

# A NEW FOCUS ON PUBLIC POLICY:

## Establishing the democracy and governance research programme



Dr Yvonne Muthien  
Photo: Antonio Erasmus

Dr Yvonne Muthien joined the HSRC in 1997 and was asked to help establish a public policy research unit, which still exists today as the Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery programme. She left to join the corporate sector in 2000. In an interview with the *HSRC Review*, Muthien spoke about the contribution that the unit made to transform public policy.

When she arrived at the HSRC, Muthien saw an opportunity to establish public policy as a science in South Africa and to exercise thought leadership in the debate about what it should be.

“The new Mandela government had inherited all the old apartheid laws. We transformed the structures of the government, but the policy frameworks of the old government were still in place. So, many of our research projects were either participating in the white and green paper processes of the government or leading that process.”

### New voices

A strong new cadre of public policy specialists was developed at the HSRC. Their research included work on the white paper on privatisation, which involved an early discussion about the extent that the state should be involved in state-owned enterprises. They also supported the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) during the first national democratic elections, helping to develop and establish the first exit poll using the HSRC’s large-scale survey research capacity.

“Right in the midst of the election and on the morning after the elections, we were able to definitively declare those elections free and fair,” says Muthien. This complemented the work of the election observers and set a new benchmark globally in terms of democratic elections.

The unit also set the foundation for what would later become the State of the Nation, when it initiated the *Democracy and Governance Review*, by pulling together edited collections of a host of research articles on democracy and governance.

“In the process, we reflected on state formation, as it underpinned the new democracy. And I think we had the slight audacity to compare the Mandela and Mbeki regimes from an analytical point of view. I think those were very insightful reflections on the state of our democracy as it was evolving at the time.”

### The HSRC’s relationship with the state

“I think that the government saw us as thought leaders and therefore had a high degree of trust in our abilities and our work,” says Muthien. At one point, the Democracy and Governance unit had more contract research work than anticipated. It had been hoped that there would be more time for deeper reflective research, she says. “But we had our hands full in assisting the government. We also provided support to the presidency, both through the terms of office of President Mandela and President Mbeki. We did a great deal of research to establish the new National Orders system, and completed the national symbols of South Africa,” she says. The National Orders are South Africa’s highest awards presented to individuals by the president, in recognition of their contribution to the country. As this was pioneering work at the time, the HSRC was seen as both a critical voice in society and a trusted partner in the public policy space.

### Strengths

The HSRC’s ability to conduct large-scale survey research was

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one of its main strengths. This was complemented by new disciplines in public policy thinking as well as political science, says Muthien. “So what has really stood out for me since then is the HSRC’s research on governance, state formation and the state of democracy in the country. [Previously], the universities were the places where research on the political landscape, democracy and the economy was taking place. The HSRC tended to focus much more on empirical survey research. That relationship was completely turned on its head, as the HSRC took the lead in academic debates.”

The HSRC attracted some of the best scholars and academics in South Africa and globally, she says. “We had a fantastic visiting scholars programme, which brought tremendous international thought leadership to the HSRC. We developed good relationships with university scholars and were respected at academic conferences. There was a close collaboration between ourselves and the CSIR as well as the Africa Institute, whose programmes often overlapped with ours. We developed a body of science council leaders that became respected all over the world.”

### Difficult times

According to Muthien there were some tough times, especially the era of budget cuts. “We constantly had to do more with less as the years went on.” She says some of the staff were not as skilled in the new thinking and new research methods as they were in those they had been using for the previous 20 years. “So the transformation of the HSRC remained a very big challenge.”

Muthien says the HSRC also lacked a strong publication track record. “We literally had to transform the printing press. They could barely keep up with democracy and governance, let alone some of the other areas. But therein lay tremendous opportunities, because today the HSRC Press, the publications library of the HSRC, is a place where scholars can immediately access information.”

### New challenges

Today, the HSRC needs to grapple with many research questions that it did not foresee in the transformation era. One example is the underestimation of the persistence of social protest and social movements, whereby, notwithstanding a more legitimate government, the need for people to protest has not gone away. The challenge for the HSRC is to try to map out what the differences are and what the triggers are for social protest today, says Muthien. “Perhaps we should focus on more research into corruption. Also, the resurgence of racism and polarisation indicates that the spatial dimensions of segregation have not been grappled with thoroughly enough. But our biggest challenges still are how to address the issues of inequality, poverty and unemployment.”