

WORKING WITH THE 'ENEMY':

BUILDING COHESION AND WINNING TRUST

In 1996, Dr Thabane Vincent Maphai joined the HSRC as the executive director of its social dynamics research programme. The HSRC seconded him to head up the Presidential Review Commission, a body set up by then president Nelson Mandela to investigate government restructuring and service delivery. He spoke to the *HSRC Review* about the transformation of the HSRC in the 1990s and how to improve research uptake.

Dr Thabane Vincent Maphai

Photo: Dr Ian Edelstein



“One of the big challenges when you go through any kind of transformation, is that you might have an implosion, which we didn’t,” Maphai says of the early years of change at the HSRC.

He says Rolf Stumpf, CEO of the HSRC from 1993 to 1998, brought in research directors from outside, transforming the core of the organisation. One of the early programmes introduced was on governance, and another was on poverty and social livelihoods.

There was a new government, so the context given and questions asked by stakeholders were radically different from those in 1948, when apartheid began. “The key dynamic was that nobody was told that because they were white or male, they then had to make room for a black or a woman. All of us, the old and the new at the top, agreed that not everything from the past was bad, nor was all from the present good. The team decided to draw from tradition and from the refreshment that came with new members. That is why, in my opinion, the place never fell apart,” says Maphai.

Seen as legitimate

He says the HSRC was the only institution in the country that had the resources to conduct the type of large data surveys in which it specialised. “All units contributed to the surveys. Our publications were snapped up and read. We introduced the *State of the Nation* publication (an independent analyses of the national agenda through the lens of the South African political, economic and social context). We brought in new kinds of evaluators who were experts in their fields.”

The government began to commission the HSRC to conduct research.

“The biggest change was that the HSRC was legitimised, beginning with our appointment, and consolidated by our ability to attract people who would not have considered the HSRC in the past. Initially, we had some ideological difficulties with the Department of Science and Technology but we saw those as simply growing pains.”

Part of the debate was whether the research should be done by the HSRC in its existing form or by the universities, which pushed for this to happen. However, tension was eased by the formation of the National Research Foundation, as the intermediary agency between the policies and strategies of the government and the research institutions. It was established on 1 April 1999, in accordance with an act of parliament.

Funding

Maphai also spoke about the role and influence of research funders. The policy of framework autonomy,

which was introduced in the late 1980s, required that science councils also accessed private-sector funding through contract work, so that they were not solely funded by the state. “The funder can control the mind. Unfortunately, this is the way the world works. The beneficial impact [of framework autonomy] was that it was making the HSRC aware of the need to be competitive. For a research organisation, its competitive edge is the quality of its publications. To be strongly competitive, it needed to bring in high-profile people who were highly respected.”

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A personal perspective

In the early days, many of the newly recruited black researchers needed to cope with the idea of suddenly working closely with colleagues who represented the “enemy” in the previous dispensation.

“In those days anything Afrikaans still represented evil for a township boy, and Afrikaners could hardly be considered ordinary people. The first thing that struck me when working with Afrikaners, was that I was in fact dealing with people who were no different from me, who wanted to earn a salary, who had bonds to pay and who were trying to do an honest day’s work. So, I connected with people at a basic human level,” says Maphai.

While serving on the Presidential Review Commission, Maphai engaged with a number of Afrikaner organisations in dialogue about where the country was heading. “I think it was my experience at the HSRC



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which enabled me to deal with that kind of dialogue. It told me that people are not driven necessarily by hatred. People are also driven by fear of the unknown, by indoctrination, by all kinds of things. The second memorable thing for me [was] that when the organisation came under siege, we stood together as professionals, not as blacks, not as whites, not as English, but professionals who were saying this is what is driving us and this is what can be done. And the third thing was seeing an organisation hated by the majority of society become mainstream to the point where I think young people working there [now] don't even remember its history."

The future of the HSRC

Maphai's advice to research councils, which also applies to large corporate organisations and political parties, is to never lose sight of their core values, which in the case of the HSRC is to produce the best possible research.

He says institutions easily fall prey to political correctness. "The trouble with political figures is, they come and go. Also, the world has consolidated so much that I think you need to see yourself as part of the global movement. One of the problems in South Africa is that we have a sense of exceptionalism, [thinking] our problems are unique. They are not. If you don't take a global view of people, you become myopic and might

spend a lot of time reinventing the wheel. Furthermore, a research institution's major asset is its independence, which gives it credibility. The minute you are captured by any sector, others don't take you seriously."

According to Maphai, one of the areas where the HSRC can be effective is distilling the plethora of research outputs that are out there. "You need to pull together a whole series of public policy publications, underpin them with some global perspective and present them in a digestible fashion. I think your job is to educate the public so that the public can run with these things. Societies are not changed from institutions; they are changed from the ground."

Talking to the next generation

"My sense is that the next generation has no sense of boundaries, black or white. Their world is much bigger. Boundaries and nationalism don't appeal to them. Our mistake is to continue trying to talk to them in our language of the past, to which they cannot relate."

Maphai also believes the HSRC needs to become more vocal and authoritative on public issues, such as the debate about land, highlighting the true points of debate and the successes and failures of past policies and interventions. "The HSRC needs to be less reactive and begin to be very forward looking, anticipate issues and start working on them now."