



Young people protest for action against climate change outside the parliament in Cape Town, South Africa in March 2019.

Photo: Ashraf Hendricks, GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)

# Climate change knowledge in South Africa on the rise

In February 2022, South Africa introduced the Climate Change Bill in parliament. If the bill becomes law, it will be the first legal framework in South Africa to respond to the climate crisis. But for climate policy to take effect, the public needs to be on board. A recent HSRC survey led by Dr Ben Roberts asked a series of interrelated questions to gauge the scope of South Africans' knowledge of and attitudes towards climate change. By *Andrea Teagle*

**T**he interior of Southern Africa is warming at around [twice the global average](#). A report by climate change expert Prof Nicholas King focusing on the Western Cape, Limpopo and Mpumalanga predicts that in the coming decades the country will almost certainly experience extreme heat and weather events. South Africa can expect economic collapse, social conflict and displacement following coastal damage, food insecurity, water stress and disease outbreaks.

Such findings clearly point to the need for decisive action in all spheres of society to mitigate the climate crisis, particularly through reducing the use of fossil fuels. Yet, until recently, little was known about the attitudes and behaviours of South Africans in relation to the issue. Now, a report led by the HSRC's Dr Ben Roberts has found that awareness of the climate crisis increased between 2007 and 2017, with the proportion of people who had never heard of the term 'climate change' dropping from 27% to just 8%.

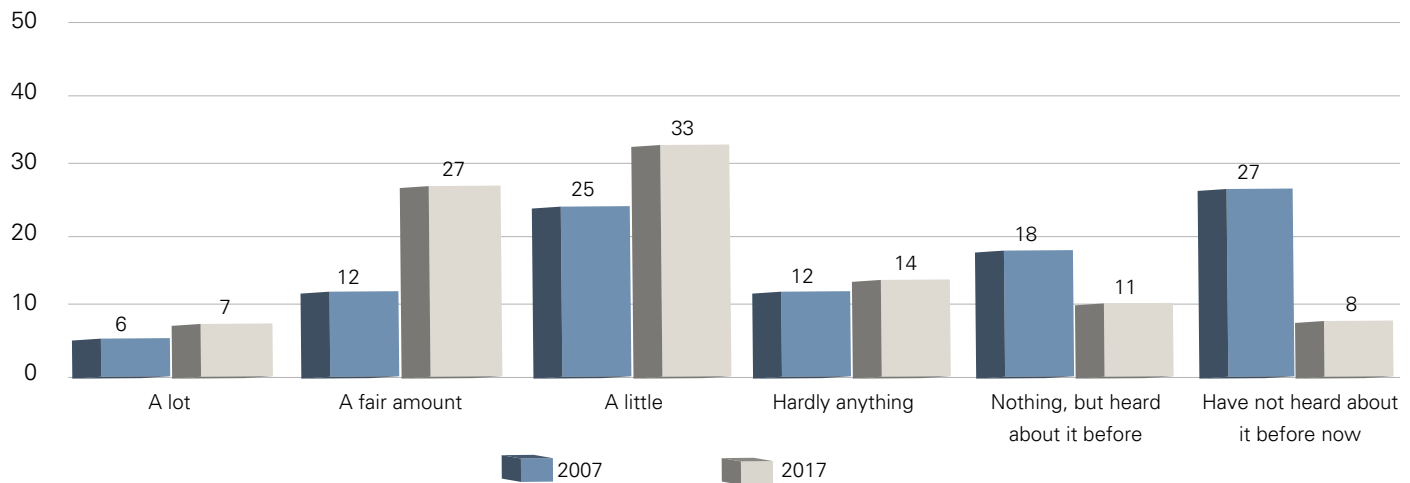
"This positive shift [to more awareness] is likely to have been precipitated partly by increasing climatic shocks and

media attention to the climate crisis," Roberts observes. The study was commissioned by the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) and National Research Foundation (NRF) and was included as a series of questions in the 2017 round of the HSRC's South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). It involved, in part, a replication of cross-national surveying undertaken by the European Social Survey (ESS) on this topic.

The findings show that while awareness of climate change had increased, most people still had only a shallow understanding of the issue: just a third of South Africans know at least a fair amount about climate change. (Figure 1.) The study also revealed a stubborn, significant minority of one in three who did not believe in the reality of climate change. In comparison, among European countries that took part in the parallel ESS survey at the same time, fewer than one in 10 participants held this view.

"We need to think about how best to tackle this scepticism," Roberts says, adding that it matters because it affects pro-environmental norms and behaviour change.

**Figure 1.** Changes in self-rated climate change knowledge between 2007 and 2017 (%). Note: Item non-responses excluded from analysis



**Source:** HSRC SASAS 2017, DSI/NRF climate change and energy module

### Urgent need for climate campaigns

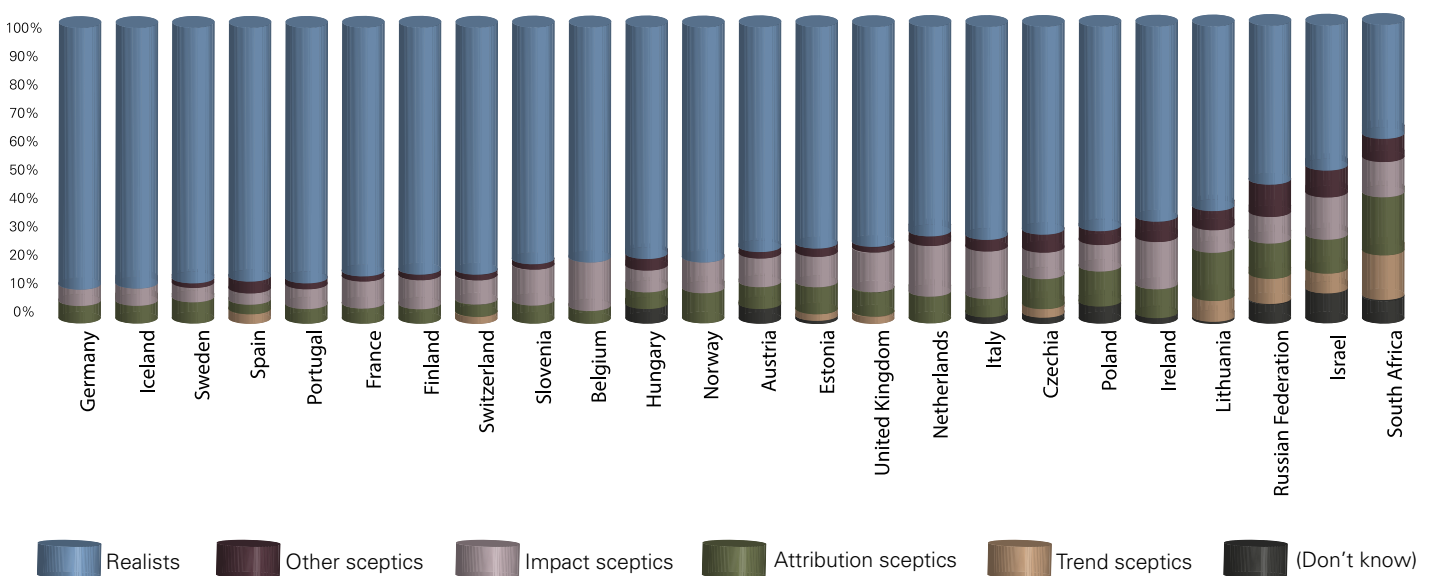
The study makes use of Stern’s model of environmental behaviours, which traces links between what people believe and how they act. Specifically, it suggests that people will be more likely to act in environmentally friendly ways, firstly, if they believe in climate change, and secondly, if they believe that climate change poses a threat to things they value – clean air, wildlife, food and water security, for example. Finally, they must also believe that their actions can help to reduce the threat.

The study team identifies three types of climate sceptics: trend sceptics, attribution sceptics, and impact sceptics. Trend sceptics do not believe that the climate is changing; attribution sceptics dispute that people are to blame; and impact sceptics doubt the severity of the impact. ‘A majority

of the South African population exhibited some form of scepticism on the issue of climate change. We found that only 39% of the adult population could be described as realists on the issue,’ they write. (Figure 2.) Similarly, a study led by Dr Nicholas Simpson that sought to measure climate change literacy across Africa, where literacy was defined as awareness of climate change and its anthropogenic causes, found average rates of 23% to 66% across 33 countries.

Roberts notes that greater knowledge about climate change does tend to reduce scepticism: “One of the silver lining messages from the study is that knowledge is not leading to greater ambivalence.” He recommends that South Africa rolls out robust climate crisis campaigns via different media and in different languages to sway hearts and minds in the green space.

**Figure 2.** Percentages of persons who are realists or exhibit some degree of scepticism on climate change



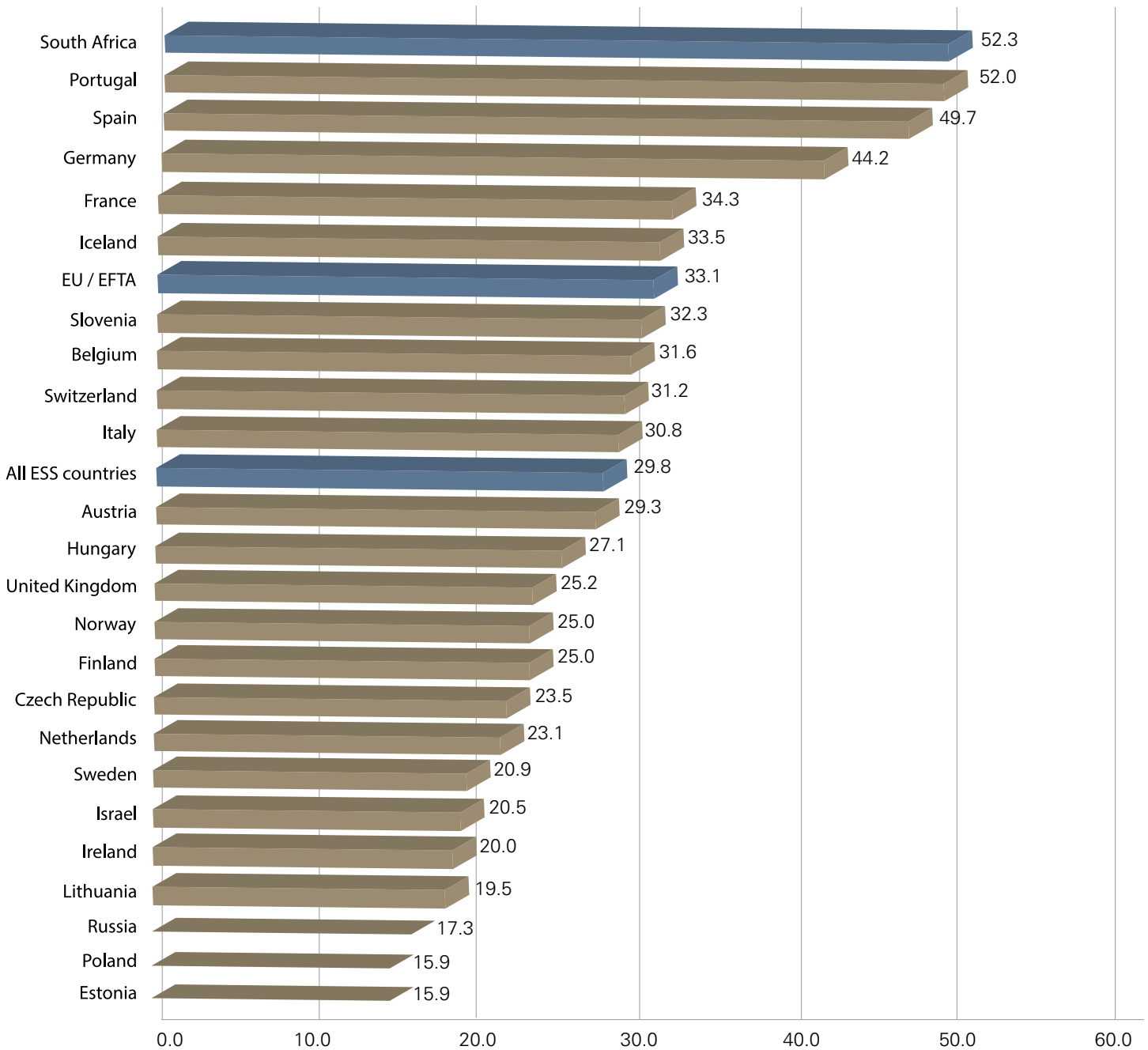
**Source:** HSRC SASAS 2017–DST/NRF climate change and energy module; ESS R8: European Social Survey Round 8, 2016–2017

### Comparatively high concern

The second link in the model of pro-environmental behaviour is the belief in the impacts of climate change that you care about. The study suggests that among those who believe in the reality of climate change, concern is high (57%). In fact, South Africa's levels of concern are higher than any country in Europe that undertook similar surveys. (Figure 3.)

The increase in concern corresponds with an upsurge in awareness of climate change, particularly among the black African majority. "Uncertainty has been replaced primarily with recognition of the far-reaching effects that climate change is going to have," the authors write.

**Figure 3.** Concern about climate change in South Africa compared to Europe, ranked high to low based on the % that are very or extremely worried about it (2017). Note: Excludes non-responses as well as those saying that the climate is 'definitely not changing'.



**Source:** HSRC SASAS 2017–DST/NRF climate change and energy module; ESS R8: European Social Survey Round 8, 2016–2017.

In a multivariate analysis, the study further confirmed that concern was linked to a higher probability of pro-environmental behaviour. This suggests that this worry can be built upon and leveraged to encourage behaviour changes such as lowering energy consumption.

## Individual actions and systemic changes

The survey found that a substantial proportion of the South African public do believe they can reduce their energy consumption, but are less convinced that their actions will make a difference, or that enough people will change their behaviour to have any real impact. They are, however, more convinced of this than their European counterparts. Participants were asked to rate, on a scale of 0 ('Not at all likely') to 10 ('Extremely likely'), how likely it was that limiting their energy would help reduce climate change, and the average South African score was 5.6. In comparison, of the 23 European countries that implemented the survey, all but Austria (with a mean score of 5) scored below 5, with Estonians (3.2) expressing the least confidence in personal efficacy.

Are those who believe that their actions can help to reduce the climate crisis right in thinking so? This question is often at the heart of discussions around how to respond to climate change.

Some activists worry that focusing on individual responsibility detracts from the larger, [systemic issues](#) driving the climate crisis, [offloading responsibility from governments and industries](#). But individuals can play a role in holding the government and corporations to account, and pressuring them to follow through on climate commitments. According to Ben Roberts, the South African government has demonstrated the political will to shift towards a greener economy – for instance, by introducing the landmark [Climate Change Bill](#).

Behaviour change at individual and household levels (lowering energy and water consumption, shifting to a plant-based diet, etc.) can help to reduce overall emissions, particularly among higher-income households, which are also better equipped to make lifestyle changes. As residents of the Western Cape demonstrated during the 2019 drought, when given the right information, people can come together to make pro-environmental choices. Aligning our actions with our values gives us a sense of agency and [hope](#) – both of which are critical to tackling the crisis.

## Green energy transition

Recently, civil society groups wrote to the president demanding that the minister sign off on the construction of new renewable energy sources in response to the energy crisis. However, Roberts notes that a large share of the public is still supportive of coal-based energy supply. "Because of the level of poverty in South Africa, and the level of economic strain in recent years, people primarily want a reliable source of energy and one that's relatively affordable – whether it's coal or renewable energy," he says. Gaining a better understanding of public sentiment is important to inform a just transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient and sustainable society. Monitoring the public's views on environmental issues is the focus of a new partnership with the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, DSI, NRF, CSIR and the HSRC, he says.

## Acknowledgement

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# Giving voice to the struggles and experiences of military veterans

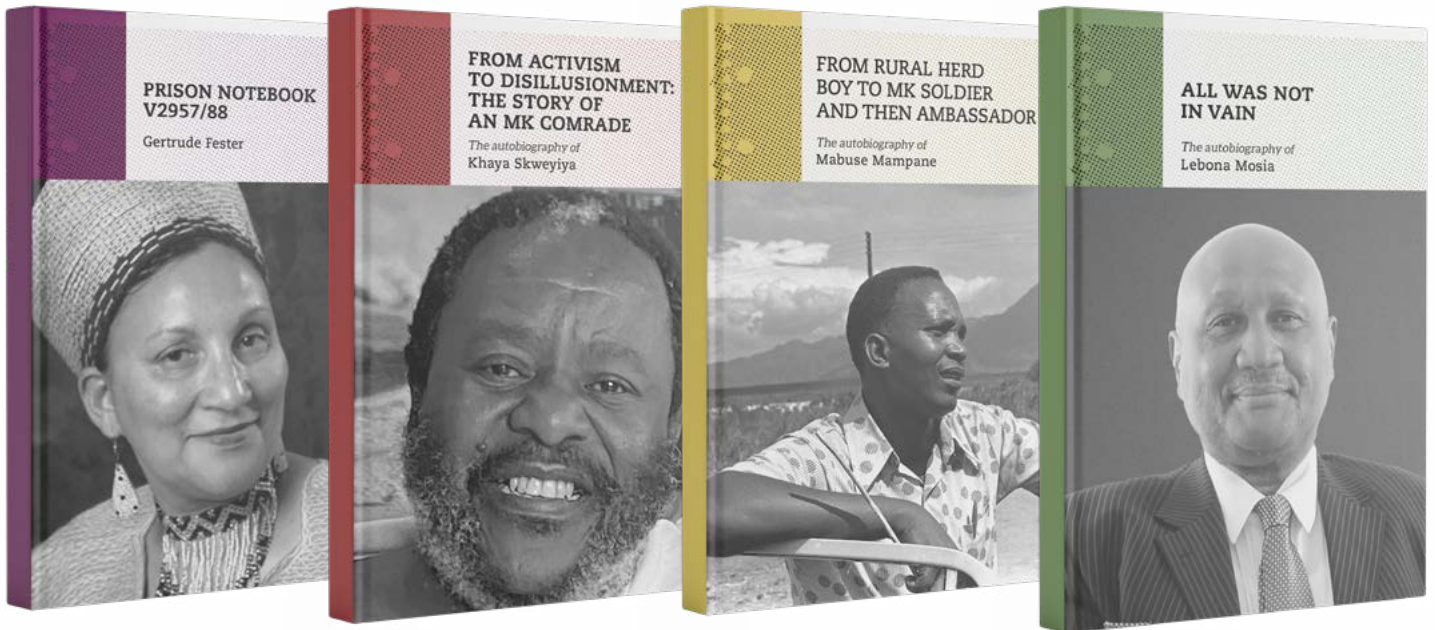


Photo: HSRC Press, book covers

Many of South Africa's military veterans have felt somewhat excluded from the grand apartheid struggle narrative, and that they have not received recognition for their role in the country's liberation. This has motivated a number of them to document their stories, a project supported by the HSRC and the Department of Military Veterans.

*Cyril Adonis, Gregory Houston and Yul Derek Davids share the details and benefits of this collaboration.*

**A**fter the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre and the banning of political organisations, military veterans were a cornerstone of the fight for liberation. Over three decades of armed struggle, they faced harassment by the security forces, detention without trial, torture, imprisonment, separation from families, departure for exile and worse. They undertook military training abroad, lived in military camps, participated in underground political and military operations inside South Africa, and combatted rebel forces in Angola. Many experienced injuries or lost their lives in the struggle.

One of the main aims of the Military Veterans Act (Act No. 18 of 2011) is to recognise and honour military veterans in life and remember them in death for their sacrifices on behalf of the nation. The Act is implemented by the Department of Military Veterans (DMV), which was

established following the integration of the armed wings of the liberation movement – i.e. Umkhonto we Sizwe, the Azanian People's Liberation Army, and the Azanian National Liberation Army – as well as the former South African, Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei defence forces, into the South African National Defence Force of today. DMV is responsible for facilitating activities to restore dignity to veterans and recognise their contribution to our freedom and nation building.

The Military Veterans Act places an obligation on the state to roll out the following services and benefits to military veterans and their dependents: military pensions; housing; free access to military health services; free or subsidised access to public transport; skills acquisition and education support; job placement; burial support; entrepreneurial support services; and counselling.

## Documenting life stories

Up until now, military veterans, especially those from the former non-statutory military forces, have not felt adequately recognised. Many feel that they are excluded from the grand narrative of the anti-apartheid struggle; however, with few exceptions, they lack the financial resources to write and publicise personal memoirs.

To remedy this, the DMV has prioritised the publication of manuscripts produced by military veterans, giving voice to their experiences both as combatants and as veterans in post-apartheid South Africa. The department is keenly aware of the urgency of focusing particularly on unpublished or incomplete manuscripts produced by veterans who are elderly and/or in ill health, in order to ensure that their stories are told.

This process was started with the assistance of the HSRC and resulted in the enhancement, editing and publication of several [manuscripts](#), including those of [Phillip Kgosana](#), [Dan Mdluli](#), [Eddie Funde](#), [Themba Dlamini](#), and [Teboho Molotsi](#). Phillip Kgosana's published memoir *Lest we forget* was enhanced and edited by a team of HSRC researchers with funding from the then CEO of the HSRC, Professor Crain Soudien. The research team edited and published the remaining manuscripts under a five-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the DMV and the HSRC that ended on 31 March 2020.

Given the success of the relationship between the two parties, and the DMV's mandate to recognise and honour military veterans, a second five-year MOU was concluded in October 2020, with the publication of more memoirs identified as a primary area of collaboration.

With the HSRC's assistance, memoirs belonging to [Gertrude Fester](#), [Khaya Skweyiya](#), [Lebona Mosia](#), [Morena Motaung](#), [Mabuse Mampane](#), and [Muntu Nxumalo](#) were published and launched on 31 March 2022. The DMV has also contracted the HSRC to complete the biography of late Ambassador [John Kgoana Nkadimeng](#). On the recommendation of the DMV and the Nkadimeng family, writing the biography of John Nkadimeng was undertaken by Professor Peter Delius of the University of the Witwatersrand and this manuscript is currently in the publication process.

Engagements between the DMV and HSRC are already under way for the publication of additional military veterans' manuscripts during the 2022–2023 financial year. Given the fact that the DMV is inundated with requests for assistance from military veterans to have their life stories published, this is likely to be prioritised for the remainder of the MOU that will end in October 2025. The collaboration is also prioritising the publication and launching of the Nkadimeng biography this financial year.

## The impact

In addition to honouring the heroes and heroines of the liberation struggle, these records are invaluable sources of knowledge, insight and inspiration for the current generation of change makers in South Africa, and for future generations. The personal stories of these extraordinary individuals provide a lens through which to understand the particular historical period and events better. They also provide fuller portraits of the human beings beyond the deeds, ideals, glory and greatness that are distilled and sometimes mythicised in historical narratives of struggle heroes.

The collaboration between the DMV and HSRC aims to contribute to a broader social reconstruction project. The HSRC, with its knowledge-brokering and impact assessment capabilities, proposes a public engagement strategy after the publication of the manuscripts, in order to exploit their potential for contributing to social cohesion. This strategy could be centred on knowledge-brokering activities and intergenerational dialogues. Including other relevant stakeholders such as the Department of Basic Education and the Government Communication Information System would also be critical and contribute to ensuring that the partnership between the HSRC and DMV has maximum impact.

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**Watch:** The eNCA's Faith Mangope speaks to Irene Mpolweni, the director general of the Department of Military Veterans.