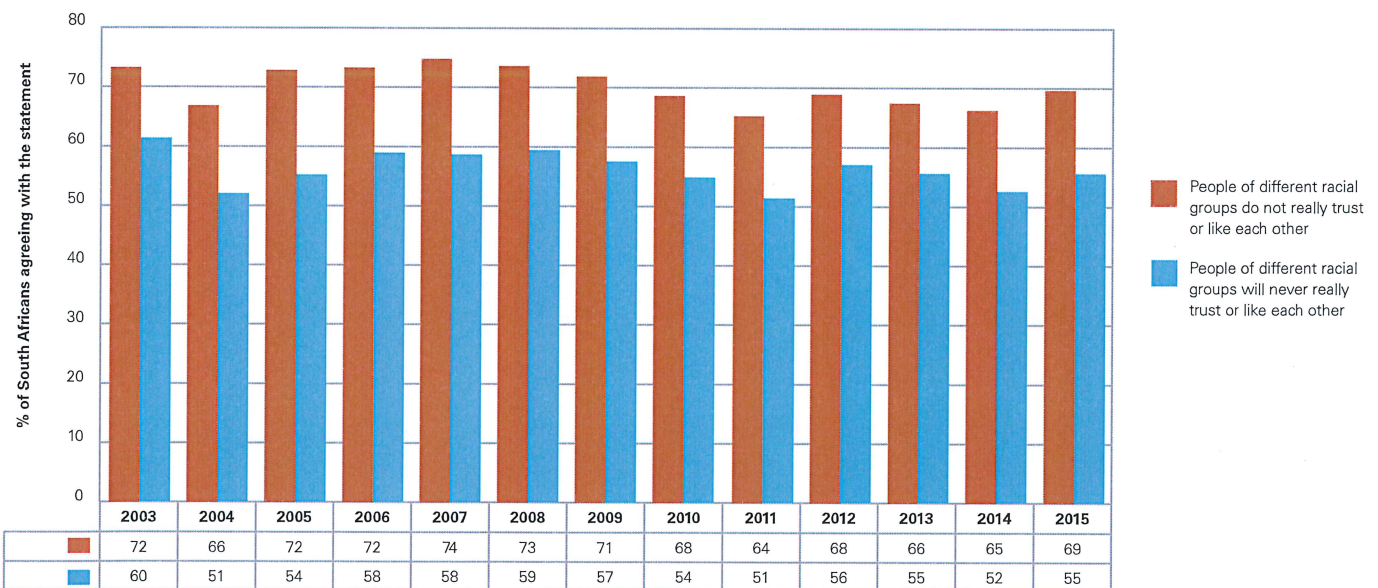
The data, we suggest, should be used as the starting point; not necessarily to insist that there has in fact been an improvement in race relations or that there is room for optimism and hope

(which there is), but rather to use the sobering survey figures as the basis for encouraging deeper understandings between groups about where we are, what it means to be here, and why we are where we are.

As the country prepares to welcome a new bill on hate speech in an attempt to curb racist language, the SASAS data can perhaps act as a valuable reminder that to individualise and criminalise, we ignore longer and wider trends that are pointing us elsewhere. They point us to the fault lines of social cohesion and nation-building in South Africa and remind us that our work must happen at the levels of individuals and groups but must also address the systems, structures and institutions that keep racism and racial inequalities in place.

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Fig 3 Trust between race groups, 2003 – 2015 (% agreeing with statements)



Source: HSRC SASAS 2003-2015



# REVIEW

Making sense  
of racism

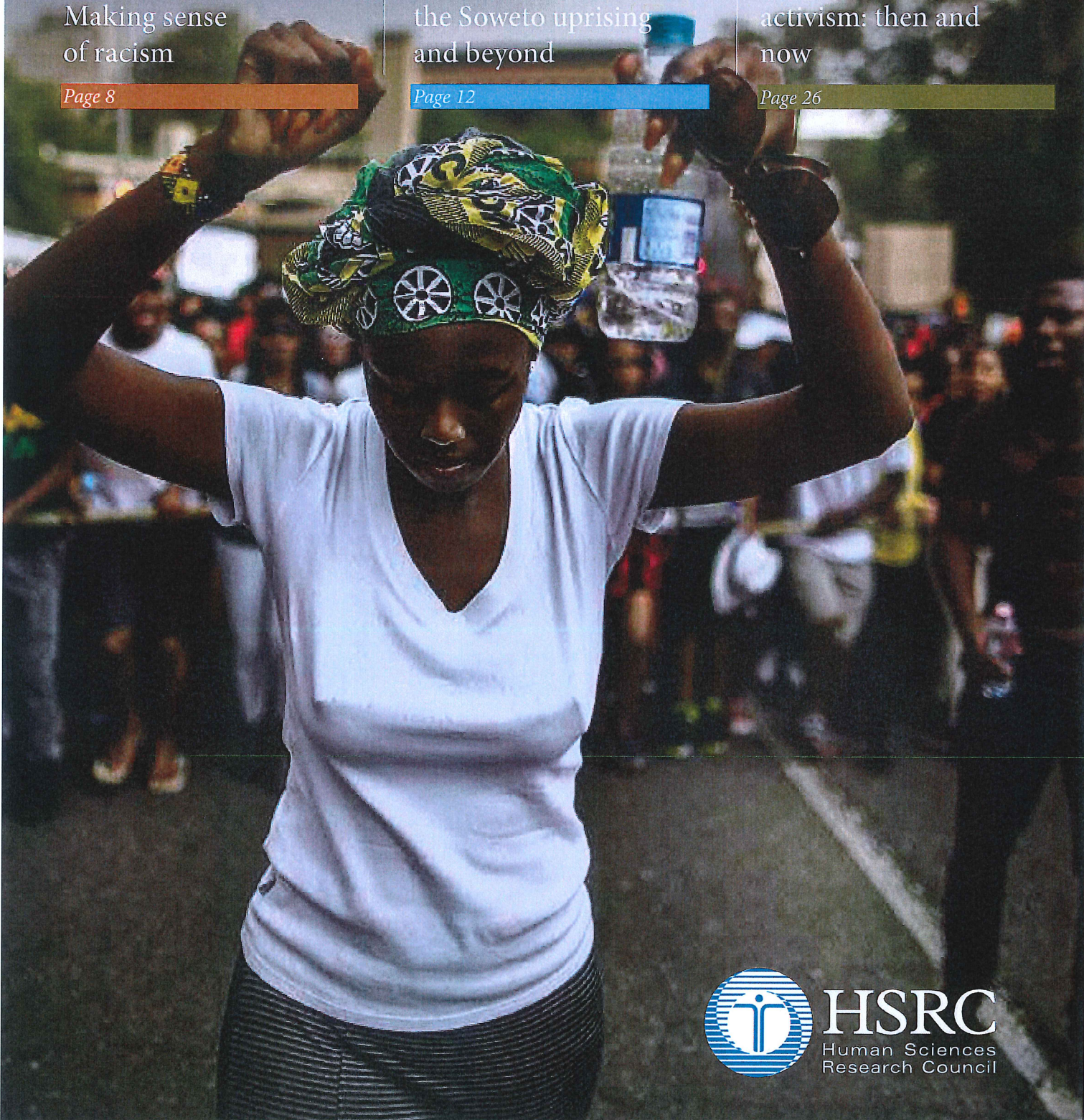
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Remembering 1976:  
the Soweto uprising  
and beyond

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Youth (educational)  
activism: then and  
now

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