

**70 years on 'the
Freedom Charter is
not irrelevant - it is
unfinished'**

-By Ari Sitas

At an IFFA
workshop to bring
together academics
from all Cape
Town's universities,
ARI SITAS asked if
the Freedom
Charter,
particularly its
economic clauses,
are still fit for
purpose?



Introduction

When the Freedom Charter was adopted in 1955 in Kliptown, it was more than a political manifesto – it was a transformative social contract drafted, as Congress leadership claimed, by ordinary South Africans from all walks of life. Here, Ben Turok, the founder of this Institute, had a big task in collating the material gathered from many working groups on the “ground.”

The two economic clauses – “*The People Shall Share in the Country’s Wealth*” and “*There Shall Be Work and Security*” – were particularly powerful because they addressed not only political exclusion under apartheid, but the deep economic dispossession that had long defined black life in South Africa.

These clauses confronted a system where the economy was crafted for the benefit of a white minority. The Charter called for the “national wealth” of the country, particularly the gold and mineral riches, to be “restored to the people.” This was not just about ownership on paper – it was a demand for transformation in who controlled the means of production, land and industry. It implied a redistribution of power, not just a redistribution of income.

Similarly, the call for *work and security* was grounded in a clear sense of economic justice: everyone should have the right to work, to fair wages, to rest, to maternity leave, to pensions – in short, to a life of dignity. In a country where cheap black labour had long been exploited to generate white wealth, this was a radical declaration of intent.

In my conversations with Ben Turok, he insisted that what made these ideas so powerful was that they were not “just slogans” – they came from real grievances. They were, he insisted, the collective voice of miners, domestic workers, factory workers and the unemployed. People who knew that liberation without jobs, without safety nets, without control over natural resources, would mean the continuation of inequality under a new flag.

Criticisms of the Charter’s economic proposals at the time

From the beginning, these economic demands were contested. The apartheid regime and its business allies labelled the Charter’s economic clauses as Marxist, communist, socialist, and dangerous. They seemed afraid that redistributive justice would threaten their accumulated privileges. The Charter was banned. Meetings about it were raided. People were arrested for carrying it.

Even within the liberation movement, there was disagreement. Some felt that the wording of the clauses was too vague. Critics from groups like the Pan Africanist Congress believed the Charter failed to prioritise African ownership of the economy –



they saw the idea of “the people” as too broad, diluting the focus on the black majority’s rightful claim to the land and wealth.

Steve Biko did not ignore the Charter but he also did not fully endorse it. He was concerned that it was too close to the ANC’s “multiracial” or “non-racial” approach to liberation politics. He felt that it was too accommodating to white liberals and non-African interests. Yet he did not engage with the economic clauses as such!

On the broad left, there were those who viewed the Charter as not going far enough. There was concern that its calls for redistribution stopped short of full-scale nationalisation and/or dismantling of the capitalist system. In their view, it left too much room for compromise with the very economic system that had fuelled apartheid.

Yet perhaps the most persistent criticism over time has come not from opponents in 1955, but from the legacy of implementation. The gap between the Charter’s vision and post-apartheid economic policy – particularly the adoption of market-friendly approaches in the 1990s – has led some to argue that the Charter’s radical economic promise was never fulfilled or that it was vague enough to allow self-interested pretenders to claim that it was.

Despite all this, it was taken seriously – and found expression in the Constitution

Despite the criticism and repression, the Freedom Charter remained central to the identity and strategic orientation of the ANC and the Alliance. When South Africa transitioned to democracy, the Charter was not discarded – it was, in many ways, enshrined.

You can trace its influence directly in the statutory system that emerged. The Constitution’s Bill of Rights affirms the rights to fair labour practices, access to housing, health care, food, water and social security.

Now, it’s true that the Constitution does not call for nationalisation or a mandate to construct a specifically alternative economic system. And the ANC’s policy choices in government – from GEAR to the current mixed-economy model – reflect a more cautious approach than the Charter’s wording might suggest.

The economic clauses remain an invitation — not to nostalgia, but to serious thinking and praxis.



But the symbolic and ideological power of the Charter has endured. It framed the moral vision of the democratic project. It kept economic justice on the table, even when policy took a different turn.

Relevance for a new generation of black thinkers:

Today, 70 years later, we must ask: what do these two clauses mean to a new generation of black South Africans?

For many, they remain profoundly relevant – perhaps more than ever. South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Youth unemployment is above 50%. Wealth remains highly racialised, with asset ownership still concentrated in the hands of a small, largely white elite. While there is a black middle class and a politically empowered black elite, the structural economic legacy of apartheid endures.

A new generation of thinkers – from activists in movements like #FeesMustFall to scholars, public intellectuals, and community organisers – are grappling with its legacy. Hopefully like us, they are interrogating it. Are they also asking: why did this powerful economic vision not materialise? Where did the implementation fall short? Was justice traded for stability?

The calls for shared wealth and secure work to challenge neoliberal orthodoxy, to arguments for wealth taxation, the insistence on universal basic income grant, and arguments for new forms of ownership, including cooperatives and community trusts.

For some, the Charter was a grand mistake since its inception. For many, it is not irrelevant – it is unfinished.

Closing Reflection

The Freedom Charter gives us also the right to wrestle with it. As we mark 70 years since its adoption, we must ask the hard questions. Not just about what it promised, but about what still needs to be done. The economic clauses remain an invitation – not to nostalgia, but to serious thinking and praxis.

They ask us, once again: What does it mean for the people to truly share in the country's wealth? What would real work and real security look like – today, for millions left behind?

The answers may not be easy, but they remain essential.

BIOGRAPHY

Ari Sitas, Acting Director of IFAA, Emeritus Professor was the former head of the Sociology Department, University of Cape Town. He is a writer, dramatist, musicologist, activist and poet. He holds an honorary professorship at the Open Africa Institute at the University of Stellenbosch, was a member of the Scientific Committee of UNESCO's World Humanities Report and a Fellow at Université Paris Cité. Prof Sitas was awarded the Order of Mapungubwe by the South African Presidency in 2019.